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Arts, Peace and Conflict

Bridging the Gap of Indifference – Contemporary German Art on Current Conflicts and World War I

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Are war and peace still subjects of contemporary art in Germany, some 25 years after the end of the Cold War and German reunification, 75 years after the beginning of the Second World War, and now 100 years after the outbreak of the First World War? How are modern wars and conflicts depicted, and which subjects are addressed? To what an extent is the Great War an issue of German contemporary art at all, now, in the centenary of the Great War, being a huge subject in Australia, Belgium, France and the UK?

First and foremost, pacifism is strong in Germany, especially after the caesura of the Second World War and the National Socialist dictatorship. It was not the origin of pacifism, though: Taking aside a rather small pacifistic movement in the latter stages of Imperial Germany in the late 19th and early 20th century, it was widespread after the First World War and its millions of victims. Some 2,037,000 German soldiers were killed in this global conflict, some 700,000 civilians perished (mostly due to the naval blockade),[1] and millions more were affected: maimed, traumatised or confronted with the loss of loved ones. Many artists who had openly supported the war at its beginning had changed their minds after they had encountered the realities of modern warfare. Ernst Barlach, who is rightly known for his pacifist works, compared his experience in autumn 1914 with "a great love affair";[2] his lithography *"Der Heilige Krieg"* (the holy war), published in 1914 in the propagandistic *"Kriegszeit"*, presents a warrior who is calmly preparing a blow with his sword to defend himself; the fighting takes place without aggression, it is rather a necessity. Two years later, his work *"Aus einem neuzeitlichen Totentanz"* (from a modern *danse macabre*) is similarly composed, but this time, the warrior has lost his senses: with pure rage does he lead the heavy hammer, crushing what is left of the skeletons on the ground, focusing on the encompassing destructive powers of war.

Most German artworks about the First World War that are well-known today stem from the post-war period: both the triptych and the portfolio *"Krieg"* (war) by Otto Dix, the scathing works by George Grosz, holding up a mirror to the divided post-war society, or the accusatory works of Käthe Kollwitz who had lost her son Peter in the Great War:[3] *"Nie wieder Krieg!"* (no more war) was a common slogan. But the difficult socio-economic situation and the cross-societal disappointment with the Versailles Treaty were factors to fuel extremism. Even although the beginning of the Second World War was far from being welcomed by the Germans (contrary to Nazi propaganda), the comparably quick successes of the campaigns in Poland (1939) and France (1940) led to a widespread view that war could pay off, that national humiliation could be revoked, and that Germany had to be recognised again. Just some years later, Germany was heavily destroyed; even more millions of soldiers and civilians were dead. The National Socialist dictatorship would become the main issue of both international and national perception of Germany. Pacifism became heavily embossed into the German psyche: "no more war" was not just another fashionable slogan. Ten years after the war's end, when the Western Federal Republic of Germany became member of NATO and the Eastern German

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[1] Hirschfeld, Krumeich, Renz (eds., 2014), p. 664f.

[2] Rother (1994), p. 86

[3] Unlike her husband, Käthe Kollwitz had supported her son in his wish to volunteer – in late October 1914, he had died in Flanders. Kollwitz's grandson Peter, named after his uncle, later died in the Second World War.

Democratic Republic part of the Warsaw Pact, the question of setting up new armed forces became eminent. In the democratic West, there were huge demonstrations against this rearmament: *"Ohne mich"* (without me!) was one of the slogans, visible on many posters. But *realpolitik* took its toll, and Germans had to cope with new armed forces, the *Bundeswehr* in the West, and the *Nationale Volksarmee* (national people's army) in the East.

