

Dor Guez
Al-Lydd

KW

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Dor Guez

Al-Lydd

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Editing and copyediting / Redaktion und Lektorat: Friederike Schäfer, Franziska Solte

Texts / Texte: Ariella Azoulay, Felix Ensslin

Conversation / Gespräch: Susanne Pfeffer and / und Dor Guez

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Exhibition / Ausstellung

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Assistant to the curator / Assistentin der Kuratorin: Franziska Solte

Project manager / Projektleitung: Wendela Loman

Project assistant / Projektassistentin: Sonja Lau, Anke Schleper

Exhibition assistant / Ausstellungsassistentin: Friederike Schäfer

Registrar / Registrarin: Monika Grzymislawska

Installation manager / Aufbauleitung: Lutz Bertram

Installation team / Aufbauteam: Familie Kartenrecht & Friends

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Video editing / Video-Editing: Adi Sarig, Eitan Buganim

Sound editing / Audio-Editing: Daniel Meir

Assistance to the artist / Assistentin des Künstlers: Adela Yawitz

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Susanne Pfeffer in conversation with Dor Guez

SP — In your exhibition “Al-Lydd” at KW Institute for Contemporary Art you tell the story of the Christian-Arab branch of your family that extends over three generations. You outline cultural, religious, ethnic, and historical junctions by using many different media including photography, scans, video, and animation in your work. In your show here in Berlin you focus on the Lod-based Monayer family whose story is interwoven with the city’s history. In 1948, Lod—or Al-Lydd, its Palestinian name—was occupied by the Haganah, a Jewish paramilitary organization. After the occupation it became the core of the Israeli army. The result of this 1948 military act was the displacement of the majority of Al-Lydd’s citizens. 95% to be precise, as your grandparents describe it in your video entitled *July 13 (2009)*. Your grandparents still live in Lod. In your *Al-Lydd* series (2010) emptiness seems to dominate the city.

DG — The series *Al-Lydd* presents the necessary connection between ethics and aesthetics. I think the two are inseparable. The old city of Lod, which is in fact the Arab city Al-Lydd, is slowly being eaten away and ruined. I am not only referring to the 1948 war, which was traumatic for all, but also to a longer, more complex process of erasure and denial of Arab history that continues to this day. When I was growing up in Lod in the late 1980s, these areas were still full of Arab houses with beautiful inner courtyards, orchards and rose gardens.

At first glance, these photographs are about emptiness. They depict erased plots where Al-Lydd used to be. These lots, however, are not empty. They hold an indexical arrangement of signs and testaments: some stand out, such as the hovering floor in a sea of thorns (*Al-Lydd #11*) or the remnants of a lone Arab house with no inhabitants (*Al-Lydd #9*). In other photographs, the viewer sees other sorts of traces: a recess in the ground where a house used to be (*Al-Lydd #12*) or leftover gravel from another demolition (*Al-Lydd #6*). The thorns and dirt roads that gradually formed in neglected

areas also become part of the detailed landscape. One must look closely. It isn't about emptiness in the least, but about an archeological trove of human life.

In the *IDF Ave.* series of photographs (2010) the indexicality is straightforward and clear. The series was shot on Al-Lydd Road, which was given its current name only after 1948.

SP — How did Lod change?

DG — My grandfather's house, which was into the town hall after his family was forced to relocate to the Lod Ghetto (as he recounts in the video *July 13*), is still there. However, it is one of the only remaining Arab houses, and it is surrounded by newer building projects. The series presents fragments of houses, monuments of stone and mortar that are like scattered puzzle pieces. In some, the interior is exposed to the street; these buildings have not yet been completely demolished, but they soon will make room for more high-rises (*IDF Ave. #4 to #7*). Even some of the buildings that I photographed only last winter have since been torn down.

SP — I think, what is really crucial about your work, is that you manage to pinpoint a highly delicate political issue by telling personal stories. This is like throwing a pebble into water that creates ever-wider circles. The personal story reflects or mirrors a more general historical and political matter. It thereby raises general questions of cultural diversity and ethnic identity.

