

# Photography

Ariella Azoulay

## The ontological question

The most frequent response to the question “What is photography?” is latent in the etymology of its name and recurs from the very inception of photography until the present, or at least until the advent of digital photography. In this etymology, photography is a “notation in light.” Writing in light is what transpires when the camera shutter opens and light rays, reflected off that which stands in front of the camera, penetrate the lens and are inscribed upon a certain surface.<sup>1</sup> Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of the technology known as photography, also known by other names such as the “Calotype” or the “Talbotype” at this time, underscored this characterization of photography in the title of his book, *The Pencil of Nature* published in 1844.<sup>2</sup> Talbot directed our attention at the question of agency which distinguishes photography from previous methods of image production. In the place of an individual artist possessed of certain talents and aptitudes, nature now inscribes itself by itself. The term “nature” serves Talbot as a general designation for the referent of the image. Predictably it gave rise to criticism among those seeking to explicate photography, not because of the use that Talbot made of the word “nature,” but because of his elimination of the human agent and his presentation of photography as a medium for the production of images without human intervention.<sup>3</sup> Talbot, who was himself a photographer, however, and some of whose photographs appear in his book, did not in fact seek to eliminate the human agent.<sup>4</sup> He sought instead to offer an alternative description to the prevailing notion of the omnipotent creator who with the stroke of his brush translates his object of reference into an image possessing a certain impact. Talbot’s description moves the emphasis away from the owners of the means of production and points to the potential latent in the capacity of the new technology to deviate from the familiar forms of image production which assumed a singular author. His position was, however, misunderstood, as if all that was at stake in his discussion was a technology that seems to act in its own right. His opponents differed from one another yet shared a common motivation—to undermine the assumption that the “pencil” could direct itself. There were those who saw photography as an unreliable medium and the photographer as a constantly manipulating reality through the photograph so as to reflect his or her biased point of view. On the other hand, there were others, eager to preserve the photographer’s prestige, who insisted that the photographer’s unique contribution—her/his artistry—did not result from the technical activation of the apparatus. While the debate raged, a growing number of enthusiasts and technicians of photography continued to make use of photography as photographers, as photographed persons and as spectators of different

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An earlier version was presented at the 4th Lexical Conference, Minerva Humanities Center, Tel Aviv University and is the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of *Civil Imagination, Political ontology of photography*, translated by Louise Bethlehem (Verso, 2011).

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fields of knowledge and action. Until the shift occasioned by the development of visual culture as an academic discipline during the last two decades of the twentieth century however, the contributions of such amateurs were not deemed worthy of investigation, nor of conceptualization as an integral part of the practice of photography.

Talbot's stance, which undermined the status of the author of the photograph, eventually lost its advocates. What was left of this position in a debate that slowly receded was Talbot's emphasis on technology. Certain of the adherents of Talbot's position investigated the technology in its own right, but they did not present the technology of photography as functioning autonomously, seeing it instead as a form of technology operated by the photographer. The distance between the two opposing forms of objection to Talbot's position diminished until they could no longer be termed oppositional at all. Thus, for approximately one-hundred-and-fifty years, photography was conceptualized from the perspective of the individual positioned behind the lens—the one who sees the world, shapes it into a photograph of his own creation and displays it to others. Paradoxically, something of the position that Talbot originally represented, devoid of defenders for a long period of time, emerged in the form of a kind of primitive poetic residue distilled from the arguments of his opponents, as in Roland Barthes' celebrated notion of the "*punctum*" for instance. Barthes sought to use the notion of the *punctum* to undermine the centrality of the singular photographer, the uncontested ruler of what Barthes terms the "*studium*" of the photograph, where the *punctum* figures as a kind of residue neglected by the photographer. But even Barthes' "*punctum*" didn't undermine the centrality of the photographer as the one who stages the *studium* and creates the conditions for the emergence of the *punctum*.

The emaciation of the ontological perspective latent in the title of Talbot's book and the narrowing of his argument by his opponents or those who pretended to argue with it so as to make it encompass merely those aspects of photography which rendered it an autonomous technology enabled, in turn, the emergence of a no less reductive position—one centering this time around the subject who commands the technology of photography like clay in the hands of the potter. Research into the technology of photography saw the ontology of photography in this light, whereas research into photographic oeuvres and their creators, modeled on the familiar protocols of art or the history of art took the place of the political question: What characterizes the new relations that emerge between people through the mediation of photography? In both instances, from the moment that photography began to be diffused in the world, it was seen as a discrete technology possessing a clear purpose—the production of images—and it was delineated as a circumscribed technology whose field of action is subjugated to the activating gesture of its users.

