

## **An Aesthetic of Absence**

### *Critical Counter-narratives of Journalistic Story-telling in Eva Leitolf's Photography*

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#### ***Abstract:***

The photographs of Eva Leitolf subvert the representation of “reality” in journalistic storytelling, linked to the complex relationship of text and image. In developing an *aesthetic of absence*, Leitolf's photographs differ from conventional ways of representing fraught images. The absence of the pictured crime, of an “event,” positions itself against an “overconstructed” photograph, questioning what viewers believe in and about a photograph as a document with indisputable historical/political value.

#### ***Résumé:***

Les photographies d'Eva Leitolf subvertissent la représentation de la « réalité » dans le discours journalistique grâce à l'exploitation de la relation complexe entre le texte et l'image. En développant une *esthétique de l'absence*, les photographies de Leitolf se distinguent des façons conventionnelles de représenter les « fraught images ». L'absence de la figuration d'un crime, ou d'un « évènement », se positionne à l'encontre d'une photographie « surconstruite », interrogeant de la sorte les croyances des spectateurs dans la photographie comme document à la valeur historique et politique indiscutable.

#### ***Keywords:***

documentary photography, Eva Leitolf, aesthetic of absence, counter-narratives of journalistic storytelling



*Image 1*  
*Orange Grove, Rosarno, Italy 2010*

*In January 2010 the price obtained by Calabrian citrus growers for their Moro and Navel oranges was five euro cents per kilogram. They paid their mostly illegally employed and undocumented African and Eastern European seasonal workers between €20 and €25 for a day's work. Depending on the variety and the state of the trees a worker can pick between four and seven hundred kilograms of oranges in a day. The business was no longer profitable and many farmers left the fruit to rot.*

*During the 2009–2010 harvest there were between four and five thousand migrants living in and around Rosarno, most of them in abandoned buildings or plastic shelters, without running water or toilets.*

*On 7 January 2010 local youths fired an air-gun at African orange-pickers returning from work and injured two of them. The ensuing demonstration by migrant workers ended in severe clashes with parts of the local population, during which cars were set on fire and shop windows broken. Accommodation used by seasonal workers was burned and hundreds fled, fearing the local citizens or deportation by the authorities.*

*On 9 January, under police protection from jeering onlookers, about eight hundred Africans were bussed out to emergency accommodation in Crotona and Bari.*

*A Season in Hell: MSF Report on the Conditions of Migrants Employed in the Agricultural Sector in Southern Italy, January 2008; tagesschau.de, 10 January 2010; interviews with orange farmers and seasonal labourers, Rosarno, 27–29 January 2010.*

An orange tree standing on a field, filled with fruit, most of them overripe, fallen on the muddy ground. Dry, high-growing reed plants in the background, and above, an almost blue sky (image 1). This is a colorful, well-balanced composition, which could be located at any of the numerous orange groves in southern Europe. But how might one read the photograph—as a symbol of fruitfulness/fertility, a contemporary Garden of Eden? Is the landscape truly as innocent as it appears at first glance?

The atmospheric and unobtrusive photo is part of the series *Postcards from Europe* by German photographer Eva Leitolf.<sup>1</sup> First exhibited at Villa Massimo, Rome (2012), and then at Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany in 2013, the picture conceals a dark history linked to the circumstances and place where the tree is located.<sup>2</sup> Next to the hanging photograph, visitors find a stack of postcards with a simple, unemotional description of its frightening background.

