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“Prosthetic” Memory, “Aftersights” of Memory, Memory “Easy to Consume”? A Few Words About Visual Remembrance of the Holocaust

ABSTRACT: Kowalska Urszula, “Prosthetic” Memory, “Aftersights” of Memory, Memory “Easy to Consume”? A Few Words About Visual Remembrance of the Holocaust. “Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 12. Poznań 2017. Publishing House of the Poznań Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences, pp. 331–345. ISSN 2084-3011.

Discussion about the borders restricting (unavoidable today) aestheticization of memory about the Holocaust experience is still valid – in the article are recalled some different strategies of remembering the Holocaust in the art using photography. Two of the artistic projects (*Powidoki* by Zbigniew Libera and *Pocztówki z Auschwitz* by Paweł Szypulski) are using authentic photographs to initialize the discussion about trivialization of image, removing it from its original context and, at the same time, “blunting” the sensitivity of the recipient. The other two works (*Auschwitz, co ja tu robię* by Mikołaj Grynberg and *Miejsca nieparzyste* by Elżbieta Janicka) are suspended between conversation and silence (two classic poles of memory about the Holocaust). All of these works are disputing with “fixed” models and imaginary experiences, deconstructing pathos, they are talking about the blurring memories and manipulating with memory, about competition of different historic narrations and attempts at overtaking the past, passing the traumatic experiences of the war and the Holocaust to the next generations.

KEYWORDS: prosthetic memory; aftersights of memory; aestheticization of the Holocaust; Zbigniew Libera; Elżbieta Janicka; Mikołaj Grynberg; Paweł Szypulski

Contemporary art around the world refers largely to the trend that is not new¹ – the pop-cultural aestheticization of the Nazism. It is enough just

¹ A representation of the history of Nazism in the pop-cultural convention was already quite common just after the Second World War. Leaving aside films and books, it is enough to recall for example comics *Strange adventures* (1950–1951), where Adolf Hitler appears (he is captured by aliens just before his suicide attempt). All works of art mentioned in the paragraph, meet the criteria of the so-called “funny games” or “toy art”, and show only one dimension of the pop-cultural anesthetization of dramatic and traumatic history, which has

to recall the controversial examples of works in the field of the so-called “toy art”, or “funny games” (e.g. *Hitler moves east* or *Mein Kampf* by David Levinthal, *Your coloring book* by Ram Katzir, *The Simpsons in Auschwitz* by Alexander Palombo or *Lego concentration camp* by Polish artist Zbigniew Libera)². These are already widely known examples of works that use the pop-cultural convention and discuss with commercialization indicating by this deficiency of memory and testimony in the “pictorial era”. And, at the same time, they make an attempt to be aware of historical experience – thanks to unfolding and parodying dangerous commercial face of remembering. More or less successful artistic visions break traditional conventions by building memory and historical awareness mainly on provocation that is causing recipients’ confusion. They test and cross the limits of good taste and taboo. At the same time – often using various pop-cultural methods and concepts, they discuss with the pop-cultural trivialization of evil. This trivialization seems to be gaining higher acceptance in the “collective consciousness” than artistic transmissions, in which tension between the form and the content is not based on simplification, and does not provide false relief³. A criticism of banal sentimentalism that hides or blurs first of all historical truth, is one of the main challenges nowadays also concerning contemporary art about the Holocaust.

Bartosz Kwieciński claims, that “memory asks for responsibility, not solely for the comfort of participation” (Kwieciński 2012: 11). It is extremely important to know what this “comfort of participation” means and how it is threatened by contemporary art and culture⁴. According to

been remaining still relevant and often used by artists since the seventies of the twentieth century till today.

²For more information, v. Engelking 2007: 79–94.

³One of the examples for usage of the so called “safe props” in modern pop culture, is the story of reception and particular cult of Anna Frank. In multiple reviews focusing on the cultural and sociological phenomenon of the diary, there is no criticism of the text itself. A number of allegations are formulated though, when talking about its realization in film, theatre or comics. Manipulations with the words used in the *Diary*, changing its contextual dimension, simplification or own-usage of tragic events should be, according to some researches, perceived as arrogant. Quoting Bartosz Kwieciński: “Mass culture and pop culture, using the drama, simplify and trivialize the tragic experience of that girl. Her suffering is deemed to be the source of audience’s aesthetical impressions, giving unjustified consolation, a piece of happy end” (Kwieciński 2012: 16, trans. U.K.).

