

Kai Wiedenhöfer
THE BOOK OF DESTRUCTION
GAZA AFTER THE 2009 WAR

28.01.11 - 12.02.11





Sabah Abu Halima, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm

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For over 20 years, the award-winning German photographer Kai Wiedenhöfer has documented the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2009, he won the inaugural Carmignac Gestion Photojournalism Prize, a competition in which photographers were assigned the subject of the Gaza Strip and awarded a grant to undertake a new body of work around it.

In November 2009 Wiedenhöfer returned to Gaza to witness and record the destruction of its buildings and the injuries inflicted on its inhabitants during the Israeli offensive, known as Cast Lead. The result is a harrowing collection of landscapes and portraits that are at once deeply moving yet full of humanity and dignity - an uncompromising indictment of the ruthless immorality of war.

Kai Wiedenhöfer comments: "What stunned me most in Gaza were the methods that human beings develop to make an utter misery out of other people's lives – with a 'creativity' which leaves in its wake a geography of desolation and pain."

Fresh from its widely publicised opening at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, this is the first time that *The Book of Destruction* will be exhibited in the UK.

Introduction

Omar Al-Qattan

What makes Kai Wiedenhöfer's depictions of the outcome of the war waged on the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Army during the winter of 2008-09 so different to other war photographs?

His photographs are gentle, almost elegant portraits of badly injured people – and mangled buildings – decimated by the Israeli Army. Yet we are surprised to find the light soft, the angles demure and respectful, the approach contemplative, almost as in classical portraiture. The time of day that the photographer chooses for his landscapes is invariably, eerily romantic – early morning and dusk, when the harsh sunshine of the Southern Mediterranean is still discreet and gentle. How could this be, when the stories of these photographs are so obviously painful and violent?

The subjects look us straight in the eye. There is no pleading or pity in any of them; bitterness perhaps, but always coupled with an overwhelming restraint and dignity. The stares, even of those blinded in the war, are defiant yet intimate in the unsettling way of those fleeting looks we might share with a stranger on a train: knowing but not personal. This results in an extraordinary relationship, which Wiedenhöfer invariably succeeds in establishing with his subjects: a line of vision as perturbing as it is questioning.

How could this be? His subjects seem to ask.

The injuries displayed are so obviously appalling and painful that we are moved to deep sympathy. We are also tempted to turn away from them in horror. But the arresting looks of the injured hold us back, inviting us to linger and reflect. They are not accusing looks; there are no expressions of condemnation or anger. In fact, they are looks devoid of judgement: the moral issues are superseded, because the injuries are the result of such utter amorality. We are before raw pain.

The bodies of those portrayed seem serene yet soulless, even when we occasionally catch the glimpse of a wry or wistful smile. Soulless in that they have been desecrated, stripped of that natural seductiveness, indiscretion



Jamila al-Habash, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm



Yahia al-Adham, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm



The remains of the EU-funded Gaza International Airport in Rafah, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm

and sensuousness that happier bodies display in front of a camera. In an extraordinary show of courage for a society otherwise so restrictive, some of the women and young girls temporarily put aside their prudishness to reveal injuries in intimate places. Like the buildings that are barely left standing, there is nothing left to hide, and nowhere to hide it.

Stripping bare and forbidding a man or woman from enjoying their own intimacy, from hiding away from the stares of others, is an old and favourite tool of the torturer. However, what may seem here voyeuristic intrusions into private spaces are, on the contrary, the photographer's forensic methods of revealing the extent of the crime at hand.

How could this inhumanity come to pass? We, like those portrayed, cannot understand it. Perhaps, the photographer seems to ask, the perpetrators could explain to us all how it is possible for men – and women – to inflict such violence and cruelty on their fellow human beings?

In addition to posing these questions, Wiedenhöfer's photographs also succeed in asserting the dignity of his subjects with such force that it is no longer possible to walk away from them as if they were the unfortunate

victims of a war, any war. Could their injuries – and the destruction of their built environment – be the direct result of a will to violate the Palestinians of Gaza, rather than its unfortunate by-product? It is an inescapable question posed by the amplitude of destruction portrayed in these works.

The series juxtaposes broken bodies with broken buildings. It is a shrewd juxtaposition, for it lends otherwise lifeless concrete and steel some of the sharp physical pain so present in the portraits. Gaza's is an injured landscape, its debris a metaphor of human pain.

Like the human body, the built environment has become a cruel and cheap testing ground for new technologies of violence. This is true here in besieged and overcrowded Gaza, but also in other landscapes and cities where the wars waged on, by and within the Arab and Muslim worlds have been waged...just as that same body, male and above all female, in Gaza as elsewhere around the Muslim world, is now an ideological theatre, a disposable and bullied scapegoat.

