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# **Patterns of Civil Imagination: drawing the unshowable photographs**

**Jean Boyd**

## **Abstract**

Seeking out the patterns of constituent violence, in order that these patterns might be understood and reordered, lies at the heart of Ariella Azoulay's discursive project, the 'Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation' (2012).

The photographs in question capture scenes from the mass movement of Palestinians after the establishment of the state of Israel. In response to archival restrictions, she enacts an apparently simple gesture, that of making drawings of these 'unshowable' photographs. The resulting works operate to reposition the viewer as an active interpreter, suggesting a practice that is both aesthetic and political. These terms are examined for their ability to cast light on Azoulay's key concepts of civil imagination and the civic gaze.

Her critique of the archive is also considered, particularly archival mechanisms for setting and repeating divisive, diachronic patterns whose impacts are not contained in the past but continue to work on the present. However the archive can also be a generative source of potential histories, occluded patterns of life and possibilities that were suppressed or overlooked.

Azoulay approaches photography as an event that is ongoing and multiple, renewed in each encounter with a viewer. The drawings, as a form of graphic witnessing, intensifies the ethical relation to the image. I will argue that the act of drawing seeks to bind rather than separate, bringing us in to a relation with the image that the photograph could not. From here it is possible to glimpse the emergence of a civil imaginary that resists familiar aesthetic and political categories, one that obliges viewers to reconsider their agency as citizens. Recognising this, new patterns of being-with others may become possible.

## **Keywords**

archive  
civil imagination  
dissensus  
drawing  
patterns  
photography  
politics  
potential history

## **Patterns of Civil Imagination: drawing the unshowable photographs.**

At first sight Ariella Azoulay's 'Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation' (2012) would seem to enact a simple, if disobedient gesture: in response to the archive's insistence that its photographs be accompanied by approved texts, Azoulay made drawings instead, which could then be used freely within her discursive work. But this would be to miss the full range of this act as dissensus, offering a strategy of citizenship that seeks out the patterns of constituent violence based upon division, enabling new patterns of being-with others to be imagined: 'I therefore prefer to conceptualize my act of tracing the event of photography as the realization of a civil right, not as an act of disobedience.' (Azoulay, Flanders 2012:17).

This study seeks to trace these patterns; to approach the archive as a structure that can both uphold and redraw these patterns politically and diachronically. To utilise the generative resources of the archive requires interpretive effort, Azoulay warns, and a mode of ethical attentiveness she defines as the civic gaze (2015:121). The Unshowable Photographs afford us insight into these concepts, demonstrating how drawing's relationship to its viewer and its subject model a form of civic gaze. From here it is possible to glimpse the emergence of a civil imaginary that resists familiar aesthetic and political categories, one that obliges the viewer to reconsider their agency as a citizen.

The photographs in question lie in the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and were taken by their representatives between 1948 and 1950 during the partition of territories that founded the state of Israel. They show scenes from the resulting mass movement of Palestinian people from 'Jewish' to 'Arab zones': not sensational images of atrocity or violence, but the unfolding of 'disaster' that Palestinians refer to as Nakba. Nor are they inaccessible, indeed they are now viewable online. However it is still imperative that they are accompanied by 'proper citation' including their 'caption', and that the 'neutral, impartial' nature of their source is never compromised. (ICRC 2018) Under conditions that position the viewer as one who cannot contest the archival framework, nor respond to the images other than as documents of the past (Azoulay, 2012:5) the images were rendered 'unshowable.' Azoulay found the archival terminology particularly problematic: 'Jewish zone' and 'repatriation' sound benign but belie violence. Repatriation implies rightful return of people to place, and place to people, on *both sides* of a divide. More profoundly, the terms establish an originary narrative of spatial and ethnic separation, a normative assumption of conflict, and occlusion of shared histories and previously civil arrangements of daily life.

In response Azoulay chose twenty five photographs and made drawings of each. Personal reflections and contextual information were collated with the archival referencing into a critical assemblage of knowledge claims, actions and discursive positions which treat the viewer as an engaged interpreter. To draw is to doubt what is seen, to labour to see and to leave traces of this effort: a drawing must be built from marks and erasures, each judged and accumulated through time. Drawing reminds us that meaning is not given but must be sought: the project suggests a practice that is both aesthetic and political.

### **Art and Politics: redrawing coordinates**

Art can make visible 'the possible as an aesthetic category' state Deleuze and Guattari, suggesting it must also be a political category (1994:177). Defining how concepts – planes of thought – could be ordered from chaos, they point to three approaches: philosophy, science and art. Concepts set patterns that cut across chaotic variability and give consistency, thus ordering

reality. 'A concept is therefore a chaotic state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought.'(1994:111). Art makes new concepts available through its ordering of percepts and affects, allowing us to see and respond in new ways.

