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Autor: Hänsch, Valerie

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ON VISUAL EVIDENCE

Picturing Forced Displacement in Northern Sudan

Text: *Valerie Hänsch* / **Photos:** *Valerie Hänsch, Osman M.*

Introduction: Images as Claims of Truth Telling

The advance of digital technology, portable video cameras, and smartphones as well as the global circulation of images, have spurred the vernacular capturing of events aiming at the production of visual evidence. Victims, participants or bystanders record videos and take pictures to testify against crimes and human rights abuses. These images are distributed via social media networks and TV-channels. Such visual forms of documenting and witnessing are claims of truth telling which can be traced back to realist understandings of pictures. Videos and photographs are inscribed with the ability to present reality directly and objectively rather than being regarded as mediation that rests on specific indexical signs. This belief in the truth of pictures, which is also prominent in the conventional discourse on documentary forms, reflects the idea that photos/videos can capture reality in the same way as our eyes can see it.

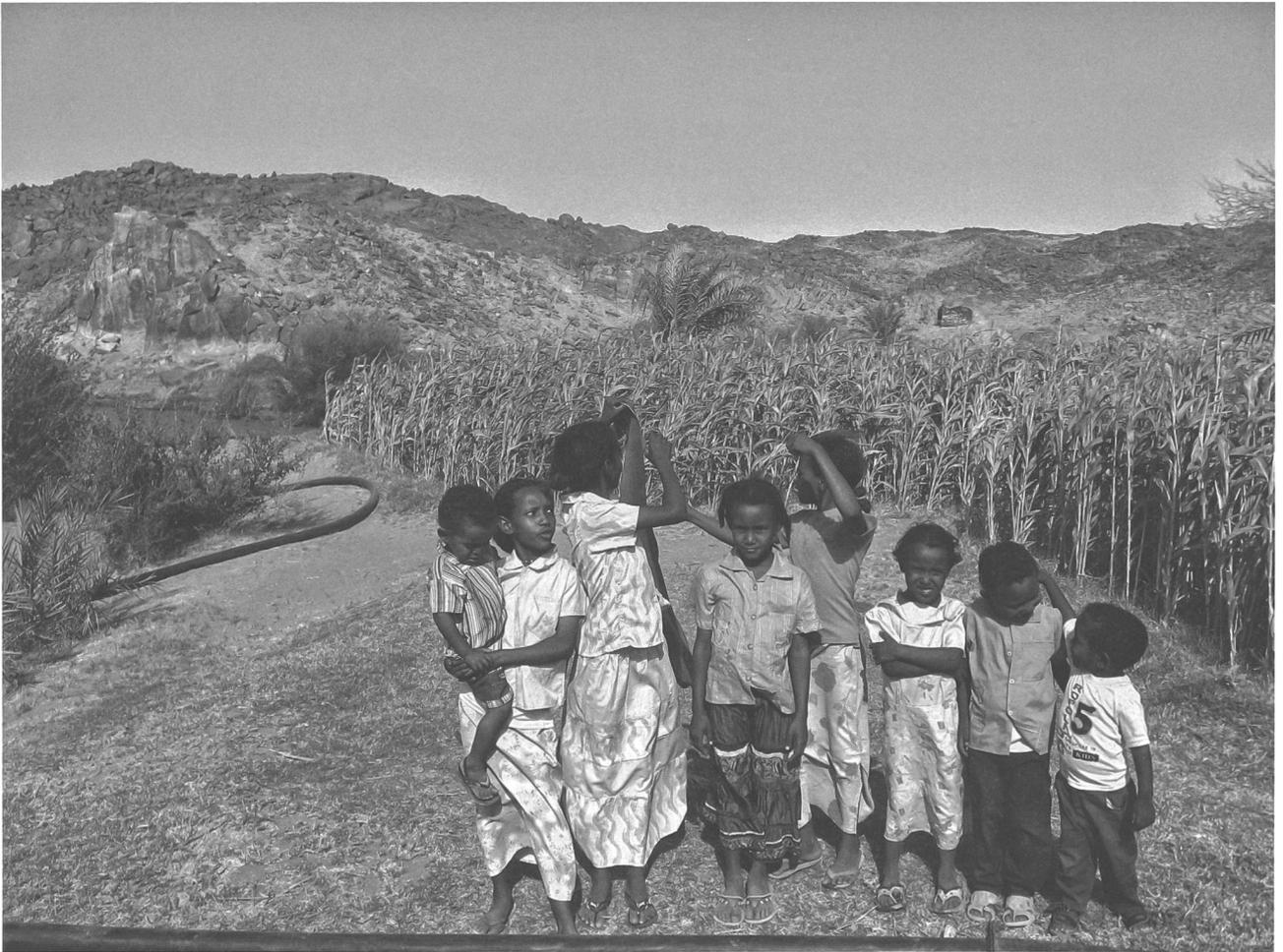
Not only ordinary people take images to provide testimony. Governments use images such as satellite pictures to prove, for example, the fabrication of weapons. Such documentary forms produce certain realities rather than depict reality and ultimately serve to determine truth and hence legitimise political action. Seen from this position, the production of images, and therefore the production of reality, is always intertwined with

