

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POLITICS

Politics and photography – does it work? If so, why and how? Israeli philosopher and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay curated a photographic exhibition on the occupation of Palestine Israel in a notorious apartheid prison, now the grounds of South Africa’s Constitutional Court. Juan Orrantia and Ravinder Kaur respond.

What is the political role of photography? Or what can it be? What are the implications for aesthetics in political photography, and where do sensual and emotional reactions come into play?

As part of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, Israeli philosopher and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay presented a photographic exhibition on 40 years of occupation of Palestine by the state of Israel.

In an attempt to capture some of the dialogue these events generated in South Africa, we present some photographs with their accompanying narratives from Azoulay’s exhibition *Act of State: A photographed history of the Occupation* with responses to the exhibition by Juan Orrantia and Ravinder Kaur.

Together these pieces ask questions about the photograph as event, the relationships between photography and citizenship; the dis- and con-junctures between political philosophy and (or as) cultural

theory; resonances between South Africa’s past and the Israeli-Palestinian present; and the political visualization of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The following four photographs and accompanying texts formed part of an exhibition staged in The Old Fort, a notorious colonial and apartheid prison in Johannesburg, now a museum and the site of South Africa’s Constitutional Court.

ACTS OF STATE: A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Ariella Azoulay

(Bar Ilan University, Israel)



Unidentified photographer 1967

1967/09

The Old City of Jerusalem. Crowds, streaming to the spot where, days after the war ended, bulldozers razed what then became the Wailing Wall plaza, gaze beyond the rubble of the Maghrabia Quarter just in front of them. Army generals, who decided in one fell blow to demolish this neighborhood without any official sanction, supposed that the Jews’ enthrallment with the Wall would prevent them from noticing the rubble. One of the generals visiting the place a few days earlier with the Jerusalem Mayor and the General in charge of the Central Regional Command, while the houses were still intact, described it as follows: “We concluded that the entire area facing the Wailing Wall must be cleared. This is a one-time historical opportunity. We knew that June 14th is the Eve of the Feast of Pentecost and multitudes will come to pray at the Wall. We resolved to bring in the bulldozers and act as soon as the Sabbath was out.”



Photographer's name remains confidential 2001 1967/24/c

Hebron. Before the army denied Palestinians the right to move about large parts of the city of Hebron, this street was a bustling commercial center. The silence it has been fated to has turned it into an ideal atelier for the artist wishing to draw the portrait of an Israeli soldier. The soldier revels in the tourist's interest in him and stands facing her, erect, his weapon crossing his body closely, his right hand resting on its butt.



Photographer: Anat Zakai 2004 1968/07/c

Huwara Checkpoint. When the second man on the left presents his ID to the photographer, some meters before reaching the soldier at the checkpoint, he presents to her – and to us – the automatism of this gesture, as well as its absurdity. Each of the other three men seen with him in the same frame expresses a different attitude towards his gesture. The first smiles, the second is not amused, the third is suspicious.



Photographer: Nir Kafri 2002 1968/14/c

Lod. Arrest of 'illegal aliens' within the Green Line. A plainclothesman cuffs the hands of an elderly man whose presence in Israel, after years of working for his Israeli employer, has been declared illegal. In order not to risk daily delays at the checkpoints and get to their jobs on time, these men have stayed away from their homes in the Occupied Territories all weekdays, slept in dire conditions in shanties and basements, and been restricted to their sleeping quarters at night.

A LAYERED RESPONSE

Photographer and visual anthropologist Juan Orrantia went to the opening of Acts of State.

Juan Orrantia

(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)



Visiting this exhibition is a multilayered experience: an encounter, as curator Ariella Azoulay puts it. A series of affective moments crafted in the interaction of gazes addressing each other in multiple temporalities. Different trajectories coalesce, with the intention of sparking the numbing of the history of the Israeli occupation. The silence here takes a stance through color and in black in white, in strong faces and desolate spaces, in blood and tears, in flames and water spilled over pavement, under dust and rocks full of meaning -- even if only for some. But it

is this same multiplicity that sometimes makes this a difficult space to travel through. There are many things going on at various levels and registers – even in the quantity of images themselves – that the visitor has to deal with.

