

Displaced time

10 PHOTOGRAPHS FROM RESTRICTED COLLECTIONS AS A MODEL FOR remembrance

by Annika Toots

abstract

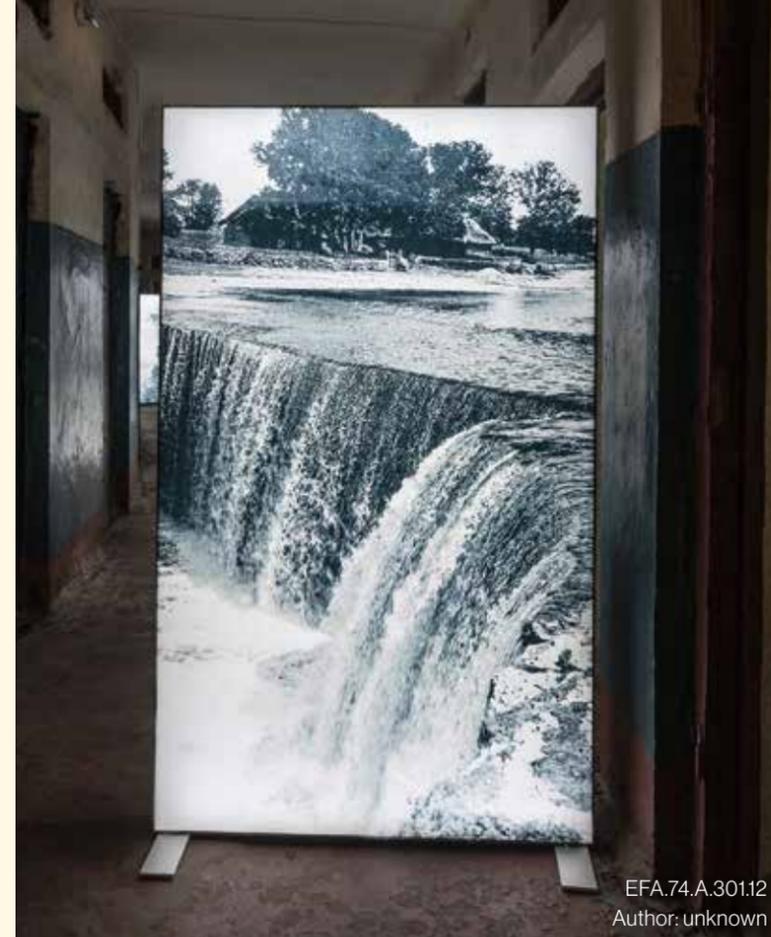
This article focuses on the site-specific exhibition "Displaced Time: 10 Photographs from Restricted Collections" as a model of remembrance and an act against oblivion. The article analyses "Displaced Time" as part of ongoing memory work that aims to explain and understand the mechanisms of the Soviet period and its influence on contemporary society. In order to analyze the power relations between photographs and archives, this article also explores the power relations between the photographer and the subject – the photographic gaze – as well as the power relations between the photograph and the reader – the agency of images.

KEYWORDS: Memory work, totalitarian regimes, oblivion, photography, archives.

The exhibition "Displaced Time: 10 Photographs from Restricted Collections" by Aap Tepper at the Film Archives of the National Archives of Estonia was opened in May 2018 and re-opened in September 2019 during the Tallinn Photomonth Contemporary Art Biennial by curator Annika Toots. The exhibition is based on archival materials from restricted collections and analyses the processes of restricting and unrestricting materials during the Soviet occupation. "Displaced Time" brings out the uses and abuses of archives, as well as the power of archives to construct collective memory and identity. By using a specific visual language, this exhibition becomes a model of remembrance that engages with younger generations of Estonians and speaks across borders to an international audience who can relate to the issues of a traumatic totalitarian past.

Archives: the dark potential

We all suffer from *mal d'archive*, or the compulsion to collect and store, as pointed out by Ernst van Alphen.¹ Archives have a long history, which started with the need to keep track of produce and land and has become more and more digital in the present age. However, no archive is innocent.² Archives, in their several different forms, are not passive – they are active; through them, our past, our present and, in some ways, our future are constantly being reconstructed and re-negotiated. Archives are places of memory – *les lieux de mémoire*³ – places where memory is constructed and contested, based on the preferences and views of present-day society. Since their very birth, archives have always



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Installation view of the exhibition "Displaced Time: 10 Photographs from Restricted Collections" by Aap Tepper.