Leitolf planned the series *Postcards from Europe* as an “open-ended archive,”<sup>3</sup> documenting the desperate situation of migrants at the European borders from a *different* point of view.<sup>4</sup> Since 2006 the project has taken her to Spain and the Spanish exclaves of Melilla and Ceuta in Morocco, to the Hungarian borders with Serbia and Ukraine, to the Channel ports of Calais and Dover, to southern Italy, and to Greece, in order to witness the distressing situation of migrants at European borders.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Leitolf’s photographs track a tragedy that could be called the biggest failure of human rights in the European Union, or the fact that more than 23,000 people have lost their lives in the last fourteen years while attempting to reach Europe.<sup>6</sup>

In Hannover, twenty different photographs in her series were exhibited, presented on archival boards alongside each other, close to the wall, and each in a portrait format with the same size (68.6 x 83.5cm). The visitors were meant to get close to the images and to find an unpretentious description of the place/crime where the photographs were taken. Subsequently, they would discover the harrowing stories behind the images, all of them suspended in a similarly disturbing moment of silence and *emptiness/absence* of a “real” event such as, for example, a peaceful-looking beach scene in Tarifa, Spain, contrasted with a shocking note (image 2) or a picturesque shot showing an open view to the ocean in a nature reserve in Italy, to which truly disturbing information is added (image 3):

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1. The full series can be found online on the artist’s homepage: <http://www.evaleitolf.de/> (accessed August 1, 2014).

2. A detailed background about the circumstances in Rosarno has been described by journalist Johan Kornder in his article “Früchte des Zorns,” in *Amnesty International Journal* (Aug 2010), <https://www.amnesty.de/journal/2010/august/fruechte-des-zorns> (accessed August 1, 2014).

3. Interview with Camilla Boemio, <http://www.landscapistories.net/interviews/eva-leitolf?lang=en>, accessed August 1, 2014.

4. See interview with Camilla Boemio. More and detailed information about the hopeless situation of migrants at the European border can be found on the homepage of Amnesty International: <http://www.whenyoudontexist.eu/at-the-borders-of-europe-facts-and-figures/>, accessed August 1, 2014.

5. See interview with Camilla Boemio.

6. Maximilian Popp, “Europe’s Deadly Borders: An Inside Look at EU’s Shameful Immigration Policy” *Spiegel Online*, September 9, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/europe-tightens-borders-and-fails-to-protect-people-a-989502.html> (accessed September 12, 2014).



*Image 2*  
*Playa de los Lances, Tarifa, Spain 2009*

*A boat carrying twenty-three undocumented Moroccan immigrants went down off Tarifa during a severe storm on 1 November 1988. The bodies of ten who drowned were washed up on the beach at Los Lances. Nine were never found and there were four survivors.*  
*A vessel with more than thirty people on board sank near Tarifa on 15 September 1997. Six passengers survived, fourteen corpses were found on the Playa de los Lances and an unknown number were lost at sea.*

*El País, 2 November 1988 and 16 September 1997; Diario de León, 9 October 2002*



*Image 3*  
*Vendicari Nature Reserve, Italy 2010*

*On 27 October 2007 two walkers came across several shoes washed up on a beach in the nature reserve of Vendicari. During the following days seventeen corpses were found there. On their own initiative the couple obtained a list of the names of the dead from the authorities, contacted the relatives in Egypt and Palestine and arranged for a Muslim funeral to be held. About one hundred people attended the ceremony officiated by the imam of Catania on 1 November 2008, including relatives of the dead and local police. The events led to the founding of Borderline Sicilia.*

*RagusaNews.com, 24 October 2008; interview with journalist Roman Herzog, Noto, 23 January 2010*

The separation of image and text creates a certain tension between the iconic quality of the photographs and the journalistic aspect of the facts, raising the question of what can be seen and what is left to the viewers' imagination.<sup>7</sup> But why has Leitolf transferred strategies of journalistic storytelling into an art context, playing with the different meanings of a text and image relationship?

Furthermore, Leitolf not only designed the *Postcards from Europe* series for the exhibition/art space, but also published excerpts from it in a journalistic context, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*.<sup>8</sup> By placing the photographs in a newspaper magazine, linked to a specific tradition of image-making and storytelling, her strong interest in the aesthetics of documentary becomes obvious. In an age where people are overwhelmed by media images, mostly used to shock in order to gain attention, Leitolf asks how the form of documentary photography offers new spaces for viewer reflection. The crux of the matter is then: how can photography in the art context reflect on journalistic storytelling by questioning its documentary standards?

