



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography

Shobeiri, S.A.

Citation

Shobeiri, S. A. (2018, January 24). *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Shobeiri, S.A.

Title: Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography

Issue Date: 2018-01-24

—Chapter 5—

The Spectator: A Place That Is Sempiternally Taking Place

Spectator is ourselves.
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

As Barthes once noted, the study of photographs can be the object of three practices: to do, to undergo and to look, in relation to the photographer, the photographed subject and the spectator respectively. According to him, the photographer functions as “the operator” who initiates the act of photography, the photographed subject is the referent whose spectral trace is forever embedded in the photograph, and the spectator is “all of us who glance through collections of photographs.”³²⁴ Throughout the last four chapters, I have paid extensive attention to the photographer or the “operator,” to the referent in relation to the camera and to the photograph as both a thing and an image, aiming to illustrate how each of them can feature spatiotemporal characteristics. To be clear: I have discussed how the photographer’s body can be deemed as a lived place replete with indeterminacies, how the camera is a contingent place that perpetually suspends the referent, and how the photograph as a thing becomes a placeless place that drifts towards unspecified directions and as an image a liminal place that possesses the blind field. Having discussed the aforementioned, in this chapter my examination of the notion of place apropos of photography comes full circle by the inclusion of the spectator in a photographic act.

As Azoulay has put forward, theorists of photography tend to neglect that their reading of the medium stems from a particular field of discourse that regards the photograph strictly on its own terms. By doing so, they overlook the role of the spectator in a photographic act and reduce photographic productions to the “producer of the image,” i.e. the photographer.³²⁵ According to her, an accurate reading of the medium of photography should not be limited to the photographic image, since “the photograph bears the seal of *the photographic event*, and reconstructing this event requires more than just identifying what is shown in the photograph.”³²⁶ Among other things, Azoulay’s socio-political reading of photography puts forward that this medium has the potential of making an event, which can either take place in

³²⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.

³²⁵ Ariella Azoulay, “What is a Photograph? What is Photography?” *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 1 (2010): 11.

³²⁶ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazeli and Ruvik Daieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14. (My italics).

conjunction with the camera and the photographer or the photograph and the spectator. Evidently, in Azoulay's conception of photography the spectator's role is an indispensable one, since the photographic event can transpire either in relation to the photographer and the camera, or in relation to the one who looks at the photographic image: the spectator.

In this chapter, by embracing and expounding on Azoulay's formulation of the photographic event and further investigation of the concept of event as such, I examine how can the photographic event in relation to the spectator shed light on spatiotemporal features of the concept of place? That is to say, by reading the photographic act vis-à-vis the spectator, I will demonstrate how photography can constitute an intangible place that only makes an elusive presence in time and space. To this end, by discussing several different perspectives upon immaterial facets of places, I will firstly foreground how a place can be regarded as something conceived through momentary confrontations. Subsequently, through examining the work of contemporary philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Slovenian Žižek, I look at the concept of "the event" in parallel with Azoulay's formulation of the photographic event. Eventually, having explained the immaterial existence of places and inherent properties of events, I will argue how the inclusion of the spectator in the photographic event can account for a transitory appearance of place in time and space.

5.1 Place as a State of Being

Place is a unity containing within itself different aspects.

Andrew Merrifield, *Place and Space*.

In the first chapter, I discussed why the lived body of a photographer—i.e. a lived place—should not be regarded as a simple location in space, as if it had fix coordinates and measurable distances from other locations. Mainly because a lived body is a porous organism that constantly enmesh in its surrounding space and thus cannot be viewed as a single point or position in it; instead it is of the space. However, according to Cresswell, a place cannot be reduced to what geographers refer to as "locale" either. The term locale, he defines, "refers to the material setting" of a place that constitute its appearances: it is "the way a place looks."³²⁷ In other words, while the term location addresses the exact point at which something is situated,

³²⁷ Cresswell. "Place," 1.

the term locale describes the material assembly of a place that gives it a particular look. For instance, while the geographical location of the city of Baghdad can tell us where the city is positioned in an abstract space, allowing us to locate it on a map or in a GPS system, it does not provide us with any other characteristics of Baghdad as a place. It is because Baghdad “is also a locale ... it has a material structure that, in part, makes it as a place,” states Cresswell.³²⁸ However, neither Baghdad’s location nor its material constituents can account for its being a place, since, as Cresswell contends, practice lies at the heart of the notion of place.³²⁹ For instance, as I have shown before in reference to photography, the camera is a place whose significance cannot be reduced either to the location or to the material setting thereof, due to its internal mechanisms that defines its practical uses. That means, the camera’s agency in a photographic act is not much hinged upon its locale—i.e. the way it looks—nor on its location in space as is on its inner mechanisms, functions, and the way through which it is put into practice.

