

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS

OUTER VIEWS

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EYAL SIVAN

HARUN FAROCKI

PIOTR KRAJEWSKI

JORGE RODRIGUEZ GERADA

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EYAL SIVAN

o politics / archives / forbidden editing / provocation / religion / fear

Eyal Sivan is an Israeli self-taught documentary filmmaker who at first dropped out of school to pursue photography. On one of his fashion photography field trips an incident took place, which later turned into his first documentary film *Aqabat-Jaber* (1987). The film was screened at the *Cinéma du Réel* Film Festival at Centre Georges Pompidou and won the first prize. After this initial success, Sivan continued to make award-winning films that never failed to spur lively public debates. His films *Izkor: Slaves of Memory*, *Jaffa: An Orange's Clockwork*, *Route 181* and *The Specialist* have all achieved the status of cult documentary films.

The interview with Eyal Sivan was recorded at the Berlin Documentary Forum 2, where Sivan presented his recent project *Montage Interdit* (Forbidden editing), an online archive exploring and experimenting with possibilities of montage in documentary film.



Let's start with your background and education. You quit school and you never studied film.

I have no formal education, I left school quite early, I never finished my A levels. I was studying in Jerusalem and I started to work very early. I started as a still photographer and then I started with journalism. Then I moved to fashion photography and I left Israel and I started to make films without really learning. I continue to learn, I was learning through work, which is for me the real school, the school of work. I never forget that cinema is about labour first of all. And this is also why I don't teach film making as such – I teach film thinking. But film making is about thinking technology, thinking possibility, thinking potentialities. The making can be learned through the making, not by teaching the making.

What is missing today in art schools, in film academies, is the engagement of students in projects, the apprenticeship; this old tradition where you have a filmmaker or an artist and then you have trainees that you are working with and you learn the different feels of the film-making process. Draining cables like I did when I was fourteen, just electricity cables, and then putting up lights. And you see a kind of a strained effect with students that come out of cinema schools, who feel that they are 'filmmakers' because they learned filmmaking. And this is a strange fact. As someone who has no formal education I am kind of reluctant about the idea of teaching the "making", maybe in a kind of arrogant way. For me, teaching is also my way of learning. This is maybe also why each film that I work on functions as a type of a laboratory: they are very different formally and conceptually, even if I am kind of navigating in a small field of subjects.

Being a fashion photographer, how and why did you make your first film? What was it about?

It's interesting because there is a connection between the fact that I was a fashion photographer or wanted to be, and my first film. When I was in my last years in high school, before I left school, I took a beautiful girl to make a session of fashion photographs in the desert of Judea next to the Dead Sea, 30 kilometres east of Jerusalem. It's a place that is officially written down as an abandoned refugee camp on maps and in guides. It has mud huts built in the desert and when we came there, suddenly kids came to see us and I realized that people are living there and that it's not abandoned. And a few years later, when I left Israel and settled in Paris, I started to write theory in a very pretentious way. I was twenty years old and I thought that I can write about the theory of representation. I knew nothing about it! And I had to provide an example. And I recalled that camp and decided to make a film about it, which became my first film. It's called *Aqabat-Jaber*, the name of the camp, *Passing Through* (1987), which was the subtitle of the film. It's about a day in the life of a Palestinian refugee camp. It was 1987 when the film was completed, I was 23 years old and I presented it to the *Cinéma du Réel* competition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, which at the time was the film festival. And it so happened that I got the first prize for my first film, which was a surprise and which pushed me into two things: an announcement of a political engagement, to be an Israeli Jew that is doing a film in Arabic, an hour and a half, about a Palestinian refugee camp, asking about relations of Palestinians to the land and this desire of return. So I was suddenly very marked and recognized as an activist and pro-Palestinian. And at the same time,

because of that prize I suddenly was in all film festivals and I started to see what a documentary actually is, which I didn't really know before. So I was a maker and a spectator at the same time and things moved on from there. When I talk about this today I am very self-critical, because I understand that in fact what I did was a classical example of documentary cinema, which is first of all to go and film the Other, the poor, the suffering, with all the beauty of suffering. And in a way I maybe had an intuition about it, because my second film was in fact about us, about the Israelis, and about the education in Israel and about what I call the enslavement to memory. The film was called *Izkor: Slaves of Memory*. And it's about how the education aimed at eliciting a sense of victimization in Israel is in fact a method of instrumentalising memory with the aim of creating a certain type of obedient soldier who will fight in the name of his victimhood.

Was the controversy around *Route 181* intentional means to start a discussion?

You know, there's a nice proverb in Arabic that says: "when you plant the wind you gather the storm". So I wasn't surprised, I always took the notion of provocation in a positive way, which is to provoke something. This definition of controversial for me says nothing about me, it says a lot about who is using it. It's a very conservative position. If you're not controversial, what are you? Consensual? I mean, imagine if I were a consensual filmmaker, I would just go to sleep, right?

