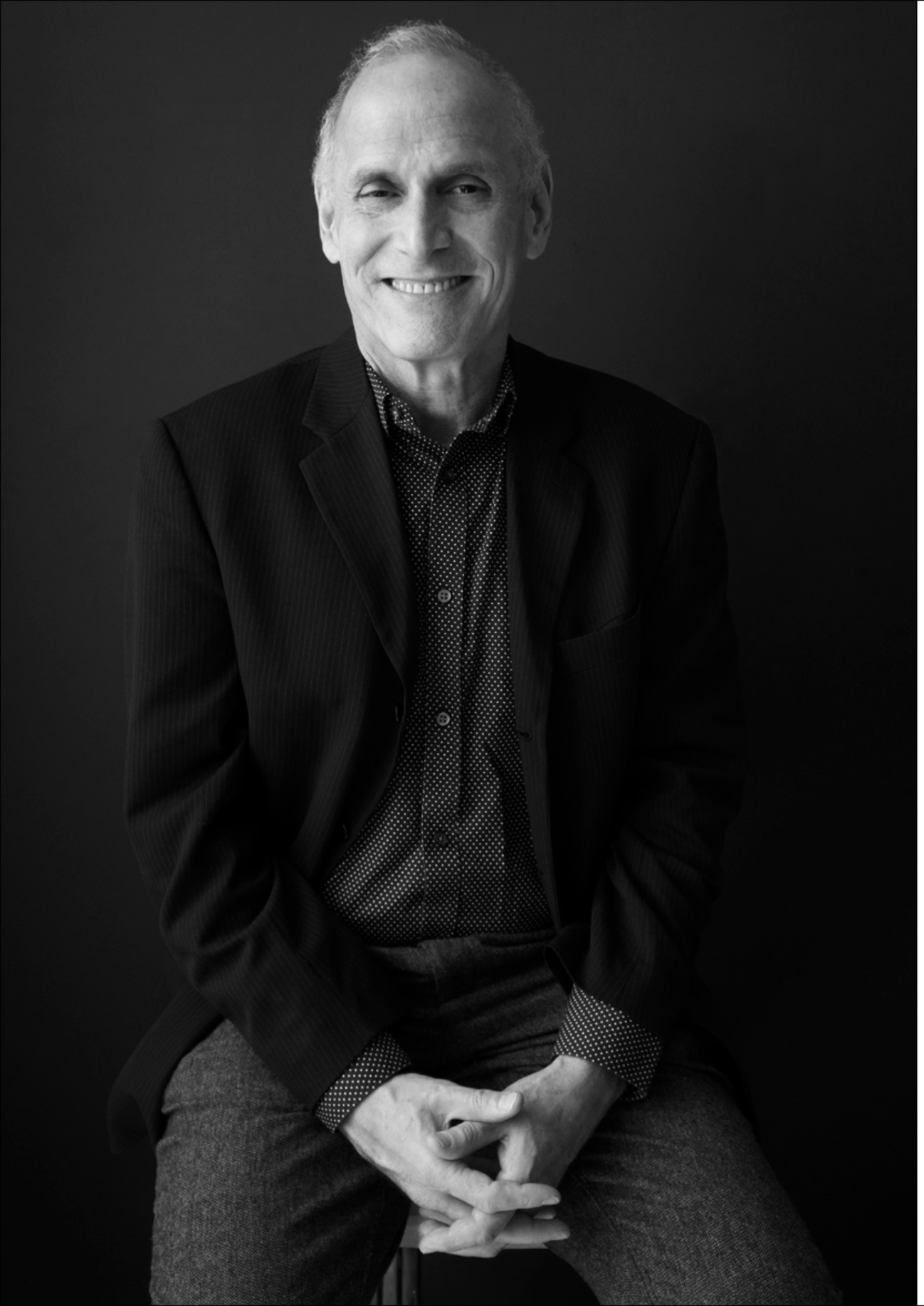


SHIMON ATTIE *sign language*

ANDREA BLANCH: ***Why did you choose the places that you did in Israel and Palestine for your series* Facts on the Ground*?***

SHIMON ATTIE: Well, it's very, very easy to find sites in Israel and Palestine where, content-wise, context-wise, and history-wise, it would have made sense to have certain phrases inserted into the landscape. It's not at all difficult to find contested, fraught, and problematic sites in Israel and Palestine. What's more difficult is to find sites that have all of those elements going on—contested narratives, history—but that are also photographically compelling. I chose those sites because they combined all of the content I wanted, plus I thought I could make dynamic, beautiful, and hopefully arresting photographs of them. In other words, combining aesthetic and content together at the fifty-yard line. I would probably look at fifteen sites for every one that I selected. All fifteen had the history, had the content, would have made sense, but would have led to very boring photographs. And above all else, one must not make bad art.

ANDREA: ***How did you come up with the phrases?***

SHIMON: A lot of reflection—that's how I developed the phrases. How do you condense, distill, and articulate the zeitgeist? Whether the zeitgeist ensconced in the body politic, in the landscape—sort of the ideological, psychological, political and cultural subtext that are maybe latent in the landscape of today but not manifest, not immediately visible. I have a very long history with that part of the world. From childhood, I lived there at different phases as well as during formative years. Also, I read a lot of literature growing up relating to the history of Zionism and nationalism—things of that sort. To answer your question, I developed those phrases over the course of a year before I went there to do the project, and I worked very closely with two Israeli colleagues. I created the phrases myself, but I would get their feedback on them. I would say about three quarters of the phrases are my artistic and literary distillations, and one quarter I kind of plucked from the history of Zionism, but shortened and condensed them.

