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The Absence of Atrocity: Bart Michiels's *The Course of History* Photographs

Sonja Fessel

This article examines the absence of atrocity in the photographic series *The Course of History* by the Belgian-born, New York-based photographer Bart Michiels (1964–). It shows, in beautiful, large-format prints, seemingly innocent landscapes and confined views of nature. Only when viewers read the titles of the photographs do they become aware of the violent history of the sites. These turn out to be the fields of fierce European battles such as Verdun, Waterloo and Stalingrad. The present article reviews recent trends towards using place as a motif in contemporary art photography and focuses on the 'empty' landscape as a pictorial strategy that opens up a narrative space, one that needs to be completed by the viewer. The absence evoked by the image is treated as antithetical to the conventional ethos of photography, which canonically stands as the evidence of an occurrence.

Keywords: *Bart Michiels (1964–), European battles, battlefields, history, war photography, aftermath photography, landscape, atrocity, absence, 'lieux de mémoire', narration*

The photographs comprising 'The Course of History' by the Belgian-born, New York-based artist Bart Michiels show spacious landscapes or close-up details in nature – some romantically beautiful, others sombre and desolate.¹ Panoramas of extensive fields and vast meadows alternate with views confined to the ground that almost collapse into the flatness of abstraction. No human activity is depicted, no architectural elements appear, and only rarely do hints of time and place mark these images. Only by reading the titles of individual photographs does the viewer become aware of his mistake: almost inevitably, one is seduced into perceiving these photographs as 'pure' landscapes. In fact, they reveal themselves to be the sites of some of the most violent battles in European history from antiquity to the Second World War: Thermopylae, Waterloo, Verdun and Stalingrad. In these very locations, now so still, decisive battles were fought and thousands of soldiers died.²

Michiels's photographs are striking for their harmonious composition and aesthetic appearance. In *Verdun 1916, Le Mort Homme* (2001) (figure 1), for instance, one sees a wide, slightly hilly meadow with high grass beneath a featureless sky. The horizon line lies almost exactly in the middle of the photograph, dividing it into balanced halves. On the far right one can make out two tiny trees. These, as well as a few parallel tracks in the grass, are the only elements that disturb the monotony of the vast scene. Furthermore, the tracks are the only temporal reference to any event prior to the taking of the picture. The restrained, coherent colours underline the spacious void that arrives with an almost sacral silence.

The detachment from the dramatic history of the sites is even more evident in those photographs that show confined views onto the ground. *Passchendaele 1917*,

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1 – Bart Michiels started the series in 2001. All photographs are C-prints. They are printed with a white margin and have been shown framed in three sizes: 28 × 33 in., 40 × 50 in. and 60 × 72 in.

2 – The historic battlefield as a motif in contemporary art photography is a fascinating and complex phenomenon that can also be noticed in the works of other artist such as Peter Cattrell, John Divola, Peter Hebeisen and others.



Figure 1. Bart Michiels, *Verdun 1916, Le Mort Homme*, 2001, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Foley Gallery, New York.



Figure 2. Bart Michiels, *Passchendaele 1917, Goudberg Copse*, 2005, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Foley Gallery, New York.



Figure 3. Bart Michiels, *Monte Cassino 1944, Monastery Hill*, 2004, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Foley Gallery, New York.



Figure 8. Bart Michiels, *Lepanto 1571, Mare Sanguinoso VII*, 2006, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Foley Gallery, New York.

Goudberg Copse (2005) (figure 2) limits its view to a pumpkin field. There is no horizon line. The shallow plane of the image is structured by the rows of plants, bright orange pumpkins that spread evenly across the picture field, ornament-like and with an ‘all-over’ effect. Rather than being a photograph of a landscape, it shows a terrain that once had been covered with scattered military remnants. But again, nothing happens here in the present, except for the cultivation of produce. No visual cues direct us to the history of this spot.³

War-torn Landscapes

The discrepancy between the aesthetic disposition of Michiels’s photographs and the perceptual effect caused by the violence once committed at these sites could not be greater. Michiels’s photographs stand in the long tradition of landscape painting (as well as that of landscape photography). Landscape has been associated with physical experience and contemplation ever since Petrarch’s celebrated climb of Mount Ventoux.⁴ But Romanticism in particular imposed the effects of landscape as a discrete subject matter for painting. The comprehension of landscape as a constellation of nature that stimulates emotional arousal and increasing self-awareness in the viewer is closely linked to the concept of the Sublime, as presented by Edmund Burke in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).⁵ Burke placed strong emphasis on the sensation that he believed caused by nature:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature* is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. [...] Astonishment is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree [...]. No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. [...] Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime.⁶

