The involution of photography

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As we settle further into the era of digital media and globalized visual culture, it might be tempting to think that photography holds no more than historical interest. Yet it continues to feature in debates with considerable significance for the present.[1] The terms by which it was negotiated in the twentieth century – the print, the negative and the mechanical-optical apparatus, the affective experience of a moment stilled, and any truth that its rendering promises – have been technically and culturally displaced and expanded. New instabilities have become familiar and have distanced us from how photography was understood, even in the fairly recent past. The current historical conjuncture is marked by a widespread suspicion that existing theories – including those that turned, in the 1970s, to Marxism, feminist critique, semiotics or psychoanalysis so as to politicize and contest mainstream photographic culture – might no longer be adequate to photography's contemporary situation. That photography still matters, however, can be evidenced, prosaically and contingently, by noting the increasing number of new scholarly journals and exhibitions devoted to its past, present and future in recent years.[2] There is, in this – as Fred Ritchin is only the latest to note – a sense that the undoing of photography's prior certainties constitutes an ending and an enlargement. The fate of photography provides an 'expansive filter' through which to chart the 'chaos of possibilities that emerge and recede, back up and move forward, crisscrossing each other.'[3] Expectations of the new and the old, the obsolete and as yet only anticipated, are thrown into temporal disarray as its openness to reformation gives the photographic past a futural slant.

One case in point is the photographic index. Photography has often been thought to produce indexes of things in a way that enables its ontological characterization. The idea is that the photographic index arises out of a strict relation the apparatus establishes with something that has to be in front of the camera in order for its image to be produced. However, the lack of motivation in this process tends also to indicate other (contextual and dialogic) meanings. As Blake Stimson and Robin Kelsey noted recently, photographic indexicality is tendentious and has shifted 'from scientific guarantee to social promise to myth'. They think of this history as foregrounding a 'double indexicality' in photography's 'peculiar pointing both outward to the world before the camera and inward to the photographer behind it.'[4] In the wake of new media, this relation has shifted again. Whilst one might be sceptical of the ways in which indexicality has been used as a key to the definition of photography, it is striking that in some senses – at the very moment at which the mechanical-optical apparatus guaranteeing its sense is eclipsed – the ontological purchase of the concept on theorizations of the photographic has only seemed to increase. Certainly, this marks recent controversies between those who want its apparent sudden obsolescence to renew indexicality for the task of capping photography off historically, and those who carry on using the term regardless of the ground shifting beneath them. Indexicality has come to act as a retrospective and comprehensive stand-in for a range of related terms (such as evidence and reference), which, at various stages in its history, served different ends in contests over photography's character and meaning. This does not leave the present untouched. One might say that photography is undergoing an involution registered by the transformation of indexicality. The historically freighted and politically ambivalent ways in which this might unfold call for close scrutiny.

Three recent books adopt different approaches to understanding photography in this regard.* Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never*

* Arielle Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans., Rela Mazall and Ruvik Danieli, Zone Books, New York, 2008. 585 pp. £26.95 hb., 978 1 89095 188 7; Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008. 410 pp., £28.50 hb., 978 0 300 13684 5; Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, eds., *Photography between Poetry and Politics: The Critical Position of the Photographic Medium in Contemporary Art*, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2008. 191 pp., £32.00 pb., 978 90 5867 664 1.

Before is a grandiose attempt to interpret a mainstream tendency in post-1980s' photographic art as the redemption of certain modernist values. In *The Civil Contract of Photography* Arielle Azoulay develops a novel account of photography's conflicted and fundamentally social form, reframing its political imperatives in light of the 'civil contract' she takes to subtend the production and consumption of photographic images. There are significant points of relation between these two publications. One is the manner in which they deal with Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. As many – not least Jacques Rancière in the previous issue of this journal – have noted, the pivotal influence of this text is marked by certain historical ironies.[5] Barthes's account of indexicality as an unmediated experience of the 'having-been' of the photographed came just before the digital image began to destabilize its technical basis. Furthermore, the separation of photography's powerful affects from a generic notion of visual culture – central to Barthes's search for the essence of photography – is premissed on the rejection of different modalities of intentionality, notably, artfulness and art. Yet, it is in photographic art and its critical discourses that *Camera Lucida* has had most impact.

The anthology *Photography between Poetry and Politics: The Critical Position of the Photographic Medium in Contemporary Art* sets out to evaluate photography's abiding critical value through the examination of recent photographic art. Its framing contrast between poetry and politics is highly suggestive as a way of thinking the 'chaos of possibilities' that marks these spheres. While, for a number of reasons, the anthology disappoints, the critical articulation of this disappointment nonetheless enables one to think of Fried's and Azoulay's rather different claims on the past, present and future of photography as, in some ways, filling out the problematic terrain that the idea of *Photography between Poetry and Politics* aims to understand.