Installation view by Aap Tepper.

been political tools for hegemonic powers. Every object obtains a new meaning and potency when placed between other objects into the collection of an archive.

In 2018, the young Estonian visual artist Aap Tepper started working on a project he had conceived while working at the Film Archives of the National Archives of Estonia. I had the chance to collaborate with him on this project as a curator. The main aim was to show how sublime landscape images can reveal repressive mechanisms of a totalitarian regime and to expose not only the way we see but how we look at the environment around us. The project focused on the restricted archive collections that had been kept secret during the Soviet regime and centered on 10 black and white landscape images that were in these collections. Aap Tepper's position as a young artist and an archive worker was crucial for this project for several reasons. First, in the midst of the archival data he had the gaze of a visual artist. Second, he had the time and opportunity to really delve into the materials in the archives – the time to conduct research, even when he didn't know what he was searching for. And third, he was born in 1991, which means that all the experience of the Soviet past was something mediated for him.

This project, which later became the site-specific exhibition "Displaced Time: 10 Photographs from Restricted Collections",⁴ revolved around a selection of landscape views that had been captured during the Estonian War of Independence and in the interwar Republic of Estonia. As an archive worker, Aap Tepper had gone through enormous amounts of visual material, most of it digitized, and was attracted by a number of photographs that depicted landscapes and scenery, and which resembled amateur nature photography. However, surprisingly, these photographs had belonged to the Restricted Collections of the State Archives because of their ideologically unsuitable content from the perspective of the Soviet regime. For the exhibition project, these images were enlarged, printed on light boxes and placed in a former cell block of the Film Archives building in Tallinn (formerly a prison), along with the original albums in which they had been found, as well as vitrines with files from the archives that introduced the processes of restricting and unrestricting materials during the Soviet era. In this article I aim to analyze the ways in which it is possible to create narratives of the past through fragments and photographs, by exploring these 10 images that were chosen for this exhibition project in their various contexts.

THESE SEEMINGLY VERY innocent, scenic, even sublime, black and white photographs referred to the dark potential⁵ of the archives – to the possibility of using archives to restrict or erase certain periods of time from the collective memory. Jacques Derrida has pointed out that violence is something inherent to archives, because when a selection is made of things that are stored in an archive, other possibilities, or other stories, are repressed.⁶ In 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union, archives became the tools for rewriting history, conducting power and erasing certain events, periods or even people.⁷ The restricted collections, which contained hidden materials, were under the strictest surveillance, and special permission was needed to

enter them. These collections, which contained many kinds of documents and materials, including poetry and books from different time periods, were part of a totalitarian society and only started being opened up during the late 1980s.

The "Displaced Time" exhibition at the Film Archives sought to address this dark potential of the archive by creating a series of juxtapositions or contrasts, which together created space for a new temporality. It was a site-specific project in which the building itself played an important role. The building in Tallinn, at Ristiku 84, served as a detention facility during the Soviet period, in which soldiers who had been sentenced to short-term disciplinary punishment were held in small cells. In this space, and while weaving it into the narrative, the exhibition constructed a visual narrative comprising images, objects and documents that could be called a postmemory⁸ – an attempt to reconstruct and understand something from the past with which subsequent generations have had no direct contact. Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term in 1992, has argued that postmemory is "a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation".⁹ "Displaced Time" was based on historical documents, but it also allowed space for the imaginative, intertwined from the perspective of the present condition – different layers of the past and present collided, opening up opportunities for communicating and understanding the past, and making it more transparent.

