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## The Art of Battle Scenes *a posteriori*<sup>27</sup>

The battle scenes created by Polish artists born after World War II often unmask the abasement and helplessness assiduously concealed by the preceding generation of artists. It is as if the children decided to give voice to what their parents had kept hidden from them in order to lead 'normal' lives. I am concerned here with two artists, Jerzy Koszałka, born in 1955 and Zbigniew Libera, born in 1959, both of whom, in my opinion, give particularly telling visual expression to the silence of the older generation, to the spiritual patrimony of fear and to a resistance against historical pressure. Both artists have thus been represented as singular heirs to historical painting, taking up the threads of retrospection as elements of the contemporary discourse on identity.

My topic is the renewed visual representation of the games of war, the reworking of images of ancient battles in the art born *post*; as an aside, in the German discourse on art, writers speak of *Nachgeborenen*. I have no wish to set out general theses of any kind but, rather, to call attention to an interesting trend in the historical works which appeared within the compass of the critical art that emerged after Poland had regained independence in 1989. This relates to the reinterpretation not only of history, but also of the role of the artists or, more broadly, the creators, since, outwardly, the status of 'guest' in the stories of war cut them off both from the possibility of making decisions and bestowing form and from the experience-at-source. To phrase it metaphorically, it made leeches of the generation born after the war and into the order established by the post-Yalta agreements; it made them consumers of the camouflage adopted by those closest

<sup>27</sup> This essay is an extended version of the introduction to a paper entitled *Batalistyka dzisiaj. Gry wojenne w sztuce polskiej po 1989* [Battle Scenes. Games of War in Polish Art, Post-1989] given at the *Contexts of Contemporary Art* conference held at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in 2006.

to them, their strategy that of aestheticising what turned out to be unacceptable in the sclerotomy of the post-Yalta consensus. I am thus regarding unheroic experience as a rightful experience of history and, at one and the same time, an experience which contains within it an interesting critical potential. I am adopting the premise that, in this case, what fed the *post* generation was not only accounts of events, but also the fact that there was no cohesiveness between those accounts, that what lay betwixt the traces and the words were sudden leaps and dark holes. This was, in all probability, one of the reasons underlying the replacement of the heroic model of the artist-as-endower-of-form with the ironic model of parasite-leech; the ethos of the originators of the avant-garde had been superseded by the incurable parasitosis of culture at that time. The *post* world was founded not on the causative will of its artists' predecessors, but on their denials and renunciations. Just as these *post* artists had no possibility of uttering the divine 'let it be thus', so it transpired that what was now the most pressing was not in the least the endowing of form, but the defining of one's own position. The utopia of participation had been supplanted by the diagnosis of a common embroilment. It was thus not a matter of charting the desirable points in the future toward which we would head, but of providing the precise coordinates of the current position and distinguishing between the avant-garde and the critical.

For a considerable part of the twentieth century, historical depiction, which had formerly been so important in art, was viewed as an anachronism. In Mark Godfrey's opinion, the turning point as regards this negative attitude toward historical painting came with works such as On Kawara's *Today* (1966-2013) and *October 11* and Gerhard Richter's *1977* (1988).<sup>28</sup> The historical *volte-face* in Polish art is scrupulously discussed by Izabela Kowalczyk in *Podróży do przeszłości* [Journey to the Past].<sup>29</sup> Something of extraordinary importance within the com-

<sup>28</sup> Mark Godfrey, *The Artist as Historian*, "October" 2007, No. 120, pp. 140-172.

<sup>29</sup> Izabela Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* [Journey to the Past. Interpretations in Polish Critical Art], SWPS Academica, Warsaw 2011.

pass of depicting history was the representation of war, in respect both of “essentialist silences”<sup>30</sup>, which is to say, the impossibility of presenting it and of the modernisation of the myths of antiquity. The ancient world bequeathed us not only the Hellenistic pathos of history’s tragic nature, but also a liking and compassion for the defeated. In turn, the paintings of the early modern era present a topographical mannerism alongside the traditional, elemental portrayal of battles; at the same time, the former appears to be more frequent in the art of the North and the latter, in Italian art. In particular, the lesser masters of Baroque Flanders, including Sebastian Vrancx, Pieter Snayers and Adam Frans van der Meulen, depicted war with no romantic ethos, conventionally and generalised, as a situation over which inhabitants had no control whatsoever.<sup>31</sup> As we can see, battle scenes today are an ironic revival of the genre, a revival intended not to comfort the victims, but to arouse an individual, civilian sense of responsibility. Nonetheless, if we were to seek the forebears of Jerzy Koszałka’s *The Battle of Kłobuck*<sup>32</sup>, then we would have to refer at once to the aforementioned topographical legacy of the painting of the North, the presentation of a bird’s-eye view.

Łukasz Gorczyca has recently described *The Battle of Kłobuck* as an icon of:

(...) the political situation of the nineteen eighties and the anarchic-Dadaist ‘third way’ which the young artists of the time strove to tread, beyond the suffocating dialectic of ‘Us-Them’, at a far remove from the authorities and at a far remove from an opposition that stood shoulder to shoulder with the Church<sup>33</sup>.

30 Jay Winter, *War and the Social Construction of Silence*, in: *Fighting Words and Images. Representing War Across the Disciplines*, eds. Stephan Jaeger, Elena V. Baraban, Adam Muller, University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, Toronto 2012, p. 31

31 Julie Anne Plax, *Seventeenth-Century French Images of Warfare*, in: *Artful Armies, Beautiful Battles. Art and Warfare in the Early Modern Europe*, eds. Pia F. Cuneo, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2002, pp. 136–139.

32 The work is also referred to in the literature as *A Diagram of the Battle of Kłobuck*.

33 Łukasz Gorczyca, *Stan wody: Kłobuck, Lublin* [The State of the Water], on “Dwutygodnik.com”, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/>

It was as an iconic piece that it was spectacularly hung at the top of the stairs in Warsaw’s Zachęta National Gallery of Art in order to serve as a work-cum-introduction to an exhibition entitled *The Wild West. A History of Wrocław’s Avant-Garde* (2015). As an aside, the painting’s compositional structure also has something of the Debordian *dérive* about it, with the meaningful traces of an aimless stroll in an urban landscape and their dispersion as a symbol of the fight against the capitalist economy. Thus comprehended, the painting would present a geographical map of opposition against the authorities. So, paradoxically, the painting’s ‘capacity’ embraces contradictory readings, with the first perceiving the reification of the individual and the second, the individual’s resistance to objectivisation. The logic of the battle is therefore encompassed within the very incoherence of the content, where conflicting messages fight for legitimisation in the eyes of the viewer. We might well call the picture a key work in contemporary battle painting since, in ironically reviving an anachronistic genre, it goes straight to the heart of our civic position, manipulated *post factum* and learning of what has happened from an aesthetic ‘*communiqué*’ which endeavours to bring out universal, abstract meanings. *The Battle of Kłobuck* shows the fight as being not in the least absurd, but certainly far from obvious. It depicts the battle as a spectacle of symbols, of unending operations and its pandemonic boundlessness and merciless, aesthetic logic brings about the voidance of the place, time and purpose of passages of arms. In this sense, it is a representation of every battle and, at one and the same time, of no single, specific encounter. As Gorczyca remarked in the previously mentioned article, the distinction of ‘Us’ *versus* ‘Them’ constitutes the driving force for Poland’s contemporary political class.

