

Paweł Leszkowicz

## War (!!!) and Peace (?): Fascination with Militarism in Contemporary Polish Art

New militaristic iconography and creative arts connected to war in the broadest sense are flourishing in Polish contemporary art of the twenty-first century, referring both to the historical perspective, as well as the perspective of here and now. The *War and Peace* exhibition prepared by Galeria Labirynt [Labyrinth Gallery] is an attempt to summarize this issue and also takes the next step to enrich it. The most prominent Polish artists, curators and critics tackle this topic, exploring various realms of militaristic themes.

War has been a great narrative in Poland's art history for centuries. Patriotic and historical nineteenth century paintings persist as the foundations of museums and the national heritage itself. That is when the military canon in painting had been formed, the canon which reigns in the collective imagination of the nation and in the dominantly conservative ethos till this day. One could think that after the Smoleńsk catastrophe and the return of phantasms of martyrdom the official art canon should return to that of the patriotic themes from the time of the Partitions. And yet this did not happen and the aforementioned museum-like convention can hardly be found in institutions dedicated to contemporary art. This sort of return to the past seems to be hard, though many right-wing politicians and ideologues would gladly promote and finance it. Even important institutions dedicated to modern art, in the name of pluralism, are searching for patriotic artwork, opening their showrooms for artists and curators who cherish traditional values. Examples of that may be the *New National Art* exhibition (2012) at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, organized by Sebastian Cichocki and Łukasz Ronduda, as well as Kazimierz Piotrowski's *Thymós: The Art of Wrath 1900–2011* exhibition dis-

played in 2011 at the Toruń Center of Modern Art.

It is hard to find during such exhibits a new Juliusz Kossak, Artur Grottger, Józef Brandt, Jan Matejko or Maksymilian Gierymski, who would effectively express visually our day and age. There are two simple reasons for this. First of all – saturation: old style patriotic militaristic iconography is triumphant in the mainstream television and movie productions and hardly anyone expects it to be present in the more niche modern art. Why duplicate the convention as well as plotlines from Polish Public Television's hit series *Czas honoru* (Time of Honor), Andrzej Wajda's *Katyń* or other similar productions. The more so that all over the country there are various military museums, which promote the militarist-patriotic visual art tradition and the movement focused on the reenactment of historical Polish battles since the Middle Ages up until World War II is enjoying unabated popularity. At this exhibition we are presenting a selection of photographs by Piotr Ślaski, who specializes in documenting such events, which are financed by municipal and state institutions as well as through grassroots support from groups fascinated with militarism and history. Therefore the market is saturated.

The second reason is political and relatively new in the context of the last two centuries. The Third Polish Republic belongs to NATO and the European Union and is a well-off, free and at times imperialistic and nationalistic country, which has little in common with being a victim. Nowadays we are struggling with freedom and not with enslavement! Despite the legacy of martyrdom, the ethos of combating the countries which used to be our partitioning powers, communists and the cult of the Smoleńsk catastrophe, Poland is, at least as of 2015, still independent and proud with the only war, which is taking place on its territory, being an ideological civil war, for which exclusively our politicians are responsible. Our soldiers, in turn, are occupied by, not always clearly motivated, military interventions in different parts of the world or defending the Polish border against refugees from countries struck by war and poverty, whom Poland reluctantly accepts.

In such times, in a contemporary art more reflectively focused on reality, the only militarist ico-

nography which could have developed is a revisionist one.

These are works that examine, instead of glorifying, national values, and interpret history in a different way, conduct a psychoanalysis of violence, the attachment to war and its mythology, as well as critically look at the destructive cult of militaristic masculinity. On the one hand it is art on a pacifistic ground, on the other hand it is one that is obsessively fascinated with the perversions of militarism, which it unveils and dissects. This visual tendency seems to be a necessary and priceless therapy in the face of the surrounding militarist madness, which is first and foremost present within us. And it originates from the subconscious, and yet rampant, fascination with violence.

