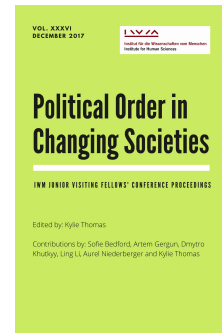


# Notes on Photography, History and Resistance

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The capacity for photographs to fracture how we see, to allow us to see more than one place at a time and more than one time in one place makes photography a productive medium for thinking about transnational histories. My current research traces the formative role the catastrophic events of the Second World War played in shaping ways of thinking about the relation between photography, resistance, and social justice. As historian Timothy Snyder's recent book makes clear, engagements with these events are of critical importance for Europe and indeed, for the entire world, in this time when racism and xenophobia threaten the ideals of a united and humane post-war Europe.[1] The Shoah, and the resulting injunction to 'never forget' in order not to allow the events of the Nazi genocide from recurring, have fundamentally affected global ways of responding to human rights abuses, cultural production, and memorialisation. There are numerous important texts that have defined this field of research, and the politics and ethics of visual representation of the Holocaust has been an area of intense focus[2].

My research draws on the insights of these works and traces the new ways of seeing that come into view when photography is thought beyond the national frame. My study focuses on the work of women photographers whose images were made to expose and resist repressive regimes in Austria, France, Germany, and the Netherlands during the Second World War. I am interested in how photography can be a means not only for remembering the painful events of the past, but also as a medium that can inspire action and resistance in the present. While from the time of the invention of the medium photographic images have travelled across borders, photography has largely been read as providing evidence of national identities and histories. My work explores how photographs and photographers move across national boundaries and forge connections between diverse places and historical events. I explore the key role photographs have played in both the production and disruption of national histories and argue for thinking about the complex interconnections between photography and transnational history[3]. My research aims to cast new light on both the history of photography and on how we see the past, as it focuses on understanding women photographers whose work offers alternative perspectives on violence and modes of contesting injustice. This focus is important as, in spite of the significant contribution of women photographers to

documenting the war and its' effects, their work remains under-researched. My research aims to draw attention to the work of women photographers whose photographs have been, and can be, used to contest authoritarian regimes and to advocate for social justice.

It is important to try to read photographs through the context in which they were made, to contextualise them in their particular historical contexts, and my project seeks to do this through tracing the biographies of the photographers and what their images meant at the time they made them. In my work, I am also arguing for the importance of reading images now, in the present, with the recognition that photographs are also addressed to the future.

## **Photography's temporalities**

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Photographs can be read for what they reveal about the time in which they were taken. We can make use of photographs to deepen our understanding of particular historical moments and time periods. In this sense photographs have a kind of indexical relationship to historical time. However, reading photographs in this way is to miss a great deal of what photographs are and what they can do, or what we can do with them, in the present. The multiple ways to think about time and photography is the subject of a collection of essays edited by Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder and in their introduction they note “the notion of time escapes, in many senses, the merely technical mode that has played such a paramount role in the history of the medium, where issues of time reduction have been instrumental in the production of the hegemonic view of photography as a slice of time: reduction of shutter time (a problem of optics), reduction of development time (a problem of chemistry), and reduction of processing time, between the taking of the picture and its social circulation in printed form (a problem of industrial management)” (2010: vii).[4]

The camera captures an instant in time and the photograph makes it possible for us to see not only what is represented in the image but makes time manifest. Photography is a form of mechanical reproduction; a record of time past, but also something more than this that exceeds its object form. Photography is “a complex social process, which is not just a technique, an art, or a way of picture-making, but also a dream, an idea, a political device, in short an object that is by definition hybrid and networked: things, people, technology, and institutions, both synchronically and diachronically are intertwined and produce social meanings and interactions that evolve in time and through time” (Baetens et.al. 2010: viii).

Theorist of photography, Roland Barthes describes cameras as “clocks for seeing” (1980:15) and the way in which photographs open a kind of channel into the past, at the same time that they seem to convey the past into the present, makes it possible not only for us to see time but also disrupts historical chronology and challenges how we think about ourselves in relation to the past[5]. Photographs are a kind of eternal return and intrude upon our perpetual forgetfulness, our refusal to recognise the past and its weight on the present. Photographs can draw us into an engagement with history; they can confront us with painful visions we would rather not see; they can trouble and disrupt the neat course of history; and they provide a medium for us to reflect on our mortality and

find it reflected back at us. Of course, photography is not always used as a form of resistance in overt ways, but I am arguing for understanding photography as a resistant medium, and for the capacity photographs hold for resisting the oblivion of time.