The artist himself has explained that the title was created as a ‘mix’ of the Battle of Kursk and the Battle of Kock; initially, he had had no idea that, during the September Campaign of 1939, there had been a battle near the town of Kłobuck, which is situated fifteen kilometres from Częstochowa. Hav-

[godnik.com/szukaj?query=Stan+wody%3A+K%C5%82obuck%2C+Lublin](http://godnik.com/szukaj?query=Stan+wody%3A+K%C5%82obuck%2C+Lublin) (retrieved on 31.07.2015).

ing spent his boyhood in the backyards of Upper Silesia, Koszałka's recollection was more of the fact that, when children were playing, a person 'from Kłobuck' functioned as a synonym for a 'loony' of even greater calibre than someone 'from Rybnik'. At any rate, the expression 'an old fart from Kłobuck', which is discussed on that town's official website, has nothing whatsoever in common with the artist's interpretation. However, it might indeed be acknowledged that the virtual participant in the battle of Kłobuck whom Koszałka 'had in mind' concerns someone mentally fragile.

The work is both a multiple and ready-made, since what was used here was parcel paper with a two-colour, ornamental pattern printed on it. The pattern consisted of two elements; a soft, undulating, organic, closed form in green and a short, thick, red, truncheon-like dash.<sup>34</sup> The obvious dichotomy of the two forms, which were created using contrasting and complementary shapes evoking male-female sexual connotations, means that, in fact, we are dealing with a portrayal of a polarised world. However, what is extraordinarily telling is not merely the design, but also the original function of the object. After all, the choice of parcel paper relates to the changing of an image and also to veiling and protecting what should not be seen. Parcel paper serves a masquerade, a masking of objects, the temporary suspension of their function. Indeed, packaging is not only occasioned by benevolence, as poisoned or explosive parcels demonstrate.

*The Battle of Kłobuck* appeared in "LuXus" magazine in 1986 as one of the pages in that hand-produced periodical; the slogan for that issue was "Luxus Goes to War". Subsequent showings includ-

34 In a text entitled *Amator totalny\** [Absolute Dilettante], Paweł Jarodzki remarked that: "That paper was everywhere, it was the only decorative paper available in Poland. Koszałka called the amoeba 'Us' and the red dashes, 'Them' and made of it a diagram of one of the Polish Nation's many heroic battles. Total chaos. The same chaos as might exist in the head of someone who would like to understand Poland's history and its effect on daily life". I should also add that, in subsequent versions of the paper, the coloured dashes and amoeba differ distinctly, rendering the simple, categorising of 'red' as 'them' impossible. [\*typewritten manuscript, with thanks to Mr Jarodzki for his kindness in making it available].

ed the *Love Isn't Everything*<sup>35</sup> exhibition in Sopot in 1993. On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2004, in conjunction with the sale of postcards of the painting at the Cheap Art Fair held by the Raster Gallery, Koszałka gave a talk, *On the Political and Social Causes and Effects of the Battle of Kłobuck*, combined with "the promotion of visual arts works devoted to that event non-present in the history of Poland".

From the outset, the nature of the work's existence was that of a ludic multiple; the artist quite simply set his name to a sheet of paper which had actually been designed by an unknown artist. He thus appropriated the work of that other, anonymous author, though with a certain measure of perversity, since the act of conquest involved returning the scrap of paper, now 'souped-up' and no longer possessing the same status, to its owner, who was unaware that he was the owner of a work of art. The work continued to serve as an element of social exchange, but the artist had given the original meanings a certain added extra, although that, too, was loaded with the memory of the initial purport. In this imperceptible fashion, a cheap, universal and available object of possession became part of the artistic and historical discussions held by any number of people, regardless of their social status and regardless of their gallery-going habits. A deprecated item of applied art was transformed into a salon piece, or, more properly, a 'prestigious salon piece', yet the transformation was neither lasting nor irreversible. The artist's activity could thus be

35 This is based on the typewritten manuscript of Piotr Stasiowski's master's thesis, *LuXus events show. Mity, legenda i postulaty „kultury hipno” wrocławskiej niezależnej formacji artystycznej z lat 80. i 90. dwudziestego wieku* [The LuXus Events Show. The Myths, Legend and Postulates of Wrocław's Independent 'Hipno Culture' Arts Group in the Nineteen Eighties and Nineties], 2005, thesis supervisor: Professor Waldemar Okoń, held in the History of Art Institute at the University of Wrocław and on the artist's own accounts. *The Battle of Kłobuck* was also exhibited at a solo show entitled *The Art of Disappearing Art, the Art of Seeking Art* at the BWA Wrocław Awangarda [Avant-Garde] Gallery in 2004 and at Krzysztof Wałaszki's *Do dwóch razy sztuka\** at the Bielska BWA Gallery in 2005. [\*The title of the exhibition involves a play on words; the word *sztuka* translates, *inter alia*, as 'art' However, the full title is a Polish idiom which translates as 'lightning strikes twice' – translator's note.]

called anamorphic; it affected a change in the perspective from which the object was viewed, but not an enduring change in the status of the work-cum-object.

Changing the perspective from which it is viewed erodes our faith in the neutrality of the function of packaging. However, what is important is that this act of oblique viewing and of appropriating existing patterns in order to elucidate a particular narrative undermines the universalist and rational foundations of our power of judgment. History is written in accordance with existing formulae and always from the end. The clumsy nature of the all-encompassing narrative, the pattern consisting in truncheons and irregular, cylindrical forms ... the battle of the Rigids and the Ovals ... is obviously a perspective which rearranges the past. In demonstrating the possibility of this disintegration, Jerzy Koszałka shows a perspective of the game which snatches the ground from beneath our feet. For, when we undertake that game into which he is drawing us, we become aware that we have the possibility of ethically discriminating any and every narrative, of referring solely to a subjective point of view or a random pattern and not, quite simply, to some kind of ideal or principle. Within an ironic operation of this nature, if we apply Richard Rorty's deliberations, the moral definition of a person might read "something that can be humiliated", with "a sense of human solidarity based on a sense of common danger, not on a common possession or a shared power"<sup>36</sup>. The humiliation revealed by Koszałka is related both to belonging nowhere, since 'place' has been demsemanticised and to the in-