⁴Kwieciński explains the problem referring to the first film adaptations, TV series *Holocaust* from the late seventies, and *The Schindler’s List*, movie that has shaped the Western

Lisa Saltzman "kitsch in conjunction with the presentation of history, transforms its traumatic experience in fictional melodramas, gives cathartic dimension of disasters, makes the story too understandable, digestible, easy to consume" (Saltzman 2004: 204). The question of what happens to memory in the age of exhaustion (both of the form and of the content), fatigue with the subject of the war and the Shoah, in the age dominated by pictorial culture, remains. The pictorial memory can be nevertheless treated as some kind of "Biblia pauperum" – lacks knowledge, influences emotions, does not stick to the classical rules of decorum...

Not always: this text was "imagined" despite the so-called "safe props". And also despite complaints, that the age of visual memory trivializes suffering. The visual memory of the Holocaust balances today between two poles of performing – kitsch and provocation (often used in symbiosis, what makes kitsch stop being kitschy). First one is responsible for literature, art, culture, memory that can be described as "ready to use" or "easy in consumption". The second one embarrasses, confuses, shocks, wakes extreme emotions.

Between (unconscious) kitsch (based on the light pop-cultural conventions, kitsch which is trivializing the problem, blurring its seriousness, depreciating evil) and artistic provocation, exist, of course, a number of intermediate forms. The purpose of my article is to present a few artistic projects representing visual culture (associated with the mass culture), however, fleeing from simplifications.

Present times dominated by images are not single-valued. In a world full of images, you can also find those that provoke and, at the same time, benefit from traditionally assigned functions, reinterpreting them in the new space. It seems new, because throws new challenges at the aesthetics and ethics of memory. My observations will be devoted to modern Polish art and "modern" Polish memory. I would like to reveal, that in the "imaginary", "visionary" or "pictorial" epoch, there is still a place for the musing and reflection, which cause sometimes larger shock than "traditional" artistic provocations of last years. In a sense, they are returning to the roots

perception of the Shoah, and somehow "americanized" it. According to Kwieciński, myths and symbols constructed by the mass culture undoubtedly create common, historical world's consciousness (cf. Kowalska 2016: 47).

of the representation of the Holocaust, asking again questions that were asked many years ago – about the form that will not obscure the content, about borders in the aestheticization of the most traumatic experience in the twentieth century.

Of course, these are not new problems – it was already Adorno, who said about the debt that imagination owes to history and the necessity of seeking for a “proper” form, which will not cover suffering. The shock caused by the commented works, that will be shortly described in this essay, is perhaps not so obvious. It is rather a long-lasting confusion appearing on the contrary to momentaneous excitement evoked by some pop-cultural visions. The biggest controversy was caused by “inverted” photographs made by Zbigniew Libera – perhaps they are irritating by its literality, they are too (ostensibly) positive, as being prepared for the relief. Surprisingly enough, Libera’s false happy end met some sort of more or less intensive attempts at censorship. Not institutional ones, but rather “provided” by an average recipient, who is not used to reading metaphors. Contemporary art focused on the Holocaust very often meets with criticism, which is usually justified by the care about memory, decorum, and respect for the Holocaust victims. Critics of this type of creations seem to be either ignoring or neglecting the radical difference between texts that are aiming (and at the same time failing) at historical reconstruction and the ones that are trying to stimulate memory. Interestingly, other (in my opinion more dangerous) abuses, such as simplifications and manipulations with social or common memory, as well as excessive sentimentalism influencing so well the imagination of an inexperienced recipient, are not raising so many controversies as modern art concerning the Holocaust.

Contemporary art never ceases to surprise and provoke. Discussion about the borders restricting (unavoidable today) aestheticization of memory about the Holocaust experience is still valid, and that is the reason, why I would like to recall some different strategies of remembering the Holocaust in the art using photography. I am going to mention only a few works that clearly show a couple of possible shots and looks.

Two of the artistic projects mentioned below (those by Libera and by Szypulski) are using authentic photographs to initialize the discussion about trivialization of image, removing it from its original context and, at the same time, “blunting” the sensitivity of the recipient. The other two

works (by Grynberg and by Janicka) are suspended between conversation and silence (two classic poles of expressing memory about the Holocaust), between blurry, imprecise pictures that demand tighter contours (just like the memory of the youngest generation, which is rather sensed than remembered) and the transparent image. Photo of the air, "an object", that one couldn't capture, the same way one couldn't see those, who were killed, the air, which is the aftersight of their presence.