... No, I wasn't surprised, if I were surprised I wouldn't want to get into the controversy; if I didn't want to provoke something in the area of political conservative stagnation, I would make completely other films. It wasn't the first film that really raised controversy. When *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* came out in 1990, speaking about the instrumentalisation of memory, it highlighted the fact that Israel uses memory both to blame the world on the one hand, and to create this image of the good perpetrator - who always sees himself as a victim - on the other. This was also a kind of provocation, I would say, or let's rather use the word *avant-garde*. I think that somebody has to go to the front, and when you go to the front, you have one risk, to get wounded. I was wounded. The hysterical reaction in France was shocking. I left France after that, but I left France not because of those who attacked me, but because of all those that kept silent and said nothing. All those filmmakers, all those colleagues, all that French cultural milieu that venerated those who were attacking me, mainly Claude Lanzmann, Henri Lévy and all these contemporary French icons. But what really surprised me was the huge amount of cowardice, the

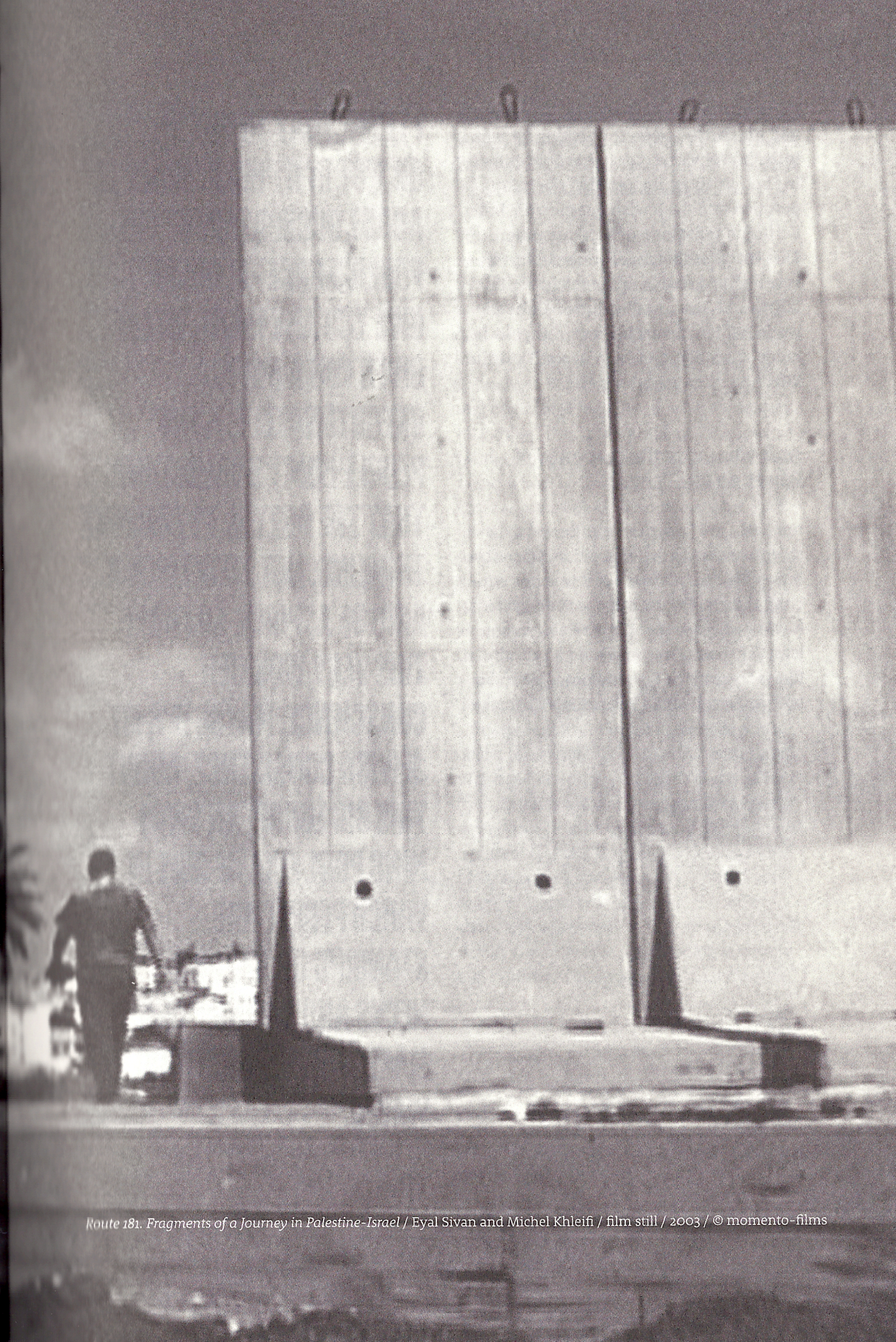
shyness of people to take a risk. But I was supported by fantastic people, I mean, one of the first people that supported me was Jean-Luc Godard, which is good, the other was Cvetan Todorov. I mean, it said a lot about what the French cultural milieu is about. Route 181 was the first film after the Algerian war that was censored by a French minister of culture, following a list, a petition, a letter that was sent to him, signed by Philip Solas, Kristova, Henri Lévy, Noémie Lvovsky, Arnaud Desplechin and all these people. And all this because there's a nice story in France. France had the French revolution, they killed the king but they never abolished the court. For some of them it was important to remain in the court. I left France for four years and then came back, but I have no contact with this French cultural milieu; and each time I ask for grants and funds in France, I am waved away. I don't know anyone who thinks I'm a bad filmmaker, but they're afraid for their own asses, excuse my expression.

