Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political

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Abstract

The point of departure of Berger and Mohr's *Another Way of Telling* (1982) is what they call the discovery that 'photographs did not work as we had been taught'. Since their book was written, the same feeling of 'discovery' has been expressed in other writings on photography. Often, these 'discoveries' have been linked with the way 'ordinary' people have been using photography. This paper addresses this recurrence and asks what are the discursive conditions under which this understanding of photography has been perceived as a 'discovery' whenever it has surfaced in the last 30 years. The paper analyzes the conceptual grid within the hegemonic discourse on photography that has contributed enormously to the marginalization of this new understanding of photography – the common opposition between the 'aesthetic' and the 'political', and accordingly between two seemingly contradictory judgments: 'this is too political'; 'this is too aesthetic'. These judgments, applied frequently to photographs taken in zones of 'regime-made disaster', usually differ and sometimes completely prevent the possible encounter with the photographed people who, through the photograph, are co-present with the spectators in the event of viewing the photograph.

Key words

aesthetic ■ Benjamin ■ judgment of taste ■ Palestine ■ photography ■ political ■ visual culture

INDOOR SCENE at a Palestinian house in a refugee camp near Ramallah, 2002 (Figure 1). Palestinian refugee camps, as can be read in this photograph, are sites of 'regime-made disaster'.[1] The photograph was taken by a soldier who was present at the time and had a camera in

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Figure 1 Refugee camp near Ramallah, 2002
Source: Photographed by a soldier member of Breaking the Silence

his possession. This photograph, like many others taken by Israeli soldiers, found its way into private family albums and was circulated through various family and social networks. One day someone who had access to this image – maybe the photographer or one of the photographed persons – recognized in the given photograph a crime committed, a deed that never should have been done, a violation, a disaster, a horror – something that had been previously ignored and suddenly appeared in a different light. The gaze – in order to detect what was now newly formulated as a disaster or a crime, and in order to enable the viewer to grasp his/her own complicity with that crime – had to be freed of certain viewing patterns, whether artistic or national, to which it was previously committed.

The point of departure of John Berger's and Jean Mohr's groundbreaking book, *Another Way of Telling*, is what they call the discovery that 'photographs did not work as we had been taught' (1982: 84). In one of the chapters, Mohr presents five of his photographs to ten people and asks them to describe them. The answers, printed below the photos, are presented as possible answers to the photographer's question expressed in the chapter's title: 'What did I see?' The photographer gave up the position of the knowing subject with regard to his own photos. This position has not been occupied by another knowing subject, such as a critic or a curator, but has rather been offered to 'ordinary people' who were chosen randomly. In most cases, what they saw in the photo was not what the photographer saw or was about to include in the final frame. The possibility of seeing this gap and exploring it further is the new way of seeing, the new way of

telling what one sees in a photograph, that Berger and Mohr present in their book.

Since their book was written in 1982, the same feeling of 'discovery' has been expressed in other writings on photography, and in different contexts.[2] Often, these 'discoveries' have been linked in one way or another with the way 'ordinary' people (i.e. people who are not considered experts in photography) have been using photography. These people supposedly possess a certain kind of knowledge regarding the photographed image which helps us to understand that 'photographs do not work as we had been taught'. The same can be said regarding, for example, the work of the Israeli artist, Michal Heiman, who conducts 'tests' on museum spectators, who are invited to describe what they see in the photographs presented to them as if they were patients in a clinic (Heiman, 1998). Similar situations may be found earlier in Wendy Ewald's photographic projects, carried out with various communities as an effort to reclaim citizenship through the use of photography (Ewald, 2000); or in that of Susan Meiselas's archives for Kurdistan, created in collaboration with the persons photographed or their relatives, all part of a community that lacked its photographic memory until this archive was created (Meiselas, 2008).

The question I want to raise regarding the recurrence of this new way of seeing is not why this or that writer, photographer or artist ignores the previous 'discovery' regarding the nature of photography, but what are the discursive conditions under which this understanding of photography has been perceived as a discovery whenever it has surfaced in the last 30 years. However, this article does not propose a comprehensive or direct answer to this question; rather, it describes and analyzes a certain conceptual grid that has contributed enormously to the marginalization of this understanding of photography – this 'new way of viewing' which paradoxically is so common among 'ordinary people' using photography – within the hegemonic discourse on photography. This hegemonic discourse was developed under the aegis of art discourse. This conceptual grid is the common opposition between the 'aesthetic' and the 'political', and accordingly between two seemingly contradictory judgments: 'this is too political'; 'this is too aesthetic'. These judgments, applied frequently to photographs taken in zones of regime-made disaster, usually defer – and sometimes completely prevent – the possible encounter with the photographed people who through the photograph are co-present with the spectators in the event of viewing the photograph.

The 'new way of viewing' is characterized by the effort to link the photographs to the situation in which they were taken. A similar effort is associated with my attempt here to get rid of the opposition between the 'too aesthetic' and the 'too political'. Linking the photograph to the situation and act of taking the photograph doesn't mean ignoring what John Berger describes as an abyss 'between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph' (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 87); on the

contrary, it means not giving up on the urgency of restoring and re-establishing as many links as possible between the photograph and the situation in which it was taken. The aim of this effort is to enable us as spectators to re-position ourselves in relation to the disaster we are watching and to let us be engaged with its happening, its victims – our fellow citizens, its lingering effects on its victims and on its perpetrators, as well as on its accomplices – we the spectators.