Stating specific qualities for both concepts, he considered the following to be characteristics that may induce the sensation of the sublime: ‘obscurity’, ‘vacuity’, ‘silence’ as well as ‘loudness’, ‘vastness’, ‘greatness’, ‘infinity’.⁷ William Gilpin later demonstrated a blending of both concepts in one picture, employing a new term: the beautiful and the sublime as intermixing categories of the *picturesque*.⁸ Jean-François Lyotard connects the sublime with the unrepresentable and therefore also with what is not shown.⁹

Michiels’s photographs embody the criteria of the beautiful and the sublime on two levels, but in a dissociated way: while they do comprise several of the stated pictorial qualities of sublime landscapes, they provoke the feeling of harrowing astonishment by identifying the scenes’ fateful history. While one can easily identify the pictorial qualities of the sublime in Michiels’s *Monte Cassino 1944, Monastery Hill* (2004) (figure 3), what makes one shudder is the moment of recognition, when one suddenly grasps that those misty folds are the site of one of the fiercest battles of World War Two. At Monte Cassino the Allies fought a series of four bitter battles in 1944 in order to break the Gustav Line. The historic monastery on the hilltop, founded in 542 CE, was seen as a thorn in the side of the Allies, who presumed it to be occupied by the Germans. On 15 February more than two hundred bombers attacked Monastery Hill with an estimated 1,150 tons of explosives and bombs, leaving it a smoking ruin. Altogether, the four battles at Monte Cassino killed more than 105,000 soldiers.

From Landscape to Place

Even though Michiels uses landscape as his principal form of representation, landscape as a subject or as an artistic problem is not his main concern. Instead his primary interest lies in place. This distinction is rarely made in art history. Landscape as a motif of photography has a long and varied tradition going back to the very beginnings of the medium, but place as a motif has received little attention to date.¹⁰

3 – Several photographs include architectural hints, and many of the shown landscapes had been shaped by the violent events, but mostly they are identifiable only if one already knows what site is shown.

4 – Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1963 (first published 1949), 1 and 10.

5 – Edmund Burke, *Elements of the Sublime: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London 1770 (sixth edition; first edition 1757). For a thorough study of the Sublime in landscape painting, see also Gerald Finley, ‘The Genesis of Turner’s “Landscape Sublime”’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 42:2/3 (1979), 141–65.

6 – Burke, *Elements of the Sublime*, 95–6.

7 – *Ibid.*, 99, 125, 127, 129 and 152.

8 – Finley, ‘The Genesis’, 144.

9 – Jean-François Lyotard, *Die Analytik des Erhabenen (Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime)*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1994.

10 – Sérgio Mah, curator of the PhotoEspaña 2008 in Madrid, chose ‘place’ as subject-matter. At the same time, Mah curated an exhibition on ‘Compromised Places’ featuring artists such as An-My Lê, Walter Niedermayr and Joachim Koester. See Sérgio Mah, *Lugar/Place*, Madrid: La Fabrica 2008; and *Lugares comprometidos. Topografía y actualidad / Compromised Places. Topography and Actuality* (exhibition catalogue, Museo Colecciones ICO (4 June–24 August 2008)), ed. Fundación ICO, Madrid: Fundación ICO 2008. A recent publication on landscape photography is the thematic issue *Paisajes silenciosos / Silent Landscapes* of the Spanish quarterly *EXIT*, 38 (2010) published by Rosa Olivares & Associates, S.L. Madrid. The issue presented, amongst others, photographs by Bart Michiels, Ori Gersht, Joel Sternfeld and Axel Hütte.

11 – Other photographers who follow this strategy are: Joel Sternfeld, Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon. I see this tendency also as evidence of an interesting antagonism to the likewise striking interest in what Marc Augé has termed 'non-places'. See Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London and New York: Verso 1995.

12 – W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994) 2002, viii. In 1989 the growing interest in space was labelled the 'spatial turn'. A great deal of literature on space, as well as on place and landscape, has been published since then by scholars in many disciplines.

13 – *Ibid.*, x.

14 – Ulrich Baer, 'To Give Memory a Place: Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition', *Representations*, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering, 69 (winter 2000), 38–62.

