

# Surviving Images and Images of Survival: On Activestills' Photographs of Protest

Vered Maimon

Activestills' work points to a major change in the political and critical viability of photography within global visual culture. In the current moment, it is no longer in its status as a "document" or irrefutable indexical form of evidence and testimony that photography acquires its prominent role, but in its capacity to foster *belief* in specific framings of the real, what Judith Butler calls "frames of war and violence."<sup>1</sup> That is, in its ability to relay political and ethical affects that are inseparably sensorial, perceptual, and material. This change led scholars such as Margaret Olin, Ariella Azoulay, and Thomas Keenan to insist on the need for a theoretical and critical shift in the field of the history and theory of photography, and particularly within scholarship on documentary photography.<sup>2</sup> Keenan explains the urgency and necessity of this shift in his seminal essay "Mobilizing Shame":

What would it mean to come to terms with the fact that there are things which happen in front of cameras that are not simply true or false, not simply representations and references, but rather opportunities, events, performances, things that are done and done for the camera, which

come into being in a space beyond truth and falsity that is created in view of mediation and transmission?<sup>3</sup>

Thus rather than focusing on the representational aspects of photography (the relation between the image and its referent), these scholars emphasize its *performative* roles (the intersubjective relations between viewer or user and image).

In relation to these observations, it becomes clear that Activestills' photographs acquire their political currency and meaning not simply because they document protesting communities and acts of military and state violence that are inflicted on them. Their power resides not simply in what is seen in them, but mainly in their *operative* mode of transmission, circulation, and dissemination. Their images are thus performative rather than representative since they are subject to continuous acts of reinscription and repetition through which sovereign strategies of possession (of land and territory) and control (of subjects and populations) are challenged. I argue in this essay that it is precisely in their dynamic and multiple roles as simultaneously material objects, visual images,

and tactile surfaces that the photographs enact an urgent call for political forms of agency and solidarity.

### The Afterlives of Images

More than anyone else, it was Aby Warburg who, as part of his effort to expand the study of art into the study of images in all their forms, developed the notion of *nachleben* or the "survival" of images. His concern was thus with the "afterlife" of images, what Georges Didi-Huberman calls "heterochronies."<sup>4</sup> Warburg resisted formal modes of analysis that consisted in the visual identification and decipherment of stylistic and iconographical motifs through which visual objects are conceived as fixed, self-contained, and "passive" documents of history. Instead he saw images as *agents* of communication and transformation. The meaning of images for Warburg was thus determined by their function and use as part of their *operative* mode of historical transmission. Warburg emphasized the psychological and expressive function of images, their emotional efficacy, as part of civilization's relentless and inherently unresolved struggle against fear, myth, and superstition. For him, images do not simply "represent" or depict the oscillating struggle between magic and logos, but are active forces within it as instruments of "psychological orientation" and means of *survival*.<sup>5</sup>

Warburg's legacy has recently been evoked in relation to the current politicization of the field of visual studies, and the emergence of new digital technologies of production, dissemination, and circulation of images.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this recent reconsideration of his legacy also makes it clear that his psychological theory of perception and emotion needs to be significantly rethought. While Warburg emphasized the role images have in the self-preservation of human civilization as part of the affirmation of life as an immanent biological, cultural, and psychological force, in the current moment, it is mainly in relation to the political and economic condition of *precarity* that the survival of images, their active and fluctuating modes of circulation and transformation, becomes inseparable from strategies and acts of survival. Life, as Butler argues, is no longer conceived as ontologically given or as a function of a universal psychological impulse, but as a *condition of co-dependency* through which the possibility of being materially and economically sustained relies "on social and

political conditions, and not on a postulated internal drive to live."<sup>7</sup>

Precarity is thus not an existential fact marking human finitude and mortality, but a politically and economically induced condition through which a differential allocation of resources and protections is set and defended. For Butler, the term "precariousness" marks a political and social ontology which is not concerned with

... fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organization. On the contrary, none of these terms exist outside of their political organization and interpretation. The "being" of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others.<sup>8</sup>

