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The Task of the Curator: Research of Social Activism Online and on the Ground

An important aspect of my research into the Israeli peace activism (which may be better understood as anti-occupation and pro-human rights activity) is following their documentation of activities online, much of which is either still photography or video. There are well-established conceptual approaches to researching such activism through its visual documentation. Notably, Kevin DeLuca analyzed mainstream news coverage of environmental activism in terms of “image events” that function as condensed yet fragmentary symbolic challenges to hegemonic discourse.¹ There is a long tradition of looking at the dramatic performance of social protest and conflict through the lens of photojournalism.² More recently, there has been a move in scholarship away from the documentation by observers of social activism towards activists’ engagement in social media. Research looks at how social movements amplify their activism across social media platforms,³ and how social movements engage in video production not only to represent their activity but as a form of direct action mobilization.⁴ Looking at similar material to mine, Simon Faulkner complements DeLuca’s concept of “image event” with an analysis of how activist media function as nomadic images, reproducing across different media platforms.⁵

In this essay I propose that activist media production of images can also serve as an archive – not only in the present for the researcher (myself) of the past (recent or otherwise), but also as an archive of the “future perfect.” Constructing an assemblage of the fragments of activist visual and verbal documentation, the researcher, along with other cultural producers, can construct a document – an image – of activism that prefigures a time in which the work of the activists will have become “successful.” But before I explain those concepts, let me first describe an example of the sort of activist image production on which I work.

[*Ta’ayush*](#)⁶ is a grassroots Israeli-Palestinian group who work non-violently in partnership to end occupation, and achieve civil rights for all. In their current practice, they focus on supporting the Palestinian residents of Area C of the West Bank, which remains under full Israeli military and civil rule. Early every Saturday morning a handful of Israeli and international activists leave Jerusalem to join with Palestinians in ploughing and planting fields, shepherding flocks, clearing wells and cave dwellings, in the face of frequently violent harassment by settlers and the coercive obstruction of the Israeli military. A regular aspect of *Ta’ayush*’s work is to document the regular, routine violence – denial of access to land, dispersal of flocks, destruction of buildings and arrests, beatings, and so on: and the occasional success – a ploughed field, a lamb being born. *Ta’ayush* is a small organization, funded by its activists and supporters, and those taking video footage and photographs of their regular activities are not professionals, although adept at posting information from the field quickly. Most of what they post is raw footage, roughly cut into short clips. Nonetheless, in the several years that audio-visual recording has become part and parcel of its repertoire of practice, *Ta’ayush* has amassed a vast, if fragmentary, archive of evidence of the routine violence of Occupation. They are, of course, not the only grassroots anti-Occupation activists who collect such audio-visual evidence, whether Israeli, Palestinian, or international (or a blend of them), but *Ta’ayush* is a significant collator of this material.

The archive is not situated on a single social media site, but spread across several platforms. Web 1.0 complements Web 2.0 in this dispersal of the video and documentary archive. There is [Ta’ayush’s Facebook page](#) (created on October 31, 2009, and as of August 21st 2014, showing 3,663 “likes”), on which many reports and announcements of activities from similar anti-occupation grassroots groups are reposted. The Facebook page is linked to a [Twitter account](#), which had 2089 followers and 2364 Tweets by the same date. Many of the photograph albums of *Ta’ayush* activities (often stills of video footage) are shared from the Facebook page of one of the group’s activists, [Guy Butavia](#). The same activist also hosts a YouTube channel, as [guybo111](#), which to date has 588 subscribers, 727 videos, and has attracted 813,308 views since November 28th, 2007. *Ta’ayush* also maintains a [website](#) with a Hebrew

and English version, the latter of which holds a more organized archive of activities according to location and type of activity (agricultural, aid and solidarity, information, protests), each of which is further subdivided. It's thus possible to track activities in some very specific locations, such as [Umm el-Arayes](#), a small agricultural community in the troubled South Hebron Hills area, where the continued existence of some 30 Palestinian villages is threatened by the Israeli occupation. There are 19 items about Umm el-Arayes from November 17th 2012 until February 1st, 2014 on the English version of the website. I am focusing on Umm el-Arayes in this piece as I went there in December 2012 as a participant observer of *Ta'ayush* while conducting academic research (about which I wrote [this blog piece](#), which has been included on *Ta'ayush's* website). There is a mixture of 6 video postings with paragraph-long explanations, blogs or other written counts, 10 accompanied by photographs, and three without, including an article from *Le Monde* about *Ta'ayush*. The Hebrew version of the website is slightly different, as it doesn't include the "information" category. On [Umm al-Arayes](#), the Hebrew version has 12 items from 26th January 2013 until 1st February 2014, of which 7 are videos with explanations, 4 are texts with photographs, and 1 is text only (the article from *Le Monde*). The additional video clip in the Hebrew version is a [report](#) from [Israeli Social TV](#) about events at Umm el-Arayes, about which I'll say more below.