Now, 25 years after the reunification of the two German states, and with many *Bundeswehr* abroad missions for NATO and the UN in mind (including combat missions such as in Kosovo and especially Afghanistan), pacifism is still a main driver in German society. While the armed forces are perceived as a trustworthy part of society, the war in Afghanistan and the German participation is disapproved by between two thirds and three quarters of the population, forming a huge disconnect between these two opinions.[4] One of the main issues of this German approach to pacifism is, indeed, its indiscretion: Germany should keep her fingers out of war, even if there is also a "responsibility to protect" within the United Nations. But in 1939, it was Great Britain and France who drew the line to German aggression and expansionism. In 2005, Federal President Horst Köhler called the German approach to war and peace, on defence and security as "friendly ignorance", and current Federal President Joachim Gauck is fiercely attacked for being a "war monger": he dared to address that Germany has to take responsibility and not rely on others all the time.

Coming to war in German contemporary art, it is, indeed, a difficult subject. Of course, it is a huge theme of mankind. The art market, however, is focused on saleable art – and works on war do usually not qualify as such in modern democratic societies. Even museums often shun from showing contemporary works about such "difficult" subjects: In the countless exhibitions on the First World War in 2014, there were only very few contemporary takes to be seen, and if so, one prefers the "view from abroad" such as the "Stela", a fascinating work on commemoration at the *Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr* (military historical museum of the German armed forces) in Dresden by Kingsley Baird from New Zealand.[5]

A huge difference between artists a century ago and today is the immediacy of the war experience. During the First World War, nearly all the artists were soldiers by themselves. Contrary to the commissioned artists in a few countries (e. g. Great Britain, Austria-Hungary), they primarily were soldiers and artistically worked in their spare time only.[6] Fritz Steisslinger appears to be the only artist who made oil paintings on the front while being a soldier, often using scrap pieces of sackcloth.[7] For example, Otto Dix, one of the most famous artists regarding the Great War, survived the whole war from 1914 to 1918, and was awarded with the Iron Cross 2nd class. Contrary to this immediacy of war experience, artists today are hardly at the front lines of contemporary wars (in fact, there are hardly any "front lines" today). They usually get the images for their works from the media. Surely, the way to impressive works of art about war does not necessarily need to endure the suffering, but it is important to remember the different situation a century ago.

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[4] Bulmahn, Wanner (2013), p. 43f.

[5] http://www.mhmbw.de/sonderausstellungen/14-menschen-krieg/stela/stela-en

[6] Küster (ed., 2008), p. 48-79

[7] Schneider, Gotttschlich, Ladleif (eds., 2014), p. 227

Jens Kloppmann (born in 1969) is one of those contemporary German artists who centre on socio-political issues and especially on the cultures of remembrance.[8] In his series *"Diktatoren mit Tieren"* (dictators with animals, since 2005), he combines historic and contemporary dictators with animals that he finds more suitable to the specific character than the usual chosen symbols of might and prowess such as lions and eagles. Italian Benito Mussolini proudly sits on – a donkey. North Korean Kim Jong Il is paired with a panda, as clumsy, if not bizarre as his human "counterpart", while the anti-pleasure Iranian leader Khomeini is combined with a flamingo as a true opposite.

Kloppmann's series "Bullets" (since 1999) is made of Berlin's battle scars. When he moved to the German capital in the early 1990s, he was astonished to find bullet holes from the Second World War in many buildings. After German reunification, these remnants of the past subsequently vanished. "Bullets" might be mistaken for a serial abstract work, as the holes are presented on a white, plain surface. But it is important for the artist that they cannot be traced back to a specific location: it might have been a factory, a block of flats or a villa, and at the same time, it cannot be distinguished if the source of these damages were Soviet or German bullets during the Battle of Berlin in spring 1945, or if they had been caused by Allied bombardment: war affects people in the same way – and it equally should be remembered.

His video installation "6:57 P.M." (2012) refers to the moment when US President George W. Bush returned to Washington on 9 September 2001, hours after the disastrous terrorist attacks. After he left his helicopter, he walked to the White House, being watched by the media and thus millions of people. Everybody knew that he had to react, to "do something" – and that the reply would hardly be peaceful. The short loop of "6:57 P.M." consists of Bush walking and walking and walking – and we might ask ourselves if he (or we) ever left this stage, if there was a true direction in the post-9/11 actions, if there is progress beyond pure movement.

