

Shadi Habib Allah, *Chair Sink*, 2009

IMBALANCES OF POWER

Shadi Habib Allah has been navigating the underbelly of parallel economies and shadow networks for over a decade, producing works that question power from the inside out.

Text by Kevin Jones



Installation view of *Hammer Projects: Shadi Habib Allah* Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA, 2018. Photo by Joshua White

Certain laws affect some more than others.

Re-zoning in the absurdly named Liberty City neighborhood of Miami sounded the death knell for corner convenience stores: the big-box players squashed the mom-and-pops. The trickle-down

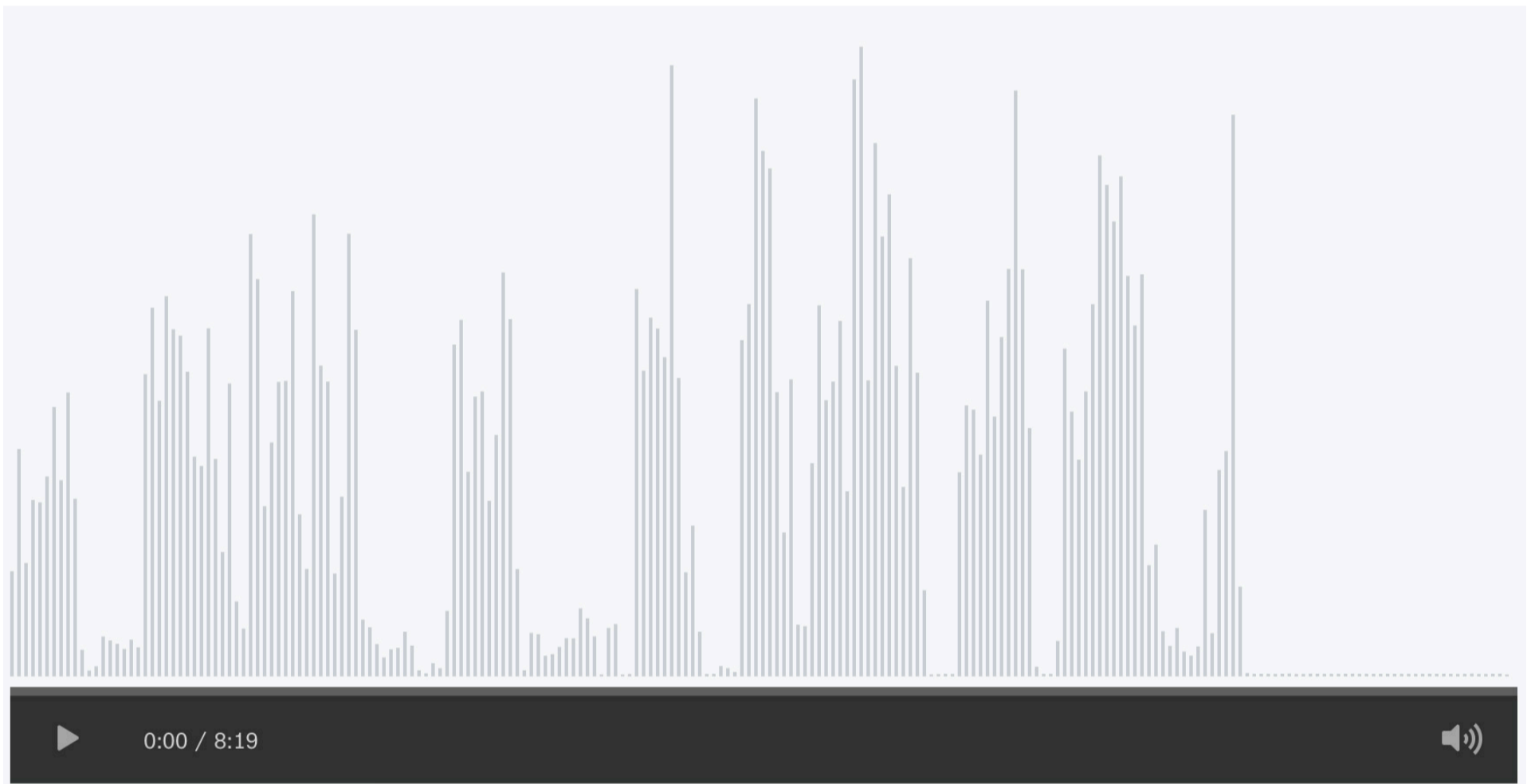
effect of such extreme economic violence forced shopkeepers (and their clients) to devise new mechanisms to outwit the system. From within this stark new economic reality, Habib Allah's reaction is disturbingly ghosted, eerie.