Basically in the contemporary artistic approach to the subject of war, not only in Poland, one can discern two tendencies. The traditional approach presents the tragedy and horror of war in a lofty way, it pays homage to its victims or documents the progress of military activities as well as their aftermath. The opposing tendency is connected with reprocessing the concepts and ideologies linked with wars, it is a level of meta-reflection on the depictions of violence, where strategies of playing with media and art clichés take place using irony and even humor. It seems that in Polish modern art we can observe more of the second approach or a somewhat ambiguous synthesis.

A new type of militarist iconography developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when Polish soldiers were stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan, where war was for them an adventure or a job (still lethally dangerous), though unconnected directly with the defense of their own territory. A light approach to the subject, which appears among artists, is probably a result of them being distant from a real war. They do not experience a genuine existential risk, they only have the privilege of critically working on the mythologies and ambitions, which still motivate many men to join the army and many power hungry politicians to make the decision to go to war.

Militarist themes in Polish art are of a universal, global and transhistorical character and do not relate exclusively to the history of our country. Sometimes artists conduct a dialogue with the

history of art, filled with depictions of victory or defeat as well as they relate to contemporary war crime documentation. Such is the style in Hubert Czerepok's series *Screenings: The Horrors of War* (2007-2009) inspired by the famous images by Francisco Goya depicting the calamities from the Spanish-French war (1808–1814). This Polish artist sketches modern-day war atrocities: rapes, torture, humiliation and executions, based on actual photographic documentation from different parts of the world. His vision lies somewhere between the photographs of the humiliated Iraqi prisoners from Abu Ghraib, done by American soldiers and the anti-war paintings by Leon Golub portraying scenes of torture in South America during the period that military juntas ruled there.

There are also artists, who cite and label with their style the classics of Polish military and patriotic art in an act of intertextual play with the image. Edward Krasiński in his installation entitled *The Battle of Grunwald* (1997) puts his distinct blue sticker on a copy of Jan Matejko's painting, annexing this relic of Polish culture for the sake of conceptual art. Tomasz Kozak in his mural *Yet Another Effort, Poles!* (2004), which alludes to Marquise de Sade's revolutionary appeal: "Yet another effort, Frenchmen, if you would become republicans," uses the figures from the patriotic and religious series of Artur Grottger's paintings in order to create a scene of sadistic insurgent conflagration and anti-Semitic fantasy. This way the artist confronts romantic depictions of martyrdom and reveals the dark, and not messianic side of Polishness<sup>1</sup>.

Despite abandoning the simplistic patriotic tradition, an intense fascination with war is apparent in art. Travesty the title of Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Fascinating Fascism" (1974), one can call this phenomenon "fascinating militarism." When writing about the popularity of Leni Riefenstahl's movies, Sontag indicated the lasting presence of fascist aesthetics as form of expression in popculture as well as the fleeting memory or even negation of the maleficent meaning behind it<sup>2</sup>.

1 Maria Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna: Fantazmaty literatury* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), p. 34.

2 Susan Sontag, "Fascynujący faszyzm," trans. Andrzej Antoszek and Tomek Kitliński, *Magazyn Sztuki* 12 (1996):

Similarly, one can diagnose the fascination with militarism as a theme in contemporary Polish art. It is most of the time interesting, though extremely ambiguous in an ethical sense and is rather based on performing and citing than on truly painful experience. This is probably a deliberate attempt at departing from the traumatic-patriotic tradition of Polish painting as well as the World Press Photo reportage convention of literally documenting the suffering of the victims of war. Instead of that many contemporary artists offer deconstruction of the cruel “charms” of war, focusing on militarist fetishes such as guns, uniforms, the soldier’s body and the passion for combat.

The Polish military art tradition is not connected exclusively with the nineteenth century romantic and realistic patriotic paintings that were a reaction to uprisings against the partitioning powers. Also during the communist period, in the People’s Republic of Poland, this type of art was developing intensively, supported by the authorities, e.g. by the Central Political Board of the Polish Army. Exhibitions dedicated to artistic depictions of the army were organized on a regular basis; their aftermath can be found today in the Polish Army museums. The album, *The Polish Army in Contemporary Art*, published in 1968 on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Army of Poland is an excellent illustration of this tendency.

