Fazal Sheikh. Desert Bloom 9. *2011.*

ZAHID R. CHAUDHARY

This photograph was taken by Fazal Sheikh on October 10, 2011, as he leaned out of a two-seater airplane with its side door removed, over the Negev desert.[1] The abstract forms are the wheat fields of Moshav Yoshivia, sown in an area between three villages in the Negev desert, each established soon after 1948 and built on the lands of Palestinian villages, lands that remain contested to this day. *Desert Bloom 40,* from the same series, shows the remains of Palestinian homesteads evacuated when the Israeli military established a live-fire zone on the site, a common means of Israeli expropriation of land in the desert. The series also includes the GPS coordinates of the sites on view, signaling that the whole world is a grid of homogenous space, abstracted for various purposes, potentially subject to a military gaze, and they also mark a specificity whose meaning is only legible by means of that grid. In the age of Google Earth and drone warfare, how do we read the abstractions produced by the simple fact of these views taken from above? The denotative information about the shapes and figures—wheat fields of Moshav Yoshivia here and live-fire zone there—has been available when these works are displayed in museums and in the published book of the complete series. Such information is a critical part of the artworks themselves.[2] These photographs emerge from a historical context of competing and unequal claims concerning visibility. In Israel/Palestine, forms of evidence as well as disclosure are critical to the ongoing expropriation and contestation over land and resources, contestation that takes up a range of political narratives, from the juridical to the mythic (both are often imbricated here). Sheikh is a cosmopolitan photographer based in New York. He is primarily known for his documentary work, and his previous projects have explored issues of displacement, mourning, and marginalization across a wide range of countries: Afghanistan, India, Somalia, Kenya, Pakistan, and Malawi. The "Desert Bloom" photographs are positioned somewhere between the singularity of a unique space and time and the shared historical processes that bear upon

1.   I am using the desert's Hebrew name, "Negev," rather than the Arabic "Naqab," in order to mark in my own language the current colonized reality of this region.

2.   To assume that this information is somehow extraneous to these photographs—that the artwork's significance must be found only in the shapes and figures it represents or in the very objecthood of the artwork itself—is to share in a modernist fantasy about the artwork's self-enclosing unity and wholeness.

Sheikh. Desert Bloom 40. *2011.*

that singularity. As such, the abstraction of these works is not the kind of abstrac-
tion that can be easily opposed to the figural or to the concrete. These images are
abstract *and* figural, and they indicate world-historical forces *and* uniquely local
histories.

That might be one way of understanding the politics of their abstraction. But
is abstraction itself ever truly apolitical? To turn its back to the world and revel in
pure form, abstraction must assume a stance that still carries with it a political
valence. Derived from the Latin verb *abstrahere*, "to draw away," abstraction can be
leveled as a term of accusation, indicating maneuvers of distancing or even eva-
sion, or as praise, signaling an expansiveness, a peek into the capacious nature of
even a single shape. The high-modernist understanding of abstraction is often
read as a rejection of the concrete—art's recursive turn onto itself, and into pure
form. Global modernist traditions, however, position abstraction very differently.
Take, for example, the sculptures of African-American artist Senga Nengudi, made
from darkly colored nylon pantyhose, which evoke a gendered experience of race
whose visceral nature refuses a single name or reference. In Nengudi's work, race
and femininity hover as figures at the edge of our conceptual grasp, coming

together but also coming apart as concepts, precisely because of the nature of her abstraction. Or consider the strange abstraction of advertising images, in which the model pictured does not designate an individual but a type, a shared fantasy, or a wish. Brief as they may be, these examples make plain that "to abstract" does not mean to suspend referentiality but to engage it.

Abstraction, like modernism, has multiple and global genealogies, from the calligraphic abstraction of painters such as Anwar Shemza and Ibrahim El-Salahi to the line drawings of Nasreen Mohamedi to the abstract expressionism of Natvar Bhavsar, not to mention the multifarious art forms of Latin American *modernismo.* Previously existing traditions, including the arabesque, calligraphy, and the reactivation of forms from indigenous art, all enter into the global history of modernist abstraction. Such a genealogy of abstraction is necessarily discontinuous and fragmented, and it is within this non-originary lineage of abstraction that a cosmopolitan photographer such as Fazal Sheikh operates. For this lineage, European aesthetic forms are simply one among other overlapping traditions.[3]

