

Beyond good and evil

Transcription

Krzysztof Wodiczko

In fact, it is difficult to talk about culture, especially national culture, without reference to wars, war experiences and to any preparations in case of war, but also reminiscing the history of wars. As if our identity, our value as people had to prove itself in the context of wars. Just like we behaved during the wars, between the wars, before the war and after the war, this is a reference to our identity. The books we read, literature, movies, in fact, to a large extent, this entire cultural space is filled with situations related to violence and war. Somewhere, as people used to say in my time, somewhere between the monuments is Poland. Of course, in fact, it was mainly about war memorials, monuments to tragic war events, or moral victories and, at the same time, lost battles and victims and martyrdom. It is difficult to talk about building a world without wars in such a space. And at the same time, since this is a part of our culture, well, everyone who is active in culture, including artists working in all fields of art, we were, I must admit that I am a part of it as an artist, we were builders of such a culture. Our paintings, films, monuments, of course, all kinds of literature, all this is the work of us artists. This is how we replicate certain patterns. One could even say to oneself that it would be difficult for us to live without reference to wars and violence. In this situation, you can also turn the matter around and say - since all those who build culture, including artists, have contributed to the culture of war, they could also contribute to the culture of "un-war", or "off-war", that is, to dismantle, to create a counter-narrative or an un-narrative, or to re-construct additionally already existing narratives that replicate our way of thinking and our all the time preparation ourselves for war. We must prepare for the time when there is no war. We need to find models and maybe build monuments, create some narratives about those who contributed to the fact that the conflict did not break out, who contributed to relieve tensions. Creating a situation, for example after the war, that would allow us to think about preventing conflict from recurring by building peace, a positive peace, that is, a peace, in which it is spoken how wars arose and how they should not arise. What are the mechanisms that caused the mobilisation to wars. How to create conditions so that the conflict is resolved not by using weapons and bloodshed.

So restoring a national identity based on past conflicts with neighbours, as if blaming the neighbours for what their ancestors did, while glorifying ourselves for what our ancestors did against or in defense of their neighbours. One way or another, such narratives must be dismantled, disarmed. But unfortunately it is not... It is not as common a process as Monnet, who was the originator of the European Union, imagined. In one of his last interviews, he said that if he were to start creating the Union anew, he would start with culture.

That is, the question of transforming culture from the "culture of war" to the "non-war" or "off-war" one. Therefore, those monuments that are in the urban space are quite significant here. I am not downplaying the importance of literature, painting, music, theatre, all that we learn from school textbooks, which also need to be rewritten, but monuments, as spatial symbolic forms, that barricade public space so that we must circle them, divide the city, that create a conceptual map of the city, which are the theater of various types of military parades or commemorative anniversary gatherings, or glorifying war victories, of course, have a great influence on our thinking about the future, because they have their historical continuity. For example, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris is the first proper triumphal arch of its kind, that has multiplied into an incredible number of slightly smaller arches, but also into votive candles or the graves of the unknown soldier, usually placed in the center, at ground level, street. The narrative of these triumphal arches is relatively similar everywhere. Of course, this is exceptional. There's only one bigger arch than this one in the world, so it's up to now the model, it's the mother virtually all war memorials.

The four main sculptures themselves also create a kind of illusion. The illusion that peace can only be achieved through war.

At the top, in the very upper part, I imagined a great discussion forum, where perhaps representatives of various places, countries, places in the world were the most, as if burdened with the tradition of wars and conflicts, including, and perhaps above all, civil wars.

Such a forum could create such an agonistic situation in which contentious issues, all this that is there, what can explode, all this load of various kinds of misunderstandings should at least be considered, discussed, confronted in such an atmosphere. Maybe it's easier there, as if to start thinking in a different way, to change the paradigm of thinking about the future a bit.

Either way, this project can be seen as utopian. I do not consider this project as utopian. I believe it has to be, something like that created, built, constructed.

