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Myths, Fears, Fascinations: Visual Culture and the Militaristic Motifs in Contemporary Polish art

On September 8th, 2001, exactly three days before the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a poster appeared on one of the billboards in Warsaw with a man in a blue shirt lying on a meadow, looking at the sky, smoking a cigarette and dreaming about war; the viewer was informed about this by an inscription next to the idyllic image. It just so happened that the billboard stood only a few hundred meters away from the American Embassy in Warsaw, the one that experienced a real siege after the attacks. Being terrified by the news from across the Atlantic, people lay wreaths and lit candles, which they lined along the street, where the embassy is located. Sometime after the attack someone from the embassy called the management of AMS (a company engaged in outdoor advertising) intervening about the poster. In response to this request the authors of the billboard, Mariusz Libel and Krzysztof Sidorek, acting as the Twożywo group, decided to paint over the word „war.” As a result the young man on the poster dreamed only of „when will there finally be...” When asked about the inspiration for his work, Mariusz Libel spoke of the „silence before the storm,” an irrational feeling of tension and foreboding that, which although had nothing to do with the attack on the other side of the ocean, was associated with a conviction, that the world yearned for a huge, spectacular change, akin to a blockbuster movie. The poster was to some extent a response to the thirst for sensation and the desire to participate in something extraordinary, the urges ingrained in people’s minds and manifesting themselves in particular circumstances. This coincidence caused, that on Koszykowa Street in Warsaw, war as an exciting vision was suddenly brutally

confronted with the fact that had shaken the entire world. Millions of people watched on television the accounts from the place of the tragedy and they were returning to the image of the glass towers collapsing.

As Susan Sontag wrote in her book on war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience¹⁸.” Globally we are living in a perpetual cycle of war. The past century has brought us the experience of many violent conflicts, including two world wars, with which mankind is still trying to come to terms. Today, in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are witnessing the brutal ongoing war in Iraq and also, quite close to us, in the Ukraine. The latest information and images on the events occurring in these areas are constantly arising on the Internet. “We now know what happens every day throughout the whole world--”¹⁹, Sontag cites Gustave Moynier’s statement from 1899. As we read those words over a hundred years later, during the time in which there has been unprecedented technological progress, we reflect on the status of this image and the influence of its omnipresence on our perception of reality. Indeed for those who have not experienced war directly, it is nowadays primarily a „media image.” The iconography of war present on the Internet, on television, in the press, film, and literature, penetrates the imagination of adults, adolescents and children, shaping the image of war as a conglomerate of facts, memorable pictures, headlines, comments by reporters and movie scenes. It is this media generated hype that seems to guide the work of our imagination. The media are an element of today’s reality, just like a tree is a fragment of the landscape. No wonder then, that the media image constitutes a point of reference for many artists in their works on the topic of war.

Chronologically the *War and Peace* exhibition is opened by the work *Art Is Power!* by Józef Robakowski, a classic artist and precursor of the Polish video-art. Robakowski belongs to a group of lead-

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 18.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

ing Polish artists who in the early 1970's initiated a deeper reflection on the cinematic picture, analyzing its internal structure. *Art Is Power!* concerns the status of the cinematic image as a televised document in Poland of the mid-1980's. The film is a kind of deconstruction of a power play and a display of military force. The artist completed it in 1985, during the communist era in Poland. Robakowski's movie is a re-broadcast of the military parade on the Red Square in Moscow which used to be held on each anniversary celebration of the October Revolution. All of the television stations from the Eastern bloc aired transmissions from the parade. The artist filmed a TV set, on which a column of armored cars are slowly gliding across the screen, there are also soldiers passing by, evenly and rhythmically stepping in formation. Robakowski deleted the commentary accompanying the transmission, and instead of that inserted the track by a Slovenian group, Laibach, as background music, thus transforming and symbolically „disarming” the communist spectacle of power, in a distinct way making the military ritual transparent as a form of political aggression, demonstration of force and domination. At the same time he also spoke clearly in favor of political and artistic freedom.

