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NGOs involved in the climate movement try with the help of so-called "climate witnesses" to show a chain of responsibility from the victims of climate change to individual perpetrators. Through event-oriented images and the testimony of those affected, the dangers of the anthropogenic climate change should also, though, be conveyed to people in climatically-speaking less exposed parts of the world. The pictorial strategies associated with displaying the visible phenomena of climate witnesses can be seen as a response to the widespread but very short-lived thesis of the "non-representability" of climate change.

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The Climate Witness: A Visual Phenomenon Developed by the Climate Movement to Address Responsibility in Matters of Climate Change and Expand Experiential Space

While the discourse about the Anthropocene invokes the past to a great extent ("How we got to this point"),¹ anthropogenic climate change as a serious phenomenon within the Anthropocene invokes the here-and-now. Climate change is an ongoing process, an enduring change on a global scale, based on a future-oriented perspective. It is a widely held thesis that due to its long timespan and the statistical methods of climate research, climate change is beyond our immediate sensory perception.² In fact, it is evident that many actors, especially NGOs involved in the climate movement, have developed a variety of image types to address the issue of visibility without abandoning the global perspective.³

One image type, already established for several years and used frequently by many NGOs, is the image of the so-called climate witness. This essay addresses this type of image and its use by actors within the climate movement for campaigns or as advertisements for their NGOs.⁴ The sources of the analyzed images are websites or printed magazines.

Two narrative strategies

NGOs that communicate to the public about climate change use, among others, objective and subjective narrative strategies⁵ to produce visible evidence or demonstrations for their claims. Images with an objective narrative strategy can be found, for example, in the scientific papers on climate change from which NGOs often quote. Objective images of natural weather phenomena have a long history, dating back to the end of the 18th century,

when weather data was first visualized in the form of maps and graphs.⁶ This tradition of pictorial meteorological knowledge was continually advanced, until the data currently amassed (from all geological eras!) enabled more comprehensive objective images. These images transpose the existing findings of natural science onto anthropogenic climate change. As the regular reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show, these scientific findings are the internationally recognized, "factual" foundation of the debate. The objective images emerge through measurement and modelling methods over long periods and across large geographical areas. Often, the results of the measurement and modelling are made visible using comparative formats.⁷ Despite the alarming data expressed through such comparisons, seen, for example, in exponentially rising trend lines or red-blotched world maps, these data visualizations alone are not sufficient for many protagonists and NGOs of the climate movement. With these images, there seems to be insufficient pressure on the public or lawmakers to enact the necessary changes in order to prevent catastrophe.

Images with a subjective, documentary narrative strategy provide NGOs with more impactful evidence and visual material to raise awareness of climate change and its consequences; the problem is assigned a face and a location. Subjective imagery originated in a pictorial tradition that developed, I would argue, from the observation of society and its various subgroups. The decisive impulses for the use of such narrative strategies came from the social-documentary photography of the early 20th century, as well as from the action-oriented campaigns of the environmental movement from the mid-20th century. The latter, especially, developed parallel to early mass media (daily newspapers and television) and tried to meet in kind these media's reaction speeds with mechanisms of reduction and intensification. Today, subjective images of climate change have a similarly narrow point of view, in that they usually focus on one group of people and one event. Through these pictorial strategies, the event of climate change becomes comprehensible

to the viewer by way of the perspectives of affected agents. Such pictorial information is more in line with human visual and narrative habits: the images make it easier to develop a position and attitude; the form and content are more familiar to us; it is easier to integrate the images into the field of one's own experience. Both external events (e.g. natural disasters) and self-generated events (e.g. the blockade of a power plant) are contextualized by this image type, as it embeds the local in a larger, global narrative of anthropogenic climate change. The figure of the climate witness, as it is analyzed below, can be regarded as a kind of hybrid of both narrative strategies. Objectively measurable changes such as the increase in extreme weather events (e.g. droughts, storms, or floods) are "witnessed" by individuals through personal testimony and photography.