It seems to me that it is a matter of the right time, the moment when somehow this project, maybe in a different form, maybe the structure will be different, maybe it will be built occasionally, not permanently, maybe it will have a different character, but the program itself, I have hope that somehow it will be deemed necessary to face this memorial. Perhaps there are yet other symbolic machines of this kind. One, of course, we have in every country, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We have all kinds of war culture cult temples. You also need to think about how to deal with them. Perhaps military parades and the changing of the guard at the torch at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, perhaps they should continue just during various kinds of discussions and debates. And I hope that the work of such an Institute will lead to a situation where these parades will be purely historical, there will be no new plaques added in the Graves of the Unknown Soldier. Or maybe at some point they won't be needed anymore. I don't think they are needed right now, but it's about awareness, people's awareness. Masses of tourists who come with children - you have to remember that these symbolic structures are visited by all generations. Parents explain to children, tell stories, add their narrative. All the time, as if this cohabitation with monuments is reproduced as a natural thing and preparing to sacrifice one's life on the altar of one's homeland, or a leader, or some object of collective love.

Józef Robakowski

My story as concerns war and the problem of war is so far interesting as I was born before the war, the Second World War. I was six months old when my father just went to war, he was an uhlán and he went to fight on the Bzura River. It was such a war, to be honest, doomed to be lost one. This is what my mother told me about. It was a very uninteresting matter for her, because he left his two children and went, as she called, "to the war". And already on September 21, he was dead, so very quickly he ceased to be that soldier. This thing has been going on pretty much my whole life, because what else is interesting, he left me such album. One is a family album and the other one was his such an album about military. It was the grandfather

who imposed such a situation, all his sons, and there were three of them, these kids had been wearing uniforms since they were children, and there are such photos. I looked at this album very often and my elder brother somehow got involved in this military matter, while as to me, as he later, after the war, played with some toy soldiers, it pissed me off already as a kid that he was playing with it.

We lived in Gdynia and you could also find weapons in such flats there, but also under various walls and he collected these weapons in the apartment. He had some automatics, some rifles, and that thing never entertained me. I've grown up and I'm still not amused, because in my work, such an artistic one I often refer to militarism, which I hate. But there was also another reason, because I was brought up in an orphanage, a poor little orphanage in Tuchola, and there was such a post-war drill, that is, all activities took place through a whistle, a bell, through marching drills. All the pupils dreamed of becoming soldiers, or policemen, and militiamen, and always there was something like this. Also in sporting activity these drills still could be felt. I always escaped from these colonies, from these various camps. My mother used to take me because I just couldn't stand that situation there. And as I grew older, I saw the senselessness of this war as such even more. After all, we were brought up under socialism, also in some kind of war situation. Those beautiful Soviet films that glorified victories. It was done by great directors, so it looked so beautiful and so effective. All the more so I became so reserved about this matter, and when martial law came, I took up this topic with all the importance. And before that, I made such a film *6,000,000*, it's a very early film, it was my first film, it was 1962 and there also the problem of 6 million, that's was the problem also with this war. I somehow interpreted it, very cleverly, with such found footage material, i.e. with such a compilation. At that time, it was such an opportunity to collect such found footage tapes, which is even one of the first such found footage films in Poland. It is functioning at the moment, it is shown at various festivals and it arouses admiration that it was created so early, there are also issues of the Holocaust, and in the 1960s these issues were not discussed, it was only possible to do it in an amateur way.

And when this martial law occurs, we were deprived of the opportunity to take pictures outside, because whoever had a camera in the streets, it was taken away, or a movie camera, even more so. So everything could be done at home, that is in a private way, I called it *Own Cinema* and just watched the TV that was on all the time. Very different, strange things were happening on this TV, and I was making something like a chronicle, a chronicle of that time, through the TV

