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by Andreas Fiedler

Sowayma – a village in Jordan at the Dead Sea, 330 metres below sea level, a few kilometres away from the Israeli border. Some 450 people live in the village, all of them somehow related, practically none of them with Internet access. Not much traffic, jobs available only elsewhere, for example, at nearby luxury hotels that rise out of the parched landscape like artificial oases. Sowayma makes a hermetic impression, as if cut off from the rest of the world – but it is located in the midst of a roiling political hotbed.

Following a chance encounter and a spontaneous invitation, Gilles Fontolliet first visited the village six years ago and has since returned several times. As the guest of a large family, he approached the local community in small steps, immersing himself with the greatest of care in a network of social relations that had formed across generations. Family pictures, brought out by villagers for celebrations or other special occasions, proved to be a great help in this process. These pictures taken at professional photo studios in the nearest cities eloquently demonstrate what photography has always been able to do: they stimulate communication, function as a point of departure for the exchange of memories, generate a sense of community and identity, and foster a sense of belonging within the finely meshed social fabric. They are like pieces of evidence, reinforcing what has been passed on by word of mouth but often challenging it as well. And they also make an appearance when outsiders like Gilles Fontolliet come to visit. Such photographs are a source of fruitful even without sharing a common language.

The fact that few of the villagers seemed to have portraits of themselves inspired Fontolliet to embark on a photographic project in Sowayma; it emerged almost organically out of the daily life that he was sharing with the local residents. Without any particular conceptual specifications or restrictions, the artist started making portraits in the fall 2014 and then giving the sitters prints as a gift. With the simplest of means, improvised photo studios were set up in different places – in a living room, in front of a prized television set, outdoors on a dusty street or against the wall of a tent.

Everyone in the village was invited to be photographed and to decide when, where and how they wanted to face the camera. Fontolliet made sure to create a welcoming situation, marked by trust and empathy among the participants. The sitters had to address the familiar question of how they wanted to have themselves pictured – and above all, how they wanted to be seen by friends and neighbours on special occasions. Significantly, the photographs become a repository of how others perceive the subjects of the portraits. What motivates people to have themselves photographed in front of a car, on a camel or next to a bush at the side of a dusty, barren street?

In the meantime, the series comprises over 100 portraits and will be enlarged the next time the photographer comes to visit – not out of conceptual necessity but because the people in the village want them. Every one of these portraits is a moment of closeness frozen in time and, as such, embodies the core of the entire project. A video, showing how each of the pictures was made, complements this process and is an integral constituent of the series photographed in the fall of 2014. People are seen laughing and lamenting, chattering and posing – and then, click: The camera has captured a quiet, individual moment out of a lively procedure often involving the entire family. After the clearly audible click in the video, there is a cut and the next person prepares to face the camera.

Nowadays untold pictures are uploaded and liked, or not liked, on sharing platforms; the exchange is unlimited and unremitting. The problem of securing the data, relevant in view of the breakneck development of storage media, is largely ignored. However, if pictures of specific moments in one's own life are soon to be lost again, the act of remembering is likely to undergo fundamental change. Photography has not only influenced our collective memory more than any other visual idiom, it has also become a medium of preserving personal histories. In Sowayma, the prints end up in plastic bags and become rooted in the everyday life of the villagers. Acquiring a portrait of oneself goes hand-in-hand with the recognition of one's own transience, for the passage of time unmistakably brings to the fore the inevitable estrangement from one's own face in the photograph.

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Translated by Catherine Schelbert