What was in the film that provoked this response?

What provoked this response was in fact one scene which is closely linked to the project that I'm presenting at the Berlin Documentary Forum. It is the idea of Montage Interdit, a forbidden kind of montage, between two historical events. There's a scene in Route 181 in which a Palestinian barber speaks about a massacre that took place in 1948 by a Jewish militia. He tells his story as a witness who was asked, then a young seventeen year old boy, to take out the bodies from that Mosque where the massacre took place and burn them. He tells this story while cutting the hair of the co-director of the film, Michel Khleifi, and this scene was seen as a direct analogy or comparison with the famous barber scene from Claude Lanzmann's Shoah. Then the argument turned to the allegation that I was "nazifying" the Israelis. If the Palestinian barber is like the Lanzmann's barber in Treblinka, it means that I'm nazifying, that I'm comparing. This is what I call a forbidden montage, the fact of refusing to see, to consider that a historical event is unique on the timeline of history and not accepting the fact that events can be linked. I mean 8 May 1945 is the day of the end of the Second World War and the ending of the Nazis, but at the same time it is the beginning of the colonial massacre by the French people in Sétif in Algeria and those two events are linked. Like 1492, which is on the one hand the expulsion of the Jewish from Spain but it's also the discovery of the natives by the white men, or what is called in Europe the discovery of America that will become the beginning of the genocide. So the fact of accepting that there can be two or three elements at the same time, the fact that there is no compe-

I KNOW THAT IF THE UNION OF EUROPE WILL CONTINUE TO BE ABOUT WHO IS NOT EUROPEAN, WE'RE COMING BACK TO THE CATASTROPHE OF EUROPE. THIS IS WHAT WE'RE FACING TODAY: A DISCOURSE WHICH IS NOT ABOUT WHO WE ARE, BUT WHO'S NOT US. THIS IS WHAT'S COMING BACK. YOU KNOW, I HAVE A JEWISH MEMORY, AND THIS FRIGHTENS ME. EVEN IF THE JEW TODAY IS NOT THE JEW, IT IS THE MUSLIM, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER. EUROPE ALWAYS FINDS ITS NEW JEWS, IN THIS CASE THE MUSLIMS. BUT THIS IS WHAT EUROPE IS ABOUT, IT'S A GAME OF DEFINING WHO IS NOT US. THIS MEANS THAT EUROPE DOESN'T WANT TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR, AND SAY WHO WE IN FACT ARE. WHO ARE WE?

WE ARE THE ONES THAT COLONIZED, WE'RE THE ONES THAT MASSACRED, WE ARE THE ONES THAT PUT PEOPLE IN CAMPS, STALIN OR HITLER CAMPS, WE ARE THE ONES THAT CONTINUE TO GIVE LESSONS TO THE WORLD. IF EUROPE WON'T STOP IT, EUROPE WILL KILL ITSELF, AND WHEN I SAY KILL ITSELF IT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED IN THE '40S, EUROPE KILLED ITSELF.



Route 181. Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel / Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi / film still / 2003 / © momento-films

tition of victims. The barber of Lanzmann and my barber are not competing for who is the bigger victim. It's not about comparing but it's about the fact that the Palestine question and the Jewish question are both European questions at the same time. This is something that is untenable, this is something that is unacceptable in this fake world, the so called Judeo-Christian world, which means just one thing. To be Judeo-Christian means to be anti-Muslim. That's all, there's nothing else.

And what was the response of Palestine and Israel?

In Israel I am known as a critic and a dissident, as part of the opposition. Of course it was highly criticized but it was less criticized than in France, there was no hysteria, it was just a critique. For the Palestinians, at least for some, I'm considered a Palestinian filmmaker, which I'm very proud of: to be both an Israeli and a Palestinian filmmaker.