During the communist times, appreciation of military artwork served to underline the attempt at maintaining continuity with the great national art tradition represented by Piotr Michałowski, Artur Grottger, Jan Matejko or Jacek Malczewski. The artwork displayed back then presented mainly acts of heroism during World War II<sup>3</sup>. The artists, who focused on this topic had survived the war; the result of their experiences were hand-drawn reportages, e.g. by Aleksander Rafałowski, Feliks Topolski, Henryk Siedlanowski and Adam Bunsch, whose spontaneous and expressive technique capturing the struggle, daily life on the frontline or the faces of soldiers, would break the social realist convention. The most typical representative of the social realist

was the most promoted military artist of communist Poland, Michał Bylina, who painted key battles that took place during World War II. However most artists had done their homework from modern art, for they used expressive deformations and synthetic simplifications in order to depict military action. Fundamentally, the ideology, as well as iconography of combat and victory, disowned the horror of war and such art was perfect propaganda for the Army of the People’s Republic of Poland. Nevertheless, also significant works by artists like Walerian Borowczyk, Wojciech Weiss or Zbigniew Lutomski were created. In sculpture the realistic portrait busts of sailors and soldiers made by Stanisław Horno-Popławski and Xawery Dunikowski have not aged.

Contemporary military art broke ties with the official ideologies dominating the theme throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, preserving the same iconographic foundations, but subject to considerable transformations and updates. One of the key figures used was of course that of a soldier – the defender of the country and its national identity. A soldier is in himself a national symbol, but for the modern art he is a problematic symbol of masculinity. Deconstructing the patriarchal and nationalistic society with the use of gender and sexuality has become one of the more important themes in Polish art in the period of searching for democracy<sup>4</sup>. In this context we can observe a new vision of the soldier, which captures the core of the revisionist approach to the patriotic tradition. The sexualization of the soldier present in popular culture and folklore – “all the maidens will follow a man in uniform” is undergoing an obsessive amplification and turns toward homoeroticism. Some examples of this militarist-erotic tendencies are on the one hand provocative, ambiguous images of soldiers in Tomasz Kozak and Bogusław Bachorczyk’s paintings, and on the other hand Zbigniew Libera’s series of photographs *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless* (2009)<sup>5</sup>.

4 Tomasz Kitliński, *Dream? Democracy! A Philosophy of Horror, Hope and Hospitality in Art & Action* (Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, 2014), pp. 125–130.

5 The subject matter of *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless* is playing war recognized and captured as the most important motif of the new military iconography at the *Zabawy dużych chłopców* [Big boys games] (2008) exhibition organized at the Galeria Appendix 2 in Warsaw by Paweł

120–137.

3 Juliusz Starzyński, *Wojsko Polskie w sztuce współczesnej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Ruch, 1968), pp. 3–4.

It seems that artists are looking for effigies and metaphors, which link the iconography of a soldier with the context of military past and current wars as well as the contemporary discussion about masculinity and its metamorphoses. This intensified gender awareness, though nowadays articulated openly, from a visual perspective is nothing new in Polish art. In the socially engaged photomontages by Janusz Maria Brzeski or Teresa Żarnowerówna from the interwar period, there were depictions of military-warlike themes (e.g. parades) with male or female nudity or erotic scenes. Also much earlier Artur Grottger presented in his patriotic series exposed fragments of bodies of freedom fighters, recruits or exiles. On the title print of the *Polonia* (1863) series the shrouded figure of Poland enslaved by the powers which partitioned her is surrounded by three allegorical male nudes posing gracefully and with pathos. What is symptomatic is that these three “Adonises” are interpreted as the personifications of the Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian nations<sup>6</sup>. In the center of the dramatic narrative from *The Draw among the Recruits*, from the *War* (1866) series, there is a beautiful youth, the embodiment of romantic manhood. Whereas in the drawing called *Only Misery Remains* showing the particular cruelty of war, there lies a defiled body of a young woman with her white blouse torn and revealing her ample breasts. This sort of erotization of violence is commonplace in contemporary art.

