

Activestills

Photography as Protest in Palestine/Israel

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All the photographs in this book are signed collectively
by Activestills members.

This book is dedicated to all the
communities, groups, and activists
that invited us to take part
in their struggle.

Contents

- 024 **Foreword** Miki Kratzman
028 **Introduction** Vered Maimon and Shiraz Grinbaum

Part I Active

- 044 **Activestills' Photographic Archive:
A Common Treasure** Ariella Azoulay
058 **Distributing Dissents: Activestills and
Alternative Israeli Media** Haggai Matar
066 **The Middle East and New Media: The Challenge
and the Opportunity** Ramzy Baroud
074 **Contentious Displays: Activestills'
Street Exhibitions** Simon Faulkner

Conversations

- 090 Zehava Greenfeld
096 Nariman Tamimi
104 Hakmih Abu Mdīgim and Salim Abu Mdīgim
110 Issa Amaro

Activists' Texts

- 120 Abdallah Abu Rahmah
130 Monim Mandela
136 Reuven Abergel
142 Carmen Elmakiyes
146 Chen Misgav
152 Lilach Ben David
160 Adi Winter
164 Santiago Gomez

Part II Stills

- 182 **Surviving Images and Images of Survival:
On Activestills' Photographs of Protest**
Vered Maimon
196 **Communities of Touch: Photography's Spaces
of Appearance** Meir Wigoder
206 **Before the Law** Sharon Sliwinski
214 **Being There** Ruthie Ginsburg

Photographers' Texts

- 232 Ahmad Al-Bazz
244 Faiz Abu Rmeleh
258 Tess Schefflan
264 Anne Paq
270 Basel Alyazouri
278 Yotam Ronen
282 Ryan Rodrick Beiler
288 Keren Manor
292 Shachaf Polakow
296 Oren Ziv

Epilogue

- 306 Sarit Michaeli
310 Contributors
312 Photographers
315 Acknowledgments
316 Index

Foreword

Miki Kratsman

When I started teaching photojournalism at the Geographic Photography College in Tel Aviv back in 1997, the local news field was in the middle of a crisis. It was only five years since *Hadashot*, the groundbreaking newspaper that had set a new standard for the profession and had been a key player in the articulation of Israeli photojournalism, had closed its doors. *Hadashot* drew on the photographic tradition of the local newspapers in Israel, such as Tel Aviv's *Ha'ir* and Jerusalem's *Kol Ha'ir*, which were characterized by photography that was not committed to or dependent upon text. It also succeeded in establishing a dedicated group of photojournalists who viewed their work in the light of social and political responsibility. Although this approach was not spelled out explicitly, and did not necessarily hold true for all of the group's members, it was the dominant attitude of the newspaper's core photojournalists.

As a lecturer at the Geographic Photography College at that time, I needed to help my students who had dreamed about working in something bigger than a local newspaper come to terms with the hard truths of

working in a dwindling photojournalism market. In 2005, my eighth year of teaching, a new photographic practice began to make its way into the classroom: a group of third-year students started bringing photos to class that they had taken at the weekly Friday protests against the Israeli separation wall, which were being staged in the West Bank village of Bil'in. While it was understandable that the students would travel together to the occupied Palestinian territories rather than go separately, there was something new in their photos that had begun to coalesce over time. Over the course of that year, the students—Oren Ziv, Yotam Ronen, and Keren Manor—together with the Argentinean photographer Eduardo Soteras, created a photography collective under the name "Activestills."

In the photographs, I could see a relationship forming between my students and the demonstrators, Palestinians and Israelis from the Anarchists Against the Wall group. Such relationships are rare in conventional photojournalism. Furthermore, the students became part of the protest and, in that position, it became appropriate for them to photograph other photographers who were

also present at the same event. The act of reexamining the position of the photojournalist in an event was both interesting and challenging, especially when viewed in light of the recent Iraq War, during which the very institution of journalism had been put to the test and failed. The Iraq War was not the first time photojournalists were forced to examine the power relations between themselves and the establishment and question who had the right to determine the boundaries of the freedom of information. In contrast to journalistic writing, photojournalism requires a constant repositioning of oneself in the field, in real time, as well as examining the political forces that allow one to be a photographer in a particular place and position, which leads to questions such as: Which side should I stand on? What are the political structures that make my presence in a specific territory possible? Activestills photographers decided to stand with the protesters in Bil'in and position themselves in the field within the boundaries that the protesters determined. The choice to stand with the protesters rather than behind the soldiers neutralized any control the ruling power may have had on their photographic act. It was important for me to understand that this was an ideological position that preceded the journalistic position, and that it would engage every aspect of their work.