Theories of witnessing

The concept of climate witnessing, as many NGOs employ it, is most closely related to the theoretical implications of bearing witness in general. Although the theory of testimony has most prominently been developed around the example of survivors of the Holocaust, there are many attempts to expand it to other occurrences as well. Aleida Assmann states that "the paradigmatic combination of testimony and the Holocaust on the path of analogy has created many new fields of application."⁸ Nevertheless, whether these concepts can actually be applied in the case of the climate witness must be examined carefully. For example, Avishai Margalit's figure of the "moral witness" seems, at first sight, to offer some points of connection. A moral witness "has knowledge-by-acquaintance of suffering,"⁹ and the witness has the hope "that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony."¹⁰ Both, as we shall see, can also relate to climate witnesses, whose testimony often transforms a witnessed event

into a “narrative that motivates the public politically and preserves the interests of the state.”¹¹ The application of Margalit’s concept to the climate witness, however, becomes problematic in that the moral witness experiences “radical evil” and is therefore assigned the ability to describe the “ineffable.”¹² Here, the differences between a testimony of the Holocaust and that of anthropogenic climate change seem too large to allow for productive comparison. It may well help, on the basis of these discrepancies, to be less concerned with witness typology than with the basic aspects of testimony. For example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub arrive at more universally applicable assumptions about testimony from two very different perspectives: that a testimony “does not offer [...] a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events,”¹³ but rather seems to apply to the subjective narrative strategy already introduced in this essay. To describe testimony as “a discursive practice” suggests how much the acts of speaking and pointing out are constitutive of testimony.¹⁴ Applied to the case of climate witnesses, this means that it is possible to regard the statements, images, and the context of the campaign altogether as an act of bearing witness.

Thomas Hobbes pointed to another characteristic of attesting, namely the doubting of a truth that is believed to be secure: “For no man is a witness to him that already believeth, and therefore needs no witness; but to them that deny, or doubt, or have not heard it.”¹⁵ The same observation is made by Sibylle Schmidt, who calls these moments in which a witness is needed “situations of truth crisis.”¹⁶ In these crises, decisions need be made, and problems and disputes solved in which “we are not only required as cognitive subjects, but as operators.” She writes further that testimonies should be consulted where “the limits of our knowledge become a practical and ethical problem for us and others.” If we wish to make use of Schmidt’s thesis with regard to

the relevance of testimonies to anthropogenic climate change, then the term “limits of knowledge” must be extended to “limits of experience.” We have already reached the fundamental problem of communicating an understanding of climate change. Although important fundamental research, in particular towards understanding atmospheric processes, continues to take place, knowledge about human influence on observed climate change is considered to be secure. Far more problematic – and here begins the concept of climate witnessing – is the fact that many of the phenomena lie beyond the field of one’s own experience.

Carrying over into action

One way to overcome this limit of experience is to collect and publish reports of people directly affected by climate change. The first “Climate Witness” initiative was developed in 2004 by the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF-India) with the aim: “[...] to record first-hand accounts of climate change by the local people for a better understanding of climate impacts to help in policy change and advocacy.”¹⁷ The idea behind such a campaign, in which the climate witness plays the central role, is that people all over the world are already experiencing the effects of climate change. Farmers, for example, suffer from prolonged periods of drought, just as the inhabitants of particularly low-lying areas struggle increasingly with the catastrophic consequences of floods caused, in some cases, by ever-more intense tropical cyclones. The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events – both of which are linked to climate change in the findings of the vast majority of scientists – mainly affect people in the global South. The protective measures in countries there are often insufficient. Sometimes they simply do not exist, or are not feasible in response to such catastrophic events due to geographical and economic conditions.

Although communication technologies allow information about almost every major event to be available worldwide within minutes, consumers of this information, as long as they are not directly affected by the event, seem have very successful distancing strategies in place.

With the help of climate witnesses, people in the temperate northern latitudes should be sensitized to climate change and inspired to ask for climate justice on behalf of those more directly victimized. The slogan "Climate Justice Now!" can be heard at almost every demonstration for the improvement of climate strategies. The slogan stands in the tradition of the One World idea, in that it calls for a stronger sense of responsibility in relation to the far-reaching consequences of one's own problematic actions. With the help of images from the climate witness campaigns, the field of one's experience is enlarged, which inevitably includes reflection on one's individual actions. Because climate witnesses are part of a visually mediated narrative of victims and perpetrators, the principle of global responsibility comes into focus. I wish to argue that, within this narrative, climate witnesses evolve through various stages. Victims become witnesses in an act of self-empowerment, and at the advanced stages they become accusers. The protagonists of the climate change movement exploit this potential – connected with the witness's testimony – for their own campaigns (for example, against coal-fired plants) by engaging a simple strategy: every human being is potentially responsible, by his or her daily actions, for climate change, if it is to be considered a serious event within the Anthropocene. In the campaigns, however, individual perpetrators are specifically named and their responsibilities highlighted.

The perpetrator-and-victim image

One example of this pictorial strategy of arguing for global responsibility and identifying individual perpetrators is the 2010 cinema advertisement *Film ab gegen Kohlekraft* by the NGO Oxfam.¹⁸ The perpetrator-and-victim image used in the ad is also used in climate witness campaigns, which is why an analysis of the phenomenon is urgently needed.