Epic dimensions

Since the 1970s, photography has become increasingly central to the critical discourses and institutions of art. A familiar way of narrating this is to note photography's importance for the conceptual art of the 1970s and the dovetailing of its influence with that of radical criticisms of photographic culture developed at around the same time. These factors paved the way for photography's widespread acceptance as art in the 1980s and provided it with a critical framework. Different forms of photographic art have thrived since this period. Some have explored material and organizational questions (appropriating found images, exploiting archival contexts). Others took on existing genres of photography to investigate cultural formations of identity (as in Cindy Sherman's film stills). Many (like the American 'pictures' group) scrutinized the simulacral character of photographic culture. Whilst there are some who have consistently worked in a documentary vein (such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler), the broad drift has been to problematize or reject photography as a realistic and documentary form. Significantly, this tendency has found often nuanced expression in elaborate photographic constructs that foreground their status as pictures and not documents, as in Jeff Wall's lightboxes. Wall has come to act as a model for the characterization of a genre: the 'photographic tableau', which combines large scale with high production values in the self-conscious design of photographs for the gallery wall and adopts modes of visual address that are more traditionally associated with paintings.[6]

In light of the proliferation of artistic uses of photography this prevalence of the photographic tableau provokes reconsideration of medium specificity. As the editors of *Photography between Poetry and Politics* ask in their introduction, 'Does photography today have a hybrid or chameleonic character because it can be part of entirely different mixed-media works of art or should it be understood as a medium-specific, well-defined way of making contemporary works of art?' The photographic artwork's mode of engagement with the social world is thus foregrounded by the collection's framing contrast. In turn, Van Gelder and Westgeest distinguish between a 'larger' and 'more narrow' sense of the poetic that characterize this relation as itself a broadly conceived 'political' question:

> The wider employment of the notion [of poetry] indicates an autonomous art, a photography that is foremostly engaged in art – or an artistic tradition – itself without so much aspiring to take up a socially engaged or critical position. The more specific reading of the term 'poetry' hints at an art which uses photography in order to create a visual imagery that is marked by its epic dimension and which is so politically freestanding that it becomes extremely difficult to understand how such images position themselves in the world at all. The photo-tableau appears to be the example by excellence of such a more narrow interpretation of 'poetic' uses of photography today.

Both these senses of the poetic are modes of relative autonomy, which appear to delimit the means by which the photographic artwork might engage the social. The epic self-absorption of the tableau appears wanting here, because its elements seem to exhaust

Claes Oldenburg, *Placid Civic Monument*, 1967. Photo Daniel Partlin/NYC Parks Photo Archive

their representational claim on external reality in the constitution of the work's autonomy.[7] This gestures towards a familiar modernist sense of the critical: the artwork's auto-critical or self-reflexive constitution. But one must recall the force of the idea that even the most 'freestanding' photographic artwork cannot help but depict something. The brevity of the editors' introduction does not allow further articulation of this idea, or of its alternatives. This task is taken up with varying degrees of interest and success by the nine contributions that make up the collection.

These are organized into three sections. Sections one and two are mostly taken up with defences of specific practices in light of post-Greenbergian debates about medium specificity. Broadly speaking, the first is shaped by the influence of Rosalind Krauss and the second by Michael Fried. Famously, Krauss conceptualized art's 'expanded field' in an early rejection of Greenberg's medium-specific definition of the arts according to their material substrates, but later, in the 1990s, retreated from this expansion of art into a reconsideration of the notion of artistic medium.[8] Here, Westgeest's discussion of the 'changeability of photographs in multimedia art', and Marsh's account of the 'spectral' persistence of photography's medium specificity, both trade on this equivocation, but remain within its terms. The crudely titled second section – 'Processes of (Re)construction, (Re)production, and (Re)presentation in Photography, in Relation to Reception and Memory' – features essays by Cliff Lauson and Susan Laxton which already look, by way of contrast, to Fried's *Why Photography Matters*. Lauson, in particular, compares Wall's digital construction *Flooded Grave* (1998–2000) with a sequence documenting Claes Oldenburg's *Placid Civil Monument* (comprising fairly banal staged images that depict the artist and others watching a hole being dug and refilled in Central Park one afternoon in 1967). No doubt one could make a lot of the similarities and contrasts between the staged character of these works, the relative values evident in their production, and their singular and sequential forms, especially in light of Fried's privileging of the tableau, which I will discuss further below, but such critical questions remain undeveloped here.

