

Around Osnat Bar Or's photo exhibition, *Land*

Bukja

Osnat Bar-Or, Norma Musih, Ariella Azoulay & Manar Zuabi:

An open talk on open living

Ariella Azoulay: Are we on camera? I thought this was to be transliterated, so what's the camera for?

Osnat Bar-Or: I thought, now that you're moving elsewhere, and actually each one of us is summing up a period in life, and starting one too, I simply found it appropriate to film and when we have some more time we'll edit it and think what to do with it. We all look good, actually great, and I thought this is a good moment – we can take the time to think back. Each one of us, whether in relation to another, or independently, did a lot of things. There's a common ground. Tomer has dissuaded me from offering interpretive articles like they do in catalogues. He said to me, let's think about what we want to do here.

Norma Musih: And what did you want to do here?

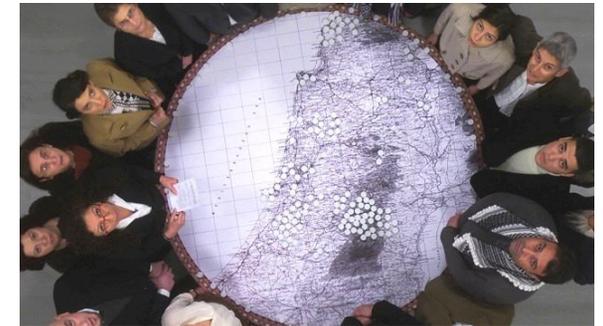
Osnat Bar-Or: What I wanted to do here was to sit and talk with the three of you. I thought we have a common course of action that should be brought out in the open, it is the broad context in which I'm working. I am learning from all of you as I develop my work. It's like when you, Ariela, make your film, *Civil Alliance*, and you call me up and I come over and Manar comes as well. Like the exhibition we had at *Comme Il Faut* in Tel Aviv that we did together. Norma told me I have a tendency for group projects. There's certain loneliness in artwork – I love the places where things interrelate, interwoven. This is the cultural work that interests me, and therefore I view the work you all do as the ground form which my own work sprouts.

Norma Musih: So tell us a bit about these photos.

Osnat Bar-Or: I began working on these images two years ago. I felt there was something in that intimate search that attracted me, and that enabled me to talk about what I want to talk – about our cultural situations,



An open talk on open living. From right to left: Norma Musih, Osnat Bar Or, Manar Zuabi, Ariella Azoulay.
Photograph: Roni Alfandari



In the movie *Civil Alliance* (2012), Arabs and Jews gather around a map of Mandatory Palestine to report a civil race against the clock taking place in Palestine until the founding of the State of Israel in May 1948. Based on archive research, those gathered around the table read out loud the many efforts made between Arabs and Jews before and during 1948, not to let violence takeover their lives, to halt the violence that national and military forces were intent on igniting and negotiated with each other in order to create mutual civil alliance. Photograph: Miki Kratsman and Asi Oren, still from the movie

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in feminist contexts as well as in political and also ecological contexts and such, and the way all those contexts reside very close to the body.

Ariella Azoulay: Give us an example.

Osnat Bar-Or: In the soil photos, for example. I'm dealing with Permaculture, which is sustainable way of life, including self-maintained agricultural systems modeled from natural ecosystems. When compacted and scraped, the soil's fertility is lost. It takes a long time to rehabilitate such soil, to restore all the organic material raked away and inner livelihood inside it – all that is lost for many years. I felt I'm experiencing this compaction, this loss of fertility in the reality around me.

Ariella Azoulay: This compaction, where do you see it?

Osnat Bar-Or: The roller that levels the ground, the bulldozer that compact is – this immense force, I also experience it physically, like a compressor weighing on us, I experience these forces, these destructive, overwhelming forces, I experience them as a woman, as a human being, I experience them as a person in the world – these forces that force us, that scorch our bodies. It's like Manar says – when she sees her veiled Muslim friends it makes her sweat. I feel that we physically experience oppression so often, that when I need to send a child to military service – and I have a son that age – I experience the force of that bulldozer on my body. It's like when you, Ariella, talk about the nationalistic character of your daughter's schoolbook about Israel, you talk about it as a form of rape. I see it in the materials I look at, out of my physical proximity to them. Physical proximity is a type of bodily presence, a sense I'm also trying to convey experientially, sensually, through the photographs. I see this disorientation, this scorching of the flesh – I see abuse, domination, terrible waste, castration. The bundles I photographed, for example: in one case it's construction debris wrapped in a sheet, in another it's the clothes of a dead woman, left near the dumpster.

Manar Zuabi: How do you know it's construction debris inside, did you open it?

Osnat Bar-Or: I opened it and I saw – you wouldn't believe this – walls inside a sheet of cloth. The second bundle was opened after a day or two, because in Pardes Hanna where I live, everyone likes to snoop and find all sorts of stuff, and then all the innards of her life – bras, panties, sheets, pillows and notes pour out.

