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A Conversation on Hagi Kenaan's *Photography and Its Shadow*

Hagi Kenaan and Assaf Evron

In this wide-ranging interview, Hagi Kenaan reflects on the potential of photography to intervene in times of crisis such as the current global pandemic. In his new book Photography and Its Shadow*, Kenaan discusses the history of photography from an angle that has, quite literally, been overlooked. He points to the marked rupture in our relationship with the world that photography provoked and explains how this initial rupture is crucial for understanding our contemporary visuality. The disappearance of the shadow in photography, he argues, characterizes not only the history of philosophy itself but also indicates an irreversible change in our relationship to nature, to the real, and to time and death.*

Hagi Kenaan. *Photography and Its Shadow*, Stanford University Press, March 2020, 248 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781503606364, paperback ISBN: 9781503611375.

Assaf Evron Your new book, *Photography and Its Shadow*, was published just as the world changed on us. The book was written, of course, before this challenging time of COVID-19, but it captures, I think, something deep about the way we live with images which is very relevant also to understanding the new roles of the image—say, the Zoom image, or that of the police body-camera—that we have experienced in the last few months.

Hagi Kenaan I think you're right, but we would need to tell a wider story to explain this.

AE Okay. Let's begin. *Photography and Its Shadow* is not a photo theory book in the traditional sense. You are offering a thorough philosophical investigation of photography, but your approach avoids a definitive answer to the question of what photography is.

HK The book offers an understanding of what photography is, but it resists a common way of framing the question about photography's essence. Unlike those central texts—you know, the classics of photography theory—that search for the determinative struc-

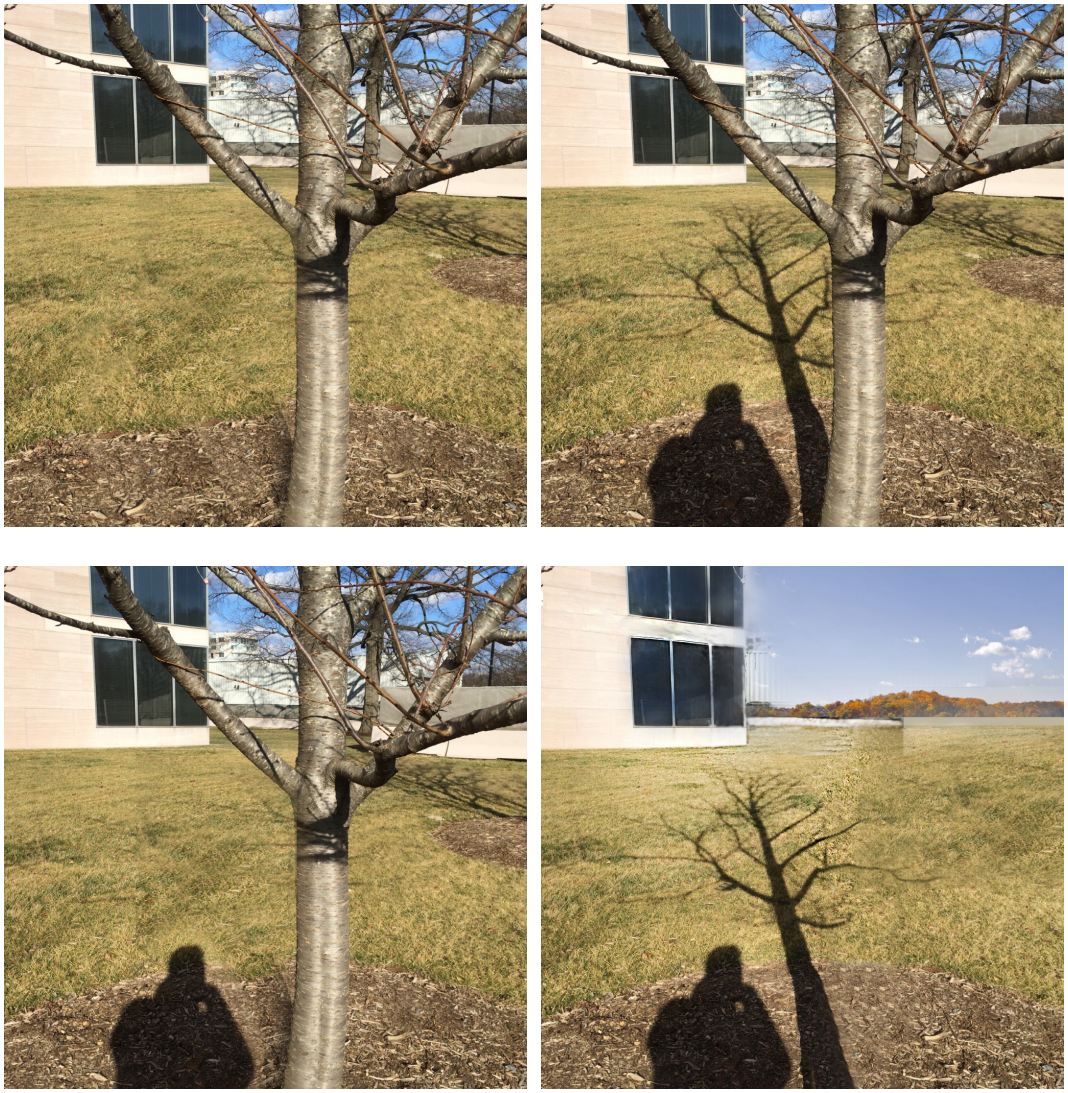
FIGURE 1. *Philosophy and the Visual* Zoom seminar, Tel Aviv University, April 2020. Screenshot. Image credit: Y. Ron.