The final section goes a long way to make up for the shortcomings of the preceding two, and anticipates the kinds of issue discussed in Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* in interesting ways. Alexandra Moschovi gives a measured account of photography's institutional successes since the 1980s, whilst Simon Faulkner and T.J. Demos discuss work produced in the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Faulkner (drawing on some of Azoulay's previous publications) focuses on Israeli painter David Reeb's appropriation of journalistic photographs by Miki Kratsman and Eldad Rafaeli. These photographs depicting the 'tunnel war' in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1996 aim at being explicitly 'connotative' so as to disrupt the assumption that press photographs are smoothly 'denotative'. The context is an analysis of the Oslo peace process and the way it ended in the enhancement of Israeli military control in the area. Reeb's later use of these photographs is read as allowing 'the extension of the connotations of the Tunnel War' in examination of this. Demos discusses photographs by Ahlam Shibli and gives a critical defence of two of her documentary works, claiming that they problematize documentary form at the levels of its interpretation and institutional context by striking a nuanced critical and aesthetic balance.[9] His reading centres on a familiar theme in documentary photography: the desire to make the invisible visible. The people depicted in these works are often obscured – 'rarely do they appear uninterrupted or clearly legible' – and Demos draws out of this an elegant account of the heterogeneity that characterizes the works' relation to the people they depict. He identifies 'an antinomy … at the crux of her practice – to *represent* the unrecognised, but also to *deny* them representation'. As an engagement with the social world through the aesthetic and critical conditions of documentary form, this is explicitly oriented to avoid the monumentalizing aestheticism that haunts the tableau form. For Demos, Shibli articulates an alternative

aesthetic that evidences the 'fundamental uncertainty of photographic meaning', and strives neither to monumentalize its objects nor to dismantle its ideological framing simply to cover it with another.

The photographic tableau and the belated redemption of modernist art

As various contributions to *Photography between Poetry and Politics* suggest, for good or ill, Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* will feature significantly in coming debates about photographic art.[10] It is an ambitious, much anticipated and problematic book that centres on a relatively small number of contemporary artists. Among these, Jeff Wall is central. Earlier photographers do feature (Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Lee Friedlander, Stephen Shore, August Sander and Diane Arbus) but reference to these 'pre-tableau' figures serves mostly to illustrate the historical novelty and artistic value asserted of various works made after this watershed.

Fried is best known for his 1967 critique of minimalism in 'Art and Objecthood', which argued against the 'theatricality' of minimalist art and for modernist painting's and sculpture's 'anti-theatricality'. Minimalist works were 'by definition incomplete without the experiencing subject'. Modernist works, in contrast, were anti-theatrical as they 'took no notice of the beholder, who was left to come to terms with them … as best as he or she could'. Contemporary art is, for Fried, defined by the crisis induced by the relegation of anti-theatricality and he takes the photographic tableau to redeem this situation. The central claim is that such photography foregrounds and mediates a tension between its status as a discreet picture (that 'takes no notice of the beholder') and what Fried calls its 'to-be-seenness' (its mode of self-reflexively confronting its audience). The central concepts used to articulate the argument he makes on this basis derive from his later art-historical work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, which obliquely fills out his critique of minimalism.

> Starting in the 1750s in France a new conception of painting came to the fore that required that the personages depicted in a canvas appear genuinely absorbed in whatever they were doing, thinking, and feeling, which also meant that they had to be wholly unaware of everything other than the objects of their absorption, including … the beholder standing in front of the painting. Any failure of absorption … was considered theatrical in the pejorative sense of the term and was regarded as an egregious fault.[11]

Modernist painting emerged in the nineteenth century with Manet, who attempted, according to Fried, 'to make not just each painting as a whole but every bit of its surface – every brush stroke, so to speak – face the beholder as never before'. Manet's 'crisis' was that of absorption and his response was to acknowledge the 'facingness' of painting. Wall performs a similar, historically reflexive, overcoming of the crisis of post-minimalism: 'The new art photography seeks to come to grips with the issue of beholding in ways that do not succumb to theatricality but which at the same time register the epochality of minimalism/literalism's intervention by an acknowledgement of to-be-seenness'. Fried thus commits himself to an account of photographic art that is anti-theatrical *and* self-conscious of its 'to-be-seenness'. This is an uncomfortable combination, to say the least.

The book starts with three 'beginnings', the major function of which appears to be to sideline other discourses on photographic art. First, Wall's, Sherman's and Hiroshi Sugimoto's engagement with cinema in the 1980s is formalized in the terminology of 'absorption' and 'anti-theatricality'; a depoliticizing shift away from categories such as 'spectatorship', 'distraction' and 'fascination' through which these engagements have, productively, tended to be read. An account of the emergence of the photographic tableau as a recasting of relations between artwork and 'beholder' provides a second frame. A third addresses 'the problematizing of beholding in the context of voyeurism' and appeals to literary sources: an anonymous French tale from 1755 and a narrative by Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of Dawn*.[12] Whilst this latter story of visually figured, restrained and tragic desire is highly suggestive, one can't help but suspect that its explicit function here is to displace other accounts of spectatorship, with which Fried is unwilling to engage. The overall effect is that questions of desire and difference are displaced onto a formal aesthetic dyad of artwork and beholder.