picture, picture and sound. And these were amazing materials, they were on very different topics. And that militarism flourished, as that was something to be celebrated. Mainly the Soviet Army had to be praised, as they have these great celebrations, May 9th parades - fantastic parades of world quality, where they boasted about this equipment, boasted about this incredible success, winning the war, where they lost several million people, but these people did not be very important to these chiefs. And such this whole socialism was also so armed. I went through such various situations where this militarism was more and more disgusting to me. And there came a moment when I included these problems in my works. I generally did not deal with such serious topics as war. I knew that it wouldn't go well in such an amateur movement, but it turns out that I found some convention that allowed me to make two or three such important films on this very topic. And I treated it with such a half-squinted eye, I treated it sarcastically. I chose the material in such a way that, despite this primitive technique, it was very convincing. And perhaps the most convincing film, such a video, *Art Is Power*, that is, a military parade on Red Square, which holds such a pompous, occasional situation there in honour of the fame of the Soviet army, their victories, with huge instrumentation, with such an international show, where in the stands are not only their chiefs, but also chiefs from all over the world. It was a fantastic opportunity to approach the situation so critically.

Even earlier, I was making such incredibly interesting material, because it concerned Brezhnev's funeral, who for me was a total criminal. And his funeral was so conventional, because these funerals were held in such a conventional formula, I shot this on such time-lapse material, so I sped up his funeral, this pompous situation at such an accelerated pace. When I was doing it, I was afraid to watch this material, because I knew that it would be a very ambiguous situation. When I started showing this film, it turned out that it is of great importance, that it is a document of something that probably will never happen again. That is, a spooky funeral, which at an accelerated pace aroused such impatience and often such a protest of various people, even, I would say, from the areas of art. I remember that Ryszard Stanisławski, the director of the Museum of Art in Łódź, when he first saw the film, said that it was forbidden to do something like that, that after all he was a human being and that it was forbidden to make fun of such a situation as a funeral. But the moment came when this film gained such a reputation of something very important, such an amazing, sarcastic documentary, and he himself bought the film for the Museum of Art, and when there was such a great exhibition of the collection of the Museum of Art in Zachęta, this film was, of course, represented there. And has been presented yet in various other situations.

I was with these two films, I remember in Riga at a festival where, when I was showing this Brezhnev's funeral, some ladies even came out of the kitchen, it was something so shocking for them that I treated this outstanding character in this way.

Later, these films were also shown at such a biennale in Moscow, where they also aroused opposition, but also, in a way, enormous respect.

When these films went into motion, I still had such a very interesting adventure with these films. I had an hour on German television, still on Western television, when those were the times of West Germany and an hour was a lot for an artist, it was such an evening for me and naturally I wanted to show this film *Art Is Power*. There was such a large assembly gathered there. They discussed for a long time and decided that this film could not be shown there because the band Laibach performs there, which sings, in addition, in German, such a well-known rock song. And after these discussions, this film was withdrawn, after long discussions. I was told something like that, when I asked why this film was excluded, they said that such a film could only be produced by a Pole who doubts this western side and doubts this eastern side. And in fact, this is something in me, I doubt this militarism and these two sides - both to the left and to the right - that is, I would simply prefer that such a situation never happen again.

Alicja Karska & Aleksandra Went

Alicja Karska- We took the first photo for this *Deamons* series fourteen years ago while working on another series of works also devoted to ...

Aleksandra Went - Aviation.

A.K. - Aviation, yes. We focused then on the pilots who were practicing acrobatics just before the flight and were immortalising this moment of their preparation - pilots who were practicing sequences of movements, sequences of acrobatic figures that they were about to perform in the air. And it was a series of films. And then also such a wide-ranging "sketchbook" was created, because we were looking for various threads and topics related to aviation, and then also our first photos of aviation monuments were being created. We were looking for a concept. It wasn't

like we went there and immediately knew what the pictures were supposed to look like. We were just documenting these objects and at some point one of the photos came out fuzzy, just so blurred. Right away we saw the plane flying over there. And this case was immediately noticed and repeated many times, so the first of the photos was taken in Babie Doły, a district of Gdynia, fourteen years ago, and we left this for many, many years.

A.W.- This is how this work began, that we traveled around various localities looking for such monuments to airplanes, usually military ones. In our field of interest were just military planes, which were placed as an attraction in housing estates in Poland, or in some squares. For older people it was a recollection of such dark days of war, and for children it was a big tin toy. And so we started photographing these monuments.

A.W.- When we returned to work on this project after many years, such the beginning was the thought about what is happening in the world now, i.e. the situation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And these memorial planes suddenly became such a ...