In order to do so, one should explore not only what is seen in the photograph and what the photographer intended to frame within it. The following quotation by the photographer (of the photo taken inside a Palestinian home in the refugee camp in Ramallah, Figure 1) who became a spectator of his own photographs, is an example of an old 'new way of viewing' that bypasses the ready-made grid of the two contradictory judgments ('this is too political'/'this is too aesthetic') that tend to dominate the way we view photographs from zone of disasters:

> It was during the World Cup and we were carrying out searches in a certain village. We had to enter one of the houses. Now you got a really cool platoon commander who's a fan of the Argentinian team too, and he too wants to watch the game. So you tell him, 'Listen, bro', you know ... this house or that house, it's all the same but this one's got a television set, man.' So we went into the house with the TV set, and just took a family out of its home so we could watch the Argentina-Nigeria game. (from Testimonies, Breaking the Silence website)[3]

Through a civil gaze, the souvenir-photo from the time of one's military service in Ramallah became a document of a crime, of an event to be denounced, to be shared in public. With the help of information such as this testimony of one of the participants in the photographic event, this photo becomes a document of a regime-made disaster, a document of the exposure of Palestinian houses to the intrusion of Israeli soldiers. This is a regime-made disaster as Palestinians' dwellings have been continuously exposed to violence since the establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948, which expelled them from the state and transformed them into refugees, and then, in 1967, transformed them into occupied people, governed by a regime under which they are non-citizens.

The relation between the 'aesthetic' and the 'political' continues to frame the discussion of art in general, and of photography – in which I have a special interest – in particular. The two categories, 'political' and 'aesthetic', prevail in contemporary discussion of photographs perceived as art. Each of them serves as a predicate in prevalent judgments of taste whose general form is: 'this photograph is (not enough/too) political' or, alternately, 'this photograph is (not enough/too) aesthetic'.

Walter Benjamin contributed greatly to the institutionalizing and disseminating of this dichotomy. His frequently cited formulation concludes his essay on the work of art: 'Its [Humankind's] self-alienation has reached

the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic *pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replied by politicizing art.*'[4] This formulation has yielded numerous books and essays, motivated scholars to invest years in the attempt to fathom it, and inspired the work of artists and curators. It has sharply formulated two directions of the artistic act and placed them as two poles of a contradiction, mutually exclusive, upon which contemporary judgments of taste are based.

In the first part of this text, I shall dwell on the gain and loss of the use of this opposition in the discourse of art and photography. In the latter part, I shall propose a renewed conceptualization of the political as a new framework to deal with images.

The images that evoke such judgments of taste are usually recognized as pointedly social or political; often the people photographed are men or women in distress. The 'aesthetic' and 'political' categories that serve to classify images actually sort these same actors who classify the images and make judgments of taste. These actors are sorted according to their positive or negative attitude towards those categories, generally used as contrasts. When a speaker in favor of political art tags as 'aesthetic' a work whose content is political, she judges it for being overly aesthetic. In like manner, there are always those who will prefer aesthetic art and find detriment in the overly political. Therefore, this judgment of taste determines whether the image under discussion is 'aesthetic' or 'political', and points out its success or failure as either one of the two – when it is condemned as aesthetic it is because the image has not succeeded in being political, and vice versa – and also expresses the affinity of the speaker toward one of these opposing poles.

Here are a few recent examples. All of them either implicitly or explicitly refer to Benjamin:

> The aestheticization of politics is what we would call branding, or design, which presents politics as a seductive spectacle. It's the same idea as Guy Debord's 'society as spectacle'. Politics becomes a way to seduce people, which can actually lead to fascism and war. On the other hand, the politicization of art is a way to get free of that and to act purely politically – beyond aesthetics, beyond art, beyond seduction, beyond spectacle. (Grosz, 2008)

> The process of making exhibitions politically strives to address an audience that differs from the traditional audience of an art-exhibition in terms of social origin and class composition. It mobilizes the spectator to find himself as a political subject. But it realizes quite differently from the direct experience of participation in political action. (Vilensky, 2007)

> Armenia's governing authorities strive to aestheticize the domination of violence by recruiting show business or soap operas, actors or artists to their campaigns. Karen Ohanyan resists those tendencies by politicizing art. (Jaloyan, 2009)

> Is there political art today in Serbia? Or can we even speak about specific crises of recent art production and local curatorial practices in relation to the political, and their inability to provide adequate articulations of, responses to, and engagements in what constitutes effective political interventions today? Is it possible to say that while in the 1990s artistic practices effectively functioned as a political front, today there is no such a thing as critical-political art? (Vilenica, 2008)[5]

> We are looking, in fact, at an aesthetic – too aesthetic – exhibition of works that speak colonialism in its most painful and extreme sense. They are not uninteresting, quite the contrary – they are even fascinating. As works per se they are well done and up to par. The question, however, remains whether they evoke even a single twinge of regret, account-taking, a fleeting sense of identification, or does the aestheticism which infests them all underscore the alienation that distances those living in affluence from those exploited human resources. (Baruch Blich)[6]

The simple contradiction proposed by Benjamin has proven to be mesmerizing. It has attributed to art an omnipotent role in the struggle against fascism in particular, and against oppressive political power in general. He presented the politicization of the aesthetic as a task designated for the opponents of fascism. In this formulation, Benjamin actually set in opposition not two realms but rather two acts – aestheticization and politicization – to each of which is attributed the power to turn its object into that from which it wished to distinguish itself. The relation between them has been presented as mutually exclusive: either the aesthetic becomes political, or the political becomes aesthetic. In time, this formulation by Benjamin has become extricated from his intricate thinking – which does not easily yield to dichotomy and the revolutionary horizon it implies – and has taken on a life of its own. Many have taken this formulation as a moral edict, a political call, almost a defined mission that the individual is called upon to undertake in order to block fascism.[7] Many readings of this essay by Benjamin and the common use of the political imperative ensconced in this paragraph have turned the term 'politicization' into the mission of a rare few. The artist, the interpreter, the critic, the curator – all have been tested by the political judgment of taste, ruling whether they have successfully brought about the desired politicization.