Robakowski's movie was created with the artistic group Film Form Workshop, which experimented with the film medium, analyzed it, demystified it as a tool used for manipulation. In *Art Is Power!* the artist exposed the internal logic of the video image, which – even slightly processed – can take on a new meaning and as a result can be used as a weapon that serves those, who have it to their disposal in the particular circumstances. A movie, just like a photograph, cannot be regarded as an impartial document. Today, in the era of special effects and virtual worlds, this statement sounds banal, but even half a century ago, an image recorded on the tape could be seen as irrefutable evidence that objectively reflected reality. Robakowski's experiments were an expression of the artist's sobriety in thinking and maintained a healthy distance towards the new media, the possibilities of which fascinated and inspired him. Today *Art Is Power!* is an iconic work, a classic of video art, which retains an extraordinary freshness thanks to its strength of communication and the simplicity of the gestures made by the artist.

Robakowski's work introduces us to the context of the exhibition on militarism in contemporary art using an assumption of an ambiguous, fascinating and sometimes dangerous status of the image and the idea of art as a sphere of resistance, deconstruction, responsibility and freedom. Since the creation of the movie *Art Is Power!* the conditions in Poland have changed beyond recognition, and the technology dealing with the transmission and proliferation of cinematic productions developed immensely. Together with it the visual field on the images of war and violence, to which we have acquired unlimited access, expanded. In the era of the internet we are not only bombarded by images, including those relating to war, but also we increasingly start to experience reality and understand it. In such a situation it is essential for us to be aware of the status of the image in the broadest cultural context, because sometimes it is simultaneously a testimony of truth and an excellent tool for manipulation.

The status of the image in the media sphere is an issue, which has long been a point of interest for Zbigniew Libera. The exhibition presents some of his works: *The Ultimate Liberation I* and *The Ultimate Liberation II* from the *Bush's Dream* series. The photographs depict Iraqi women cuddling up to soldiers in American uniforms, as if they were their yearning wives. These shots, stylized as if part of reportage, were orchestrated by the artist and published in several magazines, as if they were authentic photographs. The reader, especially the less observant one, might have as well perceived these photos as „facts.”

Not only in these two works does the artist undermine the credibility and authenticity of media coverage and the photos presented in it to emphasize the manipulative nature of the media. Libera before *Bush's Dream* worked on a series of photos entitled *The Positives*, which consisted of transformed iconic images of war, for example the photo depicting the naked nine-year old Kim Phuc, who was fleeing with her face contorted in horror from the explosion visible in the background. In Libera's interpretation the original pictures have gained a new, joyful dimension. The artist, creating photographs that mimic reality, reminds us that the ability to read an image is not enough; the awareness that it can

be manipulated is not sufficient either. We need to constantly verify our knowledge and we need to be vigilant, think logically, and – sometimes – question the sensual input. Only by constantly asking questions do we have a chance to protect ourselves from the status of a victim of media manipulation and become active as subjects.

The interpretation of the images on TV, which remain in one's memory as snapshots „binding” reality, is to a certain degree the subject of Mirosław Bałka's work *Audi HBE F144* from 2008. The artist, similarly to Robakowski, rebroadcasted and processed the messages presented on television. Both *Art Is Power!*, and *Audi HBE F144* reflect the ambiguity associated with the media message and its importance for the so called wide audience. In this case, it concerns issues related to the memory of World War II and its victims. Bałka recorded on camera the coverage of Benedict XVI's visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp, which he shortened later to twenty slides. On these slides we see the black Audi limousine with the license plate numbers which constitute the title of the work, moving between the camp barracks, surrounded by bodyguards dressed in black suits. The work is devoid of verbal commentary. The thing that strikes the most is the grim atmosphere, marked with fear and solemnity. In the indistinct context of practically monochrome frames various questions arise: Who's in the car? Who is Benedict XVI? What is the purpose of the black funeral procession traversing across the desolate space between the barracks? Would it be possible for somebody to shoot the pope? Does the Holy Father clearly see what is happening outside the window of the car in which, we presume, he is sitting? Are the bodyguards looking at camp's architecture? Etc.

The fact, how Pope Benedict XVI's visit in one of the most important places for the Polish memory of the Holocaust looked like, is irrelevant. The question that is put up front is the one about our understanding of the image, about our own knowledge which we have in reference to the news given to us. For the artist, the Pope's visit to the death camp seems to be primarily characterized by the emphasis on his status as the head of the Catholic Church and the concern for his safety. In this context, the question which obsessively returns is the

one about the issue of responsibility and historical memory. What the artist is passing on to us is his own account of the Pope's visit to Poland, a reconstruction of what he saw on television, one can say, his self-projection cast on a particular piece of media coverage. Every one of us would've kept for him or herself his or her own snapshot.