politics and shaped by power relations. However, as the filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl (2003) notes in her article «documentarism as politics of truth»: «On the other hand, though, the power of the document is based on the fact that it is also intended to be able to prove what is unpredictable within these power relations – it should be able to express what is unimaginable, unspoken, unknown, [...] – and thus create a possibility for change».¹ She recognises the construction of images and its politics, but rejects relativist conceptions of truth and argues that images may convey some «moments of truth».

Taking this discussion as a point of departure, my visual essay intends to show how citizens aim to visually document, witness and express a silenced history of forced displacement at the Fourth Nile Cataract in the Sudan. Based on the internalised knowledge that images are able to establish evidence and facts, the forcefully evicted citizens placed great hope in the power of images to provide visual counter-evidence against hegemonic discourses, hence to foster the possibility for change.

After a brief introduction to the context, I will discuss the picturing of displacement and then move on to the question of what these pictures might evoke in the outsiders' gaze who is not familiar with the aesthetics of the life-world at the Nile. A tension remains between the citizens' aim to bear witness to forced evictions and the perception of these images by non-local audiences.

¹ This is the translated version of the quote, see <http://eicpc.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>. The original German quote may provide a more solid impression: «Auf der anderen Seite beruht die Macht des Dokuments aber darauf, dass es auch das beweisen können soll, was innerhalb dieser Machtbeziehungen unvorhergesehen ist – es soll das Unvorstellbare, Verschwiegene, Unbekannte, Rettende und sogar Ungeheuerliche zum Ausdruck bringen können – und somit die Möglichkeit zur Veränderung schaffen.» See http://eicpc.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/de/#_ftnref2.

















Worlds Falling Apart

During my research at the Fourth Nile Cataract in the Sudan between 2008 and 2010, the newly constructed Merowe Dam impounded the river Nile and flooded the inhabited villages along the river. Within a few days, the rising Nile waters flooded the whole village I was living in and took away the fields and date trees. We all had to flee from the rising waters to higher grounds. The men constructed improvised shelters from wood and palm leaves in the adjacent desert. During ten months, the dammed river Nile rose further and the inhabitants had to move again and again to higher ground in the desert.

The physical landscape altered drastically and most resources were drowned. Worlds of meaning suddenly fell apart. The peasants lost their common ground, finding themselves in a strange world, which had once been a familiar world, but which had changed completely. This produced feelings of crisis, existential uncertainty and alienation.

The villagers had felt the threat of the rising waters for months. However, it was difficult to assess whether the river was rising due to the annual Nile flood or due to the closure of the dams' gates. Official information about the dams' operation was not forthcoming. At that time the inhabitants were waiting for the construction of new settlements around the future reservoir to which the government had agreed after years of often violent struggle. The Sudanese government had originally planned to transfer some 70,000 people to state-run resettlement schemes with large-scale agricultural projects. However, during a highly dynamic political process of negotiating their future lives, the majority of the Manasir community (50,000 people) developed an alternative vision of resettlement, namely to stay in their homeland, in new settlements at the shore of the future reservoir.

The Production of Visual Evidence

Both before and during the flooding, the Sudanese government, as well as the dam administration and the German engineering company, which supervised the dams' construction, upheld the discourse of successful resettlement to the state-run schemes. Broadcasts aired on TV-channels and photographs placed in development reports and daily newspapers provided visual evidence of truth telling against leaked out reports of flooded com-

munities. Glossy pictures of new concrete houses, schools, and beautiful mosques, as well as zoom-in images into large agricultural fields, all accompanied by verbal explanations, were contrasted with poor homes built of mud, situated in a hostile, barren environment at the peripheries of the Nile Valley. In short, these pictures and audio-visual reports painted a largely ameliorated life and a bright future for the peasants.