The reorganization of the public sphere in the late 18th century, and the dissemination of works of art (and images in general) in various places, created new forms of being-with-others in public and affected existing ones. Used in this historical context, the term 'politicization' of art designates those new patterns of human gathering in the new spaces of art and power such as the Louvre in Paris or Somerset House in London. None of these patterns alone generates politicization, but together, the consequences of their gazes, words and deeds reorganize the shared space, or, as in the later formulation of Jacques Rancière (2006), take part in 'the distribution of the sensible'.[8] Opening the Louvre to the general public, to view the art

salons exhibited there since 1740, created new conditions for the relations between audience, art and ruling power. The gathering of human masses viewing and being inspired by works of art, all within a space that was previously reserved for the ruling power – the royal palace – exposed the regime (later named the '*ancien régime*') to the public gaze no less than it exposed the works themselves.[9]

The politicization of art in other European countries in the late 18th century can be described in a similar way. Holger Hoock, in his research of the Royal Academy of that time, describes the growing interest of the Crown and the government in art, alongside the flourishing discussion of art by a growing public. The encounter of this public with art and power, and to no less an extent with itself as a public, honed its political and aesthetic capacities and skills (Hoock, 2005).

The inverted symmetry produced by Benjamin's formulation is largely misleading and makes us forget that the issue is not a perfect inverted symmetry – the aestheticization is of the political, while the politicization at hand is of art, not of the aesthetic (Buck-Morss, 1992). The unfelt and ungrounded shift in Benjamin's paragraph, from the 'aesthetic' to 'art', is very common in what I propose to name 'the political judgment of taste' that judges whether a work of art is political or not. This smooth transition, rendering an almost invisible 'jump', is due to the fact that at the heart of the 'political judgment of taste' is the opposition between the 'political' and its other, and the transformation of the political into an activity that can be performed by an individual. The artistic (or the aesthetic – for those who favor this opposition, it is all the same) and the political are produced as mutually exclusive opposites and represent two directions in the practice of art.

Since it was formulated up until the end of the recent century, this opposition appeared pertinent and seemed to leave no room for action – within the public sphere – outside the two positions it characterized. Any work of art, or any writing about it, were regarded as an engagement in a struggle that obliged one to position oneself on one of these two distinct sides, thereby confirming the power of the opposition and its function; while the 'aesthetic' position was criticized from various points of view[10] – often seeking to 'politicize' what was constructed as 'aesthetic' – the relation between the terms of this opposition as such was not an object of investigation until recently.[11] If one chose not to accept the horrors of the modern world, and if one supposed that art is more than the practice of producing pictures on a wall, the choice was obvious: one should resist the aestheticization of the political that is identified with fascism and choose the politicization of art identified with Marxism.

Over two decades ago I found myself on the left shore of the formula, the one striving for a constant politicization of art. However, with time I began to ask questions about the naturalness of this 'either–or' choice. The chiastic inversion that Benjamin made with aestheticization and politicization began to seem paralyzing. It limits one's field of vision to art's strictly professional gaze, and disrupts the movement of the wandering or

swept gaze, when the latter dares to dwell too long upon elements in an image that are not relevant to the artistic intention that the image is supposed to incorporate, in other words, to its aestheticization or politicization. Thus, too often I heard too many people – myself included – sentencing an image and pronouncing it an utter aestheticization of the political – or, even more currently, the 'aestheticization of the suffering of others' – while the image at hand, I want to suggest, could easily serve as a rich source of knowledge about the world and people appearing in it, who by their presence address not only the spectator's professional gaze.

Re-reading such judgments of taste made by various scholars and curators, especially when referring to harsh images, photographs of disaster or distress areas, I began to be bothered by them and perceive them as symptoms of a discourse. This became even more troubling since it was clear that turning the seen into an object of political study goes hand in hand with the professed political tendencies and moral sensitivities of some of these experts: seeing above and beyond the photographed persons – that is, ignoring them – would contradict their explicit position. Some secret pact seemed to be made by people who unknowingly participated in an act of silencing, distancing or concealment, for judgments of taste uttered by experts in the visual domain determine what is not to be seen or what is not worthy of one's gaze.

The intellectual skills and capacities of those experts are finally reflected in a kind of assessment that evaluates the images and establishes whether a certain image is political, and another – aesthetic. Thus, after the Kantian judgment of taste of the 18th century whose essence was the statement: 'This is beautiful', and after the Duchampian judgment of taste formulated in the early 20th century, whose essence was 'This is art' (de Duve, 1998), towards the end of the 20th century, a problematic formation evolved, of a non-reflexive judgment of taste whose essence is: 'This is *too* aesthetic', or alternately, 'This is *too* political.'

This 'too' attribute is a structural expression of the problematic nature of the contemporary judgment of taste (which I shall elaborate later). For the time being, let me just note that, unlike the two former judgments of taste, the latter judgment does not exist as a correspondence of the general category and the individual instance, and is rather based upon a tentative evaluation of superfluity – 'too' – that distorts the correspondence. What I call the 'political judgment of taste' preserves the Kantian pretension to universal judgment – the judgment of taste expresses the presupposition or pretension that each and every individual facing the work of art would, or should, judge it precisely as I do. And, indeed, the experts who make these judgments of taste are remarkable not only in their abilities to hunt down too-aesthetic or too-political images even when laypeople would not detect them as such at first glance; but also because the experts hurry to announce publicly that these images are not worth looking at, and even to encourage others to adopt their judgment and ignore them, exile them from their field of vision (Barthes, 2000).

In discussion of this kind, there is no room for the photographed persons to address their spectators. The expert spectator who exercises her professional gaze in order to make a 'political judgment of taste' pretends to know better than those photographed that the way they appeared in the photograph is not the right one. Here, for example, are two highly stylized photographs taken by Micha Kirshner in 1988, in an attempt to make the victims of oppression during the First Intifada present in Israeli public space (Figures 2 and 3).