It's significant that the website includes textual explanations of the videos and photographs because the audio-visual material that appears on *Ta'ayush's* Facebook page or the [guybo111](#) You Tube channel sometimes has no or little contextualization, or sometimes appears as a photo album with the barest of captions. Of the 6 videos categorized under Umm el-Arayes, the one with the longest textual account is from November 23rd, 2013, on a page titled "[An Organized Attack in Umm el Ara'is and More.](#)" The [video](#) is only 47 seconds long, showing a melee of soldiers, activists and locals. Above the noise an activist can be heard shouting in Hebrew to one soldier, "You're kicking a girl!" to another who is grabbing a boy "Leave the boy alone!" and to another who approaches him as he films "leave the camera alone and calm down." The text explains that preceding the recorded incident Palestinian children of families on whose land the illegal outpost of Mitzpe Yair have built hothouses (which are scheduled for long postponed demolition by order of the Israeli High Court) had been attacked by the settlers when they approached the hothouses, along with the activists documenting the incident. The soldiers present did not intervene for about twenty minutes, after which they began enforcing a "closed military area" order, roughly arresting some of the Palestinians and Israeli activists – but not the settlers.

The clip was posted to *Ta'ayush's* Facebook page with captions in Hebrew and English about violence on the part of settlers and Israeli occupation forces, its source being on [guybo111](#) (where it currently has 2,383 views). A separate [video](#) lasting 42 seconds,

embedded in the text, shows in slow motion a woman activist being attacked by a settler who grabs her camera and smashes it. That clip is also housed on [guybo11](#), where it has attracted 1,181 views. But without the longer textual explanation or close familiarity with the situation and type of events, it's hard to fathom what's going, especially for those who understand neither Hebrew nor Arabic. These are short clips from a longer video record, but other than the slow motion of the second clip, there is no sign of editing other than the cut, and certainly no narrative framing, which is provided by the text on the website if anyone makes the connection.

The pattern of settler violence and military and police coercion in relation to local Palestinians and activists runs through *Ta'ayush's* archive, the coverage of Umm el-Arayes not showing the worst of it. Yet, in another [longer clip](#) (lasting 8:34 minutes), the heated exchanges between soldiers and Said Awad, the leading local Palestinian campaigner for his family's land rights, the structural violence underlying the whole situation is articulated. The video starts with members of the Awad family making yet another attempt to reach their land that has been seized by the settlers of Mitzpe Yair, and being blocked by Israeli soldiers wielding a "closed military area" order (which in this case is invalid, as the camera shows it hasn't been completed properly). There is some pushing and shouting, but it's not really the physical and verbal violence that the [web page](#) title highlights that's significant here, nor even the detention of the two activists that is mentioned in the paragraph of text that does provide useful, concise context for the local situation. Rather, what stands out is Said Awad's determined dispute with the soldier whom he faces almost eyeball to eyeball. Said tells the soldier that he cannot claim to be a "man of the law" as he's defending an illegal settlement. "Your weapon is your law," he says.

The story is not always one of confrontation, though the context is. In [one clip](#) (from October 5th, 2013) that doesn't appear on the group's Facebook page, but is hosted on another activist YouTube channel, [publicamir](#), we see the usual cat and mouse game between soldiers trying to enforce a "closed military area" and in this case a Palestinian boy who evades them and manages to reach a settler boy about his age who, after some hesitation, accepts his outstretched hand to shake it. The title of the *Ta'ayush* webpage on which it appears foretells the ending of the event, "You shook my hand? I'll throw stones at you!", as the settler boy throws a couple of rocks as the Palestinian boy heads back across the field to his family, which a nearby soldier appears not to notice.

Yet, the most popular of the 6 clips is the most harrowing. On a tense day at Umm el-Arayes on January 19th 2013, in enforcing the routine closure order, the military and police arrested 15 local Palestinians and activists, among them a mother and her 18 month old baby. The 1:36 minute [clip](#) shows, among much shouting and shrieking, a

man being forced to the floor as he's arrested, and military policy surrounding the woman, gesturing and calling for her to be quiet and calm down as they seize her and lead her away as she carries her baby, while another activist holds a crying boy in his arms. The text on the [web page](#) adds some information about the release of the detainees, and on this occasion the video on guybo111 is accompanied by some explanatory text that names the mother as Reema and the baby as Quamar. This [clip](#), credited to Nissim Mossek (who also has [his own YouTube channel](#) with material about *Ta'ayush*), has had 95,021 views. While in this case the video wasn't posted to the Facebook page, there was a small album of 6 photos documenting Reema's arrest as well as two postings in Hebrew about the event, and subsequently a link to [a report](#) in the quality Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz* about it and other confrontations that same day between Palestinians and occupation authorities. On this occasion, *Ta'ayush's* social media activism broke through to the mainstream press, though not its more popular channels.