In common parlance and common misunderstanding, "to abstract" means to avoid a reckoning with the singularity of the object at hand, a problem all the more paradoxical for abstract photography since the medium's authority would seem to reside in self-evident referential claims, largely based on its rhetorics of presence. For high modernists, abstraction was tinged with a dual reflexivity: The painted form was both autonomous and contingent, as the surface upon which forms could be painted at all. As Rosalind Krauss put it, for modernist painters "this [painted] square . . . is both a beyond and the conditions for mapping that beyond."[4] By this token, all photographs would be abstractions at the point of inception: The objects they depict are at the same time the conditions of those objects' visibility. In Lyle Rexer's words, "What light does, a photograph is."[5] Photographic abstraction thus requires a rethinking of terms borrowed from the discourse on painting, and while photography may have been in dialogue with painting, the phenomenological status of its objects is such that this dialogue sometimes happens at cross-purposes, especially when geared toward non-problems concerning the fate of photography as art. From Anna Atkins's cyanotypes of botanical forms and William Henry Fox Talbot's photogenic drawings to Ellen Carey's and Trevor Paglen's photographs, abstraction has woven through photography's history, and in each historical instance its meaning has continued to change. Walead Beshty's caution—that photography seems to become most abstract when one allows its representational content to supersede its status as an object synchronized into forms of ideological reproduction—is helpful but limited, since photographic rhetorics are no longer

3.   Thanks to Kajri Jain for helping me think through this framing for Sheikh's work.

4.   Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography and Abstraction," in *A Debate on Abstraction* (New York: Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 1988), p. 67.

5.   Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2013), p. 16.

reducible to the photograph-as-object.[6] Not only must one be wary of generalizing abstraction as conceived by its modernist iterations, but one must also be aware of how changing photographic practices have conditioned the meanings of its abstraction at every turn.

Studies of photography perennially revisit the problem of the exact relationship between a photograph and the object it pictures. Every history of photography contends with this relationship, and as each account seeks to correct the one preceding it, it reorients this relationship between the photograph and the world. Can photography be said to be a variant of language? Is its indexical truth a source of certainty or doubt? Does its situation among varying representational and cultural practices render it another form of representation, or can it be said to be fundamentally nonrepresentational and abstract? No doubt, as George Baker has argued, photography is now practiced in such an expanded field that the question of its medium specificity is a false problem.[7] Baker points to the tendency of the discourse on photography to shuttle between binaries like art/science, truth/falsehood, or stasis/narrative. To these we can add Kaja Silverman's recent contribution—evidence versus disclosure. (Silverman prefers disclosure, relegating the evidential to vulgar instrumentalism.)[8] Such binary thinking across opposed terms rarely posits a continuum between the oppositions or any intermixing of terms, which suggests an epistemological anxiety about photography itself. Since its inceptions, photography has been haunted by unknowability, be it through belabored points about photography's relationship to death (the very limit of knowledge) and the spark of contingency introduced to the lens, which always sees more than the photographer intended, or recent pronouncements about the uncertain nature of photographic representation given its digital coding. Unknowability not only renders all photographs abstract in a very general sense but also fuels the sense of epistemological mastery produced by thinking in binarisms.

Fazal Sheikh's photographs resist such conceptualizations. While most of his work consists of portraits, his series often contain a small number of works that render the human figure or an incidental detail abstract. In the series "Ramadan Moon," for example, Sheikh intersperses portraits of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somali female refugee in an asylum seekers' shelter in Holland, with patterns of vegetation, the stars, or reflections in the water. Wardeere's husband and son were left behind in Somalia, and these abstract shots, often dark but sometimes shimmering, seem to figure both the absence of loved ones and the consolation and illumination of prayer (Wardeere is a religious woman). No doubt they can also be read as figures of longing, forms of correspondence that

6.   See the exchange between Walead Beshty and George Baker in *Words Without Pictures,* ed. Charlotte Cotton and Alex Klein (Los Angeles: Aperture, 2010).

7.   George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field," *October* 114 (2005), pp. 121–40.

8.   Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: or The History of Photography, Part I* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

evoke a host of subjective associations. "Ramadan Moon" is a composite portrait of a subject, and a reflection on the subjective state of being a supplicant in an asylum shelter in Europe.

In 2011, Sheikh participated in a residency hosted by fellow photographer Frederic Brenner in Israel and the West Bank. Brenner brought together six photographers (none of them from Israel or Palestine) around a single theme—"this place"—that explored the place of Israel and Palestine as both location and metaphor. When the exhibition traveled to the Brooklyn Museum, the activist group Decolonize This Place staged a protest against it. In its protest, the group pointed out that the funding for the exhibition came from a diverse range of ideologically suspect sources, including hard-line Zionist groups, organizations involved with the Israeli military, and individuals who have sought to erase the presence of Palestinian people or denigrated their claims to sovereignty. Accusing the Brooklyn Museum of "artwashing" the political realities of the Israeli occupation, Decolonize This Place also pointed out a problem at the heart of art institutions everywhere: that "most funders of the show come from the 1%" and that "a special subset of funders are from the elite 0.1%."[9] Decolonize This Place raised an important and difficult question, one that was at the heart of the Frankfurt School's discussions on aesthetics and politics: How do we approach the artwork when the conditions that produce it are unconscionably inhumane, that is, when the social relations that give rise to forms of aesthetic beauty are so patently unlivable to so many people? Walter Benjamin's reflection about the necessity of viewing cultural treasures—whose origin one "cannot contemplate without horror"—with what he called "cautious detachment" has never been more relevant than in considering the works produced in *This Place*, even if Sheikh's work in the exhibition critically engages the very history that made his images possible.[10]

