



**About the published content on each
section: Exploring Contemporary Realities**

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About the published content on each section: Exploring Contemporary Realities

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Abstract:

Exploring Contemporary Realities: Photography, Ethics, and the Production of Knowledge examines how contemporary photographic practices contribute to critical understandings of culture, space, and society within the editorial framework of scopio Magazine AAI and the CONTRAST III project. The essay analyses four key contributions: Joana Caetano's "An Ethics of Seeing," which interprets Gerda Taro's Spanish Civil War images as "photoscapes" oscillating between utopian aspiration and dystopian testimony; Paul Landon's "The Resonance of Abandonment," which reflects on the Vilnius Sports Palace as a modern ruin embodying memory, vulnerability, and failed utopian promise; Dária Salgado and Sérgio Tavares's "Trees as Visual Thinking," which foregrounds trees as agents of visual, sensory, and ecological knowledge in the urban landscape; and Lukas Sander's unfinished, a site-specific video walk interrogating Zurich's Manegg district as an emergent, corporately branded urban environment in flux.

Through these case studies, the essay demonstrates how photography extends beyond representation to become a tool of knowledge production. In dialogue with theoretical perspectives from Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Walter Benjamin, and Michael Marder, the works highlight photography's capacity to act ethically, to mediate cultural memory, to articulate ecological imaginaries, and to destabilise dominant narratives of urban development.

The integration of these contributions within scopio Magazine AAI reflects the broader mission of CONTRAST III, which fosters interdisciplinary collaboration across art, architecture, and design while situating photography within global debates such as the European Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus. By bridging artistic practice, pedagogy, and research, the project affirms the role of photography as a transversal and interdisciplinary language, capable of confronting contemporary urgencies and nurturing alternative futures. Ultimately, the essay positions visual practice as a privileged medium for generating expanded critical knowledge and constructing new imaginaries of the built and inhabited world.

Keywords: Visual language, Cultural boundaries, Exploring Contemporary Realities Photography, Ethics

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Exploring Contemporary Realities: Photography, Ethics, and the Production of Knowledge

Ana Miriam Rebelo, Maria Neto and Pedro Leão Neto

The editorial theme Exploring Contemporary Realities constitutes the conceptual structure of *scopio Magazine* AAI's second continuous volume, integrating the collaborative framework of the SCOPIO & CONTRAST International Conference and its open call. This volume initiates a strategic collaboration with the project Contrast: Multidisciplinary Network of Artistic Initiatives in Art, Architecture, Design, and Photography, reflecting shared objectives and interests: to create spaces where visual practice becomes a mode of knowledge production, bridging the artistic and academic spheres.

This partnership echoes the aims of the pedagogical research project CONTRAST III, which foregrounds photography as both interpretative and transformative. By situating artistic research at the intersection of architecture, art, and design, the project nurtures a platform for debate and critical reflection on contemporary challenges—from transforming public spaces to the sociopolitical urgencies shaping everyday life.

Four Ways of Seeing: Ethics, Ruin, Ecology, and Transition

Photography as Ethical Testimony: Utopian Readings of Gerda Taro

Joana Caetano's article *An Ethics of Seeing: Utopian Readings of Gerda Taro's PhotoScapes* critically analyses photography as a political testimony and forwards an interesting interpretation combining ethics and aesthetics. Situated between documentation and symbolism, Taro's images of the Spanish Civil War show what Caetano terms "photoscapes", which are visual fields where solidarity, violence, and the possibility of a transformed future coexist. This dual reading—utopian and dystopian—situates photography as an ethical act, demanding both remembrance and responsibility from its viewers.

Caetano draws here on Barthes' reflections about the punctum (1982) and Sontag's explorations of the ethics of war photography (2004) are highly resonant. Like Berger (2013), Caetano underscores photography's potential to foreground the agency of those photographed, resisting both voyeurism and romanticisation. Placed within the editorial vision of Exploring Contemporary Realities, Taro's work exemplifies how images can produce knowledge beyond representation.