36 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Polish translation, Waclaw Jan Popowski, Wydawnictwo SPACJA, Warsaw 1996, p. 130 and ff.\* This topic is also discussed by Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Polish translation, Janusz Margański, Wydawnictwo KR, Warsaw 2003, p. 233 and ff. [\*The English original was retrieved at [https://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKEwiO-64Tyy-nHAhUBnXIKHWm2AeU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpages.uoregon.edu%2Fkoopman%2Fcourses\\_readings%2Froty%2Froty\\_CIS\\_full.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEI-3F18LSLsTEA3hJPUi44SdscAg&sig2=ra4R7iiN9Eci32dX-rXfAWg](https://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKEwiO-64Tyy-nHAhUBnXIKHWm2AeU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpages.uoregon.edu%2Fkoopman%2Fcourses_readings%2Froty%2Froty_CIS_full.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEI-3F18LSLsTEA3hJPUi44SdscAg&sig2=ra4R7iiN9Eci32dX-rXfAWg) on 01.09.2015 for the purposes of this translation – translator's note].

solubility of an identity which can be donned in the same way as clothes. And, like seekers of asylum in refugee camps, neither the Rigids nor the Ovals belong to place or time. This extraterritorial status and temporal hole mean that they exist without the ability to create history, since, being displaced, they have no right to define the situation and encapsulate it in lasting concepts; after all, they themselves have been encapsulated as 'reds' and 'greens'.

Koszałka's proposal that the position of 'us' and 'them' be equalised is uncommon inasmuch as 'they' are usually deprived of the right to dignity, to be heard and to be right. To begin with, membership of the community of 'them' defines a moral value. Off-handedness as regards the equalising of status thus becomes something extremely inconvenient because, as a reflection on contemporary politics, it would concern a project which is, really, still unaccomplished. At the root of Koszałka's jest lies something ostensibly guaranteed under law in democratic states, yet, for all that, unfulfilled; the moral status of every human being. No status of this kind exists in the world of *The Battle of Kłobuck*, just as there is no hospitality, no empathy and no readiness to share. However, the camp-like, military nature of that world rebounds in the lack of a finale to the unending conflict, for there, no truth will occur, nothing will be verified and nothing will become binding. Whilst outwardly, at least, no desire to abase the adversary is apparent here, since both parties to the dialogue seem to have full rights and neither of them occupies a subordinate position, it is the situation itself which is caricatural. For the problem rests in the fact that there is nothing to have a dispute about, because everything has been arbitrarily designed. The confrontation depicted by Koszałka is not a dispute about truth or right, since, with 'us' and 'them' rendered powerless, the world is revealed as a place permanently devoid of the possibility of choice.

The starting point in Koszałka's work is the community of people and solidarity against danger and humiliation. The anamorphosis lays bare the fact that we are not participants in events, but the object of manipulation, closer to the role of cannon fodder than to that of the subject of history. However, the mass reconquest of parcel paper, its universality and the accessibility of the operation reveal

not only the ability to package humiliation aesthetically, but also the potential democratic power which lies within the ability to look. Although it exposes our powerlessness, it nonetheless does not camouflage it, it does not wrap it up; instead, by calling a spade a spade, it makes standing up to the situation a possibility. The mode of looking lays bare the passivity of consumers in a world designed for them, their desire that at least, from now on, the battle be fought out not behind their backs, but under their supervisory gaze, albeit merely a gaze both powerless and abased. At the same time, it reveals the artist's position as one entrammelled and not as an external authority. That position is also typical of Zbigniew Libera.

The history of *The Battle of Kłobuck* is told *pars pro toto* any and every battle fought out in the past, regardless of the race, sex, religion, financial standing and social status of the belligerents. There is no room for actual, specific people in battles; what occurs is the collapse of everything particularistic and substantialist. Something similar sometimes happens with democracy. Yet, to explain to each and every person viewing the work, when all is said and done, we are witnesses to the impossibility of revoking everything which is individual in the crevice between the universalism of the battle scene and taking the side of either the rigid or the pliant ... and democracy and taking the side of the dispenser of the cheapest parcel paper. That crevice is the awakening of subjectivity and here, too, Zbigniew Libera operates.

*Disassembly* (2004), from Koszałka's *The Germans Have Arrived* series is another work which makes reference to the fear that World War II is not over and that the Germans will return to the territory allocated to Poland as one of its outcomes and in compensation

for her lost eastern lands.<sup>37</sup> The work is the art-

37 The vernissage of Jerzy Koszałka's solo exhibition entitled *The Germans Have Arrived* was held on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2006 in the Lab.log Gallery, run by Urszula Śliz at ul. Kościuszki 49/18 [Unit 18, 49 Kościuszko Street] in Wrocław. The event was part of the *Identity* series of exhibitions; cf. *Tożsamość* [Identity]. Jerzy Koszałka, Urszula Śliz, Krzysztof Wałaszek, Renata Brnjanowska, Przemek Pintał and Marek Sienkiewicz (catalogue), text by Agnieszka Kłos, Lab.log, Wrocław [ca. 2006].

ist's personal voice in a discussion on the identity of Wrocław. It consists in a 1:35 scale model of the city's *Iglica*<sup>38</sup> and figures of rifle-equipped soldiers. The original *Iglica* was designed by Professor Stanisław Hempel in 1948 for the Regained Territories Exhibition as a demonstration of both the potential of Poland's thinking in the sphere of engineering and of faith in Wrocław's Polish future. It was not without ambition in terms of creating a dominant urban feature of Polish origin that would also tower over its neighbour, Max Berg's masterly Centennial Hall, which was scornfully dubbed 'the German crock' at that time. Given that, at a hundred metres, the *Iglica* soared to twice the height of the Hall, it certainly did the job as far as the towering was concerned. *Disassembly* alludes to communist Poland's policy of eradicating the traces of the Germans who had lived on the lands which were now known as 'the Regained Territories':

Koszałka suggests reversing the situation; in his approach, it is the Germans who are erasing the symbols of Polishness, including the Spire in Wrocław.<sup>39</sup>

Koszałka himself recalls that:

In the nineteen seventies I arrived in the city for the first time, by train. On a large wall by the station, I saw a propagandist mural with the slogan "Piastronian<sup>40</sup> Wrocław welcomes you". I was told that, earlier, the city had been attacked with posters; "Wrocław. Your City. The Odra. Your River" and

38 *Iglica* translates, *inter alia*, as 'spire' or 'needle'. Wrocław's *Iglica* is a monument in the form of a needle-like column – translator's note.

39 *The Germans Did Not Come* (catalogue), eds. Michał Bieniek, Tadeusz Mincer, English translation by Karol Waniek, ART TRANSPARENT Fundacja Sztuki Współczesnej [Contemporary Arts Foundation], IMPART 2016 Festival Office, MWW Wrocław Contemporary Office, Wrocław 2015, p. 122. [Retrieved at [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Y5b29bvlK1k:muzem-wspolczesne.pl/mww/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/MuzeumWspolczesneWroclawjednodniowka-wersja\\_druk.pdf+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pl&lr=lang-en](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Y5b29bvlK1k:muzem-wspolczesne.pl/mww/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/MuzeumWspolczesneWroclawjednodniowka-wersja_druk.pdf+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pl&lr=lang-en) on 01.09.2015 for the purposes of this translation – translator's note].

