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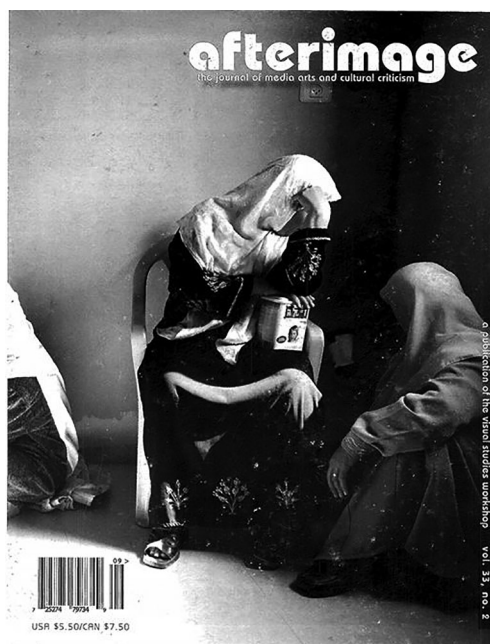
Auguries of Emergency

Ariella Azoulay

“The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography”

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An untitled photograph by Miki Kratsman prefaces Ariella Azoulay’s 2005 *Afterimage* essay “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography,” one that is also reprinted in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008). A woman stands in the center of the image, in her home; she is holding her dress up high, almost above her thighs, to reveal her bruised, lacerated, and swollen legs. Her right leg seems to bear the imprint of something that has punctured it. Her pants are scrunched around her swollen

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and bruised ankles. She looks straight at the viewer and her expression is determined and intent. “It’s as if she were saying,” Azoulay writes, “I . . . am showing you, the spectator, my wound. I am holding my skirt like a screen so that you will see my wound” (40). Next to her, a young woman bends her head downward toward the older woman’s injured legs; in contrast to the older woman’s face, hers is mostly obscured by her intent gaze.¹ The readers learn later in the essay that the woman in the center of the photograph is Mrs. Abu-Zohir, who was shot in the legs with rubber bullets by the Israel Defense Forces and demanded that Kratsman, a photojournalist who has worked in the Occupied Territories for several decades, document her wounded legs.² Her request that the photo be taken “as if it was her right to demand her photo be taken . . . and everyone else’s duty to see it” embodies what Azoulay introduces in this essay as the “civil contract of photography” (39). Azoulay asks the reader of “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography” to focus not on the horror of Mrs. Abu-Zohir’s wounds, but on her belief that she has the right to be photographed (as distinguished from being seen by the photographer). The photograph of Mrs. Abu-Zohir reinforces the agency of the individual wounded to have their experience documented and of the condition of becoming a citizen not through statehood but through the medium of and active participation in photography. “The right or duty does not stem from the law, but from the civil contract of photography,” Azoulay writes. “She was seeking to become a citizen by means of, through and with photography. By becoming a citizen, she enables others to become citizens” (39).

Juxtaposing the photograph of Mrs. Abu-Zohir with the image on the cover of Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) reveals their very different approaches to thinking through spectatorship. The cover of Sontag’s book is not a photograph but a Francisco Goya etching entitled *Tampoco* (*Not [in this case], either*) from *The Disasters of War* series (1810–20), about Napoleon’s invasion of Spain. It shows a Napoleonic soldier looking at a dead man hanging from a tree; the dead man’s pants are pulled down below his knees and his head droops downward. The seated soldier looks at him with a contemplative curiosity, with one arm bent against his hip and the other bent so that his hand cradles his head, which is tilted toward the dead man. Sontag discusses the Goya series as ushering in “a new standard for responsiveness to suffering,” a means “to awaken, shock, wound the viewer,” and compares it to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work as “a turning point in the history of moral feelings and of sorrow . . .”³

Sontag is interested in the question posed at the outset of her book after her discussion of Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938): “Who are the ‘we’ at whom such shock-pictures are aimed?”⁴ She poses this question not just to interrogate the question of who

1. In another discussion of this photograph, Azoulay describes the woman in the photograph as a “young relative” whose presence “undermines the automatic privilege given to photographers to intrude into others’ private spaces. She is there as an authorized spectator, stating by her presence that not just anyone, at any time, can view the wounded body of another, and that not all spectators are granted the same status.” See Ariella Azoulay and Miki Kratsman, *Miki Kratsman & Ariella Azoulay: The Resolution of the Suspect* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2016), 68.

2. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

3. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 44–45.

4. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 7.



Tampoco (Not [in this case], either) from the series *The Disasters of War* (1810-20) by Francisco Goya.

the “we” are (generally either “the privileged and the merely safe” in her estimation) but also to begin an interrogation that runs through *Regarding the Pain of Others* of the impotence of the “we” who looks at atrocity images and who have no immediate ability or will to change the conditions that produced the violence they depict. Though Sontag’s title is surely ironic and critical of those who would ignore others’ pain, she also argues for the importance of acknowledging difference and distance; the very ending of the book reinforces that the “we” who has not only not experienced political violence but who has not been killed by it only reinforces the distance between the “us” that has not had this experience and the “them” that has. “We don’t get it,” she writes. “Can’t understand, can’t imagine.”⁵ Sontag’s citizenry centers around geographically or ideologically removed spectators, not the photographed. Her concern is about the limitations of the epistemology of knowledge and experience that photographs reveal—even her discussion, for example, of Ron Haviv’s photograph of a Serbian paramilitary soldier kicking a dead Muslim woman (later used in war crimes trials stemming from the Bosnian War) centers around what the image *cannot* tell the spectator.⁶

5. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 123.

6. For reference to this photo being used in war crimes trials, see James Estrin, “Photography in the Docket, as Evidence,” *New York Times*, April 2, 2013, <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/photography-in-the-docket-as-evidence>.



A Serbian paramilitary kicks the dead body of a woman in Bosnia in 1992 (1992) by Ron Haviv; photograph courtesy Ron Haviv/VII.

Azoulay's conceptualization of the "citenry of photography," by contrast, considers the ontology of photography in relationship to the encounter between the camera lens, the photographer, the photographed, and whoever sees the photograph.⁷ Azoulay not only wants to redefine how "citizen" is defined by the civil contract, but also to disrupt the categorizations that are forced onto images and the narratives they produce—asking us to interrogate the very nature of an atrocity image, of the spectator and of the photographed as "others." Azoulay's 2005 *Afterimage* essay is working toward an "ecology of images" that would transform the relationship between linguistic, political, and image fixity and how they interact to limit and manipulate the political imagination.⁸

* * *

The exhibition room was dark and compact, located on the ground floor of the International Center for Photography (ICP). Laser-printed images of sixteen photographs of Abu Ghraib torture were affixed to the dark gray walls with pins and illuminated by small spotlight-like lights above each image. I recall the initial jarring feeling of being both overwhelmed and underwhelmed: the monumentality of the images seemed to be

7. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 219.

8. See Azoulay and Kratsman, *Miki Kratsman & Ariella Azoulay*, 35. "Our language fails to describe state violence executed by and through us, fails to argue that the photographed persons appear as the enemy because of this violence that privileges us as citizens in the body politic, oblivious to the violence exerted by the state not only upon the non-citizens, but upon us as well, compelling us to acknowledge their status as different from us."



Installation view of the exhibition *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib* (2004); courtesy International Center of Photography.

rendered casual by their format and size. Exhibited in the fall of 2004, *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib* appeared less than five months after CBS's "60 Minutes II" broke the story (which the network delayed by two weeks at the request of General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and the *New Yorker* published Seymour Hersh's essay "Torture at Abu Ghraib," which included two of the prisoner torture photographs. Sontag's "Regarding the Torture of Others" was published in May 2004, about a month after the CBS broadcast.⁹ The exhibition's curator Brian Wallis described the exhibit as offering a counter to "the studied heroics of twentieth-century war photography . . . designed to make war palatable—the heroic flag raisings . . . the sense of shared humanity among combatants, and the search for visual evidence that war is universal and inevitable."¹⁰

Azoulay's essay was published in *Afterimage* a year later and it opens by interrogating what it means to "conquer the world as a picture" and to enact its role, as she writes, as "the prime mediator in the social and political relations among citizens, as well as the relations between citizens and the powers that be" (39). While Azoulay doesn't discuss the Abu Ghraib photographs nor the *Inconvenient Evidence* exhibition in this essay, both the Abu Ghraib photographs and the ICP exhibition exist in her essay like a potent

9. CBS, *60 Minutes II*, "Abuse at Abu Ghraib," April 28, 2004; Seymour M. Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," *New Yorker*, April 30, 2004; Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.