Ariella Azoulay: This is also pretty amazing.

Osnat Bar-Or: What did you think about it?



The above three photographs: Osnat Bar Or, from the exhibition: *Land*

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Ariella Azoulay: There are two motifs here, maybe more – two procedures, or aspects. One is the aspect of excessive, extreme violence that has to do with the way we live here, with the specificity of our existence here, in the State of Israel – which is what you're trying to show through the soil. But there's also something else here, that has to do with life's frailty. I see it in the mattress, as well as the bundle photos – the violence that has to do with vulnerability, when the intimacy of life is exposed for all to see. I looked at the photos and thought about Hannah Arendt, about the way we always try to make the sheer existence disappear, one of the dimensions of human condition that Arendt calls *labor* – our metabolism with nature, our decomposition, the fact that we are actually a certain kind of nothing. And this is extremely visible in the photos. The violence of existence exposed when not cultured, or the moments when all we have tried to culture breaks out from within it and emerges with all its persistence. This is the dimension of human existence we keep trying to repress. The other dimension, that's really the terrible power of the State of Israel that's present in all aspects of our existence. These two aspects are not completely separate. The denial of the fragility of existence is part of the national project.

Osnat Bar-Or: What do you mean?

Ariella Azoulay: The abrupt transition from Remembrance Day to Independence Day. Not from the Nakba – still completely denied by the state - but from Remembrance Day to Independence Day. The moments you have to erase immediately, to delete, because there is another project that has to be sustained at all cost. The traces are in the way, so you expunge them. The traces in the photos here are also the traces of our existence, in the most banal and daily sense, but also the specificity of this project that demands that we expunge them. We may build beautiful houses and hang pretty pictures on the wall and get up every morning and see to it that we look good, but that's not what's waiting for us at the end of the road, we don't know when the end comes. But that's what waiting for us. Not long ago, I saw this series of powerful images of young women in menstruation, and I asked myself, Where were they all this time? In one of the photos you see a young girl sitting in a cafeteria, reading a book, and her legs are a little spread, and you can see a menstrual stain on her panties. Didn't this happen to us once too? And how come no artist has ever dealt with these stains?

Manar Zuabi: True.

Ariella Azoulay: That impossible panic, that anxiety, that we may have left a menstrual stain behind on the chair.



The above two images: Osnat Bar Or, from the exhibition: *Land*



Ohad Matalon, *Mifgan 'Esh* 2006. Printed in *Sedek: A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba*, Volume 2, January 2008. Zochrot, Parrhesia, Pardes.

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Manar Zuabi: Yes, we actually left our entire private world behind. Maybe we have to start erasing ourselves from here before we abruptly pass away. Gain some control of an uncontrollable moment.

Ariella Azoulay: Exactly. These are stains we don't leave behind only at the end of the road. That is, maybe it's a thought about the end, but it's also a daily, mundane thought. That's why Arendt is so important to me, because it's not just the discourse of the end, that only at the end we would be revealed in our nothingness, but the daily labor of delaying the end, erasing its presence in the present, the constant concealment of this existential dimension. It's something very powerful that reaches out of the images. The vulnerability that juts out of them, which is part of universal human existence, and the way human existence here in the State of Israel is subject to particularly violent control. Therefore I often think that our protesting against the state's ideologies and practices is more than intellectual. It is a truly physical experience. The state's violence invades the way we manage this existential dimension as well. It does not remain on an abstract political level – it also interferes with our bodily existence.

Norma Musih: I also thought about Arendt when I saw the images, and following Tomer's story, where he describes the umbrella and what it's going through until it gets here. He tells her story in the first person, he tells the story of its design and its arrival all the way from China through the people whose hands have touched it. I think he actually describes the two primary dimensions of existence, labor and work. I thought what we could do here is to describe the action, the human condition where political action takes place.

Ariella Azoulay: Your need, Osnat, to open this package, to see what's in it, as if to anticipate what's expecting those bundles anyway. These packages have a tendency of opening by themselves. Your need to see is also the need to show. There's a series of transformations here, something which becomes something else and has lost its shape, while still being the same cloth. There is something interesting in the note that emerges from the bundle here and confers a biography on the cloth, which the photo brings us closer to while keeping it distant from us.

Osnat Bar-Or: It says here, it says here on the note, you'll see it in the enlarged print, "instructions for the interview". Maybe it belonged to somebody who was going to be interviewed and prepared herself, or somebody who took a workshop on how to pass an employment interview.

