

Letters on Contemporary Nov. 2008

Dear Friends,

As of 1st December the Gallery's name will change to 'Natascha Mehlhop Gallery'. Though I



am a little sad to lose the touch of exotic by replacing 'Brussels Flamingo', I am most happy to more visibly identify with what the Gallery stands for and, consequently, what I would like to be held responsible for by you, the supporters and friends of the gallery. I wouldn't deny that the gallery's program has my subjective touch, however – and this is what

matters – the universal and so objective message of this kind of art influences us all. Thus, I will continue to search for and introduce to you artworks that in their genuine language speak to us, emanate ideas and concepts that are time-resistant and yet are channelled in a contemporary way and with a clear mastership in the art form in question.

The current exhibition at the Gallery of work by artist duo Goran Galic and Gian-Reto Gredig sets a gallery internal record concerning the dwelling time of visitors (almost reached by the corresponding time people spent around C.B.Goldbach's

'Underwood' in January this year). With this hour-long calm and concentration on the work comes a most stimulating wish of most gallery goers to discuss what they have just listened to. The video-interviews indeed raise so many questions about photojournalism in general, the responsibility and limits of the profession and yet, all these questions in the end throw us back to reflecting about the world we live in. That gives this work the universal impact. We are left with more open than answered questions – yet, without these interviews we would never have come across these questions.

Photographers in Conflict or – the endless search for the defining moment

Many people claim that photography as a medium to keep up with current political affairs, as the immediate witness, is dead. As soon as anything newsworthy happens the TV stations will soon go on air to spread the news in a supposedly more direct and close-to-the-action way. Nowadays each war is accompanied by the fight for the TV rights and the power over the best satellite to cover the country in question. In 2001 it

emerged that the Pentagon had bought a private satellite named Ikonos in order to gain exclusive power over the image of the bombing in Afghanistan; and during the Gulf war it was CNN who coined the general notion of the events and yet, as Susan Sontag put it: “*TV is a stream of pictures where each new one is swapping the one before*”. A photograph on the other hand encapsulates *one* privileged moment.

Very often it is a specific image that doesn't fade from memory. If we take the Abu Ghraib incident, for example, it is the one photo with the man wearing a hood over his head that endures while all words made in this context sink into oblivion. Robert Capa's moment-of-death photograph of a Royalist soldier during the Spanish Civil War (one of the most famous war photographs of all time) illustrates the impressive potential



Stanley Greene/ NOOR

of photography. It stands for photography's immense power, once the photojournalist succeeds, to raise above the narrow horizon of the current event. Photojournalism at its best doesn't lend itself to massmedia consumption. In 1946 Jean Cocteau wrote in the introduction to a book with photos by Pierre Jahan (who instead of photographing corpses opted for a graveyard of broken statues to show the horrors of war): *"The job of the poet consists of placing those objects of the world which have become invisible due to the glue of habit in an unusual position which strikes the soul and gives them a tragic force"*.

Photographers have been on hand at the defining moments of the 20th century and they still have an eye on capturing history as it unfolds. Their images have changed our perception of war,

political leaders, social crises and the communities next door. In 1968 during the Vietnam war there were more than 600 photojournalists accredited and yet it is not the heroes depicted from below, but the defenseless naked children and other victims of war that linger in our mind.

Unfortunately, due to the power of television, photojournalism is going through a financial crisis. Few magazines any longer commission photographers to go off for sev-

eral months and produce an "essay". So photojournalists inevitably look to book production and search for allies among their colleagues to realize ambitious projects. It was already in 1947 that the best known agency of that kind, Magnum, was founded and a great many were to follow. After the second world war documentary photography took on a social concern, actively promoting values such as hope, courage and – predominantly – humanity. And it is still this concern which seems to lead photojournalists specializing in the documentation of conflict and war to work at the forefront of battle and strife.

In Galić and Gredigs' video-interviews the journalists acknowledge that their photos only very rarely have a noticeable effect on the course of the world, but at the same time most of them say that without believing that their photos make a difference, they couldn't do their job. *"We'd like to influence politics ; but at the end of the day I think no, we don't. I keep hoping that we can, so I keep doing it and I keep banging on peoples' heads, trying to make them listen to us"* (Stanley Greene/ NOOR). Another photojournalist compares his work with watering a plant: *"It is very, very difficult in photojournalism to change things but it's like a seed – if you don't water that plant, it dies"* (Philip Blenkinsop/ NOOR).

In another video 'Publish or perish' the journalists describe how they are at times exploited by



Philip Blenkinsop/ NOOR



Shaul Schwarz/ Getty Images

photojournalists recall a certain experience or situation in so much detail that they again do what they are best at: capturing a defining moment, but creating the image in the listeners head. This is particularly the case during the interview called ‘My kind of picture’ where they are asked about their favorite or key picture. Tellingly, this picture frequently coincides with a situation where they received the confirmation that

all the risks and pri-

the media and how governments and political allies try to push them in a certain direction. An editor might want to tell the story in his own way, misleading captions might weaken the impact of a photo or photos might simply not be published for the concern of an advertiser in the magazine. Sometimes though, the manipulation might start at an even earlier stage as Getty Images’ Shaul Schwarz’ story about the flying stones reveals: He recalls a day of ongoing demonstrations between Israelis and Palestinians that he was sent to photograph and that neither of them would throw stones if the photographers weren’t there; so if all photographers had left the chaos might not have happened at all.

During the video-interviews the most astonishing and evocative moments are those where the

variations they impose on themselves for doing their job do have a meaning. Peter Dejong from Associated Press describes a day in Chechnya during heavy bombardment, where despite the life-threatening chaos a man found the strength to remain calm and solace his wife when they had to leave behind their house. According to Dejong it was also a solace for him to find that through all the suffering there were people who remained human, who exercise this human strength. It is the search for such moments and human emotions that keeps him going. At its best a documentary photograph holds the quintessence of a

whole situation as it is the case for Shaul Schwarz’ photo of the young boy stealing a piece of raw meat in Haiti: *“...it just showed where the country had gotten to at the point... This is what’s it came to; this is what reality looks like”*.

Being ‘in’ the war, ‘in’ the conflict zones necessarily leads to situations where the photojournalists need to decide whether to take a photo or to help, dealt with in the video-interview titled ‘Camera down’. Stanley Green/ NOOR: *“ Well, there is a village in Altaroun in Lebanon where these people where living and being bombed, I guess for many days. We, a group of journalists, arrived there during a 40 hours ceasefire and they came out of these houses as if they hadn’t seen people or anything else for a really long time. They were very scared. They asked us to save them and we*



Peter Dejong/ Associated Press

said: "We are journalists...". They thought we were NGO's. It became evident quite quickly that these people were just so desperate because they couldn't get out. They were handicapped, they had mental problems, women and children. We had literally to put down our cameras, our bulletproof vests and our helmets and carry them out. Well, you can't take pictures while doing that. In the end, it was really a great day for jour-

nalists, because it was the humanity that overcame the desire to photograph. What an incredible scene with this march of journalists, carrying refugees with all this rubble, stones and barbedwire. ...The Israelis could have turned around and bombed our position. We didn't have our vests, we didn't have our cameras... None of that came into play".

Many photojournalists died in

places like Afghanistan, Israel, and Chechnya, but without getting close to the action; many moments in history would have passed without a witness to seal them on photographic paper and bring them to the world's attention. Without witness it would be as if nothing had ever happened.

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." Robert Capa

Next Vernissage: Thursday, 4 December 6-9pm
Michael Pycke
influx