ture or the "identity" of the photographic, I address photography as a complicated, multi-layered phenomenon whose identity is constantly changing. For me, change is the key to a philosophy of photography.

AE What's at stake in this methodological shift—are you thinking about photography through its temporality? Or is your approach more historical?

HK My interest in photography's changing conditions is ultimately ontological. But I think that an ontology of this kind is inseparable from a historical understanding of photography. History is important because it allows us to see that photography has never been one with itself—never self-same nor constant in meaning. Photography, unlike the way Roland Barthes and his followers had it, is never (only) a form of memorialization or bereavement. And neither is it the opposite: not, as James Elkins and other materialists put it, a mode of presentation of the mere "stuff," the dullness of what our world is made of. The point is that photography simply cannot be articulated in positive terms, such as "Photography is ABC" or "Photography is XYZ."

AE So what is the alternative you're suggesting?



FIGURES 2–5. Hagi Kenaan, from the *Tree with No Shadow/Shadow with No Tree, DC* series (2017). Manipulated photographs. Images courtesy of the photographer.

HK I think that we should approach photography dialectically, that is, in terms of its evolving relationship to itself, its self-determination which has changed again and again in forming what has become photography's history.

AE You speak about photography in terms of dynamic, evolving relationships. But photography's relation to itself ultimately opens up as a question about the intimate relationship we, humans, have with photography, the ways in which we live with photographs, and the dimension of the photographic. This perspective involves an important shift. It's not any more

FIGURE 6. Hagi Kenaan, *Face in Tree, Pennsylvania*. Photograph. Image courtesy of the photographer.

a subject–object relationship but a question of *being with* photography.

HK Yes, photography is woven into our lives in so many ways. It has become an integral part of the fabric of modern life. And at the same time, we need to remember that its status as a hegemonic kind of image belongs to a relatively short episode—probably a passing chapter—in the human history of being with images.

FIGURE 7. Carleton Watkins, *Multnomah Falls, Oregon* (1867). Photograph. Image courtesy of the Getty Open Content Program.

AE Photography is so central to our lives, and at this particular time—the time of the pandemic—it seems that our being with photography is even more intense and intimate than ever before. In the book, you reflect on a triangular relation of the visible, the visual and the virtual, which offer a relevant toolbox for thinking of the "pandemic subject." What can the histories of photography tell us about our pandemic time?