Ariella Azoulay: In my visual imagination, which is of course structured by what I've seen, these packages have a lot more to do with the Palestinian world, with what the Jews have done to the Palestinians by turning them into people who walk around with improvised bags. The images I have in my head of Jews walking with carpet



Ariella Azoulay, from the visual essay, *Architecture of Destruction*. Printed in *Sedek: A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba*, Volume 3, July 2008. Zochrot, Parrhesia, Pardes. Photograph: Keren Manor/Activstills



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bags in the thirties and forties are in black and white. This crazy colorfulness that's so rich and beautiful, I know it from expulsions of Palestinians – not the 48 expulsion which was shot in black-and-white, but later expulsions, from 67 onwards. That's the point I tried to raise before: The encounter between state violence and the language we have been born into, which has structured what we are able to see and what we do not. This menstrual stain that I've mentioned, it's a type of violence, the violence of human existence that suddenly exposes me despite all we women do to protect ourselves from exposure. It's not violence applied from outside. It's precisely the place where the violence applied is not external like that which the state applies to its subjects, but the violence from within our human existence which is strained, conflicted, between the desire to create something more stable, whole, controlled, and what disintegrates that effort from within.

Manar Zuabi: How do you call it in Hebrew?

Osnat Bar-Or: Bukja.

Manar Zuabi: Bukja.

Osnat Bar-Or: Bukja.

Manar Zuabi: Bukja.

Ariella Azoulay: What?

Manar Zuabi: Bukja.

Ariella Azoulay: What's Bukja?

Manar Zuabi: Bukja is exactly that. In Arabic.

Ariella Azoulay: It's made of cloth?

Manar Zuabi: Yes. Yes.

Osnat Bar-Or: It's that cloth bundle.

Manar Zuabi: The cloth bundle, exactly. In Arabic we call it Bukja. I remember when we talked, Osnat and me, about this photo. It immediately reminds me of the Palestinian deportees. It's really that thing of bundling your entire life in that cloth bag and simply going somewhere that you don't – you don't know where. And I think



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Deporting the women of al-Tantura. The photographer wrote on the contact sheet, "Arab women from Tantura going to Jordan." This caption, in addition to what we learn from it about the limits of Zionist discourse at that time – the use of the neutral verb "to go" and the attribution of the act to the expellees as if they were going on their own initiative - shows how the Arabs were severed and exiled from their home in a manner designed to deny them "native" status. The women deportees in the photograph aren't going from al-Tantura to Trans-Jordan, even if most of them came from al-Tantura and was eventually ended up in Trans-Jordan. Nor was the photograph taken in al-Tantura, which was why the photographer couldn't simply write "Tantura" on the contact sheet, but only what the photograph in fact documents – the uprooting of al-Tantura's residents from their homes. Tantura became the name each of them bore on her back, along with her children and her belongings. Photographer: Beno Rothenberg, Israel State Archive, 18.6.1948. From Ariella Azoulay's *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950*. Pluto Press, 2011 (English translation of *Constituent Violence 1947-1950*, published in Hebrew Resling, 2009)

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another photographer would not have chosen to shoot these things. Your choice is really guided by political and visual awareness.

Norma Musih: I'm very interested in the point of view, because Osnat, you are obviously looking very close down. When I look at these photos I see the action of shifting the glance, pulling your head down and directing the lens. It looks as though you are shooting right under your feet.

Osnat Bar Or: True, in some of the pictures my foot is just at the edge.

Norma Musih: It's a photo that reveals the position very clearly – the place where the photographer is standing and watching down. Osnat's photographic action is one which clearly exposes where you stand – your eyes, your point of view. It is a courageous action, because exposure enables criticism. That is, the photo exposes your position, Osnat, which is very clear and non-evasive. I think this is something that characterizes the work we all do: positioning ourselves clearly in reference to the work, in a way that leaves us exposed.

Manar Zuabi: I'm interested in what you've said, Norma, in how you defined it. The camera can really fly to heaven, and it can capture landscape as well as movement. But really, Osnat chose to look at the ground itself, and follow the traces of life. Industrial life and human life, as well as natural life and the finality of life, death. With you here I see that it is very much related to death, more than to life. Almost everywhere, if we look, particularly at the ground images – it's death, it's finality, it's not flowers.

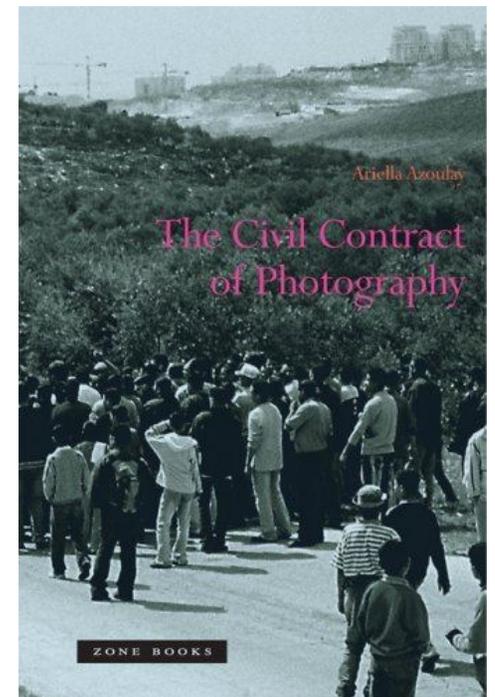
Norma Musih: There is something very meticulous and very delineating in the way you cut your frames.