40 The Piasts were Poland's first ruling dynasty. The Silesian branch of House of Piast ruled the Duchies of Silesia until the second half of the seventeenth century – translator's note.

that the inhabitants had added “F\*\*\*. Your Mother” to them<sup>41</sup>.

Referring to the crown formed from eight round mirrors, each of them three metres in diameter, which topped the *Iglica* and was struck by lightning and lost, he jokes that perhaps this was the Germanic gods taking their revenge, going on to add:

So I think that, for the Germans, it's a special place and that's what the work treats of and it also treats of the fact that *THE GERMANS HAVE ARRIVED*, because that's the truth, because, after all, art is truth, that which can be seen...<sup>42</sup>

The works refers to the notion of supporting the principle of the unity of territory, nation and state which was reinforced over the course of the last two centuries both by our military enemies and, in consequence, by us ourselves. Here, we consciously use the contrast of ‘us’, the Poles and ‘them’, the Germans, in order to show that it is only in a confrontational national juxtaposition of that kind that a dispute as to the principle of the nation's bond with state and territory could occur. This notion is bound up with the attribution of human qualities to only one of the parties to the dispute, preferably the one which is transforming its status as newcomers ... to the ‘Regained Territories’ ... and adopting the concept of perennial duration. In reality, the independence complex, driven by the nation-state-territory combination, cripples and degrades myriad human beings, even though it was intended as a remedy for abasement. Like *The Battle of Kłobuck*, *The Germans Have Arrived* thus demonstrates how, by depriving the newcomers of their humanity, the action of one redemptive recipe exposes both ‘us’ and ‘them’ to suffering.

The reworking of history to suit current requirements is a topic which appears in the work of Jerzy Koszałka and Zbigniew Libera alike. With Koszałka, the ‘falsification’ of history means that the present day appears like temporal hole where all choices have already been made by previous deceptions. In similar fashion, with Libera, that which is past

is more by way of being film and photograph, the inflation of proof as to ‘what happened’ in the form of shots of actors and extras.

The works from Zbigniew Libera's *Positives* series evokes images connected with the effects of various armed conflicts and revolutions. In terms of practice, they thus make apparent reference to such forms as classic Soviet photography, *inter alia*, constituting a template for that factual literature, focusing on facts published in documentary fashion. Alexander Rodchenko's photos published in the “Novyi Lef” journal gave precedence to the direct language of the photographic image and discarded the omniscient narrator in favour of the eyewitness. They recognised the predominance of report over proclamation and of description over narrative exegesis.<sup>43</sup> Rodchenko had decided outright on being a photo-archivist, since, as Leah Dickerman notes, he recognised the publication of crucial photographs from the history of the revolution as a *sui generis* common memory bank<sup>44</sup>. She goes on to add that, in this way, access to ‘authentic documents’ became the heritage of the Revolution itself, although, of course, the history created was not ‘true’ but allegorical. Like Rodchenko, Libera, too, is an archivist; however, in contrast to the Russian artist, he has a wholly different understanding of ‘the archive’. For a long time now, he has photographed and sorted newspaper photos in albums in line with a key which is purely intuitive. However, whilst reflecting as to whether the photos from all the newspapers on a given day would form a picture of the world on that day, he came to the conclusion that, together, what they really create is a lie worthy of our times. He added that, although it is only the photos we carry within ourselves which are true, those which are preserved ‘externally’ are pretenders to the truth.

In *Positives*, the documentary photos, which Martin Kemp would undoubtedly consider “truly iconic”<sup>45</sup> on account of their “wide recognisabili-

41 *Tożsamość – czy my wiemy, co robimy?... – odsłona II* [Identity. Do We Know What We're Doing?... Scene II], <http://culture.pl/pl/wydarzenie/tozsamosc-czy-my-wiemy-co-robimy-odslona-ii> (retrieved on 31.07.2015).

42 *Ibidem*.

43 Leah Dickerman, *The Fact and the Photograph*, “October”, 2006, No. 118, pp. 132–152.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 147.

45 Martin Kemp, *Christ to Coke. How Image Becomes Icon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 2012, p. 3 and ff.

ty"<sup>46</sup>, with Libera himself as 'pretending to truth', have undergone deformation and displacement in time. Even the participants have been changed. Instead of the Vietnamese burned by napalm and fleeing from an air raid in Nick Út's photo of 1972, we see people running along a beach; a Nazi propaganda photo showing German soldiers crossing the Polish border transforms into cyclists demonstrating their opposition to a red and white barrier; rather than the mortal remains of Che Guevara in Freddy Alborta's photo of 1967, the *guerrillero* is seen reclining on one elbow and smoking a cigar; and, in place of the concentration camp inmates in a still from a film shot by Alexander Vorontsov in 1945, we have smiling residents behind the fence. The dislocation of the message has occurred thanks to the famous *détournement* technique typical of the Situationists, a technique contrived in order to avoid the communication of authority. As a result, we do not know in whose name the artist is speaking and the authority of the document is crushed.

To put it precisely, this was not the first degeneration, for the source itself, the authentic document, was contaminated. Worse still, documentary and pseudo-documentary photos were intermingled with neither selection nor hierarchy. Sequences from Vorontsov's film did, after all, serve as evidence in the Nuremberg trials and, although a more joyous version of the liberation was filmed later, when the spent prisoners found the strength within themselves to rejoice at the sight of the Red Army bringing them freedom, the 'misshaping' of the significance of the photos and the unshown fake was finally relinquished.<sup>47</sup> The joyful, smiling

46 *Ibidem*, p. 8

47 Different books give different versions as regards precisely when Vorontsov shot the film in Auschwitz; cf., for instance, Yehuda Koren, Eliat Negev, *Giants. The Dwarfs of Auschwitz. The Extraordinary Story of the Lilliput Troupe*, Robson Press, London 2013, where the authors also write about the staging of shots. In *Filming the End of the Holocaust. Allied Documentaries, Nuremberg and the Liberation of the Concentration Camps*, Bloomsbury Academic, London-New York 2014, John J. Michalczyk writes of Vorontsov "allegedly" starting to film at the death camp "at the moment of liberation" (p. 60) and, in addition, like Stuart Liebman, also makes mention of staging the shots in order to meet the needs of the political message, cf. also

faces of the saved would not appear again until Libera's shot. In the case of *Che. Next Shot* (2003), his paraphrase of Freddy Alborta's photo, it is worth noting both the connection between the latter and Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp* (1632) and its possible influence on the photos of Tadeusz Kantor's eponymous happening (1968).<sup>48</sup> The indexicality of Libera's photos thus not only has a link to reality, but also becomes inherent to the intertextual entanglement of the history of art. In the instance of the 'documentary' shot of the Wehrmacht soldiers forcing the barrier at the Polish-German border on 1<sup>st</sup> September, what we have is a Nazi staging of the scene, set up a fortnight later. When it comes to the photo of the Vietnamese children, it has been noted that Nick Út's choice from amongst numerous shots consciously settled on the one where the suffering would make the greatest impression and where the effect it gave would be that of a single witness, which necessitated cropping the press photographers from the frame. This is why Rob Kroes states that "the final image derives its power from selection, if not manipulation, by the maker" and argues that direct confrontation with reality is simply a construct.<sup>49</sup> It might well thus be said that Fred Alborta's and Nick Út's manipulations have been subjected to manipulation anew. The effect of Libera's manipulations is similar in force to that of Kosalka's work; in the case of the latter, the unresolved clash of arms in *The Battle of Kłobuck* enchants with its decorative beauty while, in the former, the beauty emerges thanks to a minimal correction of details which transforms the painful nitty-gritty into a generalising formula. Libera's *Positives* has been discussed from the angle of reshaping traumatic experience by means of repetition and showing it as, quite simply, a laboratory analysis of the relation-