A.K. - They're alive again.

A.W. "They' came to life, yes. Again, they became a symbol of war, again defense comes to mind, people's suffering, which today, these days is so unreal, and yet it is and it repeats itself. So again they are getting such very symbolic.

A.K. – A very real meaning.

A.W. – Meaning, yes.

A.K. They're weapons again, and they're flying again. Yes and this innocent perspective of children for whom it was an attraction and a toy. Each of us has such a photo where he is standing either in front of a tank or in front of a plane, and this was...

A.W. "It was such an attraction, it was fun.

A.K. Yes. Part of the identity too. At that moment, these planes took off. But I also remember a moment when the war broke out in Ukraine and reports reached Poland about what equipment was being used again in this war, that it was a return to the past again - such a dark return to the past - that this equipment that had been lying around for so long time in the hangars and was fortunately unused, at this point it was dredged up again, that the form of this war was so - is - so archaic as this equipment. Although now it has changed, because indeed the arms races have already caught up with the situation and there are already the most modern equipment on both sides, but these beginnings were also dramatic because of the reports that the same equipment that was already a memorial is being used again.

A.W. – These photos are taken on long time shutter setting. They are moved, out of focus on purpose, so that they would give the impression of movement, as if they are about to fly again.

A.K. - For me, it is also a very interesting situation here to use this camera, which freezes the moment and stabilises this situation, and here thanks to photography - it gives movement to this image, so there is also a complete reversal of this medium.

A.W. – The title *Demons* actually comes from the plane that was indeed called that. There was a military plane called Fiend.

A.K. - Yes, of course, we also picked up the symbolism of this word and the meaning for our culture and our cultural circle, that these *Demons* and the darkness of this word were released again after years.

A.W. – And they are so very relevant now, in these times. Also in terms of the fact that they are standing on these plinths, they are stopped - they would like as to fly, but they are standing - so as this whole situation such international too. They show such a difficulty in the world of helping exactly Ukraine, how to do it, that these are such moves, sometimes it would seem that things are going well now, but before that there was a lot of silence and deliberating how to react properly. So it's a bit such a standing aid.

A.W. – The first plane, the one in Babie Doły, in Gdynia, is such an object that stands to this day, in a housing estate, among blocks of flats. It's such a very strange picture - suddenly there is a monument on a pedestal between the blocks, flying.

A.K. But in general, there are a lot of these monuments in our works, because also this work with the Museum of the Second World War. It was also a moment when we were supposed to be the generation that already watches the war in museums and on monuments. And that's how it was already supposed to be. And in this moment the story comes other full circle.

A.W. – With this work with the Museum of the Second World War, this precisely it's so very close, because there we also used photographs with a white teddy bear, with which people photographed against the ruins of Gdańsk. So this teddy bear was also such a theme of game, a toy. It is similar with these planes that they were also supposed to be such an attraction forever. They weren't meant to be anything else. A roadhog or a toy for children.

A.K. – In this first sequence, just this original black and white photo, there were the ruins of Gdańsk and a group of artists with a white teddy bear, who were photographing themselves against the background of the ruins. And we took a photo of our artist friends years later - this white teddy bear was lying somewhere as a sign, as a reference to that situation - against the background of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, which was being built. These

constructions of the new building referred very strongly to those pointed ruins of Gdańsk. And we were also supposed to be this generation that would remember the war in this way.

A.K. – This situation was supposed to be already a monumental situation and that's how I was perceiving it. We were talking here about the fact that this is an attraction for children. We talked about that..

A.W. - The tin airplane.

A.K. Yes, about the tin airplane. About the fact that they could be perceived as something collapsed in beautiful architecture, or in public space in general.

A.W. - Yes. We could be annoyed that they are there and what for at all.

A.K. We can discuss it and all these issues have been very innocent up to this point.

A.K. – It was supposed to be so, that it was supposed to be just a photo in an album with a giggling child in front of the airplane. All this history was supposed to be enclosed in these monuments, and it came to life again, it is relevant again.