Manar Zuabi: Microscopic.

Ariella Azoulay: After writing the *Civil Contract of Photography*, Ori Dessau interviewed me about the book. He asked me, Wait a minute, what do you do with landscape photos? They have no people in them, what do you do with them? I think that this photo series makes it painfully evident not only that human intervention is present in any landscape, but also the fact that actually, whenever we capture a landscape frame we are clearly already there. Only those who look at the photo only as what has been registered within the frame can imagine us outside it. It's beyond that – the traces of human presence in the world. Some of these images reveal, through those landscapes we live in, the fact that we have betrayed what we had been entrusted with. It's not just that we can read our human traces out of the world. The world is not ours, it is a kind of trust that we have betrayed our responsibility for. Instead of keeping this trust and endowing it to future generations, we have



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Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. MIT Press, 2008.

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abused it. This abuse is intensely evident in the photos. The world is not ours. Manar, how do you say "trust" in Arabic?

Manar Zuabi: Is it like, amana?

Ariella Azoulay: What's amana?

Manar Zuabi: Amana is like suppose, if I go somewhere far, so I entrust you with an amana, it's like I give you something to look after, I say, Keep it for me until I return.

Until I return

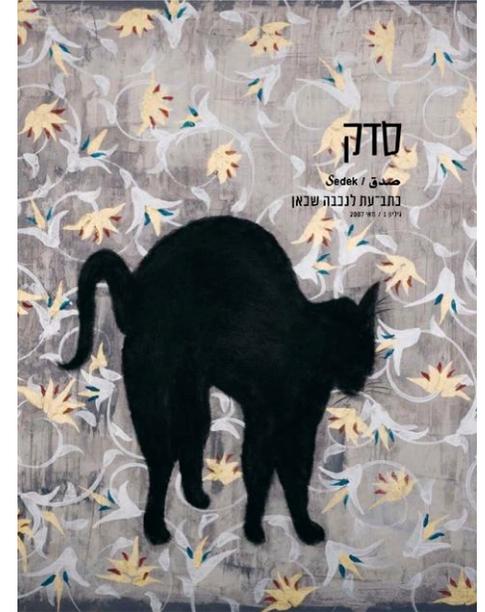
Ariella Azoulay: How did you two meet?

Osnat Bar Or: We met in 'Ar'ara, when Manar was teaching art there. The second time, when we were invited to the Ayam association, for a project on the Palestinian memory of Jaffa, and we both joined the association. And we've been doing lots of things together ever since.

Ariella Azoulay: And how did you two, Norma and Manar, meet each other?

Manar Zuabi: Through *Sedek*, actually.

Osnat Bar Or: Zochrot appealed to artists to take part in a first issue of new journal on creating culture in acknowledgement of the Palestinian Nakba. The appeal was to writers and artists, but we at Parrhesia, that is Ofer Kahana and me mainly – I immediately showed it to Ofer and told him, Ofer, we're doing this project. So we met and talked, and Zochrot and Parrhesia became partners in publishing the journal. Manar also joined Parrhesia and the relationship intensified when we presented in Vienna, even though in Vienna Manar presented her artwork on her own, while we did the graffiti, *Through Language*. Manar and I also work together in Al Bir – a Palestinian women's organization for cultivating culture and community in Wadi 'Ara. Actually, our projects have been closely related for years, touching on one another, merging, separating. And there was that exhibition we did together with you, Ariella, when we did the exhibition in that clothes shop, Comme Il Faut, where we all joined together. But now, Ariella, you're going away. Why don't you tell us a little about that? Are you going for good? Is the Bar-Ilan University chapter over and done?



Sedek (see also above), is a journal and book series which make up a platform for political action, through vision and text, towards acknowledgment of Jewish Israelis in the Palestinian Nakba, The Catastroph of 1948. . On the cover of the first issue of *Sedek*, Farid Abu Shakra, *A Stretching Cat and an Ornament*, 2006.



Through Language is a visual dictionary of Arabic and Hebrew words presented in public space. The project is a response to the process of erasure of the Arabic Language from public life in Israel. *Through Language* was made by Parrhesia members – Jewish and Palestinian artists and designers - in several art exhibitions and cultural events.

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Ariella Azoulay: The Bar-Ilan University chapter is over long ago. They expelled me out of Bar-Ilan. But this place here, I'm not leaving for good. We have four grown up kids here that are not coming with us, and this is my most important anchor here. But yes, we're going to live somewhere else, teach somewhere else and think somewhere else. Do things somewhere else.

Osnat Bar-Or: I want you to elaborate on that "expel" a bit. What, did the Bar-Ilan University explicitly tell you that your political views were inappropriate?