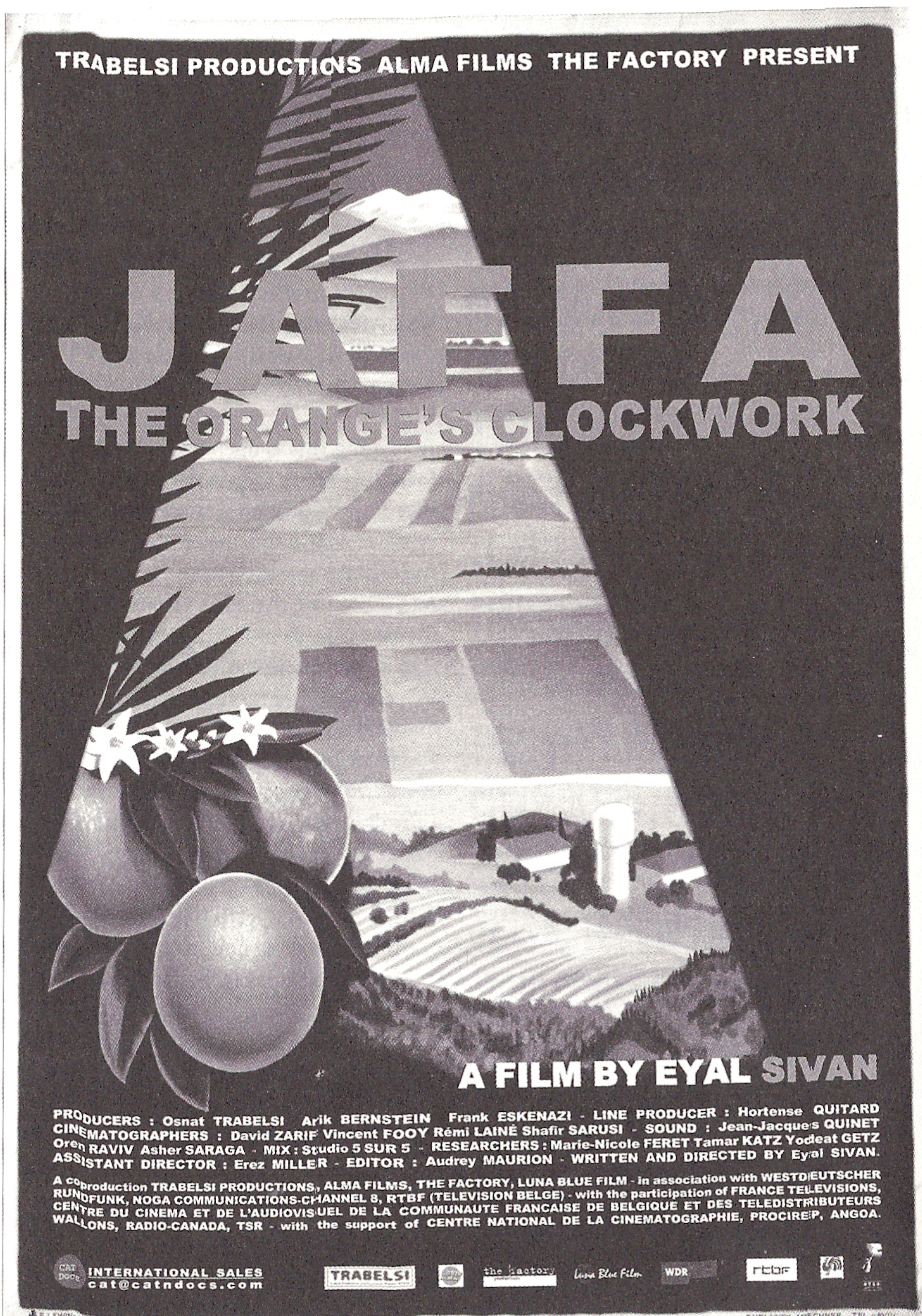
I THINK THAT TO PUT AN OBJECT IN A PUBLIC SPACE IS ABOUT OCCUPATION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE - IT DOESN'T GIVE YOU ANY RIGHT, BUT IT GIVES YOU A DUTY. UNFORTUNATELY, MANY PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT THE DUTY IS TO PROVOKE THINKING, NOT TO DELIVER A KIND OF ASPIRIN. SO I HAVE THIS VERY WORRIED CONSCIENCE, MAYBE IT'S MY JEWISH CONSCIENCE, ABOUT THIS BIG EUROPEAN SWIMMING POOL FULL OF SHIT IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE STANDING UP TO THEIR NECKS AND SAYING: "DON'T MAKE WAVES, DON'T MAKE WAVES."

Lanzmann has publicly expressed his views on your film Route 181. What about your views on his film, Shoah?

It is obviously a major work. But I think that it's not sacred, it's not holy, it's not something that you have to whisper when you speak about it. It can be criticized like any film, it can be watched as a film. I don't accept this terror that is imposed by Lanzmann and by the group around Shoah, in Lanzmann's words: "For a new kind of crime we have to invent a new kind of cinema." Shoah is a fantastic work but that doesn't make it something that we can't talk about normally, and even laugh about, if we want to. It's another film, it's not the event. But it functions today as an intellectual terror. As if Lanzmann has the copyright to the Shoah, but he doesn't. Hitler has the copyright.

It seems that the discussion around these films, also in this forum, is often focused on a theoretical analysis and abandons the actual topic.

