

## THOUGHTS FOR READING “The Contract of Photography”

Azoulay says that the relationship between the governed and the governing authority resembles the photographic relationship. What does she base that conclusion on?

When Azoulay says “photography” she is looking at a fairly broad set of aspects. What do they include for her? Note how she calls the actual printed photo “an artifact”.

How does she see photography emerging in history? As an “invention”? A “practice”?

Look at the idea of a professional gaze she mentions on p 96. How does that relate to what we do as media makers?

Who are the members of the community of photography?

Azoulay historicizes the rise of the “viewer” on p. 97.

On p. 99 she says taking a photo is 'always an act of violence'. Or later on p.106 'an unequal exchange.' Does that make sense to you?

Azoulay's work is based on a specific understanding of politics which looks at the idea of the sovereign state on the one side and the people on the other as respectively the authority and the governed. If we think of the English political philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes who developed the idea of a “social contract” where people were first conceptualized as giving authority to a governing body, we can start to understand her version of the State. Her understanding comes out of writers like Hobbes, as well as Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt and she speaks most specifically to the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, who saw the state -- and he is specifically addressing ancient Roman Republic -- as emerging from a moment where the state takes on the right to expel or reject people as non-citizens.

She then spends time looking at the idea of ownership of a photograph and looks at the claims of the photographer, of whoever commissioned or paid them, and of the subject. She rejects those forms of ownership as never comprising the whole of the set of relations engendered in photography, especially in the situation of a catastrophe or disaster. On page 104 she has a key line that links the practice of photography and the practice of citizenship in the context of disaster:

These uses of photography are part of the way in which citizens actualize their duty toward other citizens as photographed persons who have been struck by disaster. The exercise of photography in such situations is actually the exercise of citizenship - not citizenship imprinted with the seal of belonging to a sovereign, but citizenship as a partnership of governed persons taking up their duty as citizens and utilizing their position for one another, rather than for a sovereign.

She goes on to say that this approach to photography has to be defended and supported. (105).

She goes into the distinction between a contract and a compact. She notes that the kind of political 'deal' imagined by Hobbes and Locke has two parts. In the first, people agree to create a government. In the second, they give that governmental power to a sovereign.

Only photography, she suggests, picks up the first partnership and coming together, without giving itself over to the state monopoly on power or violence. (109)

On p. 113 she talks about how people learn to see in a new visual economy through the eyes of others, relinquishing their control/monopoly

The meaning of the photographic situation thus cannot be understood without attempting to locate the general context of the praxis of photography and its modes of organization in political space. (113)

On pp 117-118 she goes into detail about the relationship between the categories Man (as in "The Rights of Man" and Citizen. She points out that while rights are postulated as universal, citizenship is restricted. She suggests photography is still an open space where those restrictions do not apply. Hence, it highlights situations of what she calls "flawed" citizenship.

A great line: "Photography was depicted as history's representative on Earth, an instrument capable of perpetuating everything that was lost yesterday and of saving what may vanish tomorrow." (121)

"These practices - in which the general public could in principle participate, either as active or passive agents (photographer or photographed) - constituted a significant stratum in the new exchange relations formed in the political sphere." (123) This is key when we think about the newer technologies of the internet and mobile media. People have started becoming both photographer and photographed at the same time!! She goes on to say, "photography was the forerunner of a missed revolution." (123)