Ariella Azoulay: Did you ever hear anything said explicitly in Israel?

Manar Zuabi: Certainly not, they're always evasive.

Osnat Bar-Or: Without explaining?

Ariella Azoulay: Yes, just like that.

Manar Zuabi: No need to – you actually predicted it.

Ariella Azoulay: Luckily I got a position in a university that's a little bit better than Bar-Ilan. No doubt this means a lot of changes in my life, in our life. There's a lot of pain in that parting, but also a strong sense of liberation. It's hard for me here. It always has been, this sense that we're always being pushed back to square one, that sense that I don't want to go on being that person who's doomed to be here, a second-generation oppressor, the one who entrusts the state with her children and has to struggle daily against the lies the state distributes and tries to imprint on the children's consciousness through the education system. I'm not talking just about the military – I'm talking about the mind theft.

Manar Zuabi: Yes, about the day-to-day at school, the day-to-day in the media and the day-to-day on the streets and everywhere.

Osnat Bar-Or: What you mean Ariella by "mind theft".

Ariella Azoulay: Three generations were rubbed here, and this rubbery never stops. Living in a place where the key bond between people is maintaining the lie, that's mind theft. In the documentary *Home Movie* that I've seen recently, a woman is watching a film in which the inhabitants of Ness Ziona topple down a minaret and telling herself that she feels Ok with it, because it wasn't against the law. Our very existence is being attacked. For years, in that counter-work, I've been focusing on what they did to the Palestinians. I don't think that was the error, but it was completely partial.



Above three images: from the exhibition: *Land*, Osnat Bar Or

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When Norma invited me to talk on the *Towards Return of Palestinian Refugees* conference, I actually realized, the most foundational insight in my work, that everything they did to the Palestinians, they also did to the Jews. Not the same things, but whatever they did to Palestinians, the same act did something to Jews. If we understand it that way, you cannot go on telling the story like we're telling it. You have to realize that what had happened here destroyed an entire culture, not only the Palestinian. The destruction of an entire society, the destruction of potentialities of existence – again, not only Palestinian. True, the Palestinians always pay the higher price; one can't compare what they did to me, to “us” with what they did to “them”. Nevertheless I insist on placing it on a single continuum, insist on claiming it's part of the same thing. Our struggle for the mind is ongoing, and without that counter-struggle, which in most cases does not change the way we live, I would have been a total subject of this place. The struggle is for being a citizen rather than a subject. Not a citizen in the sense of citizenship granted by the state, the one I have and the Palestinians don't, but a citizen in the sense of not accepting the regime's point of view, that point of view which so deeply separates me from those governed together with me.

I don't like that term – mind theft – it's too easy, it's as if the way we're structured not to perceive our existence as existence among equals is in some way external to our being. For years, the struggle of Jews who've been empathetic or sympathetic or sensitive or I don't even know how to call it, to what they've been doing to the Palestinians was based on a fundamental error, the gist of which was the denial of what has been done to themselves.

Osnat Bar-Or: To themselves, you mean to us, to the Jews?

Ariella Azoulay: Yes, “us” Jews. That denial is part of what has been contributing to the endless perpetuation of this differentiation between us and the Palestinians, because if Jewish Israeli political activists would have realized that this regime is actually doing terrible things to them, they would not have needed the Palestinian mediation, wouldn't have needed to say “we're fighting for the Palestinians”. They would have realized that what this regime was doing to them is a continuation of what it was doing to the Palestinians, and then we would have had a joint force of Jews and Palestinians. Such a force had not come into being here for many years, and one of the things which contributed to it was the way people who did see beyond what the regime forced them to see, these very people denied a terribly important dimension of their existence. And that denial, the denial of the present, the denial of existence, has all sorts of aspects, such as the prioritization of struggles. For years we've been hearing, “OK, let's put the feminist struggle aside because we have to struggle against the



Work, Housing, Education, A Through Language work during the 2011 Israel tent protest. Photographs: Osnat Bar Or.

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occupation". Or, "Let's leave 48 aside because that's a done deal. The Palestinians across the Green Line are much worse off".

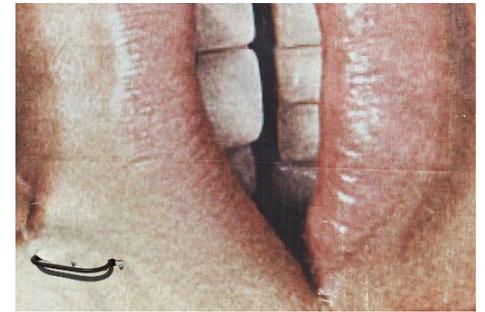
Manar Zuabi: And Ariella, there was another common phenomenon, last summer, during the Israeli Tent Protest. How they attempted social protest devoid of political protest. How can you, it's like being a man or a woman without being human, no? It's political, it's social, it's all together. And the truth is I very much agree with you, Ariella. From the other side, as a Palestinian who's been wronged in a very concrete sense, both personally as a Palestinian living inside Israel and through my family who stayed here and suffered land appropriation and life under military rule. And also through my partner who's a refugee – a deportee. His parents are refugees from 'Ein Hawd. The instantly became refugees.