HK The "visible," "visual," and "virtual" are key concepts for thinking of images. The visible has to do with the appearance of the environment to a living, embodied eye immersed in modes of

seeing. Having a surrounding world that is visible to us is something we share with animal life. When, on a hike, we see the big rocks that have rolled down the slope and blocked our path, the surroundings are visible to us just as they were to the deer who stood there earlier.

The visual, on the other hand, has to do with the *visualization of* the visible and is therefore most clearly manifest in cultures in which image-making is central. In the domain of the visual, the tree is transformed into a picture of a tree and its meanings become part of the literary matrix of language. The visual is anchored in a second-order human relation to what is seen. And one of the main features it inserts into the visible is a frame structure. The visual is an enframed visibility which, as such, appears as a totality: an inherently relational matrix that, under certain circumstances, can separate itself from the visibility of nature and assert its independence.

When the visual turns its back on the visible, the *virtual* comes to life. The caesura from nature allows images to act as autonomous: to forget their roots and replace nature with a visual excess we might call an image pandemic. A common context in which this happens is when technical algorithms establish themselves as the rule of the visual.

AE But given this proliferation, can we nevertheless talk about photography's origin or actual beginnings? Wouldn't you want to say that photography was plural from the start, "photographies" rather than "photography"?

HK That's a great question. The story I tell has a beginning which is the invention of photography. But this is not a simple, discrete starting point as much as a complicated moment caught in between its pasts and futures. The book is interested in the birth of photography as a traumatic event that ruptured our life with images. And, as in a birth trauma, photography's inception could become meaningful only retroactively. More specifically, I show that from its very beginning, photography needed to hide its mechanical birthmark, whose presence created a contradiction that it could not contain. This contradiction was precisely what opened up photography's new visuality, but at the same time, it was also what prevented photography from grounding the meaningfulness of its images. Haunted by a void, I argue that photography had to negotiate different strategies in order to

FIGURE 8. W. H. F. Talbot, *Photomicrograph of Insect Wings* (ca. 1840). Photomicropgraph. Public domain.

FIGURE 9. W. H. F. Talbot, *The Haystack* (ca. 1841). Salted paper print from paper negative. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Public domain.

FIGURE 10. W. H. F. Talbot, *A Peony Leaf Above Leaves of a Species of Chestnut* (n.d.). Photogenic drawing. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY Public Access Initiative.

assert itself as meaningful and come into its own as a distinctive pictorial medium.

AE You are particularly interested in the British inventor of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, and his book—the first book with photographs—*The Pencil of Nature* (1844). It is not merely his achievement of being one of the very first to invent a

FIGURE 11. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Carmel Caves)* (2019). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

photographic process that makes him such an important figure for you, but rather the kind of relationship he proposed with the new medium. What was Talbot's role in shaping what you describe as a new visual era?

HK Talbot is an intriguing figure. He was an empirical scientist, but also a philologist and a humanist with an interesting historical consciousness. On a philosophical level, however, I first of all see in him a proto-phenomenologist: a thinker attuned to the question of phenomena. This is also what makes him so attentive to nature and the experience of shadows. It is precisely his original

FIGURE 12. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *Fossils and Shells* (ca. 1839). Daguerreotype. Public domain.

understanding of shadows that opens up, for him, the path to an invention of a new image-making process.

AE However, with the publication of *The Pencil of Nature* Talbot shifted his approach to photography: from a phenomenology of the shadow to a more mechanistic view of the natural world.

HK You're right. This tension between his phenomenological sensibility, his attentiveness to and love of nature and, on the other hand, his "cost-effective" determination to instrumentalize nature, is clearly seen already in his early epithet for the invention: photography, for him, was the "Art of Fixing Shadows." Whereas the interest in shadows grows out of an understanding of nature's self-expressivity, the idea of fixing shadows points in the opposite direction. It resonates with the mechanistic transformation and control over natural appearances. Photography as a "fixed" or morphed shadow is, in fact, a mutilation of nature's gift which is intrinsically temporal and evanescent. Given that shadows originally belong to the condition of whatever is "under the sun," photography's transmutation of the shadow is, in

my view, a new stage in our human relation to the phenomenality of nature. And this is ultimately tied to the evolution of the "pandemic subject" you mentioned earlier.