Probably the most important and precursory works of the new, perverse and corporeal militarist iconography is Artur Żmijewski's *Polish Army's Representational Corps* (2000). This movie is one of the flagship new depictions of a male nude in Polish art. Former soldiers from the Polish Army's

Sosnowski. This display focused on an ironic way to depict war in contemporary Polish art, instead of the heroic and patriotic approach and created – what's symptomatic – by men. The following artists presented their work there: Olaf Brzeski, Edward Dwurnik, Grupa Azorro, Grupa Łódź Kaliska, Władysław Hasior, Jerzy Koszałka, Paweł Kowalewski, Tomasz Kozak, Zbigniew Libera, Robert Maciejuk, Jerzy Stajuda, Jerzy Truszkowski and Włodzimierz Jan Zakrzewski.

6 Mariusz Bryl, *Cykle Artura Grottgera: Poetyka i recepcja* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1994), p. 182.

Representational Corps, whom the artist convinced to perform in it, presented in front of the camera a ceremonial drill – naked, but with rifles in hand. The soldiers' bodies as such do not have any heroic character and the erotic aspect of genital nudity is competing with the comic nature of the entire situation. The presence of sexuality in the helpless and soft male body can be one of the levels of discovering humanity and retrieving it from its patriarchal, militarist and national constructions. The artist strips the man of his armor, contrary to militarist fetishism and the gender-based conditioning.

The theme of the military parade present in Żmijewski's art and treated in a critical manner, appeared in Polish art much earlier in *Art Is Power!* (1985), the classic art-video by Józef Robakowski. By putting the music of Laibach over the broadcast of the annual military parade on the Red Square in Moscow, the artist brilliantly underlined the nature of the communist regime – absolutely totalitarian and spectacular even during the time of its decline.

Nowadays this anti-Soviet realization can constitute an ominous commentary to the increasing role of militarist and predatory policy of contemporary Russia, where the art of state propaganda is flourishing now as it was the case in the past. George L. Mosse, a scholar specializing in the history of masculinity and nationalism, states in his work that the military parades manifest the ultra-male conservative revolution based on the cult of the soldier, male bonding and heroism<sup>7</sup>. In Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, in turn, the subjugated and trained body is that of a man: a worker, prisoner or soldier<sup>8</sup>.

Normative sexuality is a part of the ritual of subordination. In a cultural sense soldiers are one of the erotic fetishes of masculinity, especially the “presentable” ones, like those selected for the Honor Guard. This is apparent due to the presence of sensual nudity of military men in the visual arts in pop culture, especially in movies. These are usually brief scenes, where soldiers during intervals be-

7 George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 8.

8 Michel Foucault, *Nadzorować i karać: Narodziny więzienia*, trans. Tadeusz Komendant (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia, 1999), pp. 132–137.

tween combat scenes bathe joyfully in a river or in the sea. Movie narratives concentrate on violence and death instead of love life. They play an important role in the heterosexualization of a soldier's identity, which continues to be threatened in an enclosed male-centric environment, and that is why it needs to be reaffirmed.

Military masculinity is always strongly "heterosexualized" and brutalized. Artists make use of the masculine perspective of rape, penetration and potency, in order to determine the type of weapon, strategy of attack and conquest<sup>9</sup>. Artists presenting revisionist iconography choose a subversive strategy of sensitization, feminization, infantilization and homoerotization, they queer militaristic masculinity or they transform it from the allegory of the macho into an ambiguous camp-style symbol. The transition from trauma and pride into humor and fun is an effective visual strategy of neutralizing tough masculinity and military triumphalism, an excellent example of which can be a pink colored tank or Maurycy Gomulicki's *Pink Rocket* presented at this exhibition; they both disarm the violence by means of pink eroticism.

Not without significance is the historical fact that the new revisionist militaristic iconography started to develop during the Polish army's international expansion, which had been a part of the American war on terror, while the independence of our country was unthreatened. In order to promote our military's participation in the war in Iraq of 2003 even the main-stream media eroticized military masculinity, almost like it is done in gay pornography. Popular magazines were presenting soldiers showering. Commanding generals were shown as heroes and became new symbols of success as well as moral authorities. The model of tough masculinity was triumphant as never before, because it was shrouded in an erotic and nationalistic aura with a colonial shade. Despite the pope being openly against the American intervention, the nation was watching during Christmas Eve the midnight mass from the Babylon military, recorded in the style of a reality TV show, with the broadcast starting with

a song about Alibaba. Conscriptio was shown as a joyful experience for young men and a great professional and financial opportunity. A mental and political phenomenon emerged from this combination of militarism, sexuality, nationalism and religion. This entire conglomerate of ideas and facts became an excellent material for art, which Tomasz Kozak used in his *found footage* movies and paintings.