Photojournalism has traditionally relied on the circulation of its product through news agencies and related media outlets. In the 1940s, freelance photographers would dash from the scene of an event to news desks in a bid to be the first to sell their wares. Later, agency-affiliated photojournalists from agencies such as Associated Press and Reuters could rely on wide circulation through the teleprinters that were installed in newspaper headquarters. This new technology displaced the intimate familiarity that photojournalists had once shared with newspaper editorial boards. In a certain sense, digital circulation methods continue to maintain the same "disconnection" between the photojournalist and media outlets. Activestills photographers have made the ideological and ethical choice to disseminate their materials through media with which they identify politically, such as *Local Call* and *+972 Magazine*, or through nongovernmental organizations. Though they do publish and sell their photographs to local and foreign media, they refuse to be dependent on newspapers

for their livelihood. They are truly bringing the term "freelance," or "free-lens," back to its original meaning.

In another challenge to traditional photojournalism practice, they choose to present their materials in the same communal public spaces where they photographed. This is an exceptional strategy, since the people being photographed for newspapers often do not have access to the media outlets that cover them. This strategy also has an aesthetic aspect. While most photographers envision their work printed in large scale, on quality paper, framed behind glass, and exhibited in some contemporary photography gallery, the Activestills photojournalists continue to imagine their photos in a size not exceeding A3, unframed, and glued, pinned, or taped on to a wall. Activestills photographers thought of their work from the beginning as a tool for social and political change. The collective's drive and idiosyncratic practices anticipated the rise of the smartphone and digital photography as mobilizing tools on social media.

Activestills have not just survived, they have grown in a decade that has witnessed the switch from negative film to Twitter and seen cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians reach an all-time low. This has been possible only because of the commitment of all the members to work jointly—the occupier and the occupied—based on a clear political stance against the Israeli occupation, to observe and photograph the act of occupation itself.

After following the collective's work for a decade, in 2015 I joined Activestills. For over three decades as a press photographer, I was lucky to be able to choose my own subjects. Now I have the chance to act and witness from within, and never before did I feel as close to those I photographed as I have over these last years.

Activestills members maintain an ongoing relationship with the communities they photograph and their struggles. This creates a kind of partnership and intimacy that goes beyond journalistic coverage. Every so often, it is not the photographers who are initiating the coverage; rather they are invited by the communities to join their actions as photographers. Activestills realized in practice, before the support and also the disruption that technology would bring, the affinity between the producers, subjects, distributors, and recipients of information, which for me is the base and the power of photojournalism in the future.

Israeli soldiers arrest a protester during a demonstration against the construction of the Israeli separation wall.





Introduction

Vered Maimon and Shiraz Grinbaum

The photograph therefore does not only look backward ... but it also opens onto a future: it is in fact displaced toward the future.¹

This book is a joint contemplation about the body of work produced by the Activestills photography collective from its inception in 2005 up to the current moment. It includes the perspectives of activists, journalists, historians and theoreticians of photography, and the collective's members themselves, in an effort to articulate the distinctive position that Activestills embody within the fields of photojournalism and documentary photography as well as within the realm of political engagement. With this collaborative project, we wish to place the collective's now decade-long involvement with political struggles in Palestine/Israel as a milestone of *activist photography*.

Our examination is directed at both the past and the future. By looking back at the collective's political and photographic forms of intervention in specific historical and geographical milieus, we aim not only to point to photography's changing status and role within contemporary global visual culture, but also to outline the possibilities and potentialities for a critical practice and

theory of photography in the future. We conceived this project as opening a shared space for thought *and* action, photographs *and* texts; a dialogic sphere between viewers, photographers, and subjects photographed, marking Activestills' long-term commitment to cooperation and joint communal struggles. In this regard, this book is configured not as a catalogue documenting or summarizing the work of the collective, but as an effort to continue and expand its political, material, and perceptual modes of mediation, intervention, and action.

