

READING THE EMPTINESS



OSVRTI, PRIKAZI, RECENZIJE | REPORTS, ESSAYS, REVIEWS

Watching, Waiting: *The Photographic Representation of Empty Places*, ed. Sandra Križić Roban, Ana Šverko. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2023.

The terms “watching,” “waiting”, and “empty place” from the title of the recent publication *Watching, Waiting: The Photographic Representation of Empty Places* evoke the paradigmatic image of pandemic isolation and existential uncertainty with unmistakable synergy: people confined to their homes gaze through windows at empty streets, waiting for the threat to pass. This image served as a catalyst for gathering around the theme of emptiness at the sixth annual international conference *Otkrivanje Dalmacije / Discovering Dalmatia*. Organised by the Institute of Art History — Cvito Fisković Center in Split and inspired by the project *Ekspozicija — Themes and Aspects of Croatian Photography from the 19th Century until Today*, the conference took place virtually in November 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when infection and death rates were at their highest, and travel was nearly impossible.

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Ana Šeparović

Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža / The Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography

Although the book originated as a collection of studies developed from conference presentations, it is not a typical collection of papers but a truly scientific work that approaches the concept of an empty place from various perspectives, examining it through its photographic representation at a moment when it assumed a hitherto unknown dimension, when emptiness paradoxically became visible. The book also serves as a reminder of how the current situation, though extremely limiting and almost threatening, can be fruitful when used as a starting point for artistic and scientific research. By combining their research positions and academic interests and recognising the (pandemic) crisis as an opportunity for dialogue, the editors of the publication, Ana Šverko — *spiritus movens* of the *Discovering Dalmatia* conference, and Sandra Križić Roban — the head of the *Ekspozicija* project funded by the Croatian Science Foundation brought together eleven studies and one visual essay that contemplate the phenomenon of space and the medium of photography through the concept of emptiness. Emptiness in this book forms the core of scientific and artistic research, approaching it from the perspectives of different disciplines and their methodologies — art history, cultural anthropology, sociology, and the history of medicine — considering it in its many historical and contemporary manifestations.

The book is structured into several major sections within which the studies are thoughtfully grouped under a common denominator. In the first part, titled *The Politics of Emptiness*, three texts are brought together which, starting from the depiction of emptiness in photography and film, question dominant historical narratives, giving voice to the marginalised subject. The text by **Stuart Moore** and **Kayla Parker** from the University of Plymouth is a personal testimony that chronicles collaborative work on the film *Father-land* from 2018. In the film, the authors present their personal (nomadic, dislocated, isolated) experience of growing up in a military environment within the British Royal Air Force base located in the border zone of Nicosia. They bring an intimate perspective interweaving the history and culture of Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, and colonial Britain. **Bec Rengel** from the University of the West of England in Bristol, starting from the “empty pedestal” left after the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was toppled in Bristol (during the *Black Lives Matter* protests in the spring of 2020), exposes the narrative about the historical “giant” and “philanthropist” as a myth produced by the Bristol Victorian business elite during labour unrest and the “threat” of socialism to advance their bourgeois agenda. The text examines key points of structural racism and class conflict in Great Britain as a colonial power, where the black community still experiences unequal positions, marginalisation, and exclusion. **Anna Schober** from the University of Klagenfurt observes art, culture, and especially photographic practices as engaged media interventions that can deepen sensitivity but also have a polarising effect. Exploring how the lockdown led to mass practices of public expression (on balconies, windows, streets, squares), she sees the mobilising potential of solidarity and unity in selected photographs. Still, she also recognises them as a means of social polarisation, for instance, during anti-government and “anti-scientific” “anti-measure” protests, where organisers used discriminatory symbols appropriated from the past, creating arbitrary and unfounded analogies with the contemporary situation.

In the second section, titled *Returning to Emptiness*, studies are gathered where emptiness represents a research concept *par excellence*, reactualised due to the pandemic situation. **Catlin Langford** from the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne-Naarm focuses on photographic representations of emptiness, isolation, and loneliness, tracing them in a broad historical spectrum from one of the first photographs ever taken, Louis Daguerre’s daguerreotype *Boulevard du Temple* (1838), through the simulated suicide by drowning of Hyppolite Bayard (1840) and *Mariane* by Julia Margaret Cameron (1874/75), to contemporary enactments of loneliness in the context of modern urban hustle — works by Frances Kearney, Gregory Crewdson, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. **Tihana Rubić** from the Department of Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty

of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb also deals with staging in photography. Starting from Milovan Gavazzi’s photo album taken in Dalmatia between the 1930s and the 1960s as part of the *Ethnological Atlas of Yugoslavia* project, she discusses the role of photography within ethnology and the development of the discipline itself — from earlier positivist and universalist understandings to “partial truths,” opening questions of representation and problematising the photographer’s view in the context of a structuralist and postcolonial approach. **Stella Fatović-Ferencić** and **Martin Kuhar**, both from the Department of History of Medical Sciences at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb, extract photographs from Vladimir Čepulić’s collection for the Museum of the History of Medicine. They focus on depictions of historical sanitary and hygienic facilities on the eastern Adriatic coast (cisterns, fountains, wells, aqueducts, sarcophagi, etc.), whose emptiness allows them to shed other meanings and be viewed as traces of health and hygiene culture at the intersection of different cultural circles — Greek, Roman, Islamic.

