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## From the Civic Imaginary to the Nongovernmental Commons

Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, eds.  
***Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism.*** New York: Zone Books, 2012. 664 pp., 17 color ill., 114 b/w. \$36.95

Ariella Azoulay. ***Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography.*** London: Verso Books, 2012. 288 pp. \$29.95

In recent years there has been increasing interest in a realm of activity that has been called many things. The terms themselves are highly contested, but to list them at least sketches out a territory of inquiry: activist art, social practice, social sculpture, participatory art, situationist art, site-specific art, collaboration, collectivism, community arts, dialogical art, and relational aesthetics. These are discrete practices, but they overlap to create a space where social and political phenomena are not only represented but activated and even performed. These practices raise the question: what is the relationship between the imaginary and the real when art and politics collide?

Critics, curators, and theorists such as Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Gerald Raunig, Miwon Kwon, Shannon Jackson, Boris Groys, and Nato Thompson have taken positions and taken each other to task on the ways in which cultural production in the realms of art, architecture, and film engages the social sphere. In a sense, this is an argument for the imaginary realm of art to address the real world of politics. On the other hand, this discourse has opened up the possibility that political action can sometimes take on the aesthetic characteristics of cultural production. In other words, activities that seem firmly rooted within the real world can suddenly become imaginary.

Two recent books, *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, add to this corpus by laying out a mutually responsive political philosophy and philosophy of aesthetics. In particular, Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt are regularly cited and prove to be methodologically useful for these

authors both to build on and to resist. Like the practices and discourses listed above, writers in the two books demonstrate an attitude that politics uses the sensible by envisioning our present and imagining a better future. In this way, the social is both represented and performed by political activism and cultural platforms such as photography, film, and architecture. Furthermore, this integration of the real and the imagined is directed toward the civic engagement of a public rather than the passive spectatorship of an individual viewer or reader. This idea seems indebted to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of "the commons," which, they argue, is "the incarnation, the production, and the liberation of the multitude."<sup>1</sup>

While *Sensible Politics* is an anthology that addresses a wide range of geographical examples of art and activism, and *Civil Imagination* is a monograph that is ultimately about photography more broadly, both pay a great deal of attention to Israel-Palestine as a prime example of the complex relationships between art and politics. Ariella Azoulay, the author of *Civil Imagination*, is an Israeli theorist of photography, and an essay by her is included in *Sensible Politics*, as are essays by Eyal Weizman, Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and others that address the particularities of a conflict that has grown so baroque in its political dimensions that it requires the skills of a cultural theorist to parse the real from the imaginary.

As the editors Meg McLagan and Yates McKee note in their introduction, *Sensible Politics* builds on the oft-cited groundwork of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Theodor Adorno's culture industry, and Walter Benjamin's analysis of the work of art in relation to mechanical reproduction. All of these foundational texts critique capitalist culture and its systems of power. In particular, Adorno advocated for a position of autonomy, and it is this notion that McLagan and McKee reject. Their central argument is that "images do not move by themselves, but are trafficked along material networks and embedded in platforms" (16). They have selected texts that use activism of the recent past in Israel-Palestine, India, Peru, the former Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq, the Congo, the United Kingdom, and Sweden to show how photography, film, architecture, protest, and social media are inevitably complicit with the material networks of power, but can also be leveraged as mechanisms of resistance,

precisely because of their close proximity to the object of their critique.

The title of this volume is based on Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics and its relationship to the sensible.<sup>2</sup> Since McLagan and McKee rightly reject the notion that politics and aesthetics can be separated, they propose that the "distribution of the sensible" in visual culture, usually attributed to aesthetics, is the product of political mechanisms. If that is the case, then activist practices that redistribute the sensible could potentially affect the political forces that support the status quo.

