World Skin
A Photographic Safari into the Land of War
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Armed with cameras, we are making our way through a three-dimensional space. The landscape before our eyes is scarred by war — demolished buildings, armed men, tanks and artillery, piles of rubble, the wounded and the maimed. This arrangement of photographs and news pictures from different zones and theaters of war depicts a universe filled with mute violence. The audio reproduces the sound of a world in which to breathe is to suffer. Special effects? Hardly. We, the visitors, feel as though our presence could disturb this chaotic equilibrium, but it is precisely our intervention that stirs up the pain. We are taking pictures; and here, photography is a weapon of extinguishment.

The land of war has no borders. Like so many tourists, we are visiting it with camera in hand. Each of us can take pictures, capture a moment of this world wrestling with death. The image thus recorded exists for no one any more. Each photographed fragment disappears from the screen and is replaced by a black silhouette. With each click of the shutter, a part of the world is extinguished. Each exposure is printed out. As soon as an image is printed to paper, it is no longer visible on the projection screen. All that remains is its eerie shadow, cast according to the viewer's perspective and concealing fragments of future photographs. The farther we penetrate into this universe, the more strongly aware we become of its infinite nature. And the chaotic elements renew themselves, so that as soon as we recognize them, they recompose themselves once again in a tragedy without end.

I take pictures. Through what I do — first aggression, then feeling the pleasure of sharing — I rip the skin off the body of the world. This skin becomes a trophy, and my fame grows with the disappearance of the world.

Here, being engulfed by war is an immersion into a picture, but it is a theatrical performance as well. In the sequence of events which characterize the story of a single person, war is an exceptional incident which reveals humanity's deepest abyss. It promotes the process of reification of another human being. Taking pictures expropriates the intimacy of the pain while, at the same time, bearing witness to it.

This has to do with the status of the image in our process of getting a grasp on this world. The rawest and most brutal realities are reduced to an emotional superficiality in our perception. Acquisition, evaluation and understanding of the world constitute a process of capturing it. Capturing means making something one's own; and once it is in one's possession, that thing can no longer be taken by another.

In German, one says "schießen," "nehmen;" in French, "prise de vues." Shooting, taking. In the case of a material storage medium, "taking" something is the equivalent of taking it with you. Photography captures the light reflected by the world. It constitutes an individual process of capturing and arranging. The image is adapted to the viewfinder.

The picture neutralizes the content. Media bring everything onto one and the same level. Physical memory — paper, for example — is the door that remains open to a certain kind of forgetting. We interpose the lens [Objektiv in German] between ourselves and the world. We safeguard ourselves from the responsibility of acting. One "takes" the picture, and the world "proffers" itself as a theatrical event. The world and the destruction constitute the preferred stage for this drama — tragedy as a play of nature in action.

The living are the tourists of death. If art is a serious game, then so is war. War is a game in which the body is placed at risk as an incessantly, unremittingly posed question of the reduction of existence to its bare remains.

The printed trace is the counterpart of forgetting. A "good conscience" is a contradiction of a "good memory." One knows what one has retained, but one does not know what one has stricken from one's memory.

Here, the viewer/tourist contributes to an amplification of the tragic dimension of the drama. Without him, this world is forsaken, left to its pain. He jostles this pain awake, exposes it. Through the media, war becomes a public stage — in the sense in which a whore might be referred to as a "public woman" — and pain reveals its true identity on this obscene stage, and all are completely devoured. The sight of the wounded calls to mind the image of a human being as a construct which can be dismantled. Material, more or less. The logic of the material holds the upper hand over the logic of the spirit, the endangered connective tissue of the social fabric.

War is a dangerous, interactive community undertaking. Interactive creation plays with this chaos, in which placing the body at stake suggests a relative vulnerability. The world falls victim to the viewer's glance, and everyone is involved in its disappearance. The collective unveiling becomes a personal pleasure, the object of fetischistic satisfaction. I keep to myself what I have seen [or rather, the traces of what I have seen]. To possess a printed vestige, to possess the image — inherent in this is the paradox of the virtual, which is better suited to the glorification of the ephemeral. The sound track is there to enable us to go beyond the play of images and to experience this immersion as real participation in the drama. In sharp contrast to the video games that transform us into passionate warriors, here the audio unmasks the true nature of apparently harmless gestures and seeks to provide a form of experience rather than a

form of comprehension. Some things cannot be shared. Among them are the pain and the image of our remembrance. The worlds to be explored here can bring these things closer to us — but always simply as metaphors, never as a simulacrum.

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