

---

# De facto border. The division of Cyprus in contemporary photography by Heinrich Völkel Samira Yildirim

This essay deals with the question of how artists show and document the topography and landscape of a border. Since the end of the 20th century, borders have been developed into a global network of ‘sorting machines’ in which integration, separation and transfer take place.<sup>1</sup> Artists conduct artistic field research along borders and with their works of art capture artificial divisions, politically negotiated and often militarily guarded barriers of the world. Art is, therefore, part of the practice and research of topography, which is made up of the Greek words *tópos* for place and *gráphein* for drawing or writing, referring to the description, measurement and representation of a place. Although we see the green and built borders in the images, they simultaneously disappear through their reification, as we aesthetically experience representations of water, sand, mountains, trees, rivers, meadows, cities, villages, roads, traffic routes and infrastructures, which in turn is antithetical to the knowledge of the violence of borders.

The Mediterranean plays an important role as a border because it is much more than just a tourist destination for holidaymakers, but also a geopolitically relevant location of the EU’s external border regime. Fortress Europe marks its border to the south in the Mediterranean with various counterparts, and it is being successively expanded and upgraded, making it a constant source of conflict. The absurdity of carving a constructed border

---

<sup>1</sup> Steffen Mau, *Sortiermaschinen: Die Neuerfindung der Grenze im 21. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H. Beck, 2021), 19.

into natural topography is clearly illustrated by the sea. Broad and deep waters are already insurmountable hurdles for us humans. Declaring them political borders plays into the hands of states, as no border architectures are required here to demarcate one territorial state from another. At the same time, maritime borders have the advantage of appearing natural, which makes them 'less vulnerable to attack'.<sup>2</sup>

As a border, the Mediterranean is complex and controversial, as the Mediterranean space is formed in the past and future primarily through its relationships, as Fernand Braudel pointed out in his extensive *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* in 1949.<sup>3</sup> This incongruity between political, cultural and social connections and divisions is the subject of numerous contemporary artists who analyse the Mediterranean as a hybrid border region.

## Camera view of absences

OSTKREUZ – a Berlin-based photographers' cooperative – produced *Über Grenzen* in Berlin and Dresden in 2012.<sup>4</sup> Through the medium of photography, the members of the cooperative approached social questions about borders, clarifying that borders inscribe themselves onto everyday life and humans' living spaces as well as onto nature. They can take on military, social, architectural and ethical forms. The topography of a border can never be captured in its entirety and remains fragmented in the images. A line on a map can depict the entire course of a border. The topographical works, on the other hand, present very limited and individual perspectives.

Heinrich Völkel is a member of OSTKREUZ and integrated motifs of deserted streets, abandoned buildings, UN observation posts and a dilapidated airport into his photo series *The Green Line*. These are places that separate Northern Cyprus from the Republic of Cyprus. The Green Line, a buffer zone established by the United Nations Peace Keeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in 1964, is intended to maintain a ceasefire and covers around three per cent of the island. The zone stretches from east to west, shrinks to six metres wide in the capital Nicosia and widens to seven kilometres elsewhere. It separates the Turkish Cypriot north from the Greek Cypriot south.

2 Anke Hoffmann, 'Border Sampling – oder von hier nach hier', in *Nevin Aladağ. Border Sampling*, ed. Matthias Lenz and Regina Michel (Friedrichshafen: Rober Gessler, 2011), 5. This work was published in conjunction with an eponymous exhibition at the Zeppelin Museum Friedrichshafen, 21 October–4 December 2011. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

3 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).

4 OSTKREUZ – Agentur der Fotografen, *Über Grenzen = On borders* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), exhibition catalogue for *Über Grenzen*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 9 November – 31 December 2012; Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, 17 May – 11 August 13.



