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# SHOW THAT WE EXIST: IRAQI WOMEN'S STORIES, RITA LEISTNER, AND HER SEEKING HUMAN(ITY) IN THE IMAGES OF CONFLICT

## Abstract

This article presents an analysis of one of the socio-artistic projects of the Canadian photographer Rita Leistner. Her work focuses mainly on how humans function during conflict and crises, including internal ones, but also includes initiatives related to environmental protection and fortitude displayed by her characters in everyday life. By focusing on the human condition and the situation of humanism today, Leistner demonstrates concern and a profound sense of empathy. Our reflections focus on the *Safer here* project, which tells the story of women incarcerated against their will in a Baghdad psychiatric hospital. Leistner presented their daily struggle for survival, their dignified lives, and how they come to terms with their plight. It was originally part of *Unembedded*, a project of four photojournalists stationed in Iraq. Our aim is to place Leistner's story in a broader context that considers how war stories are created and presented to the world. We also consider the demanding and difficult role played by artists in this process, who try to find a balance between being interpreters and being historians. Leistner's work shows her as, above

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all, an activist fighting for public attention and empathy for war victims. We use storytelling and visual analysis in our empirical investigations.

**Keywords:** Rita Leistner, Iraqi women, visual storytelling, socially engaged art, war photography, photojournalism.

## INTRODUCTION

Can war photography serve as storytelling and become a story? Can such a narrative capture something significant about armed conflicts, guns, bullets, assassination, and landmines, that cannot be voiced in other forms of expression? If photography is capable of narrating war stories, how does it enhance what reportage or documentary already conveys?

The answer to questions asked lies between the way a storyteller looks at the reality they deal with and the way they tell stories. The storyteller mentioned in this story, Canadian Rita Leistner, primarily known as a war photojournalist, describes her activity as socially and politically engaged art. She has a special interest in revealing how people live in challenging everyday conditions, such as life in conflict zones, cities under surveillance and isolated communities. The way she tells the stories represents a specific form of art, as it focuses not on self-expression or aesthetics, but rather on contributing to the global debate about the state of contemporary society. While looking for her "toolbox" (a box full of useful concepts, methods, and narratives), Leistner first encountered Cornell Capa's concept of the "concerned photographer" in the late 1990s, and since then has aimed to showcase the painful consequences of humanity's involvement in complex social, political, and cultural issues. As an eyewitness, she often puts her safety and her life at risk to capture moments in images that serve as evidence for events that would otherwise be unseen.

The links between media coverage of armed conflicts and artistic creativity are not obvious and could be shocking or even repulsive to the audience. When Leistner was asked whether war photography qualifies as a form of art, she replied:

> War photography is a sub-genre of photojournalism. Photojournalism is the most widely practiced politically engaged art of our time. I think a more helpful distinction, than whether or not war photography is art, is whether or not it is good or effective politically engaged art [Kukiełko-Rogozińska, Tomanek 2017: 19].

Perhaps this could be the secret to understanding her art more fully since it offers a multifaced glimpse into the world she has captured. In interviews with war photographers, the question often asked is why they chose such a theme for

their work. According to Leistner, regardless of what drives them to take up the subject of war, they are all characterised by a certain personality trait, an undefined power that allows them to run towards danger when the rest of us are trying to escape from it as quickly as possible. "Fear is not what's important; it's how you deal with it." [Leistner 2018a: 138].

In this article, we present one of Rita Leistner's wartime photographic stories, which not only highlights the photographer's involvement in initiating social change but more importantly, offers a portrait of women, situations and places that need such change to take place in their life most urgently. We are referring here to a series of photographs and accompanying authorial comments titled *Safer here*. That endeavour is part of the *Unembedded* project, which the artist carried out with three other photojournalists – Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, Kael Alford, and Thorne Anderson – during the war in Iraq (2003). We conduct an analysis to uncover the storytelling techniques and narrative approach used by Leistner. This paper will take as its source material photographs and publications authored by her. We present Leistner's story from Iraq in the broader context of producing contemporary war reportage, and the role artists play in it[1].

## STORYTELLING IN SOCIOLOGY

Storytelling has a history as long as human societies have existed. In the social sciences, storytelling is usually seen as a form of communication, as well as a social practice [Rice, Mundel 2018] that expresses understanding of the self and the world. Storytelling is a way to establish human bonds and build communities. Although the purposes and forms of storytelling change depending on the time and culture, it fulfils a key social and individual need, for people have a need to share their feelings and experiences through stories. Being human means telling stories [Del Negro, Kimball 2021]**.** Stories are not only a way of sharing ourselves with others, but also a key element in building our identity and finding purpose and meaning in life. When storytelling, we consolidate and reimagine the past, weave reflections about