Underlying the importance of practice in understanding the concept of place, geographer Charles, W.J. Withers suggests that the notion of place should be perceived “both as location and as constitutive locale.”³³⁰ While location is habitually regarded as the fixed boundaries of a place in most historical and geographical work, Withers suggests that locale provides “more variations” for places; mainly because, being the material structure of a place that affords involvement, locale means that a place can be “a product of social interaction.”³³¹ For Withers, the material setting of a place or its locale, above all, provides the possibility of experience, practice, and social engagement. Consequently, he proposes that a place should be regarded simultaneously as a location and a constitutive locale. He exemplifies the significance of practice in relation to the material structure of a place by the instance of a laboratory, a place in and through which modern sciences are made.³³² According to Withers, looking at the laboratory as a place it becomes possible to argue that science “is *produced through places* as practice rather than simply *in places*.”³³³ That is to say, a laboratory signifies the concurrent functions of a location that is positioned in space *and* a locale that affects the practices carried out in it, thereby indicating the conflation of both in one place.

³²⁸ Cresswell. “Place,” 1.

³²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³³⁰ Charles W.J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in Geography and in History,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70. No. 4 (Oct, 2009): 653.

³³¹ Withers, “Spatial Turn,” 649.

³³² Ibid., 652.

³³³ Ibid., 653. (Italics in original).

Nevertheless, geographer Edward Relph refuses to accept that the meaning of places comes from their “locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve,” instead he argues that “the essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound center of human existence.”³³⁴ In other words, for Relph places are not defined by where they are located nor by the material structure that determines their functions, but rather by the unconscious recognition of places dependent on each individual. To be exact, Relph proposes that places are essentially marked by each person’s perception of them and not much by their locales and locations. Relph’s understanding of the concept of place features another aspect of places that is usually subsumed under the category of “sense of place,” defined as “the feelings and emotions a place evokes” in individuals, which can be either personal or shared in a community amongst people.³³⁵ As Cresswell explains this point, when we talk and write about cities such as “Calcutta or Rio or Manchester for instance, even those of us who have not been to these places have some sense of them.”³³⁶ This individual meaning, conjured up from each person’s emotional state about a place, is what is widely referred to as “sense of place.” Nonetheless, Cresswell contends that an apt understanding of the notion of place should combine the three aspects of location, locale, and sense of place, since “in any given place we encounter a combination of materiality, meaning, and practice.”³³⁷ So Cresswell merges the three aspects of places—i.e. location, locale and sense of place—and defines places as “locations imbued with meaning that are sites of everyday practices.”³³⁸ That is to say, for Cresswell the concept of place is not a palpable and effortlessly graspable one, but rather a matter of coalescence of its three facets into a unity whereby a place comes into being. Therefore, being simultaneously constituted of a sense of place, a geographical location, and a constitutive locale that undergoes alteration, places become, as geographer Andrew Merrifield proposes, both a “thing” and a “process.”³³⁹

According to Merrifield, although space is habitually deemed as a patently abstract phenomenon, place is frequently associated with “an easily identifiable reality,” such as a location or a locale.³⁴⁰ He thus vehemently criticizes this view by submitting that the notion of place and space are not polar opposites, but rather “different aspect of a unity.”³⁴¹ That is to

³³⁴ Edward Relph, *Place and Placeness* (London: Pion, 2008), 43.

³³⁵ Cresswell, “Place,” 1.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid., 9.

³³⁹ Andrew Merrifield, “Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation,” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, new series 18, No. 4 (1993): 521.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 520.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 527.

say, he argues that spaces become places, and vice versa, through time and depending on the situation in which they are enacted. He exemplifies space-place relationship by drawing a comparison between the “circulatory capital” and “fixed capital” in the work of Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1973). As Merrifield discusses, while for Marx all capital is “circulatory capital,” indicating the transformation of commodities to money to capital and back to commodities, at a certain moment capital becomes fixed at a place, in turn, it becomes “fixed capital.”³⁴² For Merrifield, the possibility of capital for being both circulatory and fixed in the global capitalist system, above all, features the capacity of place to appear as an emergent and particular moment in this process. That is to say, while capital essentially has a fluid structure—through which it circulates from commodity to money to capital and so on—during its circulation, it necessarily needs to be localized in a *place*, when it transiently becomes fixed capital. This movement is not only when circulatory capital becomes fixed capital, but is also when capital is both localised and processual, manifesting place as an emergent form in this circulation. As Merrifield explains:

Capital is an inexorably circulatory process diffusive in space which also fixates itself as a thing in space and so begets a built environment ... capital fixity must, of necessity, take place somewhere, and hence place can be taken as a specific *form* emergent from an apparent stopping of, or as one specific *moment* in the dynamics of capitalist social space.³⁴³

For Merrifield, similar to the fleeting fixation of capital in the capitalist system, a place emerges at certain movements as a form of being when it is simultaneously a thing and a process. However, Merrifield’s understanding of place, as an emergent moment in the circulation of capital, differs from Tuan’s who states, “if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.”³⁴⁴ In that, Tuan’s conception of place implies a recess in the flow of space, but Merrifield understands place as a moment when it is both a process and a suspension, exemplified by the momentary emergence of fixed capital when it is still capital in circulation. Merrifield refers to this ephemeral appearance of fixed capital as the “moment of place,” a temporal dimension in which “place *emerges* through the interpenetration of objective and

³⁴² Merrifield, “Place and Space,” 520.

³⁴³ Ibid., 521. (Italics in original).