AE There is an important point here: what is interesting about the Victorian approach to nature is not what we can learn about nature itself but rather how nature appears as a construct. How nature operates within culture. And photography seems to be playing a big role in this story not only in relation to nature but in a deeper sense.

HK The figure of "the pencil of nature" resonates with this precise duality. Nature ultimately needs *techne*. And *techne* not only originates in nature, but also marks the incompleteness of nature. Photography's initial love of nature goes hand in hand with the separation from nature whose eventual consequences are the destruction and disappearance of nature.

AE So, there are also ecological implications here—

HK —Yes, which can be seen, for example, in the early-twentieth-century ads for hand cameras where hunting becomes the prevalent analog or metaphor for the practice of photography: "If you want to take it, take it with a Kodak," or, "There are no game laws for those who hunt with a Kodak." The underlying assumption is that nature is at man's disposal, available for consumption. At the same time, we also hear in these ads the echoes of the game laws and conservationism of the early twentieth century with its growing realization that nature and natural resources are, in fact, exhaustible. In this sense, the camera was a perfect tool for sublimating that urge to exploit nature by offering a sustainable alternative that adhered to newly established conservationist restraints.

AE For that reason photography also had a major role in colonialism: the shift from thinking about nature itself to nature as understood by culture is connected to one of the key ideas in *Photography and Its Shadow*. Photography expands this "Kantian shift" from nature itself to the visible world at large.

HK Yes. The appearance of nature, the field of natural phenomena, whose traditional sense was that of "the visible," can no longer be understood independently of the virtual. One of the book's

FIGURE 13. Apollo 17, *The Blue Marble* (1972). Photograph. Public domain.

main concerns is to articulate the role of photography in this radical transformation, which furthermore bears heavily on the future trajectories of the photographic. I think that it is only in our age, the digital age of the connected image, of satellites and drones, of Google Glass and GoPro, that the logical consequences of this initial transformation have fully materialized. And, here, I argue that it is precisely the fulfilment of photography's logical essence that marks, today, the dissolution of the photographic.

AE There is a certain uniqueness to photography's visuality, which is also connected to the question of representation. There is a gap between the thing and its photographic representation (on

FIGURE 14. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Bauhaus, Wadi Musa)* (2019). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the photographer.

its various mechanisms). There is a gap or a difference between the visible and the visual that our imagination or photographic imagination is bridging over.

HK The imagination is an important prism for thinking about photography. And it's interesting that Kant revolutionizes this philosophical concept precisely at the time of the first experimentations with photography, at the end of the eighteenth century.

Up until Kant, the imagination was understood in opposition to actual perception, taken as the ability to *imagine*, i.e., to create fantasy or utopia. For Kant, however, the imagination has yet another more fundamental sense which is not at all

opposed to visual perception. For him, the fact that vision can frame meaningful appearances—can see what's on the table, for example, *as* a flower vase—is a significant achievement that is made possible by the faculty of the imagination. The imagination is the *modus operandi* by which an image becomes (legible as) an image. Analogously, I suggest we think of photography's imagination as the mode, the conditions, the visual mechanism, by which the visible takes on the form of a photograph.

AE I think that the conversation about the imagination is really important here, and that it's not only how the imagination conditions photography but also how photography shapes our imagination. In a way, photography enables this sort of imagination just by the way that you're looking at my photograph or my image or when you try now, when we communicate on Zoom, to make sense of or to construct the space behind me which is wider and richer than the one that appears on your screen. In this sense, it's really fruitful to talk of this Kantian idea in a way that goes hand in hand with the visuality of the photographic.

HK To say that photography has an imagination of its own is to imply that it does not function as a passive imprint of some given visibility. The imagination, as Kant had it, is "productive." And the question is what we make of this shaping power that photography has in visualizing the world, for us. This question was also central to the initial nineteenth-century debate, around the artfulness of photography. Does photography enhance or kill the imagination?