10. Brian Wallis, "Remember Abu Ghraib," *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib*, exh. cat. (New York: International Center of Photography, 2004), 4.

undercurrent. It gestures toward the exhibition and others like it that recontextualized images of atrocity in galleries and museums and offers a generative framing for thinking about the ICP exhibit and one of Sontag's last essays, "Regarding the Torture of Others." In that essay, Sontag described the "unstoppable" nature of the "snapshots and videos" that will multiply and circulate in what she describes as "our digital hall of mirrors," in which images will not go away, whether political leaders choose to look at them or not.¹¹ For Sontag at that particular historical moment, digital "unstoppability" was replete with political promise, purpose, and even a sense of permanence. Azoulay's essay probes the reader to question the very category of "others" in Sontag's work and asks to what degree the digital unstopability of images of violence will have political valence if those who watch them do not both recognize their responsibility for what these images portray and also do not see them as warnings and potential sites of protest. And the reader of Azoulay's essay might ask herself: What are the conditions of possibility for what Azoulay conceptualizes as a process of "ethical watching"—a slowed down, consistent, and fixed gaze—in an ecology characterized by the velocity of image capture and circulation?

It is this question of how images can embody active political resistance against the circulation of digital images of violence exploited by platform capitalism that concerns the anonymous Syrian film collective Abounaddara. "Emergency cinema" is the collective's term for their genre of film that actively embodies Walter Benjamin's conception of emergency as the need to be constantly vigilant to the concerns of the present and the storyteller as an artisan whose craft "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at



Still from *أحلم بالربيع* (I Dream of Spring, 2017) by Abounaddara Collective.

11. Of the horrifying snapshots from Abu Ghraib, Sontag noted that digital images simply will not go away, and "even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable." See Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others."

a moment of danger.”¹² This genre and the collective’s filmic *oeuvre* is productive to consider alongside Azoulay’s broader work on Benjamin’s critique of violence and the conceptualization of emergency and her urging in “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography” that prolonged observation summons the spectator to recognize a photograph as an animated “beacon of emergency.”¹³ In a still from *I Dream of Spring* (2016), one of the collective’s “bullet films” (short films between forty seconds to just under ten minutes; *I Dream of Spring* is just under two minutes long) that seek to reframe the international mainstream media’s depiction of the Syrian conflict, the viewer remains in one setting: a cemetery in which women, men, and children weave in and among graves; some attend a burial and others care for graves. This and the collective’s many ethnographic and interview “bullet films” encourage what Azoulay describes as urgent in this essay: a “prolonged observation” that may become politically and civically generative and distinct from spectatorship and spectacle.¹⁴ This type of watching of images of political and state violence can produce the emergency *énoncé* described in her essay that by turn creates an “emergency claim.”¹⁵ The collective’s concept of “emergency cinema” is intricately connected to the production of such claims, but it also asks whether images also need a constellation of legal and ethical claims that become rights for the power of emergency claims to be enacted and sustained.

The image is perhaps, at first glance, jubilant: a group of children are in unruly rows, joyfully interacting with one another. They refuse to be posed. In the left foreground, three young boys are not only smiling but laughing, and one has his arm interlinked with his friend’s. On the right of the frame, too, three little boys joke and laugh with one another. Only a couple of children in this vast group appear pouty or shy. A row of women stands in the back and most of them, too, are smiling broadly and three of them (maybe others too; it’s not possible to see) have a yellow star visibly pinned on the right side of their chest. The photograph exudes an energy that surpasses the boundary of the original print, about 2x2 inches, and that radiates from the movement of the child on the right and from the laughter of another child on the left, clutching the arm of his friend.

