

ABSTRACT

a darker, better place is a visual project (video and photography) that I created during an artist residence at the Centre for Urban History (Lviv, Ukraine, 2019) with a grant from the British Council.

The work is the outcome of research into the CUH archives, namely TV reels from the 1960s, and comprises a video installation in addition to still images retrieved from the reels. The assembled material portrays a semi-fictional community that, sometime in the 1960s, somewhere in Ukraine, turned their backs on the perils of a world on the brink of disaster. They decided to build a place of their own, secreted away from the Cold War and Space Race rhetoric. They aimed to voyage to the centre of the earth, reaching for a darker, better place.

The images retrieved are overlaid stills, unintentional and fleeting passages between two different shots that gather as a single composite image for one 24th of a second. The words accompanying the piece seek to reflect on the following questions: How can appropriation and intervention on archival footage, within the realm of artistic practice, retrieve content from its original purpose and, in so doing, generate new readings?

Secondly, to what extent do these interventions on archival material bridge between the past and the present?

These questions will be addressed in articulation with the work of authors such as Joan Fontcuberta (on the realms of real and fiction), Marianne Hirsch (on the distinctions between history and memory), and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (on the possibilities inscribed within archives).

keywords

ARCHIVE
APPROPRIATION
INTERVENTION
UKRAINE
PHOTOGRAPHY
WITNESS

a darker, better place

MARTIM RAMOS

‘Now I realize that these tiny tombs, lined with foil and filled with a tiny supply of all the beauty in the world were very like ancient burial chambers, with their assortment of objects ready for the immortal life. (...)

Like all buried treasure (X marks the spot), they weren’t very reliable hiding places, and you could more or less forget about ever seeing your trove again. Very few people knew about the burial place, two or three trusted friends. But a few days later, when you checked back under the bush there was nothing there. The ‘little secret’ had disappeared as if it’d never existed.’

Maria Stepanova

Introduction

On October 2018 I arrived in Lviv, Ukraine, to take part in an artist residency. By sheer coincidence, some weeks before, on the exact day that I received the acceptance e-mail, I was looking at a stack of books on my brother’s desk. As I grabbed the one on top and flicked through the pages, I saw a map. The title said *Lwów 1911*. The book was *East West Street* by Philippe Sands and it felt like my entrance into Lviv. Sands, who is a Professor of Law and a practicing barrister involved in many of the most important cases in International Law, from Congo

to Iraq, Guantanamo and Rwanda, had written a searing portrait of his Jewish ancestors' ordeals throughout the twentieth century, a stirring journey starting in Lviv that underpins the creation and ensuing development of two fundamental (juridical) concepts, the core of his current practice: genocide and crimes against humanity. These two concepts, Sands was to explore, were first conceived in Lviv by Rafael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht, respectively, and were first used at the Nuremberg trials, between 1945 and 1946.

Soon enough, I was stepping on its cobblestone pavements, bearing Sands' descriptions in mind, aware of how 'the streets of Lviv are a microcosm of Europe's turbulent twentieth century, the focus of bloody conflicts that tore cultures apart', a city at 'the midpoint of imaginary lines connecting Riga to Athens, Prague to Kiev, Moscow to Venice, (...) the crossing of the fault lines that divided east from west, north from south' (Sands 2016: xxv). I could feel how transient the present is when the past creeps up on every corner. Lviv had changed sovereignty over six times throughout the twentieth century and one could scent a whiff of all those bygone periods.

The artist residency was taking place at the Centre for Urban History, an institution aimed at archiving and researching the history of Central and Eastern European cities.

I was to dive into their vast archive and to produce an artistic proposition, an ongoing initiative promoted by the CUH in an effort to expand the realm and reach of actors and discourses around materials whose stories are often neglected and, at times, forever lost. I asked myself what should be the actual purpose of my actions in retrieving these materials from their stored hibernation? What was I to look for in this archive? The answers could be aligned with what Ariella Aisha Azoulay suggests:

That which we have deposited there. Not necessarily you or I personally, but you and I as those sharing a world with others; 'we' who are beyond the borders of a certain time and place; 'we' who do not converge into a collective of national or ethnic identity; 'we' who ought to have been regarded as the reason and sense of the archive, but were instead replaced by 'history' – as if at the end of time history itself would come knocking on the gates of the archive, demanding to settle the accounts. (Azoulay 2014: 6)

Azoulay clearly demarcates 'us' as subjective bodies with an anti-historical agency, which in turn strengthens our ability to navigate the archive and to create from it. The archive presents itself in its double nature, as the structural edifice that upholds the burden of history in its overarching and all-encompassing advance,

while simultaneously opening up the backdoors to the unsaid, the unwritten, the unthought, in what, according to Georges Didi-Huberman, can be perceived as a sort of an *operating field*:

a determined place – framed like a *templum* in every possible expanse, (...), capable of making heterogeneous orders of reality meet, then of constructing this very meeting in place of overdetermination. It is a ‘table’ on which one decides to place certain disparate things with a view to establishing multiple ‘intimate and secret relations’, an area possessing its own rules of arrangement and of transformation for relinking certain things whose links are not at all obvious. And for making these links, once they are brought to light, the paradigms of a rereading of the world. (Didi-Huberman 2018: 39)