His territory thus marked, Fried develops his argument through discussion of Wall with reference to Heidegger and Wittgenstein. His account of the photographic tableau as an exemplary form rests on the singularity of particular works, to the extent that he even analyses explicitly serial works in these terms. Indeed, it is in Fried's account of Bernd and Hilla Becher's seriality that his idea of photography overreaches itself and the relation between art and photography stretches to breaking point. Though it goes against the grain of Fried's narrative, I think his strategy can be summarized as follows: to bracket the hybridity of photographic art, its relation to photography more

broadly conceived (and the relative diversity of the practices he discusses), between the emphatic singularity of Wall's pictorial tableau and the Bechers' serially organized documents of industrial architecture. Whilst this attempt at containment might draw out some revealing truths regarding Wall's photographs, it gains virtually no critical purchase on the Bechers' project and leaves Fried's claim on what might lie between these two poles insecure.

Wall's concept of 'near documentary' photography (staged images depicting events that seem as if they might have occurred without intervention) is read through Heidegger's analysis of the practical engagements that structure being-in-the-world. Fried articulates this in terms of the ready-to-hand character of equipment and the manner in which – when practical involvements break down – Heidegger claims one might 'encounter entities within-the-world purely in the *way they look*'.[13] Appeal to the primordial and encompassing context of the worldhood of the world is used to generalize Fried's art historically specific concept of absorption, 'as if Heidegger in *Being and Time* develops philosophically an insight that had belonged to Western painting … for more than three centuries'. Photography's ubiquity and its capacity to render anything are thus read as a mundane register of the (practical but inauthentic) ready-to-hand, leaving Fried's art concept of photography to pick up the thread of more authentic modes of being-in-the-world.

Wall's balance of the presentation of absorptive figures in obviously staged pictures is exemplary here. The crux of the matter in this Heideggerian context is what is to be made of photography's historical achievement of an art status. For Fried, this is clear: 'the stage has been set … for certain photographers, Wall preeminently, to work against the grain of photographic spatialization and world-deprivation – of its address to a subject who "looks explicitly" at the photograph and all it depicts.' This champions Wall's artistry in constructing a 'shared world, inflected individually'. The formal balance of Wall's pictures is compounded with their staging of the social world in this existential expansion of Fried's art-historical terms. But what of the social ambition previously generally accepted as a key aspect of Wall's formal constructions?[14] What specificity might a viewer gain as a player in this game? A clue might be found on the other side, so to speak, of the beholder/artwork dyad and in the fact that, ending his Heideggerean exposition of one photograph by Wall – *Untangling* (1994), showing two workmen, one of whom is intent on the task of untangling a big knot of ropes – Fried comments that 'it is hard not to feel that the picture would be stronger if both men were absent'.

In the chapter 'Barthes' *Punctum*' Fried reads *Camera Lucida* as an anti-theatrical tract. His interpretation turns on the manner in which Barthes ties the phenomenology of photographic affect to the rejection of different modes of intentionality. Famously, the *punctum* is a relational concept that finds its locus, initially at least, in those striking elements of a photograph that might interrupt its conventional use. Such extraneous details are sneaked into the image by the camera despite, and not because of, the intent of the photographer, and there they stand, for Barthes, as a plenipotentiary of affective experience that promises transcendence over the instrumentalized form of mass culture. Fried exploits this layered critique of intentionality in discussions of the poses adopted by young beachgoers in Dijkstra's portraits and, most forcefully, in the account he gives of Thomas Demand's reconstructed archival photographs. These celebrated works are images of blank

Thomas Demand, *Archive*, 1995. Chromogenic process print with diasec. 183.5 x 233 cm

paper reconstructions, photographed 'straight' and printed large. Demand's perversely straight attenuation of the photographic index, for Fried, draws attention to the photographic as such, in so far as it suggests, but bars from view, the informative details that gave sense to the source images thus faithfully reproduced and simultaneously erased. For Fried, Demand's work approaches an index of photography's ability to index things, which is an interesting interpretation. But the claim that this is directly entwined with the author's animus towards minimalism is not convincing; nor is the attempt to think these works in terms of the relation between anti-theatricality and to-be-seenness. With regard to the interpretation of Barthes, this removes the possibility of any lacerating encounter with a paradoxical temporal ecstasy spurred by some detail. The *punctum* remains limited to the critique of only one layer of intention and loses its metaphysical singularity. Fried's Demand faces one with the bare demonstration of an indexicality that comes after the fact to stand, so to speak, before the fact.