DG — I believe that the only way to accumulate knowledge, the only way to have a wide perspective about a certain group or nation, is by focusing on the personal history of one community, one place, or even one family.

SP — Yes, I think that's something only art can achieve, literature, visual arts and other arts too, that is, to show history from a personal perspective as a way to understand. I think it's the only way to understand what happened and what is happening now, since history also extends to the present.

DG — Experiencing "Al-Lydd" is an act of reading history between the lines. Walter Benjamin said that in order to understand history one has to brush it against the grain. I think this is very well put and describes an important aspect of my work.

SP — I agree. For this exhibition, you scanned and edited the series *Scanograms #1* (2010). It tells the story of your grandmother Samira, ten years before

the Israeli occupation. The basis for this series are the old, torn, faded photographs of Samira and her close relatives. They document the important events of their lives before the family was spread from Jaffa to Lod, Amman, Cyprus, Cairo, and London. Samira links you and your family to the Christian-Arab community—a minority group, which has not yet been granted differentiation as a distinct cultural and ethnic identity. If I look at these scanograms, I see two women sitting on a carpet and if I hadn't known anything about this photograph I would have thought that it was maybe taken in Paris in the 1920s or 1930s, which I think is quite interesting.

DG — This series includes prints of fifteen different scenes. Dating between 1938 and 1958, they tell the story of one family, the Monayers, and especially of one woman, Samira. The *Scanogram #1* series begins and ends with Georgette, Samira's older sister. The scan you are referring to was taken in Jaffa, 20 kilometers from Al-Lydd, before the 1948 war and before the Palestinian exodus. It is a posed photo in which Georgette is sitting with her friend behind her, holding her, as the Arabic inscription I added suggests.

What you observe, that there is something very European in the way they see themselves or in the way they want to be seen, is correct. The Christian-Arab community has always been an ethnic minority in this region, not only during the Israeli-Jewish rule, but also long before. This group of people had dual ties with both the so-called East and the West. On the one hand, their religious center is in Europe, in Greece, and on the other hand they are in the region known as the "Middle East"—if we accept the common binary division of the world into regions. Thought it may not be that obvious from the series, all the Christians who live in Israel are part of the Arab world. Their identity is multi-layered, as this community exists in a gap between histories and cultures... Well—I must be more exact—it is not a real gap for them, as this culture is a whole, but outsiders often describe it in this way. It is precisely those communities who challenge the sterile assertions and stereotypes and who manage to escape these dichotomous definitional confinements.

The series of scanograms begins with photos of Samira's brothers and sisters in Jaffa, and continues with photographs of Samira in Lod, a year after 1948.

SP — Is this your grandmother?

DG — Yes. Back in 1948 there was, for them, an unexpected war, as they describe

it in the video *July 13*. The Palestinians in Jaffa thought that they were only closing their houses temporarily and that they would soon return. The series continues to evolve: you see Samira's wedding to my grandfather Jacob in 1949, one year after what was, for them, a canonical date: July 13, 1948. Then we see a series of her siblings' weddings, none of which were in their hometown Jaffa. At this point, the family was spread all over the Middle East—Cairo, Amman, and Lod. Samira's wedding photos are important not only on the personal level, as a private family occasion, but also because this was the first Palestinian wedding in Lod after the war, and it was held in the new ghetto.

SP — I think that's important for the audience to understand, that after 1948, these neighborhoods were ghettos for a few years.

DG — After 1948, a very small percentage of the Arab community stayed. My grandfather's family was not at home when the Jewish military came: they were hiding in Al-Lydd's city church of St. George with my grandmother's family, who were driven out of Jaffa. Only three days later did the army discover that a few hundred people from Al-Lydd and from the neighboring towns and villages were staying in the basement of Al-Lydd's monastery.

SP — I think it is remarkable that it particularly was a Greek Orthodox church, which actually still exists in Lod today.

DG — Yes, that's the only place that wasn't damaged at all during the occupation, because the church was a holy site. Unlike what happened in mosques, where actual battles took place, nobody dared to fight in the churches, since they were considered European property. Therefore, even some Muslims hid in churches.