Kirschner's style and his aesthetic choices are very apparent in the photographs. Most prominent is his choice to stage the photographed persons and their physical and emotional injuries in the studio ambience, which he improvised on site, while in the streets the Israeli army continues to suppress the Palestinian uprising, and a free camera could have documented the actual harm done in real time. Staging the photographed

Figure 2 Daoud Atiya, 1988
Source: Photo by Micha Kirshner

persons also included extreme body posing so that they displayed their injury to the camera and enabled it to be framed by an item of clothing, a gesture or lighting. The claim that the photographer aestheticizes the suffering of the Palestinians was not long in coming. Those who make this claim pose as spokespersons for the photographed persons, but actually overlook one of the main features these have left in the photograph – their explicit willingness to be photographed in this way, namely their partnership in the act of photography under the unbearable oppression of those years. Such stylized studio photographs require time, mutual understanding of photographer and photographed, cooperation, concentration, participation, attentiveness, consideration, choice, the will to be exposed, daring, decisiveness, consultation and negotiation capacity. These are apparent in every one of the photographs, making them a fascinating document of cooperation between an Israeli photographer of Jewish descent and Palestinians under occupation. Together they seem to expose to the spectators' view the deeds perpetrated by the Israeli regime.

However, all of these things – expressing the being-together of humans, their political existence – are not visible when the photograph becomes the object of a 'political judgment of taste' and the gaze viewing the photograph seeks its object in the act of the individual photographer. But these particular photographs, like photographs in general, are not the possession of the photographer alone. The photographed persons took part in the act of photography, just as they did in the telling of what happened to them which accompanied the display of the photographs. From the texts accompanying the photographs, the spectators could learn that 20-year-old Daoud Attiya was chased down the street in Issawiya village by an army jeep and, when overtaken, he was held trapped between the jeep and the fence for two and a half hours without getting any medical assistance. His body, twisted as a result of the injury, is now presented to us (Figure 2). That Ayisha al Qurd (and her son, Yassir, whom she delivered in jail) was in 'administrative detention' (detention by the state without trial, usually for 'security reasons), during which her house was demolished as a punishment for belonging to a 'hostile organization', an incarceration from which she was finally released without being charged in court (Figure 3).

When a judgment of taste establishes that a certain image is aesthetic even though it could have or should have been political, it pronounces the image, in fact, to be exactly what it rules it to be – an aesthetic object. It does so because it contracts the various dimensions of the image's existence into a single one – its existence as a work of art exclusively in the aesthetic plane.

Three presuppositions are implied by these judgments of taste:

1. that there are images that do not exist in the aesthetic plane;
2. that the photograph is the product of a photographer alone;
3. that the aesthetic or the political are attributes of images.

Figure 3 Ayisha al Qurd and her son Yassir, 1988
Source: Photo by Micha Kirshner

The *first presupposition* actually identifies the category 'aesthetic' with over-stylization whose presence is so powerful that it overshadows the photographed subject. Indicating over-stylization and identifying it with the category called 'aesthetic' produce the absurd illusion that there are images or objects that do not exist in the aesthetic plane and are devoid of stylistic components. Even when one speaks of 'anti-style' or 'bad taste', certain stylistic components are an inseparable part of objects or images made by a human being, even if not as a function of a reasoned, conscious or intended choice. Within a discussion or debate about the images, various speakers can characterize differently stylistic components that have been attributed to the images, or even try to negate the existence of such components. But the existence of an image in the aesthetic plane is not a matter of choice and it cannot be obliterated. The visual or stylistic components of the image exist in the aesthetic plane and may be sorted into various groups,

or be attributed various tastes, schools, trends, periods and places. But, again, they cannot be done away with altogether, just as one cannot do away with them in objects and images that are not considered art. Therefore, the mere existence of an image in the aesthetic plane is not a matter of choice. One may propose various judgments of taste that relate to the aesthetic dimension of an object or image, but one cannot rule out or add this dimension, or assume that the image or object might exist outside it; the aesthetic is given by way of the object's being given to the senses.

The *second presupposition* identifies the photograph with the photographer's stylistic choices that might be reflected in the framing of the persons photographed, in the composition, the lighting, color or focus (in both senses). This identification subjugates what is seen in the photograph to the photographer's intention, vision, planning and talent, and relates to the photograph as though it were nothing but their concrete realization. When the category 'aesthetic' is, thus, cast pejoratively at the photographed image, the photographer's choice of a certain stylistic model is not presented as a choice of a single model out of a broad range of visual models, but rather as determining either the aesthetic or the political. Presenting one chosen option of several, all of which belong to a single plane – the aesthetic – as a decision between the aesthetic or political planes, testifies to the nature and limits of the category 'political' as it is posed in opposition to 'aesthetic'. Within this opposition, the political is actually a style or a kind of visual dialect 'used' by the artist. But this dialect is a convention referring to a certain style as a lack of style, or as a sub-style, and therefore as non-aesthetic and political, in other words politically valid.

The *third presupposition* attributes the quality of being aesthetic or political to the image itself; it is the other facet of the previous presupposition according to which the image's being aesthetic or political is a result of the photographer's decision to design it as one or the other. Therefore, as soon as the image is out of the photographer's hands, those who wish to make a judgment of taste about it relate to it as though it is out in the world carrying traits that have been molded into it once and for all. They assume their ability to expertly distinguish these traits even as others remain blind to their existence. The spectator or critic accepts a priori her role in exposing the image's existing traits and her authority to judge the photographer as the only person responsible for those traits. The spectator thus denies her own contribution in creating the image as 'aesthetic' or 'political', and her own power to reduce or extend conditions that would facilitate linking the image to other statements. The judgment of taste assumes the aesthetic and the political as traits of the image and the result of the artist's intention, although the aesthetic is a necessary dimension of any image and the political is not a trait but the relations between a plurality of persons, on which I shall elaborate later.