On the erotic painting *A Self-portrait as Thomas Didymus* (2003) all of the afore-mentioned levels are applied. We can see two young men who are touching each other and gazing at each other. The one facing the front, older, taller and more muscular, is a soldier – he is without his shirt on, but he is wearing a Polish helmet. He is embracing a naked ephebic youth, shown in profile. The soldier's arm is placed around his waist and he is touching the young man's buttocks. The enthralled youth is putting two fingers in the "Christ wound" in the soldier's side. Above them a sign "Incredulity" is placed. The artist was inspired by the scene from the gospel according to St. John, where the risen Christ commands Thomas Didymus (doubting Thomas) to touch his body, raise his hand and put it into the wound in his side. Kozak exactly illustrates this moment, with the youth being Thomas penetrating the Polish soldier's – "Christ's" – wound with his fingers. Combining at the visual level masculinity, militarism, homosexuality and religion, the artist, in accordance with the title of one of his exhibitions, "introduces us into the deeper nights," that is the phantasmatic Poland of the beginning of the twenty-first century. His painting psychoanalyzes the national medial and political obsessions, which became a part of pop culture, hence the comic book style. Poland of 2003 – with the war in Iraq, the persecutions of women artists for blasphemy, the cult of soldiers, the discrimination of sexual minorities – can see its own reflection in this provocatively innocent painting. It is as if a symbol of that time.

Behind the patriarchal cult of militarist masculinity are hidden suppressed homosexual fantasies, on the one hand – deeply hidden, on the other hand – pornographically obvious. Feminism recognized it long ago: the most homophobic institutions – the army and the Churches – maintain their "toughness" via homosocial bonds between males

9 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 34.

controlled by homophobia. These are clans of mutual admiration, cult of male superiority, strength, intellect and, last but not least, body.

Bogusław Bachorczyk with his paintings delves into such a male-centric world of the army, with its pain and obsessions. His paintings are constituted of quotes from various wars, as well as uniforms, a variety of weapons and soldiers with a convulsive male nude depiction in the center. The bodies and figures in the works of this artist are obscenely fragmentary and humiliated, torn and posing in a grotesque manner, denuded in patterns of helpless servitude and defeat. Often in the poses of the male bodies the artist alludes to the naked and tortured Iraqi prisoners of war from the photographs from Abu Ghraib or the rapes conducted on the fallen enemies. Often beside a lying boy figure one can see the boots of the victor towering over his victim. These are depictions of domination, violence of man against man on potentially sexual grounds.

The artist is constructing a distinct version of military brotherhood, a community of men connected by trauma and/or desire. A rescue from the grotesque of history, masculinity and war is, paradoxically, eroticism, not only traumatic, but also homoerotic. Except for the wounds and death one can notice a potential amorous affair between the soldiers or a male nude on the battlefield. And thus Bachorczyk's soldiers are both lovers and victims.

Among the historical references in the artist's works one can often find World War I (and the uniforms from that time). As a result of this war soldiers started to suffer on a massive scale from shell shock, in other words post-traumatic stress disorder. Even if they did not get wounded, their psyche deformed their bodies in spasms and convulsions<sup>10</sup>. This is why in Bachorczyk's ambiguous paintings one can see various forms of post-war trauma, as well as wars depicted as factories of cripples. Old toys – tin soldiers – are an ominous allusion to the traumatic reality of losing limbs; of bodies that need to be put together, of psyches that need to be mended after post-traumatic shock. The painter does not glorify militarism, he rather

presents via the dismembered naked bodies the horrors of war – just like Francisco Goya, Jonas Stern and Władysław Strzemiński. Looking for literary references one can say that Tomasz Kozak and Bogusław Bachorczyk, who are delving into the perversions of war are wandering about the grim realms described in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*<sup>11</sup> and in Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird*<sup>12</sup>.