[1] We also write about Rita Leistner's work in the context of storytelling in the article titled *Storytelling and the Healing Power of Photography: Rita Leistner's "My Space" Project*, where we present the stories of drug and alcohol-addicted residents of the Astoria and Balmoral hotels in Vancouver. We pay particular attention to storytelling's therapeutic and bonding functions [Kukiełko, Tomanek 2023]. On the other hand, in the book *Wojna na fotografiach Rity Leistner* [War in Rita Leistner's Photographs], Kalina Kukiełko writes about the photographer's participation in the *Basetrack* project and storytelling about the war in Afghanistan with and through iPhones [Kukiełko-Rogozińska 2021].

ourselves, and consider who we are and who we could become. What we include or omit from our stories affects how plausibly we perceive our future. Stories, unfolding over time, are temporary and flexible, therefore they evolve. At the same time, storytelling does not take place in a social vacuum. It requires an audience that can accept or reject our stories and make us adapt them to their expectations.

Storytelling about life experiences in sociology involves a new approach to understanding the role of narrative as a tool to construct stories [Berger, Quinney 2004]. However, people may have an ambivalent attitude towards them. On the one hand, we value storytelling, especially personal stories, for their authenticity, passion and ability to inspire empathy and action. By saying that everyone has a story, we create a discourse with a uniquely democratic potential. On the other hand, alongside the recognition of the power of stories, there can also be concerns. Stories can be easily manipulated, and the line between art and artifice is often blurred. The emotional identification that stories evoke can stimulate moral action, but also undermine rationality [Polletta 2006]. Storytelling stems from the need to understand and express the world. It enhances and expands our consciousness and broadens the range of our experiences [Berger, Quinney 2004]. There are many different ways to tell stories about society: photography, fiction, films, drawings or maps [Becker 2007]. These unconventional methods of communicating knowledge about human life have long been outside the focus and recognition of the social sciences. However, they are beginning to gain prominence in research as we look for new ways to bring to life research findings and transform them into more effective (and impactful) communication. Much of what we discover in research remains invisible or incomprehensible to a wider audience due to difficulties in presentation, lack of appropriate skills or tools for popularisation or explanation [Bates et al. 2023]. Mining people's stories, listening to them share their experiences, acknowledging their subjectivity and thus participating in important aspects of their lives, was what drove the so-called "turn to narrative". One of the promises of this turn was to restore the long-lost "subject" and move it closer to the centre of social research [Bamberg 2007]. The study of narrative texts focuses on the institutional and political conditions under which these texts were created, how they circulate in discourse and how they are received. The study of narrative practices, on the other hand, focuses on the institutional norms that regulate them. Central to the sociological approach to narrative, however, are beliefs about storytelling: about how stories work, what functions they have and whether they can be trusted [Polletta et al. 2011]. A persuasive story is not just a form of entertainment, although of course it can be entertaining too. It is a tool that guides us in exploring reality and tries to

make sense of the chaos of existence. Persuasive storytelling combines personal experiences with public narratives, allowing society to express itself through each individual person. In sociology, storytelling can be seen as an integral part of the research process. It is not just a "report" of observation, but a key part of meaning-making. We tell stories because we want to discover something new and to learn things that were previously unknown to us. Through storytelling we discover our "voice", coming out of silence in search of ourselves. Sociology focusing on storytelling encourages experimentation with different forms of representation and the pursuit of engagement with the world outside the academy [Berger, Quinney 2004]. The events in a story project desirable or undesirable futures, giving them normative meaning. Storytellers rarely formulate the moral explicitly, leaving the overall meaning to be interpreted by the audience. Stories draw on the cultural resources of plots, conveying the normative values associated with them. Narrative, unlike explanation, demonstrates cause-and-effect relationships through a sequence of events rather than through standards of logic and evidence. Audiences expect stories to be open to a variety of interpretations, and rarely recognise errors that occur in them. Narratives are forms of discourse, carriers of ideology and elements of collective action that can be recognised by their formal characteristics. People process stories differently from non-narrative messages, suspending their natural tendency to criticise when they are absorbed by a story. The way prototypical narratives work, the way people typically tell stories, and their ideas of what proper stories should look like provide valuable information about the role of narrative in social life. Storytelling is particularly effective in communicating ambiguous meanings for two reasons: firstly, people expect stories to be allusive and require effort to grasp their meaning; secondly, stories trigger further stories. People often respond to one story by telling their own, which may offer a completely different and even contrasting point of view, without paying attention to this contrast [Polletta et al. 2011]. Those who seek to bring about social change seek to use familiar storytelling conventions to effectively communicate their message and gain support. Encouraging disadvantaged groups to share their stories can raise awareness of their plight [Polletta 2006]. With the increasing presence of storytelling in a variety of media-from fiction and non-fiction, to interviews, narratives in medical and legal contexts, news, theatre, video, social media, and many other forms-many disciplines and professions have embraced narrative concepts and methodologies, using them to explore the narrative strategies employed by different storytellers in a variety of contexts. Central to this is the recognition of stories as essential to the creation and shaping of social life and to ideas about that life, including