Since precarity has become the underlying condition of life under globalization, Butler insists on the need to reconsider the possibilities and ends of political forms of resistance. While political action, as Hannah Arendt famously argued, requires the space of appearance, this space cannot be assumed to be given as a kind of vacant stage on which subjects exercise their rights for communication and debate. This space only comes into being and is actively created when subjects, who are often devoid of rights, collectively exercise their right to have rights not out of a "natural" law or a metaphysical principle, but out of their political state of precariousness and continuous exposure to violence.<sup>9</sup> In the current political moment, Butler argues, assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will through performativity not only of speech, but also of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, and persistence, and with these actions they reconfigure "what will be public and what will be the space of politics."<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is precisely when exposed bodies occupy and persist in a space without protection that they exercise a right for support of sociality, belonging, care, mobility, and livelihood. As Butler states: "political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone is taken to be an act of delegitimation of

state power.”<sup>11</sup> Contemporary demonstrations and modes of resistance are thus configured today as interventions within the spatial organization of power in order to performatively stage, on the one hand, the continuous exposure to violence of those who are considered to be “non-subject” by sovereign power, and on the other, the need for support and protection for the maintenance of the right for life *for all*.



**Fig. 1.** Protesters at the construction site of the Israeli separation wall during a demonstration, Bil'in, West Bank, 22.2.2008

**Fig. 2.** Protesters take cover as the Israeli Army sprays them with a water canon, Bil'in, West Bank, 23.2.2007

Based on this formulation of political resistance, I argue that Activestills' photographs of the weekly demonstrations in Bil'in and other Palestinian villages are performative rather than simply documentary because they are not meant to “represent” the Palestinian struggle, but to actively create a space of appearance and intervention through which the Palestinians can be recognized as subjects of political rights [Fig. 1].

Since 2005, there have been weekly unarmed demonstrations in Bil'in against the Israeli separation wall and the confiscation of lands that are organized by the local popular committee.<sup>12</sup> Different Israeli and international human rights groups often take part in the demonstrations. Yet, in contrast to press photographs of Bil'in, Activestills images are not meant to create journalistic images of victimhood or heroism, but to expose precarity as an outcome of political policies and military strategies. That is, the presence of the collective's cameras is not conceived to be “external” to the events that are photographed, but aims to challenge the communicative rational ideal of liberal public space as grounded on equality and transparency. Their images capture the demonstrations not as “news items,” but as bodily acts of exposure to military violence toward subjects, acts that by their sheer continuous persistence undermine the legitimacy of state power [Fig. 2]. Like the demonstrations, Activestills' photographs expose political public space as one that is structured by antagonism and differential allocation of resources, and thus actively take part in the reconfiguration of political space by subjects who collectively insist on exercising their right to have rights.

Persistence and survival are thus the enabling conditions of *both* the struggle and the photographs. The survival and persistence of the images hinges on their transmission and circulation through which the struggle, its ends, and costs, are not just visualized, but perpetually propagated and mobilized. That is, the images “survive” and acquire multiple “afterlives” because, as Warburg argued, they are operative. Their meaning thus derives not simply from any specific iconographic, formal, or stylistic conventions they employ, but because they have material, sensorial, and emotional efficacy—they are *affective*—they produce social effects and enable political forms of agency. As anthropologists Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma recently argued, in the current moment, circulation and exchange can no longer be seen as processes that simply transmit meanings, but as “constitutive acts in themselves.” They coined the term “cultures of circulation” in order to argue that circulation needs to be considered as a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretative communities built around them.<sup>13</sup>

This argument suggests that issues of subjectivity, agency, and performativity cannot be adequately addressed through an exclusive emphasis on representation. Rather, they must also address specific mediums of public address, social modes of communication, and different platforms of exchange through which political struggles and forms of agency are not simply documented as pre-given, but are enacted or performed as part of *actual lived experience* and unfolding movements of alliance and antagonistic dissent.