Looking Back—Stepping In Action

The Activestills collective was formed in response to the Israeli media's highly restricted and biased coverage of the Palestinian unarmed popular struggle against the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. In 2005, co-founders of the collective—Oren Ziv, Keren Manor, Yotam Ronen, and Eduardo Soteras, then emerging documentary photographers—met in the West Bank village of Bil'in, joining the protests as activists with the Anarchists Against the Wall (AAtW) group.² At the time, villagers from Bil'in started staging weekly protests against the confiscation of the village's agricultural lands

for the construction of the Israeli separation wall and the nearby Israeli settlement of Mod'in Illit.³ Following other protesting villages, Bil'in residents wished to raise international and Israeli left-wing support for their struggle, while also turning to Israel's High Court of Justice in order to stop the construction.⁴ Wishing to expose the villagers' struggle, the group met to discuss methods of reaching out to the Israeli public.

Up until the first intifada (1987), most media coverage of the Israeli military occupation was done by local Israeli media and international wire agencies that employed both Israeli and foreign photojournalists. This situation changed when international and local media began hiring Palestinian photographers, with Reuters news agency distributing cameras to Palestinians, paving the way for their training and incorporation by international wires. Within the Israeli media, coverage of the Israeli military occupation changed in 1984 with the launching of *Hadashot* newspaper, which had a declared left-wing agenda and prioritized graphic and visual content. The newspaper was responsible for creating a new visual iconography of the Israeli occupation, sometimes publishing photographs that violated the restrictions of the Israeli Army's censorship.⁵ Yet it closed unexpectedly in 1993 with the beginning of the print media's decline.

The formation of Activestills marks a response not only to the prevalent mode of reporting or lack of it on the Palestinian popular struggle in Israeli media, but also to the global crisis of photojournalism following recent institutional, technological, and economic changes in the global media arena. The introduction of new digital media and the rise of the Internet, as Roger Hallas has recently argued, led in the last few decades to shrinking advertising revenues for print media, and consequently, photo editors are "commissioning fewer and fewer photojournalist assignments and paying far less for the completed work than in previous decades." Photographic reporting is thus outsourced to commercial photo agencies "which have also dwindled in number as the industry moves closer and closer toward a duopoly of Getty Images and Corbis."⁶ Almost concurrently, media outlets began incorporating citizen journalism, amateur imagery, and NGOs' visual advocacy information as equally important producers of visual knowledge.⁷ This "new media ecology," as Hallas terms this new condition, challenged the traditional

function of photojournalism and called for a reexamination of its ethical paradigms, as well as giving rise to independent journalism which questioned mainstream corporate media narratives and the latter's increasing concern with commercial interests.

The need to challenge the Israeli media's official narratives motivated different activist groups to initiate independent advocacy projects which are based on records and testimonies of human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories. Israeli NGOs such as Physicians for Human Rights (1988), B'Tselem [The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories] (1989), and Machsom Watch (2001), began to produce and disseminate visual documentation of Palestinian life under occupation as early as the beginning of the 1990s.⁸ This process culminated with the "Shooting Back" project (2007) initiated by B'Tselem's video trainers, who handed out cameras to Palestinians living in highly conflictual areas where settlers and army violence were especially acute. The project's main goal was to overcome the "hostility wall that was blocking the gaze of Israeli addressees, preventing them from *recognizing* an assault on Palestinians as an assault."⁹ The wish to overcome this "active non-seeing mechanism" was shared by many human rights NGOs and activist groups, as well as by Activestills members to a certain degree.¹⁰ In retrospect, B'Tselem's project worked to constitute Palestinian "camera-holders" as sources of visual testimony.¹¹

During that time, independent online news websites started reporting on Palestine/Israel in English, at first addressing international audiences of activists, journalists, and diplomats, but soon engaging the Israeli audience as well. Websites such as that belonging to the joint Palestinian-Israeli Alternative Information Center (an organization established in 1984), *Electronic Intifada* (in 2000), *+972 Magazine* (in 2009) and its Hebrew counterpart *Local Call* (in 2014), were focusing on topics related to the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian popular struggle against the construction of the Israeli separation wall, while gaining ongoing credit for their bottom-up reporting and analysis.¹² These outlets often report on human rights violations in Palestine/Israel in order to connect journalism with an activist agenda while expanding the range and scope of political discourse regarding the Israeli occupation.¹³

Activestills came into being within these structural changes in media and activism. From the beginning, its co-founders viewed themselves as activists *and* professional photojournalists, thus shaping a unique position that went beyond “citizen photography,” by combining ethical responsibility with aesthetic skillfulness and long-term commitment to joint documentation and reporting. Viewing their photographic act as tantamount to the act of protest itself and *not* simply as a form of witnessing, the group emphasis was not on “representation” of the “suffering of the other,” or on victimhood, but on the *enactment* of political agency and the demand for rights—to mobility, livelihood, and protection from violence. Shortly, the group formulated its shared political stance in a collective statement [p. 31].