McLagan and McKee focus on the intersections between visual culture and nongovernmental activism and divide their anthology into sections on photography, bodies in space, cinema, architecture, and what they call "multiplying platforms." Azoulay opens their section on photography with an essay that looks at the documentary photographs of what she calls "regime-made disaster," seeking to shift our gaze from the victims to forces outside the frame. According to Azoulay, this type of disaster "takes place as a structural part of democratic regimes" (29). She analyzes a number of photographs of Israeli soldiers giving water to Palestinians, including one of a prisoner kneeling with his hands bound behind his back, attributed to an unknown photographer in the Israeli government press office and dated 2002. The official caption of the photograph reads "Israeli soldier offers water to a Palestinian suspected of terrorism" (34). To Azoulay, this points to the "humanitarian" efforts of the Israeli military that are a structural part of occupation, not just as propaganda devices but also as part of the maintenance of the disaster so that it doesn't erupt out of control. Furthermore, Azoulay notes that this maintenance is aided by NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) such as UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), the Red Cross, and Doctors Without Borders, which rush to give temporary aid to the victims of violence but unwittingly lay the political groundwork for future violence by the governing regime.

Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman have made similar arguments, drawing on the work of the French anthropologist Michel Agier.<sup>3</sup> Agier spent years studying refugee camps, primarily in Africa, and realized that those who administer the camps often find themselves perpetuating a situation of

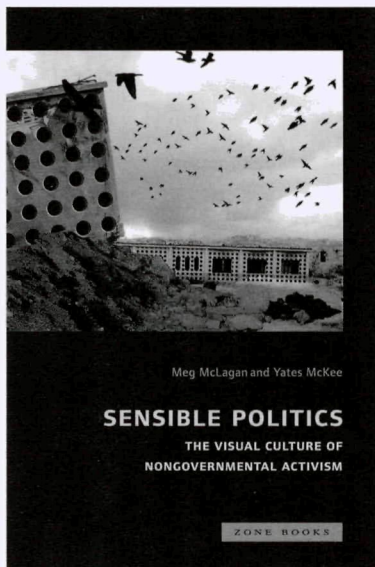
permanent catastrophe. We have heard arguments about the complicity of artists who engage with politics since Tom Wolfe famously labeled such practices “radical chic,” but arguments from Azoulay, Keenan, and Weizman critique the complicity of even nongovernmental activism. Keenan is also included in this volume, but his essay focuses on the work of Trevor Paglen, which sheds light on the shadow world of CIA ghost detainees and “black sites.”

The book was in production in 2011 as the Arab Spring was erupting, and Judith Butler’s essay “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” uses Arendt’s notion of the “space of appearance” and Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” to theorize the politics of visibility. As in Keenan’s analysis of Paglen’s work, Butler focuses on the appearance of bodies in space, but the manifestation is in real space as opposed to the realm of photographic representation. For Butler, the power of protest is made manifest when a group of bodies declares its agency within the public sphere. This sentiment is echoed by Amahl Bishara’s essay on protests against the separation wall in Palestine, which focuses on photojournalism in places like Bil’in where activism by NGOs like the Stop the Wall, the International Solidarity Movement, and Anarchists Against the Wall builds on the strategies of ACT UP protesters of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

Women on Waves, a project by the Dutch activist and physician Rebecca Gomperts, is analyzed by Carrie Lambert-Beatty. The project involves a boat with a container on board that serves as a women’s health clinic, offering safe abortions to citizens of countries in which the procedure is illegal. While Dutch law governs the ship, it anchors in international waters, just outside the twelve-mile maritime boundary of countries like Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Ecuador, and Spain. Lambert-Beatty argues that this project rejects the distinction between representation and action, creating an activist art in which “the aesthetic is not a retreat from the real, but is in and of it” (288).

This blurring between the imaginary and the real, which Lambert-Beatty has elsewhere called *parafiction*, is a feature of Michael Rakowitz’s work as well, as it is discussed by Liza Johnson.<sup>5</sup> Situated in a storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn and supported by Creative Time, Rakowitz’s project *Return* was a working export-import company spe-

cializing in the transportation of products—mostly dates and date products—from Iraq to the United States. Rakowitz was highlighting the practice of US limits on importing goods from Iraq since the 1990 Gulf War and the ways in which Iraqi date exporters got around those restrictions. According to



Johnson, Rakowitz also offered free shipping of any goods to Iraq (633). The store became not only a site for the transaction of goods for cash, but also a space for the exchange of war stories between Rakowitz and the Iraqi immigrants who became the store’s customers. Rakowitz’s family is of Iraqi-Jewish descent, and by siting this store in a New York neighborhood of Arab immigrants during the US war in Iraq, the artist set up an intersection of art, politics and commerce.