1. Mikolaj Grynberg, *Auschwitz, co ja tu robię* (*Auschwitz, what am I doing here?*), 2009

- Behind this mountain of glasses, I saw all these eyes.
How to make them not forgotten?
- The faith of my grandfather was that he was here,
and my is that I have to remember about it.
I am the memory-payer. A life-time task.
- I wanted to imagine this, or maybe more to fill it.
– And what did you feel?
- That the realism here kills. Exaltation finishes.
(Grynberg 2009, trans. Joanna Krawczyk)



Photos, publicized on the project's website:

<<http://www.auschwitz.grynberg.pl/main.php?lang=pl&str=opis>>

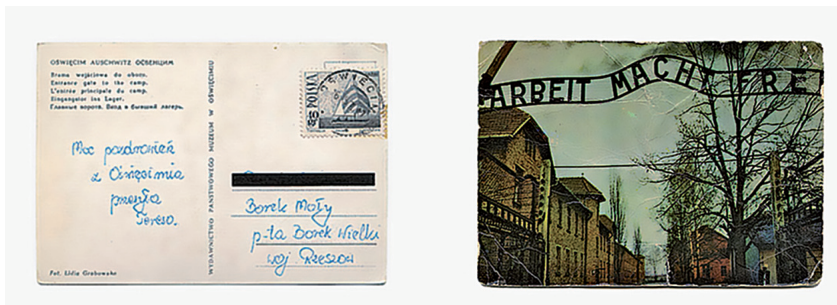
Project conducted by Mikołaj Grynberg was in some way inspiration for writing this essay. Grynberg's searching for the way of remembering the experience of the Shoah is closely connected to a belief in the necessity of standing up against trauma. It is personal history that becomes a foundation of a number of Grynberg's works – created by psychologist, photographer, journalist who, as he claims, suffers from a sort of obsessive psychosis related with the topic of the Shoah. He places himself in the position of representative of the second generation, which is differently described in literature as: “generation of postmemory”, “hinge generation”, or “guardianship of the Holocaust” (cf. Hirsch 2012). He is the author of two volumes of interviews with victims of the Holocaust and their children. But he is also a founder and creator of an artistic and educational project: *Auschwitz, what am I doing here*. In his publication under the same title, Grynberg is talking to victims and memory seekers at the same time, to people that come to Auschwitz, because they have to see it with their own eyes.

In the interview with Justyna Sobolewska initiating to the volume, Grynberg claims that the photographs of visitors were only an excuse for starting a conversation. This excuse seems, however, to be very well prepared. A purposeful blurring of the pictures brings associations with accidental, unfocused landscapes that were noticed in a hurry, in passing. In the same way, in hurry, in passing the world was perceived by the prisoners of concentration camps. Next to the blurred pictures of visitors in Auschwitz, meaningful comments are displayed. They are the answers to the question that might seem banal at the first sight, touching upon not only social memory and collective trauma shared between generations, but also on the shape of modern historical education: “What are you doing here?”. Grynberg's album is yet another tool that is aiming at maintaining the remembrance. Author mentions that his project is mainly about describing own thoughts as somebody else's. According to him, there is no such a thing like understanding the Holocaust, regardless of the amount of sources that have been read and pictures that have been seen.

When at some point, I thought, that I am starting to understand what actually happened there, I felt I am going insane. For simple reason: how can one comprehend the fact that somebody thought about having over a million people killed? How can one comprehend the factory that was created there? (Grynberg 2009: 27–28, trans. Joanna Krawczyk).

2. Paweł Szypulski, *Pozdrowienia z Auschwitz* (*Greetings from Auschwitz*), 2015

We are sending greetings from Auschwitz – neighbors.
Sending transport of warm greetings from Auschwitz with breeze sound – sister Czesia.
Greetings from Auschwitz. Everything is fine, there is only lack of you and the sun...