Apart from the reflection on the status of the media image in culture, its strength and its use, interesting issues are the possibilities of our perception towards the particularly intrusive media presence, the number of them and their repeatability. They are a source of reflection, among others, for such artists as Zofia Kulik, Dominik Lejman or Hubert Czerepok.

Kulik's project entitled *Ethnic Wars* was created over the period of almost two decades, between 1995 and 2012, and referred to the way reports on ethnic armed conflicts are presented. Zofia Kulik's work is a silent visual recording depicting a series of folk kerchiefs, with the pattern of a skull located on them. "There is peculiar juxtaposition," says Kulik, "between presenting a corpse in case of an ethnic war and the scene of weeping women accompanying it. Generally these women are wearing kerchiefs."²⁰ The short fragment abstracted from the television program, the motif of a colorful ornament, got connected with the most obvious symbol of death, becoming the universal symbol of pain imposed by contemporary military iconography, at the foundation of which is the repetitive TV news flash. *Ethnic Wars* are an attempt to depict the "relation between the actual contemporary ethnic wars and their image in the mass media." Thus the artist wanted to grasp, condense and universalize a certain excess, based on the distinct elements, which caught her attention. For this reason she deleted from the original image the elements which could be a distraction, augmented as well as expanded the motif of the ornament and added the universal symbol of the skull as a constant element of the projection. The artist is interested in the issue of suffering and the casualties of war,

20 "Niech archeolog nie odkłada łopaty." An Interview with Zofia Kulik by Adam Szymczyk and Andrzej Przywara, http://www.kulikzofia.pl/polski/ok3/ok3_przyszy.html (accessed 6 August 2015).

the way they are presented in the media as well as the status of the “average” viewer of the images of war. Media reports quickly fade away from one’s memory, what remains is a mosaic of details, a certain kind of “ornament” or “ritual,” symbolic and abstract, severed from reality and the credibility of the fact.

Our approach and reaction to the fleeting character or evanescence of the images on TV, its “ability” to volatilize and disappear, are the symbols of the information era. The theater, to which Kulik refers to, is an expression of a feeling, which is probably known by everybody, of a specific “surreality” connected with the media message, but also with velocity and temporality as such. This feeling of surreality seems to be stronger, the more drastic the content of the image, as if the mind was defending itself from its power. The words of Iwona Kurz come to mind; she compared a cinematic viewing to dreaming and perceived television viewing as a “suggestion of a wide awake fiction.” Kurz writes: “The unending manifestations, revolutions and catastrophes transmitted live from all the corners of the world are melting into the domesticated space of one’s home. This phantasmagoria of events blended into one image causes hallucinations [...]”²¹

A slightly similar relationship of the image to its meaning and application is examined by Dominik Lejman in his works. The artist is interested in the strength and morphology of the image in reference to its viewer. His works often relate to the reflection on the capabilities of human perception connected with the amount, quality and repetitiveness of the images delivered by the media and the way particular news reports are presented. A number of his pieces touch upon the subject of the aesthetisation of the contemporary visual sphere with its simultaneous brutalization and desensitization to images of violence. The artist describes this as a “phenomenon of visual anesthetics,” the commonness of which pushes him towards formal experiments with images. Lejman comments on this: “Henceforth my attempts at representation are connected

with extremely brutal events, with very clear and powerful images, if it comes for the documentary material, and they undergo a certain type of transformation; as a result incredibly beautiful, purely esthetic pictures are created.”²²

The artist in his work often intentionally reaches for, what is apparent also in Kulik’s project, the ornament motif, making it an important factor necessary for understanding contemporary visual culture.

The work *Crack in the Floor*, which as the name suggests is a projection located close to the floor, was built out of a series of short movies referring to armed conflicts that the artist treated in a way distinct for his art. Lejman disposed the primal image of its colors and left it in form of a negative in such a way that in the final version we are dealing with play of light and shadows, a black-and-white view on the border of abstraction. The image is as if “unburdened” of its original content. We are devoid of the details, which inform us about the quality of the presented reality. While bombarding our habits, Lejman provides our imagination with a phenomenon to work through, playing with scale and the quality of the image. The drama of destruction as well as the view of explosions we can recognize so well is presented here as chiaroscuro theater. The white spots of mini-helicopters the size of toys drop mini-bombs. Simultaneously, in a blink of an eye and only for a moment, they grow, confronting the bedazzled viewer with the size of their depiction on a scale of 1:1.