An interview with Weizman, a London-based Israeli architectural theorist, focuses on a number of projects including his collaboration with the NGO B’Tselem. The work involved the creation of maps that could be used by the Palestinian Authority or Palestinian NGOs to track and potentially contest the growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. While these maps were undoubtedly useful, Weizman was stunned to discover that they were also coopted by the Israeli authorities planning the building of the infamous separation barrier.

In a separate essay, Hilal, Petti, and Weizman talk about their project DAAR—Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency. In one case study they look at P’sagot/Jabel

Tawil, a settlement in the Jerusalem and Ramallah hills of seventeen hundred religious Jews recently emigrated from Russia and France, as a way to imagine what a postcolonial future might look like. They ask: “Could controlled material decay become a process of place making? How can destruction become a design process that may lead to new uses?” (458). These questions were initially prompted by the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. At that time, the question arose whether or not the Israelis would leave the settlements intact and, if they did, what they could be used for. In the end, the Israeli military destroyed all settlement architecture left behind, but it prompted the question of what would happen if there ever were a withdrawal from the West Bank. *Sensible Politics* also includes essays by Eduardo Cadava, Jaleh Mansoor, Roger Hallas, Benjamin J. Young, Huma Yusuf, Hugh Raffles, Negar Azimi, Kendall Thomas, Jonathan Crary, McLagan, Kirsten Johnson, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, Felicity D. Scott, Andrew Herscher, McKee, Sam Gregory, Faye Ginsburg, Leshu Torchin, and Charles Zerner, and an interview of Pamela Yates by Barbara Abrash and McLagan.

Azoulay’s book *Civil Imagination* also rejects the split between aesthetics and politics. Through an analysis of photography, she looks at the limits of the category of the political and tries to clear space for a new category—the civil. Her fundamental point is that “under the conditions of regime-made disaster . . . the first step in the evolution of civil discourse lies in the act of refusing to identify disaster with the population on whom it is afflicted” (2). In other words, the regime, its citizens, and those that it subjugates are all part of the same disaster. This is a condition that requires a civil and political imagination, held not by one individual but between citizens.

The book is written from the perspective of an Israeli who has been quite active in the Palestinian solidarity movement, so much so that she was denied tenure at Bar Ilan University in 2010. As the book demonstrates, Azoulay’s work extends the activism of NGOs such as Zochrot, the Israel Committee Against Housing Demolitions, Breaking the Silence, and B’Tselem. So this argument should not imply any kind of equivalence between the plight of Palestinians and Israelis. Rather, it extends the disaster that has been wrought on the Palestinian people to include Israelis and others so that we as

readers are complicit; thus it upends the tendency to essentialize Palestinian identity in terms of victimhood. We are all victims of this regime-made disaster.

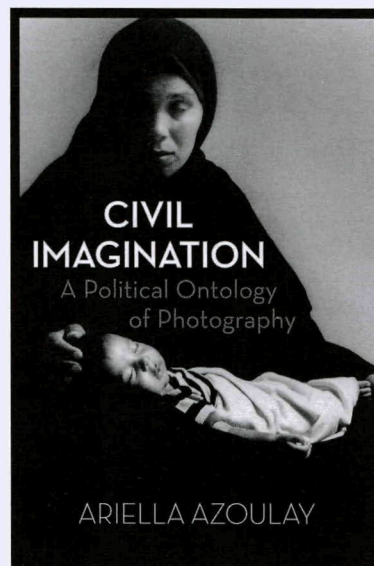
*Civil Imagination* is divided into four sections. The first, based on two exhibitions Azoulay curated, looks at the definition of photography, including questions of authorship, the agency of the photographer, and the photograph and its subjects. The second and longest section examines the conflicting positions of taste that might say “this is too political” or “this is too aesthetic.” The third is a photo essay that analyzes the grammar of housing demolitions. And the fourth proposes the civil uses of photography.

