

## SEEING AND UNSEEING THROUGH RECREATIONAL PURPOSE NAT MULLER

The history of tourism and that of photography intersect in interesting ways. Not only did the invention of photography in the mid-19th century coincide with mass-industrialisation in Europe and the creation of a middle class that could afford to travel, but tourism, and the ability to go elsewhere, became a marker of status. Photography, a technology that can capture the real and give proof of presence, became the means through which the discovery of place could be captured. The first 19th century daguerreotypes and the seminal early 20th century work of Lehnert and Landrock that documented the plains and the people of Egypt became stubbornly defining in the conception and representations of "the Orient". Nowadays, we exalt our own snapshots of family holidays that purport to show a carefree utopian moment in time, but also out of time, since tourism counters the banality of the everyday, or at least that is the experience the travel industry sells us. In any case, the economy of leisure has been—and still is—propelled by the image, or as sociologist John Urry so aptly notes in his groundbreaking 1990 study on tourism, *The Tourist Gaze*, "photography gives shape to travel."<sup>[1]</sup>

The photography project *Recreational Purpose*, in its very title, plays with the double entendre of recreational travel. Featuring the work of five Bahraini and six non-Bahraini

Arab photographers, it takes to heart the notion that tourism, just like travel, is signified by an experiential (and oftentimes geographic) departure<sup>[2]</sup> from what we are used to seeing. In this sense, the recreational excursion into Bahrain is not only to be read as a diversion from habitual visual environments in terms of locale or of artistic practice, for the local as well as for the foreign artists, but it is simultaneously an attempt to literally (re)create an imagery of place, whether the artists are familiar or unfamiliar with that place. For many of the foreign artists working on this project, it was a first encounter with the island of Bahrain. Yet, looking at the bodies of work, it is difficult to make out who set foot in Bahrain for the first time and who has lived there for most of their lives. All photos complicate, to an extent, any representational images we might have conjured up of Bahrain, whether culled from news feeds, tourist ads, personal nostalgia or the annals of history. Together these photographs offer very personal takes on what could remain in and outside the frame, whether the photographers are "travelling" in their own country or "travelling" from abroad. In addition, the very subjective points of view of the photographers stress the complicity of the viewer within this visual dynamic. As a viewer, the desire to consume an all-encompassing image of Bahrain remains unquenched. Yes, clues are provided and hints are given but the nature of the project remains fragmented and sketchy, as if more questions were asked than answered. As such, there is a flirtation with the aesthetics of the tourist snapshot. Indeed, how can there not be? Yet there is also a refusal to fully succumb to it by frustrating the touristic gaze that wants to fully consume, appropriate and reproduce a certain visual representation of place.

In some cases, this produces particularly haunting imagery. Take, for instance, the series *Interface* by Palestinian artist Taysir Batniji where the artist has sought out sites where elements foreign to each other come together to form an interstitial space. Batniji's photos are like *objets trouvés* wherein the objects, surroundings or landscapes he shows us are filled with traces, incomplete or have lost part of their function. Piles of earth lean idly against a bridge, sit in front of buildings or at a construction site, testimony to some sort of labour. A comfy chair lies abandoned in the surf, and most strikingly, tire tracks in the sand suggest a past presence that has left an ephemeral yet physical imprint. There is a genuine engagement with form, texture and composition in these often desolate and at times even ominous images. A strangeness and sense of alienation permeates these images. Desolation is also to be found in the striking black and white photos of Bahraini photographer Ghada Khunji. Usually black and white photography renders an image timeless or of the past. In Khunji's work, the grey tones emphasise and sharpen the contemporaneity. Particularly strong are the images where graffiti on walls have been blotted out by the authorities with thick black paint. The squiggly blackness highlights the presence of the texts even more, even if we cannot read them anymore. Another image shows a corrugated iron fence only featuring the word *as-shaab* (the people) in Arabic, either a reference to a revolutionary call or to another political statement wherein the people take centre stage.