Confronted with the omnipresent state-controlled media coverage and censorship, the peasants placed great importance to recording their silenced history of forced eviction, which was happening far below the threshold of the official coverage. In the general absence of smartphones and the lack of cameras at the beginning of the flooding, many inhabitants and friends asked me to take images of the destruction, the emerging refugee camps, and the drowned date trees.

With the picturing of the destruction, the displaced people aimed at bearing witness to the injustices of their forced eviction. The flooding was interpreted as a crime and human rights abuse committed by a regime accused of crimes against humanity in Darfur by the International Criminal Court. The international companies involved in the construction of the dam were also seen as being responsible.²

On the one hand, image taking aimed at documenting the flight and the struggle to stay and to re-build a life in the homeland. On the other hand, and of equal importance for the inhabitants, was the visual documentation of how life looked like before the displacement took place. Hence, the production of visual evidence also played a role for «future remembrance» (Wendl et al. 1998). Vanishing homes, lost ways of life and the collective experience of forced displacement should be captured and kept alive on images for future generations.

Time and again I was asked to record the events with my video camera, which I did. The inhabitants used my video camera as a stage to communicate their concerns and to appeal to the international community. I have discussed this phenomenon (the camera as a stage) as well as the related question of representing refugees and the problem of reaching audiences elsewhere (Hänsch 2017). In this visual essay, I will focus on photographs which were taken in collaboration with my research interlocutors. The pictures presented below were shot with a small and simple consumer camera by myself and my research partner Osman.

² In May 2010, Manasir representatives, together with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), filed a criminal complaint against the German dam-building company in Frankfurt am Main. The company was responsible for supervising the dam construction and controlling the commissioning of the dam (see Hänsch & Saage-Maass forthcoming).

Local Aesthetics and the Ordering of the Photo Series

Photographs and videos evoke remembrances, emotions, sensual experiences, and imaginations that go far beyond what is contained in the image itself. These imaginations are based on and resonate with embodied knowledge (cf. MacDougall 2006). If we follow this argument, how would it be possible to evoke and communicate the experience of strangeness and alienation that the inhabitants were confronted with? What would somebody who is not initiated to local ways of habitual perception see in these pictures?

Take for example **photo 10**. The outsider would assume that they were looking at some waterfront village and not at all at a refugee camp. Yet, an insider to the local ways of seeing would miss a wall around the shelters, and she would not see homes but improvised shelters (**photo 12**). Without a wall, usually encompassing a house, the men and women felt the loss of intimacy. Not all people could build an improvised wall. Or take **photo 11**. Where an outsider would see a charming lake, a local man or woman would point to a place on the water, to explain where once her house was located surrounded by palm trees and green fields. They would continue to explain that fishing has become a new source of income (**photo 13**). How would the outsider experience the dry and windy desert environment in contrast to the former lushness and greenness, which plays a vital role in local aesthetics?

To provide a glimpse into these experiences of displacement, I decided to order the series of photographs chronologically. **Photo 1** to **photo 3** were shot by Osman. Before his world disappeared under the water, he wanted to take pictures of things important to him. **Photo 2**, taken by Osman, was much appreciated by all the neighbours. Palm trees are a symbol of life, pride, dignity and wealth. I captured moments of destruction, flight, drowning and decay (**photos 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9**). During the flooding, Osman also documented the moment when his family had to move again due to the ever-rising waters (**photo 8**). Later, President Omar al-Bashir, urged by the representatives of the Manasir, visited the area and promised support for reconstructing villages and agriculture. Osman captured the event of welcoming, demonstrating and calling for their rights (**photos 14, 15**). It was a moment full of hope, but the promised support was never realised.

By way of the specific assembly of the photos, I try to express the experiences of a world falling apart, its fragmentation, its instabilities as well as its simultaneous re-formation. The ordering of these pictures, I believe, evoke the absent; at least this was my aim.

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AUTHOR

Valerie Hänsch is an anthropologist and filmmaker. She examines the relationship between infrastructures, uncertainty and crisis. Her work in the Sudan includes several collaborative audio-visual projects and documentaries. She holds a PhD from the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) and is currently replacing the Juniorprofessor for Culture and Technology in Africa at Bayreuth University.

valerie.haensch@uni-bayreuth.de

*Universität Bayreuth
Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften
Lehrstuhl Ethnologie
D-95440 Bayreuth*