SUPPRESSION AND RESTRICTION through archives is not something that is only inherent to the Soviet regime; it is quite a common practice in many countries throughout the world that have a totalitarian past. As archives in themselves are already violent, the naming and categorization of events, people, places and even landscapes are a mechanism of control. Paradoxically, archives are also the foundation of any nation and nation state; they are the materialized history, the very basis of identity. And as exemplified in this project, archives can be used in a way that is the most beneficial to hegemonic powers, but they can also be used against the state. Achille Mbembe has elaborated on this paradoxical function of archives, noting that although states need archives, the archives also present a continuous threat to the state's existence.¹⁰

Addressing the dark potential of these memory institutions that shape our collective memory has been a recurring practice among artists. Visual arts and literature have the capacity to reveal and communicate the past. By rejecting the narratives constructed by hegemonic powers, thereby contesting history, artists are brushing history against the grain, as Walter Benjamin suggested.¹¹ Dealing with the issues of the past has been a characteristic of social and conceptual art since the mid-20th century. The 20th century was full of violent and atrocious events that left scars on the societies of many countries around the world; these

scars have been passed on to subsequent generations.¹² This century has triggered the need to investigate even further down the timeline of history, revealing past violence and atrocities that have perhaps not been that well documented but have caused collective traumas and have shaped the world as we know it.¹³

For an artist such as Aap Tepper, going against the grain means digging deeper into the archives, looking into the grey areas beyond the conventional categories of "good" and "bad", and revealing the ways in which memory, history and identity are always in process and depend on the material documents – the archives which, however, are also very unstable, and can be used for their dark potential by the people who own them or have access to them. The importance of doing this, i.e. working with archives, digging up the past, rethinking the past – at this very moment, when almost 30 years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union – will be discussed in the final chapter of this essay.

The photographic gaze

In order to analyze the power dynamics associated with photography, and their relation to archives and hegemonic powers in more detail, the starting point should be the photographer's gaze.¹⁴ Photography is a way of seeing the world; a photograph is a collaboration between the photographer's subjective preferences and the camera's mechanical ways of capturing the visible (as well as the invisible). Although we have reached the age of non-human photography,¹⁵ a conventional understanding of photography still involves the photographer's gaze through the

viewfinder. In effect, this means that taking a photograph is in itself already an act of (taking) control, which enters the photograph as a representation of the world into a complex web of power relations that involve the photographer, the context, the reader, the unseen, the off-frame, etc.

The "Displaced Time" project is largely based on contrasts and, besides the obvious past-present dichotomy, these already begin within the landscape and scenery

images that captured Aap Tepper's attention. To explain this, attention must first be drawn to the gaze of the photographer: these black and white images were created using analogue cameras, which at the time were heavy and required a lot of specific professional knowledge. Knowing this makes these 10 photographs even more alienated from their original context, since the photographer's task was most probably to take group photographs of certain events. However, the photographer's aesthetic preferences led him¹⁶ to include these scenic captures on the pages of photo albums that depicted certain (historical) events.

These views may seem arbitrary, but as Liz Wells, a writer and lecturer on photographic practices, has written, "the content of images may seem natural, but representational and interpretive processes are cultural in that they are anchored in aesthetic conventions", adding that "visuality, that is, systems of seeing, operates through codes and conventionalised meanings".¹⁷ No image is innocent, no photograph is innocent, and also, as will

"VISUAL ARTS AND LITERATURE HAVE THE CAPACITY TO REVEAL AND COMMUNICATE THE PAST."

be discussed later, no landscape is innocent (since it is in itself a cultural construction).

Photographers turn space into place by exercising aesthetics, codes and conventions. Thus, photography has often been associated with hunting and shooting – the photographer with the camera being similar to a huntsman with a rifle, and a successfully taken photograph can often be called a “great shot”. This might apply to genres of photography such as street photography, which require luck, patience and the photographer’s aim in order to capture the decisive moment. When talking about landscape or topography photography,¹⁸ the emphasis is instead on *longue durée* (longer projects that capture changes in space), metaphysics (spaces without humans) rhythms, patterns, and the sublime. However, the process of photographing a landscape can be associated with hunting because of its power relations. It is the photographer behind the camera who has the control and power over the construction of the scene, or the shot, which depends on the photographer’s framing and timing.

Thus, what photography and landscape have in common is that they are both a form of subordinating and controlling something that is uncontrollable: time and nature. A photograph is an attempt to freeze a fleeting moment, to capture a slice of the passing of time, to gain immortality, and landscape is a form of controlling and appropriating nature – to subordinate the environment and space. Just like humans have been driven by the impulse to archive, they have also been driven by the need to conquer, control, capture and own. A photographer with a camera subordinates nature and the environment to their gaze and the framing of the shot through the viewfinder – this is why photography has been an important tool for historical and colonial expeditions, for documenting and capturing, and for creating typologies of spaces, places, species, and even humans.