The main problem/challenge of the documentary form might be found in the presentation of "reality": while its defenders believe that documentary images reproduce facts that help to unveil/picture an "essence" of truth, its critics regard the idea of a documented "truth" as a social construction, reproducing ideologies/functions of power.<sup>9</sup> Leitolf's interpretation of documentary photography seems to strike at the heart of this problem. In combining a neutral text and photo that blatantly refuses to reveal the described crime, in fact, she develops a critical counter-narrative to journalistic or "conventional" documentary storytelling. After reading the text of the photographs, certain expectations and images are evoked. Yet Leitolf's images do not illustrate the referenced disasters; they refuse to show the deported seasonal workers or the dead bodies washed ashore. Instead, they trace only the "innocent" landscape where the disaster occurred, thus capturing a disturbing moment of absence and silence.

In doing so, Leitolf plays with the indexical character of photography, creating a *double absence*: an empty space between text and photograph as well as between the indexical image (photograph) and the imagined image. Whereas traditional documentary photography uses the indexical status of the medium to refer to the pictured facts, Leitolf refuses to illustrate the described crime, or to show the crime at all—she confronts the viewers with non-events. Her images, moreover, do something that conventional documentary photography does not: they avoid giving space for visual/literary identification and open up a process of inquiry for the viewers through an *aesthetic of absence*. Yet which aspects of the "truth" do Leitolf's photographs manifest, compared to traditional, journalistic image-making? And wherein lies the critical impact of such an *aesthetic of absence*?

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7. The separation of text and image becomes even more obvious in the slipcase published during the exhibition. It is designed with twenty archive plates and texts (English/German, 29.7 x 40 cm) and consists of postcards showing the photographs with the texts on their backside describing the story behind each pictured crime. See: *Postcards from Europe 03/13*, Kehrer Heidelberg, 2013.

8. See *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, Nr. 33 (August 17, 2012), 9-15. The seven photographs are published with the "description" of the crime on the same page below, as shown in this essay. Besides, Leitolf she has produced several photo series since the early 1990s for *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, such as "Rinaldo ist ein Esel," *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin* Nr.16/1193, S.22/23. See Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, "Die Welt als Ganzes" in: Ex. Cat. *Die Welt als Ganzes. Fotografie aus Deutschland nach 1989* (Ostfildern-Ruit 2000), 8–33, here 20-22.

9. See Hito Steyerl, *Politics of Truth - Dokumentarismen in the Art Field*, Springerin (2003), [http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft\\_text.php?textid=1353&lang=en](http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1353&lang=en) (accessed August 1, 2014); and Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Wien: Turia + Kant, 2008).

As famously theorized by Susan Sontag, photographs are always an interpretation of the world, and this interpretation, be it by the photographers or viewers of the image, is affected by conventions and ideologies. In her collection of essays, *On Photography*, Sontag discusses the negative effects of mass reproduction and distribution of images, especially when it comes to photographs that are used to witness war crimes and historic events by utilizing “shock” aesthetics. From this point of view, Sontag is especially interested in the strong interrelation between the indexical status of photography in creating “traces of the real” and the “circulation and consumption of these traces.”<sup>10</sup> According to Sontag, the act of taking a photo creates a distance between photographer and reality, while simultaneously giving an illusion of participation—the negative consequence is a neutralization of meaning and events. In this sense the ambiguous character of a photograph is both “a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.”<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, Sontag compares photography with a symbolic weapon and the act of taking a picture with shooting, reifying people into objects.<sup>12</sup>

