

## SEPTEMBER 11, 2014

A few months ago Roi Kuper and I got together in his South Tel Aviv studio. He showed me the beginnings of a new project, in which he intended to photograph the Gaza Strip from north, south, east, and west. He drove down there, set up his tripod at a number of different points bordering the Strip, and took one shot after another, creating a series of panoramas. Fields and pale blue skies and a serene, dusty, pinkish-gray horizon somewhere far in the distance: Gaza. The photographs were square and, in Kuper's signature style, divided into lyrical patches of nature delineating ground, vegetation, sky, and very few buildings. We began to call the project "Gaza Dream" and planned an exhibition at the Israel Museum. According to Kuper, "It's like a mirage – a city perched beyond the horizon, like one of Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities. We're used to seeing Gaza either in aerial photographs or in shots taken amid destroyed houses, but not from this distance. Not from the fields that are so immediate to those who live in this area. As I work on the project, I keep asking myself: what will grow in these fields?"

This morning we're meeting again, after all of it – the city beyond the horizon, and what has grown out of the fields – has recently been engraved on Israel's collective memory as the site of bloodshed and vicious warfare. Today, those same lovely squares of plowed fields and a far-off, pastel-colored Gaza can only be read as images that conceal more than they could possibly reveal. There's been another war in the meantime. The IDF entering Gaza for Operation Protective Edge, Hamas militants and Israeli soldiers fighting it out in countless tunnels underneath the ground that surrounds the Gaza Strip. The same ground that looked so peaceful and ordinary in

the photographs that showed no sign of people running for cover when the sirens sounded, huddling in shelters, or wandering among wreckage. A war halted Kuper's project. He had finished a few parts of it – pastoral scenes which harbored lethal threats. The threat of attacks from tunnels that can be imagined only in retrospect (though the tunnels already existed as a part, albeit unseen, of the photographs); the threat, as Kuper's subtle but clear critique suggests, of the profound psychological separation between Israel, Israelis, and Israeli consciousness and the Gazan neighbors so nearby.

For now, there's a cease-fire. In the last two weeks Kuper has resumed work on the project. Sometimes when he photographs, Israeli soldiers ask him to leave: this particular spot is still too dangerous. Photographing from the west – the sea – is out of the question. In part, the distance from Gaza that Kuper wishes to indicate with his photographs is a function of restrictions set by the state, but it also results from Israeli society's blurred or skewed vision, which amounts to an almost unconscious blindness toward the place. Now that the rockets have stopped, it seems possible to move in closer and examine what has become of the distance, the perceptions, and the blindness. Today I'm joining him on his trip.

We leave South Tel Aviv at nine in the morning, and by 9:45 we're turning off the Yad Mordechai–Sderot highway onto an unpaved road. For some reason, we've started to talk about whether this last war had any outstanding photographs – powerful images, important images, images that people noticed and retained in their personal or collective memory. We couldn't think of any. In this war, photography didn't deliver the goods: it no longer anticipated or triggered events; it no longer had the power to mold public opinion or exert pressure on politicians. As we drove, we wondered why. Was it because the images that ISIS supplies via YouTube serve as the current icons of horror? Or was something more permanent and fundamental involved, perhaps an essential change in photography's role vis-à-vis the devastation of war? I asked Kuper if he knew of any memorable images that had emerged from

the rubble in Gaza. The answer to this question is of course subjective, a function of how and how much one is exposed to the media. But even Roi Kuper, who has taught for years and numbers a great many photographers, here and abroad, among his friends and colleagues, couldn't come up with a single shot that might be called "iconic."

