

Ariel Goldberg and Yazan Khalili

# We Stopped Taking Photos

01/06

*This text was co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of four special contributions to e-flux journal – two texts published in the present February 2021 issue, and two in the recent November 2020 issue. This collaboration aims to expand on the themes raised in the contemporary art festival Survival Kit 11. Titled “Being Safe Is Scary,” after a piece by artist Banu Cennetoğlu for Documenta 14, Survival Kit 11 took place in Riga from September 4 to October 4, 2020. It was organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and curated by Katia Krupennikova.*

*Exploring the mechanisms shaping the politics of safety, and taking the heavily charged title “Being Safe Is Scary,” the festival aimed to establish a continuity of urgent discourse on security and political violence. At the same time, the festival sought to explore how it might be possible to transform the suppositions that undergird this discourse – reconnecting safety to practices of love, intimacy, sharing, commonality, mutual support, attention, care for each other, and care for the environment.*

*Yazan Khalili (who wrote this text in collaboration with Ariel Goldberg) and Imogen Swidworthy, both featured in this issue, are artists who participated in Survival Kit 11 (Being Safe Is Scary) with their works Centre of Life (2018) and Iris [A Fragment] (2018–19), respectively. Both texts are seen as extensions of the artworks and experiments with artistic forms as text.*

## I.

Every photo is connected to an act of violence that is contained within it.

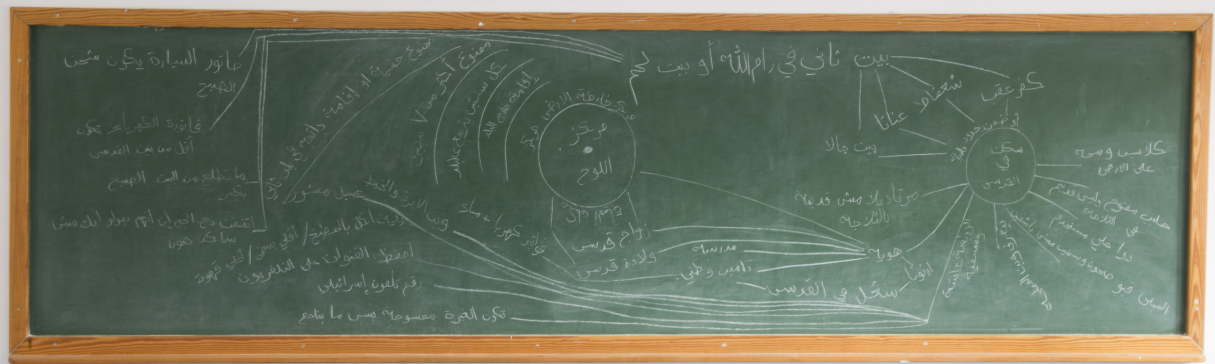
But what about those photos that circulate as acts of love, as impulses of affection? The photo that one takes of one's beloveds turns into a memory, projecting the photographer's imagination onto them, hoping that they stay as pictured forever. Young and alive. Of course, people can also be seduced by the context of cuteness or joy found in a single image.

But how does one disentangle the picture of a child being a child (or some other emblem of innocence) from the violence of the war machine that has arrived by drone? The device that kills, remotely, is also the recording device. The cop who turns his body camera on still kills. The cop who forgets to turn his camera on will still have a bystander filming over his shoulder, even though this image doesn't change the fact of antiblack state violence embodied by the police.

But how can one photograph laws, these less visual forms of violence that remain the status quo?

A photo hides more than it shows, which is

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Yazan Khalili, *Centre of Life*, 2018. Chalk on blackboard. Installation shot of "The Jerusalem Show," 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

merely the physical and reflective light of the world: bodies in a place, scars on skin, a wall in a landscape, a person holding a book, fireworks at night, trees, four people hugging each other in a joyful moment, a boy looking at his drawing, a policeman shooting at demonstrators. We have seen all of that, we have photographed it, but what about the unphotographable violence that goes through the image without leaving a trace in it, the systematic violence that is normalized within life itself, the pain of the forest, the law that doesn't allow your child to get a birth certificate, the fear of being profiled, of not being allowed to travel, and the bureaucracy of everyday life?

Is there an image without a purpose? An image that leaves no trace? Every image forces itself into the realm of how the world is understood and approached; every image is an image of the world, even if the world disobeys the intention of the image.

But what about the surveillance camera, the one that waits for an event to happen so that it can create a document? We exist in both the world and its image; the latter proves the existence of the former. The camera that is ostensibly intended to prevent an event from happening is also the camera waiting for that event. The CCTV that Palestinians install to monitor their homes against theft has become another set of eyes for the Israeli Demolition Forces (IDF) that surveil the streets of Palestinian cities and neighborhoods. One story goes that the IDF arrested a man for not having his CCTV working when they wanted to check an event of resistance. They accused him of hiding information from them. Now every CCTV camera that isn't working is a camera hiding information, and every working one is an informant for the IDF.