The second section draws on Arendt to examine the questions surrounding both aesthetic and moral judgment. Azoulay begins with two photographs of a Palestinian woman and child by Micha Kirschner—one with a naked, crying toddler and the mother half out of the frame, and the other with the mother gazing at a swaddled, sleeping baby in her lap—and the assertion that they aestheticize the political in a manner that Benjamin famously decried.<sup>6</sup> Arendt declared that theater is the only art about one’s relationship to others,<sup>7</sup> but Azoulay contends that this is also true for photography (82). Photographs like Kirschner’s might seem to aestheticize the politics of their subjects, but they could also be seen as documents of relationships between the photographer and the subject and between the subjects depicted. Azoulay uses Arendt’s own words to back up this claim, quoting her as saying, “Each time we leave the protective four walls of our homes and cross over the threshold into the public world, we enter first, not the political realm of equality but the social sphere” (91).

The position of the photograph as an artwork fundamentally about social relations is amplified in another photograph that Azoulay discusses: it depicts a group of Israeli soldiers eating lunch on the patio of a captured house in 1948. For Azoulay, this photograph casts a civil gaze on an act of looting (117). Citing Keenan, she also suggests that images like this can be used to mobilize shame as a driving force in human rights work (113).

A key to Azoulay’s engagement with Arendt is her transformation of Arendt’s formulation of agency—consisting of work, labor, and action—to a new formulation that consists of gaze, speech, and action. Azoulay critiques Arendt’s use of the gaze in classi-

cally passive terms and seeks to activate the gaze and speech as inherently political and social (101). Azoulay’s assumption of the social nature of the gaze and speech is clearly evident in her collaboration with NGOs for much of the work in the last two chapters. The third chapter, dealing with the destruc-



tion of architecture, was based on an exhibition at Zochrot in Tel Aviv. It also relied on research from the Israel Committee Against Housing Demolitions and photographs taken by the photography collective Activestills. The book ends with discussion of a photograph taken by a member of Breaking the Silence, an organization of Israeli soldiers that distributes photographs and video testimony about their experiences in the Israeli military. The photograph depicts a group of soldiers on patrol who kick a Palestinian family out of their home so that they can relax for a while and watch the World Cup. Azoulay suggests that while this photograph might have been taken as a trophy, its distribution within the context of this activist organization declares “the right of citizens to criminalize the regime that made them criminals” (248).

While these two volumes are not explicitly about the same topic, at certain points they fold into one another seamlessly. Azoulay cites Keenan and Weizman, while many of the ideas proposed by Hilal and Petti, Bishara, or Butler about the commons have a direct relationship with the notion of the civil contract that Azoulay proposes. Both books give us new tools to further clarify a complex and

all-too-often murky discussion of aesthetics and politics. The most novel contribution of the two volumes is the way in which they reconceive the role of the public in the relationship between activism and cultural practices.

Petti, Hilal, and Weizman propose the common as a “relation between people and things that is not mediated by the state” (465). This approach avoids the problems in discussing the privatization of public land or the governmental incursion on private property. They propose that the Palestinian villages and cities destroyed in 1948 and the camps that were built to house their dispossessed people are an example of a common. Petti and Hilal have been working on a new project, *Campus in Camps*, which sets up a university in a Palestinian refugee camp and takes as its subject an analysis of potential sites of the common. The project proposes the camp, like the photograph, as a site for civil imagination, not just as a record of the past but as a constructive site for a very present social relation.

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 303.

2. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

3. See Thomas Keenan’s lecture at the Tate Modern conference *Sovereignty and Bare Life*, November 29, 2008, part of the series *Zones of Conflict: Rethinking Contemporary Art during Global Crisis*, recording at [www.ucl.ac.uk/zones\\_of\\_conflict/bare\\_life](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/zones_of_conflict/bare_life), as of June 28, 2013; Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011); and Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

4. The legacy of ACT UP is also addressed by Ann Cvetkovich in *Sensible Politics*, who interviews Jean Carlomusto, an AIDS activist and mediamaker.

5. See Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 51–84.

6. See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).

7. Indeed, this is Shannon Jackson’s claim about the relationship between theater and social practice in *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

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