The buffer zone passed through three stages of escalation and isolation.<sup>5</sup> Between 1955 and 1963 there was the so-called ‘Mason-Dixon line’ – barriers between the Greek and Turkish neighbourhoods. British colonisation of the island ended in 1959 with Treaties of London and Zürich Agreements, thanks to which Cyprus gained sovereignty. The second stage of the escalation took place in December 1963, with serious riots that led to a ceasefire agreement and the physical barrier of the Green Line – a semi-open cordon with checkpoints and the ability to close certain areas in the event of conflict. After the Greek military coup and the subsequent occupation of the north by Turkish military forces in the summer of 1974, the buffer zone was closed and fortified, representing the continuing third stage. On 15 November 1983, the parliament of the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus proclaimed its independence, which is not recognised by any UN member except Turkey. As a result, the island’s internal border has been a *de facto* and not a *de jure* border since 1974. Attempts at reunification have failed and have no prospect of success. Borders of this kind are provisional and permanent sources of conflict.

5 Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *Divided Cities. Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 123.

Fig. 1  
**Heinrich Völkel: UN buffer zone, Airport Lefkosia, Nicosia, 2012.** A former international airport with the decommissioned Hawker Siddeley Trident of Cyprus Airways. The airport was between the fronts during the fighting and has been closed ever since. Photo from The Green Line series. Copyright Heinrich Völkel/Ostkreuz

Heinrich Völkel took photographs in deserted villages, in Nicosia and its natural surroundings in the border area. Völkel sought traces of the island's partition. The pictures show barricaded streets and rooms lined with barbed wire and loopholes as well as a green mountain ridge, which is named as a UN observation post in the title of OSTKREUZ's picture.<sup>6</sup> The border between the north and south appears in all the pictures, evoking a formerly united island.

The motif of Nicosia International Airport, which ceased operation in 1974 due to the conflict and is now located within the buffer zone, provides an example. In one picture, we see a plane, derelict and gutted, with smashed windows, missing doors, a dirty surface and barbed wire (figure 1). The aircraft belonged to Cyprus Airways and is still parked at the defunct airport in Nicosia. The airline lost two planes and the airport infrastructure as a result of the war. Lakarna military airport in the south, which was expanded in the same year, and Ercan airport in the north have been used since the island's partition.

Another picture shows a waiting room on the airport grounds. The room is dilapidated, the seat cushions and the floor are littered with bird droppings (figure 2). The photographs confirm the absence of something once present. Half a century has passed since the buffer zone was established, and the images show that this provisional and persistent condition has become permanent without resolution. Völkel's visual language shows that nothing remains of the former coexistence but absence. Constance de Gourcy describes this emptiness and absence as a 'double presence', which results in an ambivalent relationship between two sides:

*[...] absence is not only the opposite of presence as might be suggested by the overtaking – which is also a replacement – of the 'double absence' by the 'double presence', but an institution of meaning which defines a system of places and relational modalities between members geographically distant from a given collective.<sup>7</sup>*

According to De Gourcy, the experience of absence, which inevitably arises through migration and border crossings, is generated by the missing or the stranger and their relationship to the original place across distances.<sup>8</sup> In relation to Cyprus, the absence of each group in the other creates a connection between them. From 1963 onwards, the populations segregated, with Turkish Cypriots relocating to the north and the Greek Cypriots moving

<sup>6</sup> OSTKREUZ – Agentur der Fotografen, *Über Grenzen*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Constance De Gourcy, 'The Institutionalization of Absence in the Mediterranean', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 2018, <http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/11687>.

<sup>8</sup> Gourcy, 'The Institutionalization of Absence'.



south or leaving the island altogether. Evidence of this relocation remains, and Heinrich Völkel focused on the gaps left by this absence. For example, the classroom covered with straw and a blackboard in the centre of the picture with a quote by Kemal Atatürk: ‘Ne mutlu Türküm diyene’ – ‘Happy is the one who calls himself/herself a Turk’ (figure 3). The abandoned school is located in the south and was being used as a cattle shed at the time of the photo. The inscription on the blackboard is an oath that was used in Turkish schools to instil children with Turkish nationalist sentiment.

The picture simultaneously documents the former presence of a Turkish Cypriot population in the south as well as a failed multi-ethnic reality that could have obtained in Cyprus after its independence. In the repurposed classroom, Atatürk’s sentence seems like a curse. Völkel’s photographs of the internal Cypriot border not only show the moment when the photograph was taken and the status quo of this border; they also point to a past in which two groups lived in the same place.