AE In *Photography and Its Shadow*, you speak of both Baudelaire and Benjamin who, in different ways and in different times, saw the delimiting effects which the photographic has on the imagination. But unlike Baudelaire, who saw the negative sides of photography, Benjamin had a way around this negativity and was also open to the productive qualities of photography's visuality. How do you understand Benjamin's position on the imagination?

HK You're right that Benjamin, like Baudelaire, recognizes the advent of a new, mechanically based, visuality; and that Benjamin, unlike Baudelaire, is also attracted to the genuinely new visual possibilities opened by the camera's mechanical eye. He is in-

trigued by the space of the photographic which the embodied eye can retroactively look at (through images) without ever being part of that space. What's unique about photographic images, he tells us, is that they don't develop from the eye's conscious—fully intended—appropriation of the visible, but depend rather on an optics that brings into play dimensions of reality that typically remain invisible to the eye in its ordinary routines. Photography's ability to articulate for the eye dimensions that were previously invisible is where his intriguing notion of the "optical unconscious" comes into the picture.

AE The Marxist in Benjamin is indeed interested in the camera as a mode of production, a mechanical eye whose visuality produces a new objectivity. However, for you, this is just another attempt to ground and anchor photography.

HK Benjamin's "optical unconscious" opened a truly new path for a dynamic, nonpositivistic articulation of photographic representation. The background for that was the modernist exploration of photography's machine structure which was clearly an exciting moment. This modernist vision not only allowed for new and surprising experimentations, but, in a sense, also brought photography closer to itself (to its mechanistic essence). At the same time, we need to notice that in embracing the technological as its essence, modern photography reproduced yet another metanarrative that obscured its groundlessness and asserted, instead, the identity of its visuality.

AE Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," ties photography's machine vision to the degeneration of the fullness of human experience. This is an idea that has become even more relevant in the current pandemic, when virtual images are replacing in-person experiences. However, photography also has deep roots in another important paradigm, one that coincides with the human existential drama: the drama of loss, memory, and desire, or what you call in the book the "Butades complex" in reference to a myth that originated in the ancient world, which was revived in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, and which has become crucial for photography.

FIGURE 15. Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid* (1782–85). Oil on canvas, 106.3 x 130.8 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

HK Pliny's tale of the maid of Corinth who faces the imminent departure or death of her lover and who draws on her wall an outline of his cast shadow enjoyed great popularity in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture; and as photography came on stage, it adopted this origin scene (associated with the birth of drawing) as if it were its own. It was important for photography, from its very beginning, to locate itself at that intersection of *eros* and *thanatos*, and to imagine itself, like drawing and painting, as developing from a natural negative, a shadow, that belongs, in both the literal and figurative sense, to the core of human life in which desire and love is ineluctably suffused with absence and death. In Pliny's ancient imaginary, photography found the features it needed in order to establish its own primal scene: the copy, the trace, the index, and the positive–negative relation, as well as more general "transcendental" themes such as the triangular structure of presence,

absence, and re-presentation, or, when taking a more psychoanalytic guise, of a desired object, loss, and substitution.

AE Here again, photography, the orphaned child, is appropriating a well-established myth of the origin in order to make it its own. Do you think the assimilation of this tale of origin reflects photography's need for legitimacy and a desire to be part of the long history of painting?

HK Yes, but this would only be one aspect of the story. The "Butades complex" is yet another photographic metanarrative that upholds the meaningfulness of photography's images by rooting them in the drama of human transience and the imperative of memorialization.

AE Although photography from its very beginning was looking for legitimacy within traditional artistic media, it took almost a century from its invention for it to be fully recognized as art. By saying this I mean that only then did museums start to collect photography and have departments that specialize in photography. And in this context, photography's ability to capture and articulate the human drama or the human condition—its singularities and universal aspects—also defined the discourse of photography as contemporary art.