Leitolf’s photographs seem to strike at the heart this problem: they do not pretend to represent the “real” event, to have been there to “document” the crime. And they do not “shoot” people by objectifying their suffering. All they show are deserted landscapes—the pictured emptiness becomes a sign for the illusion of participation in traditional “shock” photos, as critiqued by Sontag. In this sense the photographed *absence* represents an ethical way to picture a crime, without showing the details of the suffering victim, like a wounded or dead body. Leitolf leaves it to the viewers to decide for themselves how thoroughly, and in what order they wish to explore the different levels of photographic meaning. The separation of text and image creates space to reflect on the question of what “real” means—there are no “victims” or “perpetrators,” no pictured stereotypes allowing easy identification.<sup>13</sup> In this manner, the deserted landscapes, in combination with the texts, become a launching point to interrogate how meaning is constructed in the first place. In the line with Sontag, Leitolf’s photographs try to re-integrate viewers’ reflections on “the real” in order to reach a new quality of participation with the pictured crime.

Published as a series of twenty photographs taken over a long duration (six years),<sup>14</sup> Leitolf’s images fascinate by their precision and detailed background knowledge. Her photographs illustrate at first glance a visual distance, picturing “innocent” landscapes as silent witnesses of the tragedy. Yet the artist participates actively and in an intimate way. During the process of the series’ production, Leitolf spent a long time living at the places where the crime took place, researching the “facts,” observing the surroundings, and talking to different people about the circumstances.<sup>15</sup> In her careful observation and long-term research lies another critical counter-narrative of journalistic storytelling, questioning the growing information flow and the non-authored image circulation in contemporary media. As a result,

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10. See Peter Geimer: *Theorien der Fotografie. Theorien der Fotografie zur Einführung*. Junius Hamburg, 2009, especially chapter 4.1. “Kritik der Bilderflut (Kracauer, Sontag),” here 157.

11. Sontag, *On Photography*, 16.

12. *Ibid.*, 14.

13. See Torsten Scheid: “An den Grenzen des Abbildbaren. Im Atelier von Eva Leitolf (At the borders of the picturable),” in *Points of View. Orte der Fotografie* (Heidelberg 2012), 37-41 (95, engl.).

14. See interview with Franziska Brückner: “Mehrfachbelichtung: Eva Leitoffs Arbeit im Prozess,” March 2009, <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/miscellanies/netzwerkmira-38541/137/PDF/137.pdf>, last access August 1, 2014.

15. See interview with Franziska Brückner.

the photographed *absence* accrues a kind of forensic quality, attempting to give back meaning to the photographed event.

Leitolf's work has often been described as a "combination of documentary and conceptual strategies," exploring the possibilities and limits of visual representation.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, her artistic education plays an important role. Born in 1966 in Germany, she studied photography at University GH Essen with Angela Neuke,<sup>17</sup> and earned her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts as student of Allan Sekula.<sup>18</sup> In this sense Leitolf's practice stands within the tradition of engaged documentary photography that, in the strictest definition, works "against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art."<sup>19</sup>

In the early 1990s with *German Evidence - Looking for Evidence*, a photo series depicting locations where immigrants were attacked in Germany after the fall of the Wall, Leitolf began to increasingly emphasize an "aesthetic of absence." As in *Postcards from Europe*, the second part of *German Evidence - Looking for Evidence* (2006-2008) combines short text notes with photographs taken from the different crime scenes.<sup>20</sup> The notes describe in the same neutral, dispassionate way the injustices that occurred at the pictured locations, such as in the example of a photograph displaying a sunny, summer lakeside scene (image 4) or a deserted street close to a bridge (image 5).

Designed as a series, *German Evidence - Looking for Evidence* consists of two parts: one taken between 1992 and 1994, the other between 2006 and 2008. Whereas the first section shows mostly interiors and people who have been directly and indirectly involved in the racist attacks of August 22-25, 1992 in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, the second part follows a different visual narrative. These photos show mostly deserted, beautiful landscapes, and question—as in *Postcards from Europe*—the innocence of the pictured locations. In an interview with Rémi Coignet, Leitolf states that the second part of the series aims to prevent a type of identification mostly linked to people, in order to create "images that look like an empty theatre where the viewer is able to project his own thoughts and emotions."<sup>21</sup>

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16. See interview with Camilla Boemio.