who we include and whose lives we value. When we talk about storytelling, we refer both to the collective process of "making" narratives that draw on a variety of narrative resources, visuals, images and artistic practices, and to the process of shaping and transforming the social worlds in which we live and our imagined and actual selves. We co-create stories and they shape us at the same time [Rice, Mundel 2018]. Stories reflect the local and complex nature of experience, contrary to simplistic behaviourist theories. People find truth and detail in stories, which are often absent from the increasingly contested broad and abstract narratives of modern progress, faith and rationality [Costa 2021].

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The materials gathered for the analysis were originally published in forms of photographs and project description by the author Rita Leistner on her web page [Leistner 2004]. We approached our empirical work by conducting an in-depth interpretation and dialectical analysis. Furthermore, the interpretation of visual material was analysed in the context of written information provided in the project description. This process was as close as possible to the documentary method present in qualitative studies, where we engage with and use multiple approaches, namely, understanding message structure, decoding meaning, interpreting emotions [Bohnsack 2008].

## STORYTELLING AND WAR

In the context of our deliberations, we pose the question of the meaning of war stories. More specifically: what stories about war must be told, and who ought to tell them? Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After virtue* notes:

> […] man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters -roles into which we have been drafted— and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are [MacIntyre 2007: 217].

In the digitisation era, the line between news and entertainment is blurred. The same is true of the borders between media coverage and state diplomacy, professional and amateur journalism and different genres of photographic representation [Kennedy 2009: 832–833]. The difference between photojournalists who have been embedded in army units and work with the military and unembedded freelance journalists is becoming increasingly clear. The first are necessarily caught up in the imperatives and goals of their country's foreign policy. Others shoulder the burden of "being a witness," registering the violation of human rights in international conflicts. These ethical obligations have become an integral part of the independent photojournalism practice [Kennedy 2012: 311].

We must also bear in mind that official discourse is not concerned with covering events from conflict sites to provide audiences with comprehensive information. The stakes in this game are very high, so the main task of the pro-government media is to evoke brief and shallow emotions in viewers, naturally to serve official policy. The dominant way of reporting the war is therefore superficial and simplistic. In contrast, those for whom the war has little relevance (especially if it is taking place far away from their country), form their attitudes solely based on the material provided by the official media. In this case, the narrative built around the war is a straightforward story with heroes fighting the villains threatening their kingdom, in which the enemy is stripped of human qualities and civilian casualties on their side do not occur at all. This, in turn, makes the war seem, in the eyes of the public, a kind of sensational and (seemingly) bloodless story. [Nikolaev 2009: 126–127].

## THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PORTRAYING A WAR

Let us begin by providing context to the journey made by Leistner, a storyteller, a narrator, and a helper, who had the courage to be on the front line and record a war story, and who told a story of heroines.

Any war event can be viewed from multiple perspectives: social, psychological, technological, ethical, aesthetic, etc. Regardless of the dimension one is interested in, a full understanding of the meaning (or rather meaninglessness) of war undoubtedly requires an interdisciplinary approach and description based on various forms of research. This also applies to war photography, which, due to its transnational "language" and its relatively easy accessibility to audiences, can be seen in this context as the medium with the most universal message. Moreover, a study of this type takes on particular importance today, when juxtaposed with the assumption that technological advances allow it to be carried out quickly and

flawlessly, over long distances and with "surgical" precision. It is photographs that contradict views, showing that armed conflicts never take place without profound consequences for their participants, and that "minimizing the human cost" often turns out to be just an empty slogan of military propaganda [McMaster 2014: 188–189]. By showing ordinary life in or after war, Leistner's work, along with other independent war photographers, proves this point in a stark way, by showing people's suffering, pain and loss.

From this article's perspective, the form of communication during armed conflicts and its impact on the way public opinion is formed seems to be particularly interesting. This raises the question of relationships between media – messages and the public perception of war. The media not only constructs social reality, but does so in a predictable way. This is because media production reflects the dominant ideological and economic forces of a given state and thus builds support for specific political interests. Even a preliminary analysis of the war-related news accepted for publishing with its form and sources clearly shows the differences in the editorials standing either "for or against" the interpretations presented in public discourse [Nikolaev 2009: 106–108]. Appropriately selected images can shape the public's consciousness and attitudes, potentially strengthening or nullifying their support for government policies and practices. For this reason, authorities in various countries do everything possible to model, control, or stop the creation and circulation of war-related imagery as much as possible. Such efforts are aimed not only at preventing the publication of "inconvenient" material, but also at promoting and facilitating the distribution of material that fits into the construction of a "proper", power-approved media message [Griffin 2010: 8].