HK I think that this understanding has been one of the most prevalent and consistently effective strategies in the history of photography. It's especially interesting how since the 1970s the Butades picture has resurfaced in new guises. You can find it at the heart of Roland Barthes, or Victor Burgin's photography theory, and then in a whole spectrum of very different photographers from Lee Friedlander to Steven Shore to Richard Avadon to Nan Goldin to Sally Mann and up to even Sophie Calle who all, in different ways, are possessed by the photograph's ability to touch (into) the passing of time and to hold onto the memory of bygone moments.[1] This typically goes together with a whole ethos of the embodied involvement of the photographer in the actuality of life, of situations, of events.

1 For a more detailed discussion of all of these figures, see *Photography and Its Shadow*. For Barthes, see 89–105; for Friedlander and Shore, see 126–30; for Goldin, see 178–82; for Calle, see 182–86.

AE But if these are only metanarratives, what is actually the truth of photography? In your book, Nietzsche and his perspectivism have an important role. Can you explain how Nietzsche's philosophy is relevant for understanding photography?

HK Nietzsche, for me, is the first and, in many ways, the most interesting photo philosopher. Born in 1844, he belongs to a generation whose world has just become photographable. Nietzsche's explicit comments on photography are few, but the basic concepts of his radical philosophy offer unique tools for articulating the new logic of appearance that was brought about by photography. This is a logic of appearance that has only today become manifest with our current visual technologies. Moreover, Nietzsche thinks of man as an animal whose constitution is still open, and in this sense the history of technology can, in principle, shape who we are to become.

AE What Nietzschean concepts are you specifically thinking of?

HK I'm thinking of a "square" of concepts which consists of Nietzsche's "Death of God," "perspectivism," "eternal recurrence," and "the will to power."

Let me say something about the first two ideas (which are at the center of Part III of *Photography and Its Shadow*). Photography, as I understand it, emerges with the death of God, a condition marked by the disintegration of a unifying frame through which the world's meaning can coherently show itself. The death of God is the collapse of the possibility of an overarching principle that could uphold human value and meaning. When a world—or a universe—becomes a homogeneous, valueless, "godless" space, all that is left are perspectives, points of view, that are equally valid and equally meaningful or meaningless. This is perspectivism, which I take to be fundamental to the being of photography. For Nietzsche, only "the artistically creative subject" is willing to accept the perspectival structure of the real and experience the "vast confusion of contradictory perspectives" ((1873) 1999, 148).

AE But how exactly is photography tied to perspectivism?

HK The primal fact of photography is the separation of the image-making device from the human body (the embodied eye, the hand). This has created an irreversible—albeit inconspicu-

FIGURE 16. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Sodom and Gomorrah)* (2016). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

ous—caesura between the domain of images and our embodied ways of seeing and making sense of the visible. Photographers can, of course, still take an embodied stance in relation to their work. But the inner logic of the mechanical apparatus is perspectival. Think here of Talbot's first cameras, the "mouse traps" which he placed throughout the grounds of his estate in Lacock. What was innovative about them was that they were not anchored in the vision of an embodied living subject. They were "neutral" viewpoints, perspectives, that belong to an extended, infinite field of options for visual representation.

AE The question to be asked here is how the divide between the photographic apparatus and the human body affect the visual field?

HK The autonomy of the visual apparatus means that every point in space becomes a potential point of view for taking a photograph. When this is the case, then the visualization of the visible becomes essentially limitless. Everything visible can, in principle, become photographically visual from an indefinite number of perspectives. In this sense, the logic of photography is imperialistic (apropos your earlier point about photography and colonialism). And yet, photography's rule of the visible is neither centralized nor coherent. What photography created is a visuality that consists of an indefinite multitude of viewpoints that are equally valid and that refuse to coalesce. The photographic appearance of a human face, for example, is indiscriminately attached and equally indifferent to what is seen from the eye of another person, an insect, or a satellite. The "same" photographed face can take the form of a traditional, frontal, "humanistic" portrait, but it may even lose its human character altogether and appear as an alien creature or, in an extreme closeup, as a field of pores and bumps, as mere organic matter.