Heinrich Völkel’s photographic practice is documentary, and he works in series: ‘Only this sorting and arranging approach

Fig. 2  
Heinrich Völkel: UN buffer zone,  
Airport Lefkosia, Nicosia, 2012.  
Waiting room of the unused airport.  
Photo from The Green Line series.  
Copyright Heinrich Völkel/Ostkreuz.



to the material turns images of non-pictorial realities into documentation?<sup>9</sup> He conducts field research by capturing places, perspectives and motifs of a topographical border. A single photograph does not seem to do this justice. The images document a moment and, following Barthes, are a repetition of ‘what has been’.<sup>10</sup> In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the past tense of what is shown:

*The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence – as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence. The image, says phenomenology, is an object-as-nothing. Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it.*<sup>11</sup>

Fig. 3

**Heinrich Völkel: Pitargou, Cyprus (South), 2012. School building of the abandoned Turkish-Cypriot village of Pitargou. Photo from The Green Line series. Copyright Heinrich Völkel/ Ostkreuz.**

<sup>9</sup> Renate Wöhler, ‘Die Kunst des Dokumentierens. Zur Genealogie der Kategorie “dokumentarisch”’, in *Beyond evidence. Das Dokument in den Künsten*, ed. Daniela Hahn (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016), 45-57.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.

In Völkel's photograph, the past is doubly present: there is the moment of the photograph in which the classroom was used as a cattle shed and the reference to a more distant past of the classroom as a place of teaching and educating Turkish children. Völkel refers to two periods: before and since the division of Cyprus.

## The ambivalent character of 'green borders'

Can a border be everywhere? Border studies since the 1990s have called for a transition from a geopolitical to a biopolitical definition of borders, according to which the focus shifts to people and their perception. Biopolitical borders demand a pluralised view, as Nick Vaughan-Williams, for example, puts it: '[B]orders are not natural, neutral nor static but historically contingent, politically charged, dynamic phenomena that first and foremost involve people and their everyday lives'.<sup>12</sup> Especially when it comes to topographies, borders are a difficult phenomenon to depict, but a fascinating one, as they consist more of practices than of motifs. And yet in art we see the motifs of built architecture, such as walls and fences as well as green borders, such as mountains and seas that are also international borders.

In the history of art, the pictorial beauty of landscapes is usually a sign of aesthetic, romantic and sublime observations that offer an impression of nature. The invisibility of borders in landscape images reinforces their ambivalent character and implies the political utilisation of nature. When looking at the pictures, the apparent naturalness of 'green borders' is disturbed, as the art reveals political borders in natural settings as constructions. In other words, a border only becomes visible in its function as such in connection with the idea of traversing it. In the case of Cyprus, Heinrich Völkel's works show that transfer and exchange across the border has been at a standstill for decades.

## Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida. Reflections of Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Braudel, Fernand. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1949.

Calame, Jon and Esther Charlesworth. *Divided Cities. Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

De Gourcy, Constance. 'The Institutionalization of Absence in the Mediterranean'. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 2018, 1-12. <http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/11687>.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2009), 1.





- 
- Hoffmann, Anke. 'Border Sampling – oder von hier nach hier'. In *Nevin Aladağ. Border Sampling*, edited by Matthias Lenz and Regina Michel, Friedrichshafen: Rober Gessler, 2011.
- Mau, Steffen. *Sortiermaschinen: Die Neuerfindung der Grenze im 21. Jahrhundert*. München: C.H. Beck, 2021.
- OSTKREUZ – Agentur der Fotografen. *Über Grenzen = On borders*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012.
- Vaughan-Williams, Nick. *Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power*. Edinburgh: University Press, 2009.
- Wöhler, Renate. 'Die Kunst des Dokumentierens. Zur Genealogie der Kategorie "dokumentarisch"'. In *Beyond evidence. Das Dokument in den Künsten*, edited by Daniela Hahn, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016.