15 – It must be said, however, that the majority of Reinartz's photographs show, and explicitly aim at showing, the traces and identifiable markers of the Nazi concentration camps. See Dirk Reinartz and Christian Graf von Krockow, *totenstill*, Göttingen: Steidl 1994, published in English as *Deathly Still: Pictures of Concentration Camps*, Zürich: Scalo 1995.

16 – Baer, 'To Give Memory a Place', 42–3.

17 – The problem of 'authenticity' in regard to historic sites, in particular those in the form of architecture, has just recently been questioned by the historian Valentin Groebner. See Valentin Groebner, 'Königsfelden Reloaded: Was ist das Originale am Originalschauplatz? Ein mittelalterliches Ereignis als Geschichts-Erlebnis der Moderne', paper presented at the symposium 'Geschichtsvermittlung am Originalschauplatz', Windisch/Königsfelden (15 October 2010), <http://www.unilu.ch/files/koenigsfelden-reloaded.pdf>.

18 – Stuart Jeffries, 'Claude Lanzmann on Why Holocaust Documentary Shoah Still Matters', *guardian.co.uk* (9 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jun/09/claude-lanzmann-shoah-holocaust-documentary>.

19 – *Ibid.*

20 – Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard 1984; in English: Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France. Lieux de mémoire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2006. Aleida Assmann is another author who has written extensively on relations between place and memory.

Of course, photography has always been the medium of choice for 'documenting' places, but today one can observe a specific artistic interest in taking sites that are peculiar in some way, engaging in thorough preliminary research, making the visit and supplying the mediation of a narrative.¹¹

The differentiated analysis of landscape, space and place has been subject to a great deal of research by scholars from many fields, although, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues in his widely read book *Landscape and Power*, 'no one has really attempted to think the three terms [landscape, space, and place] together as a conceptual totality'.¹² Mitchell emphasises the need for rethinking these three elements as a 'dialectical triad' and demonstrates their interdependency: 'If a place is a specific location, a space is a "practiced place," a site activated by movements, actions, narratives, and signs, and a landscape is that site encountered as image or "sight"'.¹³ In Michiels's photographs we never see arbitrary landscapes, but always specific places – even if the mentioned 'practices' have taken place long since, even hundreds of years before.

An early and significant scholarly contribution to the theme of photography and place was Ulrich Baer's article 'To Give Memory a Place: Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition'.¹⁴ Baer discusses two photographs of Holocaust sites taken by Dirk Reinartz and Mikael Levin in the 1990s. It is remarkable that he chooses two photographs that also show empty although decidedly sombre landscapes.¹⁵ Baer argues that these photographs:

[C]onfront us with a dimension of the Holocaust that cannot be fully accounted for by drawing on material or documentary evidence. Yet the deliberate exclusion of historical markers in these pictures is not an irresponsible, vain, or ahistoricist gesture. Rather, Reinartz and Levin rely on the aesthetic as a category to draw attention to the unbridgeable gap between, on the one hand, philosophical efforts of understanding and historicist attempts at explanation and, on the other hand, the actual event of the extermination.¹⁶

Without question, Reinartz's and Levin's photographs need to be considered in the specific context of the discourse on Holocaust and memory, in which place plays a leading role. Claude Lanzmann's famous film *Shoah* (1985) can be read as an early indicator for this new focus that is being put on place. In his nine-and-a-half hour documentary, Lanzmann does not only apply the technique of the oral interview to underline truth, but he also returns to the sites of the Holocaust, to the death camps of Chelmno, Treblinka, Belzec or Auschwitz-Birkenau. Occasionally the camera pans across empty fields, along a still river or through the villages that still exist today. The authentic historic sites, still witnesses of the fatal occurrences, function here as affirmations to the testimony of the survivors.¹⁷ *Shoah* is furthermore acknowledged for its explicit renunciation of showing the atrocities. Lanzmann does not show photographs or news footage of the emaciated, dead bodies that are utilised so often as evidence. 'The proof is not the corpses; the proof is the absence of corpses', as Lanzmann himself expresses it.¹⁸ Accordingly, the film has even been described as 'a documentary of absences'.¹⁹ Michiels's photographs share the characteristics of the prominent role of the original site as well as the absence as pictorial element with Lanzmann's *Shoah*, even though he points at a different subject matter.