These three presuppositions are exercised in the judgment of taste that establishes that any image whose overt contents are political or social is '(too) aesthetic'. This judgment of taste displaces the speaker's unease

about the photographed persons in distress. It thus becomes an unease about the special attention that the photographer paid to the look of their images while facing them. The rare beauty radiating from their portraits or the perfect lighting or composition in which their distress is shown becomes an excuse on the part of the expert spectator to exclude them from the field of vision. But focusing upon the stylistic measures taken by the photographer and advancing them into the foreground might force to the background the political space where the photographer and the photographed are already present. The speaker who judges that 'this image is (too) aesthetic' ignores his own non-political gesture in relation to the photographed persons – shifting his gaze from them and excluding them not only from the field of vision but also from a civil/political community in which they are struggling for their place through the photograph and the space of appearance it opens for them.[12] In order to make a judgment of taste, the speaker facing the photograph – or work of art in general – must isolate it from its surroundings and suspend the political space that other people threaten to produce – or might have produced – by their mere presence around the photograph. In this way, the judgment of taste is directed towards the mode of existence of the work of art as a special kind of object – an artistic object subjected to judgment, and everything else is distanced and perceived as irrelevant. Paradoxically, in order to say 'it is too aesthetic' one needs to already be 'within art' and forgo one's reference to the world that the image is supposed to articulate.

In order to discover why critics or researchers who – within the Benjaminian dichotomy – strive to politicize the aesthetic actually achieve the contrary, I shall re-formulate my opposition to the three presuppositions implied by the judgment of taste 'it is too aesthetic'.

1. Contrary to the presupposition that the aesthetic is a possible trait of images, and that there are images that do not have an aesthetic dimension, I say that no images can exist outside the aesthetic plane.
2. Contrary to the presupposition that photography can only be discussed through its product and a photograph can only be seen as the creation of the photographer, I say that photography is the act of many and a photograph is a sampling or a trace of a space of human relations whose existence cannot be reduced to a mere status of raw material or just objects of an artistic image.
3. Contrary to the presupposition that the 'political' is a trait of a certain image and absent from another, I say that the political is but a space of human relations exposed to each other in public, and that photography is one of the realizations of this space.

These three arguments will serve as my basis for a renewed conceptualization of the status of a photograph and for presenting the discussion of the aesthetic and the political not as opposites but as two distinct planes: the plane in which man-made objects appear alongside other objects, and the plane in which their actions appear.

First claim – in certain periods of time, certain artistic conventions rule that a certain aesthetic formation is worthy or unworthy of representing certain political content.

If, however, one accepts the claim that the political is not a trait of an image or an object, nor of its creator, but a relation among people in public, the image of the object cannot be perceived as political in itself. Ruling that a certain image is 'aesthetic' or 'political' expresses a convention of representation that reduces the aesthetic existence of an image to what everyday jargon calls its 'aesthetics' or its 'look'. However, recognition and priority attributed to a certain aesthetic formation and denied to another cannot change the fact that any image, even one whose contents are political par excellence, always exists in the aesthetic plane as well. The aesthetic existence of an image must be understood as its action upon the senses. This action upon the senses, or the impression of the senses, has no purpose beyond itself, as opposed to the action of a practical instrument or a tool or product (such as the seductive garment: 'wear me', or the key that says 'click me'). The identifying or orienting gaze enables us to acknowledge the product as such, and the professional gaze – including that of the art lover – is activated in the aesthetic plane where the object acts apart from the action of people in political space.

Second claim – the photographer makes a significant series of choices during the photographic event and regarding the look of the final product – the photograph – beginning with the actual decision to point the camera at a certain event or person and up to decisions as to color or camera-angle that will determine the tone of the frame.

But even when such decisions are extremely detailed and precise, the photograph – certainly one in which people are shown – is not the finished realization of the image foreseen in the photographer's mind. A camera was used and people were there. Their encounter for the photographic session is usually managed in keeping with photographers' decorum, but it is not totally dominated by such rules. At any moment the space between them and, later, the space between them and those who will stand viewing *their* picture, might become political space where people gaze at each other, speak and act away from disciplinary or governmental constraints.

A photograph showing persons who were photographed cannot be regarded merely as an object produced by a single individual. Those photographed, who continuously see and are seen, bear constant and permanent witness to the fact that, regardless of its concrete circumstances, a photograph is never merely a product of material in the hands of an individual creator. A photograph is the space of appearance in which an encounter has been recorded between human beings, an encounter neither concluded nor determined at the moment it was being photographed. This encounter might continue to exist or be renewed through additional human beings who were not necessarily present at the time it was photographed. The renewal of this encounter is a constant capacity of spectators who acknowledge the photographed persons and see themselves as their actual or

potential addressees or partners. Historically, indeed, the photographer assumed the artist's position and monopolized the power of the individuals with whom he was gathered for the photography session, making the photograph 'his own'. But this did not seal the space of relations between the photographer and the photographed; the photographer only fixed an instant of this encounter in the image. Beyond the image's aesthetic existence, the photograph preserves traces of other people's gaze and action, and thus becomes a kind of singular point in which these are stored and might be linked one to the next and moved anew at any point in time, in unforeseen directions.

Third claim – as I have said above, the political is not a trait and cannot be attributed even to images whose contents address explicit political issues. The political, even in its minimal sense, is not compatible with a trait of an image or of a person because, as previously stated, it only exists where people are assembled, and it disappears when they disperse. When one considers the presence of the photographed persons, it becomes clear that the photograph was created and is shown in conditions of plurality. Even when the photograph does not show people, the area in which it was taken is always an environment created by human beings to be dwelt in. The photograph by itself is not political but the space among people, where it takes place, can potentially become political.