We reach a little mound of earth, a *tell*, just west of a good residential neighborhood in Sderot. At the base of the tell stands an iron sculpture of a man on horseback, in memory of "the *mukhtar* and fighter from Kibbutz Nir Am, Ya'akov Gavri." Lizards run to and fro, while the bench the Jewish National Fund has placed in the shade of an enormous pine tree is lifted right off the ground by the tree's spreading roots. Until 10:10 Kuper tries to decide whether or not to shoot from this spot – the cloudy sky is a bit too dramatic. From here, across a field and a grove of trees, past a dusty road, an unimpressive row of houses of different heights stands out. Beit Lahiya. He says, the problem with the clouds is that they're moving. He takes out the little prints he made at home from his previous panoramic shots and positions his old Hasselblad on a tall tripod, exactly matching the viewpoint of only two months ago. Takes out his light meter and rolls of film. He says that his distance vision is quite poor, so he's more or less shooting blind, using just the camera viewfinder. I climb up to take a look inside the camera. A square that's been flipped from right to left, a grid, and inside that: the field, the grove, Beit Lahiya – and the sea, a line which has suddenly become very clear and blue and cold. The recently introduced train to Sderot passes nearby; the morning breeze is still with us. We look out at the Gaza Strip, debating whether to photograph and what to write. Smoke slowly rises somewhere in the distance, or perhaps it's the dust raised by a tractor where they're working on the barrier, or maybe something else. Hard to tell. And then: *bang*. The loud click of the shutter. The silence that follows seems even louder.

After a few minutes, Kuper says that there's nowhere to move the tripod and he has to get the panorama by playing with the angle of the camera; another *bang*. An

even louder click, a petrifying click. It seems to make more noise than the train or the trucks on Highway 34 or the birds chattering at one another. The Hasselblad's ominous shutter versus the eternally astounding simplicity of the photographic act, or perhaps it's the suspense, that ongoing stress bequeathed by the recent war, the anticipation of the sound of the next siren.

At 10:30 he removes the film, writes something on the canister, and packs up the equipment. Fifteen minutes later, we turn westward to Route 232 and pass Kibbutz Mefalsim, where Kuper was born in 1956. Born right into the '56 Sinai Campaign, he says, spent the first days of his life in bomb shelters. By the time he was six, his family had moved to Ashdod. He doesn't have any relatives left on the kibbutz, nothing like that, and yet he tells me, every time they said on the radio "Siren in Mefalsim, siren in Mefalsim," I tensed up. Ten years ago, he photographed here for an autobiographical series of works, landscapes showing military training areas and dunes furrowed by tank tracks. Now Kuper is aiming for something broader and more conceptual, an attempt to circle Gaza even though it's prohibited – because circling Gaza is forbidden and because Gaza is already encircled.

10:58, the Asaf Siboni memorial. At this look-out point, a giant wind-chime with twenty pipes stands in memory of Staff Sergeant Asaf Siboni of Kibbutz Nir Am, killed at age twenty in the 1997 helicopter disaster. Facing Beit Hanoun, arid plowed fields, and down below, a reservoir with ducks sitting on its concrete edges. Right next to us, three shots: ack-ack-ack. They must have come from the nearby IDF firing range. Kuper also hears shots coming from far away, from the direction of the Strip. A lot of shots. There's no point in photographing here anyway, he says. It's too crowded – the houses in Beit Hanoun are too close, and don't give him that Gaza distance with its frail horizon. He doesn't even take his camera out of its case. The tripod stays in the car.

Twenty minutes later, we're at the Black Arrow memorial site, the place from which he photographed a pre-war panorama that has already been printed up for the

exhibition. Beside a grove of tamarisks, a marble plaza with audio stations telling about Israel's retaliatory paratrooper operations against infiltration from Egypt between 1953 and 1956. He gets his equipment out of the car and sets it up exactly where he photographed before. I can't recognize the area from the panorama I saw in his studio – it's changed so much. The long dirt mound that has since been piled up separates us from the Strip and hides many of the houses in that earlier image, a small copy of which Kuper now holds in his hand. He uses the other hand to change the film in his camera. The field that looked scorched in the picture is now neatly plowed and golden-brown. Three more shots from the firing range, ack-ack-ack. A garbage truck with a huge Israeli flag draped over the back and a military jeep pull into the site, blocking the camera lens. The sergeant shouts into his cell phone, it's not the right place, Tourjeman, someone's made a mistake. Clouds of white dust fly up, and we wait for them to subside. A pair of tourists who were already at the site move from one audio station to another. From the loudspeaker we hear: "The one who dreamed still has his dream. The one who fought always remembers why. The one who kept watch will yet see the light of day. And the one who has left us will never return." My smart phone tells me that the words to the song are by Didi Menosi.