The unimpaired significance of historic battles and their sites for the formation of a national identity has been a crucial concern of the French scholar Pierre Nora. His writings on '*lieux de mémoire*' (sites of memory) have provided pioneering analyses of historic places that encapsulate the memory of a nation. Nora's theses have provoked much further research on memory and place.²⁰ Although the concept of the site of memory has been widely detached from geographic places since – it has been applied also to individuals as well as objects – Michiels's photographs of historic battlefields return to the genesis of the notion.

In photography the differentiation between landscape and place as the focus of interest is often blurred. Richard Misrach's photographs – taken at Bravo 20 (figure 4),



Figure 4. Richard Misrach, *Two Bombs* (from the *Bravo 20* series), 1986. © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

an illegal US Navy bombing range in Nevada – provide an early example, perhaps even a forerunner of photography’s interest in place.²¹ They depict the vast parched Nevada desert pockmarked by bomb craters, unexploded ammunition or dead fish.²² In Misrach’s book, the photographs are embedded in thoroughly researched texts on the history of the site – accompanied by maps, photographs from archives and other historical material. The book closes with a detailed proposal to turn the Bravo 20 site into a National Park.

Misrach’s and Michiels’s photographs share two types of composition: the vast landscape prospect, and the direct view onto the ground. But while Misrach depicts traces of the bombing and the harshness of the desert, Michiels’s photographs play with a beauty and an openness that elicit feelings of purity and innocence. Referring to a film by Alain Resnais, the American land-artist Robert Smithson once hinted at the provocative thesis that ‘each landscape, no matter how calm and lovely, conceals a substrata [sic] of disaster’.²³ Michiels’s photographs seem to respond visually to this statement.

The Aftermath of War and Very Late Photography

The battlefield has been an important motif almost since the birth of photography, gaining importance and influence with the progressive development of equipment and image-reproduction processes.²⁴ Roger Fenton’s famous photographs of the Crimean War, Mathew Brady’s pictures of the American Civil War or Timothy H. O’Sullivan’s equally well-known images published in Alexander Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* have become icons.²⁵ Irrespective of its use – as document, as proof, as legitimation or as anti-war propaganda – the photograph taken at a battlefield has typically shown destruction, death and the brutality of war, even when not showing the dead or wounded.²⁶ Michiels’s photographs show nothing of that. No references remain, whether cannon balls, spent ammunition or ruins. Battle has left these fields many years before. The photographs are no ‘trace of a trace of an event’, as David Company puts it referring to the photographs of Ground Zero by Joel Meyerowitz.²⁷ Only recently, with the US-led ‘war on terror’, have observers begun to speak of the vanishing of photography from media coverage of war.²⁸

Also in reference to Joel Meyerowitz’s photographs of Ground Zero, Company describes a ‘highly visible turn toward photographing the aftermath of events –

21 – Richard Misrach (with Myriam Weisang Misrach), *Bravo 20. The Bombing of the American West*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1990.

22 – Accordingly they have been perceived as evidence of what man does to nature. Max Kozloff has called Misrach’s photographs ‘moralized landscapes’, and rightly states that ‘the picture of nature today [1991] may testify to the damage men have done to their environment’. Max Kozloff, ‘Ghastly News from Epic Landscapes’, *American Art*, 5:1/2 (winter–spring 1991), 108–31, here 108 and 131.

23 – Robert Smithson, ‘Art Through the Camera’s Eye (1971)’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flan, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1996, 375.

24 – On early war photography, see Anton Holzer, ‘Den Krieg sehen. Die Geschichte der Kriegsphotografie 1846 bis 1918’, in *Bilderschichten. 2000 Jahre Nachrichten aus dem Krieg*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2009, 224–35. See also Gerhard Paul, *Bilder des Krieges. Krieg der Bilder. Die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges*, Zürich: Neue Zürcher Zeitung 2004.

25 – Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* appeared in two volumes. Recent research has shown that there were furthermore two versions of the book, both first published in 1866. Two photographs by Timothy H. O’Sullivan are frequently cited: *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863* and *Field where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg, July, 1863*. For recent research on Alexander Gardner, see Anne E. Peterson, ‘Alexander Gardner in Review’, *History of Photography*, 34:4 (2010), 356–67.