So it took me some time to realize that this was a problem that is relevant to Jews as well as Palestinians, because the Palestinians are the chief victims of this persecution, that it goes beyond that, that this is an ideological problem between groups of people who think and act differently, rather than between ethnic and/or national and/or religious groups. Me and groups of people like you and people around me, we think differently about the conflict and also dream of a different world. In my search for sociopolitical activist movements in the world, I've seen that they're suffering from what I and all of us suffer – from the System, the system which is a mindset, with an agenda oppressing thought and difference, a system which oppresses women, the underprivileged, Arabs, African asylum seekers and left-wing Americans who protested against the Patriot Act after 9/11. In fact, there were many North Americans who worked in universities and were then thrown out and subjected to threats. So I very much agree what you said, that as soon as we really start thinking differently and exclude ourselves from that national group, it begins to look completely different. I think that the Jewish society in Israel is particularly victimized by the system.

Ariella Azoulay: It is much more twisted.

Manar Zuabi: Yes, exactly. Because for the Arabs, for instance, it's very easy to differentiate between "my body" and "the occupier's body", while the Jew is part of the state, he wants to call himself an Israeli. I adamantly refuse to call myself an Israeli, because I associate the word "Israeli" with the essence of Israel as an occupier state – it has occupied me, it has disenfranchised me. And I cannot – even if I have an Israeli ID, I cannot but wonder, how does a Jew define himself in Israel?

Ariella Azoulay: How does he do it to himself?



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Manar Zuabi: How does he feel at ease, like, with all that? I suppose, I don't know, I was never in a situation where I'm a Palestinian and I have a state which commits atrocities.

Ariella Azoulay: True. If only for that reason we must pray that there wouldn't be another nation-state and that we will manage to turn this state into a civilian state. Not the State of Israel, a civilian state.

Norma Musih: You know, Ariella, you remember that phone call when you told me, The word is subjects. We're actually all subjects". And this was very important for me to realize. At *Zochrot* we used to be very preoccupied with that question, that is, where do we Jews take the right to deal with the Nakba? We want to talk about the Nakba, or invoke the Nakba, do something with the Nakba – by what right? This understanding, that the Nakba is also something that happened to us, part of our history and our present – that we were also there, on the other side, we were not the expelled but the expellers. And it's part of our history, part of us, to this day. This insight has been very facilitative of *Zochrot*, that is, it enabled us all to do *Zochrot* without feeling guilty and without maintaining that separation – this is ours, this is theirs.

Ariella Azoulay: I think what happened with *Zochrot* set exciting processes in motion. I view *Zochrot* as one of the most important moments within this option of thinking differently in this place. First, I think that invoking the Nakba – for a very wide community of people on the left, who knew and didn't know about the deportation, we knew a thing or two about 48, but actually we knew nothing. And I think that even you – when you started *Zochrot* – still knew nothing, but you created the framework from which there was no way back.

Norma Musih: No.

Ariella Azoulay: We simply knew nothing. No, this "we knew nothing" is shocking. No, Manar, you're laughing, but I do not like to say it, the Palestinians knew nothing either.

Manar Zuabi: That's not true. We did know.

Ariella Azoulay: Because those who remained here after the expulsion never talked about it, or hardly talked about it, and just like Ben Gurion wanted, the generation that grew here knew very little. It didn't grow of its own – the total silencing in the public sphere and in the education system and the commissioned literature laid the ground for it. I remember when I facilitated groups in the *Constitutive Violence* exhibition at *Zochrot* two groups of Palestinian citizens came – one group of just girls and one mixed group. They knew nothing. They knew even less than the Jews. They came to me and said, Wow! We've got to learn, we've got to know. We'll go



From a Zochrot tour to Haifa, April 2011.
Photograph: Mati Milstein.



From the opening evening of Ariella Azoulay's exhibition *Constituent Violence, 1947-1950*, Zochrot 18.3.2009. Photograph, Haim Deuelle Luski



Zochrot tour to Alghubayyat, March 2010.
Alghubayyat is a Palestinian village destroyed by Israel in 1948, the Palestinian Nakba.
Photograph: Osnat Bar Or

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back home, we'll talk to our parents. They've created a situation here that we knew nothing. Left, right, Palestinians, Jews – we knew nothing.

Now even the Palestinians, those who knew what's been done to them, couldn't go and learn more than that, because they weren't allowed to study it, to ask questions about it, to access archives. Naturally, they could know about personal experiences, but we don't know history just from a personal experiences. For very many years, the conditions for studying the history of 48 were damaged. Zochrot was the turning point. It shook us all. *Zochrot* created the conditions for starting to ask questions about 48. It was shocking for a pretty large community, albeit small of course in relation to the entire country.