The TV screen, as well as the computer screen, are currently a stage, where world conflicts play out. For Lejman the notion of the scene in this context has a crucial meaning: “The contemporary carnage is determined by the perspective, in which we observe the current events in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Information-wise we are experiencing a war of perspectives, a war of means of presenting death [...]. We do not lack access to information; paradoxically we lack the form of objectively staging it, the right perspective enabling the reception of the en-

21 Iwona Kurz, “Prawdziwe? Między jawą a snem,” in *Anna Baumgart* [catalogue] (Lublin: Galeria Labirynt, 2013), pp. 4, 6.

22 “Trzeba pamiętać o tym, żeby otworzyć spadochron.” An Interview with Dominik Lejman by Magda Linkowska, in *Dominik Lejman* [catalogue] (Lublin: Galeria Labirynt, 2013), p. 20.

tirety rather than the fragmentary, devoid of mutual relations of elements delivered to us by the media. Ob/scenity, which is specific for our times, is based on the universal elimination of the notion of the stage, building the ethical relationship between the viewer and the event.”²³ Art can try to create this scene, hence “transporting” the particular paintings to a new context. The transformation used by the artist is supposed to provoke the viewer’s reaction; he or she becomes precipitated from the watching routine. Reducing the image to a game of light and shadows causes the memory to become unblocked and puts the imagination to work. The steps involving the reduction of information constitute an answer to the omnipresent excess of visibility; they universalize the message and enable an easier association with it. This has a particular significance in the context of the images connected with violence. Moving them to another medium may be an expression of the need to rework them, as well as “personalize” them.

Artists go the opposite direction than television stations: they reduce visibility and appeal to the viewer’s internal world. From this perspective the series of drawings by Hubert Czerepok and Mariusz Tarkawian are interesting, both of them being to a certain extent inspired by media illustrations of war and “bad” news.

The contemporary “icons” of cruelty: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, mass executions in China, became a point of departure for a series of Czerepok’s drawings entitled *The Screenings*. These are sketches of scenes of violence, torture, executions, rapes and sadomasochistic orgies. On the laconic drawings, devoid of details, we recognize the shapes of dead bodies, silhouettes of prisoners of war and their captors, as well as the outlines of destroyed buildings. These scenes seem strangely familiar to us. The image on TV, a screenshot from a website, return in a form of a traditional black-and-white pencil drawing, which is a suggestion, a non-literal and processed reference.

When writing about Goya’s *Disasters of War* in the context of the photographs documenting suffering,

23 “Szpara w podłodze. Dominik Lejman,” <http://wro2015.wrocenter.pl/site/pl/works/crack-in-the-floor/> (accessed 5 July 2015).

Sontag points to a fact, that the picture/drawing remains for the viewer a particular creation – hence the sense of the captions by the Spanish artist assuring that what he presented, he saw with his own eyes – while a photograph is perceived primarily as a trace of reality. Czerepok’s works which are inspired by photography as well as Goya’s sketches, clearly and purposefully disrupt this scheme. We know that at the foundation of Czerepok’s drawings lies the truth. Recasting and reworking it by the artist is the application of the filter of his own sensibility on the „shot,” just like coining („punctum”) in photography.

The Screenings are documents and visions. They are also a testimony of a fascination with violence, with which visual culture is saturated. A fascination, to be frank, as old as the world itself, dictated by the fear of death and the irresistible curiosity, which Plato mentions in his *Republic*, and that pushed Leontios, the son of Aglaion, to feast his own terrified eyes with the view of corpses lying by the executioner’s house. Most probably this fascination was never as desired and commercial as it is today; never before have the media stimulated it to such a degree, so intrusively and over and over, under the motto “the bloodier, the better.”