Marius Heckmann (born in 1957) also worked on 9/11 as a defining moment of our times.[9] His series of oil paintings "Fading (9/11)" (2007-2013) depicts the planes crushing into the towers of the World Trace Center, the burning buildings, people watching it, but also those who jumped down from the WTC: they chose their own form of certain death, in a both desperate and brave act to defy being suffocated or burnt alive. When we put these images in the group show *"Zeitenwende"* (turning point) at the German broadcaster's ARD capital studio in 2011,[10] there was quite a discussion with its employees: Some of them were opposing this series, depicting dying people "which you must not do".[11] On a panel discussion, the artists pointed out that it was the media who showed these images of death and destruction for weeks and months – and now, a decade after this event, it should be unethical to remember the victims? Heckmann's series also includes a portrait of those who jumped, as well as a women covered in dust – further media images that are part of the world's collective memory.

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[8] http://www.kloppmann.org

[9] http://marius-heckmann.de

[10] http://www.wartist.org/blog/?p=931&lang=en; ARD is the primary German public-sector broadcaster

[11] Discussions between the curator Martin Bayer, some artists and some ARD employees during the installation of *Zeitenwende* exhibition, 29-31 August 2011

On this group show, Monika Anselment also presented two of her series: "TV Wars" and *"Le Cauchemar de M.A. ≠ le Cauchemar des USA"* (the nightmare of M.A. ≠ the nightmare of the USA).[12] Again, both make use of media images: The former consists of screenshots of war fighting shown on TV screens since the 1990s. Without their given context, these images could be caused by natural events or bonfires. In fact, the scenes depicted tend to be intriguingly beautiful, and it is this aesthaeticisation of war as well as the interchangeability and arbitrariness of news images that the artist is criticising. The latter work deals with the collective perception and the world's visual memory: The photos show low-flying planes, with the camera angle suggesting it may crash into a high building. Before 9/11, this would be merely seen as a trick of the senses, but since then, it brings up images of destruction and fear.

Barbara Duisberg (born in 1961) equally uses media images for her works: With the background knocked out, individual characters seem to float on a gold-plated surface, a trademark of her works. Again, a context is needed – and it might be given by the media leading to different directions. "Kosovo" shows international police men after the Kosovo war, without any scenery. What did take place when this photo had been taken? At the end, it is the same level of information available to the viewer like in the original press photo – the scenery thus is reduced to sheer decoration. But what is the "truth", the "reality", the "authenticity" we always strive for? "Helmand" (2010) was intended for a group show in Berlin, but its curator shunned away from presenting the picture, fearing possible Islamist protests as the Afghan man – an ordinary peasant – who is being frisked by a US soldier could be mistaken for Osama Bin Laden, back then still alive and on the loose. It is such an attitude of preemptive obedience and fear that the terrorists wanted to create, and even more so, it is important for art to take a position. Being part of the *"Zeitenwende"* exhibition, it was surely a reason for vivid discussions, but this exactly is an important reason for art, if it should have a meaning beyond its decorative value or a source of income.

The works of Jan Bejšovec (born in 1975 in then-Eastern Germany) are made from textiles, sewn together, with applications or embroidery added, and nearly always addressing socio-political issues such as German unification. His *"Tyrannenmord"* (tyrannicide) makes use of the media image of Muammar al-Gaddafi just after his murder. Films were aired worldwide showing the much-hated Libyan dictator as captive, being filmed by mobile cameras, increasingly realising his subsequent death. On the next day, many newspapers showed the image of the dead tyrant's face, only to vanish a few days later from the public sphere. How much dignity do we allow to people, even to those who robbed others of theirs? The work's abstracted face is surrounded by Arab applications and various camouflage patterns (used by the Libyan forces) as well as blood red fabrics in which both the dictator and the country seem to have drowned.