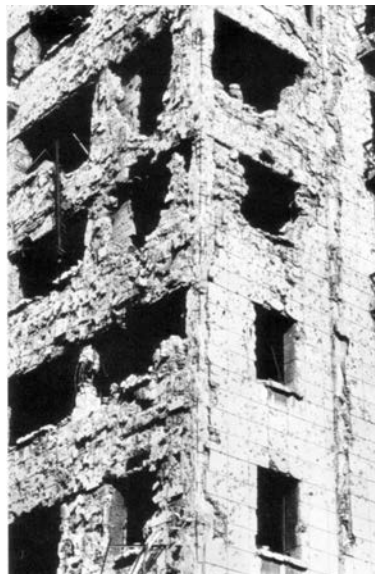
26 – Susan Sontag’s book *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a most significant and exhaustive study of war photography, and particularly of photography showing the atrocities of war. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2003.

27 – David Company, ‘Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of “Late Photography”’, in David Green, *Where is the Photograph?*, Maidstone: Photoworks 2003, 123–32, here 124.

28 – Referring to the events of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, Bernd Hüppauf has shown how the war against terrorism differs from earlier wars and how this also has affected the role of the photographer in situ and the role of photography compared with moving images. Bernd Hüppauf, ‘Ground Zero und Afghanistan. Vom Ende des fotografischen Bildes im Krieg der Unschärfen’, *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Fotografie und Ästhetik der Fotografie*, 22:85/86 (2002), 7–22.

Figure 5. Sophie Ristelhueber, *Rue Bechara-El-Khoury* (from the *Beyrouth* series), 1984, gelatine silver print, 28.5 cm × 19 cm.

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29 – Company, 'Safety in Numbness', 124.
 30 – These photographers have received much scholarly attention lately. See, for example, Ian Walker, 'Desert Stories or Faith in Facts?', in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister, London and New York: Routledge 1995, 236–52; Mark Durden, "'The Poetics of Absence': Photography in the "Aftermath" of War', in *Hidden*, London: Imperial War Museum 2003; and Agnes Matthias, "'Post-Reportagen". Ori Gershts und Paul Seawrights Nach-Kriegsfotografien', in *War Visions: Bildkommunikation und Krieg*, ed. Thomas Knieper and Marion G. Müller, Köln: Herbert von Halem 2005, 200–16.
 31 – Company, 'Safety in Numbness', 123–32; and Walker, 'Desert Stories or Faith in Facts?', 240.
 32 – Ulrich Baer has linked absence in the photographs by Reinartz and Levin to the discourse on 'limits of representation' that has been much discussed concerning Holocaust photographs. Baer, 'To Give Memory a Place', 44. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 2003. This discourse arose again after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. See W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Horror', *ELH*, 72 (2005), 291–308. The representation of human suffering was questioned anew by the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs. See Judith Butler, 'Folter und die Ethik der Fotografie', in *Bilderpolitik in Zeiten von Krieg und Terror: Medien, Macht und Geschlechterverhältnisse*, ed. Linda Hentschel, Berlin: b-books 2008, 205–28.
 33 – Walker, 'Desert Stories or Faith in Facts?', 240.
 34 – Matthias, "'Post-Reportagen"', 202.
 35 – Much scholarly writing has been devoted to this photograph, in particular focusing on the two different versions of it. See Ulrich Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle. A Visual History of the Crimean War*, Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers 2001, 119–71. Bart Michiels's photograph *Sebastopol 1855*, *The Shadow of the Valley of the Shadow of Death* (2008) is a distinct homage to the Fenton photograph. See Sonja Fessel, 'Slagvelden: foto's van oorlogslandschappen. Bart Michiels: *The Course of History*', *EXTRA*, 10 (2012), 56–63, 152.
 36 – Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archéologie*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Centre de Création Industrielle 1975.

traces, fragments, empty buildings, empty streets, damage to the body and damage to the world'.²⁹ This can likewise be seen in Sophie Ristelhueber's series *Beyrouth* (1984) (figure 5), Ori Gersht's work *Afterwars* (1998) (figure 6) and Paul Seawright's photographic series *Hidden* (figure 7) taken in 2002 in Afghanistan.³⁰ All of these photographers, whether on commission or not, have taken photographs of sites of political conflict after the fighting was over. While Company used the term 'late photography' for Joel Meyerowitz's photographs, Ian Walker had previously referred to the works of Sophie Ristelhueber as 'post-reportages'.³¹ What makes these photographs so captivating, however, is not just the temporal aspect of 'late' or 'post-reportage' but also the renunciation of showing atrocities and the pain of the human victims.³² Instead, the scars of war are documented by means of architectural ruins, the scarred landscape and military detritus. Writing about Sophie Ristelhueber's work, Ian Walker sees photography's role as being to 'record, document what comes after, what has been left when the war is over'.³³ Similarly, Agnes Matthias claims that Gersht and Seawright are interested in what remains when the fighting is over and a post-war daily routine begins, defined by long-term reconstruction, processing and perhaps also repressing and forgetting of events.³⁴ Roger Fenton's famous photograph *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855) has been cited frequently as an early and striking example of a war photograph that refuses to show the atrocities of war by human suffering.³⁵ But while Ristelhueber's, Gersht's, or Seawright's photographs were produced after the events but still close to them in time, Michiels's photographs were taken decades, some even hundreds of years after the battles were fought. If the former can be described as 'late photography', Bart Michiels's work needs to be considered as 'very late photography'.