The role of Activestills' images as means of survival and their multiple "afterlives" within the lives of the protesting communities they take part in forming can be best demonstrated through images of the leaders of the non-violent struggle in Bil'in, Adeen Abu Rahmah and Abdallah Abu Rahmah, the former bullied by soldiers and the latter detained and put on trial at the military court in Ofer prison [Figs. 3, 4]. These images appear not only in the collective's archive, Facebook page, Twitter account, and Flickr online photo-stream, but also on banners that are hung on public buildings in Bil'in and other villages, and are also used as graphic components together with texts in posters and placards held by demonstrators. The images become a form of currency, an animating force through which the very effort to eliminate the rights of the struggle's leaders by incarcerating them in a military prison in which their rights are voided, only intensifies their resistance and the validity of their political demands for rights and support.

In the case of the photograph of Abdallah Abu Rahmah, wearing the brown uniform of Ofer prison [p. 120], it is striking how the very act of photographing him becomes a performative gesture that challenges his condition as "non-subject" deprived of political rights. While the uniform with its white Ofer prison logo is part of a mechanism that subjects him to disciplinary strategies of individualization and control, the image stages a refusal for this condition. This "event" occurs not only because of his gesture in the picture, but because in his direct gaze toward the camera Activestills' photographer Oren Ziv has placed in front of him, he is addressing *not* the military judges, who take (an illegal) part in the dispossession of his rights and land, but a public and a community of co-supporters, both actual and virtual, who will recognize him now or in the future (due to the continuous circulation of

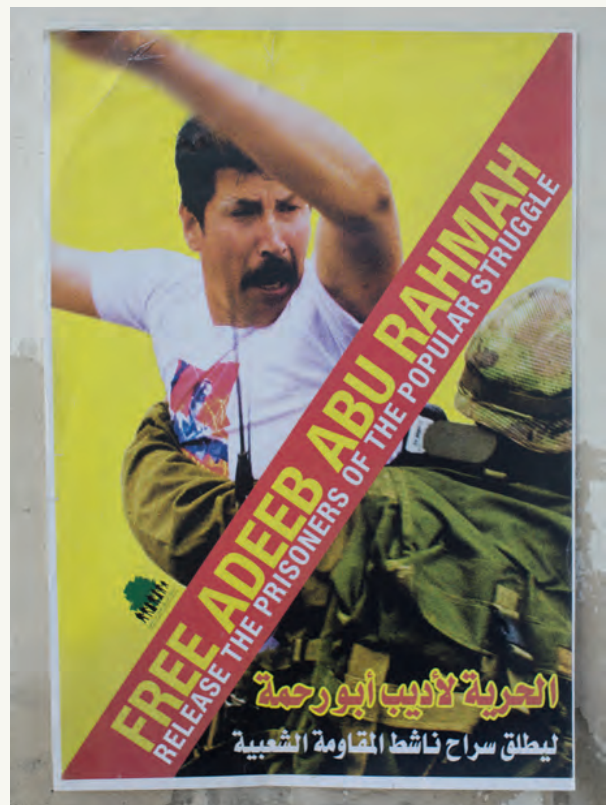


Fig. 3. Adeen Abu Rahmah detained by Israeli soldiers, 24.4.2009

Fig. 4. A poster printed by the Palestinian Popular Struggle Coordination Committee in solidarity with Adeen Abu Rahmah

the image) as a *subject of rights*. The point is not to "return the gaze" of the "victim," thus conferring on him "dignity," but to operatively *transmit* his acts of defiance beyond the confines of the occupation's military institutions of oppression. The aim of the photograph is thus not simply

*Surviving Images and Images of Survival*

Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahmah flying a kite between two segments of the Israeli separation barrier during the weekly protest against the occupation, Bil'in, West Bank, 25.7.2008





Fig. 5. Commemorative poster for Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahmah printed by the Palestinian Popular Struggle Coordination Committee



اللجنة التنسيقية للمقاومة الشعبية  
Popular Struggle Coordination Committee



**GOODBYE BASSEM**  
**YOU WERE A FRIEND TO US ALL**

**Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahmah (alPheel) was murdered by an Israeli soldier at a**

to “represent” Abdallah Abu Rahmah and, in this way, perhaps, unintentionally repeat his victimization as is often the case in documentary photography,<sup>14</sup> but to further communicate his acts of protest and resistance to the occupation by creating a space of appearance (even in a military court!) through which political agency and solidarity are enacted as part of a continuous struggle against precarity and ongoing violence.