Contemporary photography of war, pain and trauma poses complex interpretative difficulties. The question of truth and creation, propaganda and "being a witness," or the avenue of publication used are recurring themes here. It is not insignificant that a large proportion of these accounts are produced by embedded photojournalists, whose independence and desire to show reality as is, may raise legitimate questions [Bresheeth 2006]. As a socially engaged photographer, Leistner is particularly predisposed to tell the war story taking place in Iraq. She is able to report on it not as an official representative of the media or an embedded army photojournalist, but as an artist with an unusually empathetic and understanding approach to the subjects of her work. This contextual exploration of Leistner's approach is mentioned to highlight the challenges the narrator must overcome to effectively portray the lives of their heroes and heroines.

## THE ROLE OF ARTISTS IN WAR

Art, especially socially engaged art, is a toolbox employed in many ways during a war. It may be used to portray the truth about the battles being fought or to construct a false image of events for winning the favour of the public. Thus, it can be used as a means of addressing social and political issues or as a form of resistance against oppressive forces. From their perspective, an artist can play multiple roles. They can be a witness, an interpreter, a historian, or even a forger, but whatever else they do, they are typically those who protest the war the loudest. From the moment the troops of the coalition forces entered Iraq, the consumers of media coverage attached great importance to the way the war was being conducted and the accompanying commentary. Tanks, drones, and missile launchers are the main weapons in combat, but art often becomes the most important element in the battle for public opinion for "hearts and minds." [Meyers 2003: 42].

A similar approach appears in Rita Leistner's work, who not only explores means of artistic self-identification in the era of modern communication devices, but also openly describes herself as a socially engaged artist. In her approach, itis not only contact with the photographed object and the act of taking the pictures that are important, but also what reactions the "captured moment" will elicit from viewers. The relationship between the subject and the photographer is often short-lived or momentary. After the brief act of focusing and holding one's breath, the clicking of the shutter takes only a tiny fraction of a second. "The photograph, however, is lasting and permanent […]. It has a life beyond the moment when it was taken. It becomes the conduit or *mediator* in place of the photographer, between the recorded gaze and viewer's return gaze. […] The viewer of the future, […] brings their living gaze to meet the subject's photographed gaze. It is in a state of perpetual, reciprocal flux." [Leistner 2014a:]. The photographic narrative created by this artist occupies a zone somewhere between recorded participant observation, impartial registration of existing data and artistic creation. Leistner's photographs and the extraordinary content that supplements them (or attempts to explain them) can be successfully treated as a visual description of the life of a specific, albeit temporary, community. There remains an open question about the "historical truth", or "reality" of the characters, situations and contexts presented in the project. Collecting visual material requires interference and interaction with the existing social reality. During that process the researcher triggers reactions and instigates certain situations recorded by the medium (e.g., a photograph). Working in the field therefore amounts to a chain of actions: observation, reflection, "provoking the reality", recording, transforming,

translation and creating meaning. Such narratives are also present in sociology, anthropology and philosophy in various approaches (referring, for example, to the identity of an individual and a group, or historical experience).

## THE HEROINES OR THE HEROES? DOES IT MATTER TO THIS STORY?

It is worth pausing our story for a moment to consider whether the fact that Leistner is a woman mattered while she was working on her war projects. For the artist herself, this is not a matter of importance[2]. Working as a photographer in 2003 led her to be stationed in the middle of the desert alone with 150 men from the "Crazy Horse" cavalry regiment. She describes it in the following way, "In Iraq I lived with the soldiers, side by side in unsupervised Forward Operations Bases with no running water, no toilets, no shelter. We slept on the ground half the time, or under tanks to take shelter from the relentless sun and heat." [Sayej, Leistner 2020: online]. The assumption that a woman would not be predisposed to the work of a war photojournalist is quite distant from how she sees herself[3].

[2] There were many female photographers who we need to mention: Gerda Taro was a German who covered the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. She is considered one of the first female war photographers, and her work provided a powerful visual record of the conflict. Margaret Bourke-White was an American photographer who covered World War II for *Life* magazine. She was the first female photographer to be accredited by the U.S. military, and her work provided a powerful visual record of the war. Dickey Chapelle was an American war photographer who covered conflicts in countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba. She was the first female American war correspondent to be killed in action while covering the Vietnam War. Lynsey Addario is an American photojournalist who has covered conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other war zones. She is known for her intimate and compassionate photographs that shed light on the human toll of war. Donna Ferrato is an American photographer who has documented domestic violence and its impact on women and children. She has covered conflicts in countries such as Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and her work provides a powerful visual record of the human cost of war. These women, among others, have made significant contributions as war photographers, and their work continues to inspire and inform us about the effects of conflict on individuals and communities. [Boyd 2015].

