



What Are You Looking At?

A re-conceptualization of citizenship led Ariella Azoulay to a new understanding of photography's political potential, which served as the catalyst for the exhibition "Act of State." Simon Faulkner explores the show and corresponding book

— SIMON FAULKNER

In June 2007, Ariella Azoulay curated the exhibition "Act of State" at the Minshar Gallery in Tel Aviv, for which she assembled some 760 photographs by 77 photographers. All of these photographs addressed some aspect of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip between 1967 and 2007. The exhibition opened on June 7, two days after the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the Six-Day War, and was intended as a contribution to the commemoration of this event within Israel.

While the majority of activities marking this anniversary defined the war – in which Israel gained control of the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights – as a victory for Israel, "Act of State" represented it as tragic opening to the history of the occupation. Azoulay's exhibition was similar in outlook to another exhibition entitled "Desert Generation: 40 Years of Occupation, 1967-2007," which opened just before "Act of State" at the Jerusalem Artists' House.^[1] Both exhibitions were organized in opposition to the occupation and involved the presentation of hundreds of images. But whereas "Desert Generation" started from an E-mail call to artists that generated a wide variety of images that were ultimately

displayed on the gallery walls without a preconceived order, "Act of State" involved a systematic attempt to explore the history of the occupation through photographs. If the political significance of "Desert Generation" was found in the solidarity it forged between Israeli and Palestinian artists who came together in protest, the political significance of "Act of State" was in the way it developed a new mode of viewing the history of the occupation. In this sense, "Act of State" involved an experiment in seeing the occupation, and had the potential to help create a new form of political vision.

Images and Texts

The images Azoulay collected were arranged as a chronology, with each of the 40 years of the occupation represented by multiple photographs running horizontally above a black painted timeline. Photographs were also organized vertically into themes – with two to four images in every theme – that began with a specific photograph and year in the horizontal chronology and moved up the gallery wall into the future. Thus, one thematic line could begin with a photograph taken in 1987 and end with one from 2003. This overall configuration allowed spectators to track the development of the occupation through the chronologically organized

photographs, while also enabling them to consider aspects of the occupation regime through the thematic collocation of images.

Each photograph in the exhibition was accompanied by the name of the photographer, the date and location in which it was taken and, in most cases, commentary by Azoulay. As such, the exhibition presented a viewing experience defined by multiple relationships between images and texts. This brought "Act of State" closer to a display within a historical museum than it was to a conventional photographic exhibition in which textual commentary is kept to a minimum, while still resembling the "archival" installations of some contemporary artists.^[2] "Act of State" might also be related to Aby Warburg's "Mnemosyne" project, conceived as a "picture atlas" involving images arranged on screens to explore themes within European collective memory. With these comparisons in mind, "Act of State" can be described as a visual archive or pictorial atlas of the occupation presented in the form of an exhibition. The arrangement of the photographs on the gallery walls gave the impression of history having been given a tabular transparency, while the texts complicated their "reality," raising questions about what could be seen.

[1] For information about "Desert Generation," see www.desert-generation.co.il/a.html. The exhibition was also shown at the Kibbutz Gallery in June 2007 and in Amsterdam and Manchester in November 2007 and April 2008, respectively. Also see www.desert-generation.nl/ and www.holdengallery.mmu.ac.uk/desertgeneration.php

[2] For example, Gerhard Richter's Atlas, the work of the Atlas Group, Zoe Leonard and Joachim Schmid, and Thomas Hirschhorn's recent work The Incommensurable Banner (2007).

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A Clash of Identities

The recent publication of the photographs and accompanying texts used in “Act of State” provides an opportunity to consider the significance of the exhibition in relation to the mainstream Israeli field of vision when it comes to the occupation. Dominating this field of vision is a political imaginary that severely restricts how the occupation can be seen and, in fact, obfuscates the nature of the occupation as an occupation. This political imaginary is organized around a fundamental opposition between Israelis and Palestinians living in the occupied territories. This opposition is naturalized by a series of essentialist binaries that contrast Israelis with Palestinians, opposing the civilized with the barbaric, the democratic with the undemocratic and a culture of life with a culture of death. These binaries set up the Palestinians as the enemies of Israel and obscure the political nature of the occupation, which sees Israelis as citizens of a sovereign state and Palestinians as people who are governed by that state without being granted citizenship. The occupation, viewed in essentialist terms, is a clash of irreconcilable cultures and identities, instead of a political situation in which a militarily powerful state imposes its control over a stateless people. Such perceptions of the occupation have led many Israelis to want separation from the Palestinians, but without necessarily desiring a withdrawal from the occupied territories. In this sense, the dominant political imaginary involves a way of seeing that superimposes a fantasy of separation between Israelis and Palestinians over a complex reality involving their political and spatial implication. The dominant political imaginary within Israel can be thought of as a set of ideas that takes on an almost visual and geographical