Film ab gegen Kohlekraft begins with an exterior view of a coal-fired power plant. A rhythmic, monotonous sound made from alternating piano and mechanical noises establishes a threatening undertone that runs throughout the video. The camera is positioned just above a green meadow, so that individual blades of grass are, in close-up, stirred by the wind. Then, suddenly, the camera focuses on the middle ground of the shot. There, located slightly out of center-frame, is a power plant under a cloudy sky. In this first shot, the three chimneys of the power plant already stand out, like a phalanx in front of the other buildings. Cut to men in white coats in the control room of the power plant. One worker reads numbers on a monitor; another is sat at a computer. Typing and the sound of a ringing phone show that for the two employees it is "business as usual." The camera rests on the face of a worker looking at a computer monitor. His expression betrays indifference. Then cut to the monitor, which shows a blue-pixeled map of the world with some spots marked in red. A switch is flipped, indicators on displays in the factory all skyrocket, and a machine begins to move. The worker is suddenly attentive – he bites his lip, his eyes dart over the monitor. With the computer mouse he moves a crosshair into the middle of Africa. On his command: "Okay,"



Oxfam Deutschland e.V., *Film ab gegen Kohlekraft*, 2010, various stills from the video (assembled by the author), <https://bit.ly/2Oi81S9>

another worker presses a button. The sound breaks off, and after a moment of silence there is the grinding noise of something massive. Now we return to the initial establishing shot of the power plant. The three chimneys separate from one another and lower themselves towards the ground, finally turning slightly to the audience until they stop at a 30° angle, like canons. In the control room, a red button labelled "Regulator" is pressed. Fade-to-black, followed by the text overlay: "Every year, German coal power plants fire 300 million tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere – exacerbating climate change. Storms, droughts, and floods mainly hit people in poor countries. Stop the construction of new coal power plants."

Film ab gegen Kohlekraft produces a perpetrator image that is as memorable as it is biased. The victims are also alluded to only generally. At the culmination of the video, the power plant becomes large artillery, purposefully targeting the whole African continent. With the coal-fired power plant, the climate movement has found a site to serve as a symbol for rapidly progressing anthropogenic climate change. By its sheer size, the power plant already seems to have lost all human scale. It showcases the ruthless profit-seeking of large corporations at the expense of the people, in this case those in poorer parts of the world. Chimneys as huge gun barrels inevitably bring forth associations with images from the First and Second World Wars, with their tremendous expenditures of human and material resources. The ad forecasts a similarly ruthlessly conducted global "war" that is already in its opening act; this time around, however, the chimneys do not fire shells, but – a fate more abstract and thus more threatening – invisible greenhouse gases. Protecting oneself from this cataclysm seems impossible. The ad spot marked the beginning of an intensive campaign against coal-fired power plants in Germany. For a long time, not only has a freeze on coal mining been demanded, but also, following the

decision to phase out nuclear power, the shutdown of all coal-fired power plants in Germany too.

Contrary to what may be assumed at first, this confrontation between the victim and the perpetrator, while offering the viewer a valid entryway into the problem, is not an absolutely necessary staging of it. In contrast to this staging, the one behind the pictorial strategy of climate witness campaigns favors a widening of the experiential space of the targeted audience through initial focus on the home of the climate witness, as the following example shows.

Victim rather than witness?

In 2009, on behalf of Greenpeace International, the photographer Peter Caton travelled with Cristiane Aoki in the Sundarbans. The local mangrove forests are located in the estuary of four major rivers. The people who live there are exposed to changing tides, storms, pollution, and rising sea levels. On his website, Caton describes the resulting photo series *The Sinking Sundarbans – Climate voices from India* with these words:

The work is a collection of human stories and the aim is to raise awareness and further discussions about the social impact of climate change, which is already affecting many populations throughout the world.¹⁹

A large number of photographs show portraits of individuals, mostly in frontal view. Many of the people look directly into the camera; in some cases, the view of the subject is directed into the distance. Following Pierre Bourdieu, one could say that an eternal gesture is conveyed with this frontal view, whereas impermanence can be deduced from the depth.²⁰ And indeed, the experiences of these people, as if petrified into pillars, are narrated in the portraits through the choice of background: collapsed huts and a landscape flooded with water, which are

the result of a hurricane and subsequent flooding.