[3] Kael Alford, an American artist who, together with Leistner, participated in the *Unembedded* project describes that attitude the following way: "I don't really think of myself as a woman photographer. I'm just a photographer. At the same time, I recognize that it's only during my generation that women photographers have become much more common; and even now, here is something of a boys' club, to be sure. I admire the women who've come before me and pushed boundaries. So long as most societies are patriarchal, there will be advantages and disadvantages to being a woman in the field. The advantages are that we tend to appear less threatening to men and may raise fewer suspicions at times. We also get better access to other women. […] Perhaps women

We assume that Leistner seems to downplay the issue of being a woman, but it was precisely the reason that allowed her to implement the *Safer here* project (obtaining permission to enter the premises of a women's psychiatric ward in Iraq); it also allowed her to establish emotional ties with the protagonists of her story. For cultural and security reasons, a man who was not a family member or a doctor would simply not have been allowed to enter the hospital area. It was the bond she established with the women, which would not have been possible in the case of a male photographer, that determined the power of the photographs taken by the artist.

## THE JOURNEY TO IRAQ

Created in Iraq during the operation initiated by coalition forces in 2003 (the Second Gulf War and the subsequent period of the so-called "stabilisation"), where Leistner with earlier mentioned authors formed a group of individuals working independently. Each of them travelled around the country in search of "their" history, one that would be closer to their sensibilities and heart more than to what is usually considered headline news. They were independent as none were embedded in the army; nor did any of them share the same editorial office. Because of this, they were free from having to choose a strictly defined subject or fix the form in which the story was to be told. Leistner writes about this in the essay *Portraitscapes of war*. She explains how much she values that lack of dependence. In her opinion, the ability to make their own choices inspires photographers far more than working on a commissioned specific subject [Leistner 2014a]. We would agree that the aesthetic quality of a piece of artwork may be dependent on both its form and content – these determine the richness of the viewer's process of aesthetic perception. In other words, it can evoke an event of aesthetic sensations [Vernazzani 2021]. We believe that this effect is very pertinent to the work presented in *Unembedded*. There was no pressure when it came to making artistic choices, as they were not guided by a fixed principle. What is relevant is the fact that the photographers were constantly experiencing financial instability and moreover, the uncertainty as to whether anyone would take an interest in their work later [Leistner 2014b].

After several months of travelling around the country (taking short trips to New York to restock her equipment) she finally found her unique story, which otherwise would never have seen the light of day. This is where the story of the Iraqi heroines of our article begins.

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have more of an insider's understanding of women's issues related to health, gender discrimination, and so on […]." [Alford 2014: 16].

## *WOMEN IN BAGHDAD'S AL-RASHAD*

The artist decided to prepare a photographic story: "the women's ward of Baghdad's Al Rashad psychiatric hospital." The hospital is located on the outskirts of Sadr City, a vast slum in eastern Baghdad. This makeshift settlement is home to two million people, and is often the site of fierce armed struggle [Leistner 2005a: online].

During the period of Leistner's visits, nine hundred patients were admitted to the hospital, three hundred of whom were women – most diagnosed with schizophrenia. Shunned by their communities for succumbing to mental illness, Sunni, Shiite, Christians, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds came from all over Iraq and found refuge under one roof. Doctors say eighty percent of the patients staying in this hospital could function in society without problems, provided that they received the appropriate drugs and outpatient support. However, the possibility of patients returning home was problematic due to cultural considerations. Many Iraqis believe that if one daughter suffers from a mental disorder, the family will not be able to arrange marriages for any of their sisters. Therefore, when women with such problems are sent to Al Rashad, it is often with a false home address so that the hospital staff cannot send them back. Some mentally healthy patients find refuge here from being beaten, or from the threat of honour killings ("punishments"), which are carried out in Muslim countries. As a result, most of them have no choice but to stay in the hospital for the rest of their lives [Leistner 2005a].

As Leistner's work with the Al Rashad patients progressed, there were some doubts about whether anyone would be interested in publishing the photographs. Other journalists in Iraq considered it madness and a waste of time to spend weeks taking pictures in a psychiatric hospital, while outside its walls there were so many war stories worth telling. Some of them even stated that she "had gone crazy", risking her life for "a bunch of insane old women". [Leistner 2015]. Leistner did not give up, and in six months, she crossed the hospital gates more than twenty times. One of the project's photos is a self-portrait the photographer took in a hospital mirror (photograph 1)[4]. We don't know if it is a patient's room, a doctor's room or perhaps a bathroom, but it was a symbolic way to record her presence on the hospital grounds.