These were the conventional boundaries within which it was possible to think photography until the end of the twentieth century—a technology for the production of images operated by a singular subject—technician, creator or manipulator.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, the fact that photography deviated from its predecessors was not overlooked: this is precisely what

is central to Talbot's position—that which is positioned *in front* of the lens “was there” and is inscribed in and of itself on a surface coated with some kind of chemical. But very few thinkers exploited the radicalism of the insight or dared to think through the tradition of image production in a critical fashion. Among them, we may number Walter Benjamin who associated photography with forms of mechanical reproduction rather than with drawing and who described the shift entailed in the perceptual system by the advent of photography. Another voice in this trajectory is that of Thierry de Duve whose discussion of the tube of industrial paint surprisingly links painting to the tradition of technology and sees it from this industrial perspective as the forerunner of photography. But even these dissident thinkers were not fully able to undermine the productive/creative framework which continued to organize thought concerning photography.

It is difficult, perhaps even incorrect, to point to a specific moment or event responsible for overturning the canonical framework of the discourse of photography. But it is easily possible to point to a series of actions which demonstrate that this framework has recently been ruptured, allowing new questions such as “What is a photograph?” to surface and to elicit answers. Tens of exhibitions, internet forums, conferences and journals have, over the last twenty years, celebrated photography as a phenomenon of plurality, deterritorialization and decentralization. Photographic archives which had been collecting dust for years in psychiatric hospitals, prisons, state and municipal institutions, hospitals, interrogation facilities, family collections or police files, unremarked upon by scholars of photography, instantaneously became a privileged object for research and public exhibition.<sup>6</sup> The wealth and variety contained in these collections transformed the canonical discourse on photography, a discourse that had emerged in the shadow of the discourse of art which consecrated sovereign creators and which considered photography from the perspective of its creators alone. In the wake of this shift, the perspective associated with the discourse of art was transformed into merely one possible point of entry into the study of photography, and a particularly limited one at that. It is only fair to point out that the limitations with which I am concerned here characterize a certain type of discourse *about* photography, rather than characterizing the practice of photography itself whose actual activities deviated markedly from the rarefied practice conceptualized and presented as the corpus of photography, just as what was photographed always exceeded the constructs that sought to contain them as the object of reference. The many users of photography, only a small portion of whom operated under the patronage of the canonical discourse on photography, never ceased from inventing new forms of being with others through photography. After the shift in photographic interest, some commentators began to address the emergence of such practices although for the most part their output still tended to remain derivative of the products which they investigated, that is to say, bound to the particular photographs accumulated. The photographs themselves continued to set the boundaries of the discussion of photography and allowed for the preservation of the causal connections between the action of photography and the photograph. In other words, photography remained conditional on the existence of the photograph. For my own part, I would like to base myself on the unprecedented wealth of photographs which emerged into view once the boundaries of the

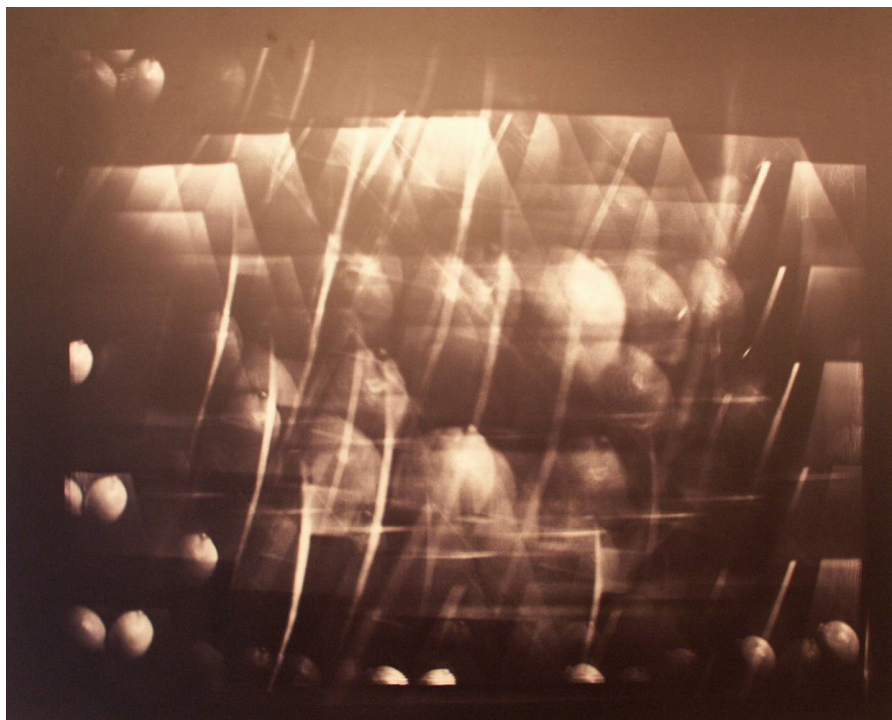
discourse on photography had been ruptured, in order to demonstrate that the ontology of photography is at base a political one.