Sheikh takes the 1948 war as a point of departure for his tripartite project. This war stemmed from the United Nations' approval of a partition plan for the region and led to the dispossession and murder of Palestinians, with entire villages depopulated or replaced with Jewish settlers. Indeed, Jewish migration to the region had been accelerating over the course of the twentieth century, culminating in the 1936–39 Arab revolt against British rule, which had overseen the Jewish migration to Palestine, resulting in many Palestinians' being pushed off their land. Sheikh's photographic engagement with the history of the region takes up the problem of the historical trace, that strangely abstract cipher that promises so much to the person who claims it. *The Erasure Trilogy* was composed of three series: "Memory Trace," a combination of location views and portraits showing remnants of pre-1948 Palestinian presence in Israel as well as a handful of portraits of

9.　　http://www.decolonizethisplace.org; Also see "Decolonize This Place" at https://decolonizethisplace.wordpress.com/.

10.　　Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, annotated edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 391–92.

Palestinians who were displaced in 1948; "Desert Bloom," composed entirely of aerial views of the Negev desert, appended with GPS coordinates in the accompanying text; and "Independence/Nakba," which marked the sixty-fifth anniversary of the 1948 war through portraits of Palestinians and Israelis, one for each year since the war. Concerned as it is with what does and does not remain of the previous Palestinian presence in Israel, "Memory Trace" sets the tone for the project overall. The photographs are accompanied by texts that explain the significance of the site and combine eyewitness accounts of the Israeli military expelling or killing residents with plainly stated facts about (and GPS coordinates for) the site from 1948 to today. Sheikh explains, "As the generation of witnesses to the events of '48 begins to pass away, so, too, the sites, the vestiges of their homes and villages, are fading, subsumed into the landscape, vanishing from both view and consciousness."[11] The trilogy is thus at its heart documentary: The empty plot of land with a slight protuberance signals a destroyed village in "Memory Trace"; the marks on the Negev desert, visible from the air, show evidence of livestock having been reared there in the past in "Desert Bloom"; the faces in "Independence/Nakba" reveal traces of both resemblances and divergences. *The Erasure Trilogy* asks us to consider the status of the trace and provides different aesthetic strategies for doing so. "Memory Trace" documents what remains of sites razed or altered in 1948, and of the marks of history on the faces of Palestinians who survived that year. These marks are all abstracted with respect to a single temporal origin: 1948. In "Independence/Nakba," the paired portraits of Israelis and Palestinians presents each face in juxtaposition with its political consort, and emplace these pairings into a series that leads from infants born just recently to two individuals born in the fateful year of 1948. The formal realism of the individual portraits gives over to abstraction when presented as a series, a presentation that emphasizes the passage of time: homogenous empty time—an abstraction central to the operations of modernity—has been experienced as anything but empty or homogenous if judged by the traces left on the faces of older generations. The traces of time's passage on these faces record the natural processes of aging—a similarity impossible to disavow across each pair of "twins"—but also realities that supplement the mere fact of aging, that speak to the differential forms of life encoded in the political divide: Israelis/Palestinians; Independence/Nakba. The trace here speaks of both correspondence as well as divergence. In "Desert Bloom," unlike the other two parts of this series, abstraction enters into the frame of every image as a part of the artwork's formal composition.

In *Desert Bloom 44* we see a forest planted on the former land of the village Al-Araqib; the notes in the published volume explain that a Bedouin cistern is visible in the top left, along with traces of a Bedouin homestead in the lower right.[12] *Desert Bloom 22* shows discarded plastic piles burning in the outskirts of Moshav Mivtahim, established in 1947 by Ha'oved HaTzioni ("The Zionist Worker," a

11.   Fazal Sheikh, *Fazal Sheikh: The Erasure Trilogy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), p. 5.

12.   As with most terms in Israel/Palestine, the word "Bedouin" is itself contested: For the Israeli state, it signals a population other than Palestinians. For Palestinians, Bedouins, too, are Palestinians.