One of the most influential ways of thinking about our relation to history is Walter Benjamin's thinking inspired by the image of an angel painted by Paul Klee. Benjamin's angel of history is "irresistibly" propelled by the storm "into the future to which his back is turned". This notion of the backward-looking gaze that cannot be shifted is one that has held considerable appeal for cultural critics. For Marxist art historian Otto Karl Werckmeister, Benjamin's ideas, and particularly his *Theses on the Concept of History*, have been thoroughly de-radicalised by critics on the Left who have replaced politics with cultural critique. Werckmeister argues that the figure of the angel of history:

has become a meditative image – an *Andachtsbild* – for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between challenge and retreat. The image keeps the aggressive critical impulse of such a mentality in a decisionless abeyance, so that the tension stays put within the politically disenfranchised, and hence ideologically overcharged, realm of culture.

He goes on to argue that "without a political perspective, a critical thinking that wishes both to diagnose and rectify the world at large cannot be carried to any conclusion"[6]. For him, history has, ironically, been de-radicalised through the appropriation of Benjamin's thought. In my work, I suggest that an engagement with photographs and the histories they provoke may not offer ways to heal or erase the scars of history. Instead they can be used to open old wounds, not simply to reanimate the hurts of the past or to bring about further trauma in the present (although they may have precisely this effect), but to provide a way to interrogate the scars, to contest the ways in which they have been formed, and to offer different modes of address.

Photographs provide a strange still point in the centre of the storm. They provide a way to stop time and to see it. Of course, we ourselves are not stopped at the same instant but continue to be subject to the vicissitudes of time. This brings about the curious state of viewing photographs, which always necessarily show us time past, from the vantage of the present, a position from which we are powerless to change the course of history that has already passed but in being returned to that history, in that history returning to us, we can formulate ways to shape different futures. This brings me to thinking about photography as a form of resistance to repressive regimes and how, in many instances, the photographs I consider, are not only addressed to the time in which the images were made, but also to a future that the photographers sought to bring into being through their images. Photographs that are addressed to us.

Ariella Azoulay's important text, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) sets out an argument about how photography has and can be used to contest authoritarian regimes. In her book, Azoulay argues that the photographic encounter produces a civil contract which can be understood as a form of resistance to those forms of power that seek to delimit the practices of citizenship. As she notes, the conjunction of the terms 'photography' and 'citizenship' is uncommon, and yet, as she shows, the relation between

the practices of photographic representation and of political representation have always been in place. “Exactly like citizenship, photography, is no one’s property” Azoulay writes, “It cannot be owned”.<sup>[7]</sup>

Photography, at least the kind that I am concerned with in this book [*The Civil Contract of Photography*] in which photographs are taken on the verge of catastrophe, also is a form of relations of individuals to the power that governs them, a form of relations that is not fully mediated through such power, being a relation between formally equal individuals – individuals who are equal as the governed as such. It is a form of relation that exists and becomes valid only within and between the plurality of individuals who take part in it. 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.<sup>[8]</sup>

My research takes up this idea and expands on it to think about how engagements with photographs that document political events and historical trauma can be a form of democratic praxis in the present. Azoulay argues that the photographic encounter produces a civil contract which can be understood as a form of resistance to those forms of power that seek to delimit the practices of citizenship. Of what does such resistance consist? Unlike those theorists who invoke the future that is yet to come or the community that is not yet formed, Azoulay’s formulation of the civil contract of photography recognises the possibility, and indeed, the realisation, of forms of resistance in the present, on the verge of and in the midst of disaster. While such forms of community and resistance may have their limits, they are often all we have. In times of disaster they are the means we have to work with and in this sense, provide more hope than utopian visions of the future that is always-to-come. Such forms of resistance summon the hoped-for justice of the future and also provide us with an example of democratic praxis. Photography offers both a means of critique and a way of making visible forms of power that are not intended to be seen. Photographs can be used to bring the past into direct contact with the present – this means that photographs can be understood as more than historical remainders and can be deployed as political tools.

In his introduction to the photographic exhibition “Human Rights; Human Wrongs”, curator and critic Mark Sealy makes a case for the powerful role photographs have played in drawing attention to human rights abuses and bringing about social justice<sup>[9]</sup>. Photography, perhaps more than any other mode of representation, has been called upon as a way to bear witness to atrocity and to document injustice. The circulation and display of photographic images has also been imagined to produce empathetic responses in those who view them and has been framed as a key tool for bringing about social change<sup>[10]</sup>. There have also been counter-arguments that link photography to the commoditisation of experience and even to dehumanisation<sup>[11]</sup>. Through my work on photographer Jansje Wissema, who documented the destruction of a neighbourhood called District Six by the apartheid regime, I developed the concept of ‘re-turning’ history<sup>[12]</sup>, which offers a way to think about how the work that photographs do, or that we can do with photographs, is

not fixed in time, either promoting or inhibiting positive social change. Instead my work seeks to show how photographs contain the potential for animating new forms of resistance in the present. I have connected Wissema's photographs taken in the 1970s with the work of the Burning Museum collective, a group of visual activists in South Africa who are descendants of those who were forcibly removed from District Six and who have produced visual works in the present that connect the violence of the past with injustice in the present.