As I have already stated, until the shift of boundaries I have outlined, photography was conceptualized as a technology that allowed for the inscription of an image in light while at the same time, the very technology itself was assumed to remain transparent without leaving its imprint on the final product. The coherence of such a description requires that photography be placed at the service of two masters—the photographer who employs it and the photograph which is the end goal of his activity, while all other traces are eliminated from the final product. When these traces persisted as visible imprint, nevertheless, their sheer presence was enough to disqualify the photograph or the photographer. Few practitioners in the past sought to foreground such traces, but early examples of such foregrounding do exist. In recent decades, ever since technological mediation began to become visible – either by photographers intentionally allowing it to leave visible traces or by spectators intentionally looking for it – it was no longer possible to conceive of the technology as external and separate from the product which produced it. It was now a relatively short path to the recognition that the technology of photography is not just

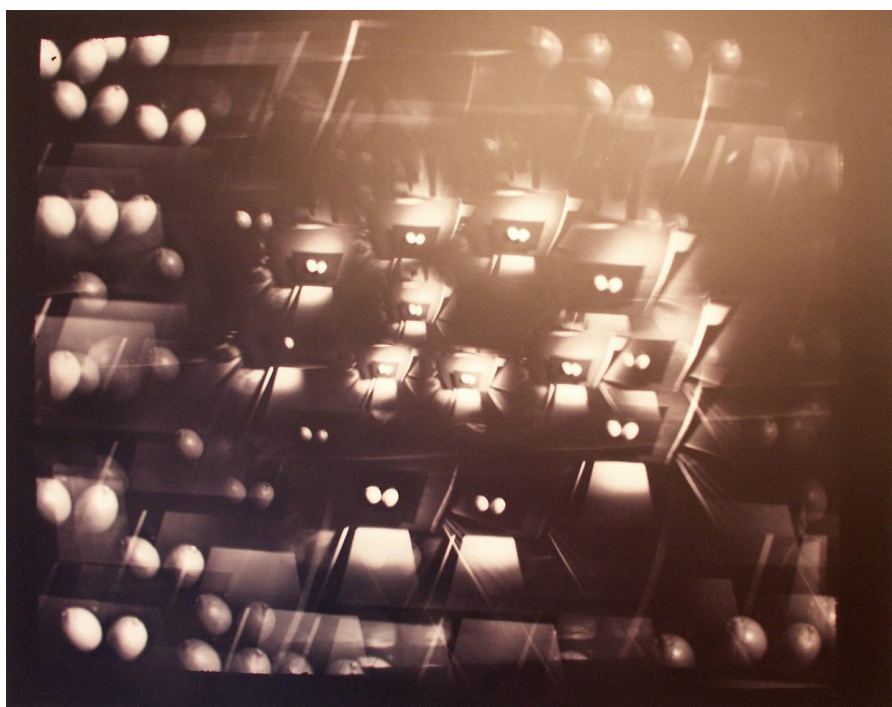


Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, 1977, Lemon cameras, Negative 4x5 B/W, 5x4 box, perforated black cardboard, Tel Aviv Museum Collection





Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, 1977, Photograph produced by Lemon camera concave, Negative 4x5 B/W, Tel Aviv Museum Collection



Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, 1977, Photograph produced by Lemon camera convex, Negative 4x5 B/W, Tel Aviv Museum Collection

operated by people but that it also operates upon them. The camera was no longer just seen as a tool in the hands of its user, but as an object which sows powerful forms of commotion and communion. The camera generates events other than the photographs anticipated as coming into being through its mediation, and the latter are not necessarily subject to the full control of the agent who holds the camera. The properties and nature of the camera could now suddenly emerge into public view, and it rapidly became apparent that the camera possesses its own character and drives. The camera might, at times, appear to be obedient, but it is also capable of being cunning, seductive, conciliatory, vengeful or friendly. It can be woefully unarmed with information, can magnify the achievements of amateurs and can destroy the work of master craftsmen. The camera is an opaque tool that does not expose anything of its inner workings. It is difficult for anyone who sees it from the outside in real time to know what it is inscribing, if it is indeed inscribing anything at all. Similarly, it is difficult to establish with any certainty whether the camera is present or absent, whether it is switched on or off, whether it is indeed producing images when it is switched on, whether this is its only effect, or whether its goal might, among other things, consist precisely in hiding its very agency. Does the camera appear to be active when it is actually dormant, or does it create dormancy while actually operating or better still, while being operated? Rather than being considered a device whose presence was totally occluded in favor of its products, which themselves circumscribed the boundaries of the gaze restricting it to the circumference of the frame, the camera—and together with it, the act of photography—now assumed the status of a significant catalyst of events only part of whose impact was contained in the possibility or threat of a writing in light.