Sheikh. Desert Bloom 44. *2011.*

Zionist Youth settlement movement founded in 1936). These are views of the Negev desert during a period of rapid transformation: At the time these photographs were taken, agents of the Israeli state were continuing to evict Bedouins from their settlements, forests were being planted, and the line of afforestation was being expanded as a result of natural and human-made processes. All of this, including the politics of establishing the "aridity line" (the limit beyond which no cultivation is possible), a line that changes with climate change but whose location can be adduced as evidence of "empty land," is painstakingly detailed by Israeli architect Eyal Weizman and Sheikh in *The Conflict Shoreline*, a valuable recent history of the Negev desert and the forms of expropriation—economic, nationalist, political—overlaid onto this landscape.[13]

The Negev desert is critical to Israeli nationalist ideology as a *terra nullius*, an empty and barren land made to bloom by the might of the Israeli state. Of course, this entails not only forcible eviction of its inhabitants but also environmental damage to the area itself. As Weizman recounts in *The Conflict Shoreline*, Israeli environmentalists have decried the destruction of ecosystems undertaken by the

13.　　　Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015).

Sheikh. Desert Bloom 22. *2011.*

Jewish National Fund's afforestation projects. "Desert Bloom" captures a social and natural world in transition and discloses traces of Bedouin habitations best apprehended by aerial photography. In *Desert Bloom 34* the circular stains show the earlier presence of livestock pens, and the varying degrees of shade across the stains indicate how many rainy seasons have washed down on these traces.

Starting in 1966, many Bedouins were forced to live in townships that were often located in the most arid areas and overpopulated, with access to few energy sources. Weizman has referred to these reservations as "concentration towns," evidence of an age-old colonial strategy of containment and slow violence. Between 1966 and 1989, seven such "concentration towns" were built, and today they are home to about 135,000 Bedouins. According to Weizman, about 80,000 Bedouins have refused to settle in these townships, returning to the routes of their nomadic settlements across the Negev. The Israeli state treats those returning as invaders, refusing permits for constructing homesteads and withholding basic infrastructure. Nuri Al-Uqbi, one resident of the townships, compares the fate of Bedouin townships with those of Palestinian refugee camps, noting that while "refugee camps are supported by the UN, we are supported by no one. We have no electrici-

Sheikh. Desert Bloom 34. *2011.*

ty, no roads, no water, no schools, and no one to provide us with medical aid and food that we need. . . . Our Nakba was not to be expelled outside the country, our catastrophe was to be concentrated."[14]

Currently a legal dispute continues in the Israeli courts between the Al-Uqbi tribe and the State of Israel.[15] Ancient cities buried in the Negev are adduced as evidence of Zionist claims to the land, and with reference to nineteenth-century European travel accounts that describe the land as empty and arid, the Israeli state refutes Bedouin land claims. The bedrock for the state's refusal of Bedouin claims to the land is the "Dead Negev Doctrine." Traceable to mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman land laws that encouraged continuously cultivated land, the doctrine gave ownership of the land to anyone who cultivated it continuously for ten years, and referred to sporadically cultivated land as *mawat* or dead. Neither the British nor the Ottoman rulers extended the reach of this law beyond the

14.   Quoted in Weizman and Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline*, p. 33.

15.   See Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Representing Palestinian Dispossession: Land, Property and Photography in the Settler Colony," *Settler Colonial Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1–18; and Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

aridity line. Israel incorporated the Ottoman law into its state apparatus by desig-nating the entire desert to be legally dead, but it ignored the attendant Ottoman law that would grant autonomy to the inhabitants of the land. In the ongoing dis-putes over land claims in the Negev, Bedouin accounts are discredited as stories told orally and therefore mere hearsay. The written accounts of European travel-ers through the Negev, with their orientalist reveries about the emptiness of the desert, its arid climate, and its barrenness, on the other hand, have been accept-ed by the courts as sound evidence. Interestingly, aerial photography from the end of World War I has also been presented in the legal disputes, but many such photographs were taken in the summer, when the Bedouin had vacated their encampments, and the grainy images do show some traces whose meaning is widely disputed within the courts.[16] It is in this legal and historical context that Sheikh set out to take photographs of the Negev. In a political and historical con-text where evidential truth is precisely at stake, the indexical traces of Bedouin homesteads are critical to the truth these photographs record. At the same time, such truth is not reducible to evidence. To understand these strangely abstracted indexical traces, two interrelated histories are critical: aerial photography and primitive accumulation.