ANDREA: ***How long did this project take you?***

SHIMON: I was working on the phrases for about the course of a year. I hired a producer in Israel to begin the process of getting me permits. The actual production—actually being in Israel creating the piece—was four months. I was invited by an Israeli contemporary art foundation to go there—I probably would have gone anyway, but that made it a lot easier and gave me a platform there. The first two months were devoted to selecting the sites, because the phrases were already developed, and having the light boxes fabricated. So, finding the sites that would work both conceptually and visually aesthetically to hopefully create strong photographs. The light boxes with all those different phrases had to be fabricated there. The second two months were spent in production—six days a week in production. Like, today we are going to go to the Negev Desert, tomorrow we are going to the old city of Jerusalem. The day after we are going to an installation in downtown Tel Aviv. I mean, everything was planned like clockwork, because in Israel you can't just pull up in a car and pull out a generator and light boxes without the military immediately coming up to you. Everything had to be permitted in advance, and that also sometimes only gets you so far.

ANDREA: ***While you were working on this project, did your feelings or impressions of Israel change from before you started working on the project?***

SHIMON: I was reminded that if you're American, Jewish, white, male, and speak some Hebrew, you have a tremendous amount of privilege. When I think about all the things that could have gone wrong—and maybe only

Portrait by Andrea Blanch.

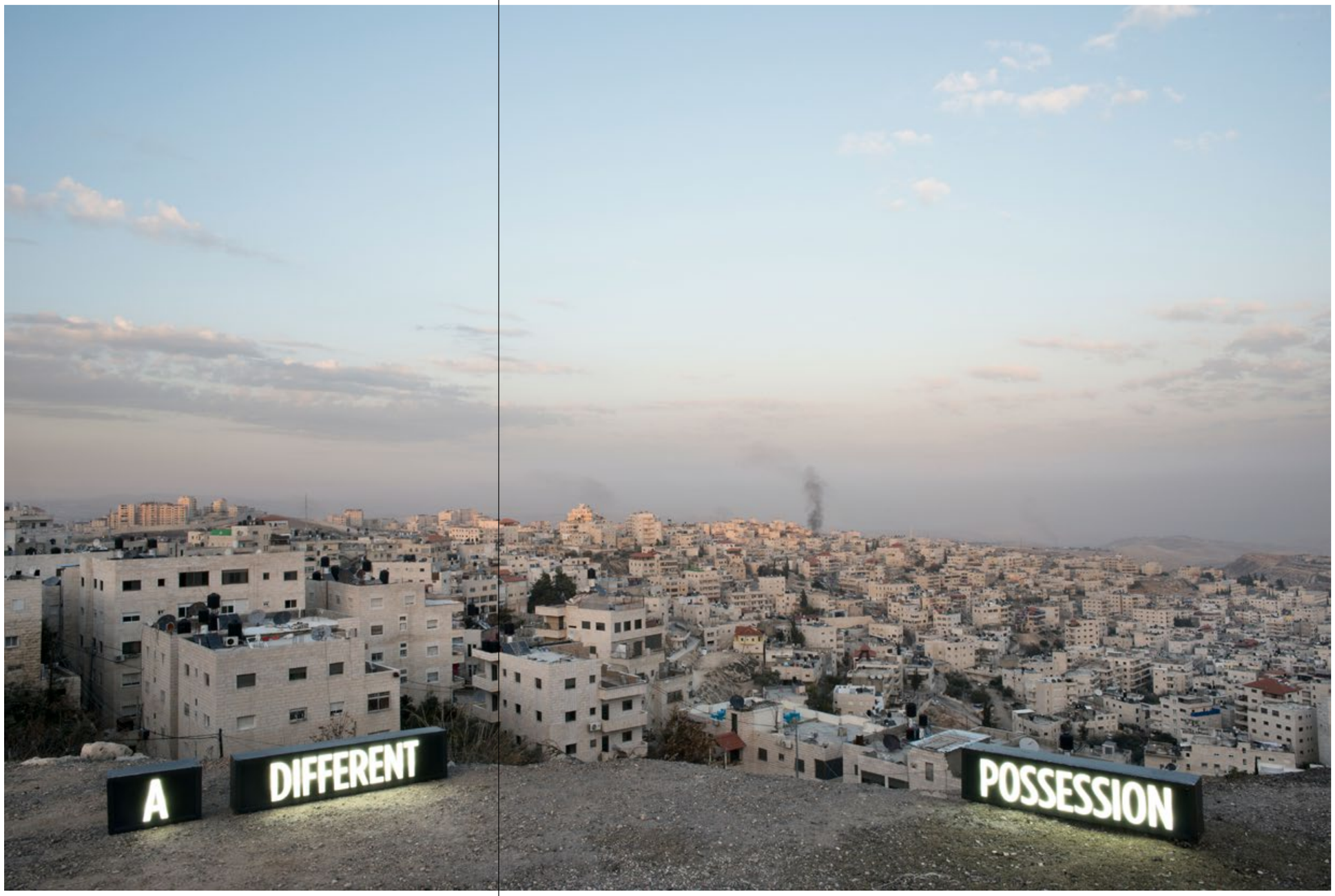
I wanted a medium that was more material, hence the sculptural light box pieces that actually have a physical presence.

one or two things went wrong and a hundred things went right—I was just reminded of that position of privilege that I was afforded. For example, I remember doing some of these installations in settlements in the West Bank. Now, even though we had permission from the Secretariat—the administration of the settlement—it didn't mean that Israeli settlers on the ground were going to be cooperative with you. The letter doesn't mean anything to them. I remember doing installations in these settlements and someone would come outside, would walk out of their settler trailer or their caravan, and they would sort of accost me, like, "What are you doing?" And I would say, you know, I would start in Hebrew, "Well I was invited by an Israeli art foundation to come here." And I would say, "I'm from New York," and then the smiles started. And then the settler would say, "My mom was from Brooklyn." So then it's sort of a *mishpacha* [*Hebrew word for family*]; it's like an 'all in the family' kind of thing even though it's not really.