The appearance of photography as the object of the gaze made a mockery of the simplistic opposition that had prevailed in the discourse on photography between the device and the subject wielding it, allowing for other possibilities to emerge that have been latent in photography from its inception, such as those intimated in Talbot's own *Pencil of Nature*. The pencil (read "camera") of nature could now be positioned differently – not as a device that wrote itself by itself, nor even as one wielded by the author who used it to produce pictures of other people. Rather, the pencil of nature could be seen as an inscribing machine which transforms the encounter that comes into being around it, through it and by means of its mediation, into a special form of encounter between participants where none of them possesses a sovereign status. In this encounter, in a structured fashion and despite the threat of disruption, the pencil of nature for the most part produces a visual protocol immune to the complete domination of any one of the participants in the encounter and to their possible claim for sovereignty. It is precisely this understanding that I would like to extrapolate from Talbot's notion of the "pencil of nature" working *in its own right*. Human subjects, occupying different roles in the event of photography, do play one or another part in it, but the encounter between them is never entirely in the sole control of any one of them: no-one is the sole signatory to the event of photography. In seeking thus to revise the notion of photography, it is clear that an ontological investigation of photography cannot concern itself with the technology of the camera alone. Nor can it be restricted to an investigation of the "final" product created by the camera, that is to say,

the photograph. In other words, an ontological description of photography has to suspend the simple syntax of the sentence divided into subject, verb, predicate and adjective—*photographer photographs a photograph with a camera*—which has organized the discussion of photography for so long and which has gravely circumscribed that deemed relevant to a discussion of photography.

The ontology of photography that I seek to promote is, in fact, a political ontology-- an ontology of the many, operating in public, in motion. It is an ontology bound to the manner in which human beings exist—look, talk, act—with one another and *with objects*. At the same time, these subjects appear as the referents of speech, of the gaze and of the actions of others. My intention here is not to lay out an ontology of the political *per se*. It is, rather, to delineate the political ontology of photography. By this I mean, an ontology of a certain form of human being-with-others in which the camera or the photograph are implicated. Neither the camera nor the photograph are sufficient to allow us to answer the question, “What is photography,” but without describing them as part of the political ontology I am setting forth, it will be difficult for us to reach reasonable conclusions.

## The Camera

The camera is a relatively small box designed to produce images from that which is visible through a lens positioned in its front. It goes almost without saying that until the invention of the digital camera equipped with a screen, we were unable fully to perceive evidence of this capacity while the camera was in use, not to mention when it was turned off. At best we could merely invest the camera with such a capacity. When we encounter the camera, it is enough for it to be raised, or to be angled in a certain position in order to signal that it is directed at us or at others. This positioning itself carves up space between the person standing in front of the camera and the one standing behind it. The raised camera poses the threat of observing us, but it also observes us without our necessarily being aware of it. The camera can always respond to the temptation of observing us and of inscribing that which other spectators pass over without photographing or without so much as registering at all. Admittedly, the camera usually serves an individual. But it is increasingly put to use in situations where it no longer stands alone but appears alongside other cameras, intersects them, acts upon them and is acted upon by them. What is at stake in this context is a physical intersection, if often also an imaginary one, which occurs in real time but may also occur after the fact in cases where we identify places and people in photographs whom we recognize to have been in the same space as ourselves, sometimes even at the same time, together with or alongside still further individuals wielding cameras.

The number of cameras in circulation in the world is growing ceaselessly while the number of people not exposed to their presence is steadily diminishing. Even if the distribution of cameras is not constant from one geographical area to another, and even if there are zones, like disaster zones for instance, where the subjects of disaster are sentenced to be



photographed rather than to photograph themselves, the omnipresence of the camera is a growing potential. The increased number of cameras together with their increased potential presence all over enables the camera to operate, as it were, even when it is not physically present by virtue of the doubt that exists with respect to its overt or covert presence, its capacities for inscription and surveillance. There are no accurate estimates concerning the density of the distribution of cameras in various sites nor concerning their effects when they are trained upon us or, conversely, concerning their influence when they are not in use. But it is easy to surmise that these influences are just as considerable in their effect as is the formal productive capacity of the camera, that is to say, the capacity to produce pictures. One of the most obvious of these effects is the camera's ability to create a commotion in an environment merely by being there—the camera can draw certain happenings to itself as if with a magnet or even bring them into being, while it can also distance events, disrupt them or prevent them from occurring. The camera has the capacity through its sheer presence to set all of these effects in motion without even taking even a single shot. Nor are such influences contingent on the actual pictures produced. We mostly encounter cameras in a state of temporary rest. But even when we see them in action, we seldom have the ability to track the images that they produce, with the exception of the one or two cameras which we might own or which might belong to our relatives. In this respect, despite the growth in the diffusion of cameras, most of us do not have the privilege of seeing the images they produce. Conversely, the majority of the many photographs we see every day appear devoid of any connection to the camera that might have photographed them. In the majority of cases, we are not the photographed persons of these photographs and are consequently not perturbed by the possibility of their