Aerial photography came into its own concurrently with abstraction at the start of the twentieth century. Although Nadar famously photographed Paris from a hot-air balloon and kite photography took off in the 1880s, it was not until World War I that aerial photography is constituted as a genre. While the high modernists were engaged in formal experimentation through abstraction, a strange form of abstraction was already at work in the service of war. Henri Lefebvre speaks of abstract space as that which renders the world homogenous, a form of perception and cognition made possible by capitalism and the war machines unleashed in its service.[17] One might argue that one cannot speak of abstraction in connection with aerial photography produced instrumentally for purposes of war, because the photograph records things far too concretely: enemy military installations, civilian areas, access to water, etc. However, insofar as these denotative views are often put in the service of capitalist expropriation, military aerial shots mobilize the con-crete in the service of the abstract. Indeed, aerial photography was among the practices that modernist painters drew upon. Kazimir Malevich based a few of his paintings on aerial shots of cities, and some modernists thought that aerial pho-tography finally proved that the new pictorial problem for art was to engage shapes and planes as figures. Paul Saint-Amour describes photogrammetry, which relied on aerial photography, "as the triumph of applied modernism."[18] He pre-sents a stunning example of a 1918 atlas, commissioned by the Royal Air Force,

16.   Weizman and Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline*, p. 49.

17.   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 229–91.

18.   Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Applied Modernism: Military and Civilian Uses of the Aerial Photomosaic," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, nos. 7–8 (2011), p. 254.

that labels aerial photographs of the English countryside as "Cubist" country and "Futurist" country. Jeanne Haffner has shown, however, that military use of aerial vision is not the only story one can tell, for aerial photographs were also used for social-scientific research, urban planning, and, later in the twentieth century, activism against forms of biopolitical governance.[19]

Certainly the aerial images of the Negev desert produced by the British military in the service of colonial war were intended to sustain the expropriation of colonial lands. Marx called such expropriation "primitive accumulation," a process that includes colonial claims to foreign lands but also the longer history of the capitalist state's violent takeover of the commons. From a capitalist perspective, resources and productive forces are critical because they can be abstracted into value. When Marx detailed the long history of primitive accumulation at the end of volume one of *Capital*, he included everything from medieval European laws against vagabondage, the tragic histories of eighteenth-century clearances in Scotland and elsewhere, the gradual appropriation of the commons by capital, and the network of colonial expansionism. Among the many results of primitive accumulation is the transformation of producers into wage laborers, or, in the case of Israeli expropriation of the Negev desert, into wage laborers as well as stateless people living in contained spaces—people made stateless then penalized for being so. Marx's account of primitive accumulation is an account of violence and law's intimate embrace; it is a history "written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire."[20]

There are three aspects of Marx's account of primitive accumulation worth recalling when considering the history of the Negev desert. First, by "primitive" (*ursprüngliche*) Marx was referring not to a process from the past that happened only once so much as to the very mechanism of capital's ongoing logic.[21] *Ursprüngliche* means originary, not only in the sense of time but also in the sense of a fundamental element of accumulation, one of its ongoing conditions of possibility, and as such a constantly reproducible origin. Primitive accumulation happens again and again: each time capital constitutes a new arena as suitable for extraction; each time a previously noncapitalist field is taken over by the logic of capital; each time the paltry protections of an older system of organization are overcome to make way for capitalist extraction. No matter how abstract capital becomes, primitive accumulation remains not only a trace of the past but also a trace of the future, signaling a potentiality. Second, it is the state (or state authority displaced

19.   Jeanne Haffner, *The View from Above* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

20.   Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), p. 875.

21.   For a succinct account of the strange temporality of primitive accumulation, see Massimiliano Tomba, "Accumulation and Time: Marx's Historiography from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*," *Capital & Class* 37, no. 3 (October 2013), pp. 355–72. For an account of primitive accumulation and photography in other contexts, see Andrew Fisher, "On the Scales of Photographic Abstraction," *Photographies* 9, no. 2 (2016), pp. 203–15. See also Jens Andermann, *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), pp. 185–206.

onto other agents) that authorizes distinct processes serving capitalist extraction. This suggests that primitive accumulation is always partly a reorganization or transformation of sovereignty.

Finally, primitive accumulation operates by means of analogy. Without the state synchronizing previously discontinuous phenomena, creating the conditions of capitalist abstraction, expropriation would not be possible. Marx inventories highly varied cases—from draconian punishments for begging to the gradual expropriation of the commons in the service of capital—under the rubric of primitive accumulation. The inventory of violence he provides, which links a diverse set of historical and political experiences, suggests that analogy is the very condition of capitalist expropriation; in order for primitive accumulation to happen again and again, the new situation must bear some resemblance to the old. Juridical and economic abstraction is at the root of the expropriation of land and resources. Making the desert bloom, a key feature of the Israeli nationalist mythos, is a result of the long history of primitive accumulation. Moreover, the desert becomes a productive space not just because there are wheat fields but because weapons testing and uranium enrichment occur there. Its blooms are vegetal as well as chemical, signifying life but also its destruction. The law and the military are the means for securing the state's interference, forms in which the state preserves itself, and the consolidation of state sovereignty develops through the very mechanisms that render the desert a productive space.