From official Paweł Szypulski's website:

<<http://www.pawelszypulski.com/index.php?projekty/pozdrowienia-z-auschwitz--greetings-from-auschwitz>>

A completely different kind of communication is showed in his work by Paweł Szypulski. His book *Greetings from Auschwitz* was published in October 2015. The author, in fact quite by the accident, has become a collector of postcards sent by people who have visited Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. His publication is a collection of trivial greetings written on the back side of shocking photographs of death, barbed wire or gas chambers. The image belies the content. The content blurs the image. The author in one of the interviews said, that his book allows the reader to learn something not about social memory, but about social amnesia of Auschwitz. It also gives evidence for the Holocaust becoming a banal element of everyday life – the fact that postcards were created is not surprising as much as the fact, that they include completely inappropriate content written under the address of some concrete receivers. Cards in this context are an attempt of taming horror, typing it in a familiar frame of everyday life. They constitute (despite prescribed silence) an easy-talking and uncontrollable narrative, which says a lot about the modern culture of remembrance:

Meanwhile, these cards are tangible proof of the impossibility of certificates and at the same time, they have no problem with that. They are showing really well how social amnesia about the Holocaust looks like. They are proving, that you can be in Auschwitz and do not notice where you are. Do not see what happened there, do not see genocide. The material that creates *Greetings...* shows how many people, perhaps the majority, live in a world without Auschwitz. They do not have the feeling that a thing without precedent happened there, something that we cannot grasp by thought or language. For them, this problem does not exist. "I was in a terrible place, I will send you a postcard, the weather is nice." That is all (Szypulski 2015, trans. U.K.).

Szypulski's collection was called "visual essay", which should (in simple terms) rely on the composing of images in a such way, that they receive new meaning. It seems, however, that the same could be said about all the works mentioned here. All of them are in fact compositions expressing a concept that could be treated as alternative words and support for thought.

3. Zbigniew Libera, *Pozytywy (Positives)*, 2002–2003



Zbigniew Libera, *Mieszkańcy (Residents)*,

<http://raster.art.pl/galeria/artysci/libera/pozytywy/libera_pozytywy.htm>

The series *Positives* by Zbigniew Libera is just another example of using historical photographs in contemporary art, which in my opinion illustrates well the statement by Susan Sontag, that we do not remember things photographs refer to, we remember the photographs themselves (cf. Sontag 2003: 89; v. also: Domańska 2006).

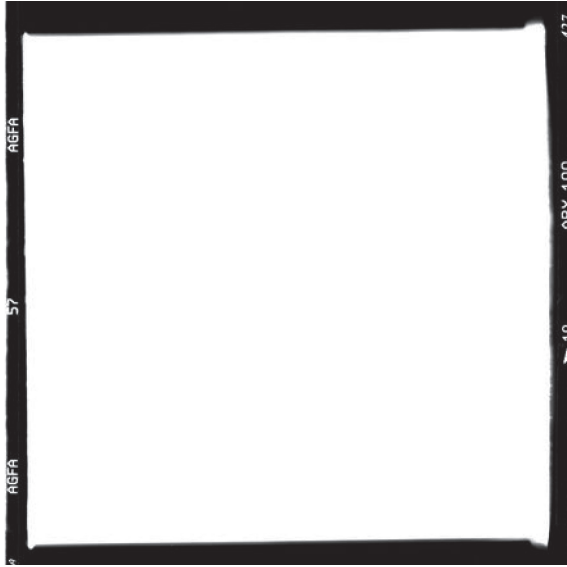
Marek Kaźmierczak noticed two main phenomena influencing current and colloquial memory about the Holocaust: “Internetization” and “aestheticization” of the Shoah (Kaźmierczak 2012). In his opinion, both of them are strengthening historical stereotypes, simplifications and myths. However, much more serious threat for contemporary memory culture is its decontextualization resulting in losing original meaning. On the one hand, it causes threat and danger, on the other – opportunity and challenge. In his work *Pozytywy* (*Positives*) Zbigniew Libera seems to refer to those mechanisms of memory. For the author, a phenomenon of “aftersights of memory” is extremely important. The aforementioned term is quite adequate while defining contemporary “remembering space”. One of the photos from the series, a picture called *Residents* (*Mieszkańcy*), presents smiling people in striped uniforms, standing in the place, where in the original photo concentration camp prisoners used to stay. The positives become the “negatives” of the well-known pictures rendering cruelty of the twentieth century. However, the awareness, that such a conjuration of reality and creation of alternative, more pleasant to eye and to imagination version is unrealistic, wins. In the *Positives* the negatives’ shadows are too clearly visible, disturb perception. Flashbacks of the past events remain, despite an increase in blurring and covering historical memory.