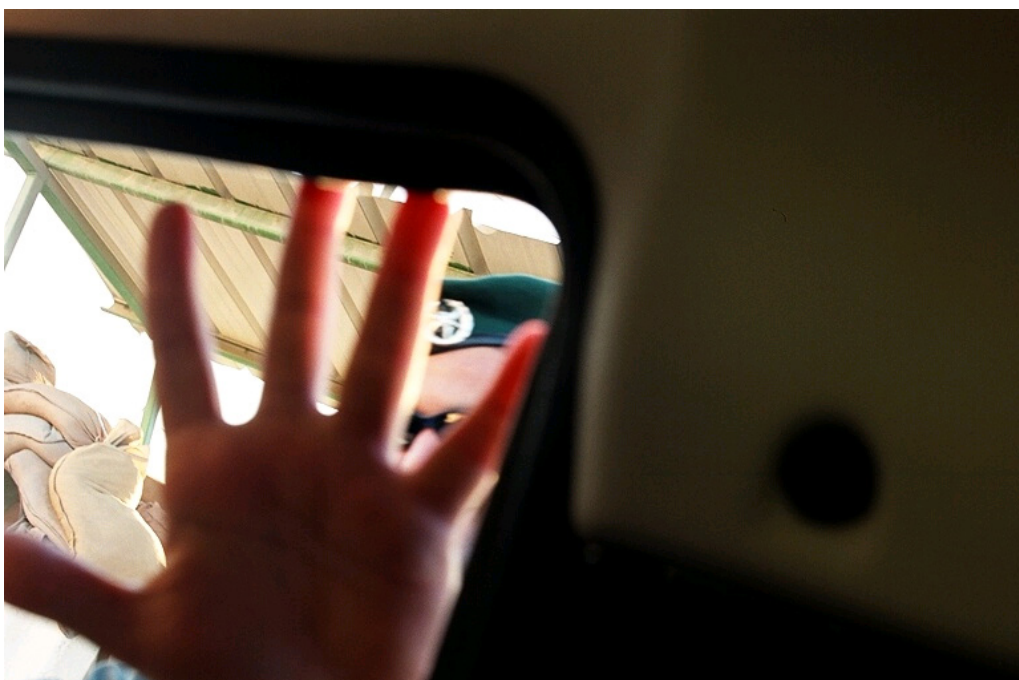


Jerusalem, 2007, Anne Paq, Activestills.org



circulation. But in places where people are irredeemably exposed to photograph, as is the case in disaster zones, the photographs which they do not see are generally photographs of themselves. For many such individuals, this is the very essence of photography. The camera is a tool that promises a picture that they will never see. Thus for instance, the woman in the picture who stands outside her home because it has been destroyed is exposed to two cameras at least: one that has produced the image that we observe and another that we can see to be in the possession of the female photographer standing towards the right-hand side of the frame. We can assume that the woman whose house has been destroyed surmises that she and her ruined house have been photographed but she will probably never see the image that results. From her perspective as a participant in the event of photography, the act of photography is not the equivalent of the photograph. Photography might rather consist for her in something like the presence of the camera in front of her, in her face as it were, during the time of her emergency. We, observing her photograph, attest to the fact that a photograph arose from this encounter—here she is in front of us—but there is another camera in front of us as well, whose products we do not see, and which we might perhaps never see, like the woman in the photograph. It is possible that nobody will see them, just as it is possible that the camera wielded by the woman who appears in the frame did not take any shots at all. Her location in a disaster zone notwithstanding, it is not inconceivable that the mere fact of the photographer's presence there is sufficient—even if her camera remains barren of images.

In other words, the event that the camera sets in motion does not necessarily result in a photograph. When it does so, the events unfolding in the wake of the photograph will, for



Bidou checkpoint, 2002, Miki Kratsman

the most part, take place in another location altogether. By virtue of the photographs, or sometimes by virtue of their absence, different people will congregate in their wake than those who met in the immediate vicinity of the camera. Both sets of participants will seek to observe the photograph even as it, or the sheer fact of its existence, ineluctably affects them all.

This being the case, in order to understand the question “What is photography?” under the conditions outlined here in brief, I seek to differentiate between the *event of photography* and the *photographed event* that the photographer seeks to capture in his frame. Both the camera and the event that it catalyzes are for the most part restricted by the skilled gaze of the spectator in order to see the “thing itself,” that is to say, that which will become the photographed event. But the rendering marginal of the event of photography, displays of indifference towards it or even the attempt to ignore it altogether can never obliterate its existence or the traces that this event which occurs between the various partners of the act of photography leaves on the photographed frame, especially when the camera present on site was actually set to work. In other cases where something or someone else stands explicitly in the path of the agent who wields the camera (that is to say, the photographer or someone who has commissioned the photographer), so as to prevent the photographer from framing the shot as he or she desires, it is much easier to use the photograph to decipher the event of photography and to perceive the presence of the camera within the photographed event. Photographs which foreground precisely a “disruption” of this sort have become increasingly common over the course of the last two decades. The traces to which I have been referring, which are not the stated goal of the act of photography, are regulated within the schema of the frame, blunting their presence and allowing the photographed event to be foregrounded as one that has already been concluded. The construction of the event of photography as prior and external to the spectator is not just a technological effect of the type that Aim Deüelle Lüschi terms “the mono-focal camera” in his discussion of photography.<sup>7</sup> Nor is this a necessary effect of such mono-focalism. Rather it is the outcome of a form of discourse whose logic of sovereignty and creativity predispose it to position the photograph as the sole outcome of any discussion of photograph and as its vanishing point.