## Re-turning History

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In 2013, the Burning Museum Collective began wheat-pasting large scale portraits on the walls of buildings on the edges of what had been District Six, an inner city neighbourhood of Cape Town that the apartheid state declared a white-only area in 1966. The apartheid regime entered the District when the first bulldozer arrived, and although thirty years have passed since the last home there was destroyed, and more than twenty years have passed since white supremacist rule was declared officially over, apartheid remains stubbornly lodged in District Six. During the long and terrible years of the 1980s activists resisted moves on the part of the state to build over the ruins and the wide expanse of land that was once so densely populated remains a scar that runs alongside the edge of the city[13]. The land restitution process in the area has been mired in conflict, and as Ilham Rawoot notes, "Fifty years since District Six was named a whites-only area under the Group Areas Act of 1950 on February 11 1966 and the more than 60 000 residents were forced to leave, their homes and businesses destroyed, along with their neighborly spirit, only 135 homes have been built in the area." [14]

The faded images of human figures that appear in the images the collective have produced are akin to the physical manifestation of ghosts in areas of the city in which the traumatic losses of the past are being overlaid and compounded by the callous 'redevelopment' of the area in the present. Like the drawings made with chalk by the young inhabitants of the District who played in the streets and who were documented by photographer Jansje Wissema two generations before, the images made by the collective are transient and at the same time assert the presence of those who made them, like handprints or shadows that have somehow become detached from their owners, and in this way, stake a claim to the space. The members of the Burning Museum Collective, Justin Davy, Jarrett Erasmus, Tazneem Wentzel, Grant Jurius and Scott Williams, are young people who live in the city of Cape Town and they all have family members who experienced forced removals. Through their work, they are refusing to allow the memory of the past to be forgotten and are resisting the ongoing injustices of the present.[15]

The work of Burning Museum reveals the trauma of forced removals – the portraits that were once displayed in people's homes are now homeless images that haunt the sites of their former dwelling places[16]. Images that once had pride of place in family homes now appear on the exterior walls of buildings nearby the ruins of what were their houses. The children who figure in the photographs Burning Museum has drawn from the archive could be the parents or grandparents of the artists who form the collective. In a sense the

children also stand in for the artists themselves and those of their generation who live on the Cape Flats, the children of the dispossessed, who, in spite of never having lived in District Six still talk of 'return'.

The acts of resistance of the Burning Museum collective, and of visual artists like Haroon Gunn-Salie[17] and Kurt Orderson, form part of an emergent popular movement to resist forced removals from inner-city neighbourhoods in the present. Reclaim the City is a social movement that was founded in February 2016 and is premised on the idea that it is "the state's obligation to play a proactive role to reverse spatial apartheid in Cape Town"[18]. Reversing spatial apartheid means something more than simply not replicating the violence of the previous order. This reversal entails imagining and realising alternative ways of constructing and inhabiting cities to those engineered in the service of racial segregation and domination. The archival photographs the collective draws upon in their work are tangible remnants of the world that was District Six and their interventions in public space reveal how photography can be used as form of resistance. The interventions of the collective draw on photography's capacity to re-turn history in order to issue a call for restitution and justice in the aftermath of apartheid.

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[5] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

[6] Werckmeister, *Icons of the Left: Benjamin & Eisenstein, Picasso & Kafka after the fall of Communism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 12.

[7] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 25.

[8] Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 85.

[9] Sealy, Mark. “Human Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction”, available at <https://thephotographersgalleryblog.org.uk/2015/02/19/curator-mark-sealy-introduces-human-rights-human-wrongs/>, 2013.

[10] Linfield, Susie. *The Cruel Radiance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

[11] Fehrenbach, Heide and Davide Rodogno (eds), *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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[13] See Fredericks, “Creating the District Six Museum.” In *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum*, ed. C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis, 13–4. Cape Town: District Six Museum, 2001 and Jeppie and Soudien, *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*. Cape Town: Buchu Books 1990.

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[16] For an analysis of the importance of family photographs for the former residents of District Six see O’Connell, “The aftermath of oppression: in search of resolution through family photographs of the forcibly removed of District Six, Cape Town” *Social Dynamics*, 40, 3, pp. 589–596, 2014

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[18] See <http://reclaimthecity.org.za>

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