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Subtheme 1.: *Latent Geographies, Opacity and Refusal, Common Grounds*

Assoc. Professor Olja Triaška Stefanović

Department of Photography and New Media Academy of Fine Arts and Design,
Bratislava, Slovakia

Email: stefanovic@vsvu.sk

www.oljastefanovic.com

Title: Quiet Fronts: Photographic Placeholders and Latent Geographies of the Cold War

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Introduction and Background

My artistic research practice examines how photography, archives, and spatial narratives shape our understanding of political and historical geographies. Over the past few years, I have been exploring the material and emotional residues of the Cold War across the territories of the former Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, USA and beyond. This research comes from my ongoing engagement with how visual and ideological infrastructures persist even after their systems have collapsed—how images, objects, and sites continue to hold traces of geopolitical power, secrecy, and disappearance.

The project Quiet Fronts: Mapping the (In)Visible Cold War emerges from fieldwork in former military zones, borderlands, and listening posts—places where political and technological apparatuses once structured the way the world was seen and divided. These sites, often stripped of their original function, linger as latent geographies: invisible, yet still active in shaping collective memory and contemporary spatial imagination. My practice combines photography, sound, video, and archival materials to interrogate how such spaces are represented, withheld, or forgotten.

This research aligns with the Placeholders conference's interest in how images construct, defer, or replace the experience of place. I approach photography not only as documentation, but as a performative act that holds a space open for reflection—a temporary placeholder between visibility and erasure.

Short Abstract:

Quiet Fronts is an ongoing artistic research project that investigates how photography mediates the afterlives of Cold War infrastructures. It examines landscapes once inscribed by military, surveillance, and ideological systems—missile bases, bunkers, and border zones—that continue to shape our perception of space despite their physical decay or repurposing. These “quiet fronts” persist as latent geographies: invisible coordinates within a global network of power, control, and displacement.

In this research, the photograph functions as both an index and a placeholder. It holds a place for what can no longer be seen, while also revealing the limits of visibility itself. By combining field photography, archival images, sound, and found documents, Quiet Fronts reactivates (invisible) forgotten sites and reflects on the ethics of looking at places marked by erasure.

Engaging with the Placeholders subtheme Latent Geographies, the presentation considers how artistic research can re-map invisible terrains and expose the infrastructures that silently organise our understanding of place. Photography here becomes a provisional form of witnessing—a tool for sensing absence, making visible the displaced, and questioning what remains out of sight in the architectures of history and landscape.

Extended Abstract:

Title: Quiet Fronts: Photographic Placeholders and Latent Geographies of the Cold War

Quiet Fronts is an ongoing artistic research project that investigates how photography mediates the afterlives of Cold War infrastructures and the invisible geographies they continue to produce. It explores landscapes once inscribed by military, surveillance, and ideological systems—missile bases, bunkers, radar fields, and border zones—that persist in shaping our spatial imagination long after their physical decay or repurposing. These “quiet fronts” are latent geographies: invisible coordinates within a global network of power, secrecy, and displacement. Though officially obsolete, they remain charged with material and emotional residue, embodying both the traces of ideological division and the persistence of infrastructural control beneath the surface of contemporary landscapes.

At the centre of *Quiet Fronts* lies an inquiry into photography’s double role as both index and placeholder. The photograph is treated not as a transparent document but as a site of negotiation between presence and absence, between what is visible and what is withheld. It holds a place for what can no longer be seen while revealing the limits of visibility itself. Through this approach, the act of photographing becomes an ethical and reflective gesture—a way of holding open a space for memory, uncertainty, and the untranslatable. Rather than attempting to restore what has been lost, the work asks

how photography might re-engage with places rendered opaque by political and ideological forces, and how it might cultivate a form of attention grounded in care rather than extraction.

