

Fayez's Aporia

Exhibition text by Amin Yousefi



Paying off my UK visa with the money earned from writing this text feels like a strange twist of fate, one of those rare moments when everything seems to align. Immigration is a new adventure for some—a period of progress filled with fresh opportunities. For others, it is a labyrinthine ordeal—exhausting, relentless, and full of complexity, as seen in Arash Fayez's *Apolis*, rooted in the nuances of his existential limbo. Fayez's work traces his journey's emotional and bureaucratic weight, beginning with a conversation with his immigration lawyer, whose frank explanation encapsulated the grey area many migrants inhabit: "You are not illegal, but you are not legal either."

In this space, one is neither a citizen nor a foreigner but something in-between, adrift among regulations that offer no sanctuary. A quiet, often invisible fate that strips away one's rights. As Hannah Arendt postulates, to lose a political community is to lose the "right to have rights." This embodies the tension of life in a state of flux, defined not only by sovereignty but by an ongoing negotiation, shaped by invisible systems and documents devoid of empathy, handled by nameless administrators. The term "citizen" defines an individual with a citizen's status vis-à-vis the state, a permanent resident bestowed full legal rights and obligations. "Noncitizen", as the United Nations defines it, is someone excluded from the collective of citizens in a country. Treating such individuals as citizens of another hypothetical state or no state at all enables states to maintain the temporary status of noncitizens and to continue governing them without the protection of citizenship.

The camera, held by a [non]citizen, does not concern itself with whether the subject matter being photographed is a citizen of a state. Instead, cameras recognise those portrayed as citizens of what Ariella Azoulay calls the "citenry of photography." Although the United States never granted Fayez citizenship, the event of photography makes contributors—the photographer, the photographed, and the spectators—become citizens of photography. In this situation, all three participants, regardless of their membership to a state, become part of the event of photography, engaging in a shared civic contract that transcends national boundaries.

The paperwork presented in the project reveals how bureaucracy—the cold product of [non]human letters and documents—was mercilessly employed to prevent Fayez's residency. Acting as a foil, Fayez's human-made photographs serve as a testament to what "was there". The images overlaying each document are not just used to conceal sensitive information, such as names and signatures, but to challenge the mechanized language of the federal bureaucracy that he negotiated with for four years. As Fayez explains, these images were taken unintentionally during his time in limbo and are like those found in everyone's phone galleries—stripped of purpose yet inseparable from the "in-between" years of 2014, when he was first detained by ICE, to 2018 when he voluntarily departed the US.

While the American flag is a recurring motif, strewn between the pages of semantic immigration procedures, it seems unusually fragile in its own land—mirroring Fayez's disappointing and exhausting experience of the American dream. These photographs are not the usual imagery of the United States and bear no traces of the so-called promise of prosperity and upward mobility often associated with life in the US. They offer no celebration of that ideal, challenging instead its core assumptions and inviting a deeper questioning of its values.

American values go up in smoke in Fayez's Rewatching news, a screenshot of archival CNN live coverage of the attack on the World Trade Center. In reviewing the footage, at the exact moment of the still, I find the CNN reporter asking an eyewitness about the size of the damage in the tower. He replies, "Let me just get a better look right now." This better look is not a kind that seeks beauty but rather unfolding chaos, the urgency of witnessing without comprehension, and the disjointedness of a moment suspended between catastrophe and the attempt to understand it. We will never know if this screenshot offers a better look at the tower because of what the eyewitness said or because of the moment Fayez captures in the screenshot—right before the second plane hits the second tower. Parallel to the "decisive moment," the event of 9/11 holds particular relevance for Iranians, and the video still represents how, in the aftermath of the attacks, came significant changes in American immigration policies. The Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) added an extra layer of scrutiny to visa applications, meant to assess the risk of applicants posing security threats, such as espionage or terrorism. Citizens from nations such as Cuba, China, Iran, and Russia found it increasingly difficult to enter the United States. Photographs offer clues, some more opaque than others.

The Twin Towers make a second appearance in the exhibition in Fayez's appropriation of a weathered poster of the World Trade Center, hanging by a thread with a tear in the middle, so thin it could split apart at any moment. Half faded, half saturated, it seems as if, years ago, someone gently folded it to reveal the left side, where the towers once stood. Yet, the poster's future mimics its present—inevitable and deteriorating. The sun, which once made New York's cityscape iconic, now mercilessly bleaches the warm sunset printed on the poster, turning the land of opportunity into nothing more than a mirage. This is Fayez's Apolis.

"Do you belong here?" my partner asks as we walk through London. After a few seconds of silence, I answer, "No," while reflecting on those who would say yes. Feelings of belonging are a privilege.