form. The key concepts that constitute this political imaginary are given iconic form and combine to form an iconographic political terrain.^[3] The Israeli national collective, the Palestinians as the national enemy and the perceived imperatives for separation and security that the opposition between these two collectives produces – all have their iconic motifs within this imaginary, constituted by concrete images and objects. For example, the separation barrier in the West Bank – as an architectural structure and myriad related images – functions within the dominant political imaginary as an icon of security that separates the space of the national collective from that of the national enemy. Similarly, the checkpoint system is iconic of the need for and deployment of Israeli security that reinforces the desire for separation between Israelis and Palestinians, and subordinates the needs of the latter to those of the former. Within the dominant political imaginary the key icons represent national self-defense or national threat. Thus, the Israeli army, the barrier and the checkpoint system are all representative of defense against the enemy represented by icons of Palestinian terror. It should also be noted that the dominant political imaginary is not just a representation that relates to a political reality. Rather, it is also productive of this reality. The army, the barrier and the checkpoints are not simply practical responses to political and military conditions. They are also products of a political imaginary that reinforces the opposition between an Israeli “us” and a Palestinian “them.” Yet the dominant political imaginary cannot determine the meaning of the concrete structures and the effects they generate. These things – the army, the barrier, etc. – can always mean something else depending upon how they are framed.

It is important to note, however, that the Israeli field of vision is not uniform. Toward the margins exists a different way of seeing associated with the Zionist left that recognizes the occupation as an occupation, while still maintaining the desire for separation between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of a two-state solution. This way of seeing defines an alternative political imaginary that conceives a peaceful future for Israel and justice for the Palestinians to be dependent upon a withdrawal from the occupied territories. Within this political imaginary, the barrier and checkpoint system are not icons of Israeli defense, but icons of insecurity. In addition to this perspective, and further to the margins of the field of vision, exists the view associated with the non-Zionist Israeli left, which not only sees the occupation as an occupation, but also resists viewing the occupation and its solution in terms of the division of people into ethnic-national communities. Instead of separation, this outlook promotes some form of political federation through a bi-national or one-state solution. This viewpoint generates a political imaginary that sets up an opposition between the interests of Israeli and Palestinian civilians on the one hand, and the power politics of the Israeli state on the other.

An Act of Citizenship

It is in terms of this last perspective that we can locate Azoulay’s critical project. Thus, she argues in her recent book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, that the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians living in the occupied territories should not be understood in terms of two competing and exclusive national communities, but in relation to their shared (though different) status as populations governed by the state of Israel. In Azoulay’s words, her approach involves a “rethinking of the political sphere as a space

of political relations between the governed, whose political duty is first and foremost a duty toward one another, rather than toward the ruling power.”^[4] This approach entails a political vision that contests the dominant Israeli political imaginary and encourages solidarity across the ethnic-national divide. It is a vision based on an alternative conception of citizenship as a non-exclusive universal right. From this perspective, citizenship is not something granted by the sovereign; instead, it is to be struggled for through what Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen have recently termed “acts of citizenship”: acts that disrupt the existing political order to “create new possibilities.”^[5] As such these acts are concerned with a “citizenship that is ‘yet to come.’”^[6] This re-conceptualization of citizenship is central to Azoulay’s understanding of the political potential of photography. “Act of State” can be defined as an attempt to disrupt the dominant political imaginary and to destabilize the division between citizens and non-citizens within the structure of the occupation. The exhibition and subsequent book can, therefore, be defined as an act of citizenship that has the potential to generate other acts of citizenship on the part of the spectator – acts that would begin with the recognition that the Palestinians pictured are equal human beings deserving of equal civil status. This recognition involves an understanding that photographs of Palestinian plight demand some kind of response. The potential for photographs of the occupation to involve what Azoulay terms “emergency claims”^[7] is especially evident in images that present a clear sense of cooperation between the photographed person and the photographer. There are numerous photographs within “Act of State” that depict Palestinians presenting to the camera wounds resulting from rubber-



[3] For a discussion along these lines, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in the East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 12 and 22.