Jarosław Kozłowski

In 1999, I started a series of works, installations, united by the concept of a standard. The first, it was at an exhibition at Matt's Gallery in London. This work was called *European Standards*. Then there were the *European Standards. Polish Version* in the AT Gallery in Poznań. Next in Brno, *European Standards. Czech version*. Later *American Standards*. Finally, *African Standards. Postcolonial version*.

The starting point of this last work were my two visits to Zambia, in Lusaka, where I taught African, precisely Zambian students. For me, it was probably the most essential teaching experience. Excellent results came out of this two-time workshop I conducted there.

Being in Africa, in Zambia, in Lusaka was extremely inspiring and interesting for me in the sense that I had always dreamed of Africa.

One of the many problems we discussed with students was the question of their social status, their presence in the world.

Walking around Lusaka, I noticed that there is a radical duality of human presence there, that is, there are extremely rich houses of the white yet colonists who remained in Zambia, always surrounded by very tight, very high fences, often connected to electricity. And on the other

hand, there were a lot of cardboard boxes in the street - cardboard boxes by the trees, cardboard boxes stuck to the walls that were African houses.

In a sense, this inspired just the realisation of these *African Standards* in the postcolonial version. A work that consists of African masks, from photos of these walled houses, sometimes palaces, former colonizers.

And from a film recorded on video.

In 2011, it occurred to me that I had to make a work which is dedicated to Africa. So created had been African Standards. The post-colonial version, in which I remembered and realised in work this, what drastically touched me when I was, when I worked in Zambia.

I brought from Lusaka a number of African masks that were given to me, usually these were gifts resulting from the excellent contacts I had made with Zambians, with these students and with other persons, Africans. And I decided to use these masks just for that, for the next installation related just to standards.

This is a work about hypocrisy. White man's hypocrisy. This is a work about the arrogance of the white man.

It concerns hypocrisy, which is expressed in the imposition of certain standards of European, Western culture.

This work was not ironic. Unlike the ones I mentioned earlier, *African Standards* was pretty grim. It consisted of photographs of these objects moved away from Zambian life, these closed enclaves of the white man. It also consisted of African masks and African figurines, which were full of meanings for them. These meanings are present in these masks, in these figurines. And when confronted with these white man's enclaves, they were drastically true.

This work is not nostalgia. This work is not an homage, it is merely a statement of fact. The fact of the devastation of African culture by the white man who imposes standards on them that are not their standards. What these masks express, what these figurines represent, which speak about their culture, devoid of all the hypocrisy that is associated with European culture or Western culture.

In a way, it's a dedication. Dedication addressed precisely to Zambians, to Africans.

And the rest belongs to those who watch this work.

Natalia Brandt

Thinking about painting, and I don't mean only contemporary painting, I realised that among the many artworks I have seen, or am watching, I am most interested in those paintings that in some sense go beyond what is visible, beyond their own beauty, beyond a perfect presentation. (A) I notice in them something that could be called the conscience of the image. The metaphor of the image's conscience allowed me to make ethical valuations of artistic presentations that refer to negative aspects of reality that are difficult to depict.

Especially in times when the media, full of drastic news and drastic images, anesthetise our sensitivity to what is still happening in various corners of the world. What happens in various corners of the world, I mean here especially acts of cruelty and violence of all kinds. So far, fourteen artworks have been created, paintings made using the technique of acrylic on canvas. Each of the paintings is accompanied by a framed postcard with a drawing on the glass. The canvases were covered with a photo prints layer documenting the drastic events to which the given image refers, to which one in some sense is dedicated. The starting point were the banal postcards I collect from different parts of the world. The places they came from were not accidental.

At some point, they had been marked by a bad memory, and that was ... that was the key to their choice. The next step was to select a fragment, for example, of a piece of land, from an image on a postcard, which I then photographically enlarged to the limits of legibility, to the limits of recognisability, and as such it became a motive for painting action on the surface of the image, covering to varying degrees the drastic scenes of violence, destruction and cruelty documented in the photographs. This painting act I first called incasing, covering up, blurring, and finally blinding, the function of which was to protect against the real world documented in photographs, on photographic documents in its darkest versions.