SP — Now, this is interesting. We are beginning to see how, when the Jews came to Palestine, after being in the Diaspora for centuries, they in turn made your family go into exile. Your family was forced to go to Jordan, Cyprus, and to other countries. In a way, this mirrors what happened before, what happened to the Jews.

DG — In a way this is true, but I avoid these kinds of comparisons. Not only because these are highly sensitive subjects—and since I am, on top of it all, also the third generation to the holocaust—but also because of the way people tend to measure and tag human suffering, which is always dependent on political and national interests and on the context. I have no doubt that history is cyclical, but I prefer working with

personal stories to understand history rather than with large abstract theories.

In Lod, there were only around one thousand people left after the war enclosed in a small area with barbed wire, under military rule. Jewish immigrants took all their houses and their property. So through the wedding scans you can learn the many levels of influence and implications that the war had on this Arab family's life. We mostly hear and talk about those who were expelled, and not about those who remained. The entire system of life changed, as Samih, second generation to the occupation, described in the video *Watermelons Under the Bed* (2010).

SP — Can you elaborate on the story behind the work: The video *Watermelons Under the Bed* is named after a family tale, which your uncles used to tell you and your brother when you were children...

DG — Yes, exactly: since my grandparents used to keep watermelons under their bed for the entire summer, where it's cool and spacious, we believed them when they told us that they grew under the bed. Now, my grandparents are in their late 80s, Israeli agriculture has changed the seasonal reality, and under their bed there are very few watermelons. Next to them I found an old suitcase, full of family photographs from the time my grandmother lived in Jaffa (before 1948) and from after the war, when her family spread from Jaffa to the nearby city of Al-Lydd, Amman, Cairo and London. Among them, there are photos from the 1960s of Samih in kindergarten, celebrating Jewish holidays with his classmates; around the same age I was when they told us where they grew watermelons. For Israelis, watermelons have become a significant symbol of their national identity—the fruit of the "Israeli summer." I use the watermelon story as a metaphor for a long-term process of the Israeli cultural occupation.

SP — So, your video, which was shot in Lod and in Amman follows the family story over three generations through the eyes of your uncle, Samih Monayer, second generation to the occupation?

DG — Yes. In the same context is a second series of scans, *Scanograms #2* (2010). They include pages from my grandfather's and my great-grandfather's mandatory British passport from Palestine. From the visa stamps you can grasp that the entire Middle East was an open area before Israel was established, all communities moved

freely, and the borders were open. The phenomenon of Israel had a great influence on the Palestinian people, externally and internally: the different communities were separated from each other, so that the entire region changed.

In addition, it wasn't only a territorial occupation: this was also a cultural occupation, as my uncle Sami Monayer, Samih's brother, describes in the video *Subaru-Mercedes* (2009). The story of the Christian Monayer family is part of Palestinian history, though one rarely heard, and it represents those who managed to rebuild their lives positively after the occupation. The narrative of Israel's establishmen is not only the refugee camps, but also the story of those who stayed on their land, and what happened to them after the environment changed. My grandmother's siblings were not deported to "the territories," since they were hiding in a church in Lod, but since only a few hundred Christians stayed in Lod and only a few thousand in the entire region, they had no choice but to marry into other Christian communities.

The Christian community is the best-educated community in Israel. It also has the smallest family units, on average, of any Israeli population, even smaller than the Jews, similar to European Christians. Even so, if we are speaking about the cultural occupation, their socio-economic level is lower than that of the Jews. There is simply a 'glass ceiling,' a boundary of race and religion that cannot be broken. That's why even today this community is in danger, because if people have the opportunity to live in Europe or in America they do so. Not only is the community growing very slowly, because of the small family units, they are also losing members to emigration. It is therefore a community and culture in danger of extinction.

SP — You have talked about *July 13*, where we have two Samiras: your grandmother and your cousin. The photo of Samira at her own wedding in the ghetto is also not part of the mainstream Israeli history.

