

## Multiple Exposure – Eva Leitolf’s Work in Process

Interview by Franziska Brückner of Netzwerk MiRA, March 2009.

In contrast to the racist “the boat is full” discourse, Eva Leitolf’s photographs show apparently calm and idyllic scenes. Her depictions of places where everyday racist violence has occurred can be understood as a counterbalance to the images of burning refugee hostels, in the sense that Leitolf’s work lays bare both the structural aspects of racism and its normalisation by the dominant society. Here the photograph is also conceived as a tool for the viewer, to stimulate a critical questioning of visual consumption, to encourage us to break with our preconceived ideas of “normality” and ultimately to engender a critical take on the visual altogether.

Leitolf: Before we begin with the interview and you ask me all your questions, I would like you to remind me briefly why you chose to approach me and why you think an interview with me belongs in your publication on critical migration research?

MiRA: In autumn 2008 I saw your exhibition “Deutsche Bilder – eine Spurensuche 1992–1994/2006–2008” at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, where you showed photographs of places where racist violence had occurred, as well as perpetrators and bystanders. What I experienced there was not a lightbulb moment, but perplexion. A brief moment where I wasn’t sure what unsettled me more, the fact that there is nothing “wrong” to be seen in the photos or the fact that I found myself unable to “comprehend” these images, at least not simply on the basis of their titles. And then I asked myself why the horror lies in the unseen, because what the pictures show is a positively uncanny idyll – in many cases devoid of people – but I could sense that I did not want to be there. And just a second later I asked myself whether this ordinariness of the images relates to the ordinariness of the crimes, which I as the viewer do not see, whose eye-witness I was not, and yet still happened. And some of whose public visual treatment perhaps remains in my memory. And this set off inside me an intense process of viewing, indeed a process of revelation, not least through the descriptions of the acts of right-wing violence in the detailed information sheet that was provided for visitors to the exhibition. We – Netzwerk MiRA – had already been looking at images from the 1990s from the historian’s perspective in connection with our critical migration research, but those had been the sensationalist images of supposedly uncontrollable asylum-seekers.

This leads straight to the topic of racism, racist violence, which we had been examining, from the perspective of a psychologist, political scientist and writer, above all in its linguistic forms. But we find it important to combine and connect many forms of knowledge production, to confront them productively with one another and thus to cast a wider but perhaps also quite different gaze on the world, on migration and displacement and the issues and problems that accompany it. We are always asking ourselves how we can speak about topics without reproducing the existing, both topically and perspectively, and have come to the conclusion that a kind of reattribution of words and images must also be a part of this process. Your work, Eva, represents a kind of lived practice of this critique of critical migration research. What led you to the issue of racist violence in the first place, what motivated you? Does your work involve an intention to educate about racism?

Leitolf: I wouldn't say I had an educational intention. We all know about the different forms of racist and xenophobic violence that occur every day. In the early nineties, when I first began working on the subject, I was troubled by the way the media – from the supposedly “serious” *Spiegel* and the television news to the sensationalist *Bild am Sonntag* – presented the issues of migration, right-wing extremism and racist violence. *Spiegel* for example spent months on end constructing a “flood of asylum-seekers” in its title pages, where the “boat is full” and a “powerless state” can't deal with the “Nazi kids”. For me, racism represents a reason to reflect upon the mechanisms acting within society.

MiRA: What is your relationship to history? Do you see your work as part of what one could call critical visual history, in the sense of the photographic work as an act of (or aid to) memory?

Leitolf: “Memory work” is not a concept that means an awful lot to me, at least not in the sense of remembrance and commemoration. But of course history and the passage of time play a huge role in photography in general, and in my work too. As a photographer I just capture a moment, a state of space and time, which I perceive in that second, and at the same time construct. Seen like that an image, especially a photograph, shows something upon which a historian can draw. But in principle one could say that the concept of my “Deutsche Bilder” is based on the activation of personal and collective visual and other prior knowledge. Ultimately I end up revisiting my own visual material. My degree work examined the places and people, victims and perpetrators of acts of racist violence in the early nineties, at a time when there were already endless images on this subject, especially on television.

