

What is Real?

Consider the source

Peter Werbe

2025

a review of

Portraits of Struggle: Photos from 1972–2023 by Orin Langelles. Global Justice Ecology Project 2024

The old newspaper adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words” has mostly been vitiated by Photoshop and AI. Photos have joined words in the realm of suspicion as now any image can be manipulated or even fabricated out of thin air with a few keystrokes.

So, am I deluding myself when I look at the subjects in Orin Langelles’s photographs taken over 50 years on six continents and see something in the intensity shining out from them, that says, yes, these are real? That they each are worth at least a thousand words? Real people involved in struggles that are captured first by the photographer’s eye and then his camera.

These collected photographs propose to “uncover and share stories that many are not aware exist,” Langelles writes in an opening statement. Although every photo is complete in itself, each demands we find out more about the struggles they portray.

Penetrating eyes stare out at us from beneath a balaclava-clad face of a Zapatista comandante. A child plays in a Landless Workers Movement encampment in Brazil. A woman fighting a pipeline in Virginia looks at us determinedly. The late Earth First! environmentalist Judi Bari walks on a beach in her last days. Demonstrators crowd NYC streets to say no to a Republican National Convention.

Some go back more than half a century when Langelles was barely out of high school in Missouri and traveled to Miami for the 1972 Republican National Convention. There, he spent less time photographing the theatrical antics of the Yippies and more on capturing the faces of former GIs who protested as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Others, as the decades slip by, document protests world-wide to stop the degradation of Indigenous people’s traditional land through deforestation, dams, and climate-created disasters. The photos almost all picture a strong central figure suggesting the totality of a people or region under assault. Indigenous and their environmental struggles make up a large portion of the subjects. They seem the most powerful, perhaps, because their way of life and the land they fight to protect are the last remaining reserves of people with a direct connection to how we lived before the planetary work/war/profit machine began chopping everything down.

There are also many shots of political struggles, some, such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, combining those with the defense of the land, but others from the 2019 Chilean uprising, anti-globalization actions, and again, confronting the Republicans, shot in urban settings.

Langelles’s photos would be enough of a contribution to the maintenance of memory of battles fought against the rulers of a rapacious system, but his work with the Global Forest Coalition and co-founding the Global Justice Ecology project in 2002 marks him also as an environmental activist.

Look at these photos. Tell me if they could be created with AI. But there is another authenticity check; there is a trusted source behind it—the photographer and the works he’s done on behalf of people most at risk and who are

fighting the planet wreckers. AI fools people in a format like the internet where community is a chimera. In real life, in real people, in real struggles, honesty stares out at you as in these photos.

Get the book at globaljusticeecology.org, plus view the work of this group.

Peter Werbe is a Fifth Estate editorial group member who lives in the Detroit area. He is the author of *Summer on Fire: A Detroit Novel* and a collection of his Fifth Estate essays, *Eat the Rich and Other Interesting Ideas*. Both are available through the FE website FifthEstate.org.

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