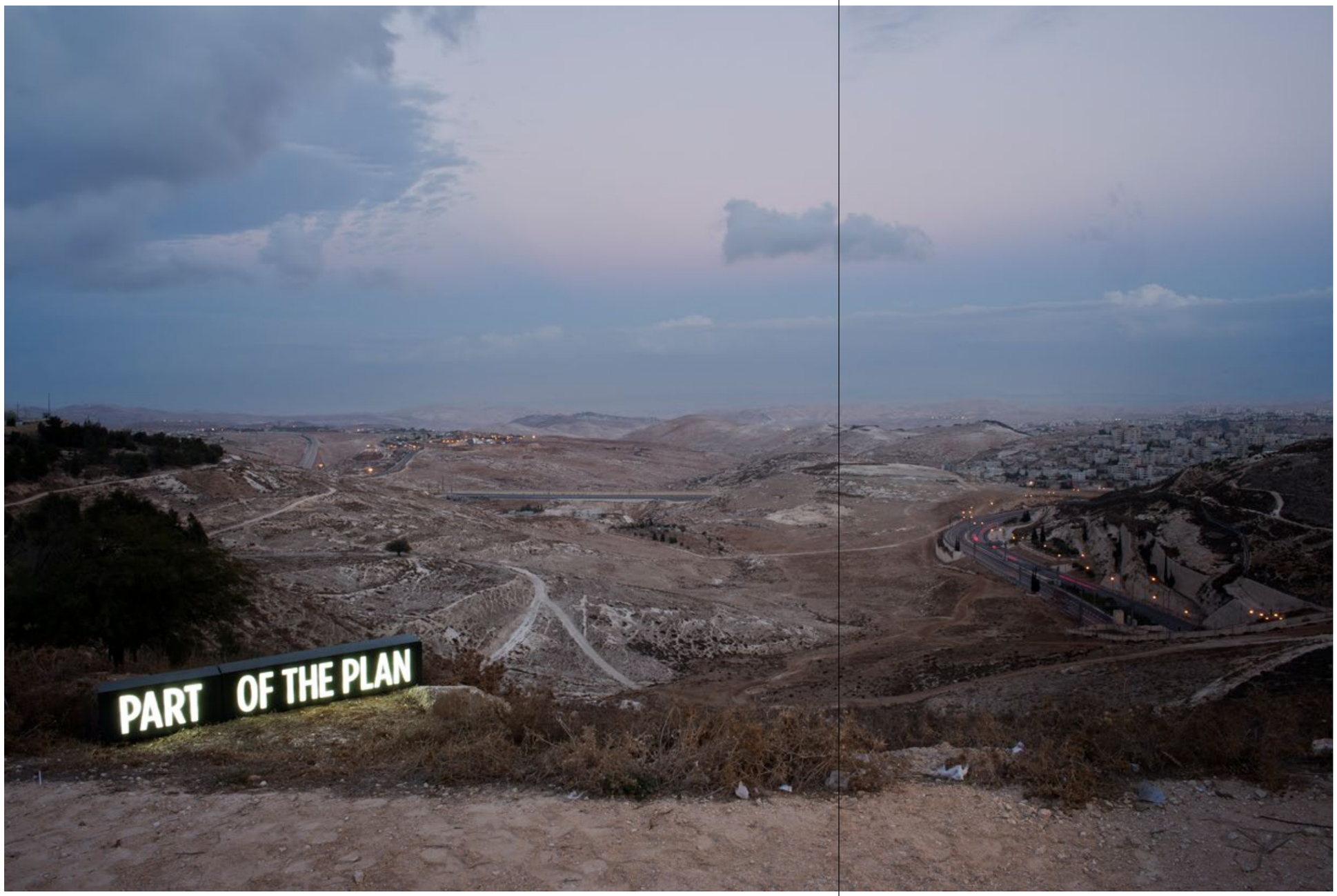
ANDREA: ***Where did your fascination with light boxes begin?***

SHIMON: One of the first times I worked with light boxes was in the nineties, in this underwater light box installation that I created in one of the main canals in Copenhagen. So it was sort of this aesthetic blending between illuminated image and undulating water. You know, my work is probably still quite associated with doing projections—like in my Berlin piece or my Lower East Side piece, here. And one of the reasons I was using projections in those projects is because I was working with something as ethereal as human memory. But for this project in Israel and Palestine, it wasn't so much that I was trying to give voice to memory, per se. It was more about ideology, national narrative, national aspirations. Things that actually get codified, canonized, solidified. I wanted a medium that was more material, hence the sculptural light box pieces that actually have a physical presence.

ANDREA: ***When you did this project, what did you want your viewer to walk away with?***



Shimon Attie; *A Different Possession; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.



Shimon Attie; Above: *Part of the Plan; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.

Hopefully there is enough space in each of the pieces for each viewer to arrive at their own conclusions or questions.

SHIMON: Well, that's the thing with art and art of a particular flavor. I don't want it to be a specific message—that is sort of devoid of poetic sport or interpretative oxygen. So I think of the pieces as more like opportunities for reflection and using the language of visual art as a way to perhaps create new experiences and associations that might get under the radar of some of our previously held assumptions. Hopefully there is enough space in each of the pieces for each viewer to arrive at their own conclusions or questions. This is a particular challenge that arises when one deals with subject matter that is so overly mediated and overly literal in terms of political discourse.

ANDREA: ***Did any of the phrases come from any Palestinian history?***

SHIMON: No, no, absolutely not. That was a place that I was unwilling to go, consciously, because I cannot be Palestinian. I would never dare to think that I could speak for Palestinians. So, I made a conscious decision to not even approach that territory.

ANDREA: ***It must be difficult to not personalize a project like this and to be so objective about a project so particularly close to you.***

SHIMON: I actually do face that in a lot of projects I do, because—for better or for worse—I often do projects in very fraught, delicate, traumatized landscapes and communities, or communities' histories. And I think what inoculates me a little bit is that I reflect a lot. I don't do anything quickly. I try to be reflective rather than impulsive.

ANDREA: ***That's curious, because a lot of artists—if they are going to deal with a topic such as yours—they want to put in their own opinion. They don't want to keep it ambiguous.***

SHIMON: Well, my opinion is sort of in there. But the

Shimon Attie; Following spread: *Something Abnormal; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.

SOMETHING ABNORMAL

I am trying to create something that is more direct and, therefore, less like documentation.

viewer doesn't need to hear me say, "Oh, you know, I really think that such and such is not good." That's not necessary in that situation. The art will speak for itself. Balance.