The most problematic part of the book is the penultimate chapter devoted to reading the Bechers' project through Hegel's notions of 'genuine' and 'spurious' infinity. This is not a bad idea, but in Fried's articulation it remains limited by the concern for single autonomous pictures and their claim on art, rather than, as seems logical, expanding to engage with the multifaceted form of photography as such. The chapter is titled '"Good" versus "Bad" Objectivity' and it sandwiches the Bechers between a photograph of a plank leant against a wall (James Welling, *Lock*, 1976) and one of the few photographs Wall has designated a 'documentary' image (*Concrete Ball*, 2003). Fried quotes himself from an earlier text on Welling (that, unsurprisingly, links *Lock* to 'Art and Objecthood') claiming the image is informed by 'an interest in real as opposed to abstract literalness or even "good" as distinct from "bad" objecthood'.

The Bechers' longstanding project documenting types of industrial architecture according to systematized procedure and standardized modes of display is, perhaps, the most influential photographic project to have adopted seriality as its organizing principle. Whilst Fried's focus is on seriality, his interpretation is oriented to understanding the Bechers' multiple, gridded images as a kind of tableau. One can't help but suspect that, for an argument so deeply invested in the essential singularity of the photographic artwork, seriality stands as a formal limit that threatens the dissolution of the singular into photography's broader and more slippery entirety. There's a sense in which Fried's account of the Bechers is marked by an undertow of ironic indetermination, which informs the use he makes of Hegel's good and bad infinities. As the Bechers said in a 1988 interview, which Fried quotes, they wanted to 'complete the world of things'. To explain this, Fried links Hegel's distinction between 'true' and 'spurious' modes of infinity to his own notions of 'good' and 'bad' objectivity:

> What is at stake is … the problem Hegel inherited from Kant, of how to specify the finitude or determinateness or (more simply) the individuality of objects in a way that does not simply contrast all the characteristics that a particular object allegedly possesses with all other characteristics it does not – an endless task that is precisely what Hegel means by the 'spurious infinite'.

The distinction between 'spurious' and 'true' infinities turns on the critical observation that determinations of the being of some finite thing, which rely on external or transcendent factors, import indeterminacies that remain wholly abstract and other to the object and thus impose a 'spurious' horizon of infinity. A determinate object bears a 'relation of itself to itself' that is, in some sense, genuinely infinite.[15] Fried seeks to establish a 'genuine' or 'good' infinity by carving a tableau out of the relationship between specific and generic elements encountered in the Bechers' grids:

> I understand the Bechers' project as at bottom ontological in intent in ways that bear suggestive analogy to Hegel's reflections in both *Logics* about objects and their finitude or determinateness. The individual objects on the Bechers' 'Typologies' are finite in their specificity but … that finitude emerges as such … against a background of the true or 'genuine' infinity of possibilities established by the types, families, groupings, and myriad industrial instances of all these that are the basis of their art.

Implicitly linking this appropriation of Hegel's 'genuine' infinity to his earlier Heideggerean framing of Wall, Fried takes himself to have established the Bechers' work as having a tableau form, in so far as their typology shows 'what is missing from the world of things', namely 'its capacity for individuation *as* a world'.

Jeff Wall's *Concrete Ball* (a Vancouver street scene in the middle of which stands a plinth supporting the eponymous globe) is supposed to provide a singular parallel to the Bechers' typologies. It is Fried's third example of 'good objecthood', but it seems not to obey the conditions set for the tableau in its singular or serial forms, except for the fact that it is quite big. Just before *Why Photography Matters* ends with a return to

the narrative analogy between Wall and Mishima, one finds Fried – perhaps distracted by the chance, finally, to do away with minimalism – unravelling the threads of his own attempt to consolidate the significance of the tableau as an exemplary instance of resurgent modernism in photographic art. The sense of Fried's claim on contemporary photography rests on the consistency and explanatory value of his interpretation of the photographic tableau as the belated redemption of his own idea of modernism. This is partial in its account of photographic art, not as compelling as the tenor of his prose would have one think, and blinkered in its address to other aspects of photography.