Configuring their work as interventionist, the collective were not eager to incorporate their images in the Israeli media or to present their photographs in galleries or museums. They soon decided to create street exhibitions to be posted in dozens of different locations on the walls of abandoned buildings and empty billboards, in order to reach different sections of the Israeli public. The first action that took place in 2006 in Tel Aviv bore the name of the collective—Activestills—and embodied its members’ wish to amplify the public visibility of the struggle in Bil’in through photographs. The exhibition consisted of 16 photographs placed in a grid form with an accompanying text that informed passers-by about the Palestinian popular struggle and urged them to join the weekly protests. The new chosen name for the group derived from the decision to refrain from personal emphasis by signing all images by the name Activestills.¹⁴ This act harnessed the individual author to a collective statement, one that was articulated explicitly as political in nature, agreed upon, and promoted by all the members.

Concurrently, the collective began to consolidate their modes of action and put up a website, *activestills.org*, where members posted their images, creating a joint archive where the copyrights of all the images are shared. Simultaneously, they created a Flickr account which updated daily. Their photo-stream soon became a source for activist communities, both Israeli and Palestinian, for imagery and news about different direct actions and protests in Palestine/Israel.

The collective’s political stance and independent,

non-profit agenda soon became the threshold for newcomers. New photographers who saw eye to eye with the small emerging group joined: French photographer Anne Paq joined in 2006; Israeli photographers Tess Schefflan, Shachaf Polakow, and Silan Dallal joined during 2007–08; Palestinian photographer Ahmad Al-Bazz, American photographer Ryan Rodrick Beiler, and Israeli photographer Shiraz Grinbaum in 2012, and Palestinian photographers Basel Alyazouri and Faiz Abu Rmeleh joined in 2014.

The expansion of the collective deepened both its photographic work and its political insight. Quite early on, the group’s meetings relocated from Tel Aviv to the West Bank where all members of the collective could have access. This kind of cooperation—between Israelis, Palestinians, and international activists—is even rarer today than in 2005. By collectively documenting the struggle against the Israeli occupation and its implications for the struggling communities, the group wished to actively resist the occupation’s prescribed political positions of occupier and occupied. As Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta observes in her *Refusing to be Enemies—Palestinian and Israeli Non-Violent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation*, “Ironically, perhaps, the hated security barrier (aka apartheid wall) has been a catalyst in forging a new brand of joint activism.”¹⁵ Looking back at this promising constitutive moment in the collective’s history, it is clear that this ground of alliance was made possible by intense decision-making processes through which all aspects of the group’s work—ideological, terminological, economic, technical, and visual—are decided together.

This political stance also helped to set and prioritize future subjects of coverage. The collective’s field of documentation soon extended to other political and social causes: demonstrations supporting Palestinian prisoners, state appropriation of Bedouin lands, everyday life in the Palestinian refugee camps, Palestinian economic struggle under the occupation, the Israeli siege and military assaults on Gaza, as well as social issues in Israel such as the struggles for public housing, women’s and LGBTQ rights, the lives of asylum seekers and foreign workers, animal rights, and incarcerations of military conscientious objectors.¹⁶

Seeing themselves as part of these struggles necessitated an ongoing coverage on a repetitive basis,

Activestills Collective Statement

Activestills collective was established in 2005 by a group of documentary photographers out of a strong conviction that photography is a vehicle for social and political change. We believe in the power of images to shape public attitudes and raise awareness on issues that are generally absent from public discourse. We view ourselves as part of the struggle against all forms of oppression, racism, and violations of the basic right to freedom.

The collective, whose members include Israeli, Palestinian, and international photographers, operates in Palestine/Israel and focuses on social and political documentation, publications, and exhibitions. We work on various topics, including the Palestinian popular struggle against the Israeli occupation, rights of women, LGBTQ, migrants and asylum-seekers, public housing rights, and the struggle against economic oppression.

Israeli public opinion is shaped first and foremost by the mainstream media that are becoming more racist and inciting. The impact of this process is evident in increased public support for violent military operations, racist legislation, and discriminatory policies. We wish to challenge this state of affairs by producing work that exposes inequality and conveys messages that contest oppression and brings the voices and images of those who are invisible and unheard into the public discourse.