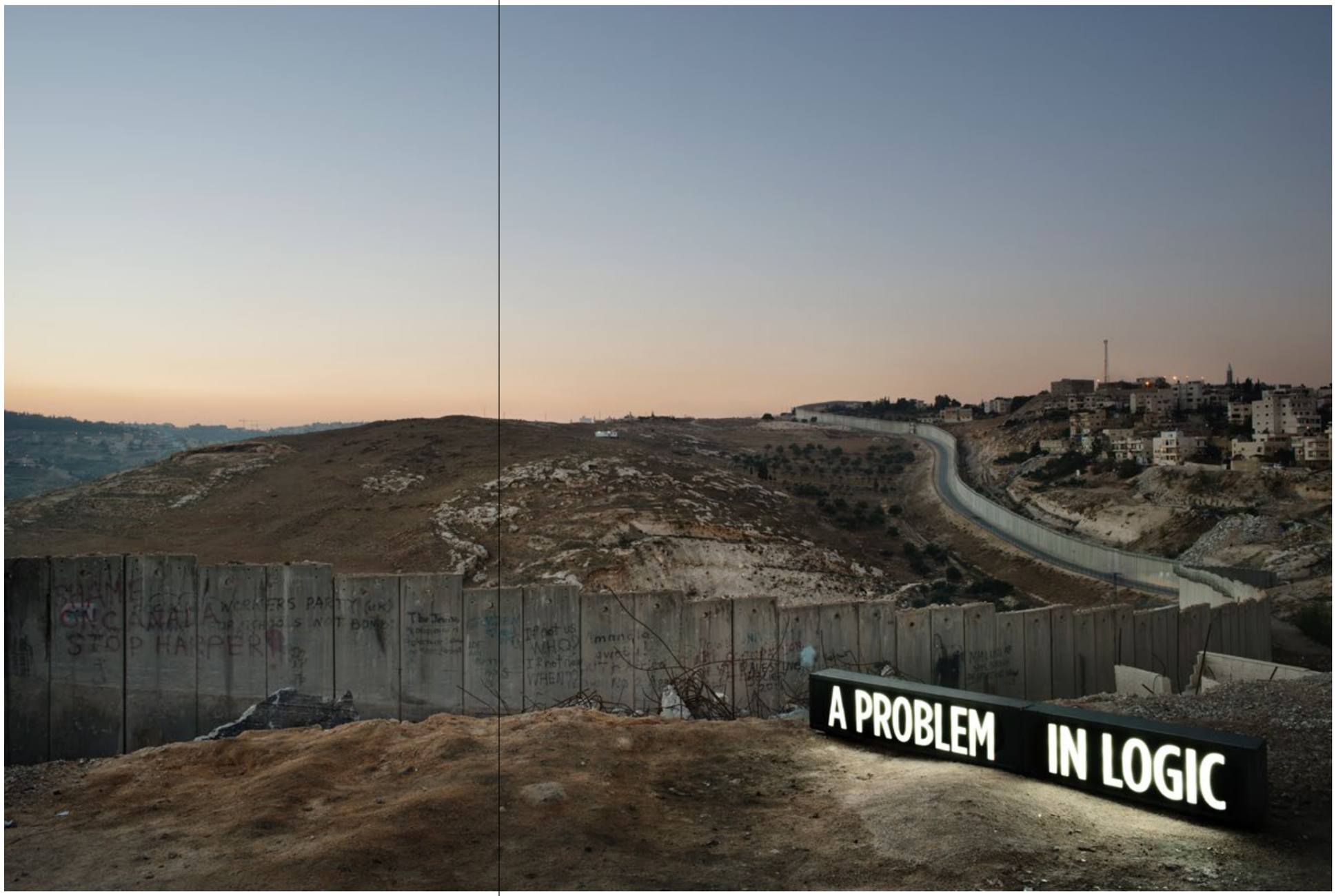
ANDREA: ***Why did you choose to have empty landscapes devoid of people in* Facts on the Ground?**

SHIMON: There are several reasons, but one is, once there's people in them, the people would presumably be looking at the installation. Then the photographs become documentation of an installation. I'm sort of trying to triangulate the viewer of the photograph, the installation itself and then the site and landscape itself. It's like a three-way relationship. So, I am trying to create something that is more direct and, therefore, less like documentation.