Katharina Arndt (born in 1977)[13] and Gero Neumeister (born in 1968)[14] formed the artist collective *"Extraschrot"* (extra shot). Their works included the light installation *"Pax vobiscum"* (peace be with you, 2007) and the video installation "I ❤ NY" (2010). The latter consists of various film clips from disaster or science fiction movies in which New

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[12] http://www.monika-anselment.net

[13] http://katharina-arndt.com

[14] http://www.geroneumeister.com

York gets destroyed over and over again, accompanied by Johann Sebastian Bach's soothing *"Air"* from his 3rd orchestral suite. Even although people know that it is "just some movies", they frequently broke into tears during *"Zeitenwende"*, as the emotional links to the grim reality were too strong. The former is a clever approach to the meaning of peace: the light installation formed the iconographic silhouette of an *Avtomat Kalashnikova* AK-47 assault rifle. This weapon could be referred to as today's true weapon of mass destruction: not really accurate, but highly robust and easy to use and maintain, it is fielded in its different versions in countless conflicts in the world, from Afghanistan to Somalia. The installation was hung at the Berlin Zwingli church, similarly to the ubiquitous illuminating decorations during Christmas time. Christmas, a celebration of peace – but all the symbols have become meaningless and interchangeable, the timeless and important message replaced by a global multi-billion "Xmas" market. The installation's Latin title *"Pax vobiscum"* not only refers to the difficulties of bringing peace by force, but also to the religions' (and even more so their human protagonists') responsibility for conflicts around the world.

Since the early 2000s, Marcus Wittmers (born in 1973) made a series of sculptures out of disused gravestones in which he realistically chiselled modern infantry weapons such as M4, SA80 or AK-47 assault rifles, Uzi machine pistols or Beretta or Colt handguns.[15] While the names of the deceased people are erased, former captions such as *UNVERGESSEN* (unforgotten) can still be read. Its German title *"Waffenruhe"* (literally armistice) congenially refers to the weapons being put to rest, too. Not the least, weapons were and are aestheticised by the media and the arts – but in real life, the result of their usage is always death.

Michael Sailstorfer (born in 1979) has become quite successful with his installations and sculptures that often include a certain level of absurd humour.[16] His "Tank (T-72)" (2010) is based on a commercial dummy tank. With costs of just some 5,000 €, such dummies simulate the appearance of a tank (visually or even including the heat signatures). During the Kosovo War in 1999, NATO aircraft destroyed more Serbian "tanks" than they actually had – or, better to say: highly accurate (and expensive) missiles often hit such cheap Chinese dummies of Soviet-built tanks. For the artist, it was far from being easy to buy such a dummy, as customers are states, not individuals; even more so, as he wanted the cannon to be slightly bigger than the original. In his installation, the rubber tank is inflated to its full life-size, only to be deflated again. From a symbol of might, it turns into a sign of (including manly) weakness, when the support for the main cannon has gone. It is just a small step from alleged prowess and strength to ludicrousness.

Simon Menner (born in 1978) made a series of photos called "Camouflage".[17] At the first look, they are simple and nice landscapes, harmless and decorative. At the second look – this view remains. It is the title of the series and the description of the images that is intended to change the viewer's perceptions: In each image, in each landscape, a *Bundeswehr* sniper team is hiding, pointing their rifle to the photographer and thus the viewer. How does this knowledge affect the viewer, if at all? In any case, the series is not

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[15] http://www.gitteweisegallery.com/wittmers
[16] http://www.artnet.de/galerien/galleri-k/k%c3%bcnstler-michael-sailstorfer
[17] http://simonmenner.com

a simple game of finding something. Indeed, the sniper teams remain to be invisible (in some cases, even a fake position had been set up). These images also refer to modern warfare, fought without clear frontlines. Be it in Sarajevo during the Balkan Wars or in Herat or Aleppo today – a calm situation may turn into a deadly war zone in just a second. Are you already a target – or will you be one?