Citizens and spectators

Arielle Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* presents an argument that cuts across and goes against the tendency championed by Fried, and takes up some of the issues broached in the final section of the Van Gelder and Westgeest collection. Her focus is predominantly on photojournalistic and documentary practices (though often these are mediated through examples of artistic appropriation). She seeks to refigure the understanding of photography in terms of critically oriented political philosophy. The argument is a synthesis of two approaches, dependent upon and directed towards one another. Though she doesn't really put it in these terms, one can take the concept of 'the civil contract of photography' as the central term of a photographic ontology that conceives of it as a fundamentally socio-historical form. Her manifest critical commitment to the close reading of particular images results in analyses that are oriented to testing out the general theoretical framework, but they are also compelled to deal with the gaps thus opened up between the particular and the general. Throughout, Azoulay repeats the demand that one needs to 'watch' photographs in order to make them 'speak'. This is a slightly sloganistic way of condensing the lengthy and complex consideration she gives both particular images and photography as such. The point is that both registers present ethical demands and politically inflected possibilities for those that make, disseminate and use them. If, at times, these different levels of analysis don't mesh entirely with each other, they do, nonetheless, project a promising synthetic framework that has the value of restaging familiar and divisive debates in a way that provokes one to think them afresh. However, it has to be noted that *The Civil Contract of Photography* is an overlong, meandering book. Its scale allows space for Azoulay to develop and consolidate her argument, but also many repetitions that distract from this task.

The central objects of analyses are: 'two injured groups … female citizens in Israel and Palestinians living in the territories occupied by Israeli since 1967'. These distinct but overlapping groups are discussed in terms of the impaired status of their citizenry and the modes of exclusion and violence that shape this: the 'partial' or 'non-'citizen's exposure to conditions of 'catastrophe'. The impairments that distinguish the two groups are specified as the social constraints imposed by the fear of rape and the facts of lives lived under conditions of permanent but 'temporary' emergency. These factors are examined under the following assumption, which is inspired by Agamben but sees itself as presenting a critical inflection of his political thought: 'citizenship in any particular historical situation cannot be understood without taking into account the noncitizens who make up part of the governed population and constitute a governed group *with and alongside which* the citizens are governed'. As Azoulay describes it:

> We can, following Giorgio Agamben, renounce the concept of citizenship altogether as fatally compromised by the exception of the noncitizens that it always entails and therefore seek to replace it, or, as I will argue, we can seek to rehabilitate the concept by overcoming the distinction between citizen and noncitizens and with it the state of exception that is its basis. To do so … we also will need to rehabilitate the concept of a political community of the governed as the basis of politics in the coming age, not, as Agamben would have it, bare life.

Some of the richest and most convincing parts of Azoulay's argument develop out of her readings of images that stand as testimony to such pressures, as, for instance, in her discussion of a photograph by Miki Kratsman, *Migrant Worker, Tel Aviv, 1998*, which shows a dead Palestinian man lying on the floor of a sandy ditch (see over).[16] Kratsman's artful deployment of lens distortion and point of view in this image – destined for publication in an Israeli newspaper – are oriented to aesthetic and public affect. Azoulay's discussion centres on the length of time a Palestinian (as opposed to an Israeli) body might lie so exposed before the corpse is covered. The difference dramatizes a moral question about whether the photographer acted in an exploitative manner in taking the time to compose such an artful shot. Her answer nuances a familiar question asked of documentary images. The tension between displaying and covering up that one might – if informed – read out of this image formalizes a civil association by carrying over into the public sphere a grievance, which is, as Azoulay has it: 'not that of the

photographed person, but of the photographed scene or event; the dispossession of citizenship, which the photographic act has posited itself against. … Photography, at times, is the only civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship.' Here one finds a specific register of one of her major points: the politics, ethics and aesthetics of photography are not intrinsically separable as modes of attention and behaviour that correspond to different roles in the production and consumption of images (photographer, photographed and viewer or user). On the contrary, Azoulay posits a basic social relation that subtends each and every photographic situation or act that, in its generality and ubiquity, is the basis of the civil contract of photography. In this, already existing, 'community' or 'civil space',

Luc Delahaye, *Taliban*, 2001.
Digital chromogenic process print. 111 x 237 cm

> Anyone who addresses others through photographs or takes the position of a photograph's addressee, even if she is a stateless person, who has 'lost her right to have rights', as in Arendt's formulation, is nevertheless a citizen – a member in the citizenry of photography. The civil space of photography is open to her as well. That space is configured by what I call the civil contract of photography.

There is some equivocation, here and throughout, with regard to the generality of such claims. At times they seem to be premissed on and limited to certain kinds of photograph, documents of specific socio-political ills made to give the dispossessed visibility. Visibility, here, is a mode of airing grievances that signifies equitable civil association *in potentia*. At other times such claims are used to project the ontological form of photography. Contrary to historicist narratives of photography's invention, for example, Azoulay develops a social narrative of how and when photography came into its own:

> Photography was invented at precisely the moment when the individual inventor lost the authority to determine the meaning of his invention. … Not only is the invention of photography the invention of a new encounter between people, but the invention of an encounter between people and the camera. Photography was invented at the moment when a space of plurality was initiated, at the moment when a large number of people … took hold of a camera and began using it as a means of producing images.