17. Neuke was part of an important movement of young German photographers during the late 1970s and early 1980s, known as "Autorenfotografie"—a term established by Klaus Honnef. The approach of this photography could be found in its combination of subjectivity with an analysis of social reality, in order to define photography's documentary function. Exh. Cat. *Die Welt als Ganzes. Fotografie aus Deutschland nach 1989* (Ostfildern-Ruit 2000), 134 f.

18. The artist and writer Allan Sekula, known for his politically pointed photographic and film projects, is a thoughtful critic of the social function and the use and abuse of photography and its documentary character in global power relations. See Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *The Massachusetts Review*, 19:4 (Dec 1978), 859-83; and chapter 4, "On Photography's Social Function: The Documentary Legacy," in Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 152-189.

19. See Sekula, 1978.

20. For the museum presentation of *German Evidence - Looking for Evidence*, the text notes have been located close to the entrance, so that the separation of text and image was even more drastic than in *Postcards from Europe*.

21. See interview with Rémi Coignet "Une conversation avec Eva Leitolf," in *Des livres et des photos* (January 25, 2012), <http://deslivresetdesphotos.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/01/25/une-conversation-avec-eva-leitolf/>, last accessed August 1, 2014.



*Image 4*  
*Schweriner See, near Berlin, 2006*

*A group of French and Italian teenagers – black and white – camping by the lake near Schwerin were attacked on 1 August 2006 by a German youth throwing bottles. The attacker gave the Hitler salute and went on with two friends to Gross Köris, where he smashed a window of an Asian take-away. Following police investigations, the three suspects were charged with criminal damage, displaying banned symbols and attempted grievous bodily harm, as well as a robbery committed later. One of the perpetrators was sentenced to two years youth custody (suspended), another to one year and six months youth custody (suspended), while the third was cautioned.*

*Landeskriminalamt Brandenburg, Staatsanwaltschaft Potsdam.*



*Image 5*  
*Pond, Viersen, 2007*

*A twenty-two-year-old man told the police in Viersen that on 10 July 2006 he had been verbally abused and physically assaulted by four young men on account of his skin colour. He said that he had succeeded in defending himself and getting away. The state security department of the Mönchengladbach police took charge of the investigation but was unable to identify any of the perpetrators.*

*Kriminalpolizei Mönchengladbach, Staatsanwaltschaft Mönchengladbach*

In creating “images that look like an empty theatre where the viewer is able to project his own thoughts and emotions”<sup>22</sup> Leitolf’s photographed, deserted landscapes become a placeholder for projection and imagination, standing in the tradition of the French pioneer of documentary photography, *Eugène Atget*. As Walter Benjamin observed concerning Atget’s Paris photos, the “emptiness” of the deserted streets plays a significant role in the construction of photographic meaning, becoming a sort of stage, a space for projection, *beyond* uncritical contemplation.<sup>23</sup> Benjamin compares Atget’s photographs with the scene of a crime and describes a sense of mysterious emptiness at the heart of Atget’s images, a feeling of uncanny incompleteness.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin addresses a politically significant aspect in the photographs of Atget: as mentioned earlier in his essay *A Small History of Photography*, Benjamin discovers the ability of photography “to give free play to the politically educated eye.”<sup>25</sup> Benjamin’s crucial point about photography is that one should never uncritically present a photograph as a document with undisputable historical/political value.<sup>26</sup> Following this position, Leitolf’s *double absence* between image and text allows viewers a kind of freedom and responsibility at the same time. Her documentary photographs uphold a tradition that “frames the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the deceitful beauty of Leitolf’s landscapes in *German Evidence - Looking for Evidence* could be read as a critical counter-narrative to journalistic story-telling in the media during this time, as art historian Inka Graeve Ingelmann notes:

[...] the shockingly graphic pictures in the tabloid newspapers and on television also offered many people the opportunity to distance themselves from those events and view them as something that had nothing to do with their own lives and their well-cultivated democratic self-image.<sup>28</sup>

A “shocking” aesthetic, used by photojournalists to document Nazi crimes, as well as asylum seekers, actually produced a distancing effect for viewers. They could assume an uninvolved stance—the perpetrators were “the others,” not those living next door. The photographic clichés, in other words, excluded viewers and created an “unreal” effect, which concealed the frightening circumstances and context of the images.

One of the earliest critiques of such an “explicit” aesthetics of shock, often a key characteristic of fraught images, goes back to Roland Barthes in his essay “Shock Photos.” Included in his *Mythologies* (1979), Barthes writes in his essay about a photo showing the execution of Guatemalan Communists. He provocatively suggests that “this photograph is not terrible in itself, and that the horror comes from the

22. See interview with Rémi Coignet “Une conversation avec Eva Leitolf,” in *Des livres et des photos* (January 25, 2012), <http://deslivresetdesphotos.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/01/25/une-conversation-avec-eva-leitolf/>, last accessed August 1, 2014.

23. See Walter Benjamin, *A Small History of Photography* (1931), 256.

24. See David Company, “Eugène Atget’s Intelligent Document,” in *Eugène Atget. Photographe de Paris, Errata Editions* (2009).

25. Benjamin, 251.

26. Sekula on Benjamin, see Sekula, 1978, 863.

27. *Ibid.*, 864.

28. See Inka Graeve Ingelmann, *Deutsche Bilder – eine Spurensuche in Rostock, Thale, Solingen und Bielefeld Rostock Ritz*, <http://www.evaleitolf.de/Ueber1.html> (accessed August 1, 2014).

fact that *we are looking at it* from inside our freedom.”<sup>29</sup> It is the same critique offered by Sontag—that the explicit visual language of framing a *fraught image*, of documenting the crime, creates a “pseudo-presence.” Yet Barthes goes further. For him, most “shock photos” have no effect on the viewer because of the almost overproduced quality of these photographs. Barthes states that “we are linked to these images only by a technical interest.”<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, images that are meant to “shock” in a traditional way are “overconstructed” and lose their effect due to the subdued presence of the photographer.<sup>31</sup> What Barthes longs for are photographs that offer an undiscovered residue of meaning beyond the photographer’s obvious intention, images that are not reducible to “language,” or photographs that offer an *imaginative space* for the viewer to “elaborate himself without being encumbered by the demiurgic presence of the photographer.”<sup>32</sup> This quality can be found in Leitolf’s concept of deserted landscapes.

What differentiates *her photography* from a conventional way of dealing with the evidentiary status of photographs, as critiqued by Sontag, Benjamin, and Barthes, is that Leitolf never treats the medium as one that falsifies “reality.” Interested in the prejudices and assumptions of viewers, she interrogates a photographer’s motives and a photograph’s larger relationship to the world. In doing so, Leitolf uses a quality that is typical for photofilmic images as such: she creates a distance, another temporal experience that permits the viewer to reflect more freely upon what he is seeing.<sup>33</sup> Concomitantly, she questions what viewers “believe” in, and about a photograph. The absence of the pictured crime, of an “event,” positions itself against an “overconstructed” photograph, giving the viewers space for their own imagination. It is a space that finally overcomes the distance to the photographed tragedy. In doing so, Leitolf’s *aesthetic of absence* offers a way to a conscious, critical reflection on photography—creating a present, not absent viewer.

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29. See Roland Barthes, “Shock-Photos,” in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 71-73.

30. *Ibid.*, 71.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 73.

33. See Raymond Bellour, “The Pensive Spectator,” in *Between-the-Images* (Zurich/Dijon: JRP|Ringier & Les Presses du Réel, 2012), 86-93.