Absence

While one can draw analogies between Michiels's photographs and the aftermath photographs of other artists, there are also decisive differences, for the events referred to by his photographs have long since lost their newsworthiness. Michiels has no interest in documenting or reporting a current situation. Nor does he seek to show the traces, or even the trace of a trace, of war, although many adequate motifs would remain: the endless rows of white crosses of the gigantic military cemeteries or the numerous monuments that testify to the immense losses at many former battle sites today would be potential motifs. One might also recall the phenomenological inquiry known as 'Bunker Archaeology' by the French philosopher Paul Virilio.³⁶ Virilio's photographs, taken between 1958 and 1965, documented the architectural



Figure 6. Ori Gersht, *Untitled* (from the *Afterwars* series), 1998, C-print, 150 cm × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



Figure 7. Paul Seawright, *Minefield* (from *Hidden*), 2002, Cibachrome print, 101 cm × 126.5 cm (124.5 cm × 150 cm framed). Courtesy of the artist.

37 – Durden, “‘The Poetics of Absence’”, has described the photographs by Seawright as ‘empty deserts’; furthermore, he refers to this emptiness as a ‘poetics of absence’, a term borrowed from literature studies. Emptiness in the photographs of Paul Seawright is tricky, for Seawright refers to something that is still there, even if not seen in the picture: the mines ‘hidden’ in the sand.

38 – Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, first published as *La Chambre claire* (1980), New York: Hill and Wang 1982.

39 – This absence is found not only in photographs of landscapes but also in those of interiors. Photographs by Laurenz Berges, Thomas Demand and Lucinda Devlin are examples of such ‘empty’ but portentous interiors.

40 – Gunnar Schmidt, ‘Der Blick in den Bombenkrater’, *European Photography*, 77 (2005), 13–18. Although his main subject is the bomb-crater photography used in news coverage, Schmidt also draws the parallel to the photographs of Richard Misrach and Walid Ra’ad.

41 – *Ibid.*, 15.

42 – Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1976; published also in English: *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 1987.

43 – Wolfgang Kemp, ‘Death at Work: A Case Study on Constitutive Blanks in Nineteenth-century Painting’, *Representations*, 10 (spring 1985), 102–23.

44 – *Ibid.*, 113.

remains of the innumerable bunkers built by the Nazi regime along the so-called Atlantic Wall. But Michiels’s ‘The Course of History’ and several photographs by Misrach and Seawright share a distinctive absence in the image, an ‘emptiness’ that is often accompanied by a feeling of silence.³⁷ The conventional ethos of photography, to stand as evidence of what has occurred, has been replaced by a void.³⁸ The event or its occurrence is no longer in the picture.³⁹

Gunnar Schmidt has also found this kind of emptiness in photographs used by the media, more specifically in their increased publication of photographs showing bomb craters.⁴⁰ Schmidt argues that these photographs function as teasers for news messages, but that they do not provoke engagement. Furthermore, they are freed of the singularity of concrete events. Particularly when crater photography becomes repetitive, it is the antithesis of photography that evokes the pathos of truthfulness. Schmidt is tempted to call these photographs a new genre, even if only a poor genre (*‘ein armes Genre’*).⁴¹ He concludes with the hypothesis that absence in the photograph reflects a general crisis of the image – particularly the information image in times of war. Perhaps this absence is even more striking in photographs used in news coverage, but the analogy is no less stunning. Considering the numerous examples of this trait from contemporary art photography, one is tempted to speak of an iconography of absence.

But what is it, exactly, that is not shown in these photographs? And how do we deal with this ‘emptiness’? In the images analysed by Schmidt, it is the wounded and dead victims of bombings that have been removed from the scene moments or hours earlier. Their dreadful stories are told in the news articles. In Michiels’s photographs, the titles point to a long bygone historical moment, a trope more familiar to us from history painting.