Although the *Ta'ayush* activists have neither the time nor resources to develop the archive beyond the well-organized web site, it can be a rich source for others. Israel's Social TV is an NGO that focuses on social justice and human rights issues and activism, broadcasting biweekly on a local channel and through the internet, including its [YouTube channel](#). In October 2013 the station compiled a [report](#), mentioned above, on Umm el-Arayes that used a significant amount of *Ta'ayush* footage, including of Reema's arrest in January, the boy who shook hands, an earlier [clip](#) of an armed settler from Mitzpe Yair chasing sheep, and another [video](#) by Nissim Mossek. (The report can be viewed with English subtitles [here](#), the relevant segment being at 6:56 - 12:60 mins). For the Palestinians of Umm el-Arayes and the activists, the violence and coercion witnessed in this footage has become routine. While this alternative news video report provides some narrative framing, there is a bigger picture that cannot be told even with the combination of video clips and voice-overs. A more ambitious editing and framing project might produce longer documentaries about the different local struggles and their place in the larger struggle against occupation, prominent examples of which are those made by [Just Vision](#), such as Julia Bacha's documentary [Budrus](#).

Whether or not anyone should ever undertake a similar project for *Ta'ayush*, its self-documentation adds up to a vital archive, even if not neatly wrapped up in the documentary genre. The archive is an odd assemblage – it doesn't add up into a whole, but consists of individually fragmentary or incoherent parts – a photo album without captions, a video clip without context, a web site without much traffic, an alternative news report with little traction. Yet it is none the less an assemblage, not one that tells the story or conveys the message, but one in which an image of civil partnership is revealed.⁷ The video and photographic documenting of *Ta'ayush's* multiple acts of civil

partnership stakes a claim in a media space that the forces of occupation, and the forces that stand behind them, seek to occupy completely, but cannot. The occupation forces aim towards dispossession, dispersal and eviction, on a large scale in the form of the Nakba, and on a daily basis in the form of “closed military area” orders. In contrast, the documentation by the hand-held cameras of *Ta’ayush* shows a sharing of space, a dwelling in moments of partnership that will always be there, and so will always be here. On the fields of Umm el-Arayes, the Jews and Arabs of *Ta’ayush* who refuse to be enemies fashion a new body politic, speak a new civil language, and create each week an “open civil area.”⁸

Yet, the coercion of occupation wins nearly every round of the unevenly matched contest. The settlement of Mitzpe Yair still stands, protected by the Israeli army, and the story of Umm el-Arayes is untold in the mainstream media, unheard and unseen in the media space occupied by corporations and governments. In their grass roots activism and their documentation of it through social media, *Ta’ayush* fail again and again, and it is hard to see how they can prevail against the occupation of land and mediascape other than in the smallest of ways. However, as Judith Halberstam puts it: “all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner.”⁹

Ta’ayush’s failure has matters in ways that are not apparent from the perspective of instrumentalist, strategic action and communication of a “message”. What matters is invisible to a perspective of success that works in terms of cause and effect and a temporal framework of “before” and “after,” according to which the progressive action of *Ta’ayush* and others should produce a progressive end.¹⁰ Until events interrupt the progressive course of history, we will see only fragments of an archive, but one day it will have become apparent that it is an archive of the “future perfect.” There will be a time in which the work of the activists will have become “successful.” Then we will see that the archive is showing us now an image of peace all along – an image of peace as partnership, as civil togetherness, as embodied reclamation of the land in which such relationships can flourish. All I can do for now, as a scholar, or cultural critic, is to cite and assemble the fragments of the archive by imagining the point in the future when they will have succeeded in imaging peace. The task of the scholar is not only to analyze the activists’ documentary images, to pore over them to discern details, to carefully reconstruct their context. Rather, my task is that of a curator who looks at what the activism and its documentation prefigure. Looking back over an archive of dispossession, occupation and repression, I look forward to the civil partnership whose existence will have become established by its imagination in the present.

¹ Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics* (London: Guilford Press, 1999).

² See for example David Campbell, "The problem with the dramatic staging of photojournalism: what is the real issue?" Available at: <http://www.david-campbell.org/2011/10/06/problem-with-the-dramatic-staging-of-photojournalism/> Accessed August 16th, 2014.

³ Sashah Costanza-Chok, "Mic Check! Media Cultures and the Occupy Movement." *Social Movement Studies* 11(3-4) (2012), 375-385.

⁴ Chris Robé, "Materializing Cultural Struggle in Film and Media Studies." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55(10) (2014), 17-33.

⁵ Simon Faulkner, "Images and Demonstrations in the Occupied West Bank." *Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* 4 (2013). Available at: http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/4-november2013/Faulkner_WestBank.pdf

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Taayush-תעאיוש-170738066985?id=170738066985&sk=info>

⁷ The sort of archive I have in mind is described by Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003) and is also exemplified by Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁸ Ariella Azoulay, "When the Body Politic Ceases To Be an Idea." In *Manifesta Journal* 16 (no date). Available at: <http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/regret-and-other-back-pages/when-body-politic-ceases-be-idea>

⁹ . Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 120. My thinking here also borrows from Alain Badiou's reflections on the viability of communism in *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010).

¹⁰ For a critique of such a "progressivist" conception of history, see Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

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