Greenpeace International presented the photo series in the run-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (December 2009), published both as a photo essay on the internet and in physical form at the conference venue.²¹ This photo essay links the photographs of Caton with the interviews conducted by Aoki. Caton's photo series was also published in the run-up to the conference in its member magazine, *act* (issue 4/2009). Under the title *Climate witnesses and climate victims*, Greenpeace Austria published some of the photographs and established a connection between the photographs and the conceptual horizons that the terms "climate witness" and "climate victims" open up. The accompanying article deals with the already visible consequences of climate change – witnessed by the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and the Nenets, a nomadic tribe from northern Arctic Russia. Like a classic eyewitness account, the article begins with a description of the "scene of the crime," i.e. the fate of the people in the Sundarbans:

It was on a Monday at nine o'clock in the morning.

Within a minute, the entire village was under water. We had no time to get anything to safety. We swam with our kids to a store and sat on the roof. We sat and watched as our house fell apart.²² Now we have nothing left.

Above the article, taken from a subtly monumental perspective, is the photo of a woman holding a sleeping boy in her arms and looking past the camera with a slightly lowered gaze. The woman and child are very brightly lit in the foreground, clearly distinguished from the grayish, inhospitable background of mud and stones. Behind the heap of earth and stones, which looks like a pile of rubble, palms



Greenpeace Österreich, *act*, Issue 4/2009, pictures from p. 12, © Peter Caton / Greenpeace. Pictures from p. 13, © Greenpeace / Will Rose.

turn in the wind and leaves are missing from the deciduous trees. Just as Caton in this photograph stages the mother and the child in mourning – a literal copy of Michelangelo's *Pietà* – the picture is deployed as an appeal for help from onlookers who sympathize from more secure ground.

The photo chosen for the cover of the magazine comes from the same series and thus employs the same climate witness strategy, but makes a slightly different statement. This time a man is carrying a boy in his arms, with both looking at the camera. Compared with Peter Caton's original photograph, the new vertical format places focus even more clearly on the man and child in the center of the image. The viewer's gaze can hardly lose itself in the landscape, which is quite varied, with lots of water, palm trees, grazing animals, and the sea on the horizon. Besides the format change, the picture has obvious color correction, which makes the cover picture look warmer than the original, corresponding better with the noticeable smile of the man. The sky is now more bluish than gray, the grass spring-green; in order not to disturb the idyll, the washed-up driftwood has been cut from either side of the photograph. The stories that Caton tell us via his photographs are based entirely on the posed presence of his protagonists; it seems that he spent a lot of time staging his protagonists and their bodies. In some of the photographs, which employ strong contrasts of color and light, the bodies appear completely at the mercy of their environment. Many are standing in water, or show the wear and tear of the tedious work of clearing and rebuilding.



1. Greenpeace Österreich, act, Issue 4/2009, cover of the magazine, © Peter Caton / Greenpeace
 2. Peter Caton, Portrait of Ajit Das with grandchild on the land where his home used to be before the sea level rise, 2009, photograph.

Unlike the bodies, on which suffering is legible, the gazes of the subjects seem to signal attitudes that are detached from the environment – self-confident and almost routine. The circumstantial eternal return of construction and destruction may be responsible for such expressions, but the authorial intervention of Caton to show the people less as victims and more as witnesses may be equally responsible. It remains unclear to what, precisely, these photographs are appealing. Is it to Greenpeace's call to "Take Climate Action," which was the battle cry of the Copenhagen Conference's campaign, or is it to the call for the immediate relief of a certain peoples' plight?

This ambiguity in the message results from the ambiguity of the presentation. Caton portrays each subject as both victim and witness. No attempt is made to weigh the portrayals more in either of these directions, as evidenced by the fact that the portraits are at the same time – thanks to the staging of them before certain backgrounds – journalistic photographs from the frontline of the aftermath of a cyclone.

"The limits of its actual scope "

The photographer and video artist Martha Rosler has repeatedly dealt, in her visual and theoretical work, with the dominant position of the viewer. In her essay *In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)* she explains how, in particular, socially engaged documentary forms – that is, moralizing photographic and cinematographic works – rewrite the social conditions from which they originate.²³ In addition, there are still the – when not false, then at least exaggerated – ideas of the beholder, who, on observing an image, might utter the statement that they "now know the world." For, as Rosler remarked about John Szarkowski (long-standing director of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art [MoMA]):

"The global claim he makes for their work serves to point out the limits of its actual scope."²⁴ The limits of presentation and the constriction of perspective inherent in each shot should always be taken into consideration in the analysis of the pictorial strategies of NGOs and other protagonists of the climate change movement. To the question: how much anthropogenic climate change can be seen in the photographs of Caton?, one can answer with a clear conscience: not so much. Only the context in which the photos are published can enlighten the viewer as to what is transpiring in the background. The question then naturally arises: could it be said that the visual strategies of *Film ab gegen Kohlekraft*, used to show the global relationships and responsibilities of the individual, are, when compared to the vagueness and neutral-descriptive quality of Caton's strategies, redeemable?