Kai Wiedenhöfer's work is a brave and humane plea in its defence

Omar Al-Qattan is a filmmaker and trustee of the A.M.Qattan Foundation.



A water reservoir in the Tel Al-Hawa area in the south of Gaza City, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm

Biography

Kai Wiedenhöfer was born in 1966 in South West Germany. After completing a number of photographic apprenticeships, he studied Arabic at the Institut français d'études arabes in Damascus, Syria and went on to gain an MA in communications and design from the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, with a focus on photojournalism and editorial design.

Since the mid-1990s, Wiedenhöfer has covered a number of territories including Turkey, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Egypt, China, Ghana and Ethiopia, publishing in most major magazines worldwide, including more than 16 pages in Stern and Max Magazines and 44 pages in the Swiss DU Magazine.

His awards include:

In 1995 the International Agfa and Bilderberg Prize for Young Photojournalists and the German Photoprize in Stuttgart; in 1996 the Spanish prize of La Revista (el Mundo); in 1998 the Hansel-Mieth Prize for the best collaboration between a writer and a photographer in the German printed media; the 1999 Art Directors Club Silver Medal for a publication in Stern Magazine; in 2002, the Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography, the Leica Medal of Excellence, the Alexia Grant for World Peace and Cultural Understanding (all in New York); the World Press Photo Award, Amsterdam and the Art Directors Club Silver Medal for a publication in Max Magazine.

In 2003 he received the Scholarship of the Picture & Art Association in Germany and the German Book Award; the World Press Photo Award, Amsterdam in 2004; the Fuji Euro Press Award and the Getty Grant for Documentary Photography, New York in 2005; the 2009 Carmignac Gestion Photojournalism Award, Paris and the 2010 Art Photography Prize from the Brandenburg and Berlin Lottery.



Khalil and Abdel-Hadi al-Jadili, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm

He has published four books: *Perfect Peace –The Palestinians from Intifada to Intifada* (2002); *Wall* (2007) and *The Book of Destruction* (2010), all published by Steidl, Göttingen; and *Checkpoint Huwara* (2008) with Karin Wenger, published by Neue Züricher Zeitung.

Currently he is working on a book about separation barriers and borders worldwide.

Solo exhibitions have included:

- 2003 Sharjah Biennale, UAE
Rencontre de la photographie africaine, Bamako
Visa pour l'image, Perpignan.
- 2004 Institute for Foreign Relations (IFA) in Stuttgart.
- 2010 Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

With thanks to:

Injud al-Ashkar, 33; Mumin Sa'ad, 10; Ibrahim Duweida, 25; Obeida Duweida, 2; Ahmad Yusef al-Attar, 14; Atyah al-Arene, 47; Sabah Nofal, 42; Ahmad Attar, 38; Ansam Attar, 3; Mahmoud Zorba, 18; Jamila Al-Habash, 16; Amjad al-Najjar, 16; Taghreed al-Najjar, 21; Zedan Abu Hammam, 19; Umran Al-Bayyumi, 55; Khalil al-Jadili, 16; Abdel-Hadi al-Jadili, 15; Hassan Sakoud, 19; Hani al-Jarji, 16; Mohammed al-Khateeb, 22; Ala'a Radwan, 16; Ramadan Radwan, 18; Nasra Al-Manaiya, 47; Samia Al-Manaiya, 16; Jamila Salman, 35; Zuhair Zimmo, 49; Hamid Swarka, 36; Baha Al-Ghabain, 17; Deeb Takfa, 23; Shaima'a Najjar, 10; Ra'ad Asfour, 12; Heba Rajab, 24; Mahmoud Abu al-Ata, 54; Raja'a Murtajah, 48; Mahmoud Sabah, 19; Samir, Sabah 48; Wafa Al-Raddi'a, 37; Sabah Abu Halima, 45; Muhammad al-Haddad, 25; Faiz Qadas, 18; Abed Ahmad Juma, 65; Yahia Abu Seif, 20; Felastin Tambura, 15; Mofeed al-Franji, 55; Sliman Salama, 14; Youssef Abul-Leil, 18; Ali Abul-Leil, 20; Haula Fati Jabr, 21; Mona al-Ashkar, 19; Tha'ir Hamid, 19; Muhammad Abu Halima, 18; and Yahia al-Adham, 23.

Cover image: *Injud al-Ashkar*, photographic print, 2009. 105 x 75 cm



Destroyed house in the Izbet Abed Rabbo neighbourhood in the East of Gaza City, photographic print, 2009. 75 x 105 cm

Exhibition:
28.01.11 - 12.02.11
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