First of all there is the political implication of the photograph as a mode of creating citizenship for those who are constantly denied it. The visibility of the invisible subject is a stance that is taken directly and sets forth the possibilities of the image for the filling of voids. Voids that are, as Azoulay noted in her opening talk, the effects of state acts that otherwise would be crimes. And still this filling of the voids of citizenship is an act that walks along the line of the victim as subject. However plausible this thin line is, I do want to take a step back from the critiques of visual representations of violence, and recall what Alan Klima writes about this critique of the visual in *The Funeral Casino*. That despite the colonial and violent history of photography, we should also ask ourselves why, even if one can never do justice to the act of true witnessing through technologies of image reproduction, “if one was not there, then why are the flecks of the unaccountable political murders one has witnessed still ‘sticking to the heart?’ Just look.”

Other aspects of this multiplicity that sparks reflection are those regarding the politics of taking photographs, presented not only in the image as image, but in also the act of the photographer as part of the context. I am thinking of an image of a photographer being attacked and photographed, in an encounter with colonist-settlers, under the gaze of both the soldier and the Palestinian – while others snap the moment. I am thinking also of the politics of the image as seen in the series of Israeli soldier’s



giving out water, and the captions that warn us of the invention – of its humanitarianism – through the crafting of the photographic moment itself.

There is also the moment of reflection of the public (by public here I refer to the visitor to the exhibition), which in this case is much more of a private experience that takes the viewer deep into her own personal memories. This moment can be a sensual form of memory in becoming, as a sensual form of memory making and experiencing the past in the present (see Nadia Seremetakis’ 1996 book, *The Senses Still*). Experiencing the effects of the images, and in this case of their location, implies a relationship with the space itself. Walking under the old prison’s barbed wire to see images of more barbed wired moments, or engaging the colors of decay on the walls where panels hang, and of the images hung amongst this decay, is part of a series of inter-



actions that add layers to the experience of traversing silence and invisibility in multiple forms. These are moments in which such visual imagery demonstrates potential to generate sensual reactions that can unsettle, delimit, excite, activate, and even re-suscitate.

This brings to the fore the role of the personal through the sensual and the aesthetic to the grounds of politics. I thus want to end this reflection by returning to the personal. A personal that guides these reactions and thoughts, and that in recent discussions is wanting to be disciplined – both in academic and in Foucauldian meanings of the term. Something that actually it was never intended to be. The personal – whether through the medium of photography itself as form of writing, in the encounter, or in the represented being – comes to this stage of the political as a vehicle for the practice of poetics,

imagination and the affective as politico-theoretical projects. Why should we limit its potential?

LIFE OF THE IMAGE

Ravinder Kaur

(University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

In this project of “re-thinking” the political in late capital, complex visual assemblages of material, symbolic and virtual elements – photography, film, graphics, animation – mediated in multiple forms and consumed every day present a challenging point of entry. How do images inform, shape and contest our political imaginaries? How are desires, fears, im/possibilities and hopes imagined, projected and produced in the political sphere; and how do image worlds and life worlds translate from one to another and back in everyday life? These questions become particularly urgent when ‘digital translation’ of life to its image is easily obtained through enhanced technological capabilities, and when imagery of distant events becomes more intimate and immediate through incessant viewing. Consider the spectacular images of 9/11 twin towers in the act of destruction, images of faceless bare-bodies of Iraqi prisoners arranged in piles in Abu Ghraib, and the orange-suited handcuffed silhouettes of WoT detainees behind imposing fences in Guantanamo that have become vital signs of the age of terror – the unsettling spectre that continues to horrify and fascinate the spectator.

It is this unsettling quality of images that Ariella Azoulay concerned herself with at the Workshop in her rich and evocative presentation on ‘civil contract of citizenship’ seeking to narrate the history of Is-

raeli occupation of Palestine since 1947-8. Through an archive of photographs amassed from as different sources as Israeli news agencies, Israeli defence forces (IDF) and Israeli and Palestine photographers, Azoulay constructs a visual history of the occupation on the one hand, and on the other locates the event of photography as an encounter that makes the *invisible* (‘non-citizens’ mainly Palestinians) *visible* (‘citizens’ of disaster). The photographic encounter creates an ensemble of people who are initiated into citizenship through a common recognition of disaster as unbearable (distinct from those who may chose to ignore the signs of disaster). The event of photography, for Azoulay, then, opens up a political space that is not subjugated to any sovereign power, and where it is possible to imagine new possibilities and creative modes of thinking about citizenship. What Azoulay offers us here is a rich weave of ideas that provoke us to reopen the themes of citizenship, political imagination, visibility, subjectivity, sovereignty and photography in our quest to re-think the political.