An American anthropologist Alison Landsberg in turn argues (and in fact it seems to be a kind of continuation of the “aftersights” conception), that in the future the **prosthetic memory** will dominate. In a simplified definition, it will be founded on circulation of images and narratives about the past.

The cycle of *Positives* is yet another attempt at playing a game with trauma. We are always dealing with remembered pictures of things, not things themselves. I wanted to use this mechanism of sight and remembering, touch the phenomenon of the memory’s “aftersight”. This photographs (*Positives*) are in fact perceived in this way, through innocent scenes are visible flashbacks of the original, cruel pictures⁵.

⁵ Libera’s comment quoted on the website culture.pl, <<http://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/zbigniew-libera-pozytywy>>, trans. U.K., 20.11.2016.

4. Elżbieta Janicka, *Miejsce nieparzyste (Odd place)*, 2006



Treblinka II (10.07.2004), *Odd Place* series, 2003–2004,

<http://www.sztepl.org.pl/pl/cms/kultura/1532.niebo-nad-treblinka-miejsce-nieparzyste-elzbiety-janickiej-/>

In spite of Grynberg's interviews and easy-talking postcards gathered by Szypulski, there is a work of Elżbieta Janicka entitled *Odd Place (Miejsce nieparzyste)*. Eleonora Jedlińska considers Janicka's photos as "illusive silent" (Jedlińska 2006: 3), since they tend to show the air in Majdanek, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Kulmhof am Ner, Auschwitz Birkenau. The images presented by Janicka were recorded on a photographic film produced by the well-known company, AGFA, which was one of the subsidiary companies of IG Farben involved in transforming the German economy into the war effort. This procedure proves that banal, ordinary, everyday objects are burdened with history heavily. A peaceful atmosphere built by the large, empty photographs is interfered with the signature telling, which place is the background for the photographic content and how

many people were killed there. This is yet another attempt to work through the traumatic past, which fills up every nook, saturates the air. The second element of Janicka’s work, is the sound – everyday tones typical (and at the same time so astonishingly inappropriate) for the places where the pictures were taken – a dog is barking, birds are singing, blurry conversations of the visitors are heard. Trace and testimony have been consolidated in this work in a surprising way – by absence. This testimony is dematerialized, but it speaks louder than many others “finished” pictures so to speak. Janicka actualized some long time ago established rules of art after the Shoah (about which was writing among others, Raul Hilberg [cf. Śpiewak 2013a: 11]): silence and minimalism. This minimalism along with severity of her work certainly elude aestheticization that sometimes may neutralize suffering⁶. On the other hand, Janicka’s works focus the recipient’s attention on the undeniable, unchanging silence of photos (especially those representing people and places that no longer exist, which also remain absent – and perhaps primarily – in the social memory). A frightening emptiness and silence of Janicka’s work are waking characteristic for the recipient’s temptation to “subordinate” the image (Tańczuk, 2007: 85, quoted in: Barbaruk 2010: 173). But how to subordinate emptiness?

In his article *Pomiędzy muzeum a white cube’em. Fotografia jako przestrzeń (Between the Museum and the White Cube. Photography as a Space)*, Witold Kanicki compares functions of the classical documentary photography with methods used in museum exhibitions. Relying on the considerations written by Herbert Diestel, Kanicki writes: “Museums are like a jar with pickles – they all have the task of preserving and presenting objects taken out of time (...). Just in the first years of photography’s existence, similar functions were indicated” (Kanicki 2014: 52). The picture is capturing the image, it is documenting, reproducing, preserving memory, protecting remembrance from destruction – these features are obvious for the classical definition of photography, especially the documentary one, which should remain “objective”, “style-less”, “real” (cf. Kanicki 2014: 52). But is there any place for objectivity and distance in case of works of art, using the medium of photography, playing with already established

⁶For more information about Janickas’s searching for the form and pattern, v. Jakubowicz 2006.

conventional features? A paraphrase or specific reproduction created by Libera, indistinct, irritating images made by Głowiński, shocking discovery of the Holocaust postcards by Szypulski and finally “consolidating” the air in Janicka’s work are to reveal that in the face of such drama (and, at the same time, such topic of culture) traditional methods are running out, classical clichés are not working.

