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Ex-Voto. A Photo Essay

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Abstract

Based on my research at three pilgrimage sites – Ballyvourney in Ireland, Mount Grabarka in Poland and Lourdes in France – this photo essay explores the meaning of religious offerings (known as ‘ex-voto’) and provides an intimate view onto sacral landscapes, temporally and spatially removed from the everyday. Through the complex entwining of people, places and objects, these images raise numerous potential arguments, about travel, devotion, belonging, traces and the meaning of home.

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Ex-Voto A Photo Essay

Alys Tomlinson

The following images show three different pilgrimage sites: Ballyvourney in Ireland, Mount Grabarka in Poland and Lourdes in France. Between 2016 and 2018, I visited these places to expand on the project that I began a few years before at Lourdes. 'Ex-Voto' is a larger, multi-sited project, and this essay shows a selection of ten images that I see as expressive of the *home* and *post-home* lives of offerings carried and prepared by the pilgrims who visited these places.

In my photo essay, people and landscape merge, just as place, memory and history entwine. A handwritten note is neatly folded and hidden into the crevice of a rock, crosses are etched onto the stone and a ribbon is carefully wrapped around piles of twigs. These are all offerings of religious devotion, known as 'ex-voto' and found at Christian pilgrimage sites worldwide. 'Ex-voto' offer a powerful way for pilgrims to connect with shrines and pilgrimage sites, since they bring *home* to the 'field' of pilgrimage. The everyday belongings gain a different meaning when left at sacred sites, becoming a source of comfort and solace to those who leave them.

The first and the last image of this photo essay both display views into the vastness of woodland surrounding sacred sites. Their presence is sublime. The forest is not just 'next to' or 'within' the religious field but it also contains its beauty and greatness. It suggests that nature has the power to conceal and to reveal; it can also overgrow the site at any time. The persistence of pilgrims and their pilgrimage sites over centuries confirms the need for devoutness and the multiplicity of spiritual forms.

In this photo essay, places and people remain anonymous in terms of dates, countries and names. And yet, the viewer can and might guess or imagine where they come from. The style of a specific male uniform, female type of veiling or the ordination of clothing act as markers of belonging. The nun's headdress is a sign of a particular Orthodox Christian denomination, the young men's boiler suits adorned with insignia present national affiliations, and so on. The images invite the viewer to transcend these markers and observe the people, places and landscapes as they appear in the apparent stillness of a photograph.

The sites' histories vary in origins and timeframes, ranging from the 6th and the 13th to the 19th century. The compelling religious narratives that draw pilgrims to them are both 'distinct and distinctive'. Similarly, the images are

united by a purity in intention and a simplicity in action, argues Rowan Cerys Tomlinson in her introductory notes to the 'Ex-Voto' photo series.¹ Moreover, she signals that these images show a shift in the way pilgrims approach sites of devotion. In contemporary religious journeys, there is less emphasis on the once-arduous journey to and from *home* (many pilgrims nowadays travel to the sites by car or plane), as the visitors experience pilgrimage physically through a variety of material engagements. At all three sites, this includes the bathing in and the drinking of holy water, the touching of rocks and the leaving behind of ex-voto brought from the *home* environment (including photos, letters, coins and crutches). Placed in the sacred landscapes as a sign of a commitment, and a hope waiting to be met, these ex-voto turn the natural features of the land into vessels for human stories of anticipation and expectation.

The post-home lives of objects are complicated. Here, in their dwelling in the vastness of a forest, or their retreat into the multitude of religious offerings, they exist through an unspoken promise of the 'field' to keep and protect them. We can understand it as being-at-home in the world, as a feeling of attachment to the idea of greatness, God and nature. There is hope and trust that the 'field' will open itself for us in its truth and beauty, which brings us back to Christian morality and faith as the motivation of the pilgrims.

The images encompass formal portraiture, large format landscape and small, detailed still-life shots of the objects and markers left behind. Shot on 5x4, large format film, the images evoke a distinct stillness and reflect the mysterious, timeless quality present at these sites of great spiritual contemplation.

These images offer a look *through* the entwining of people, places and objects and remind us of the intricate coupling of 'beauty' and 'truth' in works of art, humanities and natural science, which Elaine Scarry described thus: 'It creates, without itself fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude. It comes to us, with no work of our own; then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor'.²

1 See Rowan Cerys Tomlinson's introductory essay in Alys Tomlinson's (2019) *Ex-Voto*. GOST Books (pp. 1-2).

2 See Elaine Scarry (1999: 53) *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton University Press.





















Alys Tomlinson is an award-winning photographer based in London. Before receiving an MA in the Anthropology of Travel, Tourism and Pilgrimage from SOAS University of London, she studied English Literature and Communications at the University of Leeds, as well as photography at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. Alys is interested in the relationship between people and place, exploring themes of environment, belonging and identity. She exhibits her work widely. For the *Ex-Voto* series, Alys was named the Sony World Photographer of the Year 2018. Her work has also been recognised through the International Photography Award of the British Journal of Photography, the Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize and the Renaissance Photography Prize, the HOTSHOE Award, the Creative Review Photography Annual, the Magenta Foundation Flash Forward and the Photo District News' 'PDN's 30' list. *Ex-Voto* was published by GOST Books in 2019.