Shadi Habib Allah, *Measured Volumes*, 2018
Photo by Joshua White

The hollow casts of bulk-packed bottles, *Measured Volumes*, transpose a shopkeeper code (the absence of merchandise signposts a new corner store service—cash and credit for welfare cards). But they also attest to a vibrant alternative economy. In spite of their spectral presence, they seem less death mask, more testaments to coping and survival.

“Solidarity, much like a functional social safety net, seems elusive at best.”



[Listen: *Sound Appearance*, 2018](#)

How should poverty “perform” itself? Habib Allah’s journeys into inequality take an interesting side road through questions of representation. State expectations of welfare beneficiaries’ dress and appearance (i.e. looking “just poor enough”) are one more touchpoint of insidious institutional violence, à la Foucault. In the chillingly minimalist Hammer Museum show, an audio piece, *Sound Appearance*, culled from a 1986 Oprah show,

pits choruses of judgmental neoliberals against self-justifying welfare recipients. Accusations fly, tempers flare, raucous applause drowns speakers out. “I love how you’re dressed,” hollers one angry audience member to a welfare-recipient guest on stage. “Who paid for that?” Intra-class venom—the poor slamming the poor—is the most poisonous. Solidarity, much like a functional social safety net, seems elusive at best.

“A scuffed and dust-laden floor... tells the double story of exodus and reinvention.



Shadi Habib Allah, *70 Days Behind Inventory* (detail), 2018

When is the artist an excavator? Habib Allah's approach plays on twin registers of critique and complicity: he is in the game, but occasionally hoists himself outside it. After deep-dives into communities (or sub-cultures?), he surfaces with some emblem, a visual conceit that validates his conceptual intuition. Like the other works sprung from his time in Liberty City, *70 Days*... ricochets off a single, simple element

to indict a wider, nefarious system. A scuffed and dust-laden floor—punctuated by threadbare visuals of bygone promotions, pocked with the ghosted presence of former shelving units—tells the double story of exodus and reinvention. Excerpted from some far-flung quotidian flow, the floor is exactly like the artistic gesture that created it: distant, yet revelatory.



Shadi Habib Allah, *70 Days Behind Inventory*, 2018
Installation view at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, USA, 2018