³⁴⁴ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6.

subjective forces” as a “state of being.”³⁴⁵ In other words, for Merrifield the notion of place cannot be demarcated by its location, locale, or sense of place; instead, it arises as “the moment of place” when a multitude of conflicting aspects fleetingly amalgamates into each other as place. As a short-lived and emergent moment, geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift argue that a place cannot be represented or captured in a process, but is to be encountered.³⁴⁶

In their collaborative work, Amin and Thrift underlie the importance of encounter with regard to places in contemporary urban life. Drawing on the work of Whitehead, they argue that in our modern world where places are linked together through a concatenation of fluid networks, which provide unlimited unexpected potentials and processes, places can be best identified through encounters.³⁴⁷ Similar to Merrifield’s understanding of place as that which transpires as the moment of place in the circulation of capital, Amin and Thrift hold that places are never permanently fixed and presented in space and time, but appear as confrontational instants.³⁴⁸ As they put it:

Places, for example, are best thought of not so much as enduring site but as *moments of encounter*, not so much as ‘presents’, fixed in space and time, but as *variable events*, twists and fluxes of interrelation. Even when the intent is to hold places stiff and motionless, caught in a cat’s cradle of networks that are out to quell unpredictability, success is rare, and then only for a while.³⁴⁹

Amin and Thrift grant a relatively more indeterminate and fluid facet to places than Cresswell, Relph and Withers who argue that places can be understood in terms of location, locale and sense of place, or the combination of the three. Instead, they argue that in the era when places are constantly intermingling with each other, affecting and being affected in doing so, they should be regarded as confrontational moments or mutable events. In other words, for Amin and Thrift, and in part for Merrifield, places are not to be captured or presented as fixed in time and space, but encountered as inconstant *events* that yield evanescent appearances: they are *moments of encounter*. According to Azoulay, the act of photography, too, should essentially be understood in terms of an event that, although it cannot be fixed or embodied in

³⁴⁵ Merrifield, “Place and Space,” 522. (Italics in original).

³⁴⁶ Amin, A. and Thrift, N. “The Legibility of the Everyday City,” in *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Amin, A. and Thrift, N (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 30.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

³⁴⁹ Ibid. (Italics in original except the words “variable events”).

time and space, provides the possibility of an encounter.³⁵⁰ As she puts forward, in order to ask what a “photographic entity is, one should suspend the priority attributed to the photograph and the agent [the photographer]” and instead consider photography as “an encounter between several protagonists”, i.e. the photographer, the camera, the photograph and the spectator.³⁵¹ At this point, having discussed the possibility of places becoming moments of encounter that transiently manifest themselves through a process, I will first examine what Azoulay’s defines as “the event of photography” and further investigate the concept of the event as such, in order to indicate how photography can be place-productive.

5.2 “The Event of Photography”

Photography is an event that is not conditioned by the eventual production of a photograph.
Ariella Azoulay, *What is a Photograph?*

An event can always be localized.
Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*

As Azoulay has put forward, in order to understand the question “what is photography?” one must differentiate between “the photographed event,” as that which the photographer seeks to capture in a photograph, and “the event of photography”.³⁵² While for Azoulay “the photographed event” is inextricably linked to the photographer and the time of taking a photograph, “the event of photography” signals the capacity of photography to engender an encounter in which none of the participants of photography gains precedence over the other, and out of which a photograph might be produced.³⁵³ As she contends, “the event of photography—not the photographed event—might take place as the encounter with a camera, with a photograph, or with the mere knowledge that a photograph has been (or might have been) produced.”³⁵⁴ Azoulay formulates “the event of photography” with two different modalities of “eventness”: first, as an encounter in relation to the camera; second, as an encounter in relation to the photograph, or in relation to its hypothetical existence.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁰ Azoulay, “What is a Photograph?”, 12.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 21.

³⁵³ Ibid., 19-21.

³⁵⁴ Azoulay, “What is a Photograph?”, 13.

³⁵⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 26.

According to Azoulay, despite “the photographed event” that always assures the existence of the camera and the production of the photograph, in “the event of photography” the photograph is considered as “an unintentional effect of the encounter” between those who take part in it.³⁵⁶ That is to say, for Azoulay “the event of photography” does not necessarily yield a materialised or immaterial photograph; instead, in this form of encounter the photograph can come to existence while one is in the vicinity of a camera. For example, while in disaster zones people are irredeemably exposed to the camera, they generally cannot see their own photographs, since for them “the camera is a tool that promises a picture that they will never see.”³⁵⁷ In these situations, Azoulay proposes, the event of photography as the encounter between the camera and the photographed subject takes place, albeit it does not produce a photograph. She demonstrates this point with a photograph of a Palestinian woman who is grieving in front her destroyed house, while being photographed by a cameraman who is standing beside her in the photograph. As Azoulay explains, “from her [the Palestinian woman’s] perspective as a participant in the event of photography, the act of photography is not the equivalent of the photograph. Photography might rather consist for her in something like the presence of the camera in front of her.”³⁵⁸ For the grieving woman the fact that she is being photographed by the photographer assures that the act of photography is taking place, consequently a possible photograph of the scene becomes an extra element in this situation. For this reason, Azoulay regards the photograph as “an additional factor” in the unfolding of a photographic encounter and not a necessary one.³⁵⁹ Because, as in the case of the people who are photographed in war zones, who might not ever witness their own photographs, the event of photography is set in motion without necessarily resulting in a photograph. That is, it comes about in relation to the hypothetical production of the photograph.