Climate witnessing as iconic picture

The following example will show how the concept of climate witnessing can actually be presented both in a very memorable and effective way. When Greenpeace and Oxfam invited three climate witnesses from South Africa, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea to Germany and Poland from November 9–11, 2011, an almost iconic picture of the concept of climate witnessing emerged. Even the dramaturgy of the visit was precisely planned: the last stop on the journey was a demonstration in front of a coal-fired power plant – that is, a juxtaposition of victim and perpetrator.

As in the case of Peter Caton's journey, the pictures from this trip were also produced for a campaign in the run-up to a summit, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (Durban, November 28 – December 11, 2011). Each station on the trip was photographed, and a three-part documentary was produced, so that the entire visit was documented in detail.²⁵ During an appearance at the Environment Committee of the

German Bundestag and in front of a school class in Berlin, the three climate witnesses reported on the catastrophic effects of anthropogenic climate change in their home countries.

The overwhelming number of photographs and reports of the visit disseminated by the organization, however, focused primarily on the last stop of the trip, the coal-fired power plant Jänschwalde in the Lausitz, near the German-Polish border. A video documentation shows how the group first drives in a minibus to the rim of the opencast mine. The location where the climate witnesses stand is well-placed and intended to showcase the devastation of an entire landscape. A huge desert of sand and soil extends before the witnesses; long, straight conveyor belts and driveways give structure to the wasteland and lead to the power plant on the horizon; large steam clouds rise, unceasingly, from the many cooling towers. Zukiswa Millicent Nomwa, the South African climate witness, first betrays astonishment, and then speaks accusatorily:

I've never seen anything like that. The imagination was nothing close to what I'm seeing here. [...] For developed countries like this it's a huge disappointment. This is one of the ways that Germany is contributing to climate change. They're highly industrialized, and that affects Africa in a big negative way.²⁶

After a brief interview and conversations with local activists, photographs are taken with the climate witnesses. One photograph made by campaign photographer Gordon Walters is emblematic of the network of relationships between the victim, the perpetrator, and the witness within the pictorial phenomenon of the climate witness strategy. In this iconic image, the Nigerian climate witness Hauwa Umar-Mustapha is placed so far to the



Greenpeace Deutschland, *Climate witness Hauwa Umar-Mustapha*, November 11, 2011. Jänschwalde, Germany, © Gordon Walters / Greenpeace

right of the picture that on the left side there is enough space to clearly see the surface mining and, in the distance, the power plant. Somewhere in the huge surface mining operation, which stretches between the climate witness in the foreground of the picture and the power plant in the distant background, lies the sharpness of the image. This brings the expansiveness and emptiness of the space into relief. The unbridgeable distance between humankind and the power plant, spanned by the surface mining operation, is counteracted by Welter's juxtaposition of both on a horizontal plane. This dissolution of distance illustrates the direct relationship between perpetrator and victim, a hallmark of the concept behind the climate witnessing strategy. The subject of the photograph, Umar-Mustapha is, of course, representative of the role of the victim. In the photograph, however, she does not appear to be a mere victim, although the steam clouds from the cooling towers, which are always emblematic of the production of CO₂-as-greenhouse-gas, seem to be drawn directly towards her. Umar-Mustapha is staged primarily as a witness, looking down from above on what is happening. This staging lends the perspective of the witness a certain power, to the extent that it connotes a god-like perspective on the world.

The power of the witness, which may be overdetermined in Welter's photography, emerges essentially from two dimensions of their position. On the one hand, testimony is bound to the creation of attention. For example, witnesses are brought into a courtroom or questioned by the police, and they are objectively, without bias, "heard." On the other hand, the physical presence of the witness at the "scene of the crime" provides those who were not present with an embodied memory of what took place. Their physical presence guarantees the survival of their testimony.

Weakness of interchangeable event-oriented images

Any demonstration can be considered as bodily witnessing for a particular cause. That is the reason why such a gesture is always on the programs for the visits of climate witnesses. During the visit in 2011, after looking at the surface mining operation, the last station of the visit of the three witnesses was a site within closer proximity to the coal-fired power plant. The picture documenting this protest is the most disseminated of the entire journey – presumably because the participating organizations are represented by their logos. The three climate witnesses are foregrounded; behind them, to the left, the banner: “Vattenfall [former operator of the power plant – H. A.] threatens existences!” In the background are three cooling towers, from which a huge, white-and-gray, funnel-shaped cloud of steam rises and covers more than half of the blue sky. Several other activists are also standing on the paved square. The three climate witnesses hold up oversized red warning signs, on which are the symbols of the movement: flooding, water scarcity, and drought. An article on the Greenpeace homepage says, as an explanation of the picture: “Women hold up warning signs that symbolically depict the visible consequences of climate change in their homeland. Because far from Europe, climate change is already today a bitter reality.”²⁷ Another person in the photograph, Mathias Berndt, protested with a fourth sign against the expansion of the surface mining operation. Until his retirement in 2015, he was Pastor of the community in Atterwasch, which was threatened by the operation until 2017.