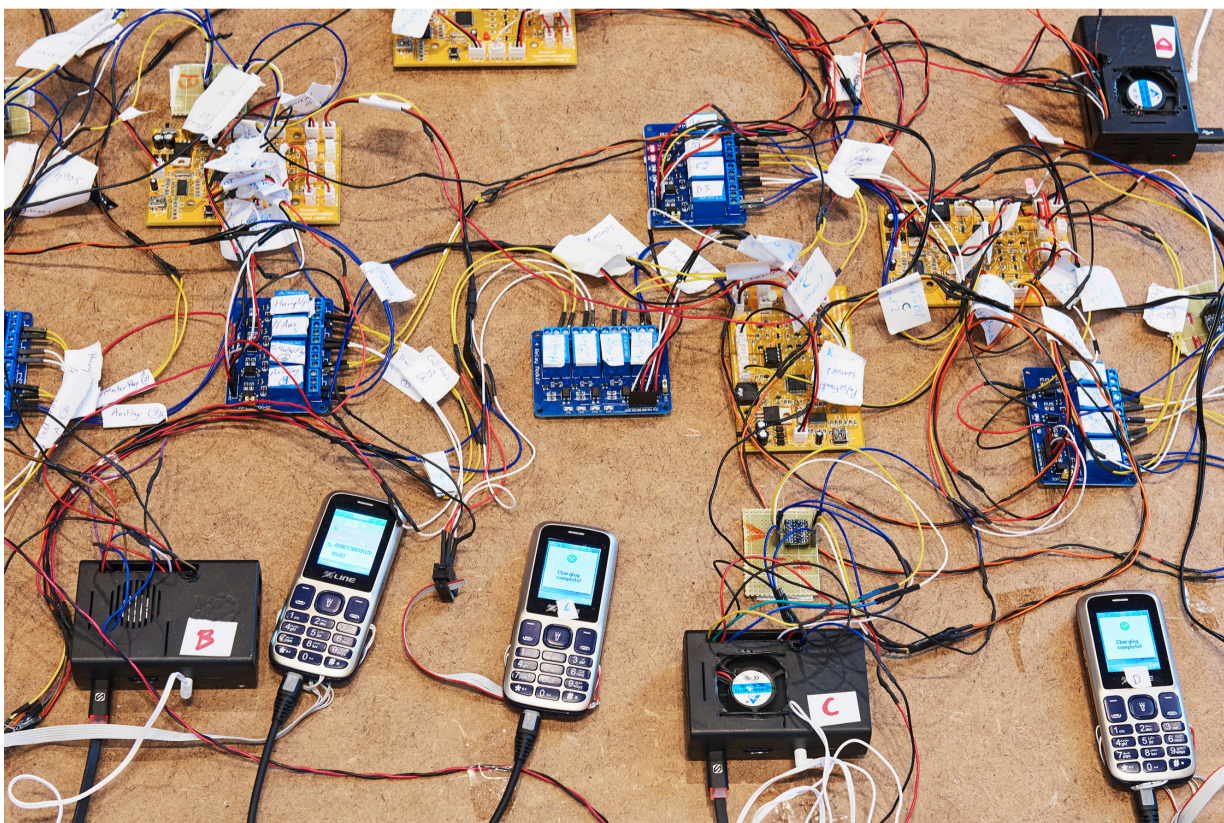


Shadi Habib Allah, *Daga'a* (still), 2015

[Watch: *Daga'a*, 2015 \(excerpt\)](#)