Not all the participants in the event of photography play a role within it in the same fashion. Many are not even aware of its existence, not to mention the temporality of its unfolding. Similarly, not all of its participants are able—or are permitted—to view the product that is the outcome of the event, when indeed there is such an outcome. Moreover, those who are permitted to view the final product are not necessarily permitted to use it in the same way. In this context, I would like to make a bold claim, however, and to argue that in the contemporary era, when the means of photography are in the reach of so many, photography always constitutes a potential event, even in cases where the camera is invisible or when it is not present at all. The absence of a camera in the field of vision of those present does not evacuate the possibility of its being there—secreted invisibly in the hands of one of the participants perhaps, or installed permanently as is the case with

surveillance cameras. In some cases, it is not even necessary for the camera to be present in order for it to influence people and to organize the relations between them. The event of photography thus contains within itself the potentially penetrating effect of the camera, that is to say, the possibility of our being located with the range of “vision” of a camera that might potentially record a photograph of us. It is a possibility that may well be experienced differently by the various participants as irritating, pleasurable, threatening, invasive, repressive, conciliatory or even reassuring.

## The Photograph

The photograph is usually thought of as the finished product of an event which has been concluded.<sup>8</sup> In contradistinction to this common assumption, I see the photograph—or the knowledge that a photograph has been produced—as an additional factor in the unfolding of the event of photography (not of the photographed event). The encounter with the photograph continues the event of photography which happened elsewhere. When an interrogator in an interrogation cell tells a detainee that he has a photograph which shows the detainee in such or such a situation, the interrogator does not necessarily reveal the photograph to the detainee—if it exists at all. He conducts himself as someone who simply derives his authority from the prior event of photography which happened elsewhere which he merely continues. In fact, however, he generates this event in order to put pressure on the prisoner.<sup>9</sup> In such a case, the event of photography can be said to take place in the absence of both camera and photograph. It occurs as the outcome of the interrogator's statement that he possesses a photograph. The fact that the majority of people photographed under such conditions never see photographs of the event of photography in which they participated, on the one hand; and that most spectators, on the other hand, routinely view photographs taken during the course of an event in which they did not participate, creates the conditions under which the mere possibility of the existence of a photograph of us taken without our knowledge of having been photographed might come to affect us with as much potency as if we had encountered the photograph itself. The fact that participants may not observe the photograph in which they played a role does not annul the event of photography nor does it annul the possibility that this event might continue to be played out in another time and place in a manner which is not contingent upon them at all.

The photograph has become institutionalized in discourse through its identification with the photographer, as his property, and as the point of origin of the discussion of photography. As a result of this, when the photographer refuses to share a photograph with the public, or when a photograph is not available for other reasons, no discussion of photograph is forthcoming. The inaccessibility of the photograph, which might result from the fact that no shots were taken at all, or from the possibility that the holder of the photograph derives pleasure, power or capital from the monopoly that he possesses in relation to it, effectively eliminates the very possibility of discussing the event of photography. This

privilege which accrues to the photograph and which has made it a precondition for any discussion of photography, imposes a form of sovereignty on the event of photography which is essentially foreign to the technology of photography and to the patterns of its dissemination which contradict unity and centralization and which deterritorialize various boundaries. This illegitimate sovereignty is based on two principles—the rendering of the photograph into a form of testimony that pertains solely to that which was positioned in front of the lens so as to say “*This is X*”, as if it were possible to cut the event generating the photograph into two; and the identification of ownership of the means of production of photography with ownership of the photograph as such, so that its “owner” will be possessed with the sole authority to determine who, what, how, when and if at all the event of photography continues to unfold. Yet it must be stated that even if this sovereign regime threatens to dominate photography, it always remains circumscribed, limited and temporary.

The reconstruction of the ontology of photography, subject to the new boundaries within which I delineate photography, requires that we suspend patterns of photographic use as they have been institutionalized over the course of the years as constituting the essence of photography. The separation between the ontology of photography and the ontology of the photograph allows us to see the photograph as merely one possible outcome among others of the event of photography, just as we can hold the evidence of other participants in this event to constitute additional sources for its reconstruction. Without the testimony of prisoners photographed during the course of detention, or without the testimony of non-citizens whose photographs are used by the Israeli security services to blackmail them, among other things in order to recruit them as so-called “collaborators,” the possibility of reconstructing the event of photography in which they have participated is slender if not non-existent. This is a consequence of the fact that photographs taken during the course of any given event, if they exist at all, are usually held by the security forces and are removed from the grasp of other participants in the event of photography.