She was drawn to these lonely and abandoned women, tossed into the hospital like unwanted goods and left to fend for themselves. The only thing they wanted was to leave that place, to get married or to reunite with families, husbands and children [Leistner 2005b].

[4] Rita Leistner provided the titles of the photographs.

PHOTOGRAPH 1. Rita Leistner at the Al Rashad Psychiatric Hospital Women's Ward, Baghdad, March 2004. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

The emotional states and material situations of the hospitalised women were of great importance to Leistner. In the modern era, being rejected by one's family for cultural and economic reasons has become difficult to understand. The photographer points out that the women are not sent to therapy to improve their health, rather the intention is to isolate them from the outside world. It is hard to tell unequivocally whether this is a hospital or a prison. And this impression is further supported by the view from the courtyard (photograph 2).

PHOTOGRAPH 2. View from the Courtyard. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

The artist cites the story of forty-seven-year-old Ranaya, who had been in the hospital for more than two years. The doctors had long wanted to discharge

her because she was healthy and did not need any treatment or medication. The obstacle was that her family did not want to take her back as it would mean dividing her parents' inheritance. This is a story that often appears in the biographies of female patients. Ranaya spoke of her brothers, who visited her every few months, trying to persuade her to sign papers certifying the relinquishment of rights to the family estate. Ranaya was reluctant to do so because, according to the promise her mother made to the imam, everything was to remain in the hands of her daughters, something the male members of the family did not want to accept [Leistner 2005a].

An important part of this work was getting in touch with patients. After all, the reporter took photographs only during nine of her visits. The rest of the time was spent building relationships and participating in activities (e.g., stretching exercises where women removed their facial veils and could not be photographed). Leistner also tried to spend nights on the ward, until hospital administrators withdrew permission to stay in the hospital at night. Leistner did not give up, and with the help of the chief physician, she secretly sneaked in at night and in the morning hid in an ambulance leaving the hospital [Braganza, Leistner 2009]. Leistner recalls one of those nights when a patient slipped her a poem under the pillow:

> Oh World!
> Is this my fate from God?
> Oh World! You turn your back on me
> Only words relieve my tears, which increase day by day
> What happened to me? I remember the joy of my youth
> But all of time is against me
> Nothing but tears remain of me.
>
> [Leistner 2015].

It was 34-year-old Bushra al-Jovani, who dreamed of leaving the hospital, getting married and writing poetry. Longing for family, loved ones, a peaceful life and love is another common theme in the patients' stories. Leistner photographed one of them sitting on a bed (a dilapidated piece of sponge placed on a shabby frame), covering herself with a piece of cloth (photograph 3). She could be heard crying spasmodically. The nurse explained her behaviour by simply stating: "She is suffering from a broken heart." [Leistner 2005a: no page numbering].

PHOTOGRAPH 3. Broken heart – July 28, 2004. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

We can imagine that visiting the patients of a psychiatric hospital requires gentleness, empathy and the ability to create space to talk and be with others in a way where there is no requirement nor pressure to be anything other than yourself. Despite these efforts, some patients would still feel uncomfortable or did not want to share their stories on some days. Others would enjoy the photographer's presence and share the joy they take from daily activities or share their sources of comfort and strength. Leistner took a series of photos of the fifty-four-year-old Mayada, for whom it was extremely important to keep fit (photograph 4). She eagerly got the photographer acquainted with her habits by presenting a set of her daily exercises, and when a nearby explosion shook the ground beneath the hospital, she told her: "Don't be afraid. I feel safer in here than out there. I don't want contact with the conflict in the outside world. I hate war, these many wars. But I do like life. Sometimes one finds strength, like a drowning person." [Leistner 2005a: no page numbering].

PHOTOGRAPH 4. Mayada – September 6, 2004.(By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

But the "concerned photographer" shares not only joy, but also pain and suffering that are difficult to convey but necessary for telling the true story. An example of this is the poignant photographs showing a patient's preparation for electroshock therapy. One shows a nurse about to apply anodes to the patient's head (photograph 5), another shows the nurse shaving her hair to make this therapy easier to administer (photograph 6).

PHOTOGRAPH 5. Electric Shock Treatment – April 16, 2004. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

PHOTOGRAPH 6. Shaving for Electric Shock Treatment. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

Hospital staff tried to provide patients with various activities to help fill their time. One of these was watching television. During one visit, Leistner managed to capture the Coalition Provisional Authority's daily conference on the TV screen; the purpose of that day's conference was to explain the strategy to prevent uprisings against the authority (photograph 7). The photographer recalls that a few months later, a clash between coalition forces and members of the Mahadi Army resulted in mortar shells falling on the hospital courtyard [Leistner 2005a].