The Unshowable Photographs, refigured as drawings, release and make possible new perceptions. They are transpositions: they move across visual registers, from camera to hand, from within to without the archive. We read the image and this action in the marks.

The drawing is a vector that allows us to see not just the transposed image but the act of its repositioning: it points back to its photographic coordinates whilst realigning observer and observed. We are called to witness both the people depicted and their depiction as embodiment of a category.

The interplay of aesthetics and politics receives much critical attention, such as Groys (2010, 2013), Mouffe (2013) and notably Rancière (2013, 2015). Azoulay finds limitations in his understanding of the political: for her it is in all shared human life (2015:108). Rancière suggests that the political occurs when the 'distribution of the sensible', the perceptual realm sensed and understood, is disrupted (Rancière 2015:44). The distributed pattern acknowledges no empty or unaccounted-for space. It partitions, assigns roles, defines the tolerable, excludes by not-seeing; this organising pattern polices consensus.

In contrast the political configures its own space through dissensus: it seeks gaps in representation, a negative pattern of what and whose traces were not previously visible. Dissensus is not disagreement, but the revelation of the world as shared. Consensus reveals itself only when unsettled, what was unsayable becomes sayable, unseen seen. Art is thus not political because of content or intent, but only in effect: destabilising the role of the viewer, refusing to transmit an imposed message.

Drawing, as a hand-made transposition, copies imperfectly. It can reorder the visible, render some detail uncertain whilst magnifying the overlooked; in these dissensual practices politics and aesthetics overlap.

Drawing is not so much a medium as an inscription of thought in time: drawing records, preserves, prepares and imagines. Drawing is temporal in the sense that it is both retention and protention, it looks backwards and forwards. Likewise, as we have begun to see in the drawings of Unshowable Photographs, the archive can operate across time, as both a policing and a political force, projecting and disrupting, preserving and imagining.

### **Diachronic patterns of the Archive**

In her examination of photography's role in contemporary states of exception, Azoulay has focused on sources of Israeli and Palestinian history and searched them for the patterns of violence that record and sustain ongoing crisis. Placing photography as a junction of multiple individual and external relations, she theorises its event as a network of interactions that are durational and ongoing, at each viewing initiating a new ethical and political bond (2008). Refusing photography as a fixed moment or location, she traces these patterns back, across and forwards through time, allowing diachronic readings of both photography and archival sources.

The drawings resist the 'iconisation' of their photographic sources as fixed meaning. A photograph easily succumbs to this pointing gesture, that it is an image of 'this, there'. This protocol of identification allows not only the photograph's filing, or retrieval, but the obscuring of that act of labelling, reiterated in every future search.

Archival patterns structure classification and retrieval, and so their temporal architecture. Artefacts from the past are selected (or rejected) for preservation on behalf of the future: as promises to that future, not just to the past (Derrida 1995:24). The archive anticipates the one

who will search and organises itself so present understandings of the past remains legible. The archive cannot be chaotic. Even if regarded as an assemblage, which may be added to or subtracted from, reordered or reclassified, nevertheless structural patterns must always order it and its access. From metadata and keywords, through all levels of public accessibility, reproduction and use, these patterns are replicated. Keywords 'repatriation', 'Palestine', '1949' link all images labelled as such, allowing this narrative pattern to be retrieved. 'Deportation' is unavailable as a search word, it is unshowable as its pattern cannot be recognised.

The act of drawing intervenes. The searcher is displaced by witnesses, the one who draws and those who will view the drawings. If the unshowable photographs are exemplars of iconic patterns, Azoulay's drawings perform an 'iconoclastic' function. They re-activate the image and begin again as questions. Detail is scant, a few lines, darker marks making patches of shadow, unmarked paper renders sun falling on bodies (fig.4). A child's hands clasped to make a chain, a point of detail. The women have only what they can carry. In retracing this scene the iconic loosens its hold: 'liberation and repatriation' are not *in* the image.

The resolution of conflict, restoration of order suggested in these terms, become suspect: the act of drawing moves the image beyond the reach of the archive and hands it to us. How might we respond?

