

B#SIDE WAR

REVEALING THE CONFLICT /
REPRESENTING THE WAR

*War, curatorship
and museum experience*



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World War I and contemporary photography

Colner Miha
photographer

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In the following half an hour I will give you a short insight into the research about the collective memory regarding the World War I. How do we see it nowadays, one hundred years later? What people nowadays think and feel about the conflict of such catastrophic proportions? How artist approach a topic to which nobody can personally relate? Nowadays nobody have no first-hand experiences from this period.

The main focus of our interest was contemporary art making and how it relates to the traumatic events of the past. The first result of the research was the exhibition which will soon be followed by a publication, printed or digital (online).

The exhibition has a title *Red Poppy Fields*; at the moment it is touring across the countries of Central Europe. However, the project is dedicated to the present as much it is focused on the past - recent history. When referring on the beginning of the 20th century a comparison with the current era is inevitable. Also now it seems we live in the time of instability, high tensions and millions of people being angry and discontent.

In the end the *Red Poppy Fields* exhibition turned out to be entirely anti-war oriented while many artists see certain similarities between the year 1914 and the beginning of the 21st century.

The World War I was enormous turning point in history. It marked the beginning of the 20th century as the first modern warfare and it meant political, economic and cultural landmark in the (developed) world. The 1914 marked the end of the golden age of colonial era and the end of flourishing global economy (based on exploitation and stealth).

In his book *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, Eric Hobsbawm pointed out the year 1914 was a huge step towards the idea of a national state and of a nation. The WWI only helped to boost identification of the peoples with their (national) state. In a way even the socialist internationalism was defeated with the advent of war (even though the first successful socialist revolution took place in 1917). However, Hobsbawm speaks of the *zeitgeist* that was not completely controlled.

“While in established nation-states and powers the patriotic zeal of these intermediate strata was more than welcome to governments engaged in imperial expansion and national rivalry against other such states, we have seen that such sentiments were autochthonous and therefore not entirely manipulated from above./.../ Seen from the perspective of August 1914, one might have concluded that nation and nation-state had triumphed over all rival social and political loyalties.”

In 1914 global economy came to a standstill, after a series of recessions; Germany appeared to be too strong (the so called German problem) while it did not share the adequate proportion of the world's colonies.

On the other hand and almost sadly the so called Great War enabled number of technical innovations and it certainly led the way to the modernity. However, the break was costly and painful. Europe remained dominant power in the world after 1918 though it was largely

weakened - and after the next war it completely lost ground and became a side player in political arena.

Already during the war (avant-garde protest art) and especially at the end of the war artists started reflecting their experiences from the combat through art making; several artists were conscripted or they volunteered to go to the frontline. Consequently many died, but the ones who survived later on expressed their anguish and anger (also) in the form of art.

The artists such as Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix or Ernst Friedrich were horrified and shocked by war and therefore they depicted it in extremely dark and almost surreal manner; but it was the war that was surreal, not the pictures.

The most explicit was political activist, anarchist and artist Ernst Friedrich who in 1924 published a book *War Against War* (Krieg dem Kriege!)

Outraged by the unprecedented barbarism and massive destruction of the World War I, Ernst Friedrich complied and published one of the first (and arguably, still the best) photographic attempts at scrutinising warfare in his seminal photobook, *War against War!* – a collection of pictures and other visual material which attempted to illustrate not only the tragic human consequences of war, but also the lies and hypocrisy of the social, political, and economic forces that produced and promoted it.

The book had three-lingual texts and captions aimed at the international audience in order to protest against the barbarism of modern warfare. Friedrich was later victim of a prosecution of the authorities of Weimar Republic. He used archival images in order to shock and to move people. But later on, with the development of mediated image, shocks became quite ordinary in modern society and consequently they don't emotionally affect people.

And when I started to study this phenomena I figured out that there are only few artists who address the issues of World War I in their art works. The focus was on the countries of former Austro-Hungarian empire (but not exclusively) because the Central powers lost the war and there is no reason for glorification and mystification.

Despite its apocalyptic proportions the so called Great War fell into oblivion. The reason is probably that it was later overshadowed by the World War II; on the other hand WWI is not seen any more as a heroic war; there is consent nowadays in most of the countries, even on the "victorious side", that it was unnecessary and avoidable war where everybody was a loser.

After the war the power of multinational corporations was weakened because during a four years of fighting states had to find a way to operate in the national frames, self-sufficiently. There was no immediate effect of that fact but consequently, basic rights for majority of people, peasants and workers have gradually improved.

The World War I was also groundbreaking in terms of media coverage. It was a first widely documented war with photography and film in leading role.

It is true that the access to the frontline was rigorously restricted and the press was constantly controlled and censored. People behind the frontlines were usually not aware of the extent of the bloodbath. There was no real photojournalism at that time, and also technically photography was not very easy to handle – the cameras were still big and clumsy.