[4] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2008, p. 17.

[5] Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, “Introduction,” in Isin and Nielsen, eds., *Acts of Citizenship*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2008, pp. 2 and 10.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[7] See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, pp. 145, 197-199, 203.

Images

Nir Kafri / *Balata Refugee Camp*, 2002

Jim Hollander / *Passing School Girls, Gaza*, 1986

Previous page:

Miki Kratsman / *2007*

Next pages (from left):

Jim Hollander / *Woman Hurls Rock at Soldier, Burin*, 1988

Wissam Naseer / *Beit Hanoun, Gaza*, 2006

Miki Kratsman / *Riots at Al-Aqsa Mosque*, 2000

Liriet Livni Lahav / *Hawara Checkpoint*, 2005



coated bullets, live rounds and torture. One sequence of photographs, in particular, portrays wounds inflicted upon or around the eyes of children during the First Intifada. In other photographs, Palestinians display evidence of Israeli army violence in the form of spent munitions and property damage. All these acts of presentation seem to be premised on the belief held by the subjects that they share an assumption with the photographer and the potential viewer that “what they are witnessing is intolerable.”^[8] The act of cooperation between the photographed person and the photographer is a civil one that assumes that there is a civil context beyond the occupation in which the Palestinian victim can be heard and given a response. This is why Azoulay defines photography as a “civil political space”^[9] that exceeds the limits of citizenship defined by the dominant political imaginary. Photography holds the potential to constitute an alternative space of appeal through which citizens, defined in the universal sense, can communicate to each other and respond to each other’s situations. The taking of a photograph has the potential to be an act of citizenship, as does its display and viewing. Thus, the photographic process can involve a sequence of acts that make claim to citizenship and respond to these claims.

Every actor involved might be changed through this process of citizenship.

Appearance and Reality

The civil space of photography is fundamentally one of visibility and vision. This point can be related to Isin and Nielsen’s suggestion that acts of citizenship are in part concerned with “creating or shaping appearance.”^[10] This is of crucial political importance because, as Jacques Rancière has observed, “Politics is first of all a battle over perceptible/sensible material.”^[11] Judith Butler concurred: “The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not.”^[12] The borderline between that which appears and that which does not is, therefore, a crucial site of political struggle: Acts of citizenship are both created upon that line and aim to redefine it. Such acts are concerned with the disruption and reorganization of the political imaginaries that define the field of vision; they also attempt to introduce new icons to these political imaginaries and redefine the meaning of existing icons. “Act of State” works along these lines by making the occupation visible in new ways through mostly unseen or forgotten images

and by reframing motifs central to the way that most Israelis see or, more precisely, do not see the occupation. Thus, Azoulay writes next to a photograph of a concrete section of the West Bank separation barrier shown hanging horizontally from a crane before it is hoisted into place in Abu Dis: “The horizon is threatened.”^[13] This sentence transforms the barrier from an emblem of security within the frame of the dominant political imaginary to one of threat. This threat is specific from the perspective of Palestinians living in Abu Dis and is also generic, in terms of the threat to freedom of movement. Here the “horizon” is both literally the horizon that will no longer be seen once the barrier is up and the horizon of human aspirations for equality, justice and peace. The pictorial space of the photograph itself becomes a context for the political contest over appearance. The text dislocates the image from its place within the dominant political imaginary and, as such, constitutes a small act of citizenship that contests the way things usually appear. Although particular photographs have fixed pictorial characteristics, at the level of meaning they entail an openness that works against their containment by a specific way of seeing. As a consequence, the dominant political imaginary cannot control the potential significance of a photograph of the

occupation. Azoulay makes this point in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, when she suggests that photography defines “a space of political relations that are not ... completely subject to the national logic that still overshadows the political arena.”^[14] Photographs can be produced and framed in such a way that they function as part of a national logic. Yet even these photographs contain an excess of potential meaning beyond their investment with nationalistic significance. It is this excess that Azoulay sought to exploit by wresting photographic images from the grip of the dominant political imaginary, making them potential icons for an alternative politics of citizenship that is still in a condition of emergence.

When Four Dimensions Become Two

Other examples of this kind of contest over the meaning of photographs of the occupation are presented in “Act of State” through the re-presentation of snapshots taken by Israeli soldiers in the occupied territories. In one photograph, taken in Ramallah in 2002 by a member of the organization Breaking the Silence (comprising soldiers and reservists calling for the army to take accountability for its actions), a handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinian prisoner sits on the floor in a stairwell next to a smiling Israeli soldier.