AE I guess this bears on photography's central metanarratives. I can see how this undermines Roland Barthes's position, that is, his grounding of photography's essence in the access it gives us viewers to the "That has been," or as he terms it, "the Intractable."[2]

HK Exactly. If photography can only offer us are perspectives, how can it claim to frame for us a bygone moment or an original event? Its perspectivism doesn't allow photography to uphold any self-identical form or sense, since it has no logos, no way of arbitrating, no way of privileging certain facts over others—it only has perspectives. And today, more than ever, it is gradually turning its perspectivism into the inner rule of the visible which serves an all-encompassing capitalist visual order in leveling the sphere of everyday experience. The question here, I take it, is whether photography still has a future in which it could find

2 For fuller discussion of this idea, see *Photography and Its Shadow,* 98–105.

FIGURE 17. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Lot's Wife)* (2016). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

alternatives to the logic of the new capitalism, alternatives that depend on new creative ways of seeing.

AE Today, there is a lot of pressure on artists and intellectuals to respond to the new situation, and to articulate how the difficulty we're experiencing thanks to COVID-19 can also be an opportunity. For me this past year has been quite paralyzing, but there was something about our conversation and this uncertain time of the pandemic that motivated me to go out with a large-format camera, something that I rarely do, and photograph around my house and studio, my neighborhood in Chicago. But, to return to

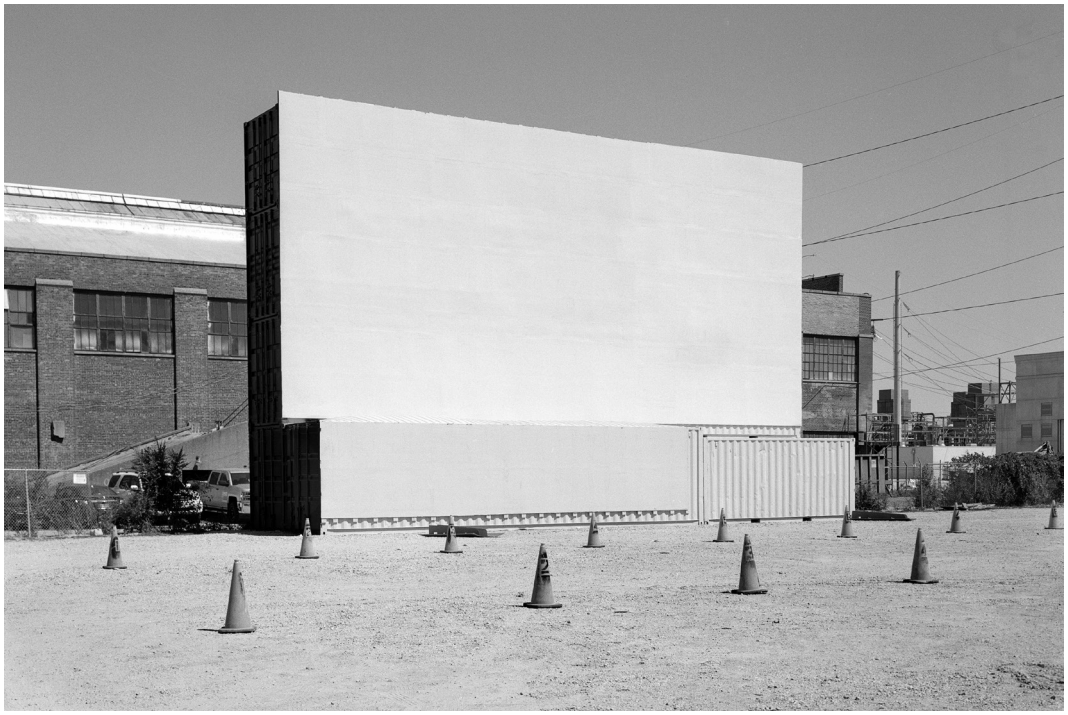


FIGURE 18. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Pandemic Drive In)*, 2020. Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

