

# Women and Photography

**Yasmine Nachabe Taan**

This special issue of *al-raida* on Women and Photography addresses photography as a medium that challenges gender roles, positions, and attributes as seen in the mainstream media. It includes papers by contributors who examine the practice of women photographers in the Middle East as well as the different ways women are represented in photographs from a variety of perspectives that range from critical art disciplines to the social sciences.

It is with pride that I announce that this issue coincides with the establishment of *al-raida* as a refereed journal. With this issue *al-raida* is joining academic journals in its editorial procedure for selecting articles. The task to identify qualified scholars to review the articles was not easy due to the limited scholarship on a highly specialized topic such as gender and photography in the region.

With few exceptions, most of the publications available on photography in the Middle East region are published in the form of photographic albums with limited textual material. In most cases, the text is often descriptive and lacks critical analysis. The articles in this issue focus on interpreting selected photographs using various analytical methods.

This issue also coincides with two major events related to memory and photography in the Middle East. "Not Just Memory, Palestine Before 1948" is the title of a retrospective exhibit showcasing 1920s and 1930s photographs on Khalil Raad's (1854-1957) photographic practice in Palestine. The show took place at the Nimr Foundation in Beirut to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Institute for Palestinian Studies. The second event is a retrospective exhibition of another early Palestinian photographer, this time a woman, Karima Abboud (1891-1955). The photographs were compiled by Dr. Mitri Raheb in Palestine. These events are evidence of a rising interest in photography related to the region not just in order to restore memory and the past but to communicate, analyze, and understand the present.

There are certainly rewards to seeing this issue coming together. Beyond editorial duties, it was intriguing to read about sonic photographs, censored photographs, and photography used as a medium for identity construction. The traditional approach of photography as capturing and preserving the past is not the only purpose in the work

discussed in this issue. Photography, while documenting social change, takes on a political dimension. It becomes a tool for activism.

Brynn Hatton, for example, examines Pietro Masturzo's 2009 World Press Photo of the Year "From the Rooftops of Tehran, June" and Shirin Neshat's multimedia adaptations of the Farsi novella, *Women Without Men*, to reflect on the representation of the rooftops in Iran and the different ways rooftops function as a space from which Iranian women contest political relations. Rooftops are common places from which Tehrani dissident women shout their discontent about the state's unjust practices. Hatton argues that these sonic photographic representations constitute a productive political weapon against the state.

Sara Mamani explores the photographs of three female Iranian artists and their reflections on queer culture in the presence of morality police restricting contact in public spaces, regulating women's navigation within Tehran, and watching for signs of unorthodox behavior. In examining Anahita Razmi's short video *White Wall Tehran*, Mamani highlights visuality as an audible medium. Like Hatton, Mamani attempts to move the attention from the visual to the audible in examining the photographs.

Daniel Berndt in "In/distinction. On Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's *Photographic Conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp*" explores Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's practice of photography in documenting the Palestinian refugee camps. Rather than being appreciated for their aesthetic value, the photographs discussed in this issue are visual hypotheses that serve as catalysts to open discussions and raise questions about the situation of marginalized people. They are emotionally-loaded photographs which are also rich with meanings. Photography can be considered as an instrument that facilitates the imposition of



Nabihah Loutfi behind the camera. Tal el Zaatar, Lebanon, 1976. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Nabihah Loutfi. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation

power by those behind the camera (the photographers) on those who are in front of the camera (the subjects in the photograph). As Berndt explains, Eid-Sabbagh chose to have the children living in Burj al-Shamali Palestinian refugee camp take their own pictures to document their daily life inside the camps. The photographs were later used by the artist to reflect on the relation between photography and the process of identity formation. In this case, Berndt argues, the photographs empowered the residents of the camps with a self-assurance that nurtures a sense of emancipation from historical generalization.

In Allam's review of Hammam's photographs the author draws on the relation between the sexual implications of the space and the photographs to comment on gender politics in Egypt. For Hammam, similar to Eid-Sabbagh but in a different context, the medium of photography is used as a medium for identity construction. Allam contends that the presence of water, bodies, and the concept of wetness can be metaphorically understood as erotic and sexual. She also discusses the fluidity of gender signifiers in photographs and reflects on the perception of nudity that varies according to gender. The presence of veiled women on the beach contrasts with the nudity of male bodies. The latter is socially accepted whereas women's nudity, according to Allam, is embarrassing.

In the last pages of this issue various aspects of photography are explored such as in the interviews with Christina Rahme on the practice of fashion photography and with Karen Kalou on the practice of photography as art. The two interviews are followed by young scholars' reflections on eclectic photography practices such as Helen Karam's article on Rasha Kahil's provocative nude art-portrait photography, Farah Berro's insight on Twitter profile photographs, and Mehrnoush Shafei's review of Rania Matar's 'gendered photographs' of teenage girls in their rooms featured in Matar's latest book, *A Girl and her Room*.

All of the photographs in this issue transcend the notion of photography as rescuing memory and the past. Most of the authors attempt to articulate the orality of photographs and their ability to communicate sound and layers of meanings. The question here is who is looking rather than what is seen. Photography cannot be understood as having a static identity or singular cultural status. The medium is better regarded as a dynamic field of technologies, practices, and images. Photographs are never neutral, they can never exist outside discourses. Photography is itself an apparatus of ideological control.

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