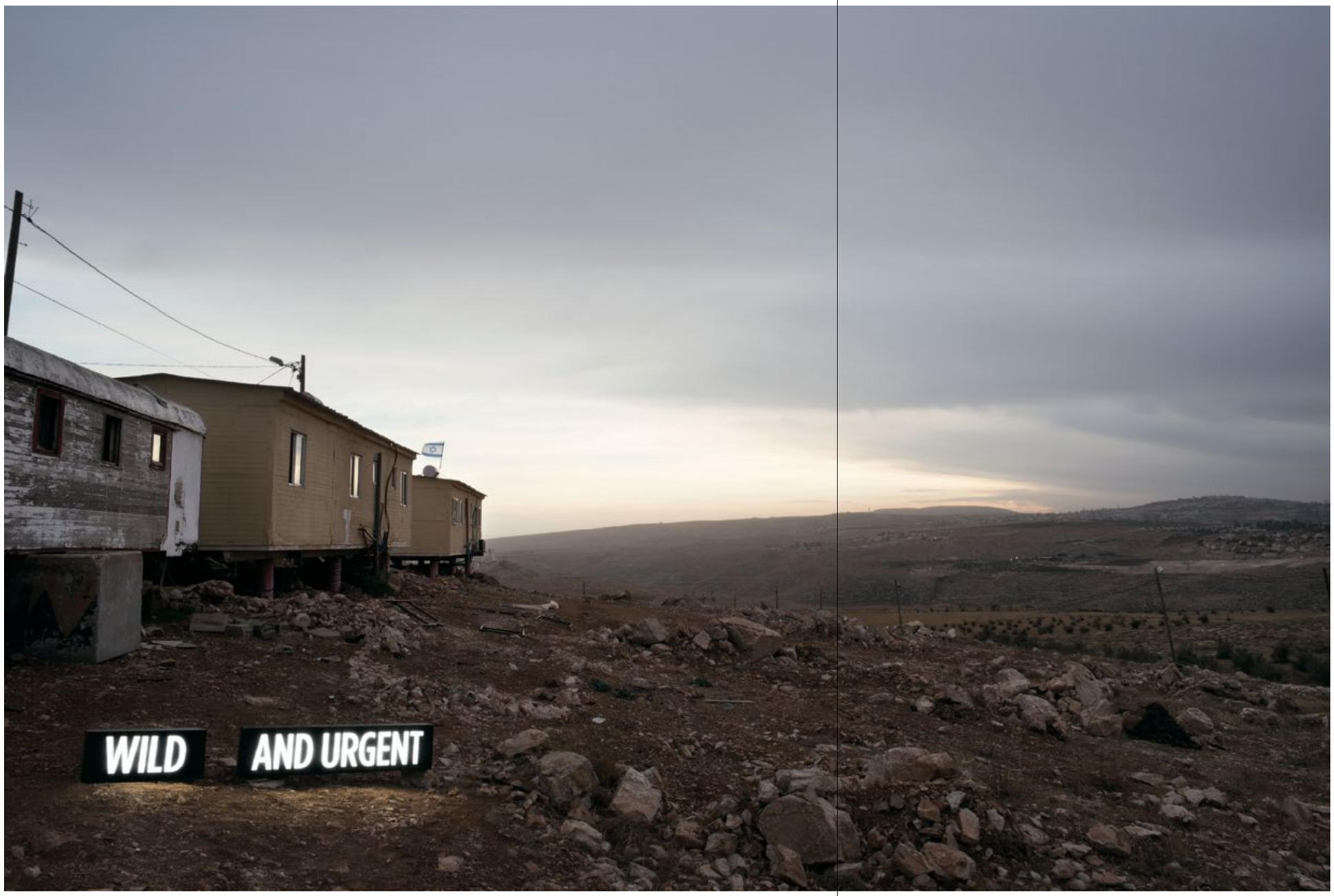
ANDREA: ***While you were doing* Facts on the Ground, *what were the reactions on site?***

SHIMON: It was varied. In Tel Aviv, there was everything from the very positive responses to negative. There was a very complicated response from one person whose English was very, very bad, and he misunderstood the phrase, "Do unto others before," even though I was with two Israelis who were helping me that night and they tried to explain to him that he was misunderstanding what the phrase meant, and we couldn't get it through his head. So he parked his motorcycle right in front of the installation so I couldn't photograph it. He thought the phrase meant, "Palestinians were here before," which may or may not be true, but that's not what I was on about. In the Palestinian Authority-controlled areas that I worked, the responses were positive. People kind of instinctively understood that if I'm doing things at the separation wall, they understood that I was probably not applauding the wall being there.

But then I had some unfortunate things as well. I'll tell you something kind of dramatic that was in Abu Dis, which is a Palestinian university town. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We pulled up, took our



Shimon Attie; Above: *A Problem in Logic; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.



Shimon Attie; *Wild and Urgent (i); Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.

I just gave the biggest deer-in-the-headlights look that I could possibly generate.

equipment out of the car at the exact same time as two Israeli armored personnel carriers stopped. I guess they had passed the University entry and maybe someone had thrown a stone at them or not—I didn't see that part. But they stopped and they tear-gassed us, among other people. Have you ever been tear-gassed?

ANDREA: ***No, pepper sprayed [*both laugh*].***

SHIMON: Actually, being tear-gassed is much worse than I ever thought. You know, you think tear gas—it's going to, what, sting your eyes and you're going to cry? That's not what tear gas does. It gets inside and you're on fire and you almost pass out. It's really intense. Anyway, I was tear-gassed and then an Israeli sniper with a high-powered automatic weapon of some kind was pointing his weapon at my forehead for a disconcertingly long amount of time. And the problem was I would have had to raise my voice to speak to him and raising your voice in such a situation is not a good idea. So, I just gave the biggest deer-in-the-headlights look that I could possibly generate.

