

Petra Bopp

Trigger Warning. An artistic conference on war, trauma and AI

Neue Galerie im Höhmannhaus, Augsburg, November 23-26, 2023

Introduction to the installation "Trauma Porn" by Boris Eldagsen and Tanvir Taolad

Trigger Warning – we encounter this title for tonight's event and over the next four days more and more frequently on the screen, in front of films and in exhibitions - usually in the form of small signs with references to possible „*sensitive content*“ in what is shown, i.e. sensitive content that could hurt our feelings and sensations when we look at images, that could trigger something in us that we have not yet consciously perceived.

Yes, we need this hint when we approach the images of "*Trauma Porn*", when we immerse ourselves in the large-format photo walls and sharpen our gaze, zooming in on the small-format edited reproductions and the framed vintage prints, the original prints from the 1930s and 1940s of National Socialism. They were the starting point for Boris Eldagsen and Tanvir Taolad, for their processing with artificial intelligence and chemical processes, the destruction of the photo surface with acid baths. The selection of these small 6x9 cm prints refers to common themes of everyday life under National Socialism and the war in the first two exhibition chapters, the pre-war and war. In the third section, the post-war section, some of the photos are turned towards the wall and only their backs are visible. They stand for the traumas, for loss and repression, for the silence and concealment that we all know from the post-war years - and sometimes to this day.

Before I come to the editing of the photos, a few sentences on the creation of these mass-produced images in small format and often with the usual jagged edges of snapshots, developed and printed in specialist photo stores.

Hitler and Goebbels relied on the visual medium of photography as soon as they came to power. They took advantage of the ubiquitous spread of amateur photography in the 1920s and as early as 1933, Joseph Goebbels called for an "*army of millions of amateur photographers*"¹ to educate the national community in the spirit

¹ Willy Frerk, „Das Erlebnis des Einzelnen ist zu einem Volkserlebnis geworden und das durch die Kamera!“ in *Photofreund*, 1933, S. 417, zit. nach Starl, Knipser, München 1995, S. 19

of National Socialist propaganda. An appeal at the beginning of the war in the magazine *"Photofreund"* further intensified this call: *"For the soldier, it is an absolute duty not to let the camera rest, especially now."*² The small and cheap cameras from Agfa, Kodak and Voigtländer made it easier for recruits to decide to buy and use them. This led to a production of private photography during the Second World War that was equivalent in quantity to the millions of photographs taken by the propaganda companies. Soldiers photographed the occupation of foreign countries on an unprecedented scale and created special war albums for this purpose. The Nazi photo industry supported the request to the soldiers with prefabricated albums, so that the soldiers naturally continued their practice of photographing their own community associations, which they had previously practiced in the Hitler Youth and the Reich Labor Service, during the war years. With these pictures, the photographers articulated their awareness of experiencing something historically significant as part of the collective act of violence of the invasions of Poland, France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, the Balkans, the Soviet Union and also North Africa, as well as their desire to present themselves as occupiers in foreign countries.

Boris Eldagsen's father was also drafted into the Wehrmacht at the age of 16 and left behind a previously hidden box of photos, which Boris only found after his death. As he experienced his father's war traumas during the dying process, these experiences and the photos were a trigger for him to deal with the transgenerational transmission of war experiences in detail and in his own way as a photographer. In addition to the family photos, Boris began to collect other war photos, anonymously from flea markets and on ebay. His selection for the exhibition corresponds to the usual motifs that we know from many war albums: Group pictures, soldiers with military equipment, celebrating, driving pigs and cows from farms in the Soviet Union, the so-called *"life from the land"*, as the propaganda put it. Graves, destruction in the cities, burning houses, smoking horizons, dead bodies in mass graves, hanged bodies, dead bodies left lying in the fields, in the bushes, a woman with her breast exposed, often photographed in close-up. And again and again so-called fun scenes, as they were created in this community of men: Practicing massacring, killing in hand-to-hand combat, shooting with a rifle attached. Even women were invited to join in and play

² Herbert Starke, Und trotzdem: Amateurfotografie!, in: Photofreund, 1939, S. 349, zit. nach Starl, S. 111

along. The collection of 20 portrait photos of men and women, often studio shots, is striking - as if Boris wanted to dig into the faces with the photographer's intense gaze, to find out what kind of people they were who had supported this system, who had themselves photographed at family celebrations in their living rooms with a photo of Hitler in the background.

As a photographer who has long been familiar with all the digital techniques of the medium and acts as "*Head of Digital*" at the German Photographic Academy, Boris very quickly turned to artificial intelligence, tried it out and won the Sony World Photography Award with the motif of a double portrait of two women. However, he gave it back because an AI image is not a photograph. In doing so, he forced a debate about the differentiation between analogue and digital techniques that continues to this day - he will go into more detail tomorrow in the Artist Talk.