Yes, my comment is that Europe is sick, people are afraid to think politically. We're in a situation where the absolute obstruction of theorization is used as a way not to deal with reality, the politics, the practice of everyday life, and it's about a refusal to do a montage, to edit. By editing I mean putting two things together in order to create a new thing. This is the problem I think we're facing. Europe is faced with a horrible moment, which is: it understands the notion of crisis as an absolute depression, whereas for me crisis represents a moment of potential. As you can see there is a fascination with the seventies or the sixties. What's the fascination of the sixties? The sixties and seventies are not just about aesthetics, they are not just about theory. They are about trying and believing that when you're doing, you're changing. In this sense I'm a fundamentalist. I think that putting an object in a public space is about occupation of the public space - it doesn't give you any right, but it gives you a duty. Unfortunately, many people don't understand that the duty is to provoke thinking, not to deliver a kind of aspirin. So I have this very worried conscience, maybe it's my Jewish conscience, about this big European swimming pool full of shit where people are standing and saying: "Don't make waves, don't make waves."



Jaffa - The Orange's Clockwork / Eyal Siwan / film poster / 2010 / © momento-films

What about your film Jaffa – the Orange's Clockwork?

Jaffa – the Orange's Clockwork is a film I made in 2009, but I wrote the idea for it many, many years before. In fact I took this brand, the Jaffa orange, known all over the world, and I linked it to the idea of the invention of Palestine's image. And I followed through archives and through witnesses the visual history of the branding of the Jaffa orange, and at the same time I tried to tell the story, to review the history of Palestine as it used to be before. For me it was a project about projection. How the west and a part of western Zionism projected on the Palestine, on the Holy Land. At the same time it was meant to review, which is a notion that is very important for me because of its double meaning: to view again and to review the archives in the sense of deviating the archives from the original organizational aim, in order to create another kind of narrative, to work the archives against the archives.

It is a continuation of a work that I started already with The Specialist - a film that I did about the Eichmann trial and another one, which I co-directed with my editor, which is about the archives of the Stasi, the ex-East German secret police which is about the surveillance. From there I went into Jaffa. Over the last years I'm really wondering about the idea of reproducing material and thinking more in terms of reviewing material, coming back to the archives, coming back to look at what there is inside the image and to consider the archives as a documentary space like any other. To consider the archive image as an image with which you can articulate something.

Jaffa is also a project about the past, which means about the future. This is part of my work because I'm linking my own work to

a very current situation, this engagement in the critique of Zionism and the Israeli apartheid, and part of it is bringing back forgotten memories of it is bringing past in order to give a key to the future, which is the last sentence of the Jaffa film.

How do you see the future of this conflict?

I think that first of all, in order to speak about the future of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict we have to define what the conflict is. If we understand that we're talking about a colonial conflict, we understand that we speak about decolonization. But we know following the decolonization of the sixties and the seventies, that it is not just about decolonizing the territories, but it's also about decolonizing the mentality of the settlers, which means the Israelis. I mean the double process of decolonization is also emancipation. And what's the future? The future is open, it can be chaos, it can be destruction, it can be a huge catastrophe, but it can also be the possibility of something completely new. I kind of believe that the only exit of that conflict is in thinking about how we, Israeli Jews, will integrate into the Middle East, and stop thinking of ourselves as white people.

You've addressed this topic in your last film Common State - Potential Conversation. Can you tell us more about it?

Common State, Potential Conversation is a series of twenty five interviews that I did with Palestinians and Israelis, mostly intellectuals, activists and artists. All filmed in their homes. I then created a double, split screen and you have an Israeli and a Palestinian, and they're talking. I created a virtual conversation in seven chapters. They just talk to each other without meeting, meeting only in the editing room. In the end it's what it's called, it's a potential conversation. It signifies also a kind of framing of what the potential conversation should be. It's not about two states or how we will cut land, or where we will take a little bit of territory. It goes much further, tries to think much further. So this is a virtual conversation which is possible in cinema, but it's not yet possible on the ground.

You said many times that you still feel very attached to the medium of photography. As a "political" filmmaker how would you compare these two mediums?