Mariusz Tarkawian’s series of drawings, initially conceived as a specific artist’s journal, refers to a great extent to news reports. In our exhibition we present a selection of drawings from the 366 *Rotations* cycle, created as an internet project commissioned by the Labyrinth Gallery. In accordance with the announcement on the internet site of the project, the artist for 366 days in a row created one drawing every day, inspired by everyday life, TV news, his own travels. As a result of that his personal chronicle of events was created. Every day has its own sheet of paper bearing a date and a caption. All of them are equally important. In effect, the journal as a whole is reminiscent of a random selection of information from TV news reports and everyday life. One time there is an invention, another time a cultural event or a plane crash, yet again it is place where there is a war going on, such as the drawing from November 10, 2014 captioned with a quote from the website: “Rabia Ali mourns at the grave of her son Seydo Mehmud ‘Curo,’ a Kurdish fighter who was killed in combat with the militants

of the Islamic State group in Kobani, Syria,” or the drawing from September 6, 2014 depicting a desolated Ukrainian tank near the town of Lebedynske. The logic of Tarkawian’s “chronicles” repeats the “logic” of visual culture, understood as the mix and remix of all the new flashes delivered mechanically without hierarchy, sorted only by an arbitrary category, which in the case of this project is the date, the next card in the calendar. In this work, each of its previous entries automatically becomes history, making the information from the previous day obsolete.

Anna Baumgart refers to violence-filled news reports, too. Similarly to the aforementioned artists she also makes the distinct treatment of transforming specific images. Baumgart cuts out human silhouettes out of newspaper photographs and moves them into a third dimension, stripping them of their initial context and introducing a new one. In 2004 she created the sculpture *Warrior* this way, inspired by press photographs showing prisoners being tortured in Abu Ghraib, whereas two years later, in response to images of violence in the press, the artist created two more sculptures of this type: *Natasha Kampusch* and *Veronica AP*. At the War and Peace exhibition we present Baumgart’s work entitled *La Chinoise*, which the artist based on a still from J. L. Godard’s film of the same title. In *La Chinoise*, characteristic motifs appear associated with economic power and military threat. Against the background of wallpaper with a tiger sitting on a fuel pump that has “Napalm Extra” written on it, there are busts of young Chinese women placed on them, one of which is smothered in blood. Toy-like planes are flying over their heads. Thematically, the work is connected with the artist’s search for a contemporary icon of the revolution, hence references to Godard’s movie, while simultaneously its visual side reflects the trauma of war and the position of the victim.

Apart from the artworks relating to contemporary armed conflicts we can also find those inspired by popular culture in a broader sense. One of the lasting and important inspirations for artists nowadays is the cinema and the music scene, which have a special influence on people. The entertainment industry works practically as a narcotic, responding to a growing customer demand, which it stim-

ulates by influencing fantasies and desires of the audience. It is said that reality today mimics that of a movie while psychologists point to the fact that young people sometimes lose the sense of reality and live like their heroes from the big screen. The cinema is a processing plant of old and a breeding ground of new myths; it has an influence on the creation of its own legends and the shaping of attitudes. No wonder it is an unfathomable area of reference for different artistic activities. Cezary Klimaszewski in his works *BUD* and *Mr. Mumbles* expresses his fascination with one of the movie stars. *BUD* is a reference to the film *Morituri*, where Marlon Brando played the leading role. The “good German” character created by Brando and the submarine appearing in the film – a distinct weapon, a war machine with specific features and capabilities – have become for Klimaszewski a reference to the myth of the hero. Marlon Brando, best known for such films as *The Young Lions*, *The Godfather*, or *Apocalypse Now*, evokes an image of a strong and extraordinary hero, and yet unpredictable and ambiguous at the same time. He fascinates Klimaszewski above all as an actor. According to the artist, Brando’s role in the movie *Morituri*, the title of which refers to the Roman greeting “Ave Cesar, morituri te salutant,” in an excellent way condenses various incarnations of Brando as an actor. A mysterious, strong, introverted protagonist with an impenetrable, alabaster face is an internally conflicted character entangled in spite of himself in the matters of war and politics. He is ready to die, although he is fighting for his life.

Klimaszewski built two installations, two models of military objects, which are signed with Brando’s nicknames: “BUD” and “Mr. Mumbles.” The glass cases, in which the models of submarines are presented, refer to the theme of a suitcase appearing in the movie and they are toying with the categories of transparency and secrecy. This separation from the world and moving it into a symbolic realm reflects the status of legendary stars, great actors and actresses, as well as reflects the state of the contemporary culture of desire, which is driven by the power of the image. The submarine in the glass-case is a work of art, a collector’s item, a toy and a fetish evoking the film image of a mysterious and menacing, and yet a romantic machine gliding

alone in the depths in search of the enemy like a silent predator seeking prey. Cinema fuels fantasies about heroism and bravery, but it can also awaken concealed fascinations with violence, power and evil. The reference to the theme of the war machine as well as the character created by Brando is a kind of an ascertainment that war is a male thing, and a man is a super-machine, an unusual military structure, "tight" and invincible, adapted for special tasks.