Nonetheless, Azoulay contends that the event of photography, as a form of encounter between the partakers of this event, can also take place in the absence of the camera as well. She exemplifies this point in a paragraph when she discusses the hypothetical existence of both the photograph and the camera in an interrogation process. As she puts it:

When an interrogator in an interrogation cell tells a detainee that he has a photograph which shows the detainee in such or such a situation, the interrogator

³⁵⁶ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 23.

³⁵⁷ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 20.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

does not necessarily reveal the photograph to the detainee—if it exists at all. He conducts himself as someone who simply derives his authority from the prior event of photography which happened elsewhere which he merely continues. In fact, however, he generates this event in order to put pressure on the prisoner. In such a case, the event of photography can be said to take place in the absence of both camera and photograph.³⁶⁰

Azoulay's example of the interrogator and detainee points at a situation in which the event of photography occurs not as an actual encounter in relation to the physical camera or the photograph, but in relation to the possibility of their existence, or better to say, in relation to their hypothetical existence. In other words, although for Azoulay the event of photography is defined by an encounter between the participants of photography, it is not necessarily conditioned by their presence. In our contemporary time when the omnipresence of the camera is conspicuously felt, Azoulay argues that the medium of photography is also capable of constituting a "potential event," even in the situations when the camera is not visible at all.³⁶¹ Due to the proliferation of cameras and so their pervasive presence in our time, the event of photography can take place without the physical presence of the camera. Strictly speaking, it can happen merely by virtue of the doubt that the camera could exist and one could be viewed by it. Accordingly, as being a potential event or encounter, the precise time of the event of photography cannot be determined by its partakers, by those who are potentially exposed to a camera's vicinity. As a potential event, Azoulay contends that not all those who take part in the event of photography are aware that "this event is taking place, certainly not at *the time of its occurrence*."³⁶²

Azoulay's formulation of the event of photography, on the one hand, sets forth an event that, although defined as an encounter between photography's participants, can exceed the founding elements that constitute it by becoming a mere potential. In doing so, the event of photography becomes a potential event that can transpire irrespective of the camera's or the photograph's actual existence—as in the instance of the interrogator and the detainee. On the other hand, Azoulay's account of the event of photography features an encounter that one cannot prepare for its time of occurrence, since as a potential of an encounter one cannot arrive at the precise time of its happening. These two characteristics, however, are not only peculiar

³⁶⁰ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 23.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁶² Azoulay, "What is a Photograph?", 12. (My italics).

to the event of photography, but as philosopher Slavoj Žižek has put forward, they reflect the way in which an event unfolds and gains its evental status.

According to Žižek, an event can concisely be understood as “the effect that seems to exceed its causes,” which in turn does not provide a certain moment of recognition for its manifestation.³⁶³ The event of photography can feature both of these characters, since not only can it become an effect that surpasses its primary causes—i.e. the encounter with the camera or the photograph—but also as a potential of an encounter it assures that its time of occurrence cannot be anticipated by its partakers. As Žižek notes, the time of an event can be understood by the moment of falling in love, in that, the time in which this event takes place cannot be foreseen by those who participate in it. In other words, people never fall in love in a present time, but according to Žižek “we all of a sudden become aware that we (already) *are* in love. The Fall (into love) never happens at a certain moment, it has *always-already happened*.”³⁶⁴ That is, an event, such as the experience of falling in love, does not provide preparation for its time of occurrence—akin to the potential event of photography—but leaves room for retroactive confrontation. As a result, Žižek holds that an event should be conceived as “something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere.”³⁶⁵ For Žižek, an event reflects an irruptive force that always unexpectedly transpires and is never in the present time, so it can only be experienced after it has already taken place—as in the moment of falling in love. Therefore, the time in which an event occurs cannot be accessed directly, but it is always experienced retroactively after it has always-already taken place. In other words, there is always a distance between the recognition of an event *and* its very time of occurrence, similar to the time of a photographic event. As Cadava holds, a photographic event should generally be understood as “the latency of experience; namely, the distance between an event and our experience or understanding of it. This distance tells us that we experience an event indirectly.”³⁶⁶

For Cadava, the photographic event unfolds as an encounter that distorts the flow of time, which eludes direct comprehension and cannot be experienced instantaneously. As he proposes, “the photographic event interrupts the present; it occurs *between* the present and

³⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transient* (London: Penguin, 2014), 3&113. (Italics in original).

³⁶⁴ Žižek, *Event*, 150. (Italics in original).

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁶⁶ Eduardo Cadava, “Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins,” *October* 96 (Spring, 2001): 49-50.

itself.”³⁶⁷ That is to say, within the structure of the photographic event time is no longer understood as “continuous and linear,” but as something that unexpectedly erupts and in so doing constitutes the present.³⁶⁸ Under this light, Cadava proposes that the photographic event reflects the “latency of experience,” the fact that our experience of this event is never immediate, but indirect and after it has always-already taken place. That is why Azoulay suggests that the participants of the event of photography are not aware of the time of its occurrence, since being formulated as an event, it always occurs unexpectedly and surprisingly: it is an encounter that comes to pass without heralding its arrival time.

As philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy remarks, the time of an event is the time of “the unexpected arrival” of something that cannot be prepared for.³⁶⁹ According to Nancy, an event never comes into being as something “given,” but it “happens” unpredictably within a structure, thereby inducing a surprising shock in the body of the given structure.³⁷⁰ As he puts it, “what is awaited is never the event; it is the advent, the result; it is what happens. At the end of nine months, one expects the birth, but that it takes place is what is structurally unexpected in this waiting.”³⁷¹ What confers an evental status to the birth of an infant is that, although it has been structurally anticipated in the gestation period, it takes place as an interruption of that process, thereby revealing the potential that has been up until then immanent within the structure. In other words, before its unexpected appearance, an event is rather a non-present element embedded within the structure and it can only become present after its unanticipated arrival—as in the unforeseen birth of an infant within the structure of pregnancy. This view of events, as the non-present elements within a structure that comes into being unexpectedly, has been given a particular attention in the work of philosopher Alain Badiou.

Before its manifestation, Badiou holds that an event is regarded as “the existence of an inexistent” within a structure, which can only manifest itself unexpectedly.³⁷² That is why an event can be recognised as such only by its consequences after it has taken place. An event, Badiou writes, “is almost nothing: it appears at the same time as it disappears.”³⁷³ For Badiou,

³⁶⁷ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1997), 61.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁶⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Surprise of the Event,” in *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 168.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁷² Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Olivier Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007), 68. (Originally published in French in 1988).

³⁷³ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 42. (Originally published in French in 2010).

the event comes into being through the very transitory moment when a non-existent element—or in Badiou’s terms an “inexistent” element—suddenly pops in and out of existence within a structure, in doing so, it manifests that which has been previously dormant in the given structure as a new possibility.³⁷⁴ As Badiou states, “for me, an event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable ... it is the creation of possibility.”³⁷⁵ Similar to the event of falling in love or the unanticipated birth of an infant, Badiou’s event happens as the unexpected arrival of something that has been, until the time of its emergence, hidden within the fabric of the world. Therefore, the Badiouian event, too, cannot be recognized at the time of its happening, but acknowledged as an event after it has always-already happened, akin to the event of photography that eludes direct recognition by its participants in the moment of its taking place.

As philosopher Fabien Tarby notes, for Badiou “the event is the occurrence or the flash, the dazzling revelation or an instant, of the void subjacent to the situation, buried in the structures.”³⁷⁶ However, he also underlines that Badiou’s event should be primarily understood as something that “exceeds the structure” by which it is constituted.³⁷⁷ That is to say, whilst the Badiouian event lies as a void beneath the situation from which it comes into being as a fulgurating instant, it appears as an extra component to the structure that gives birth to it. To put it differently, although the event belongs to the structure that generates it, it appears as the *additional element* of the given structure, thereby exceeding its establishing ground. Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux exemplifies the additional character of Badiouian event by the instance of the political uprising in France, which took place in May 1968. This political uprising has been frequently addressed by Badiou as the quintessential instance of the event as an additional element with regard to its founding structure. As Meillassoux lucidly explains:

What exactly do we mean, when we say that ‘May 68’ was an event? In this expression, we are not merely designating the set of facts that have punctuated this collective sequence (student demonstrations, the occupation of the Sorbonne, massive strikes, etc.). Such facts, even when joined together in an exhaustive way, do not allow us to say that something like an event took place, rather than a mere

³⁷⁴ Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, 42, 9, 10.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁷⁷ Fabien Tarby, “Short Introduction to Alain Badiou’s Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 142.

conjunction of facts without any particular significance. If ‘May 68’ was an event, it is precisely because it earned its name: that is to say that May 68, produced not only a number of facts, *but also produced May 68*. In May 68, a *site*, in addition to its own elements (demonstrations, strikes, etc.), presented itself.³⁷⁸

May 68 becomes evental because it has emerged as an additional phenomenon that exceeds the number of facts that constitute it, i.e. strikes, riots, people struggles, etc. Consequently, all the collective phenomena that took place in May 1968 presented the emergence of an event that has been until the time of its appearance hidden within the structure. That means, all the occurrences gave birth to an additional element that is now known as May 68, surpassing all the facts and figures that had established it. With reference to photography, what Azoulay addresses as the potential event of photography, to a certain extent, sheds light on the way in which an event can become an additional phenomenon with regard to its founding structure as well. As a potential embedded within the structure of photography, the event of photography is not anymore defined by its constitutive elements, but it becomes something that exceeds the structure from which it arises. That is, as a potential encounter the event of photography is an additional possibility buried within the structure of photography, awaiting the time of its maximal appearance, thereby providing a retroactive sign of recognition to its emergence. As Meillassoux points out, events can be understood as possibilities that exist “only minimally” within structures “until their maximum appearance.”³⁷⁹ Before its maximal appearance, an event, such as the one of photography, is merely a potential that lies dormant within its establishing ground.

However, after its maximal appearance, the Badiouean event constitutes a site, which he refers to as “evental site,” a multiple that “none of its elements are presented in the situation.”³⁸⁰ Explaining the primary features of these sites, Badiou remarks that it is “essential to retain that the definition of evental sites is *local*.”³⁸¹ For Badiou, the event after its maximal appearance is always confined to the area from which it has transpired, to the very location in which it has produced an evental site. As he states, “the event is attached, by its definition, to the place, to the point, in which the historicity of the situation is concentrated. Every event has a site which

³⁷⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, “History and Event in Alain Badiou,” *Parrhesia* 12, (2011): 2. (Italics in original).