The archive has been widely theorised as an expression of power, rather than knowledge. Derrida (1995) identifies the *arkhē* as commencement and command: history and law. The archive shelters the *arkhē*, its patterns concealed; it is a substrate for the expression of archontic power. This power consigns, chooses what is reserved, but also *consigns* through the gathering together of signs, in a 'system or synchrony in which all elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration.' (1995:3). Commenting on Unshowable Photographs, Azoulay remarks '[t]he pattern I refer to is of completing the ethnic separation of the Arab and Jewish populations' (2012:14) but it is also more than this: it is the *arkhē* of the state of Israel, articulated through the photographic event. It does not wish to govern its Palestinian majority so expels, or as in the ICRC archive, repatriates them. Constituent violence, as discussed by Benjamin ([1921]1986) in the emergence of the nation state, becomes the Law. The state of emergency declared in May 1948 is in its seventieth year, echoing Benjamin's 1940 assessment that "'the state of emergency" is not the exception but the rule.' ([1940]1988:257)

A founding gesture, the *arkhē* commands commencement of the originary narrative of two 'sides', as in the photographic captions. The pattern is set. It can be scaled, repeated across bodies and spaces, ordering events and affects along its lines from the past into the future. Azoulay cautions:

Archive documents are not items of a completed past, but rather active elements in a present and must be properly and carefully handled, precisely because they are the means by which destruction might continue to be wrought, just as they might enable some restitution of that which continues to exist as present, in the present.

(n.d)

Challenging the archive challenges the futures it promised. Derrida warns that 'one associates the archive, as naturally one is always tempted to do, with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future which is at issue here, and the archive as an irreducible experience of the future.' (1995:45). New possibilities of archival production or access 'must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations.' (1995:18). Indeed this is at stake in every area of our political and private lives. We now understand the circulation and interpretation of images as an unbounded, ongoing task, countering and far exceeding the

command of stable signification. We expect access, we are wary of official interpretations. Archive fever - the desire to find what lies beyond available artefacts – acts to undo the archive by pointing to its lack and its own historicity. It drives the search for the missing document, the account unaccounted for, the pattern not yet visible. The drawings offer such revelations, and archive fever might yet fuel our civil imagination.

The archive is a rich seam, mined for its latent potential by many, from artists to theorists of postcolonialism. Their research illuminates pasts, resonates in the present and makes available futures: a productive oscillation between actual and virtual. The potential of this has been given nuanced thought by Azoulay, and others such as Povinelli, seeking to enable the postcolonial archive as a set of spatial, temporal and subjective possibilities; ‘a generative matrix in which archival forms, practices, and artifacts carry out their routine ideological labor of constituting subjects who can be summoned in the name of a public or a people’ and ‘in which a social otherwise can endure and thus change existing formations of power’ (Povinelli 2016:150). In Azoulay’s term, a civic practice, founded on the ability to question the constituency of citizenship. The archive as productive, creative and oriented towards the future; within it lie ‘potential histories’, pasts that were forestalled (2013), that may have the power to contest patterns of constituent violence.

To search for potential histories is not to re-label, replace one with another or tell subaltern histories. It is to see how patterns of division continue work on the present and naturalise the distribution of the sensible, ‘as if they were distinctions drawn directly from sense data and not the result of constituent violence whose law should be suspended.’(2013:551). To ‘not see’ the patterns that afford citizenship to some and withhold it from others means that these patterns will be repeated. By looking for possibilities whose traces can still found, the pattern might be broken and alternate futures imagined: choices that were dismissed, not tolerated, overlooked or erased. It is ‘an effort to approach a discursive or archival point zero from which one could begin to see that which could not have been seen.’(2013:551) It is to trace out the patterns of the possible:

Potential history, then, is at one and the same time an effort to create new conditions both for the appearance of things and for our appearance as its narrators, as the ones who can – at any given moment – intervene in the order of things that constituent violence has created as their natural order. I call this move - history that exposes past potential and the potential created by this exposure.  
(2013:565)

Here we start to see the full opportunities that Azoulay’s work affords us: to use the archive as a generative source, to use the complex event of photography, to use potential history to redistribute the sensible, to use all these as creative and active forces of civil imagination. The drawings, as a form of graphic witnessing, set about assembling these forces in an encounter with a viewer that is direct, full of care and ethical urgency.

### **Patterns of dissensus**

As Azoulay reminds us, photography is always an event between people. It implies an ethical relation: however, participants may have unequal power, a pattern of inequality which determines what is included and excluded within the frame, and in turn how the meaning, uses of and access to the image is framed. These patterns leave traces which are ongoing, legible in the image, and it is these traces that can be detected and responded to by an alert and civic

gaze: one that sees itself addressed by another, in a shared and civil space, and is called to respond.

