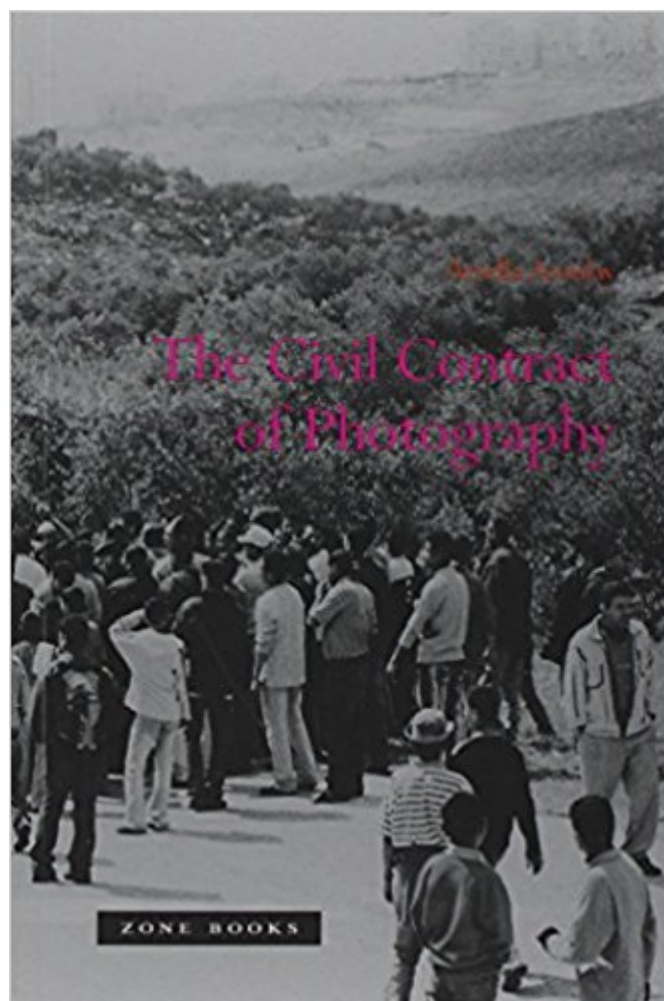


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The Civil Contract Of Photography



Synopsis

In this compelling work, Ariella Azoulay reconsiders the political and ethical status of photography. Describing the power relations that sustain and make possible photographic meanings, Azoulay argues that anyone -- even a stateless person -- who addresses others through photographs or is addressed by photographs can become a member of the citizenry of photography. The civil contract of photography enables anyone to pursue political agency and resistance through photography. Photography, Azoulay insists, cannot be understood separately from the many catastrophes of recent history. The crucial arguments of her book concern two groups with flawed or nonexistent citizenship: the Palestinian noncitizens of Israel and women in Western societies. Azoulay analyzes Israeli press photographs of violent episodes in the Occupied Territories, and interprets various photographs of women -- from famous images by stop-motion photographer Eadweard Muybridge to photographs from Abu Ghraib prison. Azoulay asks this question: under what legal, political, or cultural conditions does it become possible to see and to show disaster that befalls those who can claim only incomplete or nonexistent citizenship? Drawing on such key texts in the history of modern citizenship as the Declaration of the Rights of Man together with relevant work by Giorgio Agamben, Jean-François Lyotard, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes, Azoulay explores the visual field of catastrophe, injustice, and suffering in our time. Her book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the disasters of recent history -- and the consequences of how these events and their victims have been represented.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Ariella Azoulay makes a simple and profound claim. Every photograph bears the traces of the encounter between the photographer and the photographed, and neither party can ultimately control that inscription nor determine what happens to those traces. The photograph, she tells us, fixes nothing and belongs to no one. This untethering of photography from responsibility, at least in its traditional sense, allows her to approach the ethics and politics specific to photography in a completely new way. Even or especially when it is a photograph of a crime or an injustice, a photograph is more than evidence. It imposes another sort of obligation on us, to address and readdress it in a way that challenges what it shows of our life together. Azoulay's breathtaking book finally demands nothing less of us than to reimagine how, in the age of the photograph, we might become citizens again."--- Thomas Keenan, Human Rights Program, Bard College (Thomas Keenan)"Ariella Azoulay makes a simple and profound claim. Every photograph bears the traces of the encounter between the photographer and the photographed, and neither party can ultimately control that inscription nor determine what happens to those traces. The photograph, she tells us, fixes nothing and belongs to no one. This untethering of photography from responsibility, at least in its traditional sense, allows her to approach the ethics and politics specific to photography in a completely new way. Even or especially when it is a photograph of a crime or an injustice, a photograph is more than evidence. It imposes another sort of obligation on us, to address and readdress it in a way that challenges what it shows of our life together. Azoulay's breathtaking book finally demands nothing less of us than to reimagine how, in the age of the photograph, we might become citizens again." Thomas Keenan , Human Rights Program, Bard College "... Azoulay's central themes -- state violence, violations of human rights, and the nature and potential of photographic witness -- are as relevant to our own political circumstances as they are to hers." Abigail Solomon-Godeau Art in America"... this is a significant, deeply moral book that should undercut complacent thinking. Azoulay's renewal of cultural attention to the state and her view of photography that requires us to dispute prevailing interpretations of evidence must surely be welcomed as we are, once again, thrown headlong back to reality." Steve Edwards Times Higher Education

Ariella Azoulay teaches visual culture and contemporary philosophy at the Program for Culture and Interpretation, Bar Ilan University. She is the author of Once Upon A Time: Photography Following

Walter Benjamin and Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy (MIT Press, 2001).

This book is part of a shift away from the idea of compassion fatigue produced by seeing endless images of conflict. The author in particular criticises the approach of Susan Sontag in *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The idea that photographs should engage us in what she calls a civil contract of photography means that viewers are bound to consider the plight of others. This might apply to the situations she addresses--images of Palestinian maltreatment in Israel--but can it be generalised to other images? The central argument is very provocative and makes you think again about the role and effects of photography in mass media and in art contexts. The book is rather long winded, and not very well focused. Some of the chapters should have been cut or combined to create a punchier work. Susie Lindfield's *The Cruel Radiance of Photography* is a much better argued critique of Sontag's view of photography.

This is a key book on rethinking the role of photography--on how we are responsible for what we witness, even through photographs, and how that witness can lead to re-imagination and reformations of the civic space. It is a massive book, but highly readable. I am working my way through it.

"The Civil Contract of Photography" is on the ROROTOKO list of cutting-edge intellectual nonfiction. Professor Azoulay's book interview ran here as a cover feature on January 23, 2009.

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