The project emerges from several intertwined questions: How do Cold War infrastructures continue to shape collective memory and spatial imagination after their physical dissolution? In what ways can photography act as a placeholder—a temporary stand-in for what has been withheld, displaced, or erased? What ethical responsibilities accompany the act of representing sites defined by secrecy or disappearance? And how might artistic research foster forms of engagement that resist the visual and epistemic violence inherent in regimes of surveillance and documentation? These questions situate *Quiet Fronts* within contemporary debates on the politics of visibility and the performative role of artistic practice in re-imagining contested or invisible spaces (Azoulay, 2019; Sekula, 1983).

The project unfolds through an artistic research methodology that interweaves fieldwork, photography, archival investigation, sound, and writing. Each element functions both as a mode of inquiry and as a form of artistic articulation. Fieldwork takes place at former Cold War sites across Europe and the United States—abandoned missile silos (Nike Missile Site, San Francisco), decommissioned listening stations, radar installations, and obsolete border infrastructures. The process of photographing these locations is performative as much as documentary. It involves walking, listening, and waiting, using the camera not to capture definitive evidence but to register the atmosphere of disappearance. The resulting images evoke both presence and withdrawal, inviting a slower, more attentive form of looking that acknowledges the incompleteness of what is seen.

Archival research forms another layer of the project. Working with state and military archives, media documentation, and personal collections, I encounter the silences, redactions, and omissions that structure official records of the Cold War. These absences are not treated as failures of access but as active components of the historical landscape. The archive itself becomes a placeholder structure—a framework that organises what is visible while concealing its own conditions of production. This understanding resonates with Susan Schuppli's notion of "material witness," which highlights how both images and infrastructures testify to political processes through their absences and traces (Schuppli, 2020).

Alongside visual and archival materials, sound serves as a crucial medium within *Quiet Fronts*. Field recordings function as non-visual placeholders for memory and time. They expand the field of perception beyond the visual and suggest other ways of sensing space. The layering of sound and image allows for a multi-sensory engagement that resists the dominance of the optical and proposes a more embodied way of mapping place.

Through this combination of methods, *Quiet Fronts* moves beyond documentation toward an embodied and ethical mode of research. Photography here is not a transparent window but a process of negotiation—between remembering and

forgetting, between site and image, between the desire to know and the necessity of restraint. The work contributes to contemporary photographic discourse by reframing the photograph as a placeholder rather than a representation. It emphasizes the medium's provisional and processual nature—its ability to keep a space open for reflection rather than to fill it with certainty. This perspective challenges traditional notions of photographic truth, aligning with Allan Sekula's understanding of photography as a social and discursive field rather than a neutral record (Sekula, 1983).

Quiet Fronts also brings attention to what I describe as “latent geographies”—the invisible infrastructures that continue to shape our world long after their political relevance has faded. Underground cables, radar systems, and restricted military zones persist as unseen architectures of control, influencing how we inhabit and imagine space. The project exposes how geopolitical power manifests materially in the landscape, revealing that the Cold War, far from being a closed historical event, endures as a condition inscribed into both terrain and consciousness.

A further contribution of this research lies in its ethical stance toward representation. Rather than aiming to unveil or monumentalize hidden sites, the work embraces opacity, silence, and incompleteness as necessary aspects of ethical seeing. In this sense, it resonates with Ariella Azoulay's argument that photography can enact a “civil contract of vision”—a practice of shared responsibility between viewer, image, and subject (Azoulay, 2008). *Quiet Fronts* proposes a way of looking grounded in care and hesitation, acknowledging the photograph's inability to fully disclose what it seeks to represent.

Ultimately, the project suggests that images can function as temporal and conceptual placeholders within the shifting terrain of history. By engaging with the *Placeholders* subtheme *Latent Geographies*, *Quiet Fronts* argues that photography has the capacity to sense what persists beneath the visible—the residues of power, fear, and longing that shape how we perceive and remember place. Through its integration of image, sound, and archival material, the work positions artistic research as a form of critical witnessing, capable of revealing the hidden infrastructures that continue to organise our contemporary world.

Selected References

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