

Yaron Lapid: *The New Zero*

Text by Ayesha Hameed

Surface and Distance

In 1999 Yaron Lapid snuck into a demolition site in Jerusalem fifteen minutes before the rubble was cleared away and found a series of envelopes. Inside the envelopes were a slew of negatives and passport prints of studio portraits taken in the 1970s. Since then, Lapid has printed the negatives to create a series of interventions into this found archive in the form of a video, an installation of stills, and now a bookwork.

The title of *The New Zero* relays the feeling that, just when you think things can't get any worse, they do. Lapid found these photographs when he was an art student in Jerusalem, where formal concerns of the academy were diametrically opposed to the everyday violence that he and fellow art students faced in their lives in the city. This ambivalence is germane to a city historically divided, encroached upon and fundamentally contested, where this sense of indeterminacy also finds its most quotidian manifestation at ground level in the most microcosmic of sites: in glances averted to create distance, in eye contact made to assess risk, in gestures and postures. As another way to document the city, what would an inventory of such gestures look like? Or from another perspective, how can the city be read through *The New Zero*?

What we see is an array of studio photographs where the subjects sit in front of a white wall. Sometimes they face the camera, and sometimes they are twisted at an angle, slouching. They are children on laps, teenagers in style, senior citizens. The portraits are arranged into pairs, where posture meets posture. The most striking feature is Lapid's choice to crop the images at the eyes, in contrast with the original passport prints that are cropped below the shoulder. The virtuality of the frame of these images as it hovers between absence and presence, resonates with Harun Farocki's iconic video essay *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989). Farocki describes how, in Algeria in 1960, veiled women were photographed for identity cards for the first time. As Farocki flips through these images, he covers first the mouth and then the eyes of the women's bare faces with his hand. There is a particular softness to their mouths that are unused to the public gaze, while their eyes, when isolated and framed by Farocki's hand, look

back at the camera with the canny ease of public interaction.

The New Zero draws from the vocabulary enabled by Farocki's framing gesture but with very different results. What is lost in every instance of every image is the ability of the subject to look back at the viewer. The negative space of this broken eye contact throws a new set of referents into focus: mouth, clothes, posture and pose. But these are not the soft mouths of faces unused to public gazes: these are mouths that are sculpted into shape for the camera, posed in seriousness, seductiveness, charm, officialness. However, the compositional shift reveals another soft informality in the bodies of the subjects: in their slouches, in the small wrinkles in their clothes, and in the angles at which they awkwardly sit. This moves away from the territory of *Images of the World*, for this softness is not a product of their coming into vision. Rather, the shift of the focus of our gaze reflects the instability of the image within the frame, and perhaps the danger of the subject being lost from sight.

In other words, cropping out the eyes destabilizes an easy way for the viewer to relate to the subject, by introducing a promise of proximity to the subject of the photo that is curtailed in the very moment the promise was made. By eliminating this moment, the temporal distance between the photographed subject and the viewer is materialized. This sense of distance is more visceral in the video version of *The New Zero*, where a succession of these portraits scroll from waist to head and fades just as the face enters the frame. This succession of scrolling portraits makes clear what is lost in the repetition of failed moments of anticipation of recognition. There is a failure to look back and remember.

In the present version of *The New Zero*, the arrangement of the photographs into pairs forces the viewer to repeatedly find differences and similarities between the subjects—a comparative, demographic taxonomy. This arrangement is made all the more poignant by the possibility that some images were rejects from the extensive and exacting requirements of passport photography—in other words, they were never meant to be seen. Consequently this arrangement is complicit with the danger of the image not coming into vision, a violence

that is pre-emptive in its own invisibility. But rather than pointing to this taxonomic violence as being behind the surface of the image, the surface itself is decoded through repetition and reframing.

The comparison and decoding of the surface of the image reveals the life, in all its violence and messiness, that is embedded within this clean taxonomy of images. But creating a hierarchy of frames to decode and comprehend something about the subjects of the portraits in the constellation produced, calls into focus what is occluded and enabled in the surface by the frame itself. The images were produced in excess of the frame to meet passport regulations and introduced by Lapid himself, so at the surface of the frame lies the ghost of its attrition. But this materialized surplus and attrition has its counterpart in the context that frames the image itself: the surplus of the images themselves as probable outtakes of incorrectly taken passport photographs, the studio itself destroyed, the fifteen minutes that saved them from the rubble. The frame of the image thus extends to the destroyed studio and the ruin itself. And in its attrition and expansion lies the residue of the viewer's ability to see, the resistance of time to being subsumed into empathic comprehension, and the excess of the subject who cannot ultimately be decoded. ■

Yaron Lapid is an artist and filmmaker. To see more of his work visit www.finderandkeeper.co.uk

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All photographs from Yaron Lapid, *The New Zero*, 2011
Courtesy the artist.