But of course the Unshowable Photographs come to us as *drawings*. Thus to treat them merely as proxies of photographs is to miss what may be amplified, not diminished, by their specific traces and mode of address. Drawing photographs enacts a strategic re-presentation, mediating between source, transcription and a new inter-subjective encounter with a viewer that now carries and exceeds that photographic source. In turn, the viewer is alerted to the drawing's multiple registers and temporalities. The ephemeral drawings of Barbara Walker are exemplary here. The concept of the graphic witness also seems pertinent: it focuses attention on the act of watching, evidencing, testifying, interpreting, and the responsibilities of these acts, ethically and politically, for both witness and viewer. Apparent in the work of artists such as Nidhal Chamekh and Joy Gerrard, we might say the graphic witness calls on our civic gaze.

To draw the images then, is to act as witness to the event of photography, in all its complexity, and provide testimony. It is also to act as witness to the patterns of inequality contained therein and to intervene in 'unravelling and re-composing' (Azoulay:n.d) the archive.

The process of drawing enacts a slow transferral of viewpoint, from the monocular camera lens and scopic regime of the photograph's context. The instant of the camera's shutter is suspended, dilated and opened into a duration of thought, attention, mark-making, and movement of the hand. The decisive moment opens onto a series of decisions: which detail to attend to, what to bring to light, where to stop. Drawing traces its own process and is itself an act of memory: Derrida comments on how the making of each mark requires carrying the memory of the thing imaged from the eye to the mind's eye and then to the hand's gesture (1993:48). This gap, this 'blink of the eye' that marks vision and its memory, recalls the camera shutter. But the carrying of that memory, responsibility for its care, is borne by the human gaze, by an attentive subject, and its trace offered to the gaze of another.

To draw is to search the image and through the gesture of the mark to find another relation to those imaged: thus the drawing addresses us in ways that the photograph cannot.

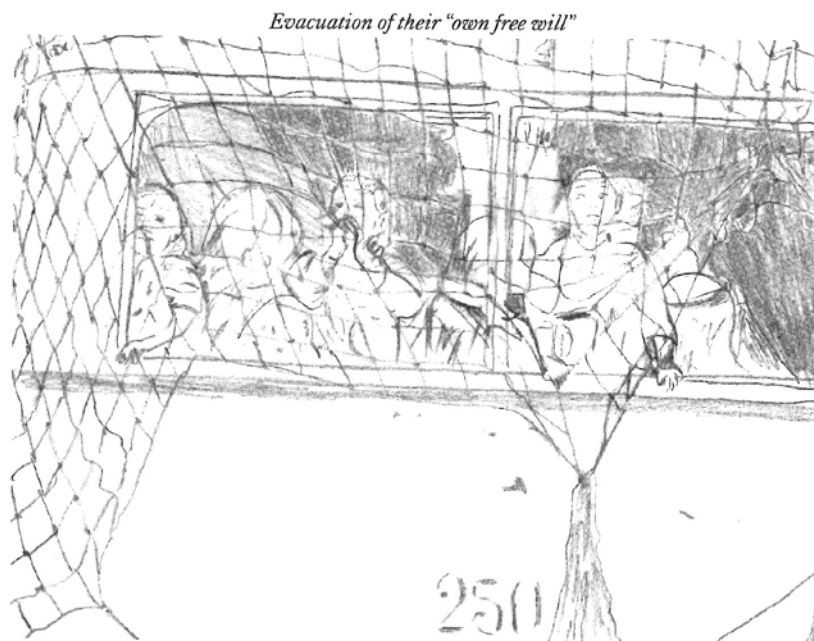
The viewer moves between the drawing and the unseen image to which it refers, its archival labelling, the contextual information and Azoulay's personal commentary. We too have become witnesses of the patterns, the distribution of the sensible, as still inherent in the present and not confined to the archived, photographed event.

This is the dissensual strategy of the drawings: not to just reorder archival labelling but to reorder patterns of civil imagination, using the archived moment when those patterns of division were set. Drawing, the act of tracing, seeks to bind rather than separate, encouraging us to understand citizenship as 'an obligation to others to struggle against injuries inflicted on those others, citizen and non-citizen alike – others who are governed along with the spectator.' (Azoulay 2008:14) This obligation draws us into a civil space of shared responsibility: 'The tracing of the photographed persons enables me to reconstruct violence as a bond of sorts rather than of separation. Once we recognize the bond, we are called upon to transform its nature.' (Azoulay, Flanders 2012:18)

Here lies the true force of these modest drawings, to encourage our viewing as a form of agency, of civil intention, one capable of redrawing the patterns of being-together.

## **Acknowledgements**

My thanks to Ariella Azoulay for permission to reproduce images from *Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation*.