According to all above mentioned works, Walter Benjamin’s statement seems to be still relevant, that the photography itself does not mean anything, does not exist without the context. The task and the challenge that are faced by artists nowadays involve a balancing on the thin border between the duties of safe-guarding memory about that context and the starting memory game with it. Just like in the case of Grynberg’s blurry photos, which, on the one hand, are trying to evoke blurry images seen in a hurry, on the other hand, while looking at them, there is no way to escape from reflection about the blurred memory and about searching its sharper shapes by today’s generation.

Iwona Kurz in her essay *Fototożsamość “ja” w czasach fotografii (Photoidentity of “I” in the Times of Photography)*, writes about modern and postmodern man who defines his identity through the visual media (Kurz 2007: 109). Kurz recalls the optical phenomenon of “aftersights” analyzed, by the way, almost from the beginning of photography. Referring to the Jonathan Crary’s theory, Iwona Kurz writes:

Aftersight draws attention to the fact, that during the perception material subjectivity of the observer is important, that the visual experience is individualized, moreover, it does not require the necessary liaison with external referent (visual impression persists despite the absence of the stimulus). (...) The subject is redefined. Perspective category is suspended (in the sense of an ideal point of view) (Kurz 2007: 114, trans. U.K.).

Are aftersights the concept reserved for the optical impressions? Don’t we live in the age of aftersights of memory? In the epoch of sensations, feeling that there is a memory, despite the lack of stimulus or – on the contrary – despite the “overcapacity” of them? The concept of aftersights remains in my opinion a slightly different approach than the one presented by Iwona Kurz. Janicka’s photos of the air represent aftersights of the space, where human dramas took place. From this perspective, every space and every place is a kind of an aftersight (of memory),

carrying with it the burden of memories about people, events, emotions that have disappeared.

Photography may be perceived (especially nowadays) as a simplification, defragmentation of the experience⁷. Perhaps this undeniable defragmentation present in the nature of photography is a preview of a new culture of memory – prosthetic memory (regarding the prosthetic culture by Celia Lury, cf. Kurz 2007: 116). Is it a new (?) type of memory, which is responsible for blurring boundaries (as in Grynberg's photos), decontextualizing images (as in Libera's artistic conception), creating inadequacy, just like the one of the "innocent" postcards gathered by Paweł Szypulski, written as if the context wouldn't even existed? Or maybe prosthetic memory is well defined by the empty, white cubes created by Janicka, which immediately associate with deficiency, absence?

Grynberg, Libera, Szypulski, Janicka and many others are working through the commonly (and superficially) known history. Their methods of overworking it are different – minimalism, playing with convention, evoking confusion or outcry. They are disputing with "fixed" models and imaginary experiences, deconstructing pathos. Their art is becoming yet another semantic gesture. For some people, this gesture is expressed in a wrong place and wrong time, for the others – definitely required. It perversely arises from the consciousness that ethic is built on overcoming the aesthetic (to quote Levinas). All these works are talking about the blurring memories and manipulating with memory, about competition of different historic narrations and attempts at overtaking the past, passing the traumatic experiences of the war and the Holocaust to the next generations.

According to Ankersmit, there are things that we will never adopt to, that should create reoccurring, lengthy diseases and neurosis. The consumers of mass visions, whom I have mentioned at the beginning of my text, seem to be immune. They find relief in a false happy end. Searching for the forms of expression, showing how easy can be getting used to something and resigning from observation, presenting the air as a sign of the "finality", grotesque aestheticization of well-known images – all that

⁷ It has been already Charles Baudelaire, who claimed that the photography is somehow responsible for "the birth of the mass culture", that it "defragments the experience" (v. for example: Baudelaire 2002).

shows, where the paths of searching for memory began. Perhaps it was a mistake to define those works of art as a representation of the Holocaust. They are rather an example of (pictorial) art, which deals with contemporary memory, its decontextualization, blurring and emptiness. This art “displeases” memory to avoid its simplifying reconstruction, trivialization and commercialization. It also avoids comfort of participation and easy remembering, which leads to amnesia. Ankersmit wrote: “Sometimes in life of a civilization, disease is better than health” (Ankersmit 2004). And confusion or incomprehension are better than adaptation.

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