³⁷⁹ Meillassoux, “History and Event,” 9.

³⁸⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 175.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

can be singularized in a historical situation.”³⁸² That is to say, the Badiouian event gains its evental status inasmuch as it occurs in its evental site, at the very point and particular location where multiple phenomena are singularized into the event as an additional element of the structure that gave birth to it. Despite the fact that “the event is a singular multiple” that is fundamentally “unpresentable,” Badiou contends that it can “*always be localized*.”³⁸³ While for Badiou the event manifests the emergence of a non-presentable element from beneath the situation, after its manifestation the event becomes indispensably anchored to the location from which it came into existence; it localizes in its evental site thereby becoming attached to it. It is precisely this feature of the event—i.e. localization—that marks the essential difference between the Badiou’s event and Azoulay’s formulation of this concept concerning the structure of photography.

As I have discussed, the event of photography shares its two main features with other modes of events, namely: the unexpected time of its occurrence that only allows retroactive recognition thereof *and* the possibility of becoming an effect that exceeds its establishing causes. Nonetheless, unlike the Badiouean event, the event of photography fundamentally resists localization; because, as Azoulay points out, the event of photography “is made up of an infinite series of encounters,” which due to the existence of the spectator, it never stops happening.³⁸⁴ Therefore, being an ongoing series of encounters that never comes to a halt, the event of photography does not give rise to a site, since it never becomes attached to where it takes place. As Casey points out, by adequately stating our relation to a place we transform it into a site, which is always localizable.³⁸⁵ A site, he defines, “is place as seen through the reducing glass of simple location,” whereas a place “is never simply located.”³⁸⁶ According to Casey, a place becomes a site when it is localized, when its boundaries are demarcated and determined in space and time. As an infinite series of encounters, however, the event of photography cannot be localized, since this event can always be regenerated and ceaselessly reiterated by the participation of the spectator. In other words, Azoulay’s formulation of the event of photography does not yield a site, but—as I will further discuss—can expose the dispositions of place as that which is never simply located in time and space.

³⁸² Badiou, *Being and Event*, 179.

³⁸³ Ibid., 181, 206, 178. (My italics).

³⁸⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 26.

³⁸⁵ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 211.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 212.

At this point, having discussed the characteristics of the event of photography vis-à-vis other modalities of the event and outlining its resemblances and main difference, I will lastly examine how this particular event, through the assistance of the spectator, can account for place as something evental, processual, indeterminate and non-localizable.

5.3 The Evental Place

The event of photography is never over.
Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*

Place is *not*; place is to be.
Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place*

In Azoulay's formulation of the event of photography, the photographer's role is to set the event in motion, or in Barthes's terms, he or she is "the operator" of the act of photography who initiates the act. For this reason, Azoulay holds that the event of photography is neither oriented towards nor determined by the photographer, since in this event the photographer is merely viewed as "a proxy, a service provider who can bring to the eyes of the spectator what his eyes see."³⁸⁷ Instead, Azoulay argues that the "final addressee" of the event of photography is the spectator, and not the photographer whose task is merely to initiate the event and thus directing it towards the spectator. Azoulay's formulation of the event of photography, however, does not address any specific spectator, as if the spectator could be chosen by the photographer, but presupposes the existence of a spectator who is "situated outside of the time and the place of the photograph."³⁸⁸ The existence of this spectator who is not confined to the photograph's time and place, Azoulay contends, is always promised at the very moment the photograph is taken. She exemplifies this point by a daguerreotype photograph, taken in 1845, called *The Branded Hand of Captain Jonathan Walker*, which displays a photograph of a hand into which are burned the letters SS.

As Azoulay explains, after attempting to smuggle slaves out of the state northward, the captain Jonathan Walker was sentenced to imprisonment, a fine, and the branding of his hand with the letters SS, indicating that he was a "slave stealer." Upon his release from the prison, Walker—the person whose hand is captured in the photo—immediately photographed his palm as a sign of a protest against the court's injustice, in order to eternalize his objection in time by

³⁸⁷ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 390.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 391.

means of photography.³⁸⁹ Although Walker did not have any particular spectator in 1845, he still decided to photograph his burned hand assuming the existence of a hypothetical spectator who would witness this photograph in the future, somebody who would take on responsibility to the injustice that had been imposed upon him. This hypothetical spectator, whose existence is presupposed when the event of photography takes place in relation to the camera, is what Azoulay refers to as “the universal spectator.” According to her, the universal spectator functions as “an implied absentee presence in the act of photography,” who allows the future participation of various protagonists in this event.³⁹⁰ This means, the universal spectator is not an addressee that can be chosen, eliminated, or conceived of by the photographer when the photograph is taken. Instead, as Azoulay puts it:

This universal spectator, hovering above the encounter between the photographer and the photographed person at the time the photograph is taken, is *an effect of the act of photography* ... without assuming the existence of such a universal spectator—whether alive or dead—there is no explanation for the willingness of individuals to conquer the world as photographs and submit the violence this involves. The place of the universal spectator is kept after his death as a *vacant space*, allowing individuals to continue to be looted in the act of photography and moreover to participate in this willingly and consentingly.³⁹¹