The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, has done an anthropological analysis of the system of male domination, which is also based on symbolic violence. Men in it are prisoners and victims of dominating cultural schemas. The truly masculine man must take advantage of every opportunity to fight for honor, dignity or glory. The dark side of this obsession with being masculine are the phobias and anxieties in the face of femininity and the traits related to it, such as weakness, softness and sensitivity. The fear of femininity threatening masculinity is something that provokes excessive engagement in manly games characterized by violence, among which are combat and war<sup>13</sup>. These games are not far off from playing with guns and that is why armaments with their components constitute an important trope in the new art, which examines modern militarism. Weapons appear in most of the pieces presented at the exhibition, not only in the form of death-bringing tools, but also as distinct type of toys, items serving entertainment and boyhood frolicking which reaffirm the gender role since childhood.

In these games with guns presented by the artists there is an embedded criticism of militarism and rituals with which masculinity is entangled. It seems, as if in order to bring out a pacifistic message in contemporary art, it is necessary to obsessively multiply armaments.

It is symptomatic that one of the flagship works of art, apart from the *Polish Army's Representational Corps*, connected with the deconstruction of myths concerning militarist masculinity, Zbigniew Lib-

10 Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 107–123.

11 Jonathan Littell, *Łaskawe*, trans. Magdalena Kamińska-Maurugeon, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008).

12 Jerzy Kosiński, *Malowany ptak*, trans. Tomasz Mirkowicz (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990).

13 Pierre Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, trans. Lucyna Kopiciewicz (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2004), pp. 63–65.

era's series of photographs, *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless*, was presented by the curator, Dominik Kurytek, in 2011 in the same room with the military collection in the National Museum in Krakow. Similarly to the staged photographs by Libera, the arrangement of a permanent display *Armament and Banners in Poland* relates to such military values like brotherhood of arms, glory of victory, or wartime adventures<sup>14</sup>. The patriotic collection and ironic photographs were reflected in each other as in a distorting mirror. Traditional and revisionist iconography encountered each other in the same space and it turned out, that they are focusing on the same figures and topoi, only from a completely different point of view.

Libera's photographs depict a group of youngsters, often half-naked, posing or wandering with weapons in hand across a romantic mountainous landscape. This fiction of war-time adventure is reminiscent of a mountain trek and seems to be like the activity of various re-enactment groups. „Joyful, innocent and soulless” pseudo-soldiers are only performing military action, although they seem to be ready for anything. Among others we find out from the book, which is part of the project, and which I would describe as military fantasy, that these are some (?) guerilla fighters or revolutionaries struggling for freedom, found by the photographer, Zbigniew Libera, during his trip to Madagascar<sup>15</sup>. The African island is an interesting trope in this case, because in the 1930s when interwar Poland revealed its colonial ambitions, there were complicated negotiations taking place focused on the colonization of this French-controlled island.

As the first element of the English title of *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless* indicates, one can find in this work a visually attractive and imaginative thread concerning the homoerotization of “warriors,” underlined additionally by semi-nude male depictions.

The aforementioned queering of military masculinity has many levels, some of them controver-

14 Dominik Kurytek, *Zbigniew Libera. The Gay, Innocent and Heartless. (It is only the gay innocent and heartless who can fly)*, <http://www.fundacjaprofile.pl/tree.php?id=891> (accessed 05.07.2015).

15 Zbigniew Libera, *The Gay, Innocent and Heartless* (Warszawa: Fundacja Profile, 2009).

sial. This is a strategy of criticism of patriarchal masculinity, which the army personifies, by undermining it using its sensitive, sexual interior and focusing attention on the homosocial (male-centered) nature of the army, beneath which various motivations are concealed. There is also in it the reminiscence of the ancient brotherhood of arms – a tradition which was homosexual.