Wandering through the archive

I was particularly intrigued by a set of digitised film reels, hours and hours of silent and unbranded TV news footage from the 60s, and so I spent most of my time facing a computer screen, staring at a stream of moving images: parades; crowds; speeches; meetings; people on the phone; blueprints and models; industrial sites; people working at TV factories, shoe factories, furniture factories; hands making things, hands feeling the soil; people ploughing, people sowing, people harvesting; kids at school, grown-ups at school; medical exams; houses under construction, people moving into houses; miners digging holes in the ground; faces staring at us.

There were no captions or any form of text to go with the images, to provide some background information of any sort. Yet, hollow as they may be without any supporting references, these images still harbour something. The countless actions performed by nameless characters comprise a material and symbolic body to be reckoned with. I was looking at a society in the making. A collective endeavour towards a near future of social well-being. Silent displays of commitment and comradeship. Or so I thought. Working from the archive means working through the archive. Pictures from the archive do not exist as fixed or unequivocal, they ‘configure the times of memory and of desire at the same time. They have a corporeal, mnemonic, and votive character’ (Didi-Huberman 2018: 27). As Marianne Hirsch posited:

Rather than giving information about that past, archival images function as ‘points of memory’ that tell us more about our own needs and desires, our own fantasies and fears, than about the past to which they supposedly bear witness. (Hirsch 2012: 22)

The resulting outcome of my work is a threefold piece depicting a group of people that at some time in the 1960s, somewhere in Ukraine, made the harsh decision to turn their backs on the perils of a world at the brink of disaster, deciding to find and build a place of their own, away from the aggressiveness of the Cold War and as a counter to the Space Race rhetoric. They envisioned reaching the centre of the earth, reaching out for *a darker, better place*. The work comprises a video installation made from the archival footage documenting this radical action, from scanning the landscape to the actual moving in and settling down of its inhabitants; a set of photographs I made illustrating the efforts to locate remnants of this place and actions; a set of film stills extracted from the videos consisting of overlaid pictures created by the original edits when two distinct reels are glued together, resulting in uncanny and eerie pictures unintended to be seen as such. The work was first presented at the Museum of Modern Art of Odesa in February 2019.

The circumstances of the work implied forms of appropriation and intervention, which inevitably raise questions of accountability on behalf of the artist. With regards to these uses, Azoulay affirms that:

Intervention, imagination and transmission are the main practices through which researchers and artists today exercise their right to (the) archive, that is, the right to share the archive, the right to make use of the archive in ways that do not take it (merely) as a depository of the past, storing materials that document what is over and done with. Traces of the constituent violence preserved in the archive can either be preserved untouched, preserving the law of the archive, or be reconfigured and reconceptualized through a new grid, whose consequences affect the way one is governed, as well as the ways one shares the world with others. (Azoulay 2014: 8)

Azoulay stresses the significance of the author as a leading actor, exerting an important influence upon the faith of the object, namely the picture, echoing Joan Fontcuberta’s observation that, ‘when in literature we talk about the death of the author as a renewal formula looming over writing, in photography we could talk about the death of the object’ (Fontcuberta 2002: 22).

On the agency of witnessing

Asserting the agency of the creator as an active player invested in the construction of the picture and ensuing readings thereof does not take anything away from the image as a material and symbolic item. Throughout the ages, image makers have exerted such subjective influence over the destiny of their works, framing, rather than constraining, the outcomes of subsequent interpretations.

A few years before the invention of photography, between 1810 and 1815, Goya depicted the disasters of war that ravaged Spain. Under each drawing he wrote personal observations that not only underlined the gruesome nature of the bloodshed but which most strikingly reinforced his position amidst the occurrences. Under plaque 44, one reads *yo lo vi (I saw it)*. Such words mark an outstanding and groundbreaking visual affirmation of the witness as an engaged and active body implicated in the events, signalling and reclaiming its subjectivity as paramount, and emphasising that to look is to participate.

In 1968, upon witnessing US soldiers killing a Viet Cong soldier, British photojournalist Don McCullin made what is arguably his most well-known picture. However, before raising his camera, he went through the dead soldier's possessions and arranged them below his corpse. We see portraits of a woman (a wife? a sister?) and a handwritten letter. The intervention introduces a cognitive shift whereby the dead soldier becomes a dead person. McCullin did not shy away from letting his actions be known and, in doing so, his meddling, as questionable as it may be, reinforces the idea that the witness is not a bystander. Although McCullin creates a fact that did not take place by itself, thus challenging the most elemental rules of good photojournalistic practice, he manages to invoke a reality that is no less truthful.