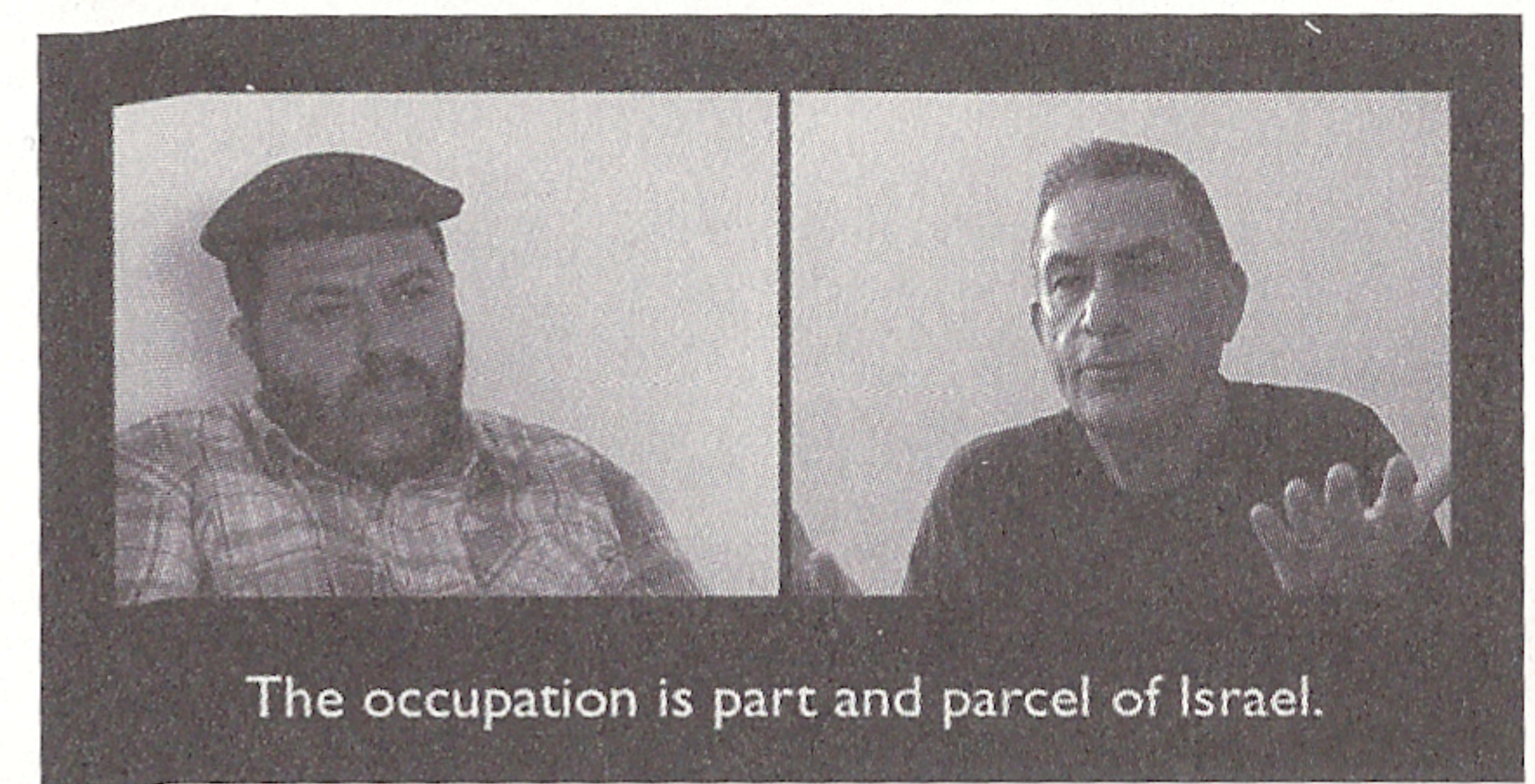
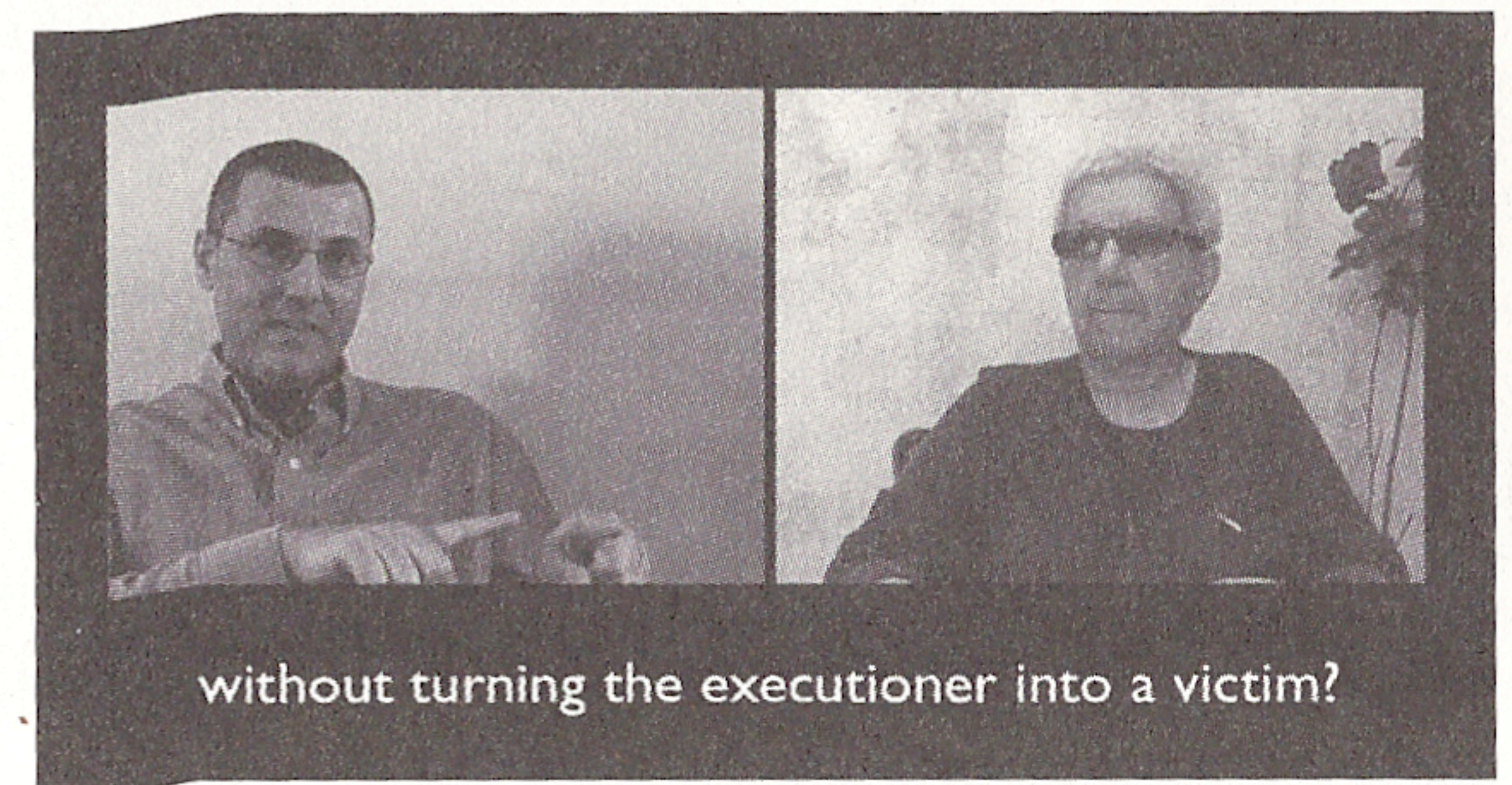
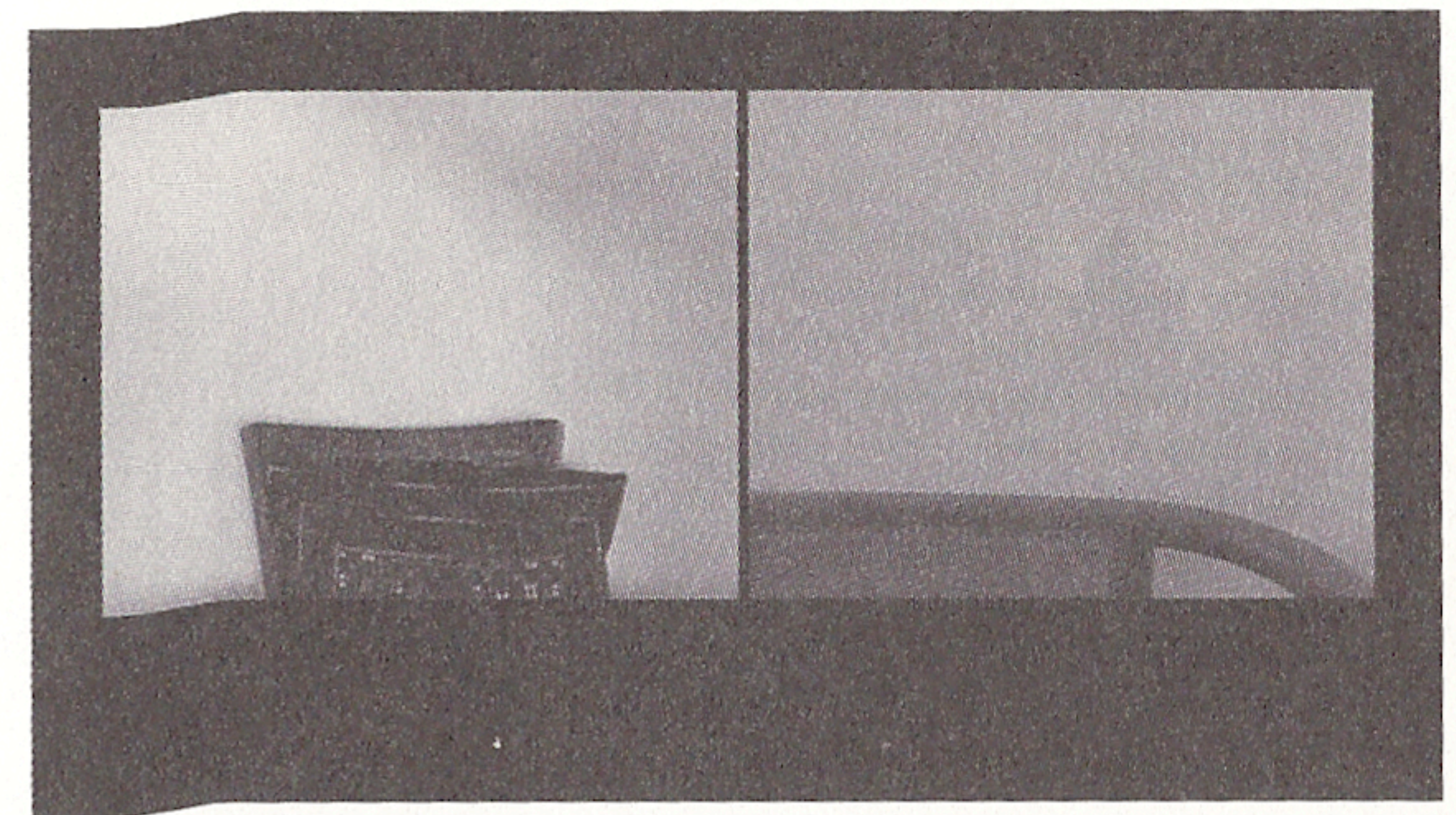
First of all, you said political filmmaker. Now, I don't know what a non-political filmmaker is. I know that many filmmakers consider themselves "not political", but they are nonetheless political filmmakers. If politics, as Foucault defines it, has to do with words, which is the definition of politics, I would also say that politics has to do with images. So when you occupy a public space and you have the privilege to occupy this public space, you are political. You can have bad politics, good politics... I'm a politically engaged person, if you want, an activist, and on the other hand I make films which are also my tool. Of course I'm totally attached to photography. I continue to do photography. I have a big desire and at the same time I'm kind of shy about exposing it. I don't expose my pictures the way I show my films. But I still have this relation to photography, I still have this relation to cinema where I remember that cinema is twenty five still images per second, and the basis is the frame. All of the question is the frame. I'm not a cinephile, I don't see many films. But I'm very interested in photography, this time that is captured in photography, and the radical choice that photography imposes, which is the fact that you have to frame and what you frame ends there. It's not just one frame and you have another frame and you can put them together. This radicalism of photography, of the still, intrigues and fascinates me at the same time.