However, there is also an opposite side, which is less present in the art originating from the fascination with militarism and masculinity. A historical fact is that the totalitarian regimes responsible for the most deadly wars and felonies of all times were extremely homophobic and punished homosexual acts in a severe manner. Hitler after seizing power intensified the persecution of homosexuals and placed them in concentration camps. Islamists still sentence homosexuals to death. A year before the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the military conflict in the Ukraine, in 2013, Putin's imperialist Russia introduced a “ban on homosexual propaganda” and the attacks on gays intensified. Nowadays identifying militarism with homosexuality is therefore not fully adequate. It is an ahistorical erotic fantasy, which entertains male-artists who are playing with the theme of war.

This is why a very different, deeper and more serious perspective is introduced by women-artists, especially feminists, who examine these games with guns. Izabela Kowalczyk, when reviewing the *Big Boys and Their Toys* exhibition, pointed out the lack of a feminine point of view on the topic of violence, which is burdened greatly with gender-based conditioning<sup>16</sup>. That is why the *War and Peace* exhibition presents the art of several women artists who focus on the subject of war.

Natalia LL and Anna Kutera juxtapose the female body with military equipment: gas masks and weapons, adding power and visual aggression to female eroticism, liberating women from the role of being exclusively victims of war. Joanna Rajkowska's *Painkillers* (2014) series shows what a completely different direction the fascination with guns can take. Her work consists of model casts

16 Izabela Kowalczyk, *Matki-Polki, Chłopcy i cyborgi: Sztuka i feminizm w Polsce* (Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenał, 2010), pp. 151–152.

of weapons used in modern-day warfare made out of powdered medicines and resin. They are sterile white, faithful reproductions which constitute a reflection on biological warfare.

The war games in feminine art present themselves in a much more radical way than the simulations of male artists. Using a metaphor of movie genres, Libera's series is a comedy compared to the horror of Katarzyna Kozyra's *Punishment and Crime* (2002) video installation. The artist based this senseless military nightmare on her own material, which documented a group of men fascinated with armaments and explosives, filmed during illegal fights on military training grounds where everything happens for real and the ammunition is also real. One can ask, what besides ideology and historical references, distinguishes these people from groups coordinated by the authorities to reenact battles? The masked men presented in the movie also fulfil their passion of armed combat and violence with full involvement. The Playboy bunny masks they are wearing add up to the ghostliness of the whole situation, which psychoanalytically and traumatically combines death drive with libido. This combination determines every war, for rapes on women constitute the basic fact and tool. In terms of sexuality war is the most murderous manifestation of the heterosexist system based on humiliation, subjugation, acquisition and the exchange of women. Women and children, as civilian population, are the most numerous casualties of wars. Rape and violence against women play an important role in the determination of the scale of war crimes and in the documentation of contemporary genocidal conflicts.

This issue is touched in a profound way by Zofia Kulik's movie projection, *Ethnic Wars: Large Vanitas Still Life* (1995–2012) inspired by television reports from the excavation of mass graves after the civil war in Yugoslavia. The scenes often present the despair of women in folk kerchiefs carrying out rituals of mourning over the dead. The artist juxtaposed the human skull with an ornamental folk kerchief. The skull located in the very center of the square patterned material as a subsequent ornament of these modern, indeed meaningful, examples of still life (incidentally still life as a theme in paintings often expressed the idea of death and transience).

This work is also an ambiguous reflection on ethnic and gender wars. During conflicts women, through their maternity, embody the ethnic group and its continuum. They are an allegory of a nation understood in a narrow manner, and that is why they are the target of violence. Zofia Kulik's painful, symbolic and ornamental kerchiefs are the best commemoration of the victims and the depiction of the atrocities of war. With their depth they outweigh the impact of voyeuristic photographic documentation of war crimes.

This artist is the most prominent representative of distinctly pacifist art in Poland. Her enormous photomontages juxtaposing guns and symbols of totalitarian regimes with a nude picture of a man multiplied an infinite number of times convey a message about the dehumanization of power, the subordination of an individual and violence, underlining the anti-military and anti-system significance with titles like *March, March, March* (1990) and *All Bullets Are One Bullet* (1993).