For Israel, such state preservation has increasingly involved outsized investment in global weapons markets, linking the scene of primitive accumulation in the Negev to the centers of finance capital in the United States and Europe. Fredric Jameson has closely tracked the disturbances that finance capital creates in culture. In an era when intricate financial transactions themselves become the levers for producing capital, the scene of capital growth is no longer centered on the spaces of production such as the factory. Speculation renders capital free-floating, and this intensifies the abstraction already present in capital's earlier historical moment: "Globalization is rather a kind of cyberspace in which money capital has reached its ultimate dematerialization."[22] And yet, as he notes elsewhere, "the idea that this society is no longer motored by production" ought to be greeted "with laughter" given that it is often expressed from the comforts of a "virtually completely *built* environment."[23] Finance capital is an intensification of economic abstraction, not its invention, and it carries a critical trace of primitive accumulation's logic in that it converts previously neutral, nonproductive, or het-

22.   Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 154. Jameson explains, "Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense): as though somehow in the national moment money still had a content—it was cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railway money and the like. Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself off from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight" (p. 142).

23.   Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 354. Emphasis mine.

erogeneously signified transactions into profits and intensifies this logic by inventing wholly new forms of speculative transactions. And this abstracted realm is no less subject to crises than those before it, as the crash of 2008 so clearly demonstrated.

One image in "Desert Bloom" allegorizes the recursive place of primitive accumulation within finance capital. The formless canyon floor in *Desert Bloom 32* records impact craters that appear as pockmarks on a rocky landscape, indicating IAF bombing runs using dummy bombs (paid for by the speculative logics of international weapons markets). The image shows a simulated airstrip battered with repeated shelling, blooming with practice marks of wars to come. *Desert Bloom 32* testifies to a militarized cycle of production and waste, a Hegelian bad infinity at the heart of settler colonial fantasies in an era of global capital. Sheikh's photographs disclose the imbrication of primitive accumulation in the Negev desert with finance capital, some of whose agents underwrote the very artistic commission that made these artworks possible. Finance capital underwrites weapons markets and also makes possible the institutional mediation of the museum, the art fair, and the gallery exhibitions that have shown "This Place" around the world. The brutality of primitive accumulation, the primal scene of production itself,
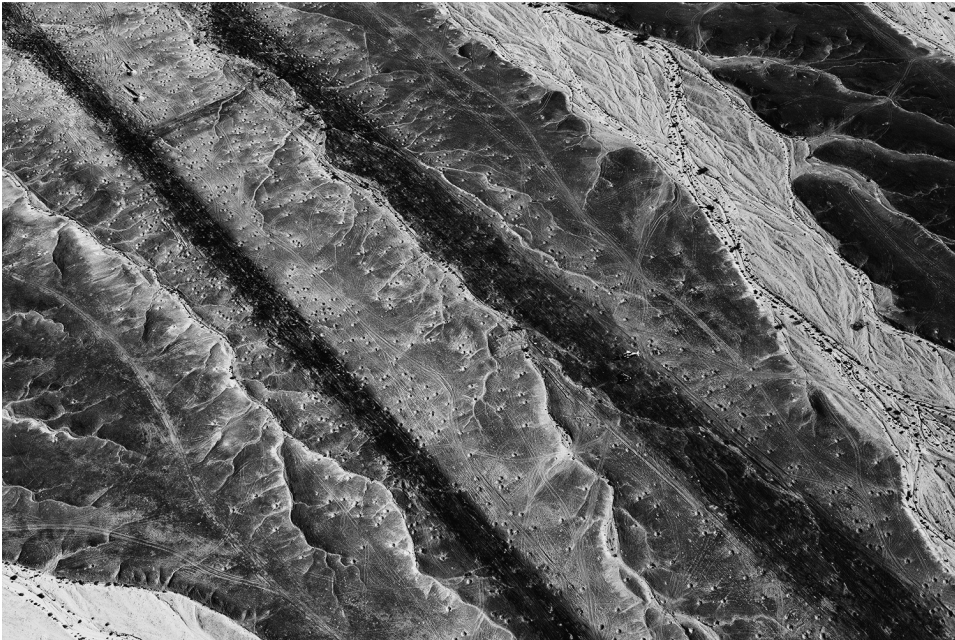
Sheikh. Desert Bloom 32. *2011.*

exists alongside the most dematerialized forms of capital's growth.[24] In *Desert Bloom 34,* the stains are a palimpsest of Bedouin livestock pens from previous seasons in an area that had just recently been designated a military live-fire training zone when the photograph was taken in 2011. The traces of Bedouin productive activity are traces of a claim to the land that operates along a wholly different economic ecology than the military live-fire zone that will slowly oversee their disappearance. Recording these conjunct realities in the same frame is one aesthetic strategy Sheikh deploys in representing these material realities of primitive accumulation's place (including accumulation by means of dispossession) within the forms of military-financial capital.