*Lessons and Legacies VII. The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2006, p. 348.

48 Cf. Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989*, I.B.Tauris, London–New York 2013, p. 47 and ff.

49 Rob Kroes, *Photographic Memories. Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History*, Dartmouth College Press, Hanover 2007, p. 73 and ff.

ship between trauma and its representation, where the trauma itself cannot be presented and makes its appearance in the imagination as an after-image; in the instance of Nick Út's photograph, this relates to Kim Phúc, the little, naked Vietnamese girl.<sup>50</sup> This is obvious, as is the fact that the mass media will censor overly explicit images. However, as the documentary photos forming the basis of Libera's manipulations demonstrate, horror has been successfully represented. The problem lies in this; in the face of the unceasing manipulation of historical documents, we, today, are uncertain as to whether they constitute any kind of evidence whatsoever. Let us remember that the photo of the deceased Che Guevara was not recognised as proof of his death; it was the amputation of his hands and examination of the fingerprints which would provide that. Ernesto Guevara de la Serna's hands had to make a journey, preserved in a jar of formalin, in order for what had been seen in the photo to be believed; that Che Guevara really was dead. So nothing ascertained on the basis of the senses, no 'communiqué' in the form of verbal account or in the form of photojournalism, has the status today that once it held. For the time being, the dispute as to truth is resolved in the laboratories of the FBI, discrediting voice and hearing, direct experience and the recording thereof. We have now lost not only the source of experience, but also the sense as to which photograph is the departing point. On many an occasion, the documentary photos from which the post-Yalta generation learned history were staged *post factum* and the visual tradition was destabilised as a consequence of discovering that fact,

However, it is not without reason that the past remains the theme of *Positives*, with the exception of one current topic, the war in Iraq, which is passing into history in front of our eyes anyway. Perhaps the question of history is an ever burning one, but

<sup>50</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, *Duchowość żenuje. Urządzenia kondycyjne. Rzecz o życiu i twórczości Zbigniewa Libery w latach 1981–2005* [Spirituality Is Embarrassing. On Zbigniew Libera\*], "Obieg" 2006, No. 1 (73), pp. 8-19. [\*The English title of the article is taken from <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/531-spirituality-is-embarrassing-on-zbigniew-libera>, retrieved on 02.09.2015. The translator's name is not given – translator's note].

Zbigniew Libera belongs to the generation which received its lectures in that subject at school from the secretary of the Local Party Unit<sup>51</sup>, an institutional cell of the Polish United Workers' Party. It might be said that every youth learned two histories, the official and the unofficial, but it seems to me that, in the case of a person whose approach to information is as critical as Zbigniew Libera's, the possibility that the unofficial version would be fully accepted is non-existent. We can safely assume that the fundamental experience which can be carried away from a similar situation is the conviction that the history of credible witnesses, passed on orally, is true to a lesser extent than the history resulting from suspicion, the history which can be spun from an analysis of what is left unsaid; other versions have to be taken on board parenthetically and provided with a question mark.

The vestiges, the fragments of the past constitute another vital factor in the question as to what happened 'back then'. In the years of Libera's youth, and of Kosałka's, these could have been a leather flying helmet, a button lost from a uniform, unfired rounds of ammunition or unexploded shells found by chance during a game of hide-and-seek, houses with walls bearing the traces of strafing or bombardment, ruins, the strange, camp-induced behaviour of the grandparents' or parents' generation... Growing up in an atmosphere of insinuation and traces leaves a vast field open to the imagination ... and that empty, silent field has to be filled with images, but those which are ready-to-hand, preserved on film, will always leave an unsatisfied need. It is like the Soviet war films which frequently appeared on television when Libera was growing up ... a visual war which aroused the interest, yet, at one and the same time, the one-sided depiction was incapable of providing emotional or intellectual satisfaction. So the commitment to addressing history emerges as an impatience with the banality of propaganda, but, primarily, as a response to the fact that, for the generation who played their part in that history, speaking of it was an impossibility, as a response to their shutting it away within themselves in order not to burden their children with

<sup>51</sup> Podstawowa Organizacja Partyjna, often referred to by the acronym 'POP' – translator's note.

the hope that the nightmare was over. The more the trauma of their parent's generation made itself manifest in surrogate tropes, such as a love of nature and declarations as to the beauty of the world, for instance, in the case Kapists' and Colourists' epigones, the more the imperative to finally give the silent vestiges of trauma a voice swelled in the children. Experiencing this dualism in the versions of history thus led not to a desire to replace both narratives with some other unifying paradigm, but served more to arouse the will toward *Götterdämmerung*, the annihilation of any and every idol in order to demonstrate the relativity and fragmentary nature of truth. An analysis of the intellectual and linguistic coherence of processed data in connection with the ambivalence of that which we see makes our access to reality highly problematic and that, in turn, destroys the borders between the private and the public, between the intimate and the political.

It has been written of *Positives* that they are a blasphemous attack against sacrosanct documents<sup>52</sup>, but Libera is not, of course, attacking any documents; he is merely giving expression to what happens unceasingly and imperceptibly. We often simply do not know what really happened; all we can do is give thought to what interests underlie each successive version of history and if, in turn, we do know what happened, rarely is it translated into a photographic image. So this is the situation; if we do not know what really happened, then documentary photos are able to provide us with each and every version of events. It is the mass media, and not Libera, who are blasphemous, albeit that the word no longer applies in the world that the media have created.

