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Introduction to issue 25 "History is Present".

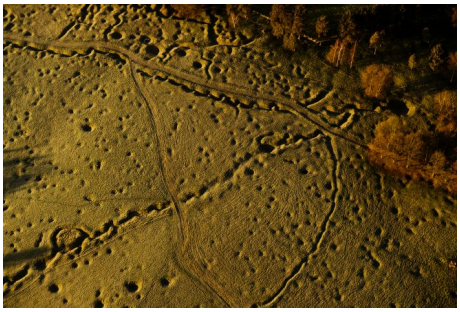
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History Is Present

> For history had only fallen asleep; like primitive creatures that hibernate – hidden away and then woken by a little warmth and damp – history needs only a ray of light to penetrate through the darkness to a lens. Then the hours that have passed can be fully reawakened and experienced again.
>
> Bolesław Matuszewski, *Nowe źródło historii* [*New Source of History*] (1898)

Bolesław Matuszewski was a pioneer of cinematography, one of the first to begin consciously recording historical events with a camera, as well as analyzing the significance of such advances. The words quoted above have themselves passed into history. The potential of cinematography was seized upon almost immediately despite the complications that came to light. What should be recorded? Daily life or events involving historical participants (such as the coronation of Tsar Nicolas II, filmed by Matuszewski)? How could "the past hours" be captured, since the equipment available instead suited relatively static events (like the coronation) or highly choreographed ones (like the reenactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace, a dozen or so years after the coronation)? And so on.

Matuszewski's metaphor – the image of a ray of light reawakening life – can be extended. François Hartog writes in a similar vein about a historian's work. Our **Close-Up** section begins with an extract from his book *Évidence de l'histoire. Ce que voient les historiens* (2005), translated by Piotr Kubkowski. Hartog analyzes the various research strategies of



Battlefield at Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial, Beaumont-Hamel-on-the-Somme. Photography by Michael Sheils ©
Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace 1918. Courtesy of the artist

the 19th-century historians Jules Michelet, Augustin Thierry, and Numa Denis Fustela de Coulanges (who worked a generation later). He enquires into the trust they each placed in different sources, and considers the different historical contexts they were born into – the French Revolution, or the July Revolution of 1830 in the case of Fustela. Despite these differences, they all pursued the same goal: to reveal "how it was," to follow diverse "paths to a historical clearing," to the "true" historical image.
This "historian's eye" enables sources to be reinvigorated – awakening the past – to finally present the past and the experiences of past generations to our eyes and ears. Bringing history to light – or even to *life* – is a demanding endeavor that requires discerning study and the interpretation of a variety of sources, mostly written ones for the cases discussed here. The image of history is therefore a conception: there are many perceptions of reality implicit in the "diversities" Hartog draws our attention to.

The appearance and spread of visual recording technology – photography and film – did not invalidate the above points, but there was, at first, the illusion of change: direct access to reality had become available; reality was captured in an image. And the new technologies gave rise to another illusion: that we possess the power to conjure up history. Matuszewski drew attention to this point by saying that we film *with future meaning in mind*. We make history in the present moment. Furthermore, the form taken by photographic and filmic activity, its broadly accessible and frequently amateur nature, had the effect that history was to become increasingly the history of individuals and their everyday experience.

The articles in this edition of *View* concern a variety of epochs and media – from heavy tomes of written history to commercial advertisements, from paintings to maps, monuments to photography, cave painting to VR and 3D technologies. (These media meet in a text with four authors: Marina Gutiérrez De Angelis, Greta Winckler, Paula Bruno, and Carmen Guarini, who

use the latest technology to try and recreate the sense experiences of the Paleolithic past.) It is plain to see that each history is different, and in any case is differently shown and interpreted. Nevertheless, the authors' discussion of historical methodology based on visual sources clusters around a few central problems.

The first of these, not necessarily limited to the nature of evidence, seems today to be of fundamental significance – the question of the historical subject and the possibilities available to us of reaching the voice of the people. Michelet poses this question directly; it is analyzed by Hartog but also returns in various forms in other texts. It is put most powerfully by Fabienne Liptay in the context of Peter Watkins's film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2000). Michał Pospiszyl previously wrote about this film for us in his article "Nakręcić rewolucję" [To Direct a Revolution] (*View* no. 17 – in Polish). Liptay interprets this question as a critique of the operations of the state apparatus, including the film industry, which uses statistics as a basic means of ordering social life. Kacper Pobłocki also specifically considers the voice of the people; however, we have been unable to publish his article yet, as the final corrections require visiting a library that is closed due to the lockdown. We plan to publish it at a later date.

Perhaps, by distant association, his case of an "unfinished" text reminds us of a certain asynchrony: when exactly do history and stories come into being, and with reference to which timeframes? At present, with the lockdown, we live with an intense awareness of historical time. More than usual, we already think this present time will be deemed significant by later generations. We consciously create artefacts from our experience of the pandemic: memes, magazine covers, press articles, and Facebook posts. There are already sociological studies underway that involve the creation of new (historical) sources – not only questionnaires but also diaries and journals. And artists have shown interest in this phenomenon. The asynchronic nature of the situation also exists in the awareness that in the f u t u r e we

will seek the tools to understand our c u r r e n t predicament: sometimes expressed by words of radical distinction ("this has never happened before"), sometimes by analogy ("the most serious crisis since the World War II"). On other occasions, the story we recount serves to speak about things we still lack the language for, and whose meaning has not become clear to us. We know that the present time is historical, but besides generalizations like "the world will never be the same again," we really don't know whether it will become a significant turning point or simply a memory connecting the "survivors." How much is in our hands? Is it possible for us not only to experience something to be later recalled, but also to make this history?

