Images in Spite of All

ZouZou Group’s film installation ‘– door open –’

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On the left of three screens, a narrow camera frame shows two bare feet walking in circles, one foot placed carefully in front of the other. The ground is tiled white and occasionally covered with orange leaves. This pacing is echoed on the middle screen, the camera’s eye looking down at a pair of sneakers striding along a grey cobbled, rainy sidewalk and turning a corner. Looking down at these feet, a female voice with a soft Arab accent remarks soberly: ‘It’s really very hard to see’.

The challenges and constraints to visibility, comprising both the acts of making seen and seeing, are what underwrite and impel the content and form of – door open – (2019), a work by the collective, ZouZou Group. Formed of two anonymous female artists, one living in Syria, the other in England, the two artists first collaborated on a project through their respective institutions in Damascus and London in 2004. Ten years later, in 2014, they began exchanging photo and video material for this joint project. The lefthand screen of the three-channel video installation assembles mobile phone video footage recorded by the Syrian artist in Damascus between 2014 and 2018, whereas the middle screen gathers scenes filmed in Russia, England, Sweden, Portugal, China, Greece, Scotland, and overlooking Germany, countries that have had an impact on the course of the Syrian civil war and its refugees. These screens speak to and across each other, in a form of call and response between two female voices that stand for the Syrian and the British artist. Their
conversation is structured through intertitles on the righthand screen that cross-fade an aerial shot of a white boat traversing blue water in an endless loop.

As friends and collaborators, the dialogue draws upon the two artists’ ongoing online messaging, contextualising, explaining and commenting on the visual material they have shared with each other, and thus giving insight into the various difficulties they have encountered in doing so. Challenges of shared authorship and agency, differing ways of working, practical concerns and potentially repressed misunderstandings are inherent in collaborative production processes. In the case of ZouZou Group, to overcome these obstacles is ever more arduous as one half of the duo is living in Syria under conditions of civil and political emergency. Together, the two artists list eleven drawbacks to their cooperation that serve as intertitles framing their dialogue, including ‘Mobility/Immobility’, ‘Bitesize Communication’, ‘Fear of the Other’ and ‘Virtual & Physical Obstacles’. Instead of attempting to circumvent or sidestep these hurdles, they integrate them in such a way that the eleven impediments come to determine the visual language, structure and substance of their artwork.

Because the Syrian artist can only film while pretending to read on her mobile phone, or through the windows of safely secluded spaces such as private apartments or cars, the footage from Damascus appears surreptitious, revealing nothing more than pavement and fleeting images of faceless figures passing by her camera. Public space in Syria is closely monitored and highly charged, and restrictions on photography that were imposed by Hafez al-Assad, and only temporarily loosened under his son’s regime in a sumptuously marketed attempt at neoliberal modernisation in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad’s presidency, have been tightened severely since the uprisings in 2011. As Donatella della Ratta asserts in her analysis of visual media and warfare in the Syrian civil war: ‘[t]he act of filming has become so inherently connected to Syria’s post-2011 everyday life’ that the camera ‘has been turned into a device to perform violence, and the quintessential tool to resist it’.\(^1\) As such, acts of filming today are punishable by incarceration,

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torture and death. Therefore, the Syrian artist only raises her camera momentarily to record demonstrations of creative resistance – for instance, two brothers playing a song together on their melodicas on a sidewalk in Damascus. The boys are slightly out of sync because, so the narrator recounts, they are sitting on opposite sides of a street corner, and cannot see and can only barely hear each other playing, a scene almost emblematic of the conditions for ZouZou Group’s collaboration. When the older brother becomes conscious of being observed, he tries to cover his face with his coat, revealing the extent of suspicion and fear that photography arouses in Syria.

Paradoxically, from the use of cameras as non-violent weapons is derived a format of conflict communication in which visibility and violence are dramatically intertwined. The non-stop, real-time documentation of attack and injury has been circulated in order to evidence injustice as well as for the purpose of legitimising and triggering counter-violence. This seemingly endless supply of ‘cruel images’ ultimately feeds into processes of victimisation and the banalisation of suffering. Every new image of the Syrian civil war ‘may begin to appear “something-like,” though not quite, but rather “similar-to” the last addition to an inventory’, as Oraib Toukan diagnosed with regard to the visual representation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As a result, the media images of graphic violence and destruction in the Syrian civil war sustain a neo-colonial trope that presents the disaster as chronic and whose effect seems merely palliative.