The artist Alfredo Jaar has dedicated a great volume of work to the Rwanda Massacre. Shortly after that dreadful occurrence, in 1994, Jaar visited the country, thus coming to learn of the unspeakable ordeal endured by a woman that witnessed the cold-blooded murder of her husband and two sons before managing to flee with her daughter. This harrowing experience is told to us through Jaar's own words, which are then supported by 100,000 slides piled on a light table depicting nothing but the woman's eyes in the work *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*.

The work is a perceptive attempt at addressing the core of a traumatic event while avoiding the recurrent material, symbolic and moral paralysis in the face of such terrors. A *mélange* of layered accounts and events relays the greater purpose of the testimony: the actual action as witnessed by Emerita; the meeting of Jaar and Emerita, and her description of what took place; Jaar's sharing of the story and, in the

end, the striking reminder that it all comes to us through the eyes of Gutete Emerita. What these three distinct examples share, I argue, is a common investment on the role of the witness, one that is aware of the powers at play when bridging different times, places, experiences, and accounts. The role of the witness is thus one that is not only able to absorb the *ethos* of a given circumstance but which is also capable of acting it out in the face of others. Writing about Anna Akhmatova's memoir, Slavoj Žižek states the following:

The key question, of course, is what kind of description is intended here? Surely it is not a realistic description of the situation, but what Wallace Stevens called 'description without place,' which is what is proper to art. This is not a description which locates its content in a historical space and time, but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomena it describes, an inexistent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a decontextualized appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being. To quote Stevens again: 'What it seems it is and in such seeming all things are.' Such an artistic description 'is not a sign for something that lies outside its form.' Rather, it extracts from the confused reality its own inner form in the same way that Schoenberg 'extracted' the inner form of totalitarian terror. He evoked the way this terror affects subjectivity. (Žižek 2008: 6)

Therefore, the extent of the role of the witness does not have to be contingent on the circumstantial presence at a given place in a given moment, but rather reaches and acts much beyond these markers. This has been made clear over the years, particularly if we consider how courts of law have dismissed testimony by people whose accounts did not match the evidence which, in turn, has come to play the most significant role in the reconstruction of past events.

Joan Fontcuberta asserts that 'against what we have been ingrained with, against what we allow ourselves to think, photography always lies, lies by instinct, lies because its nature doesn't allow it to do anything else'¹ (Fontcuberta 2002: 15). He further downplays such claims, adding that what really matters is how the photographer uses this inevitable lie, to what ends or with what purposes. This is what Philippe Sands did in his efforts to retrace his family's stories, often finding himself looking at photographs, reading into people's demeanour, their grins, their gestures, their gazes. His training as a barrister is akin to the exercise of looking at photographs, which certainly demands that he asks questions, interrogates them even, gathering dots, inferring from absences, retrieving information that lies within the picture, uncovering the hidden lives of those long gone.

¹ All quotes by Joan Fontcuberta have been translated from Spanish by the author.

Reading pictures implies entering into dialogue with them, because not only do they speak of what is visible, they also touch on what is concealed. Photography is not so much a lie, as claimed by Fontcuberta, it is rather a riddle before which one has to ask the right questions. As Azoulay claims in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, one has to ‘take into account all the participants in photographic acts – camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator – approaching the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of these’ (Azoulay 2008: 23).

The end is not near

In February 2022, I found myself again staring obsessively at news’ reels from TV networks; no longer the lost films from a previous century, but the shocking and ongoing invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. Familiar streets and buildings turned into rubble, engulfed in clouds of dust. As the alarms blasted through the air, people rushed to their basements, garages, metro stations and bunkers to seek protection from the bombs dropping down. TV screens kept on showing these ongoing events with populations packed underground, their stunned faces quietly staring in vague anticipation. This is the place I had come to know through its people’s stories and my personal interpretation of an overlooked archive, sketching out an attempt to find something better down below. Some of the people who were now enduring such perils were good friends with whom I had worked with closely in the making of my piece. We exchanged messages, I expressed my concern and solidarity, and was humbled by the resolution of their responses, their confident spirits, and their dire commitment to the dreadful present. In face of the ongoing disasters of war, it became clear to me that history did not rest quietly in the past. History has always been present, has always been the present.

References

- Azoulay, Ariella. 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.
- . ‘Archive’ in *Political Concepts: A critical lexicon*. (2014) <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/archive/>
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2018. *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Fontcuberta, Joan. 2002. *El Beso de Judas*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sands, Philippe. 2016. *East West Street*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Stepanova, Maria. 2021. *In Memory of Memory*. New York: New Directions Publishing.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *Violence*. New York: Picador.