Vitality permeates the photograph, yet noting the yellow stars, one might assume it likely shares the *punctum* that Roland Barthes described as that of a photograph of Lewis Payne, condemned to death for trying to assassinate Secretary of State William H. Seward and taken just before his execution. “The *punctum* is: *he is going to die*,” Barthes writes of the photograph.¹⁶ One might imagine the *punctum* of this photograph as “*They are going to be killed*.” It embodies a far greater horror than “an anterior future of which death is the stake” and of what Barthes describes as “the defeat of Time . . . *that* is dead and *that* is

12. Walter Benjamin, “Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255.

13. See for example, Ariella Azoulay, “The Loss of Critique and the Critique of Violence,” *Cardozo Law Review* 26, no. 3 (February 2005): 1005–40 and Ariella Azoulay, “The Tradition of the Oppressed,” *Qui Parle* 16, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 73–96, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.16.2.73>.

14. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 198.

15. Abounaddara, “Respectons le droit à l’image pour le peuple syrien,” *Libération*, January 22, 2013.

16. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981), 96.

going to die.”¹⁷ What pricks the viewer is a violent sense of time as contrasted with the “defeat of Time” that every living being will experience. The back of the photograph bears a caption or description by an unknown scribe, imprinted in blue typewritten letters: “*Ghetto de Lodz. Tous ces enfants iront à la mort dans quelques heures. Ils ne savent pas . . .*” (Łódź Ghetto. All these children will go to their deaths in several hours. They do not know”).¹⁸

Haunting, related to dwelling and inhabiting, involves the destabilization of the sense of a secure feeling, a feeling one might thus assume provides a figurative sense of home, the *heimlich*. What is *unheimlich*, “unhomed” and uprooted in this photograph, is any expectation that the people in the photograph are not in danger of extinction. This photograph’s uncanny nature is doubled when we understand it was taken by Mendel Grossman (1913–45), a professional photographer and visual artist who worked for the *Judenrat* and also took clandestine photographs of the ghetto. The Nazis employed Grossman to work in the photographic laboratory of the statistics department of the Łódź ghetto to create photographs used on identification cards to support its administration and to more generally create an official narrative of everyday life there. Part of the role of his photographs was, as Azoulay describes in her essay, connected to their function as “a duty” and their function in preserving sovereign power. Like his colleague in the statistics department, photographer Henryk Ross, Grossman created a counter-archive of daily life in the Łódź ghetto, documenting his own family’s life in the ghetto, street



Untitled and undated photograph by Mendel Grossman; Nachman Zonabend Collection; from the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

17. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

18. Nachman Zonabend Collection, Center for Jewish History.

scenes, deportations, and hangings. Grossman hid hundreds of his prints and negatives and, according to varying accounts, either buried them in the walls of an abandoned bunker or in his apartment and cellar to preserve them before the ghetto was destroyed.¹⁹ The Nazis killed Grossman on a death march from the Königs Wusterhausen labor camp to which he had been deported from the Łódź ghetto, just days before the camp's liberation.²⁰

As one who not only observes present violence but can foresee and foretell atrocities of the future, Azoulay's ethical spectator changes the temporality of the image, potentially transforming an image of either past or contemporary atrocities into harbingers of those yet to come. Her essay implores us to consider images such as Grossman's photograph and the other images included here as warnings—and in so doing, we may resurrect and practice the possibility of "potential history," the "restitution of the right to participate differently."²¹ ■

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19. Greg Cook, "How Henryk Ross Risked His Life To Secretly Photograph Life In A Nazi Ghetto," WBUR, March 29, 2017, www.wbur.org/news/2017/03/29/henryk-ross-nazi-ghetto.

20. Andrea Löw, "Documenting as a 'Passion and Obsession': Photographs from the Lodz (Litzmannstadt) Ghetto," *Central European History* 48, no. 3 (2015): 387–404, doi: 10.1017/S0008938915000801.

21. Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019), 9.