For Azoulay, the universal spectator does not refer to any specific individual whose identity can be revealed at the time the photograph is taken, but instead it exists as a potential that presents itself as the corollary of the act of photography. That means, although the possibility of the universal spectator comes into being when the photograph is taken, its identity remains unknown belongs solely to the future. To elucidate Azoulay’s conception of the universal spectator, one needs to look at one of the most emblematic war photographs of our time, the photo that manifests how a presumed spectator came into being at the time it was taken. On June 8th, 1972, press photographer Nick Ut captured *Terror of War* in the Southeast region of Vietnam, called Trang Bang, aiming to publicize the carnage of the Vietnam War through photography (fig. 7). Ut’s photograph features Phan Thị Kim Phúc in the centre of the frame, also known as “the napalm girl”, a screaming nine-year-old girl who is running up the

³⁸⁹ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 20-22.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 28.

³⁹¹ Ibid. 391. (My italics)

highway in pain towards the photographer. Just before the photograph was taken, the naked girl had been severely burned on her back by the napalm bomb dropped by the South Vietnamese air force.³⁹² It is precisely at this time, when Ut captured the inhumane condition to which the Vietnamese civilians were subjected, that the universal spectator was conceived for this photograph. If *The Branded Hand of Captain Jonathan Walker* shows how the photographed person initiated the existence of the universal spectator, *The Terror of War* epitomises how the photographer effected this supposed spectator at the moment of capturing the photo. That is to say, without referring to any particular person, an “implied absentee” sprang up at the very moment at which this photograph was taken, hovering above the encounter between the napalm girl and Nick Ut as “an effect of the act of photography.” Thanks to this implied spectator, the final recipient of the event of photography was not the photographer, but all the individuals who were yet to come, i.e., all of us who look at this photograph in the present time. Hence, while its assumed existence germinates when the photo is taken, the universal spectator is only actualized after that time. In other words, after the photograph is taken everybody who bears witness to the photographed event—i.e. that which is presented in the photograph—occupies the place of the universal spectator, since his or her place is always vacant waiting to be occupied by posterity.

Azoulay’s understanding of the spectator becomes universal, allowing future individuals to partake in the event of photography, essentially because the universal spectator *bears witness* to the photographed event through the photograph, an act that cannot be restricted to any time and place. That is to say, as an act of bearing witness to the photograph, the event of photography can transpire in any time and location, unlike the moment of witnessing what is captured in the photograph that only happens once in relation to the photographer. As theorist Gerhard Richter puts forward, the act of photography can be understood as an interplay between “the moment of witnessing,” which is always singular and linked to the photographer, and the universal “act of bearing witnesses,” which permits the unanticipated participation of the spectator in the act. Hence, as Richter puts it:

To appreciate this interplay between *singularity* and *universality* in the space of photography, we may think of the photographic image as a technically mediated

³⁹² TIME. “The Story Behind the ‘Napalm Girl’ Photo Censored by Facebook.” *Times.com*. <http://time.com/4485344/napalm-girl-war-photo-facebook/> (Accessed August 21, 2017).

moment of witnessing, in which the inscription with light cannot be separated from an *act of bearing witness*, which, by definition, always must be addressed to the logic and unpredictable movements of a reception that is irreducible to the act itself.³⁹³

The potential of bearing witness to the photograph, which belongs to spectators of the photographic image, is embedded in the photograph at the very moment it is taken, even though it is irreducible to that moment. Thus, according to Richter, when a photograph is taken the singular “moment of witnessing” and the universal “act of bearing witness” become inseparable in the photograph.³⁹⁴ Although the act of bearing witness cannot be reduced to the moment a photograph is taken, its possibility comes into existence at that very moment. That is why Azoulay propounds that the universal spectator is “an effect of the act of photography,” which initiates its existence immediately after the photograph is taken. In that, the potential of bearing witness to the photograph after it is taken, and not witnessing the moment it is taken, becomes available as the corollary of the act of photography. In other words, the existence of the universal spectator is the reason for Jonathan Walker to photograph his burnt hand in 1845 and for Nick Ut to capture the atrocity of the Vietnam War in 1972, thus providing the universal act of bearing witness to the photographed event through the photograph. Therefore, if the moment of witnessing is singular and connected to the time a photograph is taken, the act of bearing witness is universal and permits an infinite number of spectators to partake in the event of photography, thereby ceaselessly reiterating this event.

As Azoulay contends, the universal spectator “permits the event of photography to be preserved as one bearing the potential for permanent renewal that undermines any attempt to terminate or to proclaim that it has reached its end.”³⁹⁵ Unlike the other events previously discussed—i.e. the event of falling in love, the birth of an infant, or May 68—Azoulay’s formulation of the event of photography is never subjected to termination, owing to the existence of the universal spectator who can always resume this event in the future. Consequently, as an event that bears the possibility of everlasting renewal, the event of photography does not produce a *site* that can be localized, but reflects the characteristics of

³⁹³ Gerhard Richter, “Between Translation and Invention,” in Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, trans. J Fort, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 2010), xxiv. (My italics).

³⁹⁴ Ibid.,

³⁹⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 27.

place as a moment of encounter that is always susceptible of imminent recommencement by the universal spectator.