Tomasz Kozak's film *Romantic Neurosis*, made in the technique of found footage, has a special, somewhat different mood to it. It consists of short scenes and shots from the so-called found materials. Military iconography and references to the figure of the romantic hero also appear in the film. The artist clashes two orders with one another, or rather two types of images drawn from popular culture. The first one is Aleksander Ford's movie *Knights of the Teutonic Order* from 1960, based on the classic work of Polish patriotic literature, which was the first Polish blockbuster watched by a record number of viewers; the other one – fragments of heavy metal music videos of the bands Manowar and Iron Maiden. Kozak uses in his work, among others, the scene of the final battle of Grunwald, or the scene in which Jurand of Spychów forgives his greatest enemy Siegfried de Löwe, despite being asked the question: "Will you let Beelzebub go?" In the second part of the movie we see long-haired men dressed in leather pants, stretching out their arms with flames in the background, or standing in the spotlight and screaming to the heavens: "Warriors of the world!" The film ends with a caption, which is a quote from the Romantic poet, Joseph von Eichendorff: "What today descends wearily down,/Will lift itself tomorrow born anew./ Many things at night go lost–/ Guard yourself–be awake and alert!"

Kozak in his work is tracking the modern myths, the roots of which lie deep in the romantic tradition with its archetype of national heroism and valor, and which are the breeding ground for the so-called cultural industry. Its analysis appears to be essential for the critique and diagnosis of modernity. The more so that the tracking of these myths is, of course, also the question of the "prototype" roots and the original character of that, which is

the subject of this revision. In the film, this romantic myth and "the longing for power" return, or are reborn again and manifest themselves in certain repetitive, recognizable gestures, attributes and behaviors at the very center of contemporary visual culture. These myths, which Kozak deconstructs, pulsate and cause ecstasy in the collective imagination, in the very heart of pop culture, in the music and film industries.

Romantic Neurosis, as well as Kozak's other films, are characterized by large ambivalence. Kozak is an uncompromising artist who does not stop at a politically correct point, but is looking for neutral points in modernity; he strikes and tests his assumptions with great force, remaining as a rule ambiguous in his position.

One might add that the yearning for (omni)potence, which currently takes on different masks and degrees of literalness, lies deep in the entire Western culture, dictating new scenarios and building spectacular visions for the needs of the entertainment industry; it reveals a harmless, amusing and sometimes scary face, which happens especially when it is lined with resentment, frustration and hateful rhetoric. The cinematic and music industries, utilizing "powerful," saturated images with military references and depictions of violence, provide a good field for analysis of clichés and impulses ruling in the social subconscious, which are in fact far from their proclaimed values.

A large part of the exhibition is filled with film and photography. The presence of drawings and paintings broadens to a certain degree the range in reference to the medium used, causing that the works created by means of traditional techniques gain a certain power, constituting a kind of counterbalance to the sound, color and movement – the "noise" of the video-projections on the adjacent walls. This counterbalance is visible in the economical form, color scale and approach to the subject. The images of war include not only battles, war machines and human suffering, they are also landscapes scoured by war. Cities in ruins, streets filled with smoke, fire and broken glass, huge craters in the ground and abounding chaos are the well-known identification marks. These images, as clearly as photographs of bodies indicating the destruction, we inevitably see otherwise. The war landscape always seems to induce, aside from the

feelings of horror, an aesthetic agitation.

The paintings of the aforementioned Hubert Czerepok are inspired by photographs of war. His cycle entitled *Aeropiktura* is the paintwork processing of aerial photographs of bombed cities, among which there were Dresden, Kobe and Hamburg. These paintings at first glance look like geometric abstractions; however we quickly recognize in them certain symmetry, a geometrical system which reminds us of an urban planning scheme. Czerepok made use of images taken from a plane, often by pilots whose task was to bomb a given city. The awareness of the reality behind the images disturbs the “comfort,” which we usually experience in reference to abstract shapes. The recognition of the consecutive picture elements is a replay of a disaster.