Krzysztof Wodiczko goes even further than Zofia Kulik in crossing ambivalent games with militarism, by introducing a deeper ethical stance and engagement in the psychological reality of war. On the opposite side of Artur Żmijewski's *Polish Army Representational Corps* one can find *Hiroshima*, based on a different type of denudation, or, closer to a Polish context, *The Projection of the War Veterans* (2012) filled with stories told by Polish Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans and their families. Real soldiers talk about their traumatic wartime experiences as well as problems with returning to everyday life, their stories sounding out in the vicinity and projected as texts on the central buildings of Warsaw. As a result war is returning to a more local public realm, from which it has been relocated to far off lands. Moreover the project was a result of the artist's many conversations with veterans which had a therapeutic impact on them<sup>17</sup>.

This is the other side of Polish military art, not the patriotic one, but the anti-war. It is not the art aimed at comforting the hearts, but rather focusing on reflection, encouraging anti-war activities

17 Bożena Czubak, „Sztuka domeny publicznej,” in *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Sztuka domeny publicznej*, ed. Bożena Czubak (Warszawa: Państwowa Galeria Sztuki w Sopocie, Fundacja Profile, 2011).

as well as not participating in them. Thanks to the works by Wodiczko war becomes realistic, even for us, who used to watching it during televised broadcasts, now get to know its direct consequences. Wodiczko reminds us, that thousands of people, who experienced war in the past now live among us, these are those soldiers – objects of phantasies in art. They bring the war back home, making it real also for us.

The grand history is the history of wars, casualties and winners, at the same time war is never exclusively a historical fact, because it is happening somewhere all the time. War is a contemporary, constant timely archetype, only modified by context. Additional timeliness is added to the *War and Peace* exhibition by the fact that we are living in Poland in the shadow of a conflict, in the vicinity of the Ukraine, where an ongoing war is taking place, as well as Russia, where an unstable, militaristic and authoritarian situation is escalating. The fear of a repeat of the bloody history is therefore palpable indeed.

Lublin is located very close to the eastern Polish border, right beside the Ukraine, and in the Lublin region there are many refugees from that country stricken by the tragedy of warfare. The location of the exhibition is therefore exceptionally neuralgic: updating and verifying the sense of the art on display, it encourages a critical perspective on what and in what way contemporary Polish artists deal with the timeless theme of war in times of peace, but also in the face of potential danger.

The ambition of the exhibiting, indicated by the title, is presenting art referring to war and peace. It is hard to find works concerning peace without images of war, the fascination with militarism being dominant. Even artists, who create art with an unambiguously pacifistic message, such as Zofia Kulik and Krzysztof Wodiczko, make use of images of violence and militarism in order to convey an anti-war message. It seems that artists need a staging of violence in order to speak out against it. Is there another way? An alternative proposal seems to be the photographic and video project *Kvity* (Ukrainian for *Flowers*, 2014) by the Ukrainian artist Anastasia Mikhno, who lives not far from the frontline. The exhaustion with war in the Ukraine must be so great, that she has reached

a completely different type of repertoire – hippie *flower power* from the time of American antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The attractive young people from Mikhno's portraits are spouting flowers from their mouths. The artist offers a certain type of a positive and idealistic utopia instead of another duplication of militaristic iconography, at the same time she refers to the roots of pacifist movements and the cultural revolution. Although the *War and Peace* exhibition is dedicated to Polish art, this voice from a neighboring country stricken by war is symptomatic. It shows into what sort of dreams people, who are experiencing war directly, are willing to escape to, not those who consume or produce its "fascinating" simulations.

If the viewers, who are used to traditional militaristic iconography, will be disappointed with the visions of war created by the contemporary Polish artists, one can ask a question: When will an entirely new representational trend appear? I think this will happen when we make the transition from simply presenting war to fully experiencing it, just like it happened in the nineteenth century or during World War II, that is when our country will be stricken by war again. Which I hope will never happen! Our art signifies our privileged position, the luxury of being an indirect witness. Nevertheless it is definitely necessary to create a new pacifist art, dedicated to the idea of peace, an art which does not duplicate the omnipresent and overwhelming violence present in the media. Is Picasso's dove of peace supposed to remain forever an unmatched example of such art?

Translated from the Polish by Marcin Garbowski