MiRA: Your works avoid (explicitly) focussing on victims of racist violence. Why? To what extent does the victims' perspective nonetheless guide your work? To what extent have you had to deal with this perspective, for example in discussions with victims of racist violence?

Leitolf: Especially in the newer part of the work (2006–2008) I developed an interest in structural questions. How are racist violence and its victims instrumentalised, and by whom? After the fire in Ludwigshafen in 2008, Turkish newspapers immediately spoke of a “second Solingen” while the state premier categorically excluded arson before the police investigation had even begun. In the process I have completely stopped showing people; I concentrate instead exclusively on crime scenes, supposed crime scenes and other places. I regard these empty everyday places in a sense as a stage. That would not have worked with people, whether they were victims, perpetrators or onlookers.

MiRA: How do you prepare your work, how much time do you spend at a place or with people to whom your photographs are then “dedicated”?

Leitolf: I devote an enormous amount of preparation and research to the places and events, but rather less to the people involved. I set myself very exacting standards concerning the facts, and also the transparency of the sources. At this point my interest in the events is foremost, only later in the process of creating my actual photographs does my photographic side, my photographic interest become stronger again. On site, I deliberately wait for my image to appear. Sometimes I will spend

days at a time in one place, observing a motif very closely. Then I have to wait until the image in my head appears before the camera. If that doesn't happen then I will leave again without a photo. But I prefer to get what I want and not a stopgap, something I didn't want simply in order to have something to show. And I also restrict the number of exposures I make; I like to have the confidence to be able to fail if need be.

MiRA: Do you think about particular reactions that you wish to provoke with your images? Does the viewer share in your take on the world, or do you try to objectify?

Leitolf: An emotional level is not a priority for me. We are overwhelmed by a flood of images, and I often ask myself whether I really need to add my tuppenceworth. But taking photographs is my means of expression, my tool, and producing my own images also allows me to avoid reproducing what I don't want to see, or can't stand seeing any more. Visual emotainment – in the sense of images that sensationally generate or exploit emotionality – is foreign to me. Of course images can generate emotions. Personally I prefer it if images keep some kind of secret at the purely visual level, quite independently of their context, where the image does not spell out every last detail. I would say that my photographs certainly supply personal perspective and objectification in equal measure. I have a long preparatory phase, preparing the image, researching. In that way my photograph of a place or motif gradually comes together on the basis of the facts I acquire. At the level of the subjective, behind my photographic eye, there are also my experiences, my background and socialization. What I don't do is to conjure up the responses of an imaginary viewer. I certainly can't afford that, to imagine one or more different viewers. But because I grasp socially relevant topics, it is clear that there will also be reactions to my work. Even if that is merely on the basis of newspaper articles. And these days I also regard that more strongly as a part of my work. My photographs are just as much part of a discourse as the viewers and their reactions.

MiRA: So you give the viewer the opportunity to take a look when nothing is happening, after everything has normalised. You give the viewer the role of the onlooker who arrived too late and will not see anything special now. But unlike the police, who generally say little to neighbours or passers-by, you tell the viewer, the onlooker, those who might have forgotten, everything about the events at the crime scene. All the details, whether they wanted to know them or not. In the exhibition you provide a factsheet to inform viewers about the events and the crimes.

Leitolf: It is at least an opportunity to learn about other levels of meaning in the images, to call into question the idyll and the apparent peace and calm. I believe that the emptiness in the photographs, the permanent and complete absence of people, of protagonists, points all the more to the possibility of their presence. And the viewer has the possibility to imagine those images, perhaps they run a film in their head using my photographs as the set, and perhaps they use the factsheet with the details about the events. The possibility exists.

MiRA: The text turns the absence of scandal in the photographs into the presence of scandal. So is the image then a kind of "false witness"? Does the text become a "necessary evil"?

Leitolf: “The text is a crutch” is a criticism I often hear from photographers, because the images do not show what is described by the caption or the context. They are quick to claim that a picture that needs a text simply doesn’t work. And of course that’s where there is a fundamental misunderstanding. My visual work contains levels that do not work (or only work aesthetically) without the contextualization and the participation of the viewer. I’ll admit that I do delegate a kind of responsibility to cooperate, without expecting or recommending it. And it is exactly that process that interests me. Challenging image and text, how they change and influence one another. The meaning of the images changes, depending on whether we view them with or without text. The text is an additional tool.