Wolfgang Iser, the German literary critic, introduced in the 1970s the concept of the *‘Leerstelle’*, the ‘blank’, as a literary strategy in novels.⁴² According to this notion, the writer strategically elicits the reader’s involvement by not declaring everything there is to say, leaving things out in order to make space for the reader’s own interpretations. In 1985 the German art historian Wolfgang Kemp adapted this concept for reception aesthetics, applying it to nineteenth-century history painting.⁴³ Analysing Léon Gérôme’s *The Death of Marshal Ney* (1868), he demonstrated how the execution of the protagonist was not depicted at the moment it happened – the climax of the action that one most likely would expect to be shown – but several moments later. Instead, the painting is dominated by a long wall and a large, empty gap that stretches out between the corpse of Marshal Ney and the firing squad leaving the scene. Furthermore, Kemp points out another blank: the dead Marshal Ney, as well as another figure to the far left of the painting, gazes to the right, to a space outside the picture. This space becomes a narrative space that needs to be filled by the viewer:

For what happened in the temporal phase preceding the depicted moment, what is no longer visible but is nonetheless of crucial importance for the action of the picture – namely, the firing squad, the shots, the execution of state power – all remains situated in the area before the picture, in the blank, invisible and yet present both in its traces in the picture [...] and as picture.⁴⁴

Even though Gérôme depicted a surprisingly late moment of the action, the historic event that led to the painting is still represented in the painting. Michiels, however, resists showing any occurrence or hints pointing at such. Nevertheless, the emptiness constructed in the photograph likewise points back at the viewer. The references, and the names of the sites and battles given in the photographs’ titles, indicate the action that once took place in the represented place, but outside the time continuum of the photograph. It is now on the viewer to complete the narrative of the photograph.

The Reintroduction of Atrocity

If it were not for the titles of the photographs, one would not be able to perceive these landscapes as the sites of historic battles, and, consequently, one would not be able to complete the narrative. The explicit discrepancy between what is shown in the image and what is referred to through the title is therefore crucial. Or in Roland Barthes's words, one can distinguish between the denoted image, the mechanically produced image of the landscape, and the connotation achieved by the use of text.⁴⁵

Barthes's essay on 'The Photographic Message' (1961) explicitly investigates the press photograph, but many of his assumptions carry over into an appreciation of the strategies used by Michiels. Speaking of text as connotative procedure, Barthes sees it as a 'parasitic message designed to connote the image'.⁴⁶ A remarkable reversal stands behind this observation: for a long time the image had been primarily used to illustrate a text, but 'it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image'.⁴⁷ But while Barthes considers the text to be 'a kind of secondary vibration, almost without consequence',⁴⁸ titles for Michiels have an essential impact on how one perceives the photographs. While from an aesthetic perspective the photographs also work without the narrative, the viewer must decode the 'cultural' or 'historical' connotation in order to perceive the site's historical meaning.⁴⁹ Without the references provided by the titles the photographs would remain photographs of arbitrary landscapes.

Besides individual titles, a second text style used by Michiels connotes the unshown in his photographs. Although randomly, Michiels has presented his photographs together with short texts or citations that can also be found in exhibition catalogues.⁵⁰ These texts may be excerpts from history books, quotations from soldiers or even poetry. The words of soldiers who had been witnesses to the events add force to the images:

One soldier was going insane with thirst and drank from a pond covered with a greenish layer near Le Mort Homme. A corpse was afloat in it; his black countenance face down in the water and his abdomen swollen as if he had been filling himself up with water for days now.⁵¹

The photograph of Verdun has been displayed alongside striking facts of the battle:

The Battle of Verdun, fought over ten months in 1916 caused over an estimated 700,000 dead, wounded and missing. The hill of Le Mort Homme was the site of one of the fieriest battles of that episode in the Great War.⁵²

While this commentary makes a clear statement about the historic past and the significance of the site, it reintroduces the atrocities of the battle that are not depicted in the image. Michiels does not consider these texts to be an integral part of his work, but they demonstrate the problem of 'hidden' cultural or historical connotations. If the viewer does not bring along a certain historical knowledge in advance, he will not be able to comprehend the full dimension of the photograph's content.