Inevitably, to record erasure means to record traces, and it is the nature of the trace to mark something that was there. The trace, in Derrida's words, is "a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace."[25] The indexical trace deflects attention to an elsewhere that is unseen. For all its promises of presence and visibility, the index is not the opposite of abstraction but instead shares in a form of abstraction. As I mentioned earlier, even the portrait series ("Independence/Nakba") and the photographs of sites of settler violence ("Memory Trace") make the particular trace abstract. Other artists have also deployed the indexical trace to explore its own form of abstraction. Trevor Paglen and Harun Farocki, for example, position their artworks at the very threshold of representation. In their work the trace becomes an aesthetic strategy for meditating on unseen materialities. Farocki's film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War)* famously shows aerial shots taken by an Allied bomber that unintentionally includes nearby concentration camps, but these camps are precisely "invisible" because the original viewers of the photographs were not looking for concentration camps in the images. The unfathomable remained the unimaginable in spite of being photographed. Paglen's artworks operate along a similar investigative track. For the most part his oeuvre consists of very large, often abstract or hazy photographic prints that seek to picture secret military installations, torture chambers, surveillance satellites, or drones. Paglen himself has said that his photographs "are useless as evidence" but that "they're a way of organizing your attention." In one of his better-known images, *Untitled (Reaper Drone),* (2010), we see a brightly colored sky—crimson, burgundy, violet, and blue. Only upon close inspection does the viewer see, in the far-right area of the image, a tiny black object, the killer drone of the title. In another project, "The Other Night Sky," Paglen photographs the night sky with streaks of American satellites, unknown space objects, and space debris as they move across the sky. The aim here is not merely to turn the gaze back onto the system of surveillance,

24.   Remember that one of the earliest uses of the word "factory" referred to a trading post in the colonies (specifically fur trading in North America).

25.   Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 156.

but to render the viewer's known world itself somewhat uncertain, to reenergize the powers of the sublime in the age of surveillance and the deep state, whose operations are embedded within the realms of the visible, the invisible, and the borders in between. Like Sheikh's aerial photographs, Paglen's abstraction works at the level of form, but form as inextricable from the social and collective world.

There are several orders of abstraction at issue so far in my discussion: the abstraction at the heart of the capitalist logic of exchange and the production of value, which is itself internally differentiated between the abstraction of finance capital and the abstraction of primitive accumulation to which it has a semi-autonomous relationship, and, last but not least, the abstraction of form in aesthetic practice. When an aerial photograph is used for purposes of war, Allan Sekula's claim that it carries "an almost wholly denotative significance" is a convincing one: "Within the context of intelligence operations, the only 'rational' questions were those that addressed the photograph at an indexical level, such as 'is that a machine gun or a stump?' . . . Efficiency demanded this illusory certainty."[26] Military efficiency demands that the indexical sign be read as a univalent one, and it is this univalent aspect of the index that Sekula calls illusory. If we were to read Sheikh's photographs of the Negev desert in a similarly instrumental way (i.e., this trace is a Palestinian homestead), we too would be reaching for an illusory certainty of the indexical sign's supposedly single meaning, one animated by a political desire.

Given the history of Israel/Palestine since 1948, it is precisely the distribution of the visible that is at issue in the ongoing forms of slow and also quick and spectacular violence. Gil Hochberg, in *Visual Occupations*, argues insightfully that three ways of seeing have become critical in the region: *concealment, surveillance,* and *witnessing.* The occupation's deleterious effects on Palestinian lives and the separation wall itself are made largely invisible to the Israelis, while Palestinians living under occupation are placed under intense and prolonged forms of scrutiny, hypervisibility, and surveillance. Critical projects on both sides of the border wall engage in forms of witnessing through artworks and activist actions. Hochberg's argument implies that the Israeli fantasy of concealment, not only of Palestinian suffering but of Palestinians themselves, paradoxically depends on the hypervisibility of Palestinians to the military gaze. In fact, the very same state apparatuses—the military and the law from which it derives its force—regulate the concealment of the occupation from everyday Israeli experience *and* the never-ending surveillance of Palestinian life. Given these politics of visibility in Israel/Palestine, it is difficult to hold apart the disclosure of a world from evidence for its existence, yet the border wall, the military installations, the tedious checkpoints, and the constant surveillance attempt to do just that.