Another soldier stands to the right of them, resting his arm on the banisters. This photograph is accompanied by testimony from another member of Breaking the Silence about a different photograph taken after placing a terrified Palestinian prisoner in between army dogs. This was done “more for fun than for hurting anyone,” he said, and because the soldiers “just wanted that picture.”^[15] Such photographs are not an official product of army activities. Nevertheless, they gain their logic within the institutional context of the military, where they attest to comradeship under arms. This comradeship binds the individual to the national collective through the combating against and vilification of the national enemy. When seen within a military context, the photograph connotes youthful military antics. However, it also entails a visualization of the dominant political imaginary, in which the soldiers – as representatives of the national collective – combat the threat of the national enemy, in the form of the prisoner. The re-framing of the photograph within “Act of State” makes the “fun” involved in the taking of the photograph appear perverse. It also brings the implicit national logic of the photograph to the forefront by highlighting the relationship of domination between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians.

Such acts of re-contextualization do not reveal the “true” meaning of the photographs. Instead, they enable the potential of photography to function as evidence to be actualized in a different way. Because of the nature of their technological production, photographs involve depictions of specific points in space at particular moments in time, reducing four-dimensional reality to a two-dimensional surface in such a way that photographs appear to mirror, as opposed to represent, the world. This is why photographs are taken to have evidential force in ways that other pictures are not. Yet a photograph is not inherently evidence of anything. Evidence is what we make of the photograph, not what the photograph is. By interpreting photographs and encouraging others to interpret them in particular ways, the evidential and persuasive potential of photography is brought into a specific actuality. This is why Azoulay comments that photographs “must be made to speak.”^[16] “Act of State” achieves this by bringing together similar photographs to collectively represent structural features of the occupation, as opposed to isolated events, and also by combining photographs and texts. The function of these texts is to aid some Israeli viewers in the development of what Azoulay describes as “civic skills” when it comes

[8] Ibid., p. 18.

[9] Ibid., p. 12.

[10] Isin and Nielsen, “Introduction,” p. 4.

[11] Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh, “Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement,” *Substance*, 92, 2000, p. 11.

[12] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 2004.

[13] Ariella Azoulay, *Act of State*, 2007, p. 567.

[14] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 12.

[15] Azoulay, *Act of State*, 2007, p. 527.

[16] Ariella Azoulay, “A Photographed History of the Occupation,” Introduction to *Act of State*.



“Each of these photographs could then serve as evidence at the trials or truth and reconciliation committees that will be established some day, in which people who perpetrated them will publicly confess their actions and then, perhaps, their victims will forgive them” Ariella Azoulay



to encounters with photographs of the occupation.^[17] Some texts use straightforwardly descriptive terms. They assert the significance of the photographs by depicting situations that are intolerable in an attempt to garner a response of civic responsibility from the viewer. Other texts involve asking the viewer questions. For example, in relation to a photograph taken in 2002 of a Palestinian woman and her young son standing inside the ruins of their house in Nablus, Azoulay asks: “What will she tell the child when he asks why their home was destroyed?”^[18] Asking this opens up the photograph to imaginative interpretation that might allow viewers to put themselves in the subjects’ place and see a need to act on their behalf.



The Infinity of Photographic Meaning
Making photographs “speak” does not involve creating a fictional reading of the image. Such an assumption implies that there can be “factual” interpretations of photographs. On the contrary, there can be nothing but speculative, curious and imaginative readings of photographs through which their virtual potential for meaning is actualized. The point is that this potential can always be realized in different ways. As Azoulay states in *The Civil Contract of Photography*: “The



photograph always includes a supplement that makes it possible to show that what ‘was there’ wasn’t there necessarily in that way.”^[19] Similarly, she states in an interview from 2007 that the “information that a photograph stores is infinite.”^[20] In terms of “Act of State,” this infinity of photographic meaning is the product of the conjunction of multiple configurations of image and text with a potentially infinite number of acts of spectatorship. The meanings of photographs of the occupation are never fixed or finished by either their production or by any of the acts of spectatorship to which they are exposed. It is this openness of meaning that makes photography a potentially powerful resource for those who seek to contest the existing political order. The openness of photographic meaning is analogous to the inclusiveness of acts of citizenship aimed at breaking open the restricted definition of citizenship enforced by sovereign power. Thus, it is not just in the potential civil relationship between the subject and the viewer that the civil space of photography can be understood, but also in the general condition of photographic meaning as something uncontrollable by political power. The virtual potential of photography for infinite meaning can therefore be linked to the virtuality of the political that defines the potential for the