Another extraordinary example is the image of Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahmah, who was killed in 2009 by an Israeli soldier during a demonstration in Bil’in. A photograph taken by Activestills of him flying a kite alongside the separation barrier [pp. 186–87] appears in a poster commemorating his death [Fig. 5]. The poster was then hung outside his house and throughout the village [Fig. 6], as part of a memorial marking the site of his death, together with empty tear gas canisters that caused his death [Fig. 7], and later was turned into a placard and a shield used to protect demonstrators from tear gas grenades [Figs. 8, 9]. The photographs take an active part in the continuous mobilization and propagation of the struggle, through its appropriation by the community it makes visible and transmission between different surfaces of display and exchange. As part of this process, the image becomes an inextricable part of bodily gestures and acts, and in this way, it becomes an agent for transformation and political change, rather than a “fixed” representation of resistance.

The flat posters, banners, placards, and shields that enable the circulation of the images of Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahmah, beyond their digital circulation online, demonstrate their roles as *tactile* signs and *material* objects rather than simply visual images that are read or consumed through contemplative spectatorship. This movement and transformation of the images can be best understood through anthropologist Christopher Pinney’s concept of “surfacing” as part of his work on Indian and African popular postcolonial photography. Pinney argues that through preoccupation with the materiality of the image and its surface, “the photographic image becomes a site for the self-fashioning of postcolonial identities.”<sup>15</sup> These practices challenge colonialist mobilizations of photography as part of administrative and identificatory strategies of surveillance and control of colonized populations,



Fig. 6. Subhiya Abu Rahmah, the mother of Bassem, and his brother Ashraf pose for a portrait in front of their home, 7.4.2010

Fig. 7. Subhiya cleans the memorial monument to her son at a ceremony marking the eighth year of the popular struggle in Bil’in, 4.10.2013

by redefining the photograph not as a “neutral” or “transparent” window onto the world, but as “a surface, a ground, on which presences that look out toward the viewer can be built.” This is what Pinney calls “visual decolonization” through which collage and montage techniques “transpose the focus of photographic images from the space between the image’s window and its referents to the space between the images’ surfaces and their beholders.”<sup>16</sup> The meaning of these photographic images, emphasizes Pinney, cannot be attributed solely to their status as indexical traces of “past events,” rather they become, spatially and materially, multilayered and complex artifacts that are open to multiple acts of inscription and repetition. The movement and transformation of Activestills’ photographs (by *both* their subjects and viewers) into complex material objects and tactile surfaces, further supports Pinney’s argument





Fig. 8. Protesters marching with carton shields, Bil'in, 15.5.2009  
 Fig. 9. A protester in a cloud of tear gas, Bil'in, 29.5.2009

because these images are not simply irrefutable fixed "documents" (photographs of protest), but *active* components in a collective political struggle (*protesting photographs*), which acquire their meanings and roles through their multiple "afterlives" as means of survival for specific communities whose lives are marked by precarity and continuous exposure to violence.