The section *Rethinking Emptiness* consists of two studies that, inspired by photographs of empty spaces in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, consider the meaning of emptiness in visual presentation. **Elke Katharina Wittich** from the Leibniz University in Hanover, inspired by current scenes of empty squares due to lockdowns, turns to historical depictions of architecture and urban complexes created at a time when emptiness was considered a defining element of dramatic atmosphere and experience (drawings and graphics by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, etc.) but also contemporary photographs of symbolic, empty places, such as the series by Russian photographer Andrej Kremenschouk taken in Chernobyl in 2008 and 2012. She explores the resemanticisation of emptiness in the representation of architectural space, ranging from emptiness as a primarily aesthetic category to emptiness as a fundamental question of existence. **Isabelle Catucci** from the Federal University of Paraná in Brazil, examining media photographs of newly excavated graves taken from the air, i.e. photographs with strong symbolic content, considers the relationship between the image and the official discourse that denied the pandemic. She reflects on emptiness as a psychological category (feeling), observes the paradox of collective loneliness as a shared experience of people during the pandemic, and, following the ideas of Susan Sontag and Georges Didi-Huberman, opens a discussion on sensationalism and trivialisation of suffering due to exposure to an unscrupulous gaze.

Under the title *Performance of Emptiness*, the articles gathered discuss emptiness carrying the symbolic meaning of non-places and thus a powerful political message of a specific psycho-social condition. **Ruth Baumeister** from the Aarhus School of Architecture in Denmark, for example, develops the thesis about architecture as an instrument of power using the example of the National Bank project in Copenhagen by Arne Jacobsen. In the urban and architectural disposition of the bank building, the author recognizes contempt for the historical block within which the bank is located, inhospitality and coldness towards passers-by, as well as implicit surveillance, comparable to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. It is a non-place in the heart of the city that, reminiscent of a sacred space, represents and produces the values of liberal capitalism, the cult of money, and social inequality. **Klaudija Sabo** from the Department of Visual Culture at the University of Klagenfurt observes an ornamental spatial arrangement of beds in the photographs of field hospitals, arising from the desire for control and regulation of movement. Following Foucault’s “disciplinary spaces,” characterised by the lack of privacy and the fact that every movement is foreseen, directed, and monitored, she considers temporary hospital accommodations as a result of the control of social relations in times of crisis, finding in them an imprint of the socio-political situation. Jessie Martin from the University of West London brings a critical discussion of non-places — which (unlike places) represent spaces in which the subject has no sense of belonging but is only an insignificant user — finding them

in the depictions of transit spaces of empty airports at night in the photo book *When Light Casts No Shadow* by Edgar Martins. She interprets such non-places as a result of neoliberal tendencies that create spaces exclusively for the needs of production and circulation of capital.

The book concludes with a visual essay titled *Documented Emptiness: Luca Nostri* from the London School of Architecture presents photographs of empty spaces around the Italian city of Lugo taken in 2020–2021. In doing so, by choosing an analogue camera, he seeks to evoke reminiscences of nineteenth-century photographs — those mentioned in Catlin Langford’s article — where emptiness is no longer conditioned by the slowness of the medium but by the slowness of life during the pandemic lockdown.

Today, we are slowly forgetting the state of consciousness at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the time of isolation and empty spaces is behind us. However, reading this book does not have the effect of recalling that state; rather, it serves to recognize the concept of emptiness as a scientific research topic, confirming a series of studies of exceptional authenticity and excellence that, overlapping and complementing each other, form an interdisciplinary mosaic of knowledge. A group of researchers and artists, inspired by isolation, loneliness, detachment, remoteness, and absence, found inspiration in photography — be it artistic, vernacular, conceptual, documentary, architectural, archaeological, ethnological, landscape, street — whether historical or contemporary. They use it as a means to interpret visual, historical, and social phenomena. By becoming aware and critically examining numerous negative social phenomena and their consequences, such as racism, colonialism, imposed and authoritarian historical narratives, and the extreme inequalities produced by the power structures of neoliberal capitalism, the authors in this book advocate for equality, unity, equity, and social solidarity. An precisely such a message is conveyed by the availability of this book, published by the renowned international scientific publisher Leuven University Press as part of its *Fund for Fair Open Access* in open access at the link <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/76444>

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