Often this new reading of the photograph, triggered by the title and other accompanying texts, is encouraged by visual clues in the photograph that previously appeared to be inconspicuous. The reading of the *Lepanto 1571, Mare Sanguinoso VII* (2006) (figure 8) photograph as a 'sea of blood' is visually fortified by the red-tinted water. At first glance likely to be perceived as a kitschy sunset, the title links the shown to the famous Renaissance naval battle that has inspired artists ever since.⁵³ The red-tinted water seems like a dramaturgical orchestration of the setting of the clash between the Christian and Turkish fleets that killed nearly forty thousand men in four hours.

While the combination of text and photography seems to be a natural one in the context of news coverage and the use of captions is a premise in publishing, these have only recently become a favoured narrative strategy in art photography. The motif of place, the absence in the image, and the telling of the place's story often go hand in hand. Whereas Michiels uses citations taken from non-fiction books or

45 – See Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message' (Le message photographique, 1961) and 'Rhetoric of the Image' (Rhétorique de l'image, 1964), in *Image Music Text* (essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath), London: Fontana Press 1977, 15–31 and 32–51.

46 – Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', 25.

47 – Ibid., 25.

48 – Ibid., 26.

49 – Ibid., 27.

50 – Bart Michiels. *The Course of History: The Mediterranean Theatre*, exhibition catalogue, Foley Gallery, New York, 10 January–16 February 2008, New York.

51 – Citations provided to the author by the artist.

52 – Citations provided to the author by the artist.

53 – See Angus Konstam, *Lepanto 1571. The Greatest Naval Battle of the Renaissance*, London: Praeger 2003. Cy Twombly's painted *Lepanto*-cycle (2001), made on the occasion of the 49th Venice Biennial and now part of the Collection Brandhorst, Munich, is another recent example.

54 – Joachim Koester has worked with the combination of photography and text – commissioned as well as self-written – for some time; for example, *Row Housing* (1999) or *Barker Ranch* (2006). Martin Krenn likewise exhibits his photographs of the *Misplaced Histories* series (2005–08) with written texts. Joel Sternfeld's photographs from *On this Site: Landscape and Memoriam* (1996) are another example.

poetry, other artists compose their own texts.⁵⁴ In both cases the texts are the result of thorough research and strong engagement with the depicted motif. The combination of absence in the image and an explanatory caption or text also underlines the intrinsic limits of photography as medium. A photograph never shows all aspects of an occurrence, just as history itself is always a fragmentary and constantly altering construction. To confront the topos of historical battle with pictorial emptiness seems a consistent culmination.

Alternative Strategies of Picturing History

Michiels's interest in the sites of war was shaped by his childhood in Belgium. The introductory text to 'The Course of History' begins with an anecdote from his childhood:

I remember a story my grandparents told me. I was still a child, vacationing with them on their farm, in Flanders. They told me that during World War II, a bomb had fallen on the horse barn, but luckily, had not exploded. I made a drawing of this story for them. It showed the falling bomb suspended above the barn with the unsuspecting horse inside. But, as if the bomb had at the same time already hit the barn, I had also drawn a large hole in the roof.⁵⁵

55 – See http://www.bartmichiels.com/Course_of_History/COHintro.html

This anecdote is typical for a post-war generation that nonetheless has been shaped by war's aftermath: by ongoing discourse and the surrounding environment, by the telling and re-telling of events that so often culminate in the creation of legends.

Michiels's photographs do not pay homage to a singular event honoured by one nation but to events that involved and affected many. The large number of battles addressed in Michiels's series, ranging from the war at Troy to the battles of World War Two, testifies to an interest that goes beyond a specific political conflict. While photography is much valued for its capacity to capture the 'decisive moment' in just one image, Michiels's photographs demonstrate a very different approach. They do not seek to document a historical moment. They also do not refer to such. These photographs make reference to military combats that often lingered for several hours, days or even months and, furthermore, they stand *pars pro toto* for history and for the enduring impact of history on following generations. At the same time, these photographs demonstrate the tight and inseparable relation between history and place.

With the historic, long past battle as explicit subject matter Michiels appropriates a genre previously assigned to (history) painting. The deliberate absence of the historic moment as well as the missing of historical markers is a stunning, but wisely chosen visual strategy that bridges easily the gap between the 'presentness' of what is shown in the photograph and the 'pastness' of the event referred to. This friction is paralleled by the discrepancy between the aesthetic of the photographs and the atrocities reintroduced by the captions. These, as well as other accompanying texts, ensure the full reading of the photographs. While the use of text is a premise, it should not be taken as a failure of photography. Rather, it can be read as a new approach making it possible to broach historical issues that took place years before.