The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed, whether the participants are present by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked or as a consequence of deceit. Many of these traces are neither planned nor are they the result of an act of will. That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretations which have become attached to it. Even when these traces express cultural and social hierarchies that organize the power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person, they never simply echo such relations nor do they necessarily reflect the point of view of the most powerful figure present in the arena at the time the photograph was captured. This characteristic differentiates the photograph from all other forms of documentation that we know, and renders it a powerful and suggestive source for understanding the political existence of human beings, as well as for investigating their history. But, marvelous as this seems, most historians do not accord the photograph



the status of document—something that is very visible in the local context out of which I write. Their position is strenuously argued in the volumes which they author—they do not see the photograph as a source for historical research. Until recently, the question did not so much arise among the community of scholars writing about political thought. The photograph is partial, fallacious, random, biased—these are only a few of the appellations that have become attached to photographs and that underpin the renunciation of the act of contemplating them. In contexts where photographs are the subject of more active treatment, in the press, or in historical archives and museums for instance, photographs are displayed or stored as references to the photographed event, there to be retrieved and re-circulated time and time again in accordance with relatively simple but problematic semiotic codes evident in the tagging that is so characteristic of archives: “firing squad” for instance, or “a new residential area.” Thus far, scant attention has been devoted to the role of viewing in the event of photography where it is responsible for the always unfinished nature of this event. The position of the spectator is one that any subject can hold at any given moment, whether or not she is photographer or photographed. The overemphasis on the role of the photographer and the lack of weight attributed to that of the spectator are derived from the prevailing but erroneous conceptualization of photography in terms of sealing off a certain instant framed by the photographer who observes it and who witnesses it from the outside, of freezing this instant or sealing it in death before sharing it with those who observe his or her testimony. But a photograph is never the testimony of the photographer alone and the event of photography, unlike the photographed event, continues to exist despite all other considerations. The preservation of rigid binaries between “inside” versus “outside,” in terms of which that which can be seen is that which was present before the lens at the moment of the capture of a shot that has now been inscribed as a photograph presented in turn to the scrutiny of spectators external to the event, represents a misunderstanding of both photography and of the photograph alike. The event of photography is never over. It can only be suspended, caught in the anticipation of the next encounter that will allow for its actualization: an encounter that might allow a certain spectator to remark on the excess or lack inscribed in the photograph so as to re-articulate every detail including those that some believe to be fixed in place by the glossy emulsion of the photograph.

## The Event of Photography

=What, then, is photography? Photography is an event. What kind of event is photography? It is clearly not possible to describe it as a kind of interruption of, or deviation, from existing flows which brings something new into being, as certain theoretical discourse, particularly in France, would see the event. The event of photography is subject to a unique form of temporality—it is made up of an infinite series of encounters. The event of photography has two different modalities of eventness—the first occurs in relation to the camera or in relation to its hypothetical presence while the second occurs in relation to the photograph

or in relation to the latter's hypothetical existence. For the most part, these two events unfold in different places at different times such that the continuity between them is not noted nor is the necessity of its reconstruction posed as a problem. The multiplicity of events with which we are concerned as well as the separateness of their unfolding render linear sequentiality between the event surrounding the camera on the one hand, and the event surrounding the photograph on the other, into merely one possible relation between them. The connection between the two is closer to the connection between two constituents of a mathematical equation where one side of the formula cannot resolve the other without establishing the numerical value that will concretize the equivalence between them. We encounter one or another of the constituent events of the event of photography without necessarily encountering them in chronological order. Whatever the case, the moment we attempt to unravel the connection between them, we immediately become aware of the hidden variables in the equation. As is the case with the mathematical formula, it is possible to reconstruct some of these hidden variables based on what is given on one side of the equation, but it is not always interesting nor to the point to reconstruct the sequence linking the different parts, nor to attempt to unravel a hidden variable. These considerations are not always what is really at stake. Often the reason for variable's remaining hidden is negligible and circumstantial, or is bound up with amnesia or the seeping away of information. But it can also result from a local or structural short-sightedness, or might derive from a mistaken understanding of the act of photography and the power relations it subsumes. There are circumstances, however, where the oversight is intended, programmatic or malicious—the result of one participant's attempted domination of the event of photography with respect to that which might possibly be considered to be his property but should be considered to belong in some other manner to the public at large. When one of the participants in the event of photography takes sole control over a variable, he effectively designates himself sovereign by virtue of this very control, given that his actions not only affect the photographic object—as property—but affect all of the people involved in its production.