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At the heart of Azoulay’s compelling political project is the idea of ‘archive’ that appears not only in its material form but also as a sign of resistance. Here the archive (described by Agamben in *The Remnants of Auschwitz* as the system of relations between what is ‘said’ and ‘unsaid’) of photographs represents a collective testimony to the spectacular and the everyday oppression that non-citizens (Palestinians)

live under the Israeli occupation. The photographs of Israeli soldiers smiling into the camera against a backdrop of Palestinian detainees, destroyed homes, bodily injuries, and terrified faces that often gaze away from the camera (reminiscent of the images of Holocaust in some ways) constitute the visual archive through which the spectators 'see' and 'show' the horror of the regime. The act of photography, in fact, seems to become an act of witness, (or in its double meanings *Shahadat* (martyrdom): to bear testimony to be revealed on the Day of Judgment; and self-sacrifice in pursuit of truth where the photographer and the photographed subject risk dangers and reprisals in order to record the truth. (Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, in his memoirs linked the very idea of survival to the idea of bearing witness – to survive in order to tell the outside world what had happened inside the camps.) The camera, in this case, becomes the mediator that brings the inside outside in a way that language and memory often struggle with. The very art of photography has historically been associated with the imperative of truth-telling, or as Susan Sontag puts it in *On Photography*, "to unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance". This seems to be the purpose of Azoulay's archive too: to constitute a visual documentation of reality, and even a pedagogical tool that will inform and educate spectators about life lived under occupation.

How are we to make sense of the "unsaid" - all that cannot be reduced to a photo-image?

As photography and truth-telling appear to be almost synonymised in this project, might one ad-

dress the moment of photographic encounter itself to understand the limits of photography? The very formulation of a photographic *encounter* to describe the making of a photograph suggests an element of surprise, an unexpected assemblage, even a confrontation between the photographer and the photographed subject. Yet photographs are mostly an outcome of 'proper moments' that occur once the photographer is satisfied with the camera's angle, availability of light and the desired position of the subject (aesthetics is the other imperative of photography, often in conflict with truth-telling). Can the rectangular fragment of 'reality' called photograph, then, be considered outside the conditions of its own production? One might ask: who or what are the proper subjects of photography? How is the photographed subject framed, and how do we understand the relationship between what is inside the frame and what is left outside? The very privilege of the photographer to set the focus (zoom in and out of objects, body parts, locales) means that the same event may not generate two same sets of photographic images. What we see in a photograph are, then, fragmentary moments that merely hint at life where a lot is left "unsaid". How are we to make sense of the "unsaid" - all that cannot be reduced to a photo-image?

The shadow of the "unsaid" appears within the ordering of the archive itself. The photographs and the accompanying text in Azoulay's exhibition and lecture create a palpable narrative of repression and dehumanisation in Palestine, and in this tight packing leave little contingent space for photos that could interrupt the narrative. One is struck by the absence of photos that might show Israelis and Palestinians in intimate settings outside the frames of

victims/oppressors. How do we relate photographs in the archive to the moments of mutuality that are yet to become photographic subjects? The absence of such photos, and/or the absence of the possibility of such photos, open a difficult uncharted terrain if politics of contention was ever to give way to politics of mutuality.

Finally, let us revert to the life of the photographed subject itself who is liberated, or citizen-ized in the new political space opened through photography. The event of photography is a moment when life assumes its image form – a moment rich in possibilities where image is poised to transcend over life itself in some ways (making life visible, and even memorable in a collective sense). The emancipatory potential of photography is seductively double edged: liberating the subject while locking it in that particular moment too. The life after the photographic encounter is, thus, potentially foreshadowed by the image that may continue to live, as W.T.J. Mitchell claims, long after the actual photograph is destroyed. This suggested durability (rather than fickleness) of the image hints towards the power as well as the limits of the creative political space Azoulay imaginatively opens for us. What possibilities of self-making, erasing and re-making exist for the photographed subject in this political space? Can the subjects liberate themselves from their own images if they so desire? And finally, how does the political space initiated through images translate back into the life-world? The entanglements between life and its image and the fertile political space therein deserves consideration if we are to think along the "possibility of the event" as Mbembe suggested in the Workshop: To keep the potentialities alive and to imagine what seems improbable.