Jerzy Koszałka and Zbigniew Libera invoke history and war, they invoke traumatic experiences from the past which are making a comeback as farce. Summoning history by means of models, in Koszałka's case, or as reconstructed, pseudo-documents, in Libera's, serves neither normative nor commemorative purposes, nor does it serve to sow disquiet. An appropriate epithet for these artists would

thus be *anomophyllous* ... non-compliant with the law and propagating uncertainty. However, the return of trauma as farce does not signify blasphemy, but points toward the mediation of language in creating a universal story. It could be said that, really, the artists are calling attention to *how* history is created, for their anomophyllous predisposition demonstrates how bizarrely the victors' historical narratives and their prescriptiveness is established. Reflections on the creation of narrative are triggered thanks to the rhizomes of linear narrative; the photo of the deceased Che is shown in a shot subsequent to the one where we have seen him dead. Libera reanimates Guevara's corpse, commanding his ghost to smoke a cigar, while the nine-year-old Kim Phúc is transformed from a child suffering well-nigh fatal burns into a smiling tourist. Everything is tailored to our times, thanks to the meticulous reproduction of the details and to digital technology.

The armed, German soldiers materialising around the *Iglica* in Koszałka's work are basically zombies. The artist called the work *The Germans Have Arrived*, but it could just as well be said that they have yet to leave. The space around the *Iglica* is, quite simply, haunted by ghosts, albeit that the work in no way resembles a scene from a horror film. The soldiers placed around the *Iglica* by Koszałka and around Che in Libera's version of the photo are unable to kill; like cartoon characters, they belong to paradoxical, virtual forms which do not exist. As it transpires, there is no longer any difference between Che Guevara and Donald Duck; both figures appeal to the needs of a newly bewitched world. Given that nothing can be believed in, anything can happen. Given that something does not live a biological life, it is immortal.

Koszałka's and Libera's works can be included in the mock-documentary genre<sup>53</sup>, a pseudo-documentary form which has often been used in television programmes such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, radio dramas like Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* and films such as Kevin Brownlow's

52 Andrzej Szczerski, *Colonial/Post-Colonial Central Europe – History vs. Geography*, in: *Anxiety of Influence. Bachelors, Brides and a Family Romance* (catalogue), ed. Adam Budak, Stadtgalerie Bern, Bern 2004.

53 Jane Roscoe, Craig Hight, *Faking it. Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Manchester University Press, New York 2001; Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, London-New York 1988.

and Andrew Mollo's *It Happened Here*. The mockumentary operates between "parody, hoax and active critique of documentary aesthetics"<sup>54</sup> and, because it holds "a mirror to our flaws"<sup>55</sup>, its fundamental mission is our "discomfort – for it is through that discomfort that we, as both audience and subject, reflect on our norms, values, ideologies and ways of being"<sup>56</sup>. The borders between the false documentary, the ironic mock-documentary and the genre of alternative history combined with science fiction can sometimes be fluid. The manipulation of historical figures and melodic narrative lines is carried out incessantly and, from this point of view, experience-at-source is an illusion. The works thus take on a 'parasitical' form; rather than dazzling with their original form, they draw the sap from what has been acknowledged as living and as bearing authority. Like Madame Tussaud, these artists cause the dead to be amongst us and in visible form, at that, doing things they were unable to do before; they stand at the foot of the *Iglica* several decades after the war or smoke a cigar, *post-mortem*.

*The Battle of Kłobuck* is not, of course, merely a response to a post-war upbringing. To an equal extent, it is a dialogue with the tradition of Polish patriotic art. Koszałka also created a monumental version of his work. Devoted to Jan Matejko, it beat the master's canvas in terms of dimensions<sup>57</sup>; while it was more or less the same height, it was ten times as wide, measuring some four metres. *The Battle of Kłobuck* thus added its voice to the irreverent tone which first became a presence in the discourse on Matejko during the times of Stanisław Witkiewicz Senior and is also ironically represented in Stanisław Wyspiański's drawing parodying *The Battle of Grunwald*. In its nineteenth-century version, the massive undertaking of depicting the glory of Poland's arms was bound up with the desire

to seize the viewer's imagination; its parasitic repetition, on the other hand, appears to be a report on that appropriation. In another of his versions of *The Battle of Grunwald*, Koszałka set a reproduction of Matejko's painting within a frame of the parcel paper with its now-familiar motif of rigid and oval forms and irony thus became the surround for pathos.

In turn, Zbigniew Libera's and Darek Foks' exhibition and catalogue-book, *What Is The Messenger Girl Doing*<sup>58</sup>, is as much related to the manipulation of memory by the media, politicians and art as it is to the Warsaw Uprising. It therefore also makes references to the works of art which have given us sight of the world of the Uprising and, thus, first and foremost, to Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal*. The ruins of Warsaw are a part of the photomontage and scenery underscoring the beauty of the Italian and American actresses with their great eyes and innocent gaze. In order to discover and see what it was like, we have to carry out montage and manipulation. Apart from the photomontage, we have sixty-three texts and sixty-three photos; as an aside, sixty-three is a reference to the number of days of the Uprising. The juxtaposition of the texts leaves them in an extremely loose and startling relationship with the images. The accumulation of the images creates a kind of ornamental proliferation; what ensues is a packaging of representation, the sprouting and multiplication of the visible world. Yet this duplicated cosmos is the ashen greyness of faded photographs, it is deadish, as if anoxic.

In the context of artistic techniques, the engineering and technical word 'montage' was bound up with an aversion to the playing of traditional artistic roles and with the desire that the artist be

54 *Too Bold for the Box Office: The Mockumentary from Big Screen to Small*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller, Scarecrow Press, Lanham-Toronto-Plymouth 2012, pp. xi and xii; cf.: [https://books.google.pl/books?id=yog1UCopZtQC&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=yog1UCopZtQC&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

55 *Ibidem*.

56 *Ibidem*.

57 Jan Matejko's *The Battle of Grunwald* (1878) measures 426 cm x 987 cm / 168 in x 389 in – translator's note.

58 Darek Foks, Zbigniew Libera, *Co robi łączniczka* [*What Is The Messenger Girl Doing*], Instytucja Kultury Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris [the Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris Institute, Katowice 2005; cf. also: *Co robiła łączniczka. Książka o książce* [*What Is The Messenger Girl Doing. The Book of the Book*], ed. Sebastian Cichocki, Bytomskie Centrum Kultury [Bytom Culture Centre], Bytom 2006. Works from the *What is the Messenger Girl Doing* series were exhibited in the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom and the Bielska BWA Gallery in Bielsko-Biała. An in-depth analysis of the work can be found in Izabela Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości* [Journey to the Past], p. 357 and ff.

more of a worker, an engineer and a technician. This was the intention in the Soviet avant-garde; there, photomontage was also set in opposition to the artistic collage. Art was diagnosed as dead; the future lay in machine production. However, nowadays, photomontage is an historical form and its two faces, the Soviet agitational and the American commercial and promotional, have been combined, creating a enigmatic promotion of the Uprising, simultaneously fighting the political opposition through the erotic energy gushing from the film stars. Yet all of this is parenthesised by the stifling greyness of the photographs, assembled not so much, perhaps, from old shots and the ashes of the dead as from old shots and the white patches in the memory. Classic photomontage is an image brimming with energy; through cropping and elimination and through the fading of meanings, what arises from it is a potential both seditious and subversive. *What Is The Messenger Girl Doing* is a work deprived of energy not only by the faded photomontage, but also by the commentary to the images, which, rather than heightening the temperature of the reading, introduces a dissonance, destabilising the knowledge drawn from the photos. The traditional technique of composing photographs from separate negatives and juxtaposed texts aroused moral censure as a kind of trick and illegal procedure. In the face of this judgement, only surrealist photomontage introducing wonderfulness and extraordinary ordinariness held its own. With Libera, extraordinariness is out of the question, for everything, apart from a subtle, nostalgic eroticism, is deprived of meaning. Eroticism is also an element of *The Battle of Kłobuck* and it can be said that what we have with Libera, we also have with Koszałka every time he carries out a validation of depiction, an authentication of a version ... after all, we intuitively sense that the erotic succumbs to falsification less easily. Eroticisation thus quite simply constitutes a strategic tool and nothing more.