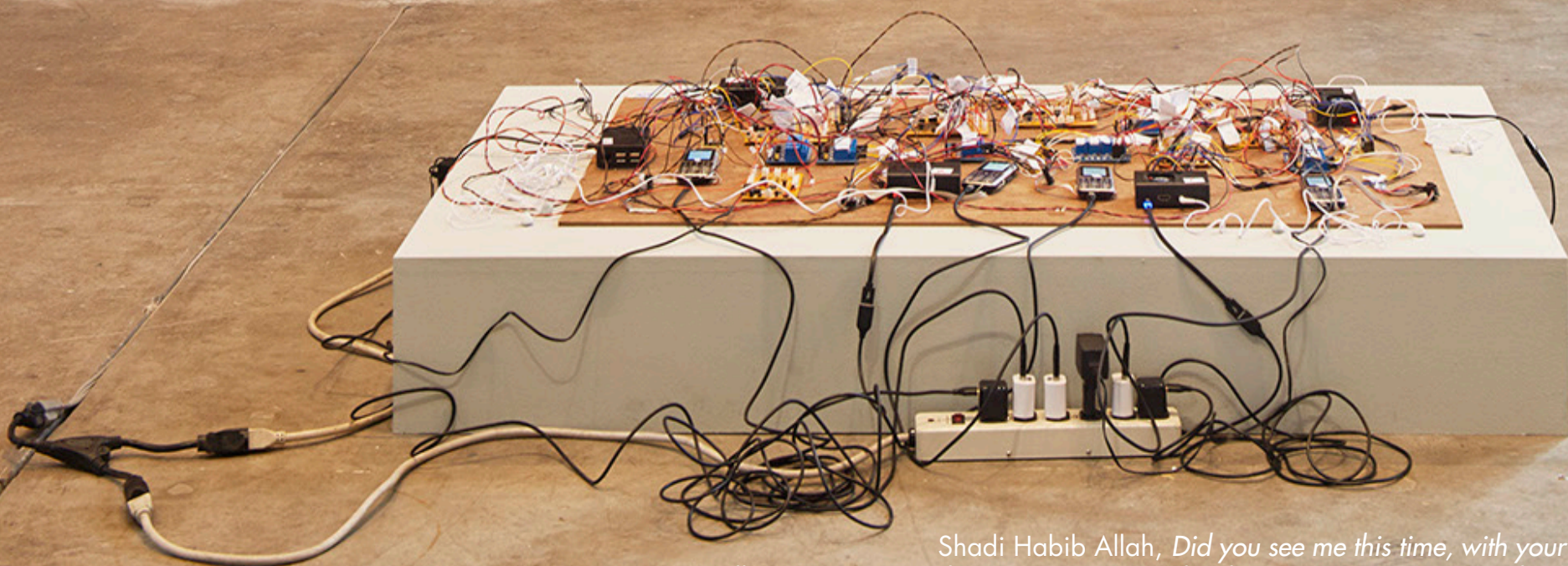
The State is nowhere and everywhere in the lives of the Sinai Bedouins. Disenfranchised by the system, the stateless men devised their own communication strategy to evade surveillance. A parallel economy—smuggling goods into Gaza and other parts of the region—is enabled by a shadow technology. Communicating solely through 2G cellular devices on unmonitored networks, they defy detection.

Tension snakes through *Daga'a* as the artist/infiltrator bears uncertain witness to obscure operations at the outskirts of authority. The complex sculptural work *Did You See Me This Time with Your Own Eyes* amplifies *Daga'a's* shadow tech filament. A tangled web of 2G devices produced by engineers in Palestine replicates the smugglers' impenetrable network, its sprawl and undecipherable density are evidence of the opaque system the Bedouins have created and continue to master.



Shadi Habib Allah
Did you see me this time, with your own eyes (detail), 2018

“Resistance resides
in gestures like this.”



Shadi Habib Allah, *Did you see me this time, with your own eyes*, 2018
Installation view at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY, USA, 2018. Photo by Kyle Knodell



Images: Shadi Habib Allah, *Marat Bathtub*, 2013
Installation view at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 2013



The spark of a revolution is sometimes as hard to isolate as its outcomes are to sustain. Yet its iconography is always immediate. The watery domestic counterpart to public self-immolation, *Marat Bathtub* crystallizes a revolutionary moment, yet speaks volumes on visualization.

The original, of which the artist has rendered a faithful replica, sits in a star-studded Parisian wax museum, forever displaying the freeze-framed assassination, reducing even as it attempts to monumentalize. Stark, vacant, forlorn, removed from any system of glorification, Habib Allah's solitary basin points to political letdown, bankrupt impulses. "Can revolutions still have heroes?" the gaping tub seems to ask.



Part of power's invisibility means its inequities slither everywhere around us. Even in the plumbing. What is this infrastructure? Who owns it? How are resources channeled? By whom? With a slight nod to Palestinian politics of infringement and resource distribution, *Chair Sink* is an artistic act of hijacking. The humble chair subverts the water from its collective flow, diverting the liquid into the contours of its private cavities. Unlike the unseen master infrastructure through which the water courses, the re-routing gesture demands to be seen: its ungainliness is its battle cry. Resistance resides in gestures like this.

Images: Shadi Habib Allah, *Chair Sink*, 2009
Installation view at Columbia University, New York

