

Book review: Sandra Krizic Roban and Ana Šverko, editors. *Watching, Waiting. The Photographic Representation of Empty Places*

Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2023

AUTHOR:

SILVIJA BRKIĆ MIDŽIĆ

The politics of representing emptiness, returning to the places defined by emptiness, artists' visions and portrayals of emptiness, are some of the topics elaborated in the book *Watching, Waiting. The Photographic Representation of Empty Places*, published in the Fall of 2023 by the renowned European publishing house Leuven University Press. The book has been edited by Sandra Krizic Roban and Ana Šverko as part of the project *Exposition. Themes and Aspects of Croatian Photography from the Nineteenth Century until Today*, conducted at the Institute of Art History. In 2020, during times of overwhelming stillness of the world and the sudden emptiness resulting from the spreading of the novel coronavirus, a conference was organized on the topic of emptiness; the contributors, although prevented from meeting in person, reacted to the call for papers with a series of intriguing presentations, part of which have been included in this book.

This is a primarily interdisciplinary publication with works by authors from various parts of the world and with different backgrounds – artists, theoreticians and researchers from both science and humanities. They are all united in critical thinking about what photography can communicate in situations like these, in which local differences pointed to the economic, political and cultural issues at a global level. One of the chapters, entitled “Emptiness as a Tool in the Representation of Public Health Monuments in Croatia”, is written by Stella Fatović-Ferenčić and Martin Kuhar, researchers at the Division for the History of Medical Sciences of the Academy's Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science. The material presented in this paper is a part of the rather considerable photographic collection kept at the Croatian Museum of Medicine and Pharmacy. These black and white photographs, which were collected by the prominent phthysiologist Vladimir Čepulić, mounted on cardboard and displayed at the Museum for the History of Healthcare in Croatia in 1944, tell a unique story about the longevity of Croatian public health and its importance in the survival of the Croatian people.

From the invention of photography in the 1830s until today, the relationship between this medium and place is often marked by the phenomenon of emptiness. It is a specific topic explored as much by the contemporary artists as by the historians of photography. Emptiness is a phenomenon that can occur both spontaneously and intentionally; it points to the breaks in urban fabric which are, for example, created to enable certain hygienic standards. Emptiness also speaks about the specificity of the development



of photography and its (im)possibility, in its early times, to capture a specific moment, later only made possible by the impressive technological advances. Slow and ancient photographic processes, however, again became relevant in the last several years, while a different sense of time characterized recent pandemic times. Then, it seemed as if the world came to a halt and as if our existence was solely determined by stasis, while the photographs which interpreted the emptiness became a means of communication.