But someone said that these cameras also show the aggression of the occupier, and that these images can be used in international courts of law. Can we choose the images we want to show and delete the images we want to disappear? Not taking part in recording everyday life is becoming an act of hiding something. Wearing a mask – a pre-Covid mask, let's call it a kufiya – is a dual act of engaging with the world but also a refusal to be captured by its image, or an act of hiding inside the image.

The state is the ultimate camera, the camera that eats all other cameras.

Has an image of oppression used in international courts of law done anything to stop the occupation?

But what about images that attempt to subvert systems of power? Can these images (and the cameras that produce them) escape a dialogue with this originator of violence? Are the reclamation and subversion of tools for self-

imaging always already compromised? Is this only the case if photographers continue to protect the image? Can an image ever be kept safe after its intended encounter of affirmation? An honorific portrait of a trans person from the past offers the present a proof of the existence and survival of gender transgression. What about those people who keep this picture tucked in the corner of a mirror at home, looking back at them, affirming the existence of a continuum in the face of a myth of absence? They protect this image from its connection to the larger project of capture.

The image lives a long life of being forgotten and remembered.

Didn't the Israeli investigator show a Palestinian political prisoner an image of himself as a child – an image that he said he'd never seen before – to demonstrate that they knew everything about him?

But what about the footage of the riot used as fodder for the FBI investigation to find those who so easily entered and left after a breach of government property, podium and laptops in hand?

We begin to view the thousands of videos and photos taken by the blur of participants and press in the white-supremacist hunt for lawmakers who betrayed their version of reality. The mob chose to take selfies above all other possible actions. They alleged their entitled presence for the camera and projected an image of peacefulness while the threat of more violence continues to loom. They knew a picture showing how easy and welcome their tour of a legislative building would be more effective at spreading their white-supremacist propaganda. Journalists processing the events in writing referred inevitably to being mesmerized by the pictures, or to their experience of watching the moving pictures. In *The Atlantic* a headline read: "The Whole Story in a Single Photo."<sup>1</sup> In the *New York Times*: "Images that Shake a Pillar of Freedom."<sup>2</sup> Do the images become the soldiers of their fascist thirst for an authoritarian leader?

Why can the image do that?

If the image is the medium of truth, of rationality, a replica of the world, if this becomes the medium of fakeness (the conspiracy theory always has a photoshopped image in its pocket), then photography is easily infiltrated to promote fake news. This tension, of photography also being its supposed antithesis, is the reckoning we photographers are stuck in. Our focus shifts to the circulation of the image rather than its production.

Can we never trust the image on its own? If we only doubt images, then do we lose a rational sense of truth? Are there symbols that are irrefutable?

But what type of truth do we mean? The loss of information or the revival of facts?

The image is stuck inside the CCTV.

The role of images in consolidating power could be evidenced by the desire by some to stop the production or circulation of images: no photography at a checkpoint; arresting journalists; a right-wing mob knocks over video cameras, then attacks a whole pile of equipment – the crowd around them cheers, stomping on the idea of information that operates against their delusions.

One might talk about the violence inside an image but no one talks about the violence that contains it, about where the image comes from. Like the Brecht quote about the river: “We often speak of the violence of a river, but never of the violence of the banks that confine it.”

Perhaps we can also practice photography by refusing to add to the saturation of images.

## II.

We are being encircled by the violence in photography; yet, the world continues to be consumed by making images. At the same time, what other medium critiques itself as much as photography? Is one option to simply stop circulating our photographs but continue taking them? Are we still taking a photograph if we screenshot the news? Because we have not actually stopped taking pictures of what amuses or delights or even terrifies us in daily life. Is it that we do not proclaim the photographs we happen to take as works of art? The idea of the photographer is no longer essential to the image because the photographer is no longer the specialist. Today the photographer more often turns to doubting the medium than defending its purity.

## III.

In June 2020 we became coauthors of the photography department at Bard College’s MFA program. From our respective homes in New York City and Ramallah, we would teach courses over Zoom. We cowrote a course syllabus – which we’re including below – while the Movement for Black Lives organized protests and events every day in cities across the United States. Meanwhile, we were adapting to life under quarantine during the Covid pandemic.

Ironical as it was, we – two photographers who have stopped taking pictures – somehow ended up teaching graduate students of photography together. Deliberating over the importance of contagious questioning, this is the syllabus we wrote for our students, to guide our work with them online, through webcams and internet connections across countries:

## Images Outside of Photography: The Falling Monument, the Mask, and Being with the Edges of Momentous Events

The image is essential for keeping us together and for allowing society to reach consensus.