Jo Röttger (born in 1954) is one of the few contemporary artists who actually went into a war zone.[18] He accompanied a company of Bavarian mountain troops to their training in Eastern Germany, to their ISAF mission in Afghanistan, and – after their return – to their home base in picturesque Bavaria. He did not choose a small, versatile digital camera, but a clumsy, old-fashioned large-format camera. The quality of the results is impressive, as is the approach through landscapes – in which the traces of war are always visible – to the image of soldiers, homeland, national and individual identity and ultimately memory. Somewhere in Afghanistan, a soldier is standing at the ready, looking like an alien high-tech element in an archaic landscape. A boy is passing him, walking a bike with flowers. Maybe the boy will just pass on, not caring about the soldier at all. Maybe he will stop and give or try to sell him one of his flowers. Or maybe he will bring an improvised explosive device to detonation, killing him and an "infidel". The soldier does not know – he tries to be both approachable and aware. We can only try to envisage the individual stress on both the soldiers and the civilians who have to live in such conditions of constant insecurity. That is one of the realities of today's wars, also covered in this series.

Till Ansgar Baumhauer (born in 1972) – who went to Afghanistan for about a year, taking part in the reopening of the Afghan National Museum – still works on a series called *"Entknüpfungen"* (literally "de-knotting") for which he takes away the knots of Afghan rugs to form symbols.[19] "When working and fighting in these countries, we leave our traces there", he said, and thus he chose symbols such as the Federal Eagle or the Iron Cross (as the *Bundeswehr* logo).[20] He also refers to the old tradition of rug making in Afghanistan, including so-called "war rugs": Since the Soviet invasion, aspects of modern warfare, from tanks to assault rifles, and from aircraft to helicopters, are included into the traditional patterns, some of them highly abstract, others quite realistic, depending on the specific area and school. The artist, however, would never use such rugs for his *"Entknüpfungen"* series, as they are already highly charged with symbolism, without the need of another layer of meanings.[21]

As stated above, the most famous German artworks dealing with the First World War are those made in the 1920s. One may remember Otto Dix's *"Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor"* (storm troopers advance during a gas attack) from the "war" portfolio (1924): The soldiers are not human individuals any longer, wearing their frightful gas masks that dehumanise their faces and reduce their eyes to huge glasses. Even more so, they directly advance to the viewer, as if it were the last moment one could see just before being clubbed, stabbed and shot to death. The end is nigh! And it was the end of civilisation

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[18] http://www.joroettger.com

[19] http://www.till-ansgar-baumhauer.de

[20] Opening of the exhibition „Collateral Creativity", 28 September 2012, Gallery OKK, Berlin

[21] Ibid.

that many soldiers felt during the Great War: already by 1915, it felt endless, but it still continued for three more bloody years.

In Germany, remembering the Great War is highly overlaid by the Second World War with its even larger rapture of civilisation, and the division into two highly different German states as one of its outcomes.[22] There are, though, some contemporary German artists who address this first global war in various forms. Chris Dreier approached Verdun, site of the largest battle between French and German forces in the First World War. This battle continues to be of primary symbolic importance for both countries (similar to the Battle of the Somme for the British or Gallipoli for the Australians), i.e. that of senseless slaughter.[23] Her series *"Souvenirs de Verdun"* (together with Andreas Seltzmann, who made drawings around the many touristic guides that were published soon after the armistice) consists of photos of today's landscapes, made with a pinhole camera. The appearance is thus specific, with the whole photo being in focus while being somewhat blurred at the same time, giving it a ghastly look; be it an overgrown trench, a bunker or a harmless-looking grove that once was the area of fierce fighting. What does remain of such a symbolically burdened place that partly is still inhabitable due to the massive contamination with explosives, heavy metals, gas and other remnants of war? Or is it the absence of humans that lets nature recapture the landscapes again, making room for new life after the destructive period of mankind?