This formulation of the political as the realization of the potential of human relations, which I have borrowed from Arendt, has helped me break loose from the opposition of the 'aesthetic' and the 'political' whereby the political becomes a trait (see her discussion of the political in Arendt, 2005: 93–200). However, upon close examination of Arendt's formulation, I realized that it, too, is held in the grip of the opposition of the political and its other. Space becomes political, claims Arendt, when the being-together of people in it has no purpose beyond itself and when the meaning of political – not its end – is freedom. This identification of the political with freedom was the basis for Arendt's judgment of most forms of humans being-together. Her judgment – 'this is not political' – also referred to different formations of being together which were conducted like political relations and called themselves political relations. As far as she was concerned, these were distortions or a degeneration of the political. A famous instance of such negation was Arendt's relation to the space of action and speech that had been constituted since the French Revolution and which she called 'social', trying to stabilize its distinction from the 'political'. Many, writing about Arendt, have perceived this opposition as problematic, and nearly all of them have preferred to abandon it and borrow mainly the spirit of her definition of the political – as I did for a long time.

But adopting the spirit of things alone did not make Arendt's formulation any less rooted in the practice of the judgment of taste. To overcome the exclusive opposition underlying this political judgment of taste, I shall present the form that Arendt called political as one of several formations of the political. I shall claim that this specific formation which she identified

with action and with freedom does not suffice to describe the complexity of the political and its various formations and practices.

I shall first make brief mention of several main characteristics by which Arendt describes political action.

The course of action is unpredictable, and thus too its consequences; action has an agent, not an author; it is distinct from simple productive action; the subject is revealed in action, the subject speaks the action; the action is not totally enslaved for the good of a cause because it is entangled in a web of relations between humans who have contradicting wills and intentions; the revelation of the subject in action entails risk since it is not clear who exactly will be revealed; the action exists in plurality; the action needs public space and aspires to the fame that it involves; the action exists only when it presupposes a 'human togetherness'; the action always exists between at least two persons, in the space between them and among the many, and revolves around things in the objective world; this between-two is not tangible or stable since it does not leave traces like practical objects/utilities; the action generates a new beginning.

I shall claim that these characteristics, which Arendt identified only with political action in the sense of freedom, are evident as well in other acts and interventions by people in the two other realms – labor and work – that Arendt distinguishes. Thus for example the changing price of rice or the demolition of a neighborhood – which in Arendt's taxonomy are not political action – might signify a new beginning and their outcome cannot be predicted. The characteristics shared by action in the Arendtian sense and other interventions that are not defined by her as political stem from the fact that any act or action which human beings carry out in a space inhabited by others cannot be managed and planned to their very end, since such interventions encounter, evolve, develop, are stopped, come into friction and confrontation with the interventions of others. If this presupposition is accepted, then this description by Arendt does not suffice:

> Political space is present potentially whenever people assemble together and it can – at any given moment – be realized. (2005)

With slight alteration this description may be re-written so as to express this common denominator of different kinds of political existence:

> Political space is present whenever people assemble together and it can – at any given moment – realize its inherent potential for freedom.

This formulation enables one to detach the sweeping identification of the political and freedom and to delineate 'the political' that is identified with freedom within only one of three of the domains of the political that I wish to characterize in relation to the *vita activa*: labor and work. This categorization extracts the political from the opposition in which it is held both in political judgments of taste and in its Arendtian conceptualization.

This categorization also undermines the identification of labor and work with private space, and recognizes that, in the modern world, these might be private matters but part of a political life among people. *Vita activa* in general, then, appears as political life, the realm in which people exist side by side with each other and their various actions directly or indirectly impact the lives of others. This life is usually distinct from *vita contemplativa*, which the classic distinction attributes to the realm of the contemplating gaze – reflection, wonder, amazement and aimless contemplation of a landscape or a figure.

Abstract thought has been perceived ever since the ancient Greeks through the metaphorization of this gaze: theory, speculation, study, things that people imagine or conceive in their mind's eye, etc. Unlike Arendt, who leaves the gaze in the realm of *vita contemplativa*, I claim that the gaze is an indivisible part of *vita activa*, of instrumental activity, of the effort to attain goals and objectives, to become more efficient and sophisticated.[13]

The first formation and realm of *vita activa* that Arendt defined as labor is activity that is meant to provide basic existence, to enable survival and reproduce life. The gaze is part of it. Humans look around them in order to identify themselves in their environment, manage their own movement, and identify the things, animals and people they encounter, fathom their intentions and the risks and chances involved in meeting them. They exercise that gaze that corresponds to the first realm of the *vita activa* – labor – that I term 'the identifying or orienting gaze'. It is based on a mechanism of identifying the seen, a vital condition for existence itself. It corresponds to what, in speech, will also be part of that same basic practice of orientation and survival, such as using signals of orientation, naming things, exchanging practical information and sharing experience with others.

The second realm which Arendt defined as work is the activity that produces objects which do not fulfill immediate needs and are not annihilated with immediate consumption; these are primarily tools, instruments, and part of tools that can serve to create other products, and eventually participate in the creation of a whole world, arrange people's life on earth and enable them to turn this space into their dwelling place. Among these products Arendt includes the work of art, thus limiting it to her objectal dimension and delineating it as a closed and stable object of a judgment of taste. Within this formation I propose to place the professional gaze that accompanies a certain type of action and guides it. This is a directed gaze that characterizes professionals (a physician, an artist, a photographer, a policewoman, an architect, a seamstress or educator) and it enables one to arrange that which is seen and control it through accumulated, ongoing and evolving knowledge. The professional gaze is not vital to existence itself but rather to the regulation of activity of a certain kind, to the analysis of situations and events, to eye–hand coordination and the like, in situations where action is free of having to fulfill immediate needs and is harnessed

to loftier goals. Professional speech – the one that specializes in reporting, documenting, analyzing, validating or judging – characterizes this formation. The discourse of art is a part of it and proposes a framework and tools for professional discourse to discuss images, including photographed ones.