Ever since the advent of *Zochrot* I'm taken by the way language is being rewritten. For me, the effort is, above all, in the language. When I started working on *Constitutive Violence* I had one clear intuition: I'm not writing a book about the Nakba, I'm not making an exhibition about the Nakba. The question was how *not* to curate an exhibition about the "Nakba" is if it were "their" narrative. I wanted to try to think the Nakba not as the Palestinian story or disaster, but as a disaster that's also ours, because either we or our parents made it happen and were also its victims. The question was how not to stumble into competing narratives – Independence for us and Nakba for them. If we accept that dichotomy we accept that all the Jews wished for that "independence". That's where the questions began – maybe the Jews-Arabs dichotomy has nothing to do with Independence-Nakba? I felt I had to suspend the Nakba concept in order to try and see where a different boundary stretches. I remember that one of my most important insights in *Constitutive Violence* was that the boundary separated those who viewed what had happened as a disaster and those who did not.

This regime we're living in is structured on that distinction. Thus, without total abolishment of that regime, no civilian existence will be possible. Because this regime subverts our citizenship. Paradoxically, this leads me to what Manar said earlier, about the difference between Jewish and Palestinian society. I think that Palestinian society – I'm talking now of the Palestinian society within the borders of the State of Israel – is significantly more civilian than the Jewish, so-called "Israeli" society, because they have not been recruited. Not just to the military, not recruited to maintain this project called the State of Israel and the Israeli Regime.

Manar Zuabi: Precisely. For us, to a certain extent, with all the difficulty, it is easy to separate, again, between me and the state. I'm simply not part of it.



al-Quds/Jerusalem. A few days after this part of Jerusalem had been captured, the words "Jewish shop" were written on stores belonging to Arabs. The original shop sign still hangs above the store window as a reminder that until a few days ago it had been an Arab florist shop. Now a pleasant salesgirl speaking Hebrew stands at the store's entrance, her customer inspecting the kitchen utensils on display. In one of the countless official documents produced by the office of the Custodian of Absentee Property on which "abandoned property" was recorded, he complained that although tens of thousands of buildings had been abandoned, many kinds of articles that were easily looted never arrived at his warehouse because they were small enough, or light enough, to be carried off by hand. The Custodian noted in particular that kitchen utensils were among the missing items. Photographer: Fred Chesnik, IDF and Defense Archive, no date.

From Ariella Azoulay's *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950*. Pluto Press, 2011.

Confronting the regime

Norma Musih: I'd like to go back to talking about the images. I feel it is easier for us to talk about images separately and then talk about *Zochrot* or about our insights or about the Return separately. And I'd like to piece those two conversations back together, because I feel we're always straddling those two paths. Why do we really need images to talk about all those things? Why are images so important in your work too, Ariella?

Ariella Azoulay: I cannot ask that question - Images are my starting point. I don't ask why they're so important. It's self-evident for me to start with images. After that I always have to explain why the texts are important. I can't think without images.

Norma Musih: Alright, you can take the images, look at them and write a text. The images, I feel there's something here that needs to be put into words.

Ariella Azoulay: For years, when for example I was dealing with images from 67, then the tendency really was to show what they did to "them", to the Palestinians. But for many years now, through the understanding of what I called the *Civil Contract of Photography*, I'm looking at occupation images and I see what's been done to the Palestinian, but I also see what the Jews do. I can't see just one side of that story. Now, this for instance is an insight I would not have gained without the images. It's not that one day I came up with a theory of photography that says that the photographed and the photographers and the spectators are part of the story. Without constantly working with the images, I could not have perceived that.

I can illustrate this through this image here. After the very long negotiation over the book's title, I received the cover proposal from the graphic artist – the cover of *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-50*. My first reaction was that I didn't like it much. Not because I didn't like the image, but I felt that an outside viewer chooses the refugee cliché. Since I knew never to respond immediately with images, I put the draft aside and waited. Images sit on my desk for a very long time until I get them, really get them, through the body, through the watching. And so I pinned that cover above my desk and after several days I saw how brilliant it was. Under the title *From Palestine to Israel*, in this photo the Palestinians aren't deported. They're returning, they're returning from the virtual, historical Palestine back to Israel. Suddenly I saw in this juxtaposition of the title and the image that potential history I keep talking about.



From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950.
Pluto Press, 2011.

Around Osnat Bar Or's photo exhibition, *Land*

In fact, what we have here is not the deportation of refugees, but their return. *From Palestine*, because Palestine is still there, *to Israel*.

In that sense, it's not the question why we need the pictures. The pictures are part of the reformulation of concepts, language and history. That's how I work. I think we all in this room share it. I know we always have to answer the question posed by others, why images. But I find myself always asking, why texts, why only texts – where are the images?

