

## READING BIL'IN IN BERLIN

installation, 2017

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Photo literacy is our ability to read the language of photography. Reading an image requires examining its content and form, in addition to its emotional impact. Beyond the information in the image and our experience of it, there are also extra-textual elements that lie outside of the frame.

*Who took the photograph?*

*Who are the people in the photograph and what is their relationship to the photographer? When/Where/Why was the photograph taken?*

b.h. Yael's three-monitor installation *Reading Bil'in in Berlin* (2017) consists of different people interpreting three different photographs (one per monitor). While the participants have access to the images in their entirety, we are only privy to fragments that unfold over time. As the details of the photograph are slowly revealed to us, the participants—seated facing the camera on a couch in front of an exhibition—attempt to describe the image shown to them offscreen. Each of the three videos ends with the photograph revealed in its entirety. The images were taken during protests in Bil'in and feature activists Abdullah Abu Rahmah, Jonathan Pollak and Muhammed Khatib. Although asked to simply describe what is presented in the image, each person provided their own interpretation and analysis of it based on preconceived notions resulting in misreadings—sometimes productive, but often not. While looking at an image, we all read it differently.

Although it is difficult to judge the emotional impact these images had on the participants interpreting them, the simple task of describing what is seen is complicated by personal politics and biases. Even without the participants knowing that these are images of activists facing Israeli soldiers and border police taken in the West Bank village of Bil'in by members of the photojournalist/activist collective *Activestills* in the mid-00's—that is, without any extra-textual information—they see heavily armed soldiers

in conflict with unarmed civilians. But rather than describing what was presented in front of them, their attempts at narrativizing the image made it impossible for them to see what was actually happening.

Images of soldiers and police in military gear who are in conflict with civilians have become all too common, it is only the extra-textual information that is in flux. The power of these images lies in their ability to expose this imbalance of power and in the audience's ability to empathize with those who are being forcefully oppressed. To bear witness is to see the image and to allow it to speak without speaking for it.