The third realm is what Arendt defined as action, which is distinguished from work since it produces no end-product and does not act upon a previous plan but is the individual's daring to generate something new in act or speech, or in the act of speech, and generate it publicly, among people, exposed to their gaze, without any governing or disciplinarian limitation. Among all the characteristics that Arendt attributes to this realm, I shall claim that only its essential openness, not subjected to an external authority or governing power, distinguishes it from the two other realms. I shall call this the civil realm. The gaze exercised in its framework is distinct from the purposeful gaze, but also from the mode of contemplation typical of the *vita contemplativa*. It does not demand separate time and space for its existence, but can be realized at any given moment and is not opposed to the two other forms nor does it obliterate them. It is aided by them and is nurtured by them but suspends the constraints imposed on them. Its object is not ennobled or sanctified, beautiful or awesome, nor is it completed and sealed, and can be present in anything and produced by anyone. Photography enabled this gaze to deviate from the interest strictly in pictures, objects and extraordinary events, and turned human existence in all its aspects – behavior patterns, items, situations, customs, gestures or places that had not previously seemed worthy of study – into objects of the gaze.

This is a new way to relate to the visual that has developed along with photography and takes place among people in public spaces, where the spectator's gaze is never limited only to what is to be seen or what he or she was asked to view. Her gaze is always in conflict with others' gaze, who are there not only as the object of her gaze but as participants in the formation of what can be seen. Photographs produced from such encounters can never be possessed by one of the participants in the event of photography, namely photographers, photographed persons or spectators. This is the civil feature of photography – no one can dominate and possess it completely and become its sovereign without a violent action that denies political space its validity (the civil gaze being merely one of its dimensions).

Each one of the three realms of *vita activa* – with their three dimensions of action, speech and gaze – can be characterized by behavior patterns, rules and their own norms that distinguish them from each other. The first, the orienting, is exercised constantly by each and every individual; the two other forms of gaze, speech and action need, as I said, the information it produces. The second form is exercised more selectively in realms of knowledge, interest, training, profession, craft or art. It is accompanied by specific authority and constitutes it, such as the artist's or the physician's authority. It exists between the professional subject and her professional

environment and specific objects within it, and does not require the sharing of objects of knowledge, action or gaze but rather accounting for their results, subject to the disciplinary or institutional rules within which it acts. And the third form of speech, action and gaze, not subject to disciplinary or governing rules, is a form that exists in plurality. First and foremost because the object of the gaze, for example, is not demarcated a priori, and everyone may arrange it differently and turn any gaze and gazer into an object. The action principle of such a civil gaze presupposes non-subjugation to external authority. The intervention of such authority directly damages not only the gaze of several individuals but also the open principle of this space itself, that must remain shared, un-possessable, not enslaved to a specific group, regime or realm.

Finally, I wish to show how this description of *vita activa* proposes a different framework for discussing images in general and photographs in particular, in a way that does not regard them as images with predicates such as 'aesthetic' or 'political' but rather as images whose existence is made up of several formations of *vita activa*. The description I propose enables one to present various human actions not under common oppositions that establish that a certain action is political and another aesthetic, but rather as complex actions that exist simultaneously in several dimensions and which cannot be reduced to either one or the other. The work of art – a product of work – is distinguished from other things that have an aesthetic existence in its effect upon the senses. It has no purpose and, in contemporary discourse, it is perceived as an opportunity for another type of encounter with situations with which the image resonates in various forms. The discourse of art tends to attribute what is created in such an encounter to the creative artist as the exclusive author of the work, or to the work of art as an acting agent. Thus for example, instead of saying that a certain work of art presents an image of a wounded woman, one tends to say that 'the work of art deconstructs the image of woman as an ideal, impeccable body', or that 'the work of art problematizes the representation of the medical body and says so and so . . .' This deviation from the effect of the work of art upon the senses expresses an attempt to break open the professional realm of art.

Under the opposition between the aesthetic and the political, this deviation continues to take place within the rules of discourse of art and actually metaphorizes the gaze, speech and action since the work of art does not act in a political space alone and of its own accord, and especially does not undertake actions such as argumentation or persuasion. One consequence is the deception entailed in the description of the work of art – emerging every once in a while – as something that can change the world – or has lost its power to change it, a *deus ex machina*:

> The success of Lange's photographs in eliciting aid confirmed a feeling that prevailed during the New Deal: those who saw the afflicted would be moved to assist them . . . when the Depression itself remained largely

> invisible for several years and a large daily dose of photographs was still a relatively new regimen, the eye and the mind, and perhaps the heart, were more receptive. (Goldberg, 1991: 139)

A description such as this one by Vicki Goldberg makes one forget that others are the ones acting, seeing and speaking through the work of art, by its mediation and under its auspices.

A spectator can look, speak and act by force of rules and limitations that the discourse of art imposes upon her possibilities of speech, gaze and action, and go on to regard the work of art merely as a point of departure of the gaze, speech and action – and their purpose. But she can also transcend the professional discourse in which she exercises her professional knowledge, enjoy her authority and exercise it, and look at the image not as the origin and purpose in itself (the professional art discourse) but first of all as a carrier of traces of actions, gazes and speech of others with whom she gets together. Then, however, she is already transcending the professional discourse and participating in a joint civil space whose rules are different and in which she is not entitled to any priority or authority.