MiRA: Does your photography speak a “special language”

Leitolf: My work is not dedicated to developing a particular visual language, which I could attempt to perfect, or to impress onto every motif. And anyway, that would not function with my motifs and the contexts. I tend to develop new ways of seeing within the scope of each project. Which does not mean that I don’t build on earlier work. I certainly utilize the existing to delimit and differentiate. In my earlier works perpetrators, onlookers and victims are visible. Now I have moved away from that and gone over to emptiness, making the scene into a film set for the mind. In “Rostock Ritz 2004” people are present again, both essentially and incidentally. In that work in Namibia I was searching for traces of German colonial history, and for me that could not function without the presence of people. Those photographs are supplemented by journal entries about the creation of the photo and/or my experiences at the place.

MiRA: Is it not a peculiar construction of *Heimat* and idyll that your pictures generate – both the “Deutsche Bilder” and “Rostock Ritz” – or perhaps more precisely the shift in the images through a textualised reality? Do you have a concept of *Heimat*, the search for it, its construction and deconstruction? And how does this relate to your photographs? Is it the case that you consciously work with the theme of *Heimat* and idyll in contrast to racism in your images, and if so to what extent and why?

Leitolf: Ideas about *Heimat* often resonate with the ideas about familiarity, idyll and belonging that make exclusion possible. That is one of the issues that interest me. I want to inquire into what *Heimat* is or should be, without having a concept of my own, in other words without defining a term. But what I have often encountered is that the homes constructed by children at play, the perfect worlds they create with building bricks and dolls’ houses, also appear to rule the lives of the adults. And my work seeks to raise questions about that. If it triggers that in the viewer then it has in a sense functioned as an instrument.

MiRA: Could you describe this instrumental function more closely and tell me why you have this intention?

Leitolf: The rapidity of the images leaves the viewer of internet, television and other visual media – and these days even in art – ever less possibility to pause for breath, to somehow escape from the deadening flood of images. That development is unstoppable. But one can still acquire techniques for a slower, more intense way of relating to images, to slow down the flood. You could say I would like to supply the

viewer with an instrument that allows them to question the meaning and context. This aims to speak to both the viewer's own visual knowledge and their imagination. Viewing images more closely, taking a closer interest in what happened, ultimately generates – at least I would hope – more critical movement, a critical train of thought.

MiRA: If I were to put this instrumental function briefly in my own words: viewers may perceive the textual as part of the visual experience. Up to a point the viewer can work out the images even without the text. But you do not literally overwrite your images. I would like to understand this con-textualisation as your method of instrument production and would call it multiple exposure. How would you describe it?

Leitolf: Well, multiple exposure is an established technique in photography. But I find it interesting to rethink and redefine – so why not!

MiRA: When viewing your visual work, and in the course of this interview too, I am brought back again and again to the key concept of the normalisation discourse and the construction of normality in the image.

Leitolf: Could you define normalization or normality?

MiRA: The everyday, the normality in the image, appears as an eternal state. You disrupt the image of the normal with text. If you agree that your work could be described in this way, I ask myself whether – especially in your images – the normal always also stands for the possibility of rupture, for the potential of deviation?

Leitolf: Yes, if you define normalization that way, I would certainly agree.

MiRA: What are you working on at the moment?

Leitolf: Currently I am interested in the enormous field of the European Union's external borders and their inclusionary and exclusionary functions, the full extent of which is probably beyond me. Especially the areas one could describe as no-man's land, where spaces have been and are being created for those who supposedly don't belong, for refugees. It is not yet clear to me what exactly I will be able to reveal with my photographs, or how I will go about it. But I have already travelled to the Spanish coastal regions to gather a few impressions. Let's see.

Translated by Meredith Dale

Reproduced with the kind permission of Netzwerk Mira.

Originally published in German in *Kritische Migrationsforschung: Da kann jedeR kommen*, available at <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:11-100199292>.