Black-and-white photographs of war are also an inspiration for Tomasz Bielak, who universalizes the theme of war, referring to the tradition of a landscape as a metaphor for the internal human experience. His small pictures as if show the water depths, or the undefined space of clouds and air. The only distinct, easily recognizable objects in this “fog” are the man-made war machines. Small, inconspicuous like toys, disappearing in the surrounding “boundlessness,” they are an expression of human domination and power over nature and other people. Bielak is interested in the “aesthetic dimension” of war, the way how “its widely understood symbols and attributes physically and aesthetically interfere with the landscape, with the space of the nature of the sky or water. On the one hand they are scary, while on the other hand they tempt and entice with their design and technology.”²⁴ His pictures are also “a symbolic field of human nature, which is oscillating between good and evil, between aggression and striving for harmony.”²⁵

In the end I would like to recall the work by the aforementioned Anna Baumgart entitled *Fresh Cherries*. In this film several stylistic conventions borrowed from the world of media, popular culture as well as modern psychology overlap and create an inter-

esting, multi-layered structure reflecting the confusion of different orders of organizing our perception and understanding of reality. A documentary is interwoven with drama, paratheatrical productions and Hellinger settings. In addition, in the *Appendix*, which shows how the work on the film was taking place, the artist herself also reveals her personal commitment to the issue when she says that she wants to know “why she must deal with this issue.” Such interweaving of conventions is typical for Baumgart’s art and causes that her works always contain a thread concerning the perception and the possibility to judge reality. Baumgart shows several perspectives at the same time, the ambiguity in which we are permanently entangled. *Fresh Cherries* is about camp prostitution, a subject covered by taboo and cast into the regions of social ignorance. Women who were forced into prostitution during their imprisonment in concentration camps have never received compensation for the harm done to them; moreover, often even the status of a victim was taken away from them. These women, unwilling or unable to talk about their trauma, took it with them to the grave. Baumgart was looking for the last of witnesses and the women themselves, trying to capture something that disappears, and we will soon forget about.

The film touches upon various important issues on different levels, it refers to the consciousness and perspective on the topic by new generations, which though burdened by recent history, are in a completely different reality. In the film, a young researcher passionately talks about issues concerning the hierarchy of victims during wars, about their suffering and the right to speak up. Meanwhile, Klara, the main character so to speak, “doesn’t feel anything,” visiting Auschwitz for the first time, which is “too real” for her, and at the same time she feels a huge weight on her body, when during the time of the Hellinger settings, starring as a camp prostitute, she stands next to a man lying in front of her and unable to bear the sight of him, she turns her back away. The same Klara is seen in the opening scene, while talking with a colleague-director of the planned movie, talking about “sex and blood shown in a really hard way,” as demanded by the contemporary viewer. Then she utters a memorable sentence: “Near Co-

24 Tomasz Bielak’s quote from his correspondence with the author.

25 Ibid.

penhagen they will really build a better Auschwitz for you, just the way you want". Klara in the film is once herself, then an actress, and yet another time a representative of the women from concentration camps. This film is important not only because of the seriousness of the subject addressed, but also because of its concept and structure, which reflect the state of the heterogeneity of contemporary attitudes, topics and perspectives, that are triggered by ideas/images, rather than experience. The already cited Iwona Kurz wrote that "history does not create events, but stories and images – films and photographs, dreams and the dreams of utopia, fantasies of power and equality, symbols and signs. They produce modern realm of memory pulp and identity pulp, composed of fractions, fragments, pieces, reflections and clichés. Looking back, we see only a dream spun by culture, but spun efficiently – producing narratives about the past and scenarios for today."²⁶

The image of war, stitched together with a countless number of other images in our head, constitutes a part of that "history," it plays an important role in the production of that "memory pulp," of which it itself is also a result. It is a fact and an idea with which we live every day. War through its presence on the Internet and television is directly near us, it enters the private space of our home, the twilight of our bedroom before we go to sleep. However it disappears immediately, with a single click of a button. It is everywhere, here and now, and far away at the same time. We know its visual manifestations, but we really begin to see it only thanks to a new impulse, when someone next to us points us to it with his or her finger. Artists, as it is shown in the works collected in the Labyrinth Gallery, are trying to do just that – to clear again our perception in some way. If the mankind's responsibility is to reach out for the truth and develop self-awareness, then today this concerns mainly the realm associated with images, including the "view of other people's suffering," which is fighting for our attention.

Translated from the Polish by Marcin Garbowski

²⁶ Iwona Kurz, "Prawdziwe?," p. 6.