However, he now took a completely different approach to processing the war images with artificial intelligence. In his collaboration with Tanvir Taolad, his younger friend and photographer from Bangladesh, he tried to access the unconscious, repressed inner worlds of trauma by altering the photos. Tanvir also deals with injuries, nightmares and hallucinations in his photos. In an intensive exchange with the photographic material, both worked on the images in very different ways. Tanvir works with acids on the surface of the photos, resulting in roughening and fogging. What is depicted is dissected, rearranged, altered with color and photographed again.

The individual photographic results are reassembled in the exhibition installation on the wall and in the room. It is only when the small vintage prints and the large, structurally processed picture walls come together that the fascination of immersing oneself in visual forms of horror becomes possible.

The title that Boris and Tanvir have chosen for their installation is initially surprising and demands clarification. *Trauma Porn* – sounds lurid and makes you think of war porn, food porn and the like. How do the artists explain this title? They refer very directly to the unconsciousness of trauma and the desire to show, which is inherent in all pornography. Through the intergenerational transmission of Boris' war experiences from the Second World War and the influence of the 1971 war in

Bangladesh on Tanvir, both photographers sought a visual expression of inner images and ideas. Then there are the diverse new formats in social media such as the *Holocaust Challenge* on TikTok, where young people re-enact the role of victims of persecuted Jews in short video clips in order to understand the Holocaust. So how can traumas be depicted in a wide variety of media using new visual techniques? Is there even a visual form for this? Since February 24, 2022 and also since October 7 of this year, we have all been confronted with images of war again and again every day. Photos from Ukraine are reminiscent of the b/w photos of Wehrmacht soldiers with mass graves and destruction in the same places. We are once again confronted with the interrelation of threatening events and psychological reactions, the flashbacks of powerlessness and helplessness. We live side by side with the war refugees from Syria, Ukraine and other countries. Perhaps something of the unconscious of these transmission processes in cultural transmission reaches us with this installation.

Trauma (Greek) stands for a wound, for injury. Traumas are passed on to the next generation if they remain silent and cannot be dealt with or resolved. Feelings of guilt and shame are passed on and become a collective matter. They live on in burdensome emotional legacies. Over the years of working on the war albums, I encountered very different ways in which the daughters/sons and grandchildren's generation dealt with these photographic and emotional legacies of the war generation.

- For two grandchildren, cousin and cousin, it was essential to trace the activities of their grandfather, a staff doctor in the Ukraine, using his photos: What did he know about the crimes committed by his unit, was he involved? However, the result, a book, broke the family bond.

- Malte Ludin, a German film director and son of Hanns Ludin, the SA-Obergruppenführer and representative of the German Reich in Slovakia, responsible for the deportation and death of 60,000 Jews, produced a film about this father and the involvement of the whole family: *"Zwei oder drei Dinge, die ich von ihm weiß"* (2004). It shows very clearly the impact of the traumas of war and the attempt to reveal them by breaking the silence.

- A young photographer, Helena Schätzle, sets off to the Ukraine and Russia to find the places where her grandfather was deployed during the war using her

grandfather's photos. She talks to the people who live there today and uses her camera to try to come to terms with her family's legacy.

- Falk Richter's play "The silence", which deals with transgenerational trauma, has just premiered at the Berlin Schaubühne: a grandfather in Russian captivity, a father as a soldier in the Second World War, the great silence in the family, which the son wants to break through in order to get to "where the feelings are that desperately want to be felt". (taz 21.11.23)

- Conferences on collectively experienced violence are increasingly dealing with trauma.

Above all, however, the daily reports on television and the messages on social media are about the massive presence of images of war that trigger these traumas once again. Boris Eldagsen and Tanvir Taolad have taken their images as source material to show us all an experience of contemporary narrative, discursive and performative ways of dealing with images and their traumas using today's artificial intelligence techniques. These image-immanent ambiguities will enter into the cultural image memory, which here leads from the processed image views of the monument of Tannenberg in East Prussia, to the injuries in the war depictions of the second room, to the colorful, abstracting images of traumatic fantasies that dissolve all b/w motifs.

"Photography that reports on catastrophes and other evils is often criticized when it appears "aesthetic", i.e. too much like art. But art does just that: it transforms - and that is the great double potential of photography. It produces documents and creates works of visual art."

With these words from Susan Sontag, I would like to leave you to the visual worlds of Boris Eldagsen and Tanvir Taolad.