This last shot of the journey betrays a weakness of event-oriented images. If an event is not really unique – and a picket line of about a dozen people in front of a power plant is not unique at all – then such pictures are interchangeable with similar ones.

For an observer who is ignorant of the context, simply looking at the photograph makes it impossible to say whether the documented event took place recently, or, as in this case, more than seven years ago. Beyond merely recording the moment of action, the documentary evidence possesses, at most, historical value. Unlike the iconic photograph taken beside the surface mining operation, which illustrates a complex chain of responsibility in a particularly memorable way, this photograph only shows, in simple terms, people who once demonstrated against a coal-fired power plant.



Greenpeace Deutschland, *Demonstration with climate witnesses*, November 11, 2011. Jänschwalde, Germany, © Gordon Welters / Greenpeace

Climate witness and activism

In order to prevent the interchangeability of gestures within the climate witness strategy, it may be helpful to create more opportunities to better contextualize the person providing the testimony. For example, all of the people Oxfam invited to Germany as defenders of the anthropogenic climate change movement have already been involved, in many different ways, with climate protection in their home countries. In order to make this commitment more visible, longer interviews were conducted with the protagonists during a recent visit of climate witnesses to Germany (March 23–30, 2017), including an interview with the witness and street artist AG Saño from the Philippines. When asked what he finds to be the best way to make people more

aware of the matter at hand, he answers:

This is best done when people tell about it. By telling my story and making clear what is happening to the majority of my country's population. We can open their eyes by showing them what they need to see. And by encouraging them to act accordingly [...].²⁸

On November 8, 2013, Saño survived the super typhoon Haiyan, which had run a course over the Philippines and killed over 20,000 people. He lost his closest friend and his friend's family. Saño wore the T-shirt with the inscription "Supertyphoon Haiyan Survivor" while standing in front of a coal-fired power plant in the Rheinische Revier near Cologne. This message, carried on the body, reminds one of the scars of victims that are shown as proof of their suffering, in case they have to provide evidence before a court.

This staging of and with bodies, along with the reports from those depicted, is one of the most important pictorial strategies in the visual phenomena of climate witnesses – the examples mentioned above testify to this. And bringing a survivor to a site that was jointly responsible for a catastrophe can contribute to public awareness of witnesses' reports. Just as the climate witnessing in Jänschwalde did, Saño's action also drew a connection between his home country and the German coal-fired power plant. While RWE (operator of the lignite-fired power stations) continues to generate electricity, his friends and relatives in the Philippines



02:37 - 27. März 2017
Oxfam Deutschland e.V., screenshot of a tweet by Oxfam Deutschland e.V. from March 27, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xKeCLH>

must “fight for survival,” complains Sano.²⁹ His demand: “This must come to an end!”

Day in court

It seems to be the next logical step that a victim of climate change who acts as a witness in such a way becomes, in the end, an accuser in a system of due process of law. Since 2015, the development and environmental organization Germanwatch and the Stiftung Nachhaltigkeit have given their support in German courts to the lawsuit of the



Germanwatch, *Der Fall Huaraz: Saúl gegen RWE*, banner, © Germanwatch

Peruvian mountain guide Saúl Luciano Lliuya from the Huaraz region. Under the motto “Saúl against RWE,” a very effective publicity campaign about the mountain guide’s claim is being waged against the German electricity supplier.³⁰ RWE, they argue, should be sentenced to pay a low five-digit amount. The sum is calculated from the proportion of CO₂ emissions for which the energy corporation is responsible worldwide (about 0.5 percent, according to Germanwatch.)³¹ The sum would only be a fraction of the 3.5 million EUR needed to offset this contribution to CO₂; it would equate to the cost of a dam, which would protect the plaintiff and up to 50,000 other people on the mountain slopes and in the Andean city of Huaraz from a possible tidal wave. This tidal wave, in the threatening scenario described by the organizations involved, would strike suddenly if the melting glacier above the mountain lake Palcacocha broke away. After the district court of Essen (where RWE has its head office) dismissed the civil suit, it was, beginning