The significance of the social history and meaning of photography is inflected by a range of theoretical linkages. For example, in an interesting passage that informs the argument significantly, Azoulay appeals to Hannah Arendt in order to refigure critically Barthes' bare noematic claim on the photographic index:

> What every photograph says of its subject, that it 'was there,' is at most a testimony to the moment of a photograph's eventuation in which photographer, photographed and camera encountered one another. Even when this encounter occurs under the difficult conditions of distress or disaster … as a space of plurality and action, the act of photography and the photographs it produces might, at least potentially, restore it. In other words, although photography may appear to be a distinctive object of contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*), a moment in which all movements have been eliminated, it is actually deeply embedded in the active life (*vita activa*); it attests to action and continues to take part in it, always engaged in an ongoing present that challenges the very distinction between contemplation and action. The photograph always includes a supplement that makes it possible to say show that what 'was there' wasn't there *necessarily* in that way.

Whilst this might seem rather optimistic, it presents an interesting extension of Barthes's noematic correlation of photographic affect and bare reference. His acedic version of contemplation is, here, dissolved in the concretely social potential that a photograph has to testify, even if this remains unrealized. Azoulay develops this in terms of Arendt's further distinction between labour, work and action to 'characterize various forms of active, noncontemplative gazes': first, those associated with identification and survival; second, intentionally directed modes of looking that seek to control what is visible; and, third, the civic form of the 'singular gaze enabled by photography'.

The major ethical inference Azoulay draws from the possible civil association photography enables is

expressed as a contract. This is an association that quite literally, if quietly, implies responsibilities that are sedimented in photographs and their uses. The general political inference drawn is that this contract establishes an already achieved form of 'citizenship' in the photographed world. Whilst, at times, this sounds rather weak in its general form, it is backed up by a couple of hundred pages of critically incisive analyses of highly politicized photographs. The idea of photographic citizenship also finds a credible, if wistful, form as a relief from the operations of power, which has an echo of Foucauldian micropolitics, but seems also to avoid the reductive temptations that dog photographic discourse in this vein: 'photography is one of the distinctive practices by means of which individuals can establish a distance between themselves and power in order to observe its actions and to do so not as its subjects.'

The self-consciously problematic attempt to synthesize the political plight of Israeli women and Palestinians living in occupied territories works at the level of Azoulay's analyses of particular images. Unfortunately, it falls short of the more general promise that it might make theoretically concrete the relationships between geopolitically overlapping situations in a theory of photography's social form. The large central chapter, 'Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of a Rape?', relates a critical history of the representation of rape in public and political discourses, in documentary photography (largely as an absence) and in pornography. Azoulay charts feminist critical discourse on rape since the 1970s to examine changing 'codes of knowledge' constitutive of 'what has been meant by "rape"'. Her astonishment at the absence of public (photographic) representations of rape informs the reading she gives of the debates about its political, social and cultural framing. The stark representational gap between the few graphic photographic documents Azoulay does find (a notorious series of images depicting brutal sexual violence in Nanking during the Chinese–Japanese war in 1937 is central) and the public service advertisements for official reports on sexual violence and anti-rape legislation frames the discussion. The argument takes the reluctance to represent rape in a non-pornographic or instrumentalizing manner to be too easily and too often co-opted to other, spectacularizing and/or patronizing ends, and her account of these issues ends in an epilogue that discusses a photomontage by the Israeli artist Michal Heiman. This work superimposes the artist's horrified face and camera on the body in Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*, and stamps it with the phrase 'I was there' (*I Was There: No. 6*, 2004). This shift into discussion of a polemical, appropriative artwork demonstrates the paucity of representations of the subject, which Azoulay's interpretation draws out critically. It also stands as an indicator of her often problematic recourse to artworks throughout the book. Heiman's works are, with varying degrees of success, central to Azoulay's attempt to link her general argument to the particular situations that it promises to illuminate. That such linkages seem far more compelling when played out through interpretation of photo-journalistic and documentary photographs is telling.

Miki Kratsman, *Migrant Worker*, Tel Aviv, 1998

There is a significant Barthesian theme running through Azoulay's philosophy of photography. One can read *The Civil Contract of Photography*, in part, as an attempt to socialize the modes of intersubjectivity that structure, but remain implicit in, Barthes's singular metaphysics of photographic affect. In one passage, she picks up on the 'other' unpublished image that structures *Camera Lucida* (upon which few commentators remark), the image of Jerome, Napoleon's cousin, which Barthes tells us sparked his desire to find out what photography is. Few tend to question the affective relationship he claims for the more celebrated 'Winter Garden' photograph of his mother as a child, whether or not they agree with Barthes's theses on the essence of photography, because of the pathos that surrounds it and the issues of privacy that determine its