PHOTOGRAPH 7. Daily Press Conference – April 15, 2004. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

The figures that appear in the photographs often seem real and unreal at the same time. A patient greedily smoking a cigarette in a hospital corridor seems to be an element of a collage, a combination of a random background with an image of a woman looking straight into the lens (the viewer's eyes). The key to the choice of objects in the photograph may be the palette of pastel colours, similar to the walls and the woman's nightgown. They almost blend together to form a single, indistinct whole. The smoke surrounding her face lends a dreamlike quality to the whole, but the unusually penetrating gaze seems to say: I am really here, locked in, alive (photograph 8).

PHOTOGRAPH 8. Chain smoker. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

Loneliness, longing, and thoughts of family are the most important themes that emerged in the artist's conversations with Al Rashad's patients. The chances of leaving its walls are slim, but hope and the power of dreams make it possible to survive another day. There is great power in these women who have been wronged by fate and, above all, the will to live and survive, even in difficult conditions (photograph 9).

PHOTOGRAPH 9. Silhouette. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

Men also appear in patients' stories. The most often, they are the ones responsible for sending women to the hospital "for treatment". But they also appear in a more intimate context: dreams of family and children, or longing for love and intimacy with another man. Before this becomes possible, they are left with the friendship and support of other women in the hospital. The community of experience abolishes any ethnic, religious, or cultural divisions between these women (photograph 10).


PHOTOGRAPH 10. A Walk in the Sun. (By R. Leistner. Used with permission).

This story is the Leistner reward. "Holy Grail," "elixir," "sword" that she could take home with pride and satisfaction.

## RETURNING HOME: LEISTNER'S ATTITUDE

Considering what she has been through, we can only imagine how engaged a photographer must be to cope with such challenging circumstances. The Baghdad hospital project produced some of Leistner's most well-respected works. Yet she was still tormented by the question of what the photographed patients had gained from their participation, besides a global audience. People with mental illness are marginalised around the world and their living conditions are even worse in times of war. There is no easy way to help them, and the only thing photojournalists can do is to capture their difficult lives and thus inspire others to work with people in similar situations in their own communities [Braganza, Leistner 2009]. This is precisely what the concerned photographer does. "The concerned photographer finds much in the present unacceptable which he tries to alter. Our goal is simply to let the world also know why it is unacceptable." [Art Institute Chicago 2006: online].

In 2006 Rita Leistner received the prestigious National Magazine Award for her story about the women in Al Rashad Hospital. During the ceremonial gala she said briefly: "Actually, can I just say that when I worked on this story, these patients said to me, «Take these photographs and show them to people, because without them no one will know that we exist»." [Braganza, Leistner 2009]. This story would never have been told by anyone else. That, for us, lends further support to our assumption that Leistner is an especially engaged and concerned photographer.

In addition to that claim, let us consider Leistner's aesthetic variety. In aesthetics, she searches for different forms of photography to show the various faces of war and its terrifying nature. Leistner shows a determination to be relentlessly innovative in her approach to the subject of war. By using a variety of artistic forms, she is trying to reach a diverse audience, each with their own sensibility. In *Unembedded* she employed naturalism, according to which a photograph should be direct and simple and show real people in their own environment, not costumed models posed before fake backdrops or other such predetermined formulas. "Historical truth", and a true image of the "reality" of the characters, constitute the goal [Emerson 2010]. But there is more, as *Unembedded* is not the only project we can point to to support our claim. As we conclude, let us finally mention how Leistner gained trust among war photographers.

Among the other works, one called *Prisoners of war Iraq* 2003 lends further support to our thesis. Leistner took emotionally challenging photographs showing prisoners detained in inhumane conditions. The photographer collaborated with

master printer Bob Carnie to create a collection of archival prints in platinum-palladium with applied sepia pigment [Leistner 2003]. For *Levant trilogy* (2006–2016) the subject of our study, bearing witness to the Hezbollah-Israel War, decided to focus on matters not covered by news photographers. The resulting photographs show the personalities of some of the war's victims, and the contexts in which they are living their lives. Leistner describes her influences and the attitude she took to the subject matter:

> Inspired by the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Ryszard Kapuściński, I wanted to meet others to try and understand what differentiated the conflict on different sides of the borders. It may sound overly optimistic of me to say, but it was not all that different meeting people in Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. I made friends everywhere I went and talked to people who longed for security, autonomy, and the basics of life. I wondered how, as an outsider, I was able to get along with almost everyone, whereas many people I met saw irreconcilable differences among themselves. This was not the rule, however, and it was when the rule of difference gave way to reconciliation and standing up for one's so-called enemies that the human spirit shined its brightest [Leistner 2016e].