This was particularly the case in the set of works entitled *Bush's Dream* from the *Positives* series because, in 2003, one of the works wound up on the cover of "Przekrój" magazine<sup>59</sup> for the 13<sup>th</sup> April

issue, which ran to around forty thousand copies, with the adverts for the publication, composed of an enlarged version of the cover, becoming part of the public space in a great many of Poland's towns and cities. In this way, the leader's dream not only constituted an aspect of the public debate, but also obtained the status of instigator, rather like the Emperor Constantine's dream, for instance.

*Bush's Dream* shows women in Islamic head-dresses, assumedly residents of Iraq, young and beautiful, of course, clasping bouquets and throwing themselves into the strong arms of handsome American soldiers. Here, military confrontation was replaced by erotic, with 'us', obviously, being the man imposing his will and 'them' being those able to accept it with wonder and joy. However, in Libera's work, the exchange of the language of violence for the language of eroticism is so patently absurd that it does more to reveal the mechanism than to cause someone to believe in the representation itself. Nonetheless, the oneiric nature of the enlarged photos set in the public space, mixing them into the same order as adverts for cigarettes, cars and clothes and putting the war-stricken women of Iraq on the same footing as the models persuading us to buy products, revealed the insolubility of that which has been deprived of substance and the incessant transformation of the incomprehensible and different into the erotic and alluring. The *sui generis* Hollywoodisation of war is a process which was penetratingly noted at that time by Omer Fast in *Spielberg's List* (2003), for instance, while the presentations of the war in Iraq itself are as varied as the ways in which Jenny Holzer's *Protect, Protect* (2009) and *Shape the Battlespace* (2007) differ from Steve McQueen's *For Queen and Country* (2007) and Nina Berman's documentary photographs.

Inside "Przekrój", Marcel Andino Veleza's article, *Bush's Dream*, adopted a photo-journalism-mystification form and it was illustrated by Libera's photomontages. It is interesting to note that, later, the photojournalism from "Przekrój" duplicated in various catalogues, differed in the details. The artist evidently prepared several versions to choose from. With one of them, bearing

59 A weekly magazine focusing on social, political and cultural events; the title translates as 'cross-section' –

translator's note.

the caption *The final liberation, colour photography, 2004*<sup>60</sup>, the introduction tells us:

*This time it's no normal expedition. They're here to stay. The population of Iraq welcomed the coalition soldiers with flowers," a Fox News journalist reported on Monday.*

The centrefold photos featured a text reading:  
*9<sup>th</sup> April; Sergeant John Garrett (centre) and his colleagues from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division enter Baghdad to a welcome from crowds of excited Arab women. By Monday evening, the American field command was stationed at a secure site.*

In a photo featuring a Marine, one of the delighted women, described as an anonymous resident of Baghdad, is quoted as saying:

*Welcome! Praise and Glory to You, the Liberators. We Love You and Your Blessed Country.*

We are given additional information above the photo:

*Women left their homes en masse to welcome those who had brought them freedom. There were flowers and heartfelt embraces and then the shared fun began.*

The numerous women in Libera's photomontage were played by the same model and that very fact endowed the reportage with the hallmark of mystification; she was easy to unmask but, at one and the same time, operated with beauty's potent force. The reportage was thus constructed so that the ambivalence of the '*communiqué*' would take effect, since it contained elements that, at one and

the same time, both supported and unmasked the message which is the promotion of war through the mediatisation of conflict. This mediatisation reached a new level in Iraq.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the invasion of Iraq has been described as a purely commercial venture undertaken by CNN and Fox News Channel.<sup>62</sup> As we look at the photo reportage, we become aware of two things simultaneously; that we have no way of verifying the media's message and that the message is transparently cobbled together. The next photos from Libera's *Bush's Dream* series are like fittings for the version which we would like to adopt as our own. In this way, political information and its media setting is cut using the trial-and-error method; like perfume and washing powder adverts, what counts is hitting the audience's expectations, raising the circulation of a publication and the proportional increase in product sales. At the same time, constant repetition acts like the blows of a hammer; it simply has to work.

An obvious analogue to *Bush's Dreams* can be found in Yevgeny Khaldei's staged photos of Berlin in 1945, particularly the shot which was published in "Ogoniok" magazine and depicted the Soviet flag being raised over the *Reichstag* by a soldier whose wristwatch was retouched in order to erase the suggestion of plundering carried out by the Red Army. First and foremost, though, *Bush's Dream* might be compared with the various ways in which conflicts are portrayed in contemporary art, since, in broadening the concept of what constitutes a battle scene nowadays, that art does not point to the spun and manipulated views of another's suffering which the media specialise in. Seen through Kikujii Kawada's lens, the destruction of Hiroshima took on astonishing and ambiguous form in *Maps* (1965). In Simon Norfolk's *Afganistan: Chronotopia* (2001), a photo showing proudly erect ruins in glorious sunshine leads the viewer into cognitive discomfort, while, in photographing a command

60 The confusion of dates could be a nod in the direction of astute readers. *Positives* was also shown on a number of other occasions, including the *E.U. Positive. Kunst aus dem Neuen Europa* exhibition at Berlin's Akademie der Künste (2004), the *Zbigniew Libera. Work from 1984–2004* exhibition (2006), shown in conjunction with the artist's residency at the University of Michigan, at the *Paisatges mediàtics* in Barcelona (2004), at the *Revenge on Realism. The Fictitious Moment in Current Polish Art* exhibition at the Krinzingler Projekte Gallery in Vienna (2005), at the *Bad News/Złe wiadomości* exhibition at the Kronika Gallery in Bytom (2005); and, finally, at the *Zbigniew Libera. Works 1982-2008* exhibition at Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery (2009). Works from the series have joined the collections of the Podlaskie Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych [the Podlaskie Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts] in Białystok, amongst others; cf.: [http://projekte.galerie-krinzingler.at/PAST/2005/RoR05/RoR\\_small.pdf](http://projekte.galerie-krinzingler.at/PAST/2005/RoR05/RoR_small.pdf)

61 Mette Mortensen, *Journalism and Eyewitness Image. Digital Media, Participation, and Conflict*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York 2015, p. 43.