The other one is the psychology student Samira who works in a café. There are two generations of Samira and thus a kind of continuity. There is also the continuity surrounding the church that still stands in Lod.

DG — And which is the heart of the community, yes.

SP — This is really interesting, because even though everything changed and is still changing, there is a constant cultural identity that remains. Although the two

identities of the two Samiras are so different—one grew up in Israel and feels like an Israeli—they are both related to the common cultural identity. It's a way to relate to the two worlds, through the two women.

DG — You are referring to the integrational: the first, second, and third generations all take part in this part in this exhibition. In a way, though it might sound strange, I think Samira's identity (the cousin) is more "Arab" and "Christian" than her parents, the middle generation.

SP — In what way?

DG — In order to understand it, you need to think of the Christian community, as Samih describes it in the video *Watermelons Under the Bed*, as the weakest people in this region. Without financial or political power and outnumbered, nobody looks out for their interests. Since they are the weakest community, they have this chameleon mechanism, to change colors and to fit in. For example, my grandfather Jacob thought that blending in, at least superficially, was the best way to handle the Israeli presence. He was one of the first to understand that Israel is not going anywhere, as opposed to most of the Arabs in the 1950s who thought Israel was temporary. He was also one of the few who realized that the state of Israel would be the reality in his lifetime. I think it had something to do with an imperialist perspective. His family lived in Al-Lydd through both the Ottoman and the British periods, and then the Israelis came. In the video *July 13* he quotes an Arab phrase: "Whoever married my mother, he is my stepfather now;" meaning, this is the reality, now how will I cope with it. He decided to send his children to an Israeli school to learn Hebrew, since that was the authorities' language, just like he had gone to mandatory British-Arab schools, to learn English. His father, in his day, had asked him to study the Qur'an, since he grew up surrounded by Muslims. We can see a pattern in the way they coped with reality; it's a strategy you choose when you are the weakest. Small communities know much more about the majority than the majority knows about them. In a way, because they lived outside of their own heritage, their identity was less—how should I put it—less eastern. Only when they grew up did they realize they were not equal, that there was a point when they saw that there is a 'glass ceiling' and the bottom line is that in Israel, if you are an Arab, whether Muslim or Christian, there is a level that you cannot rise above. This comprehension, sobriety even, led to the second generation's

decision to send their kids to Arab schools. Samira went to an Israeli-Arab school, like her grandmother Samira went to a British-Arab school. Her Hebrew is perfect, she even sounds like she is from central Tel Aviv. Her Arabic is flawless as well, and her Christian identity is very strong, much more so than her uncles' and her mother's.

She is much more aware of who she is than the previous generations. Her identity, in that way, is closer to her grandmother's than to her parents'.

SP — I had the feeling that Samira is broken or split between society on the one hand and her personal identity or cultural identity on the other hand. Perhaps between her fragile cultural background and the culture of the country that she lives in.

DG — She's Israeli.

SP — But at the end of the video you see her asking, you see that she is questioning things, she doesn't know exactly who she is.

DG — I think we need to be more precise here: she doesn't know how to cope with society's labeling and with the Israeli categories of identity. Generally, most of us think that we know who we are, but what does it mean to define someone as Israeli, Italian, or German? I mean, what is the general meaning of identity? What does it mean when I relate myself to a certain group? I think we should have the freedom to identify ourselves at a certain point in time and context and still have the choice to evolve and change our opinions and our self-definitions. In Israel, though not only there, it is very clear why people ask you to choose. It's part of the political tension between different religions and nations. Some people can't grasp that someone can be both Jewish and Christian or both Israeli and Palestinian, because the dominant political discussion has made them believe that those definitions are opposed. Can't someone be all of the above?

Going back to Samira's video, I think that when she asks the viewer what it means to feel Arab or Jewish, she is correctly pointing out that those questions are fundamentally wrong, like the boy who screams that the emperor is naked. Though she doesn't "fit" into the majorities' definitions, she clearly knows who she is. Only those who are forced to define their identity as a daily reaction to the majority's demands can attain such clarity.