The sight that I use to select a fragment from postcards, a fragment from images from postcards, refers to the camera lens. To the lens of the camera, but also for such random aiming also often at a place and aiming also, in such a metaphorical sense, at places, events to which I refer and events throughout history, the most cruel ones, often simply are .. they aim at random places and touch them.

I don't think any of the paintings, except maybe for one exception, completely covers these images and ... because I called this cycle blinding, but it's also impossible to protect through an image our such memory of these images that are in fact within us and often are very iconic images, because I also refer to very such spectacular events. Also it's never a coverage in hundred percent. Maybe apart from two cases, but that also had some justification. Also these images don't pretend to be such total protection. This is, I think, impossible due to what is happening, what we are witnessing, what we are experiencing and what is just happening, as I mentioned before, constantly in different parts of the world. Of course, each time this fragment selected from the postcard underwent a much greater transformation, it affected each time the final layer, like a protective skin, precisely a kind of protection. Only here the question arises whether it is the protection of our gaze or exactly of this image, this what is happening inside, what has been saturated by me by summoning, by giving this first layer such a very cruel and Such a most real one, I would say, which cannot be erased in any way.

Ryszard Wańko

As I think, it's probably common knowledge that in 2003 the Gulf War started, in retaliation for the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. And the United States formulated such an international military coalition and attacked Iraq on the pretext that Iraq had nuclear weapons. Which of course was a lie. Such a curiosity for me was that a new technology was introduced for the first time, consisting in the fact that the soldiers had such special small video cameras installed on their helmets. This attack started at night. These cameras sent directly reports to TV stations, mostly CNN, I think. I stayed up all night to watch because it was a technological novelty consisting in that you could observe the front line directly. Also this was enough dramatic and I stayed up at night watching these broadcasts and taking pictures of the TV screen, these broadcasts, for my archives. And later I read various newspapers, because all the media reported about this, about this war. And what interested me was that... was intrigued that there were just different reports, from different sources, about the same war that I saw on the screen. And I was wondering who is telling the truth, where is here the lie, and where is the truth. And I decided to subject this truth-lie relationship to such, I don't know, analysis in the form of this work, which is called "War Games", or otherwise "Lies". I did such a procedure, I came up with an idea to reverse everything, that the photographic negative that I had, because it was an analog camera, I made prints on canvas, these positive ones, and I decided to reverse

the situation and make a negative in an oil painting, it means there was such a situation, you can imagine that this oil painting is a negative for this photo, but really you could do it on photographic paper, but not from an oil painting, which is a negative, to make the same positive print on canvas. It is not possible. And I did it, and I asked this question, which of these images is real and which is false. This relationship exactly - truth-lie, because I myself, for example, when I look here, I wonder which one carries the truth in itself - this is real and this is real. Only that the oil painting cannot be a negative for this positive print, which was also real. And I came to such an absurdity in this work.

So, there's one more thing here that I haven't added, that this relationship that people believe in, which the media just pass on, or politicians in general and so on, that they tell people to believe in, and it just so happens that people believe what they say. This work shows how easy it is to manipulate a person. This is the important thing about this case.

Of course, I had these documented photos from this monitor, then from these transmissions, quite a lot, I had the whole archive. It was just fascinating, it was the first time I watched a war live, bombs are falling somewhere, people are being killed here and so on, it was shocking. But I decided to limit it to such a closed event and I think I painted, I don't know, maybe six works, I don't remember at the moment. One was destroyed by accident. There are only three such juxtapositions here. As if kind of a description of the whole situation. This seemed to me to be pointless to repeat it. Just to close it up in one such set and you'll be fine.

Also this work, I believe that it is still valid, because nothing has changed. At the moment, there are about fifty wars in the world. Different ones, not only in Ukraine. So it's still going on, nothing changes. Although the most sensitive are artists and pick it all up, talk about it. Nothing comes of it. Still people succumb to this manipulation, these lies. I think it's time to just end it. For people to wake up and look at this reality for what it really is. That's why I really appreciate this job. I don't like to compliment myself, but I think ... A work that doesn't age becomes important.