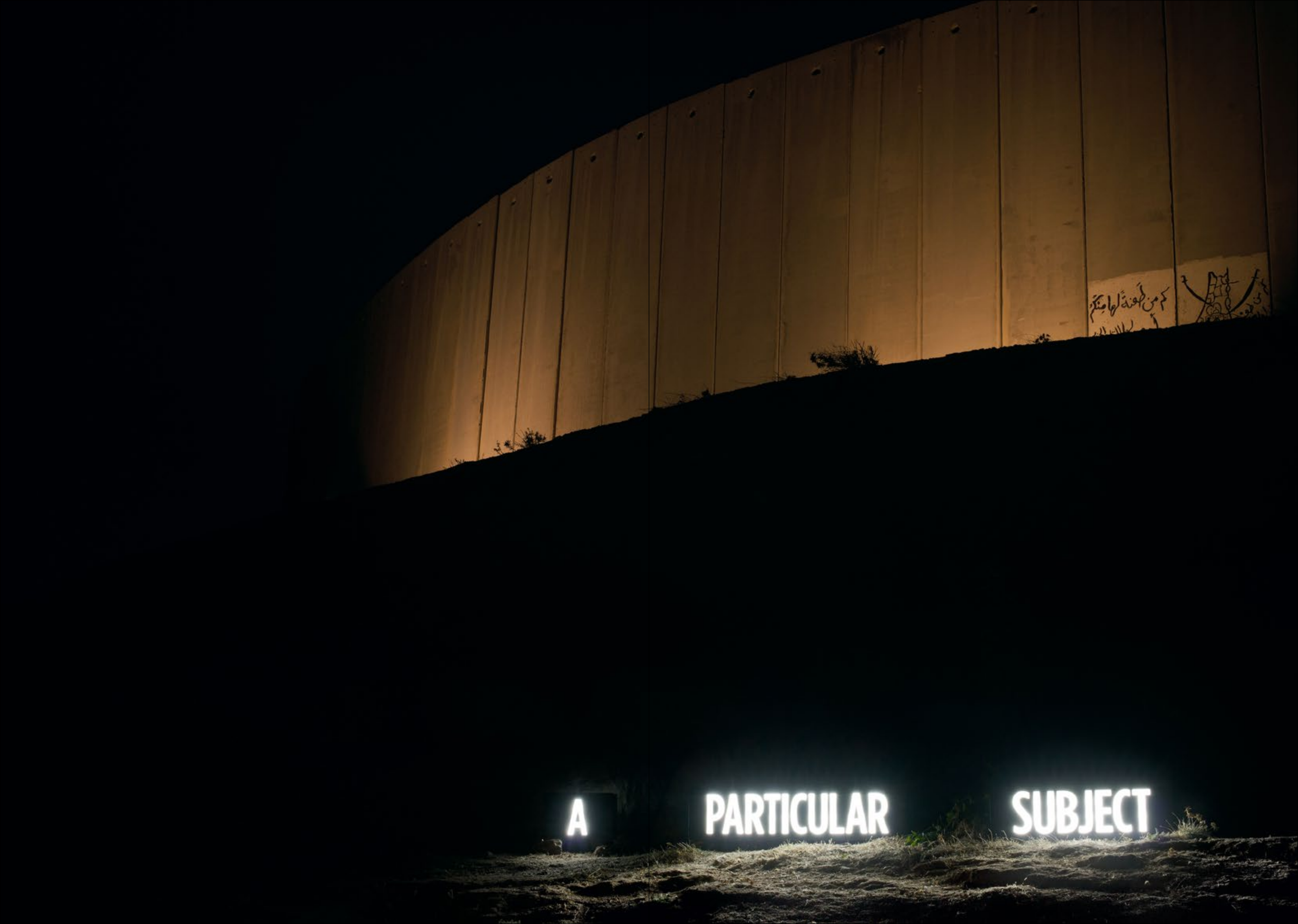
ANDREA: ***So, currently, you're working on a video about Syrian refugees? Can you say something more about the work?***

SHIMON: It's an art video.

ANDREA: ***Which means there's no narrative, or what?***

SHIMON: Well, meaning it's not a documentary. I use the whole notion of roulette—the game of roulette, the roulette table—as a way of speaking about the refugee experience, especially for Syrians, North Africans, anyone crossing the Mediterranean. Some make it alive, some drown. Some have the good fortune that their family has a few thousand dollars to get them smuggled, assuming it has a good ending. Others are never even able to leave Syria or they disappear; they just get kidnapped and disappear. So, roulette functioning as a kind of mirror and distillation for the things in our lives

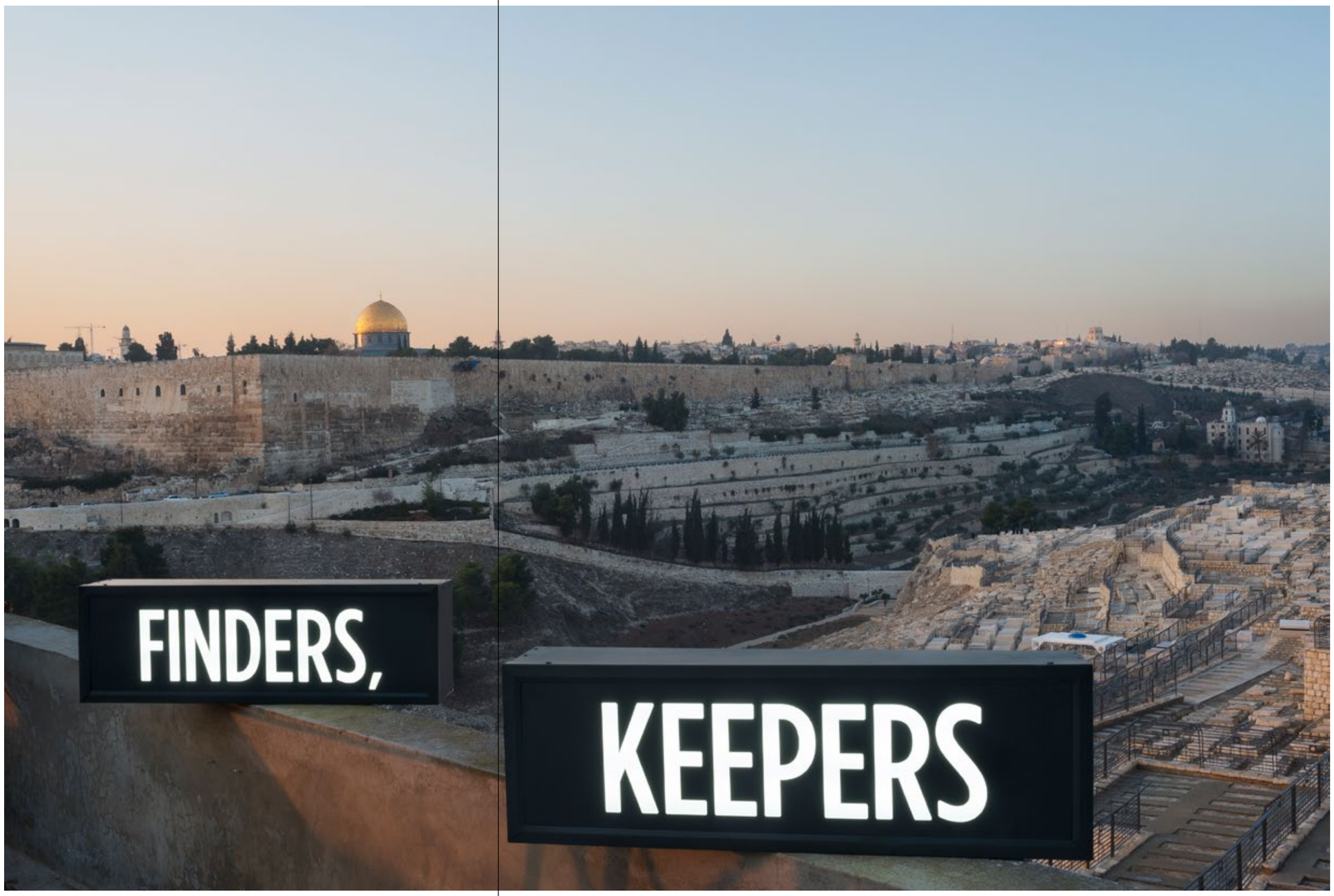
Shimon Attie; Following spread: *A Particular Subject; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.