The event of photography is also unique with respect to the fact that the camera, the photograph, or their hypothetical existence, inscribe a certain inalienable point of view in arenas where people encounter one another—one that cannot be expunged. Such a point of view is very particular: it is other, foreign, opaque, a point of view that nobody can identify with, embody, merge with, or become its ally. This point of view persists in its sustained opacity, threatening to inscribe the event somehow, as well as to exhibit the resultant inscription, including the inscription of that which is irreducible to the individual point of view of any of the participants. What is at stake is not a point of view that can be assimilated to any sovereign or regulating source possessed of omniscience and capable of extending its reach to that which, or those who, threaten its power and unity. On the contrary, this point of view cannot be appropriated. It can be assimilated neither to ownership nor to domination. It evades all forms of sovereignty such that no one can argue that it belongs to him or that he embodies it; just as no-one can fully obliterate or erase it completely and for all time and by so doing, impose upon others longstanding relations

of repression and domination, or reified contractual relations. Rather such relations have the power to be inscribed in the event of photography as well as in the conditions that organize or prevent free access to the photograph and to the opportunity of “solving” the equation and reconstructing its constituents. With the assistance of the spectator, the point of view under consideration here permits the event of photography to be preserved as one bearing the potential for permanent renewal that undermines any attempt to terminate it or to proclaim that it has reached its end. The notion of an ending is overthrown thanks to the agency of the spectator and its groundlessness is revealed, while the spectator, for her part, participates in realizing the potential inherent the act of photography, capable of complete or partial concretization at any given moment, at any instant and on the part of anyone, such that the potential of which I am speaking can never be fully extinguished or fully realized.

## Endnotes

1. The discourse on photography which has flowered over the last two decades has produced many texts on the technological, optical and chemical technologies which characterized the various “inventions” of photography on the part of people like Daguerre and Niépce, Talbot and Bayard. Despite the importance of these differences, I have bracketed them off in order to discuss the broader common denominator that obtains between them: writing in light. For the specific characteristics of each of the inventors, see Michel Frizot, *A New History of Photography* (Könemann, 1998).
2. I am not concerned here with the totality of Talbot’s oeuvre nor with the innovation his invention introduced based on the difference between negative and positive, or to be more precise on the creation of a temporal gap between the moment of the writing in light of a given image and the moment of its appearance. For the “latent” image of Talbot see Frizot, *A New History of Photography*. For the conception of Talbot’s image as the antithesis of witness, see Vered Maimon, “Displaced origins: W. H. F. Talbot’s Pencil of Nature”, *History of photography*, Vol. 32, No 4 (2008) and Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1977). Although his formulation – the pencil of nature” – was not the only one of its kind, possibly because it was compact and precise, it endured where others have been forgotten. The first decade of photography gave rise to articles with titles that are similar to Talbot’s notion of “automatic writing”: “A mirror that preserves all its traces” by Janin, or “The photographic device is an artist” by Théophile Gautier. Their writings have been compiled in a collection by Rouillé. See: André Rouillé, *La Photographie en France: Textes et controverses: une anthologie 1816-1871* (Paris: Macula, 1989).
3. Criticism ranges from scorn for the photographic image along the lines of Baudelaire who termed it a “trivial image” and the camera “the handmaiden of the sciences and arts” (1859) to the print workers’ petition against photography on the grounds that it threatened their livelihood, see Rouillé, *La Photographie en France..*
4. For the various verbs that he would use to describe his invention, including for instance, “to deliver,” “to copy,” “to inscribe,” “to catalyze,” “to imprint,” see: Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 68.

5. Photographers have been vilified since the invention of the technology. The photographer, by virtue of his craft—photography – has been seen as a robber of portraits, as manipulative, as a master of lies and deceit, as someone who capitalizes on the suffering of others and so on. Baudelaire's negative portrayal of the photographer is well known, but he is not the sole representative of this tradition of vilification which continues unabated. For its inception see Rouillé, *La Photography en France*. For later expressions of this trajectory, consider the title of the special edition of the magazine *Camera Obscura* published by the Camera Obscura School of Photography and the supplement of the Hebrew-language newspaper, *Ha'ir*, edited by Adam Baruch, and entitled "Photography is the biggest con-job of them all: creator of realities, director of memory, promoter of manipulation" (25.4.1997).

6. See for instance the following works: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1995); Denis Bernard and André Gunthert, *L'instant revê: Albert Londe* (Nîmes: Jaqueline Chambon, 1993); Sandra S. Phillips, Mark Haworth-Booth and Carol Squiers (eds.), *Police Pictures: The Photograph as Evidence* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997).

7. For the mono-focal camera, see Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, "Fragments of Horizontal Thinking," *Plastika*, no. 3 (1999) [in Hebrew].

8. Digital photography and the possibilities that emerge through its processing emphasize precisely the extent to which the photograph is not sealed. But the discussion that has followed the advent of digital photography has concentrated mainly on practices of changing what is inscribed in the frame, without reference to what took place at the moment of photography. I am not party to the resistance that this discussion creates between analogue and digital photography nor to the lack of distinction between technological potential on the one hand, and its uses on the other. But this topic is the subject of an investigation in its own right and since it will distract us from the issue at hand, I will not dwell on it here. For more on digital photography, see: Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

9. I discuss this in chapters 8 and 9 of my *Civil Contract of Photography*. See: Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

