

Speech on the award of the 2014 Karl Buchrucker Prize to Eva Leitolf
by Marion Glück-Levi and Serafine Lindemann

Eva Leitolf **Clearing**

“You cannot sleep. Every night you are thinking: When will my hearing be? After the hearing we will be able to think about the future. But just now you are desperate. You do not know what to do.” That is how a young refugee from Somalia describes his situation. One of 142 unaccompanied child refugees living in the disused barracks in Munich in 2011 and 2012. Spartan would be almost a compliment for the conditions these young people have to endure. Conditions are cramped, sometimes there are 180 living in accommodation set up for just 120. Ten hotplates and sixteen toilets between them. In some cases they are five or six to a room; sometimes bunk beds double as storage for the chairs, otherwise there is no room to move. No privacy, no room of one’s own, just the bed and perhaps the piece of wall next to it.

That was the situation until the end of 2013. In the meantime, the Bavarian social affairs minister has honoured her promise to house under-age refugees in smaller groups with closer supervision. But there are still more than fifty young people living in the Bayern-Kaserne.

Eva Leitolf’s photographs were taken before these changes. In *Clearing* she looks for the traces left by the occupants, her large-format photographs documenting what individual residents left on the walls. Scribbled words, sentences and pencil drawings on bare white walls fill most of the large-format photographs. A few personal belongings, laptops, mobiles and glimpses of carefully made beds are the only distractions in these almost minimalist compositions, conveying spatial perspective in some of the photographs. Even though we see next to nothing of the rooms themselves, their desolation is oppressive. We see nobody, and yet we sense the despair, the hopelessness the loneliness.

One wonders why the words “respect” and “rude” are written on one wall. What dreams do the female portraits represent? What the list of words was for, with “detain” right at the top?

Clearing was published in *Zeitmagazin* in December 2013. In that colour supplement format the photographs acquire a perplexing dimension all of their own. Now there is a name attached to each photograph. For example: Ahmad R. lived from 28 November 2011 until 28 June 2012 in Room 93. It is hard to make anything out on his wall. But the camera captures some of Ahmad’s few belongings lying on his bed. Or Ali A., who lived in Room 98 from 22 February until 2 October 2012. Here we see only a piece of wall on which individual words are scrawled. Fragments in the truest sense of the word Or Elias S., who stayed from 8 February until 12 July 2012 in Room 99. “His” piece of wall features almost artistic calligraphy, comprehensible only to someone from the same culture, familiar with this language and alphabet. Otherwise dots, like marks on a map...

Paradoxical as it may sound, there is something poetic about these images. Eva Leitolf succeeds in drawing the viewer in, above all in creating a confrontation with the unseen. How does our society treat those who seek protection, who need protection? How genuine is our talk of human dignity?

Eva Leitolf has been photographing the traces left by under-age refugees in the Bayern-Kaserne since 2011. She has got to know many asylum-seekers, with their traumas, worries, fears and hopes. Young

people who have landed here, far from home, far from friends and relatives, not knowing what the future will bring.

“Home is a place where you can stay”, says Eva Leitolf. And her photographs make that oppressively clear: The Bayern-Kaserne has no intention of being a home. Quite the contrary, even if almost all the young people have been there much longer than the planned three months. Some even longer than a year.

The photo series *Clearing*, realised as an exhibition during her year at Villa Massimo in Rome, operates in the realm between documentary research and artistic translation, between fact and metaphor. These snapshots of (apparently) empty places urge the viewer to look more closely: their power only becomes apparent on closer examination, when you peel away the layers. Therein lies the power, the fascination of these images. The viewer becomes part of an internal process. Leitolf’s photographic gaze shows these impersonal, almost abstract spaces to be conversation partners and confidence-keepers. We as viewers become drawn into this dialogue.

Eva Leitolf’s photographs may be devoid of figures, but there are always real people just out of sight. The absence is deliberate, creating space for the imagination. One could say she is counting on the viewer’s cooperation, for without this the images function “only” aesthetically. As Leitolf puts it herself: “Looking at images more closely, and paying more attention to events that have happened there, ultimately generates – I would hope – more critical movement, a critical impulse.” Her photographs are political statements we cannot ignore. We find ourselves looking into a parallel world that affects us all. We need to ask: how do we as a society relate to the growing numbers of people seeking refuge among us?

Eva Leitolf’s interest in questions of migration and racism date back to her student days in the 1990s. Her interest focuses not on portraying an individual story, but in the connotations that exist between the effect of image and the forming of opinion. In all her works she operates in the space between what is visible and what needs to be imagined. In the process she explores the possibilities and limits of the portrayable, or more precisely, the portrayal of the unseeable.

This is also documented very vividly in her other works, such as *Deutsche Bilder – eine Spurensuche*, which show places where acts of racist violence occurred. Or *By the Sea*, showing places where Greeks took their own lives out of desperation. Or her major series *Postcards from Europe*, begun in 2006. Here Eva Leitolf investigates how the states of Europe relate to the EU’s external borders. We see her picture of wooden ladders in the Spanish exclave of Melilla – and imagine bitter fighting between African refugees and Spanish police.

Eva Leitolf was born in 1966 and lives – when not travelling for her work – in the Bavarian Forest. She studied in Essen and California, and has exhibited in major galleries including the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, the Sprengel-Museum in Hannover and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. She also publishes regularly in *SZ-Magazin* and *Zeitmagazin*.

We are very pleased that Eva submitted *Clearing* for the 2014 Buchrucker Prize, allowing us to award this year’s prize to a work of photography. And we hope that example will encourage others. Congratulations, Eva Leitolf.