But despite that we have enormous amount of pictures and footages from the war and – what is very important – some soldiers/officers owned and used portable cameras.

There was also an invention of the aerial photography that was developed out of very practical reason – to patrol and photograph enemy lines.

So the World War I marked the first attempt towards the information war – though despite the information of the aerial photographs the armies did not change their strategies; they were still aimlessly frontally attacking.

Also then, one hundred years ago as well as nowadays artists were the ones who reflected the conflict in a critical manner. They were/are relatively free to express their opinion because for most of the people the perception of art is different from the perception of reality. On the other hand photojournalists are often restricted and dependant on their clients, agencies or media outlets. Therefore many photographers in order to keep control over the content often showcase their works – the ones that do not fit to the press – on exhibitions or in books.

All these facts have influenced and inspired contemporary artists nowadays when they reflect the events one hundred years ago. They are inspired by numerous accessible archives from that period, by the visible traces of war, by documented memories and by the contemporary notion of The Great War. Comparisons between past and present are often inevitable.

So there are two main approaches we came across during the curatorial process: aftermath photography and archival projects.

I will now show couple of examples of the art works from the *Red Poppy Fields* show.

Darije Petković focused on the long-lasting consequences of the war from the perspective of 21st century. In no other place than Bosnia and Herzegovina the war has left such deep antagonisms that are still subject of ideological dispute nowadays (between Serbs and Muslims). He documented the celebration on the centenary of the assassination in Sarajevo in order to show the ghosts from the past. It is still not determined if the assassin of the archduke Franz Ferdinand, Gavrilo Princip, was a hero or a terrorist. The photographer stood at the very place of the event exactly one hundred years after the decisive moment. So this is photojournalistic and aftermath approach combined.

diSTRUKTURA & Barbi Marković did the same but with completely different means; through the complex process of urban archaeology. Marković walked around the square and surrounding streets where the assassination in Sarajevo took place. She collected sounds, inscriptions, messages, street signs, conversations which were made into a score/text; she later performed the text for the camera in a highly symbolic place, in Košutnjak near Belgrade where Gavrilo Princip was trained.

Some artists follow the traces and leftovers of the war which was so intense that some places still have visible scars in the landscape. **Jonathan Olley** shows the enormous destruction of the entire landscape around the fortress of Verdun where one of the gravest and longest battles of the war was raging for years. 150 shells fell on each square meter of that terrain during the battle. He entered the Forbidden Forest and took pictures of the leftovers of the battle and scars in the landscape.

Lara Ciarabellini created a topography of the Isonzo Front (1915-1917). The area is nowadays pretty marginal and far away from centres of power but one hundred years ago it was a scene of one of the important geo-political changes. The photographer documented silent remnants of the war that changed the political landscape of this area.

Peter Hebeisen travelled thousands of kilometres to create topography of European battlefields. On the pictures we see monumental landscapes showing calmness of ordinary life but also representing places of huge symbolic and historical importance (for warring sides).

One of the artists who use and appropriate archive materials extensively is Hungarian **Andras Boszo**. He used old postcards from 1910s that soldiers often used to send messages to their families and friends. He merged idyllic images of the postcards with the archival photographs of soldiers who were banned from sending home any information on the situation on the front. The artist aims to express the discrepancy between the cruel reality and controlled representation of that reality.

Vladimir Židlicky took a very personal approach. He appropriated photographs that he found as a small child on the attic of his family house; they belonged to his grandfather who fought and died in the war. The artist does not know who took the photos and what they represent because all witnesses of these events are already dead and silent.

Among the artists who refer to history from the eyes of today's society **Borut Peterlin** is the one who looks into the past through the present. He compares the interrelatedness of economy, politics and war. Therefore one can see photographs of devastated industry around his home town, the previously successful factories that became victims of transition and recent economic crisis. Symbolically he uses the old technique of wet collodion which was still used at that time to show similarities of crises back then and now.

Hassan Abdelghani took pictures of the gravestones in the cemeteries of the city of Pula, Croatia that used to be major military port of Austrian-Hungarian empire. He documents washed out and barely visible portraits of the soldiers and people who died in 1914. Therefore he addresses huge changes in this multicultural city and how ordinary people were trapped in suddenly changed geo-political circumstances.

So these were some examples of the artistic practices that we included in the *Red Poppy Fields* exhibition.

And for the conclusion of this lecture let me add that the political aspect is inevitable when discussing the World War I even when it is reflected from great temporal distance.

There are several similarities: also nowadays European and global societies live in deregulated economies which cannot grow anymore. They became blunt. Today we live in a period where it seems that colonisation has never ended; quite the opposite, it has expanded, and nowadays we see entire parts of the world being economically and/or military occupied. The centres of power have grown rapidly and they impose their decisions on the entire world. The World War I is therefore inevitably very topical phenomena because history has always had the power of foreseeing the future.