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS behind these 10 aesthetic captures are mostly unknown, but it is most likely that they were all men, since women photographers were quite rare at the time. In this sense, we are probably being confronted with a male gaze. Philosophically and historically, nature has been associated with femininity and, in opposition, culture has been associated with masculinity. Nature, wilderness, landscape, etc., have always been seen by humans as something that has to be controlled, conquered, subordinated and tamed. This suggests that in these 10 photographs we are confronted with a male gaze that has been appropriating nature, from a safe distance. However, this does not apply to all kinds of landscape and scenery photography, as in many other cases the photographers are actually women.

This dichotomy – feminine or masculine – is important in this context in order to bring out the contrast or the binary categories that are present in the albums from which the pho-

tographs were taken. The albums depict certain historical events. They are meant to be historical documents of the *noeme* or the that-has-been,¹⁹ and yet, they are accompanied by these picturesque landscape photographs that offer very vague clues regarding a certain time or geographical place. In the context of information, they are quite useless. All the information they give us is about the weather conditions or the seasons. In that way, as opposed to “cultural” photographs, they can be considered to be something “wild” and perhaps uncontrollable; as something – in line with the idea of binaries – feminine. To see how and why these “wild” and “useless” (in their original context) images capture the attention of the spectator, they should be further viewed in the context of agency, landscape and the sublime.

The image as an act

An image is an act, not some thing.²⁰

Jean-Paul Sartre

The 10 photographs of “Displaced Time” belonged to a vast ocean of images from different events and periods of time, yet they all have something in common – their aesthetics drew the attention of the archive worker and visual artist Aap Tepper. Somehow, these images, the views that they depicted and the recognizable presence of the photographer’s gaze communicated with the artist, making it possible to talk about the agency of an image. This was noted by Jean-Paul Sartre when he talked

about an image being “an act, not some thing”. The image itself is an archive comprising different layers of historical (and physical) records that act differently in various contexts and for different readers. Horst Bredekamp has described this as images that have a Medusa-like power over the spectator (instead of being just passive recipients of the aestheticizing gaze): “Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action relation to perception. This is the quintessence of the image act.”²¹

This agency of the images is explained by Alfred Gell as something that is exclusively relational.²² This makes it important to see images in the social context of their production, circulation (the readers of the albums) and reception, since it is the context(s) and the presence of a spectator that allow the image to gain agency. In the case of these 10 specific images, it is important to view them in three different scenarios: first, as independent landscape and scenery photographs in the historical context of landscape photography; second, as kind of “mood” photographs in their original context in the album, which mainly depicted historical (military) events from the first half of the 20th century; and third, as independent images taken from their original context and placed into the obscure space of a former Soviet prison cell block.

“WHAT PHOTOGRAPHY AND LANDSCAPE HAVE IN COMMON IS THAT THEY ARE BOTH A FORM OF SUBORDINATING AND CONTROLLING SOMETHING THAT IS UNCONTROLLABLE: TIME AND NATURE.”



Installation view by Aap Tepper.

In the context of landscape photography, these 10 photographs not only refer to the agency of images but to the intricate layers and constructions behind the notion of landscape photography, and landscape as such. W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that we should see landscape not as a noun but as a verb, and we should not look at what it is, but instead, look at what it “does”. Mitchell argues that we should “think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed”.²³ In addition to looking at landscape as a verb and thinking about what it “does”, Liz Well has also described landscape as a cultural practice and as a social product, which results from human intervention to shape or transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part.²⁴

However, even if we see landscape as a cultural practice and social product, it is still something very abstract if we examine it more closely. Looking at a view, a landscape, the sea, the mountains, the scenery – a dark cloud in an evening sky, big waves in a raging sea, forests, or just some trees in an empty field – can evoke certain emotions and interests, but only when we engage with them, i.e. when we let them attract our gaze and seduce us. W.J.T. Mitchell has described the phenomena of looking at a landscape as an invitation to look at nothing, or to look at looking itself.²⁵ When viewing a landscape, the most seductive element can be the distance. As humans have become alienated from nature,²⁶ particularly as a result of modernization, nature has been perceived as something that is dark, dangerous and violent, with too many uncontrollable elements, death and decay. Looking at it from a distance seems safe and looking at it from a photograph leaves the impression of having gained control over

it. This safer perspective, an aestheticizing distance,²⁷ is a way of dealing with the dark side of the landscape²⁸ but also a way for the sublimation of the landscape, since it is also this danger that makes a scene sublime.