If the so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict entails such a distribution of the visible, it places the viewer of Sheikh's works in a double bind: On the one hand, it

26.   Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983*, second revised edition (London: Mack, 2016), pp. 27–28.

becomes paramount to read the indexical sign in his aerial photographs as evidence of Palestinian homesteads; on the other, such a univalent view replicates militarized rationality. This is not to suggest that a political reading of the indexical signs—one that would read them as signs of dispossession and expropriation—is a tyrannical one, but to reflect on how such evidential truths are themselves a disclosive aspect of photographs. Moreover, evidence itself encapsulates a whole social world.

Photography is the result of receiving the world, whether digitally or on film. No matter how manipulated the photograph, this first step introduces a level of unavoidable contingency that has been celebrated by thinkers from Benjamin to Barthes. Such contingency—which, for Benjamin, indexes the optical unconscious and for Barthes produces the *punctum* itself—underlies the effect of Sheikh's abstraction in the "Desert Bloom" series. In the same way that such photographic contingency has always pointed to the unseen or as-yet-to-be-unconcealed, a certain representational ambiguity has always attended the photograph alongside its rhetorics of presence and truth. Sheikh's work demonstrates how such contingency was always a lever for a certain abstraction, and the photographs deploy abstraction to enrich their political meanings rather than detract from them. If the aerial view tends to render spaces homogeneous, these photographs take the same homogenizing gesture and render it political: All spaces could be as fraught as this space, they seem to suggest. At the same time, the images never untether their evidential truth: This space, here, now, shows traces of histories unavailable elsewhere.[27]

For Sheikh, abstraction is not emancipation from form nor a celebration of the autonomy of form itself, transcendent and unmoored. Instead, abstraction is a kind of methodology that seeks the unseen, not to render it entirely visible but to point out its existence. Sheikh deploys abstraction as an approach that makes visible a form of slow violence, one that is singular, concrete, and specific to Israel/Palestine, but also one that invites analogies to other places. However, in Sheikh's work, "looking like" does *not* result in an endless relay that refuses all form. Rather, these photographs refuse to relinquish the indexical—*both* as evidence and as disclosure—even as they reach for a play with aesthetic form.

These photographs foreground the desert itself—"This Place," in the words of Frederic Brenner's title for the artists' residency and the group exhibition for which Sheikh made this series. The Negev is both background and foreground, and therefore neither fully one nor the other. The stretching of an abstract space (itself a product of capital) makes all spaces continuous with the photographic spaces depicted here. "Desert Bloom" records everything: military installation, fields of crops, signs of climate change—that is, national defense, suste-

27.   This is not a "civil contract of photography" because not only is this notion a liberal wish in the absence of a supra-juridical authority that could guarantee such a contract, but also because the rational agents that the language of contract assumes need not be presupposed. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

nance and encroaching ecological catastrophe. As such, these images record an engagement with finitude, and even in the form of climate change, such finitude does not signal anything like a common humanity (a fantasy of a previous era of photographic discourse) but instead a greater differentiation of humanity itself. The concrete abstraction of the traces of Palestinian life index the might of the Israeli state, whose live-fire zones and military installations are emblems of a global military-financial complex. Primitive accumulation is linked to finance capital by means of a perpetual crisis, one that unfolds differently in other parts of the globe. Traces of crises and conflicts elsewhere send greater or smaller shocks throughout the global capitalist network. Such traces are ciphers of both connectedness and social divisions.

Essential to understanding the operations of Sheikh's abstraction is to grasp that analogies are not equivalences, so therefore continuity does not imply equivalence but the possibility of a translation, of this here looking like that there, of this here being connected to that there. These photographs suggest that such conditions of mimesis are the conditions of politics. Moreover, politics requires that correspondence be inflected with a sense of divergence and difference, as in analogy, which refuses to reduce one term to another.[28] This disclosive truth about the conditions of politics would in itself be meaningless without the photographs' indexical, evidential traces. Abstraction here does not hinge on self-referentiality but instead on the referential world *out there*. Abstraction and concreteness work in tandem, and disclosure and evidence reveal themselves as versions of each other, analogous, in Israel/Palestine and also elsewhere.

28.   While Kaja Silverman's discussion of analogy itself offers fresh insights into the nature of many photographic practices, she unnecessarily opposes analogy and disclosure to evidence and index. Sheikh's work demonstrates not only that these poles cannot be held apart, but that it could be politically deleterious to insist they can.