The women sitting in the bus turn their backs to the exterior that has rejected them, and the children, like little angels of history, have their eyes and mouths wide open and their wings outstretched. Where we see a chain of agents, foreigners and internationals, fighters and photographers, the children see one single catastrophe that everyone around them is bringing about. So many people observed these expulsions—the many bus drivers who transported them, the Jewish inhabitants of Kfar Yona who filled the women's water bottles, the internationals who assisted the Israeli forces—without realizing they were seeing people actually being deported. At least this is what may be learned from

their reports in the Red Cross bulletins or from the local daily press.

*What maintained this dissonance between what the photographers, the archivist who classified the images, and others spectators saw and how they conceptualized it? Do the captions produce the dissonance between "children" and "inmates" consciously and intentionally? Did their author wish to express in this way an objection to the classification and selection of humans in ways that sealed their fate? Or does this indicate an automatic acceptance of the official jargon of the new regime that through such dissonances managed to blur the fact Palestinians were treated as transferable?*

*Enfants à bord d'un autobus conduisant les internés civils à Kfar Yona le jour du rapatriement. 1949.*

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Figure 1: Ariella Azoulay (2012). Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation, (Evacuation of their own 'free will'). © Ariella Azoulay, Fillip Editions.

*Evacuation from a "Jewish zone" to an "Arab zone"*



The handsome houses seen in the background had already been evacuated by their inhabitants in July. Between that time and their assembly this morning, at the square, to await deportation, they lived in improvised shelters. Ramleh as they knew it will never be the same again. First it was almost entirely emptied of its inhabitants and became a ghost town, and then it was populated by Jews. The few Arabs who remained disrupted its ethnic "cleanliness" to such an extent that they had to be deported as well. Had the photographer stepped back a little with his camera, one could more definitely establish whether the deportees that morning numbered 300, 400, or perhaps 800.

How many persons were deported on November 23, 1948? And why has nothing of this event remained in the written archive? Is it possible that for sixty-two years it has not been investigated or at least mentioned in the deportation chronicles? How could the separation between areas and populations—Jews and Arabs, respectively—have possibly become a "fact of nature" in such a short time? Is this indeed the one and only way to describe reality—the division of human beings according to ethnic categories, separating them from one another for the sake of neat archive drawers in the world order shaped along two world wars? Where were those just men of Sodom when they should have cried

out the cry of citizenship that is not conditioned by nationality? Should they not have mourned the trampling of the right to residency?

*Ramleh. Transfert de civils arabes sous les auspices du CICR. En attendant l'arrivée du convoi. 1948.*

*V-P-PS-N-00070-33A*

Figure 2: Ariella Azoulay (2012). *Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation, (Evacuation from a 'Jewish zone' to an 'Arab zone', Transfer)*. © Ariella Azoulay, Fillip Editions.

*Evacuation from a "Jewish zone" to an "Arab zone"*



Save for a car or two of this type, the only vehicles allowed here are military buses or Red Cross lorries. In order to keep them "out of harm's way"—the deportation in itself is not likely to be defined as "harm"—these vehicles too will join the convoy only after a white flag with the Red Cross is tied on. These are the last hours of the beautiful neighbourhood seen in the background. Ramle would never again be the same.

*When did Ramle begin to be called a "Jewish zone"? Did the Red Cross officials not know that Ramle was a flourishing Arab town, or did the neutrality in which the organization takes such pride oblige it to accept as a*

*matter of course the way one side imposed partition upon the land and its people? And the Jewish soldiers—what did they tell their families as they returned home that evening, or several days later? Did they say there had been a deportation, that they themselves had carried it out? Or perhaps they talked about the way in which they helped Arabs who happened into the "Jewish zone" find their place again in the "Arab zone," among other Arabs like them? And how quickly did they forget? Was the black car sent especially to collect the notables to safety? And, come to think of it, how was inequality established vis-à-vis the deportation?*

*Ramleh. Préparation du convoi de civils arabes transférés de Ramleh en zone juive vers Ramallah en zone arabe en passant par Latroun. 1948.*

*V-P-PS-N-00068-26A*

Figure 3: Ariella Azoulay (2012). Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation, (Evacuation from a 'Jewish zone' to an 'Arab zone', Preparation). © Ariella Azoulay, Fillip Editions.

*Evacuation of their "own free will"  
(Tantura–Fureidis–Transjordan)*



Figure 4: Ariella Azoulay (2012). *Unshowable Photographs: Different Ways Not to Say Deportation*, (Evacuation of their own 'free will' Tantura-Fureidis- Transjordan). Detail. © Ariella Azoulay, Fillip Editions.

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