62 Deborah Lynn Jaramillo, *Ugly War, Pretty Package. How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2009, s. 177 and ff.

centre crammed with cutting-edge technology, he sublimates militariness, presenting it as an almost divine reality beyond the everyday commonplace. Those computer-filled interiors are like the churches of a cruel god, built by the faithful *ad majorem dei gloriam*. In truth, as of the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, war reporting has also been a question of super-technology. Its point of contact with the capitalist economy as the genesis of contemporary battle art is a theme in the work of Harun Farocki. In turn, Nick Waplington photographs smiling families of fondly embracing settlers against a background of beautiful Israeli landscapes, while Michael Schmidt simply takes shots of farm animals. Only occasionally does the eye of a winsome pig meet the eye of the viewer. Yet, in general, we are looking at a solid structure of law and order, habitation and construction; a banal and omnipresent acquiescence to war.

Of a certainty, the marketing framework for the war with Saddam is standing in good stead as experience in planning the advertising campaign for subsequent war. Here, the collective memory appears as the product of a mechanism which can be effortlessly projected, while art has become an intervention exposing that mechanism for a moment. Successive remakes of well-known events are, quite simply, exciting stories and this is reinforced by the incessant mediation of communication media. As a result, the media is doing what we once called art; finding a form for the expression of universal content. Artists must thus engage in something else.

To sum up, it should be noted that the subject of the works described here is the creator deliberating on a medium, the artist reflecting on the role of history as a creator of form. The works under discussion contain an essential, self-reflective element which is related to the exhaustion of traditional media and genres. In replicating them with ironic distance, Libera and Kosałka are pointing out that, in the forming and endowing of shape, it is necessary to rely on intuition; indeed, the choice of medium simultaneously becomes the appropriation of explosive material. The explosion ... the deconstruction of historical manipulations ... can be taken as much as a wish to get out of claustrophobic spaces as a desire to build a road toward new ones. The artists in question are retreating from

the hard media behind which stand certainty and ideological unyieldingness.

It could be said that the destabilisation of foundations is a dangerous activity. However, I have tried to demonstrate that the friable concrete consists in ideological truisms, historical falsifications and social manipulations. The creator is thus someone who demystifies the process by which the foundations of a polarised world are born, exposing the rules for the formation of the narrative. The artist is therefore no longer a demiurge and the human-creator-of-his/her-own-life is condemned to replicating stock stories, scenarios written by others and to creating remakes and adaptations. In deconstructing old narratives, do they change their situation?

As conceived by Jerzy Kosałka and Zbigniew Libera, today's battle scene is more of a provisional analysis of strategy than an everlasting glorification of arms. Libera called his photos for the magazine, photos grounded in the collective memory, 'subsequent images' or 'after-images of memory' and, in so doing, he invoked Władysław Strzemiński's concept of the after-image.<sup>63</sup> Both appellations can easily be extended to the works by Kosałka which have been discussed here.

The after-images and 'subsequent images' demonstrate that we are living in times of apocalypse. The displacement of the moments of actual clashes and confrontations in contemporary battle iconography in favour of libidinal variations and falsified reportage/documents is not evidence of the fact that the clashes have vanished. Gainsaying war ... this is also a way of running a war. However, what Libera and Kosałka show is not even war; it is pandemonium. It is an apocalypse, wherein human beings have lost a fundamental attribute ... the naming of things. We no longer name the world as its rulers, rendering it our subject, but as subordinates ... vassals of that which has gone before. This is why we have to consent to the role of puppet and inferior. What this leads to is our knowing only how to compare objects and emerging

63 In the catalogue for the *Paisatges mediàtics* exhibition in Barcelona (2004), Libera dubbed his pictures *imágenes posteriores*, which could be translated as 'subsequent / later / further images'.

phenomena, whilst we are able to wrest the secret of coherent and mysterious surroundings solely through juxtaposing two incomprehensible and inseparable phenomena. Comparison of this kind is the source of learning, magic and art, exactly as it was at the beginning of history. Since the world can no longer be either named or described, building a purely human community of free and fraternal-sororal beings is impossible; it is not even possible to establish in what reality we are living. The Enlightenment has turned out to be an illusion. The human collective is always rooted in this unnamed and mysterious 'before', which lies beyond the reach of our conceiving. Anterior images make of us their caricatures, condemning us to being imperfect likenesses of a suspect prototype ... or even to being its ghost.

Libera and Kosałka show us that war endures, despite the neutralising treatments of contemporary language and notwithstanding what we ourselves might have been ready to acknowledge. The war of identity against the political-ideological narratives' appropriation of the optic for viewing the past is under way. As a resident of Warsaw, Libera wants to have the right to a personal version of the Uprising of 1944, a version which does not serve political instrumentalisation. As a resident of what was, until quite recently, the German city of Breslau, Kosałka carries out a subtle shift of emphasis in the reception of German-Polish relations. Both artists demonstrate that our access to mediated, bygone facts is via a tangle of diverse interests. Their aim is not the promotion of the individual deflected from the past, since, paradoxically, the disappearance of the subject within the mechanisms of instrumentalising history brings to light the question as to the position of separate people and not that of interest groups or communities of combatants.

For, after all, both Kosałka and Libera are also building a cooperative of interpretive experience, counting on the pleasure of shared games. Questioning reality, they propose self-awareness and introspection. The battle scene they engage in is more the quintessence of the battle scene than an image of a real clash; self-reflection places the matter of reality in a minor position. From that disadvantaged place of truth/untruth, we follow the war of anti-heroic vigilantes, disappointed 'bad guys', somewhat

cynical, discarding traditional cultural values and taking matters into their own hands. They shamelessly transform history into pulp-fiction, yet it seems that any and every transgression, frequently employing black humour, is intended to lead toward good. In transgressing the boundaries of accepted values, they redefine standards; in transgressing the boundaries of fiction and reality, they problematise their oppositional nature; in voicing the ethos of counterculture and the underground, they co-create the post-1989 transformations understood as an acceptance of pluralism and a aversion to 'only the proper' interpretations of the past. In underscoring the importance of serious and sublime themes and traditional forms, they simultaneously lay bare their predilection for what is dubbed 'low culture' and transgress the boundaries between the 'high' and the 'low'. They use historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon would define it, problematising historical representation and the essential homogeneity and cohesion of history.

The involvement in history presented by Kosałka and Libera reveals a discursive thinking on the topic, dependent on the situation and constituting an element of textual play. Historiographic metafiction frequently refers to the voices of those who are marginalised in the classic, 'transcendent' historical narrative. This allows a revision of history and the charting of new, different perspectives for it, an opening up to history without technological ambitions and conclusive truisms. This is why the answer to the question as to whether the situation *post* which the two artists present is a symbol of abasement and exhaustion or the reverse, in that it exposes the strata of freedom and inquiring, undaunted innovativeness, is purely subjective.

Translated from the Polish by Caryl Swift