on November 13, 2017, considered by the higher regional court in Hamm. That court, to the delight of the claimants, decided in favor of the plaintiff to hear the evidence brought forth. Although the small amount in this dispute can only act as symbolic compensation – the dam is unlikely ever to be built – this “David vs Goliath” trial has brought the case the worldwide interest sought by the claimant. None of the previous campaigns involving climate witnesses can make a claim to media response on this scale. As with cases currently pending in various US courts,³² a precedent could be set by a conviction. Then the figure of the climate witness, invented by the protagonists of the climate movement in order to explain the consequences of climate change, would actually become a party recognized by the courts. Whether it will achieve this result remains uncertain, since the proof of guilt against an individual entity in matters of climate change has never yet succeeded. So far, there remains only the appeal, vociferously formulated by all climate witnesses and the climate movement: “Act now!”

Conclusion

Although the examples analyzed in this essay vary in form and meaning and, as we have seen, there are a number of different observations concerning them, this short initial investigation should make it clear that the image of the climate witness deserves independent study as its own image type.

The visual phenomenon of the climate witness is evidence of the global dimension of anthropogenic climate change. The strategies that employ the phenomenon can be understood as attempts to help the numerous international agreements on climate protection along, towards morally and legally binding liability. By personalizing the impact of a highly complex atmospheric process such as climate change, each individual event and its testimony underscores the need, ultimately, to *act*.

Through the figure of the climate witness, the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change, with its catastrophic consequences, receives a face and global communicability. The actions of individuals (the corporate energy sector is clearly cast in the role of perpetrator, as we have seen) and the inertia in politics and society are portrayed as particularly consequential and, when unheeded, catastrophic. The positioning of the climate witnesses within a pictorial, victim-and-perpetrator framework emphasizes responsibilities and, despite the geographical distance that might alienate the onlooker, transfers distant events into local experiential spaces. The images of climate witnesses are twofold: documenting destruction on the one hand, while on the other reflecting the commitments in the campaign by NGOs against climate change and its perpetrators.

If NGOs use images of climate witnesses with subjective narrative strategies, it is with the hope of exercising sufficient pressure on political decision-makers and on the public. But what happens if the climate witness remains alienated from the consumer of these images – if the witness does not appear as a personality but as a stereotype, and the disaster they suffer as one among many interchangeable events? In such cases, when considering the victimhood of the subject, it seems easier to merely take on compassion for the depicted subject, rather than taking a long, hard look at one's own actions that may contribute to the subject's suffering and becoming aware of one's responsibility.

One aspect that was not addressed due to the limited scope of the essay was how the image of the climate witness could also have the potential to address the current "migration crisis" as another effect of global anthropogenic climate change. Despite all attempts and the acknowledged urgency of the problem, there is still no legal recognition of so-called climate refugees.³³ There is no right to live far away from areas with more frequent natural disasters. It may be worthwhile exploring how images of climate witnesses can be used in this discussion, and whether they are images of victims and/or

activists fighting for their rights.

As questionable as the international recognition of climate refugee status and climate witnessing before ordinary courts continues to be, the greatest potential of the climate witness image lies elsewhere. For, if the climate witness is primarily portrayed as an activist, as an actor fighting in their home country and beyond for climate protection, these images are the long-sought documents for a global movement of climate justice. Whether this movement will act through judicial disputes, forms of direct (global) action, or classic campaign work remains to be seen.

- 1 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 49.
- 2 Birgit Schneider, *Klimabilder* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018), 38-44.
- 3 When using the term "climate movement," I am using it as it is defined by: Heiko Garrelts und Matthias Dietz, "Konturen der internationalen Klimabewegung – Einführung in Konzeption und Inhalte des Handbuchs," in: *Die internationale Klimabewegung*, ed. Matthias Dietz and Heiko Garrelts (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 15-35.
- 4 This essay refers to the first results of my research in the context of my ongoing dissertation project: "Pictorial strategies in the publications on climate change and renewable energies by the climate movement and economic actors." My research is part of the collaborative research project *Gegenwartsästhetik – Kategorien für eine Kunst und Natur in der Entfremdung* [Contemporary Aesthetics – Categories for an Art and Nature in Alienation] founded by VolkswagenStiftung. "Projekt," Volkswagen Stiftung, <https://bit.ly/2RY5gTD> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 5 Birgit Schneider uses the term "wissenschaftliche Klimabilder" [scientific climate images], cf. Schneider, *Klimabilder*, 12. Anna-Katherina Wöbse distinguishes three types of images in environmental organizations: "Schönheitsbild" [image of beauty], "Schadensbild" [image of damage], and "Aktionsbild" [image of action], cf. Anna-Katherina Wöbse, "Zur visuellen Geschichte der Naturschutz- und Umweltbewegung: Eine Skizze," in *Natur- und Umweltschutz nach 1945: Konzepte, Konflikte, Kompetenzen*, eds. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier and Jens Ivo Engels (Frankfurt a. M. and New York:

- Campus, 2005), 223.
- 6 Schneider, *Klimabilder*, 26–31.
 - 7 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 206.
 - 8 Aleida Assmann, "Vier Grundtypen von Zeugenschaft," in: *Zeugenschaft des Holocaust*, ed. Fritz Bauer Institut (Frankfurt a. M. and New York: Campus, 2007), 33.
 - 9 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 149.
 - 10 Ibid., 155.
 - 11 Assmann, "Vier Grundtypen von Zeugenschaft," 42.
 - 12 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 168.
 - 13 Shoshana Felman, "In an Era of Testimony," in: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 5.
 - 14 Ibid., 5.
 - 15 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 42, <https://bit.ly/2tim7H5> (accessed February 12, 2019).
 - 16 Sibylle Schmidt, *Ethik und Episteme der Zeugenschaft* (Paderborn: Konstanz University Press, 2015), 54.
 - 17 It was formally launched at the 10th conference of parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Buenos Aires, Argentina in November 2004. "WWF-India's work," WWF-India, <https://bit.ly/2OWPHLA> (accessed February 12, 2019). According to my research, this was the first campaign with climate witnesses. The term *Klimazeugen* [*climate witness*] originally comes from geology. An investigation of sediments, for example, enables, under certain circumstances, conclusions about previous climatic conditions. "Klimazeugen," Freie Universität Berlin, <https://bit.ly/2HO5gWm> (accessed February 12, 2019).

- 18 The cinema advertisement *Film ab gegen Kohlekraft* was developed by the media company Serviceplan, without charge, for Oxfam Germany. The producer was the Brainstorm Club. The spot premiered on February 14, 2010, during the 60th edition of the Berlin International Film Festival. The video is available online at: <https://bit.ly/2Oi81S9> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 19 Peter Caton, "The Sinking Sundarbans," <https://bit.ly/2zCdxqL> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 20 Pierre Bourdieu, "Die gesellschaftliche Definition der Photographie," in: *Eine illegitime Kunst. Die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Photographie*, eds. Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, and Robert Castel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 88.
- 21 "Sinking Sundarbans," Greenpeace International, <https://bit.ly/2y5mxmj> (accessed February 12, 2019). The photo essay was produced by Elain Hill, responsible for multimedia. She was working at the Amsterdam office of Greenpeace International.
- 22 Roman Kellner, "Klimazeugen und Klimaopfer," *act* 4/2009, 12.
- 23 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Wer spricht so? Einige Fragen zur Dokumentarfotografie," in: *Diskurse der Fotografie: Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters*, eds. Herta Wolf, Susanne Holschbach, Jens Schröter, Clair Zimmer, and Thomas Falk (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 69.
- 24 Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 190.
- 25 Documentation can be viewed at: Klimazeuginnen berichten: Zukiswa Millicent Nomwa schildert die Protestaktion gegen Kohlekraft in der Lausitz, Oxfam Deutschland, <https://bit.ly/2PxymIU> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 "Klimazeuginnen in Jänschwalde," Greenpeace Deutschland, <https://bit.ly/2wEePi2> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 28 "Der Klimawandel muss an allen Fronten bekämpft werden," Oxfam Deutschland, <https://bit.ly/2zCtcGq> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 29 "Bis hierher und nicht weiter: Klimaaktivisten markieren rote Linie für RWE," Oxfam Deutschland, <https://bit.ly/2DEpPTw> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 30 "Der Fall Huaraz: Saúl gegen RWE – für die Menschen in Huaraz & globale

- Klimagerechtigkeit," video by Germanwatch, <https://bit.ly/2DDHv1w> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 31 "Der Fall Huaraz: Saúl gegen RWE," Germanwatch, <https://bit.ly/2NNsajB> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 32 Another prominent case is the complaint of the coastal cities of San Francisco and Oakland in the District Court of San Francisco (the hearing was on March 21, 2018) against the companies Exxon, ConocoPhillips, Shell, BP, and Chevron. These had sold fossil fuels for decades and sowed doubts about the results of climate research. Now these companies would have to participate in coastal protection measures, according to the claim of the plaintiffs. Wolfgang Hassenstein, "Und nun zum Klima – Teil 4," Greenpeace Magazin 4.18, <https://bit.ly/2R7gaY3> (accessed February 12, 2019).
- 33 *The invisible climate refugees*, United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC), <https://bit.ly/2Bsblgv> (accessed February 12, 2019).

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