Manar Zuabi: For me an image is a way of thinking. I started using texts only very late, one or two years ago, something like that. I think an image can open your imagination to other places. It's not locked into a verbal definition.

Osnat Bar Or: As a creator of images, there's an interesting space for action in creating images. I felt it intensely when I made *Bait Sefer* ('Home, Book', in Hebrew means School) photography project. I had a lot to say about the education system here, but I felt that by simply capturing schools on camera I could talk simply and directly. It's not that you cannot convert images into words, but images allow me to rephrase. I feel I can present several layers simultaneously, that I can connect with others. When I facilitate workshops with pupils, or with teachers, I don't need to use many words, I display the images. And then the images themselves evoke the emotions, and words and cognitions, and a desire to change and some sort of an experience we have, as parents as well as children and teachers. So I feel that as image producers we have a working space to think in new frameworks.

I also see it in my work for *Al Bir*. When Manar's students learn how to formulate themselves with a pencil and tell how they feel, or when a student of hers makes a video clip – by the way, they have some wonderful video works there – they acquire the habit of putting themselves into words, of articulating themselves, conceptualizing their voice. Given the fact that we're living in a culture that celebrates silence and oblivion, it is a political work par excellence for a girl from 'Ar'ara to conceptualize her voice, present it to her family and community, in ever-widening circles, on and on.

Manar Zuabi: I remember one girl brought home a video. She's veiled, with religious dress, and she filmed her hand with the finger passing over the lines between the bricks that make up the wall outside their house. So I said to her, Wow, that's amazing work, very nice. This work is going to be exhibited. And then, right before the opening she comes back to me and says, no, I can't. I say, why not? She says, it's my hand, you see? Look. Up to here – it's forbidden, this part. I told her, forget about it, who told you that? Who told you that? Tell me. And then she says, my brother. I told her, go to your parents, they'll let you, yes, you'll exhibit. Then we started this



Manar Zuabi, *In Between*. Installation, 2003.
Stretched pantyhoses.



The above two images: Osnat Bar-Or, from the series: *Bait Sefer* (School in Hebrew)

Around Osnat Bar Or's photo exhibition, *Land*

conversation about very thin lines. It wasn't easy, but I just exploded. I couldn't stand it. And then she went back and told me, alright, I asked my mother and father and they said that up to here it's OK. I said, good, what about your brother? Then she says, mother and father told him to step aside. So, again, it shows a complete structure of relations within relations within a family.

And there is another video work of two hands, and the girls who made it – Osnat and I saw it – there's something erotic in that clip. Perhaps the girls meant to say that they were seeking friendship, OK? So they, the two hands are touching one another and twisting around each other very beautifully. And they decided that they were not going to exhibit no matter what, because after they had shown it to their friends they started giggling – what is that? You're looking for love and that's forbidden, and things like that. So we started again to discuss this matter, is love truly forbidden? How do you get married? And that's what art does. But in the end, no, it was a bit too much for them.

Osnat Bar Or: I'll just say one last thing, because it seems that we're closing now. I was deeply touched by what you've explained, Ariella, and as always, I enjoy listening to you and always take with me something for the road. So what I take from what you've said today is the understanding the price we all pay, of what they've done to us. And that I feel that I'm also hurt, personally. And I've returned to doing art now, after a decade of not doing art. It's as if I felt that this art scene is not for me.

Manar Zuabi: The fundamentalist, the formal scene, you mean.

Osnat Bar Or: Yes, I felt that I was in a privileged position that allows me to do art and exhibit in a museum and enjoy the honors of what it means to exhibit in the art scene, and all this decade I've been focusing on *Al Bir* and *Parrhesia* groups committed to other people's voices. After a decade I feel that I, too, need to start voicing myself again because I, too, I also carry layers of oppression that I need to shed, that I need to articulate. And suddenly I experienced this outburst of wanting to speak out, to create, to talk to the world, to express my voice. And I didn't know why I was returning to it, but now you've given me some rationale, some idea, because I too need to unravel, shed the layers I've been educated upon. So this work is really a continuation of what I've been doing so far. It's another layer.

Transcription: Na'ma Morag, Translation: Ami Asher, Editors: Tomer Gardi & Osnat Bar-Or



Asil Mas'ud, Junior high school student of Manar Zuabi, Al Bir, Arara, 2.11.11



Iman Marzuk, Junior high school student of Manar Zuabi, Al-Bir, Arara, 2.11.11. Photograph: Osnat Bar-or



Al-Bir team, From Left: Samaher Abu Sharkia, Miriam Abu Hsein, Sahar Jamal, Raja Masalaha and Osnat Bar-or.

Al-Bir – Cultivating Culture and Community in Wadi Ara is a women organization in a Paestinian community, in the north of Israel. Photograph: Shahira Shalabi