A PARTICULAR SUBJECT

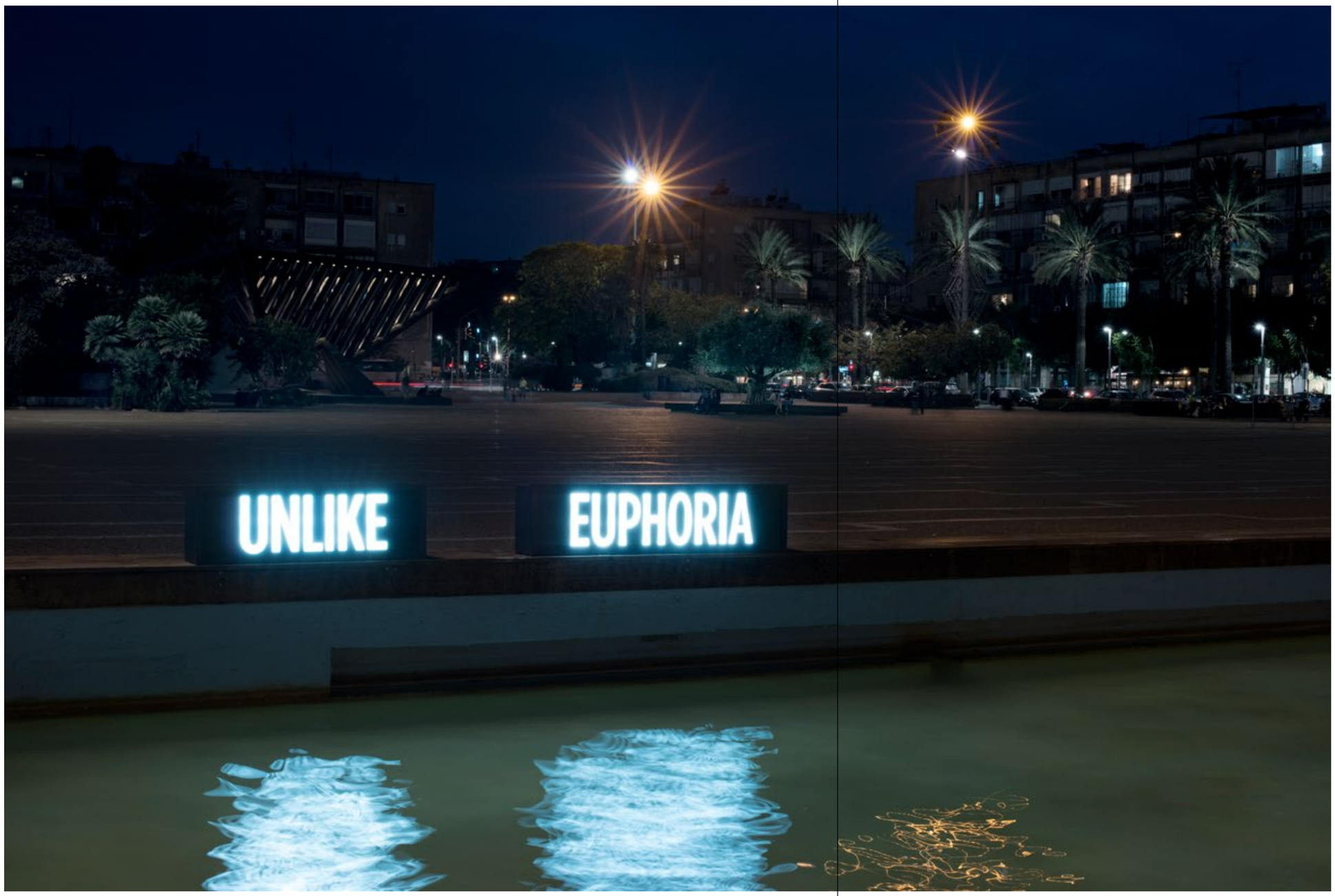
People are just disappearing from the table. We don't know why. Did they win? Did they lose? And the tension is building in the piece.

that we have control over and the things that we don't and something as simple as good or bad fortune.

The first thing I did with the Syrian refugees was a commission to create a new piece in Europe. I told them my idea and asked them what they thought. Like, "I want to make an art film with several of you around a roulette table," and I explained to them my motivation, like I just did to you. And I asked them, "Does this speak to you or not?" Because if they thought it was not reflective of their experience, I wouldn't have done the project. But much to my surprise, they were extremely enthusiastic. They were like, "That is exactly what our life experience has been so far." I use moving image footage—you know we shoot in video—but I often have people holding static poses and maybe they're standing on a platform that's rotating or moving. In this particular piece, we start with seven refugees around a roulette table—they don't speak, they are holding static poses—but the camera is moving. The camera is on a dolly, so the camera is moving in different ways and the roulette wheel, with the ball, is sometimes moving. And we use 'old master painting' lighting. It's extremely beautiful. There is a lot of eye candy in the piece. And it's very short, only about eight minutes. We had seven people, now we have six. We don't see the people leave the table. But we go from seven to six to five to four to three to two to one. People are just disappearing from the table. We don't know why. Did they win? Did they lose? And the tension is building in the piece. And so it's a combination of very beautiful and a bit uncanny. Then there is a dedication at the end. Like, "For the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war in Syria and elsewhere, who risked their lives"—I forget the exact words, it's actually in French—but, "who risked their lives, who gambled for their lives and risked everything for a new life in Europe. Seven such individuals appear in this piece." But that piece is almost done. I am at the very beginning of a new piece that I am just working on now for the St. Louis Art Museum, which is in the early phases.