Robert Schneider's (born in 1944) huge body of works centres on socio-political issues, including his "Verdun" cycle of 42 charcoal drawings, also addressing this symbolic battle.[24] Applying a realist style, he made landscapes of today's area of Verdun, only to condense what he saw and felt when visiting these places. They are thus not a mere (if exact) black and white picture of what could be simply photographed, but an artistic condensate: without showing a single corpse, one can feel the amounts of blood that once flooded this area. Schneider's artistic approach works equally well when dealing with such diverse issues such as Nazi concentration camps, forced labour, terror, natural resources, environmental pollution or the downfall of heavy industry in central Europe.

Alexander Seiler calls his works *"Archiskulpturen"*, as architectural elements such as Doric columns have a strong influence on his sculptures.[25] The ship *"Panthersprung"* refers to the "panther's leap to Agadir", part of the Second Moroccan Crisis in 1911, another incident of clumsy gunboat diplomacy before the Great War. The sculptured ship, however, is far from being a symbol of might. In fact, it looks decayed, with its pillar-shaped gun barrels feebly pointing downwards, with a corroded hull and a derelict superstructure. Seiler is pointing to what he sees as the contemporary decline of culture, with war being a catalyst of such a downfall, as well as those who deny its existence.

Since decades, Asmus Petersen (born in 1928) is visualising the movements of ships in sea battles.[26] On the first view, the results appear to be abstract reductions to arrows and lines, but again, the specific titles may make the first difference for a viewer. The "Battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916, between 1720h and 1748h" depicts exactly that situation when

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[22] Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (ed., 2014), p. 47f.

[23] http://chrisdreier.de/tolstoy/galerien/Verdun/?t=Verdun

[24] http://www.bilder-der-arbeit.de/Schneider/Jahrhundert.html

[25] http://www.shohe-alexander-seiler.com

[26] http://www.asmus-petersen.de/Bilder-des-Krieges/Pazifik/Java-See.php

the British Home Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet met in the foggy waters around the Danish coast. The only major sea battle of the First World War was basically a draw, although both participants claimed it a victory: the British, as the German fleet had withdrawn, and the Germans, as they had inflicted more casualties with its inferior force. There are no visible battlefields left at the oceans, and hardly any memorials do remember these events. Under the surface, there may be wrecks and the remnants of thousands of sailors, but they all vanished from our visibility – and also from our memory?

One should not forget about new forms of media, too. The graphic designer Peter Eickmeyer (born in 1964) published his graphic novel version of Erich Maria Remarque's famous anti-war book *"Im Westen nichts Neues"* (All Quiet on the Western Front) in 2014.[27] Keeping some quarter of the original text, he visualised many of the stories included in the book. A strong example is surely the closeup-view of the protagonist's face, fearfully watching a German soldier bayoneting his French enemy, mirrored in his wide open eyes.

The given list, of course, could be continued with many other contemporary artists. This underlines that war and conflicts are subjects of German contemporary artists, even including the First World War that is otherwise overshadowed by later events in the German culture of commemoration. This result is quite contrary to the German art market, where such works are hardly to be seen. Having said that, artistic works as the ones mentioned are highly necessary, since the societal discussions on war and peace, defence and security, terror and freedom are dearly needed, not the least in Germany. Such works remind the civil society that wars are present, even if they may have vanished from the TV screens, with other news having become more "important". Equally, another task of these unique works is to remind the public how central history is, forming general perceptions of us and others. Not the least, war is and remains a central issue for mankind, or, in the words of the Greek philosopher Plato: "Only the dead have seen the end of war." Contemporary art, thus, has a chance to make a stand, to discuss and provoke about these "difficult" issues – if not only to stay relevant beyond an overheated global arts market.

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[27] http://petereickmeyer.wordpress.com

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