### Affective Communities

In their movement and circulation, Activestills' photographs mark a new threshold in the history of documentary photography. While their images are often gestural and dramatic due to the confrontational and violent nature of the events they depict, they refrain from any visual iconographic rhetoric of suffering and destitution. These images are not meant to solicit emotions such as empathy, compassion, shame, or guilt or to "shock" the viewer, but to disrupt the "affective

economies" through which, as part of Israel's segregation policies, the Palestinians are constituted as vulnerable "disposable" non-subjects. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are not interiorized characteristics of individual or collective bodies but what operates through specific forms of circulation to "make" or "shape" the surfaces and boundaries of bodies. She shows that emotions suggest *contact* not essence, that is, what individuals feel toward objects or subjects depends not on their qualities (good or bad), but on whether they are perceived as beneficial or harmful to them. "Contact involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject. If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply 'in' the subject or the object." Having an emotion thus means associating it with "the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me."<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that emotions cannot be reduced to bodily sensations because they involve thought and judgment toward another body's capacities. Ahmed points out that while one tends to think about emotions as immediate sensorial or bodily reactions this, in itself, is not a mark of a lack of mediation. Contacts are shaped by histories which determine (re)actions or relations of attraction and repulsion in relation to subjects and objects, and involve "affective forms of reorientation" or "affective economies" through which emotions are attached to or subtracted from collective subjects through their accumulated histories of circulation. Thus, rather than residing in groups or individuals, emotions are operative because they "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects."<sup>18</sup> Ahmed's analysis suggests that emotions *do things* as part of specific economies through which concrete values accumulate, and constitute certain bodies *as* vulnerable and immobile. Emotions *bind* subjects together by delimiting them from those who are considered non-subjects.

Ahmed's reformulation of emotions as accumulated social affects adds support to Lee and LiPuma's argument that circulation processes do not simply transmit preexisting meanings, but function as

constitutive cultural forces with their own identitarian forms of abstraction and evaluation. It also further explains the operative aspects of Activestills' images because their aim is not to "represent" the Palestinians as "Others" and in this way to trigger empathy toward them, but to repartition and realign material and perceptual divisions and demarcations so that "those who have no part" can be *recognized* as subjects of political rights who are entitled to support and protection from violence. This motivation becomes particularly evident in the images' mode of production. The collective members include Israelis and Palestinians as well as Europeans and Americans. And when photographing the demonstrations in the West Bank, Activestills' Israeli members always stand on the Palestinian side opposite the Israeli soldiers, thus forcing them to acknowledge political solidarity that undermines the racist partition of space [Figs. 10, 11]. The very presence of Israeli demonstrators in Bil'in complicates the exclusive infliction of violence and is meant to counter precarity with support and care. Thus, alongside images that show exposure to violence, Activestills photographs also focus on images of Israeli, Palestinian, and international solidarity, as well as on collective care [Figs. 12–14]. The images emphasize interdependency and contact in order to reorient and counter the "affective economies" through which the boundaries between surfaces and bodies are created in a way that constitutes the Palestinian bodies as vulnerable and immobile and the Israelis as armored and active [pp. 194–95]. In this way precarity becomes a common condition that realigns political subjects rather than separates them, while solidarity is configured as a political weapon *and* as the underlying condition for the production of images of struggle.

The effort to repartition and realign material and perceptual divisions also underlies Activestills' modes of public display of their images, as writers in this collection point out.<sup>19</sup> The collective frequently organize exhibitions in public spaces in major cities in Palestine/Israel and in the spaces where the struggles for rights take place. The motivation behind these street exhibitions is not simply to expose the "secret" of the occupation, but to reorient the way it is presented and conceptualized by intervening in the spatial organization of power according to which Israeli citizens enjoy the rights of movement and protection while these rights are withheld from the Palestinians. To bring



**Fig. 10.** Israeli soldiers try to arrest Activestills photographer Yotam Ronen at a protest against settler violence, 16.10.2012 / **Fig. 11.** Israeli soldiers try to arrest Activestills photographer Oren Ziv during the same action noted above / **Fig. 12.** Palestinian and Israeli protesters march with flags of different states, calling for international intervention against the construction of the Israeli separation wall, 20.5.2005



**Fig. 13.** Protesters help a fellow Palestinian activist injured by a rubber bullet during a protest in Nabi Saleh, West Bank, 22.1.2010



**Fig. 14.** A Palestinian activist helped by her husband after inhaling tear gas, Bil'in, 23.2.2007

Bil'in to Tel Aviv in the form of street exhibitions means changing the medium of public address and communication platform as a way to materially and perceptually demonstrate what Ahmed defines as the affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace on both sides of the conflict. These public displays thus counter the general convenient view that the violence of the occupation leaves no trace outside the West Bank. Instead they suggest dependency and the recognition that rights that are not *shared* cannot be defined as rights at all since the very notion of human rights is politically intelligible only as a general and universal condition. Appropriating rights exclusively to oneself abolishes the very ground on which political and ethical claims can be made.