THE WAYS OF LOOKING AT a landscape and its visual representations had already been constructed before the invention of photography, that is – in landscape paintings. It is the picturesque, the sublime, the controlled that we are used to seeing and what we expect to see. Depicting landscapes also has a long and independent history as a genre of photography, conceptual art and amateur photography. This is particularly apparent in travel photography, since we engage with the surroundings the most when we travel and assume the gaze of a conqueror – we become super tourists²⁹. In the case of these 10 photographs from the restricted collections, the photographer has engaged with his surroundings, captured the scenes according to the pre-existing codes and norms of landscape photography and added these representations of nature – constructed pieces of aesthetic distance – to the otherwise quite pragmatic documentation of social events.

Thus, when looking at the photographs in their original context – in albums – what specific kind of narratives are these landscape and scenery images trying to describe? First, it must be pointed out that these albums are very physical – they seem rather strange objects of the past because today, everything is in clouds or phones, mediated by screens. These photo albums are enormous, heavy and, in this sense, not very practical. They were made to be paraded around and be leafed through with some physical effort involved. They were – and still are – the material embodiments of



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the fleeting past. They were also very carefully put together. The way in which the montage, or photo collages, were made in some of these albums is very curious, and rather playful.

These albums represent a variety of events that took place from 1919 to 1933, mainly associated with the Estonian War of Independence and military events, parades, visits, camps, etc. in the interwar Republic of Estonia. From the perspective of the Soviet regime, these materials were regarded as dangerous, belonging to the “bourgeois Estonia” and therefore had to be consigned to the special archives that had limited or no access. The albums were even renamed from the perspective of the Soviet regime.³⁰ History was being manipulated and silenced and an attempt was being made to erase an entire period from the collective memory.

In themselves these landscape images do not depict monuments, battlefields, historical sites or anything else that would anchor them to a specific event or time. It is only the context – the elaborate montage of several images on the heavy pages of these albums – that subordinates them to a certain historical category. On the one hand, they can be seen as aesthetic additions to these events by the photographer. However, on the other hand, they can be seen as a way of affirming a safe narrative of control over the time and space.

But what kind of narrative do they carry when they are taken from their original context and placed in a former Soviet prison cell block? Again, the possibility of communicating a distant time lies in the juxtaposition, comparison and contrasts. The sublime landscape views are placed in austere and obscure rooms which still carry the very obvious traces of the past – the colors, the scratches, the peeling paint on the walls and even the smell. This part of the building has remained virtually unchanged since it was given to the Film Archives, while the rest of the building had received additional makeovers in subsequent decade(s). The former prison cell block is a very obvious signifier of repression. This can be physically felt when walking in the corridor – a narrow space with hardly any light; and the tiny cells with a single source of daylight immediately make the spectator feel uneasy. It is not only a walk through the past; it is a walk into the acknowledgment of the possibility of one person’s superiority over another, a nation’s superiority over another and of one political view being superior to another. It is the feeling of the awareness of how ideological and political constructions can become physically and mentally repressing and violent.

THE SPECTATOR IS guided through the space in a kind of linear yet still ambiguous trajectory. At the beginning and end of the narrow and dark space, only illuminated by the light boxes, the spectator encounters vitrines that display files that mark the formation of these secret archives until the final stages of their opening in 1992. They give the spectator an idea of how the Soviet repressive machine functioned and an insight into the elaborate and carefully working machine of bureaucracy, which kept track of everything and everyone. The secret archives were used to erase certain memories but they were also used against people.

One of the files, dating from 1962, states why a photo album

from 1941 should be transferred to the secret archives. It declares that the committee has decided to change the status of these specific albums from “general storing” to “secret storing” because “these albums contain photographs that have been taken from the perspective of an incorrect or bourgeois propaganda”.³¹ All kinds of materials that somehow undermined the Soviet regime and were not part of Soviet propaganda – or materials with any traces of conflicting ideologies – were sent to the restricted collections, which were kept strictly in secret and away from the public. The people who handled these materials and had access to them were very loyal to the Soviet power and even had to give an oath to keep secrets just like that – secret.