‘It is really very hard to see’, the Syrian narrator aptly asserts while looking down at her bare feet walking in circles in her backyard. She contemplates a relentless quandary, the disjunction between what feels like overrepresentation of the Syrian subject, and a genuine frustration with an inability to see that subject. To explain this paradox, Susan Sontag’s original claim might resound – that too many images of suffering anaesthetise viewership. But this assertion leads into a
Theoretical dead end and the problem persists, no matter how many cruel images have been overlooked. Increasingly, it is in the realm of art that images of the Syrian conflict are disseminated and this discrepancy is problematised. The anonymous Syrian film collective Abounaddara, for instance, attempts to disrupt and reroute the stream of horrific images by producing intimate video interviews with a wide cross section of the nation’s population, including protesters, military men and regime votaries, and uploading them to Vimeo. In this freely accessible archive, violence never becomes explicitly visible but resonates in personal anecdotes and recollections of individual interviewees. Neither does ZouZou Group ‘want to hear any more about the drama of war’, and thus enquires into ‘how to make art that people will not be bored by’. In order to shun the inclination to having their images understood via resemblance and the colonial gaze, the collective refrains from including any direct visual evidence of violence and destruction in their artwork. Instead, – door open – exposes the dreadful conditions of its creation by manifesting the effects of warfare on the formal processes of its production.

Technology enables the film to come into being but also limits the final form it can assume. Digital formats and the content filters of social media platforms are being modified, and censorship and charges levied on internet users need to be negotiated constantly. The Syrian artist must access the internet by proxy to avoid detection, and maintaining anonymity is a key concern for ZouZou Group. This involves concealing the names of the artists and their supporters and advisors but also applies to the film material that is made public, a carefully composed selection of video clips that give no indications as to the place of residence or personal environment of any of the protagonists. Their mobile-generated, sometimes pixellated, narrow frames are indeed images in spite of all, ‘images that have been shot and uploaded in spite of the danger and against all the odds’.

Conflict invariably recalibrates the production, dissemination and reception of images, and this work by ZouZou Group functions, as Anthony Downey summarises in the exhibition’s introductory text, like ‘a seismograph of sorts, a register of a particular moment in time that, through the very form it takes (or does not take), discloses a state of historical, social, political, cultural and individual crisis’. Formal indicators, such as narrow camera frames and focal points, a rejection of panoramic shots and depth of field, and the denial of distinctly identifiable times, places and people through close-ups, evoke the disquieting feeling of ‘a sort of “neverendingness”’, stuck between an erased past and a blocked future. This is also signified by the lack of images picturing the horizon in the Syrian artist’s footage, leading her British counterpart to suggest that ‘if you cannot represent the horizon, then you cannot depict the future’. Only once does the horizon come into view: a distant shot of a dark grey cloud of smoke rising over Damascus. And remarkably, this is also the instance when the effects of warfare become most explicitly visible in the film footage.

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4 See della Ratta, Shooting a Revolution, op cit, pp 173–174
5 Ibid, p 132
7 della Ratta, Shooting a Revolution, op cit, p 6
Zooming in on the dark cloud of smoke over Damascus, the British narrator reiterates the Syrian’s initial claim: ‘It is hard to see the fire. It is hard to imagine the destruction.’ The film footage recorded by the British artist seems to continuously question the position of its own production and the potential of its visual response. The panorama of the cloud of smoke over Damascus is met with a 360-degree shot of a park outside of St Petersburg; views of street passages through narrow window frames of the Syrian artist’s grandmother’s apartment are mirrored by window views onto trees in southern England, and the confinement of mobility in Syria becomes more evident in contrast to images of travelling in trains and planes. What might be disregarded as a lack of initiative and density in these video clips is, in fact, one of the work’s strongest points: it attests to a courage to remain silent while listening intently, to step back in order to allow for a careful and conscientious reaction. To this end, the British artist documented her own process of looking: she filmed the videos by her Syrian collaborator playing on her laptop or reflected in train windows, and recorded herself retracing these images as charcoal sketches on semi-translucent paper. Thus, a level of distance is inserted in the visual material that opens up a space for (self-) reflection and (self-) awareness.

In this space, the British artist’s confession reverberates that she experiences a sense of shame when facing the footage from Syria that is produced under a continued state of emergency and reviewed from a relative comfort zone. This shame seems to stem from a fear to misinterpret or even overlook the actual effects of warfare evinced in these images. Quoting Primo Levi’s account of shame, she might even feel accused and compelled to justify and defend herself as a consumer of such images of violence at a mediated distance. And, crucially, her sense of shame appears to emanate from a genuine concern and care for her counterpart without resorting to pity or empty propositions.

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A cruel image ‘raises [the] bar of shame for even looking at such woe, and also for not having looked prior. I either look, or look away.’9 In this abyss looms a second, even more relentless quandary, the perpetuation of violence and participation in conflict through looking at it, and a genuine desire to express solidarity and foster resistance by looking at it. But unlike cruel images that ‘represent a degraded subject, become materially degraded with time and travel, and degrade a subject further by virtue of being seen’,10 – door open – does not seek to represent degradation and thus violence, but to expose the violence in the frame of what is represented. ZouZou Group calculate and incorporate the frame continuously into their own image-making process in order to question the challenges and constraints to visibility and their repercussions for gaining a sensate understanding of war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war. This is where Judith Butler, in her response to the media portray of the so-called ‘war on terror’, locates the critical role for visual culture ‘precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be’.11

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9 Toukan, ‘Cruel Images’, op cit
10 Ibid