SP — What really astonishes me is that even if she is an Israeli who was

brought up and educated there and who shares the same culture and history, Israeli men would not see her as a potential date because she is Arab.

DG — What is really striking is that she is told that they would date her if only she wasn't an Arab. But what makes you think she would ever consider dating *them*? I think she would not.

SP — I find that shocking.

DG — That is very naïve of you.

SP — I thought being Israeli or not was more about the nationality.

DG — But she is Israeli as well: Palestinian-Arab-Christian-Israeli. That's the point. From our perspective it's not a contradiction. I would even broaden the argument and suggest that it's not only that the vast majority of Jews would not consider marrying someone who is not Jewish, they would consider marrying a European who is not Jewish before they would think of an Israeli-Arab as an option, and vice versa.

SP — So you are saying it's reciprocal?

DG — Yes, but it's not the same.

SP — Why?

DG — Because of majority-minority relations: the Christian-Arab community is in danger of extinction. If the next generation of Christians marries Muslims and Jews, the community and its culture will disappear in a few generations.

SP — Yes, but I think that's a natural part of history. You don't even believe in God.

DG — That's not relevant. I am a part of the religions' culture; being Christian or Jewish is not just obeying the religions' dogma, it's a whole culture, philosophy and a way of life.

SP — I understand, but it was also brought to you in a mixed manner and you still preserve it.

DG — I preserve it, yes, but the generation after me...

SP — ...But is it not a dream to preserve this culture, against all odds and outside influences?

DG — There has been a Christian community in Lod since the 4th century, and in the same way that identity is dynamic, so is culture. Chameleons change their colors

to avoid carnivores and in order to blend in, but it's only a defense mechanism, and they remains a chameleons. I don't believe that breaking all the boundaries of religion and culture is desirable. There are differences between people and communities, and I see their importance. I think it is significant to have separate Italian, German, Israeli, and Palestinian identities. I wouldn't want them all to fuse together and lose each individual one.

SP — I think that's stupid.

DG — You wouldn't understand it since you are not part of a community in danger of disappearance.

SP — True, but even if I wanted to be part of that community I couldn't because I am German.

DG — You would be allowed in, since you are Christian. It's the other way around that threatens the community's existence. I think the most important facet of identity for the Christian-Arabs' identity is their christianity. they are Arab and Palestinian like the Muslims, and they are Israeli like the Jews. The only aspect of identity the Christians don't "share" with any other population is their religion, which includes a Christian culture.

SP — I understand. I am not disagreeing with that, I am just saying that it would be preferable to shift between these rigid identities.

You mentioned to me elsewhere that Lod is considered a "mixed city." Can you relate that to our discussion?

DG — In Israel a "mixed city" means the population is both Jewish and Arab under the same municipality. It's not considered a mixed city if there are Russian, Ethiopian and Moroccan Jews living together, only if there are mixed religions. Lod is one of several so-called "mixed" cities in Israel...

SP — ...Because they are not really "mixed," they just have two groups. It's even more of a separated city, since the two populations are not integrated.

DG — Exactly, but it's more than two groups. My objection to this word is both to the term itself and to its application to reality: it would be difficult to define these cities, or even Israeli society as multicultural, or mixed, since the local cultural arena often functions as one of conflict—even violent strife—between different groups,

rather than being shaped by mutual respect and enrichment. In reality such "mixed" cities result in sterile zones, similar to the idea of gated communities. I think that the government's plans for mixed cities are another form of discrimination. Only Jewish neighborhoods are being built in Lod and in the neighboring city Ramla. The Arabs can technically purchase properties in these new neighborhoods, but it would be much harder for them to do so.

SP — Let us return to your family for a moment. Being Arab and then, within that minority, also being Christian is like being a minority within a minority. I think this is not very well known. We also talked about the ghettos that existed and that are neither documented nor widely known about. Considering these not such well-known subjects, I was wondering how your show at Israel's Petach-Tikva Museum "Georgiopolis" (2009) was perceived.