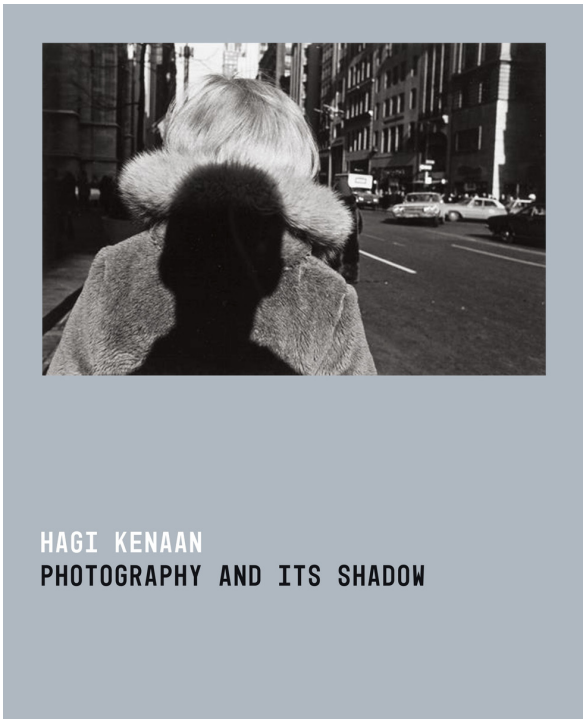
the book, how does it help us in responding to questions about the presence of images in these trying days of COVID-19?

HK The book's starting point is that photography is an *Existential*. That's a term borrowed from Heidegger to describe the very basic structures of human existence. As such, the question of the photographic image should be articulated and answered in terms of who we are, who we have become and who we are becoming. In other words, the future of the image is the future of humanity and vice versa. The last few months accelerated and accentuated the presence of processes that were already there. Some of these processes are alarming not only in the threat they pose to human freedom and to basic forms of being social, but also because they play a formative part in the emergence of a new subjectivity: the "pandemic subject" that ties so well into the phantasmatic visuality of apps such as FaceApp, an AI-based portrait editing app, and, on the other hand, the visuality of images that are products of current surveillance technologies. But the perspectivism we talked about can also be a key to new, subversive, alternative ways of doing things with images.

AE So the "pandemic subject" presents another metanarrative for photography: connectivity at the times of physical distancing, striving to create a web of intersubjective relationships—I can think of all kinds of interesting performances with Zoom—on one hand, and surveillance and control on the other.

HK The image, I think, is never one thing or another. It always comes double because humans are open ended creatures. It is typically part of a metanarrative, but, also, in its futurity, it is part of an openness to new possibilities, new forms of life. While the photographic is, today, in so many ways embedded into—and serves—the mechanisms of a surveillance society, it has also been central, as we've seen in the last few months, to acts of protest and genuine solidarity, as we have seen this year in the US and Israel, the countries in which each of us lives these days.

FIGURE 19. Assaf Evron and Hagi Kenaan, Zoom Conversation. Credit: Assaf Evron.



Hagi Kenaan (Ph.D., Yale University) is a professor of philosophy and the Chair of the Philosophy Department at Tel Aviv University. He specializes in twentieth-century continental philosophy, with particular attention to aesthetics and the philosophy of art. In recent years, his work has focused on the ontology and ethics of images, from cave art to street art to photography and VR.

Kenaan is co-editor of *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking* (Springer, 2011). He is also the author of *The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language* (Columbia University Press, 2005), *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze* (Tauris, 2013), and, most recently, *Photography and Its Shadow*.

Assaf Evron is an artist and a photographer based in Chicago. His work investigates the nature of vision and the ways in which it reflects in socially constructed structures, where he applies photographic thinking in various two and three-dimensional media. Looking at moments along the histories of modernism, Evron questions the construction of individual and collective identities, immigration (of people, ideas, and images), and the representations of democracy.

His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums internationally including the Museum for Contemporary Art in Chicago, Crystal Bridges Museum for American Art, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Evron holds an MA from the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University, as well as an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where he currently teaches.

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