These strategies of production and display differentiate Activestills' photographs from other major photographic projects depicting political demonstrations, such as Chris Marker's book and exhibition *Staring Back* (2007), or Allan Sekula's slide projection and book *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999–2000).<sup>29</sup> These photographic projects document resistance but they are not meant to enable and actively reinforce political agency or to propagate struggle. They are more representational than performative because they are ultimately meant to be looked at and not to be *used* by specific communities as part of an effort to intervene in the partitions and "affective economies" through which the boundaries

between subjects are made. While Marker's and Sekula's images register how the condition of collectivity can be elusive and dispersive, and therefore ultimately unrepresentable, Activestills' photographs take part in the formation of *specific* protesting communities and their struggles. Their images are meant to be touched, held, carried, and worn and, in this way, to trigger and propagate affects between, and through, bodily gestures and acts.

In conclusion, the significance of Activestills photographs lies not in their "documentary" or indexical "evidentiary" status, but precisely in the opening of a space that questions political, social, and perceptual partitions as these manifest themselves in normative frames of violence and the affective economies these produce. Their photographic work suggests that understanding photography's role within contemporary global visual culture necessitates a shift in the frame and the ends of analysis within the theory and history of photography—from problems of reference to those of circulation and transmission; from notions of irrefutable (indexical) authentication to ones of belief and accumulative affects; and finally, from the focus on images and their institutional "constructed" modes of representation to an analysis of their performative modes of reinscription through which political forms of agency are both contested and made possible in the current moment.

1. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).
2. Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008), and her more recent *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012); Thomas Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:2/3 (spring/summer 2004): 435-49.
3. Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," 435.
4. Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology," *Oxford Art Journal* 25:1 (2002): 59-70.
5. See the essays collected in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999). See also Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
6. See Nicholas Mirzoeff's introduction to the third edition of *The Visual Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). See also W.J.T. Mitchell's essay in the collection, "There are No Visual Media," in which he argues that visual culture needs to move beyond the emphasis on the visual and the "scopic wars" into "a more productive critical space, one in which we would study the intricate braiding and nesting of the visual with the other senses, reopen art history to the expanded field of images and visual practices which was the prospect envisioned by Warburgian art history": *ibid.*, 13.
7. Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, 21.
8. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
9. Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics*, eds. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 124.
10. *Ibid.*, 120.
11. *Ibid.*, 124.
12. Bil'in is an agricultural village of about 1,800 residents that is located twelve kilometers west of the city of Ramallah in the West Bank. Since the 1980s about 55 percent of Bil'in's agricultural lands have been confiscated for the construction of Modi'in Illit settlement. In 2005, Israel began constructing a separation wall on Bil'in land cutting the village in half, its houses on one side and agricultural lands on the other, in order to put Modi'in on the Israeli side of the wall.
13. Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity," *Public Culture* 14:1 (winter 2002): 192.
14. On victimization in relation to documentary photography, see Martha Rosler's canonical essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 303-40.
15. Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in *Photography's Other Histories*, eds. Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 219.
16. *Ibid.*, 219.
17. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.
18. *Ibid.*, 10.
19. See Simon Faulkner's and Meir Wigoder's essays in this volume.
20. On Marker's book and exhibition *Staring Back*, see my essay "Towards a New Image of Politics: Chris Marker's *Staring Back*," *Oxford Art Journal* 33:1 (March 2010): 81-101; on Sekula's slide projection and book, see Benjamin J. Young, "On Strike: Allan Sekula's Waiting for Tear Gas," in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Politics*, eds. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 149-81.