Our collective is based upon the belief that mutual work serves each photographer's personal expression, and that joint projects create powerful shared statements. We believe that the photos we take belong to those whose struggles are documented, and so we share our archive with different activist groups. Our photos are often exhibited by local communities at events, conferences, demonstrations, and court hearings. Our images are frequently published in alternative and leading media as well as by human rights, development, and advocacy agencies.

In solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for their inalienable rights, Activestills call for:

- + The end of Israel's ongoing illegal occupation and colonization of Palestinian and Syrian territory, and the removal of the Israeli separation wall;
- + The end of institutionalized discrimination against non-Jewish citizens of Israel, and respect for the human rights of all, regardless of ethnicity;
- + Recognition and implementation of the rights of Palestinian refugees according to UN Resolution 194, including the right of return, and
- + Prosecution of those responsible for war crimes.

which led to a strengthened relationship with the communities photographed and to the notion that the images belonged to them.¹⁷ As early as 2006, the collective supplied its images to the struggling communities to be used in press releases, advocacy campaigns, and signs held at demonstrations. Subsequently, Activestills' imagery spread to international groups, various media outlets, and social media networks.¹⁸

An Image-Event: Activists, Journalists, Witnesses

By defining their photographic work as a form of protest, Activestills share a common position with the South African collective Afrapix, a joint activist group made up of black and white photographers who worked under apartheid during the 1980s. Afrapix termed their political and photographic work as "resistance," or "struggle photography" whose "intention, beyond the aesthetic, is to document the conflicts between oppressors and their victims so as to alert, persuade, and elicit support for the oppressed. The reality captured by the photograph is from the vantage point of the subjugated person."¹⁹ Their collective statement emphasized their distinct position:

[We] strive not only to advance social documentary photography but also to help in a small way redress the grossly inequitable distribution of skills and unequal access to information ... [T]o overcome the blind spots resulting from an internalized apartheid ideology. To see what had not hitherto been seen; to make visible what had been invisible; to find ways of articulating ... a reality obscured by government propaganda and mass media.²⁰

Although unfamiliar with the work of Afrapix during their early years of operation, a quarter of a century later, Activestills' collective statement echoes a surprisingly similar message: "We believe in the power of images to shape public attitudes and raise awareness on issues that are generally absent from public discourse. We view ourselves as part of the struggle against all forms of oppression, racism, and violations of the basic right to freedom." This motivation turns the photojournalist from an "impartial" and external witness into a participant in the struggle who takes the side of the oppressed.²¹ In the case of Activestills, this political framework had practical

implications: members consistently accompanied the protests from the activists' side, marching with them and joining them in direct actions, sometimes being the only professional photographers present. This activist position of coverage also extended their documentation to the aftermath of the events, to arrests, house raids, court hearings, visits to injured activists in hospitals, and so forth. Activestills' photo-stream was soon filled with a wide range of images relating to the lives of the struggling communities, bringing forth social and political issues that were not covered or addressed in mainstream media, either for lack of interest due to ratings considerations or as a result of sheer intentional disregard.

In directing their audience's attention also to the "margins" of the events, Activestills' work displaces the photojournalist "decisive-moment" paradigm and challenges the logic and economy of news consumption. This act of constituting the "non-newsworthy-event" as an event reflected the collective's political perspective, as well as their effort to address and make both visible and intelligible the enabling conditions and relations that make a (political) event possible. Working independently, Activestills photographers took care to stay clear of external editorial and commercial pressures, a position which allowed them to remain loyal to a "spectacle-less" aesthetic by giving equal visual and political weight to scenes of hard clashes attended by hundreds and to small static solidarity vigils. Activestills' work can thus be considered as part of the shift, described by Hallas, from "photojournalism to visual activism," and from the documentation of victimhood and destitution to the visualization of the social relationships and networks that underlie the activities of struggling and protesting communities.²²

The collective's public exhibitions display method in photographic grids functions as an aesthetic and formal embodiment of their political and ethical positions and as a rethinking of the classic journalistic photo-essay. The grid format challenges the viewer to reflect on his/her own engagement with the images, posing questions of narrative and duration, bringing the act of observing closer to a montage-like viewing experience. Refusing to lay the burden of mediation on one iconic frame also echoes the notion of *being part* instead of aiming to "represent" the event or summarizing it for fast utilization. By the same