After the jeep and the truck have gone, Kuper gets back to his camera. He stands over a big panel about "Operation Gaza, 1955" and a color photograph mounted on metal that shows the vista with place names indicated: Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun, Jabalia. What we see in front of us here – it looks nothing like the mounted picture. And you realize that the distance between you and Gaza is fixed in a strange moment, that uncanny moment when you look at a place while holding a picture of it – even a picture taken just then – and the place seems totally different. If you haven't experienced it, this moment is hard to explain, but once you experience it, you start to think back to all those pictures from Gaza you saw in the past, and to wonder if they bore any relation to the actual place and to the role it plays in the geography of your life.

The Armored Corps Band has finished singing "The one who dreamed." It's quiet enough to hear the click of the shutter, though I haven't heard it yet. Suddenly he says to me: Once this was all orchards. When I was three, my adoptive father brought me here and asked, Will you let me be your father? A little while later, we've reached Nahal Oz. A small yellow sign on the road that circles the kibbutz: "Keep away. DANGER. Risk of sniper fire." Just opposite is Shejaiya. In Israel, this name now connotes the largest number of casualties. We see smoke rising. Kuper says that there's always smoke somewhere in Gaza, but it also looks like the white powder that rises every time some vehicle travels across a field here, or alongside the security barrier. You can't really tell – it's pretty cloudy. Here and there, we see a burnt patch in a field, left when a mortar landed, he says. And it's too close to photograph; houses fill the frame. Me, I can't see anything that seems to have been bombed.

About a half-hour later, we're in the fields of Kibbutz Be'eri. Along the way we saw more and more burnt patches. The tanks have gouged out the fields all over the place. More yellow signs warning of snipers. Now black smoke billows up in the distance. As we drive along a concrete road that dates back to the British Mandate, we can't see Gaza at all: small hills and pine groves are blocking the view, and anyway this is a less populated part of the Strip. It looks like a different place, with no horizon or sea. Kuper once photographed the low walls the British built around here, planning their defense against Rommel's forces that never made it this far. The walls stayed as they were and fields are sown around them – getting rid of the walls would be too expensive, kibbutz members explained to him. Kuper exhibited those photographs, which were part of his acclaimed "Necropolis" series, in a solo show at Tate Modern more than a decade ago. Now it looks completely different; then it was in black and white.

We continue on south to Ein HaShlosha. By now the windscreen is covered in dust. The landscape becomes flat. Here, there's no Gaza to our right. Irrigation systems wherever we look. It's less cloudy. A few minutes later, at the edge of the peanut

field, it appears right in front of us. Lots of beige and gray buildings, horribly crowded together: Gaza. A military jeep races after us and then vanishes. Kuper decides to get out and photograph; he hasn't been here before. Just walking away from the car raises so much dust that we have to wait before unpacking the equipment. The tripod stands in the field, but so far no click. He says that there is too much field and he needs a higher vantage point. Gaza will hardly be seen with all that foreground. But there isn't anywhere higher. Climbing onto the roof of the car would only get us into trouble. We need to drive between the fields toward Gaza, at least as far as that tank position over there. We suddenly glimpse a bit of the Mediterranean. On the other side of the peanut field, a Palestinian truck is driving in reverse, and we drive straight into the dust or smoke it's producing. We pull up in some hazy spot and once again the tripod and camera are set up, deep in the field. Sand and sun make it difficult to keep one's eyes open. *Bang*. A deafening click comes without warning. The noise really is startling, or perhaps what's alarming is the decision to shoot a photograph, right now, right here in the midst of all this quiet flatness.

At around 1:30, when we're in the car, he says that he can't take pictures now that the sun is so strong. The road we are on suddenly comes to an end, a surprisingly abrupt conclusion to the day. As though running away, we follow a sign to Tel Aviv, and the road seems open.

**Noam Gal**