

green line

evocative of an archeology of desperation and desire

cornelia mittendorfer ::: what I want to say

I understand my work about divided Cyprus as a kind of storytelling, which reflects the objects of the photographs as well as the conditions of perception. It is not an encyclopedic evaluation of the situation, not a documentation, but rather a journey with the imponderable which has pushed and pulled me here and there. A journey about the core questions of one of the longest and most complex conflicts in Europe, which began with a visit to friends.

Spaces and their role in the imaginary interest me. Especially with regard to their sociopolitical inheritance. What we remember has to have taken place somewhere. The spatial reference points of collective memory such as public squares, venues, buildings, and streets allow us to anchor our memory and to sort out whether they are symbolically loaded or whether they appear free from these traces. It is precisely the violent inheritance of conflicts that is anchored in these spaces, even when it appears that “nothing” of it is to be “seen”.

SHIFT OF USE. Especially significant are those spaces of memory whose sacred meaning has been violently purged or overlaid by changing hands and becoming subject to completely different forms of spatial logic. My view of the charm that dwells even in these places is constantly shaken by the knowledge or the visible traces of their violent history. The oscillation of the neuralgic points of an ethno-religious conflict calls me again and again to focus on that which is spatially there, as if to assure myself of what I saw, but also as if to use my vision to banish – in vain – the mental disturbance, to create peace. It is similar for non-sacred public spaces such as schools. Sacred spaces and schools were often the only large spaces in villages and therefore were special settings for events in this violent history.

I could also call the first part of my work REGISTER OF ABSENCE. I feel the earlier presence through its absence. I feel the absence. It screams at me. I do not see myself as detached from what I am photographing but rather in the role of a participating interest. By viewing the absence and getting involved, I arrive at a better understanding of the questions of flight and expulsion in my family history. To that extent the pictures also say much about myself. For “as much as we occupy places, they have the capacity to pre-occupy us.” (Jill Bennett, *A Concept of Prepossession*, 2005, Sidney, Ivan Dougherty Gallery).

My focus on the spaces of remembering is also based on the fact that we are flooded with the faces of people in the media, especially in representations of conflicts or war events. The danger here is that it all turns into a kind of frightening background noise. Because of this I concentrate more on seeing the people’s surroundings. In their absence or just in their prototypical and non-individualizable presence they are still there, because they are the ones the places refer to and by whom they are occupied.

ECHOES OF THE UNSPEAKABLE. I believe traumatic events are essentially un-representable. They cannot be reduced to measurable elements of reality. Just as I am preoccupied by the nature of photography as a quotation of appearances (John Berger), my photographs are here also a kind of questioning of the ambivalence of photographic representation. I do not trust realities. I have doubts about the possibility and the appropriateness of making war, violence and power immediately visible.

I construct pictures in order to make something from the tangible and visible which is real or which I consider real. I want to show empty places, spaces of the imaginary, spaces for others, inner pictures, which makes space for deeper understanding and meditation. However, it is not merely about "Meditations on internal darkness" (Lyle Rexer): "When the darkness and the light change places, time stops. And insight takes place." It is meditations about recognition but also about hope for something that opposes destruction, such as peace and beauty, that are to be found in spite of all in these pictures.

Although I feel an obligation to the real, I always want my photographs to start with what is special about a given object and to hint at something emblematic or metaphorical about it – whether they are successful is up to the observer. I am deeply suspicious of the mere appearance of things; it is connected to the consciousness of other factors that are less visible, such as pain, shame, silence, loneliness or also happiness.

I do not begin with a finished concept of my work, but rather with an idea. I have to "listen in" to the place. Only in this engagement with the place and the people is the subject for my photography created. A finished concept would be an imposition by my idea and have little to do with social reality. It would not be the eye level view that I am looking for. This is also what drives me to create agreements with the people I photograph. I like to work with uncertainty and with my intuition, in a game between action and reaction in the course of research and photography, so to speak. In my further work on the material I seek to improve my understanding and to bring out what is important to me.

DESIRE MATTERS. My view of this topography of memory glides back and forth between the search for the real in these places, and the questions of what drives me as a photographer who is not a victim of this conflict and how the often controversial interest of those involved is connected to it.

I understand photography as a means of putting myself in a relationship to the world surrounding me, while doubting that I will ever find an answer to my questions. But I do this with the intention of continuing, as a possibility of connecting myself to the environment and feeling alive. The complexity of the Cyprus conflict makes it even more complicated to put myself in relationship to it and my desire to understand even more futile. In spite of this I am fascinated by the secret of the people who are so deeply involved in this conflict and at the same time so ready for rapprochement and so capable of insight and generosity. In my internal ear I hear their stories, all their versions and truths, those heard and not heard, or not told, like a murmuring in the background while I look for the pictures. The noise emanating from controversial shared experiences and the desire for amnesia in the mutual referral of past and future will not let me go. I find levels in them that give space to my own questions of existence.

MEMORY HAPPENS. Because the unconscious always returns.

I do not in principle make a distinction between art, politics, morals, and ethics. I want to set something next to the silence. But who am I that I could bear WITNESS? For what would THE WITNESS be? I have neither seen it myself nor can I have understood it all. What I can try to do is to keep the conversation going by means of my photographic pictures, to introduce unusual aspects into the commonsense discourse.

I also ask myself: to what extent am I allowed to impose myself on these places of trauma and on the people with my photography? I consider a respectful distance from the places and the people to be appropriate. The technical qualities of my medium format camera seem to me to be well designed for this. My way of interacting with the environment also means that light cannot be controlled and I must

work with whatever light is available. What I am trying to do is find a way of photographing in relation to the object that is suitable for me and that contrasts to the established way of telling the story.

SILENT SHADOWS. AFTERLIFE. This question, but also the question of representability was of particular relevance in the anthropological labors of the Committee on Missing Persons. Here the internal tension between the desire to lower my gaze and the desire to focus it was greatest. I decided to focus my gaze as well on the continuation of life, on the people working there whose daily activity consists in identifying the remains of other people (including members of their own family) decades after their violent ends, thereby bringing about an end to some of the uncertainty.

ONE POSSIBLE VIEW. Photography is less about that which is represented per se than it is about seeing and allowing to see. Each photographic picture is a gesture of allowing to see, which at the same time contains the exclusion of other possibilities. This gesture of allowing to see, which is always subject to varied conditions – e.g. those of space and time – was here subject to further conditions. The view was obscured by prohibitions, forgetting, denial, quite apart from the practical difficulties.

The considerable exchange of population between the northern and southern parts of the island also means that people are not always familiar with the places of remembrance belonging to the other group, do not want to know about them, or deny them. Lack of communication between the generations exacerbates this lack of knowledge. Large military restricted zones, administrative and communicative conditions of a decades long cease-fire, insufficient cartographic information, overlapping and inconsistently used place names as the operative field of the conflict limit freedom of access and viewing or make it very difficult. Even in places where I did succeed in getting permission to photograph in the restricted zones (for example in the buffer zone and in a part of the Turkish military no-go zone) the areas where I was permitted to go were strictly defined and supervised.

I can only tell about what I have perceived. Even my view of all sides cannot be free from subjective coloring because it is too much determined by what is visible and can be experienced. IT IS HARD TO TOUCH THE REAL is true not only with reference to the representability of the real per se but rather increasingly also with reference to a „reality“ with manifold overlaps and entanglements, the ambiguity of which is an object of politics.

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