Even as the image plays a significant role in the production of violence and in the propelling of action, and even as surveillance governs our lives to varying degrees, protestors build nets to capture the drones photographing crowds, and image-scrubbing software enters the feed. We find ways to narrate intimacies that support us and analyze structures of power that can never be photographed. We are making and consuming images with common tools that are vulnerable and contested.

We are meeting in a time of the mobilizing force of images and increased communication and artistic practices. We are meeting in Zoom rectangles, where our composite images (sometimes on, sometimes off) provide a space of connection and accentuate our distance from one another. We are aware of the limitations and want to get to know these personal and collective limits.

How can we think in context and stage trials, confessionals, direct messages to allow the image to speak?

How will images speak to each of us differently? The image is waiting to have a voice, to be given a meaning. In that sense, the image alone does not hold truth; it becomes a fictional material. Forensic Architecture, for example, has attempted to restore or point to truth in the image – they claim to bring a counter-narrative to truth, yet they produce their own fictions that attempt to function as both art and evidence for human rights abuses. But what about events that are not photographed, how are they brought to the attention of the people?

We are working to account for the absence of the image or the failures of visibility in

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creating a collective narrative. What is not photographed does not disappear. How do images live outside of photography?

Images do not speak on their own, they are utilized by the medium that delivers them. Images are busy circulating and maintaining status quos. One can argue that the mechanisms for photography are a space for conflict – a space we must negotiate, a space where we must wrestle with these tensions. We work against and within this groundwork, and as artists we enable different narratives to come out, to speak truth to power. The image can still bring us together.

The uprisings demand that we address the possibilities of image-making in times of fighting antiblack state violence and settler colonialism in Palestine and in the US – the possibilities of resisting the spread of images that spectacularize black suffering and death. We will study the Black Audio Film Collective. We decided this after seeing John Akomfrah in conversation with Tina Campt, Ekow Eshun, and Saidiya Hartman, recorded on June 18, 2020 and posted online.<sup>3</sup> This discussion examines the legacy of John Akomfrah's early films, such as *Signs of Empire* (1983) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986) in the context of ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, the destruction of colonial monuments, and the structures of institutional racism. For further context, we will watch Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) in four parts<sup>4</sup> and then read an essay by Jean Fisher, "In Living Memory: Archive and Testimony in the Films of the Black Audio Film Collective," the first essay in *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar of the Otolith Group (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, 2007). Finally, we will read "Thoughts of Liberation," a collection of responses "to the present 'moment'" published by *Canadian Art* in June 2020. Edited by Nataleah Hunter-Young and Sarah Mason-Case, the responses come from the following black scholars, activists, and artists: Christina Battle, Dionne Brand, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Chantal Gibson, El Jones, Anique Jordan, Robyn Maynard, Charmaine Nelson, Christina Sharpe, and Kara Springer.<sup>5</sup>

These are texts, events, and links that have been shared between us – that friends recommended to each of us and that we then recommended to each other as we tried to understand more deeply how to study and talk about photography in this present. Having now taught this material, we wish to add one more resource: the virtual teach-in "Art of Collective Care & Responsibility: Handing the Images of Black Suffering & Death," a project of the Black Liberation Center, founded by La Tanya S. Autry, a curator at moCa Cleveland.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV.

So we have decided to stop taking photos for now, and to think about photography instead.

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**Ariel Goldberg's** publications include *The Estrangement Principle* (Nightboat Books, 2016) and *The Photographer* (Roof Books, 2015). Goldberg currently teaches at City College (CUNY), Parsons, The New School, and Bard College, where they are the cochair of the photography department.

**Yazan Khalili** lives and works in and out of Palestine. He is an artist and cultural producer. His works have been shown in several major exhibitions, including "New Photography," MoMA (2018) and the 11th Shanghai Biennial (2016–17), among others. He was the director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center between 2015 and 2019. Currently, he is the cochair of the photography department in the MFA program at Bard College, NY, and a PhD candidate at ASCA, University of Amsterdam.

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1  
See  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/confederates-in-the-capitol/617594/>.

2  
This headline appeared in the January 8, 2021 print edition of the *New York Times*. For the web edition of the same article, the headline was "A Shattering Blow to America's Troubled Democratic Image" – see <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/world/europe/macron-merkel-trump-capitol-democracy.html>.

3  
Organized by the Lisson Gallery. See <https://www.lissongallery.com/studio/john-akomfrah-tina-camp-saidiya-hartman>.

4  
See  
[https://ubu.com/film/bafc\\_handsworth1.html](https://ubu.com/film/bafc_handsworth1.html).

5  
See <https://canadianart.ca/features/thoughts-of-liberation/>.

6  
See <https://www.artofcollectivecare.com/>.

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