future to unfold in different ways. By reframing photographs, “Act of State” utilizes and champions the openness of photographic meaning, while at the same time attempting to actualize the potential of photography to function as evidence, as a means of exposing the criminality of the occupation regime. Photographs in the exhibition were re-contextualized as evidence of what Azoulay terms ‘acts of state’: a legal condition that legitimizes and decriminalizes the oppressive and violent application of sovereign power. In her words: “The term ‘act of state’ represents a legal doctrine granting impunity to people sent by their state to commit actions that would otherwise be defined as crimes.”^[21] Azoulay indicates her intention to reframe photographs of the occupation as evidence of criminality in the introduction to the exhibition’s book when she states: “Each of these photographs could then serve as evidence at the trials or truth and reconciliation committees that will be established some day, in which people who perpetrated them will publicly confess their actions and then, perhaps, their victims will forgive them.”^[22] The desire for a reckoning of this kind seems like a tall order given the current political conditions within Israel. The widespread support for Operation Cast Lead, despite its death toll of more than 1,400 Palestinians,

indicates that the way of seeing the occupation defined by the dominant political imaginary continues to hold sway. This way of seeing can be linked to what Neve Gordon has called the “politics of death” that since the 1990s has replaced a “politics of life” as the dominant regime of control within the occupied territories. As Gordon argues, this shift from “life” to “death” involves the effective abandonment of the occupied population by the occupying power. The Israeli state no longer seems to care about how Palestinians in the occupied territories live or how they might be disciplined to accept the occupation regime, increasingly choosing instead to use modes of sovereign power, including extrajudicial executions and the bombardment of civilian populations.^[23] Under these conditions, the occupied territories have become what Susan Buck-Morss calls a “wild zone of power,” in which law is suspended and violence rules.^[24] The abandonment of the occupied Palestinian population has been replicated within the field of vision through the relative transformation of the dominant political imaginary over the last two decades, so that this population is at best viewed as being of no concern to Israeli citizens and at worst as a threat that requires elimination. Having stated this, nothing about the politics of the occupation is absolutely fixed. There

is always potential for change no matter how bleak the prospects might appear. Who can predict what “Act of State” and projects like it might generate in terms of thoughts and actions? Who can say for sure that it will do no good? That there will be no constructive and creative consequences and that such projects cannot lead to a point where there is political change in Israeli society that might allow for the historical trial for which Azoulay hopes? Such a trial would be based upon a political actuality in which the accused and the accuser would have gained equal status as citizens. This equality will be the result of the citizenship “yet to come” that is a far cry from the present. However “Act of State” and Azoulay’s critical writing on photography suggest how photographic acts can be potentially powerful tools in the service of people determined to act as citizens in ways that are not restricted by nationalized definitions of citizenship. The political struggle will entail another struggle over the field of vision and the order of appearance for which the creation, presentation and observation of photographs will be of great importance. The occupation must continue to be photographed, and these photographs – along with those that already exist – must be looked at again and again to see what they might “say.” →

Images
Ziv Koren / *Hila Checkpoint, Gaza*, 2004
Nir Kafri / *Hadarim Prison*, 2004
Eli Gormezano, Israel Sun Ltd. / *Checkpoint in Nablus*, 2004
Miki Kratsman / *Heira Abu-Hassan and Amiya Zakin, Yamun*, 2001
Ariane Littman / *El-Chader*, 2004

[17] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 14.
[18] Azoulay, *Act of State*, p. 64.
[19] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 94; emphasis in the original.

[20] Ory Dessau, “Photography’s Opportunity: An Interview with Ariella Azoulay,” *Studio*, 170, August-September 2007.

[21] See the English language press release for ‘Act of State.’ www.ffipp.org/pdfs/Act.State.1967-2007.pdf
[22] Azoulay, “A Photographed History of the Occupation.” See also Ariella Azoulay, “Everything Could Be Seen,” in *Everything Could Be Seen*, exhib. cat., Umm El-Fahem: Umm El-Fahem Art Gallery, 2004, p. 15; Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, pp. 195-196.
[23] Gordon, *Israel’s Occupation*, pp. 2, 19, 188, 212.
[24] See Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, chapter one.