As I have previously discussed, places are not simply delimited to their locale, location or sense of place, but as Merrifield and Thrift have put forward, they can also be deemed as fleeting “moments of encounter” that manifest themselves in “the moment of place” in a process.³⁹⁶ Concurring with Thrift who suggests that places are grasped as momentary confrontations in a process, Casey further argues that the processual dimension of a place never comes to a halt, since for him the concept of place is essentially “a matter of *taking place*.”³⁹⁷ Thus, he argues that a place is never “simply presented” in an instance that can be demarcated and singularized by any specific time or location, but is to be “recognized as an undelimited, detotalized expansiveness” that is continually in process.³⁹⁸ While Casey’s account of place in part accords with Thrift’s, suggesting that places are never permanently fixed and presented in space and time, it differs from Merrifield’s who conceives of place as an instance or “the moment of place,” which momentarily appears through a process. Because, if for Merrifield places are deemed as short-lived moments that appear in a process, which can be singled out as in the instance of fixed capital, for Casey those fleeting moments are considered as place insofar as they always continue happening. Due to this reason, he argues that “place is not determinate in character,” since it cannot ever become distinct in a process, but is to be understood as that which is continually happening without a cessation.³⁹⁹ That is to say, for Casey a place does not include a pause or the moment of place when it fugitively becomes a thing, but it is to be recognized as an endless process that only affords confrontation. As he puts it:

Place is not entitative, as a foundation has to be—but eventemental, something in process, something unconfined, to a thing. Or to a simple location. Place is all over the place, not just here or there, but everywhere. Its primacy consists in its omnilocality, its continual inclusion in ever more expansive envelopments.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Amin & Thrift, “The Legibility”, 30. Merrifield, “Place and Space,” 522.

³⁹⁷ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 339. (Italics in original).

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 336.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 337.

While for Merrifield a place reflects that which is simultaneously a thing and a process, as in the instance of fixed capital that is also circulatory capital, for Casey a place is never a thing, but an inexorable process that is never confinable to any time or location. Strictly speaking, for Casey a place is recognised as such inasmuch as it is always taking place, untrammelled by any fixative temporal and spatial confinements.

Returning to the event of photography at this point, I would like to propose that this event manifests the characteristics of *place as infinite moments of encounter between the photograph and the universal spectator*, which in turn never cease happening in time and space. That is to say, the event of photography reveals the place as the moment of encounter that is, in Casey's terms, simultaneously "in process," "eventemental" and "unconfinable." *Firstly*, this place is inherently processual due to the existence of the universal spectator who, through providing the possibility of bearing witness to the photograph, assures the unending renewal of the event of photography. That means, the event of photography does not only occur once, but can endlessly extend towards the future by virtue of the spectator. Hence, as an everlasting moment of encounter, this place is always in process, since the possibility of bearing witness to the photograph is infinite thanks to the universal spectator as the effect of the act of photography. *Secondly*, through reflecting the two defining features of events discussed in this chapter, the event of photography also foregrounds the qualities of the place as a moment of encounter that is inherently evental. In that, not only the time of its occurrence is always experienced retroactively, but also as a potential quiescent within the structure of photography, this event becomes an effect that exceeds its establishing causes, thereby gaining its evental status. *Thirdly*, the event of photography in relation to the spectator cannot be delimited to any specific location, since—as I have previously discussed—photographs themselves are never simply located, but massified through polyvocality of directions. That is, in the age of digitization when photographs can become flyers that constantly sail through indeterminate directions, the event of photography is unconfinable to any specific time and location. As such, in relation to the universal spectator and the photograph, the event of photography manifests the dispositions of place as infinite moments of encounter; always processual in time, unconfinable to any location, and evental with regard to its emergence. In other words, the event of photography gives birth to a place that never localizes in time and space but exists omnilocally through them: an *evental place* that fugaciously but perpetually comes into being between the spectator and the photograph. As Nancy contends, an event "is the taking place of place", and as I have discussed, so is the event of photography; however, only after the inclusion of the universal

spectator who endues this event with the possibility of eternal resumption, thereby evincing an evental place that is sempiternally taking place.⁴⁰¹

Up until now, I have brought the spatiotemporal characteristics of each partaker of photography to the forefront, through arguing how the photographer is a lived place, the camera is a contingent place, the photograph is a placeless and liminal place, and eventually how the spectator can feature an evental place. In my last approach towards reading the concept of place apropos photography, however, I will deal with place as the subject matter of photography. Although usually in photography the subject matter seems to be determined by the photographer, it is always affected and influenced by a wide range of representational practices that gave shape to the medium.⁴⁰² That means, if on the side of the photographer the subject matter seems to be that which the camera points at, e.g. a physical place in the world, the moment it becomes a photograph it is a matter of specific representational systems that define its significance and possible meanings. In order to look at how a representational scheme deals with place, in the following chapter I will single out a photographic genre that has an inextricable affinity with both physical places in the world and embodied ones in photographs. In my final approach towards reading photography vis-à-vis the concept of place, thus I will argue how a particular photographic genre utilises its representational methods to communicate its subject matter through places.

⁴⁰¹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 173.

⁴⁰² David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford and New York, Berg Publishers, 2009), 16.