Both Batniji's and Khunji's work are informed by a gaze that is predominantly observational and is defined by encounters of the strange and the familiar. Syrian photographer Hrair Sarkissian's contribution is expressed in a similar vein, yet in his work there is also an estranging movement from a view on the micro-level to the macro-level; a close-up of an architectural scale model, palm trees and all, is juxtaposed with a close-up of a skeleton in a museum's display or a billboard on the roadside. It seems as if the characterising features of place have been kept to a minimum to, paradoxically, articulate the specificity of place. This is quite different from the methodology of Lebanese photographer, and long-time resident of Bahrain, Camille Zakharia, who is a master of urban typologies and seeks to document variation in similarity. In *Birds of a Feather*, he explores the

phenomenon of gated communities in Bahrain, an urban trait that aptly illustrates the rapid urban and economic development of the island, not always to the advantage of the social and environmental make-up. These homogenous-looking housing units in Budaiya, Hamad Town, Tubli and Reef Island vary in terms of scale, comfort and amenities but their function is pretty much the same: housing a particular social and professional group. By showing us the fluctuations in building types in a systematic way, Zakharia makes a subtle but poignant comment about social class and social mobility. In this case showing less is telling more. This is also the case for Haya Alkhalifa who, in her understated photographs, calls attention to the rapid transformation of Bahrain's coastal areas.<sup>[3]</sup> Voracious land reclamation has not only disrupted traditional ways of life, like for example those of fishermen, but also poses ecological challenges to marine life. The battle between old and new Bahrain is fought out most visibly on the waterfront; Alkhalifa's almost generic and neutral images, are testimony to that.

Bahraini artist Waheeda Malullah exemplifies the heterogeneity of the Bahraini population in a series of photographs that depict Arabic flatbreads with names of Bahraini villages and towns written onto them. As the sequence of photographs progresses, the bread appears torn up, the writing illegible. On the one hand, this project can be read as portraying Bahrain as a place where different populations interact and intertwine with each other in one big (bread) melting pot. On the other hand, the images also speak of fragmentation and ruptures in the social fabric. However, not all projects in *Recreational Purpose* take on a documentary or socio-political approach. Recreation, of course, also lends itself to the realm of the fantastical and the imaginary. This becomes most apparent in the projects of Tunisian artist Nicène Kossentini and of Palestinian artist Steve Sabella. Kossentini's dreamlike black and white images present a place suspended between the skies. Here fiction and reality blend seamlessly and Bahrain morphs into a territory that is literally ungrounded, a place of magical possibility and whimsy. Sabella's compositions veer from the surreal depictions of mirrored cityscapes and the iconic 400-year old Tree of Life, to highly deconstructed energetic painterly collages reminiscent of cubist and fauvist paintings. In one collage, the compiled facades of buildings make up a completely novel cubist and chaotic cityscape, with only windows, lanterns and satellite dishes as recognisable elements. It is as if Sabella has stripped his Bahraini images of their specificity in order to construct a composite image with layer upon layer of visual information.

I commenced this essay by pointing out that the advancement of photography as an image technology shares a history with the development of the tourism industry. With the advent of digital photography and mobile phones, photography has never been so accessible and democratised. Eman Ali has capitalised on this sensibility and has used the discretion of her mobile phone to snap images of urban life in Bahrain. Still, the people she captures remain anonymous for the most part as she focuses predominantly on their shoes, hands and backs. Caught up in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, Ali has worked as an urban anthropologist, a participant observer, who shares the heartbeat of her surroundings with us. In contrast to Ali's popular and contemporary usage of technology, Saudi photographer Wed Abdul-Jawad uses the classic technology of a handmade pinhole camera to capture the environs. This technique slightly deforms the image and attributes to even the most contemporary buildings a dated feel. Yet the most invasive usage of image technology is to be found in Iraqi artist Jamal Penjweny's series *City of Flowers* where he has Photoshopped pink roses onto his subjects. Bordering on the tacky, the roses become artificial substitutes for chairs, heads, or shirt buttons. They completely defamiliarise the photographs and in their very particular hyperbolic way, make us see things anew. As such, Penjweny has, like all other artists in *Recreational Purpose*, decided to play with the double-faced idea of tourism and travel:

a departure that at its worst and in its most mass-consumed form, caters to an expected experiential desire as presented through postcard perfect advertisements, yet at its best generates a place of new possibility and perception.

1. JOHN URRY. "SEEING AND THEMING". *THE TOURIST GAZE*. LONDON: SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 1990. REPRINT 2008. P.128.
2. *IBID* P. 126
3. CFR. *RECLAIM*. KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN NATIONAL PARTICIPATION AT THE 12TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA (29TH AUGUST - 21ST NOVEMBER 2010). EDS. NOURA AL-SAYEH AND LÉOPOLD BANCHINI. BAHRAIN: MINISTRY OF CULTURE, 2010.