It was during the work for *Levant Trilogy* that being a "concerned photographer" led to a crisis. Observing the way people treat others, and the callous use of deadly weapons against civilians, led Leistner to the conclusion that humanity is in crisis. This belief took her to a point where she started using alcohol, and spent many nights crying, feeling frustrated, tired, and lonely [McBridge 2009]. In *Basetrack* (2011), she was embedded with U.S. Marines in Afghanistan as a team member of the experimental social media initiative. Using her smartphone to capture images of war was her goal. She used the Hipstamatic application which is available for iPhone. That application captures the quirks, grain, imperfections, and randomness of analogue photography and makes them available for iPhones.It makes it possible to use a retro-effect filter in permanent palladium metal with applied pigment — this is known as the most permanent colour printing process. The effect somehow brings warmth and a sense of security, which might sound bizarre considering the setting. This technique, as Leistner says, "[…] gives the images a timelessness that both refers to the technological present (the military apparatus in the photographs and the very technology used to make the images in the first place) as well as the greater historic context of a country that in other ways technology seems to have passed-by." [Leistner 2011]. In *The tree planters* (2016–2019) the representations of forest scenes are rendered at a large scale and with flawless detail. The images are dark and light. Using photography as a language, Leistner employs both realism and surrealism to tell multiple stories. The *Enchanted forests* is painterly: using the technique of "day

for night" reduces the ambient light so that artificial light can take over. Donning a headlamp she enters the forest, blasting music out of speakers to ward off wild animals. The light makes the forest shine in an artificial, dramatic fashion. "You would never see the forest this way with your naked eye," says Leistner, "but you would paint it this way." [Leistner 2019].

As related above, the projects Leistner is involved in are emotionally, humanitarianly, and politically engaged – which makes us confident in our claim – he is a "concerned photographer."

## CONCLUSIONS

An active voice in the discourse on contemporary society may take various forms that are often not obvious. In this article, we have presented one of them: Rita Leistner's artistic projects, which show the photographer's commitment to initiating social change, and most of all, her involvement in human stories. Leistner's art is not only the images of harsh reality captured via photography. Each project is a separate journey, a process where we get to know her determination to tell the stories accurately, her dangerous adventures, and the pain and joy of the individuals she meets along the way. When looking at and reading *Safer here*, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Leistner transcends the role of a photographer and values as much, if not more, the establishment of a close relationship with everyone who wants to share their story with her. In return, she offers understanding, warmth, and intimacy. The stories people share with her, and their willingness to be photographed at very difficult moments in their lives, are evidence of the great rapport she can achieve. Leistner carries with her all the stories she has heard, recalling, and retelling them, and sometimes adding her own comments, making a story about others also a story about herself. This type of art and storytelling seem to be the closest to what we imagine when we speak of socially engaged art.

In the work and stories of this artist, we are confronted by many difficult questions about the condition of contemporary humanity, and the role of compassion and understanding in everyday life. Leistner's stance and the stories she tells are guiding lights, and inspiration for anyone with the courage to undertake their own quest for answers to fundamental questions.

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## POKAŻ, ŻE ISTNIEJEMY: HISTORIE IRAKIJSKICH KOBIET, RITA LEISTNER I JEJ POSZUKIWANIE CZŁOWIECZEŃSTWA W OBRAZACH KONFLIKTU

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę jednego z projektów społeczno-artystycznych, kanadyjskiej fotografki, Rity Leistner. Jej twórczość koncentruje się głównie na funkcjonowaniu człowieka w czasie konfliktu i kryzysu, także wewnętrznego, ale obejmuje również inicjatywy związane z ochroną środowiska czy pasją jaką przejawiają jej bohaterowie w życiu codziennym. Leistner okazuje troskę i głęboką empatię, opowiadając historie, których tematem jest kondycja człowieka i obecny stan humanizmu. Nasze refleksje skupiają się projekcie *Safer here,* który opowiada historię kobiet zamkniętych wbrew swojej woli w bagdadzkim szpitalu psychiatrycznym. Leistner przedstawiła ich codzienną walkę o przetrwanie, godne życie i pogodzenie się z samą sobą. Pierwotnie był częścią *Unembedded* – projektu czworga fotoreporterów stacjonujących w Iraku. Naszym celem jest umieszczenie historii Leistner w szerszym kontekście, w którym zastanowimy się nad sposobem tworzenia i przedstawiania światu historii wojennych. Bierzemy pod uwagę także wymagającą i trudną rolę, jaką odgrywają w tym procesie artyści, którzy starają się znaleźć równowagę między byciem interpretatorami a byciem historykami. Twórczość Leistner ukazuje ją jako przede wszystkim aktywistkę walczącą o uwagę opinii publicznej i empatię na rzecz ofiar wojny**.** W swoich rozważaniach wykorzystujemy storytelling i analizę wizualną w interpretacji opisywanych prac Leistner.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rita Leistner, kobiety w Iraku, storytelling wizualny, sztuka społecznie zaangażowana, fotografia wojenna, fotoreportaż