Traces of those who have taken part in the production of a photograph are present in a weakened form in a work of art. In photographs, even those that have been integrated in the professional discourse of art, these traces cannot be erased without violent disciplinary or governmental action. The photographed persons share a political space of relations with the photographer as well as with spectators. Even if the photographed persons are ignored by the spectator, and even if she relates what she sees only to the photographer and perceives herself as standing alone facing a single creator, their presence as participants can't be erased.

A political judgment of taste establishes that the photographer aestheticized the suffering of photographed Palestinian Ayisha Al Qurd (Figure 3), and assumes that her suffering is the object of the photograph, shaped by the photographer. The political judgment of taste which supposedly aims to choose between the aesthetic and the political fuses them, in fact, as a single whole in the way it relates to the image, and thus does not actually make room for a practical gaze of the third type I described – the civil view.

The ontological state of the photograph – a result of presencing a previous getting-together and in itself the occasion for a new getting-together – invites a deviation from professional discourse, either political or artistic, in which the experts observe, speak and intervene. Such transcendence cannot tend toward 'the political', as the spectator and the photographed persons are already within the political. Going beyond the limits of the professional discourse, then, might lead towards the civil – the space in which the existence of others is not pre-determined, and their participation, like that of the spectator who transcends the political judgment of taste, is prerequisite.

The civil domain does not stand in opposition to the domain of work and creation, and moving towards it does not necessarily mean giving up or destroying other domains. Keeping these three domains – labor, work and the civil – distinct from each other is sometimes the last obstacle to a total instrumentalization of the political space which includes all three of them, and its subjugation to the professional political gaze of the ruling power.

An aesthetic reading of a photograph, of the way it is offered to the gaze, is not opposed to other readings. It is one of several possible readings, enabling us to see what they cannot, and might sometimes provide a more solid basis for the other readings. Without the investigative gaze at the garment worn by the photographed Ayisha al Qurd and at the specific lighting that illuminates it so as not to flatten it in spite of its blackness, there could not have emerged a civil view that recognizes traces of Al Kurd's part in the perfect pieta setting for her portrait. Thus, too, the photograph of Daoud Atiya and the other photos in the series were not achieved in a snapshot gesture, but rather created after photographer and photographed negotiated the proper manner at a given time to shape their portraits in a flawed public space where the injury to Palestinian bodies was not – and still is not – the object of public interest. In order for the civil view to take place, each and every individual must permanently renew the situation necessary for its existence – the open and unrestricted participation of others. Civil intentionality towards the photographed persons simply does not suffice. One is called upon to identify and acknowledge the injury to the conditions of their partaking in shared space. An identifying gaze will look for the name of the photographed, her place of residence, the details of her story which have made her a photographed person, thus partaking in the act of photography – a mother of five children who, along with her spouse, the army has dispossessed of their lives by turning them into administrative detainees, demolishing their home in Khan Yunes refugee camp, where their parents were exiled 40 years earlier, and releasing them several months later without prosecuting them.

Unlike the theoretical view, the practical view in its three forms does not have as its object some Being that transcends the visible. A practical view wishes to dwell upon the visible and use it. It will articulate the seen, helped by outside pictorial information that necessarily exceeds that which a given discourse has framed for its gaze. A civil view cannot exist within the paradigm of viewing the 'suffering of others', as if the spectators' citizenship is immune from the suffering that befalls others – in this case the Palestinian non-citizens – and which is observable from the outside.

A civil view will insist on gazing not only at the photographed person but at all those who took part in the act of photography, from the regime that demolished Ayisha al Qurd's house, exposing her to photography, the soldier who carried out the arrest and demolition, the photographer who arrived at the scene, the assistant, the interpreter whose services were needed to accomplish the negotiation between the photographer and the

photographed, and a friend of the family. Together they render the picture of a regime under which the disaster that befell Ayisha al Qurd does not appear as such. The civil spectator will know such a disaster to be a regime disaster.

Translated by Tal Haran

Notes

1. For more on regime-made disaster see Azoulay (forthcoming).

2. Dwelling on their discovery doesn't mean that it had no precedents. I choose to start with their book and not, for example, with Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'optical unconscious' because of their explicit claim about discovery.

3. See Breaking the Silence website: http://www.shovrimshtika.org/index.e.asp

4. In its various versions, this essay was written vis-a-vis the horrors in Europe during the latter half of the 1930s. Quoted from the last version, written in 1939 (Benjamin, 2003: 270).

5. These questions were raised by Vilenica at the first RUK (Workers in Culture) conference in Belgrade organized as a response to the violent closing of the exhibition 'Exceptions: Young Scene from Priština (Kosovo)', whose opening was violently interrupted by right-wing organizations (see: http://radniciukulturi.net/files/7februar.Glasilo%20Radnika%20u%20kulturi.pdf).

6. From a critique of an exhibition at Museum on the Seam (http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/he/1173510036/1176900614).

7. Here is the source of the commonly asked question 'Is there political art?' in the discussion of art in different parts of the world since the latter half of the 20th century. The question has various formulations and is usually accompanied by the answer that states that there is – or is not – political art at a given time in a given place.

8. In his recent book Rancière (2009) criticizes the widespread trend in the art world to claim that a certain artistic activity is political.

9. On the migration of political terminology into art discourse, see Haskell (1974: 218).

10. For a critique of the 'aesthetic' position from a Marxist point of view, see for example Jameson (1982), Eagleton (1990), or from a feminist point of view see Schott (1993), or specifically within the discourse of photography see Rosler (2006).

11. I recognize the same effort to deconstruct this opposition and get rid of its power in two different recent books: Groys (2008) and Rancière (2009).

12. For a more detailed critique of this position see (Azoulay, 2008, chs 3–4).

13. For more on Arendt and the gaze see Azoulay (2010).

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