How then is the exhibition A Blind Spot* political?

You know, I believe that there are texts - and when I say text it can be cinema, texts, image - that are created in the moment, but that need time to be understood. There will come a time when they will be commented upon. If we witnessed in the last years clearly political subjects in art, I think that today what we're witnessing, and I have to see the exhibition again to talk about it, is another take on politics, which is to try to think, to put forth texts that require thinking, and those texts also need their commentators. It's important. Not the theoreticians, but the commentators. But as I said I think that Europe today has a situation where politics became a profession, it's no longer a vital need, so the question is how to bring it back to become a vital need. So sometimes there's a desire to push out the clear political take as if that means getting a little dirty.

*A Blind Spot (curated by Catherine David) was an exhibition at the Berlin Documentary Form 2.

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Commonstate. Potential Conversation / Eyal Sivan / film stills / 2012 /
© momento-films



Izkor: Slaves of Memory / Eyal Sivan / film stills / 1991 / © momento-films

What about the future of the European Union?

I know that if the Union of Europe will continue to be about who is not European, we're coming back to the catastrophe of Europe. This is what we're facing today: a discourse which is not about who we are, but who's not us. This is what's coming back. You know, I have a Jewish memory, and this frightens me. Even if the Jew today is not the Jew, it is the Muslim, but that doesn't matter. Europe always finds its new Jews, in this case the Muslims. But this is what Europe is about, it's a game of defining who is not us. This means that Europe doesn't want to look in the mirror, and say who we in fact are. Who are we?

We are the ones that colonized, we're the ones that massacred, we are the ones that put people in camps, Stalin or Hitler camps, we are the ones that continue to give lessons to the world. If Europe won't stop it, Europe will kill itself, and when I say kill itself it's exactly what happened in the '40s, Europe killed itself. That's what we're facing, even in the way they speak about Greece. The question is whether the Greeks are European enough. Maybe they're lazy, maybe it's their fault, but the Germany that gives loans to Greece still didn't give them back all the billions that they stole from them, in gold, during the Second World War. That's the big question.

The question is this arrogant image that says "we are the good ones, we are the clean ones." The deep refusal of Europe to consider that the work that needs to be done is one about self-definition and not definition by default, as in who is not us, where are the borders, who can come, who cannot come.

Are you thinking about making a film on this topic as well?

Yes absolutely... it's part of the project that I'm presenting at the Documentary Forum. The project started from a lecture that I gave - Godard's Time Line: 1939 to 1949 - from Europe to Palestine and Back. The Palestinian question is the European question. Montage interdit, a forbidden editing, is exactly about making those links: to understand that Columbus came from Europe to America, that colonization started from Europe to the south, etc.

I think one of the things that needs to be done is to break the linear historical timeline of the story that Europe is telling itself. They speak about a secular Europe, as if Europe wasn't religious! I mean, we are in Christian land!

This is something that should be asked, what does it mean to be in a Christian land. But of course what I'm saying is shocking. "No, we are not Christian, we're secular, we are Enlightenment, modernity, etc." No, we see now, when we hear talk about "people coming from the south." What does that mean? It's people that are coming to share the wealth that was stolen from them.

I mean if we would stop speaking about immigrants and start talking about people that are coming to take back what was stolen from them, everything would change.

OUTREVIEWS. CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS
IS COMPRISED OF 17 INTERVIEWS WITH
ARTISTS, SELECTED FROM THE ARCHIVE
OF THE ARTISTTALK PROJECT.
HAILING FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND
ACTIVE IN A VARIETY OF ARTISTIC FIELDS,
THESE ARTISTS' AND THEIR WORK
CHALLENGE THE COMMON CONCEPTIONS OF ART
AND THE ROLE OF ARTISTS IN SOCIETY.