DG — The most common reaction of the Jewish visitors was astonishment. I had some people who were upset with what my work exposed and even asked me to stop lying to them, but a lot of them were really grateful. I am trying to challenge the dominant and constructed Israeli mainstream narratives. I believe that racism is rooted in ignorance and that this is relevant to all sides. Israel was built on the belief that the Jewish nation was returning to their land after 2000 years of exile. But the land was not empty, neither in biblical times nor in the 20th century. The argument about whose land it originally was is irrelevant to me. It's a battle of knowledge and of written history.

SP — And to become aware of another culture, which is part of the Israeli culture.

DG — I believe my work doesn't only talk about the Christian minority. It raises universal issues of identity, mirrored in this minority. This exhibition relates to a specific community and place in Israel, but it is relevant anywhere in the world where people struggle with their identity and with their self-definition in the face of change.

SP — This is a fundamental question. And then you are the third generation to the occupation, which is interesting, because the term is usually used for the third generation to the holocaust.

DG — ...I am also third generation to the Holocaust.

SP — I think the generation before, as you said about your uncles, was less

connected to their identity and tried to adapt to the new situation. Perhaps only the third generation is really stable enough to raise their voice.

DG — I am often asked why I think that Arab-Israeli artists don't deal with these topics. I feel that many Arab artists working today try to avoid these issues.

SP — Why do you think this is so? Are they afraid to deal with them?

DG — I think it's a question of the right platforms. All over the world, not only in Israel, people are going back to their roots. This phenomenon can be found in all sorts of communities, as a reaction to globalization.

SP — Is there a link between your subject of representing minorities and your work in video and photography? Why have you chosen these media?

DG — I believe the medium an artist chooses is connected to his nature. In my case it suits my character.

SP — I think it's striking that many Israeli artists who succeed abroad, especially those whose work touches on politics, choose to work with video. Maybe, as you say, this is the case because it is much more closely linked to reality than other media.

DG — There is a slice of reality in photography. It is always manipulated; it is never pure, but still reality. I see my work as a junction of history, culture and art. I generally call this a social-poetic process: to formulate sociological aspects in a manner that extracts a poetic dimension from them. The form serves the content, and the content is derived from the form. I see the artists' primary role as researchers who look at reality and analyze it.

SP — Upon reflecting what is most important, I think it is a vital artistic approach to confront what is around you.

DG — I am obligated to deal with that.

SP — So it's an inner need for you?

DG — It is. The first step of civil responsibility is simply to engage with history from a wider perspective. With "Georgiopolis," my exhibition at the Petach Tikva Museum, I really felt that the Israeli audience was going through a process that was beyond the aesthetic experience. It happened through the art, and it was an emotional and social process as well.

SP — You present complex issues, one gets to know your subject closely and on an intimate level, which otherwise is not easy to access.

DG — I once called it a "honey trap." The viewer follows the charismatic characters with a smile; he can't help but connect with them. I'm not hiding this method.

SP — I think it's interesting that in each film you present more unanswered questions than what is actually answered or dealt with.

DG — Yes, what the characters don't want to talk about, what can be read between the lines, is the real story. Just as we mentioned at the beginning of the conversation—how to read history against the grain. Often, instead of answering my questions, the characters tend to respond with other questions. I also believe that when they do give an answer, this is the right answer for this specific time, in that very moment, but perhaps if I went the next day, or if it were a different interviewer, their answers would be different.

SP — Yet you, specifically, can introduce a very personal view onto the story, which represents a wider history of Israel's past and its present. And maybe also its future.

DG — In the videos, the subjects answer in two different states of mind, and this is another reason why I find photography and film so fascinating. One is the photographed state of mind, where the camera represents a way of communicating with the public, and when you are recorded you talk differently. In this state of mind, they look directly at the camera and talk to it, and they have something to say to the imaginary viewer. The other state of mind is when they talk to me as a family member, and they forget the camera, they look at me, and what they say is more personal, without their masks. There is much to learn from this gap between the public persona and the personal one. It's fundamentally a question of identity.

SP — I have a last question, which you probably don't want to answer. What is your identity?

DG — Ask me tomorrow.