Shimon Attie; *Finders, Keepers; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.



Shimon Attie; *Unlike Euphoria; Israel/Palestine*; 2013-14.

The problem with permanent pieces is everyone has a stake suddenly. So temporary interventions are much easier in that sense…

ANDREA: ***Give us a hint.***

SHIMON: Alright, I'll give you a hint. The St. Louis Art Museum is obviously near the Mississippi River, and it is five minutes from Ferguson, Missouri. So that's already telling you what direction I'm thinking in. I am creating an installation inside the museum which has a sculptural aspect to it that is a bit reminiscent of a Huckleberry Finn raft, and it's also a nineteenth century allegory to American race-relations. That raft has a few elements on it that conflate it with more contemporary issues related to police, community, race, even Ferguson. So there will be this beautiful sculptural piece in the center of the gallery with an immersive video environment around it related to the Mississippi River, that's all I can tell you.

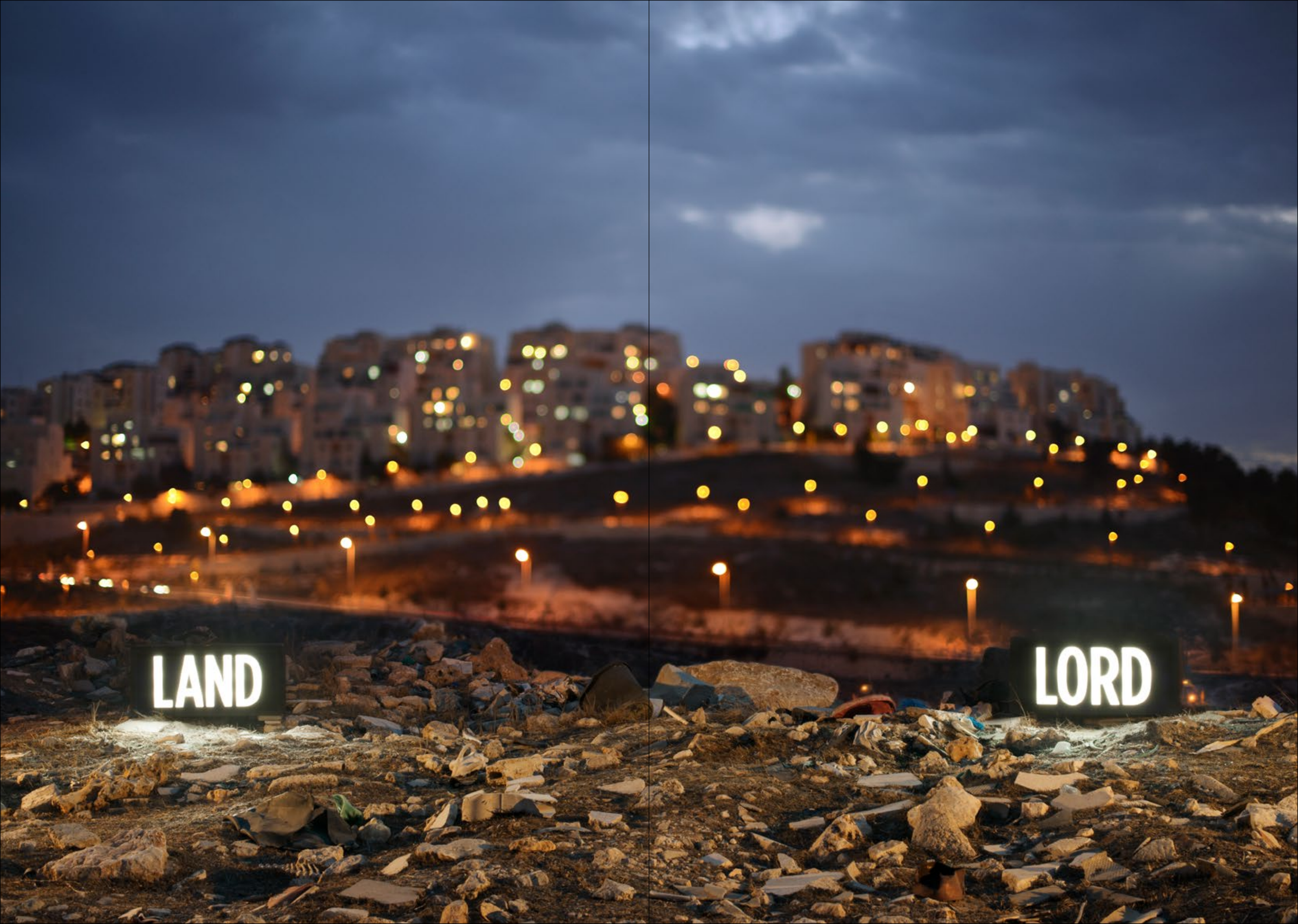
ANDREA: ***That's exciting. When's that opening?***

SHIMON: The piece opens April, 2017. So that's where I am going to be putting most of my focus for the coming year.

ANDREA: ***Your work deals with public installation, if only for a brief amount of time, in order to be photographed. What are your feelings about public installation, and what challenges does it face?***

SHIMON: Well, the big dividing line is: is it permanent or is it temporary? If it's permanent, oh my gosh, the challenges are endless. The problem with permanent pieces is everyone has a stake suddenly. So temporary interventions are much easier in that sense, the burden of due diligence or whatever, it's easier, it's freer. You as the artist are freer because it's temporary; the sense is that the stakes are not as high, I suppose. Regarding why I have a need to create public installations, I think it's because I am an installation artist, and I do have a visceral need in my own body to actually touch and intervene in actual, physical sites. Because you can fake things on a computer with Photoshop if you want to, but for me there is something about intervening in the site that's very central to my artistic impulse.

Shimon Attie; Following spread: *Land Lord; Israel/Palestine;* 2013-14.


LAND
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