Resonance and Ruin: The Vilnius Sports Palace

Paul Landon's *The resonance of abandonment* turns to a different yet equally powerful dimension of contemporary realities: modernist architecture's material and perceptual afterlife. Through photography and video, his exploration of the Vilnius Sports Palace reveals the uncanny persistence of sites marked by utopian ambition yet consigned to ruination.

Drawing on Benjamin's (1986) theorisation of ruins and Augé's (1995) "non-places," Landon situates the Sports Palace as both a relic of socialist modernity and a liminal space of memory. The ruin becomes a physical testimony and a "resonant" site, where viewers oscillate between loss and possibility. In this sense, photography functions as Huhtamo (2011) describes it as a "media archaeology," re-presenting the past in the present while opening speculative futures.

Trees as Visual Thinking: Ecological and Sensory Knowledge

In *Trees as Visual Thinking*, Dària Salgado and Sérgio Tavares focus on the agency of non-human elements within the urban environment by positioning trees as "visual thought," exploring how their mutability, sensoriality, and imagistic charge reshape human perceptions of place.

Here, the phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty (1999) on perception intersect with Marder's *Plant-Thinking* (2013), which insists on the philosophical agency of vegetal life. The project's synesthetic approach also draws from Chion's (2016) work on audiovisuality, as photography, moving image, and sound coalesce into a multisensory landscape. By proposing trees as mediators of affect and meaning, Salgado and Tavares open a dialogue with Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (2003), where natural forms catalyse new imaginaries of dwelling.

unfinished: Urbanism in Transition

Lukas Sander's *unfinished* examines Zurich's Manegg district as an emergent site of contemporary urban transformation. The project synchronises embodied experience with mediated perception through a site-specific video walk, inviting participants to inhabit an urban space branded "Greencity critically."

Here, the logic of corporate-driven sustainability intersects with Deleuze's time-image (2006), where cinema exposes temporal multiplicities and spectral futures. By combining imagery, interviews, and conjectural narratives, *unfinished* questions how urbanism builds and erases memory. The project remains deliberately open-ended, resisting closure and aligning with Benjamin's notion of history as unfinished fragments (1986).

CONTRAST III: Networks, Pedagogy, and Imaginaries

By integrating these essays into *scopio Magazine AAI* we are exemplifying the broader mission of CONTRAST III, which places photography at the centre of interdisciplinary debate across architecture, art, and design. As the CONTRAST editorial asserts, the project responds to the cultural, social, and political transformations of the 21st century, while cultivating a collaborative network between higher education institutions in Portugal and beyond.

In this sense, Caetano, Landon, Salgado, Tavares, and Sander embody CONTRAST's central objectives. Their works confront urgent issues—war and ethics, ruins and memory, ecological entanglements, urban speculation—while opening interpretive and pedagogical spaces simultaneously. Moreover, their methodological diversity (photography, video, sound, performative walks) reflects CONTRAST's commitment to transdisciplinarity and to creating hybrid forms of knowledge.

Conclusion: Toward Expanded Critical Knowledge

When analysing these four contributions together, we see how they structure and explore a diverse set of approaches through which we can comprehend and rethink contemporary realities:

- Caetano's ethics of seeing situates photography as a site of political responsibility;
- Landon's ruin photography interrogates architectural memory and utopian residue;
- Salgado and Tavares expand visual practice into ecological and sensory registers.
- Sander destabilises urban narratives by foregrounding corporate logics and open-ended futures.

What unites them is an insistence that photography is not merely a representational tool but a form of critical inquiry. Barthes (1982) argued decades ago, as did also Sontag (2011), that photography oscillates between document and imagination, testimony and fiction. These essays extend that insight by showing how the image generates knowledge across ethics, ecology, and urbanism, offering tools to rethink how we live and transform our environments.

Thus, it is easier to comprehend the importance of CONTRAST III and its mission, which is to position photography as a transversal, interdisciplinary language, able to interlink several areas and respond to global challenges while cultivating pedagogical, artistic, and social connections. By integrating diverse critical voices, the project fosters shared imaginaries that both confront contemporary urgencies and nourish the possibility of alternative futures. In doing so, *scopio Magazine AAI* and CONTRAST do more than curate visual practices—they create an expanded field of critical knowledge, where art and research converge to reimagine the realities of the present.

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