This digression into the topic of "pandemic people" permits us to become aware of two possible (though probably not the only) formulae for the creation of meaning. The first of these depends on the production and interpretation of signs, of telling stories; the second concerns the creation of historical events. The two aspects need not be separate: as Łukasz Zaremba shows, erecting monuments in honor of the Confederation – a few years, and then several decades after the end of the American Civil War – was as much a matter of establishing a certain version of the past as of shaping contemporaneous politics. Agata Sierbińska reveals similar processes at work in the creation of the "Smolensk legend," although the timeframe and materials involved are very different. Her point of departure is a photograph of Donald Tusk and Vladimir Putin taken at Smolensk North Airport on April 10, 2010. The "historical uncanny" (cf. W. J. T. Mitchell) born out of the experience of disaster also reveal the group work of processing the effects of catastrophic events. Our doubts as to whether and how the voice of the people of history can be heard are closely tied to the question of how history's images speak – and in whose name. Widely recognized, reproduced, distributed, and discussed media images and advertisements respond to the people's needs just as much as they are able to influence those same needs and

attitudes. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska reveals subtle aspects of these interactions in her article on advertising in women's magazines in Germany immediately after World War II. The clash of the voice of the "people," often individual, and objective generalization is also presented by Kinga Siewior and Aleksandra Szczepan as they interpret various maps that were prepared in the context of genocide sites. Their necro-cartographical project is based on Roma Sendyka's concept of non-places of memory,and includes the question of traces of the past that are still hidden underground, awaiting discovery – to be "awoken" by the historian.

In **Perspectives**, the American painter R. H. Quaytman talks to Katarzyna Bojarska about the mutual influence in her work of images of history, the history of art, and her own personal history. The authors writing for our **Panorama** section take an external look at the same interactions. On the one hand they observe how history shapes conceptions of art – for instance, Sotirios Bahtsetzis analyzes the economic history of the meaning of "masterpieces." From another angle, our authors consider how the history of art can be rewritten, or how art can be made as the result of rewriting archives. Teresa Fazan interprets Nomusa Makhubu's work *Umasifanisane I* [*Comparison I*] (2014) from the critical perspective of black feminism, revealing how work with archives can make new forms of representation available. Piotr Skłodkowski writes about transformations in the history of art that result from curatorial practice and which also have the capacity to transcribe history in a "retro-active" gesture. He bases his analysis on the following exhibitions: *Ekspresje wolności. Bunt i Jung Idisz – wystawa, której nie było…* [*Expressions of Freedom: Bunt and Yung-Yidish – An Exhibition That Never Was…*] (Museum of Art in Łódź, 2019); *Nigdy więcej* [*Never Again*] (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019); and the planned exhibition *Streng/Włodarski*.

Marta Rakoczy and Michał Pospiszyl also write about *Never Again* in our **Snapshots** section – providing two diverse

perspectives. They both invoke the broader contemporary context of anti-fascism (and fascism), the main theme of the exhibition. Once again, the issue of the agency of the subject and its expression via images comes to the fore. The section ends with a response from Ewa Domańska to Andrzej Marzec's review of her book *Nekros* [*Necros*]. A large portion of Domańska's argument is also devoted to the place and role of the writing subject.

Several contributing authors draw our attention to the problem of the passage of time, a phenomenon which means we will not speak of "experiencing again," as Matuszewski put it, but of experiencing "by new subjects." The grand narratives of 20th-century history are disappearing from memory – or at least changing form. Witnesses of World War I are no longer with us; the last witnesses of the Holocaust are passing away. What remains for us is not so much repetition as recreation – which can be the ghostly, phantom return of history. A popular form this takes is historical re-enactment, where participants try to relive history today. They "re-live" it in two senses – not only as a performative, aesthetic experience, but also as an overcoming of the death that does not really occur in their choreographed battle scenes.

The photograph on the cover of this edition of *View* comes from Michael Sheils's project documenting the real battlefields of the World War I. One hundred years later the remnants of the past are still visible on the Earth's surface: the trench lines, the craters left after explosions, and the irreparable shaping of terrain by long-lasting military action. Sheils's photography is ostentatiously beautiful, following a kind of *National Geographic* aesthetic – a magazine which has been reminding us of the world's beauty for well over a century. At the same time, his work suggests two further questions. The first concerns how we read the signs of dormant history and what more we can (still?) learn from the today; the second asks what the consequences are of

the process by which history – including war – becomes merely an aesthetic representation.

The projects presented in the **Viewpoint** section pose these same two questions – as well as undertaking a critique of the genre of reconstruction. Agnieszka Rayss, in her work *A więc wojna* [*This Means War*] (2019) – commented on by Iwona Kurz – focuses on the very idea of this form, revealing its spectral and purely aesthetic nature. In turn, Róża Duda and Michał Soja's work *Nie obejmuj płonących posągów* [*Never Embrace Burning Statues*] (2019, in progress) – takes over the genre of reconstruction so as to engage in speculative history. Dorota Sosnowska reveals further layers of this narrative, narrated by various means. This is a narrative of something that did not happen, but could well have happened if one particular subject had wished it: Faustyn Wirkus, an American soldier of Polish descent who took part in the conquest of Haiti.

Editorial team