withdrawal from publicity. In her brief analysis of his introduction of the Jerome photograph, Azoulay posits a negotiation between reciprocal but asymmetrical gazes that returns Barthes's influential first-person narrative to a discourse on the social form of photographic experience. The unmediated experience of the 'having-been' of the photographed actually entails a negotiation between projection and identification, judgement and desire. This, in light of her thesis of the civil contract of photography, is the basis for an inversion of Barthes's move from the generality of a *mathesis universalis* of photography to the *mathesis singularis* of the photograph. Neither the photograph, nor its viewer, is ever alone in the sense that Barthes would have us think – and which Fried trades upon in justifying his thesis on photographic art.

Problems associated with art appear crucial in light of the imperative to rethink photograph. Given that, presently, past forms are entwined with the projection of future possibilities, the complex heritage of modernism is significant, but only partially so. It would be unfortunate if photographic discourse allowed itself to be overcome by the desire to foreclose possibilities that might arise from this situation. If photography is undergoing an involution, registered in the concept of indexicality, the importance of photographic art and the socio-historical forms of its testimony, then, Azoulay's attempt to theorize the openness and complexity of photographic form will prove helpful in scrutinizing the historically freighted and politically ambivalent ways in which its involution might unfold. Far more so than Fried's efforts to the contrary.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, 'Notes on the Photographic Image', *Radical Philosophy* 156, July/August 2009, pp. 8–15. Note also the centrality of photography to Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London and New York, 2009.
2. In just the last two years, two new English-language photography theory journals have appeared: *Photographies* and *Photography and Culture*; another is due in February 2010, *Philosophy of Photography*. In Britain, the institutional success of photographic art encouraged major galleries to confront their previous lack of interest in photography, head on. The Tate is exemplary. Their landmark was the exhibition *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph*, June–September 2003, after which other exhibitions supplemented the display of photographic artworks, including *How We Are: Photographing Britain*, Tate Britain, May–June 2007, and *Street and Studio: An Urban History of Photography*, Tate Modern, May–August 2008.
3. Fred Ritchin, *After Photography*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2009, p. 11.
4. Blake Stimson and Robin Kelsey, eds, *The Meaning of Photography*, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown MA, 2008, pp. xxv, xi.
5. See Rancière, 'Notes on the Photographic Image', p. 9. See also my discussion of *Camera Lucida* in 'Beyond Barthes: Rethinking the Phenomenology of Photography', *Radical Philosophy* 148, March/April 2008, pp. 19–29.
6. For Wall's account of his trajectory from conceptual to pictorial photographic art, see Peter Osborne, 'Art after Photography, after Conceptual Art: An Interview with Jeff Wall', *Radical Philosophy* 150, July/August 2008, pp. 36–51.
7. The problem with this criticism of the tableau's 'poetry' is that it overformalizes the case. There remain critical distinctions to be made between those works that exploit the form's grand political thematics to sophisticated but telling critical effect and those that are no less sophisticated but much less critically acute. For instance, compare the treatment of conflicts in Afghanistan by Jeff Wall in *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter, 1986)*, 1992, and Luc Delahaye, *Taliban*, 2001, which are both illustrated in Fried's *Why Photography Matters*, pp. 112 and 183, respectively.
8. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1999, pp. 289–305; and *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2000.
9. The works in question are *Unrecognised* (2000), which depicts Palestinians of Bedouin descent living in northern Galilee in a village that lies in the territory of, but remains unrecognized by, the Israeli state, and *Goter* (2003), which documents Palestinian Bedouin of the Naqab desert region.
10. Fried's discussion of photographic art already loomed large in James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007; in particular, in Diarmuid Costello's Friedian chapter, 'After Medium Specificity Chez Fried: Jeff Wall as a Painter; Gerhard Richter as a Photographer', pp. 75–90.
11. *Why Photography Matters*, p. 26. See also, among Fried's earlier works, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of California, Berkeley, 1980; *Manet's Modernism or the Face of Painting in the 1860s*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.
12. The anonymous tale is *Adelaide, ou la femme morte d'amour*, which Fried informs us 'appeared in the journal *Mercure de France* in January 1755' (24). Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of Dawn*, trans., E. Dale Saunders and Celcila Segawa Seigle, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1970.
13. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York and Evanston IL, 1962, p. 88; cited (and given emphasis) in *Why Photography Matters*, p. 48.
14. See, for example, John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998, pp. 184–99.
15. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Garaets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1991, p. 149; cited in *Why Photography Matters*, p. 325.
16. It is interesting to compare Azoulay on Kratsman's *Migrant Worker* and Fried on Delahaye's *Taliban* in *Why Photography Matters*, p. 183.