The main source of light in the narrow and curved corridor of the prison cell block is the light boxes with the landscape views of the images that act and invite the spectator to engage and look at looking itself. Next to the light boxes are the prison cells – tiny spaces with one small window as a source of daylight. These cells still contain material layers of the past. The colors, the wallpaper, the drawings on the wall that enter the spectator’s skin pores with their damp and dusty presence. The space is repressive. In this cramped and uncanny space, the spectator can view the massive photo albums, positioned on Soviet-era tables, from which the landscape views came. This montage contains the military events, the camps, the parades, the people who took part in them – and the landscape views. The wild and rogue images that refuse to give any specific information, and yet, are never innocent.

The exhibition space together with the light boxes and vitrines with documents create a different kind of temporality, a space of reflexive present,³² where the present and the past intertwine, leaving room for interpretations and response. “We are there; history is present – but not quite,”³³ as van Alphen described these kinds of installations, which deal with certain events or periods from the past – this “not quite” being the reason why these installations are able to communicate intricate past occurrences to a wide range of audiences, from people who experienced these occurrences themselves, and more importantly – to people who have had no direct contact with them. The site-specificity of this project allows the spectator to engage with the images and texts mentally but yet physically experience a certain uncanniness or uneasiness in these small and dark spaces, which are illuminated by attention-seeking and active landscape views only.

Against the oblivion

No matter how much we may be capable of learning from the past, it will not enable us to know the future.³⁴
(Arendt 1967: xxii)

As in the case of these restricted collections during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, other totalitarian regimes of the 20th cen-

tury also included “organized oblivion”³⁵. This was conducted through documents and archives, as well as through camps and executions. If there were no more witnesses, there was nothing to be witnessed. According to Arendt, in the case of the Holocaust concentration camps, this organized oblivion also applied to the families of those who were in the camps, as “grief and remembrance are forbidden”. The extensive organized oblivion of the Holocaust (the Nazis were masters and fanatics at archiving; everything and everyone were counted and listed, and people were transformed into objects with a number³⁶), which was conducted by archiving prisoners executed at the concentration camps, made their absence even more present and the Holocaust the central trauma in the memory studies discourse at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

To put it simply, trauma and traumatic experiences are experiences that have not been discussed or worked through; they are experiences that have been so atrocious or unfathomable that they have not been made sense of.³⁷ If any kind of working through is forbidden, for example, grief and remembrance, then this only deepens the trauma. In this aspect of working through, rethinking and negotiating the past, both art and literature are very powerful tools as they help people cope with the past and reveal its effects

on the present day.³⁸ This also applies to the several occupations and deportations that took place in Estonia, as well as the Soviet regime with its elaborate system of fear and repression. In Estonia, both the Soviet regime and the independence that the country re-gained in 1991 are considered to be traumatic experiences³⁹ and are still being analyzed and addressed in the cultural field.⁴⁰

IN THE CASE OF the project “Displaced Time”, which succeeded in engaging both the younger and the older generations, it is important to focus on the visual language of this site-specific project. The large black and white images, the files and the albums with photographs refer to their original context – the archive. But the same archive also creates the Holocaust effect⁴¹, a term coined by Ernst van Alphen when discussing works of art that deal with a traumatic past, particularly the Holocaust. This is present in the works of French artist Christian Boltanski, who has been working with the Holocaust past since the 1970s, and his visual language has been a significant influence on the visual arts associated with memory work. His practice includes using light boxes, archival documents and objects, as well as confronting viewers with absence instead of presence.⁴²

Using archive as a method and this specific visual language for communicating past events should be seen from two different aspects: on the one hand, this visual language is already familiar; it creates the Holocaust effect, it tells the story of past events and yet it allows us to subjectively experience this space and temporal dimension. This allows for more dialogue, understanding and empathy across generations and borders. As Max Silverman

stated: “Connections between different events do not simply result in a bland fusion but open up memory and history to the complex, tense, and unresolved relationship between similarity and indifference, sometimes with disturbing effects.”⁴³

On the other hand, it also contributes to the competing of memories of traumatic pasts. In a globalized world, memory has been described as being transnational, transcultural and migratory. The Holocaust memory has provided strategies for dealing with the traumatic past that have been adapted to remembering other kinds of violence and terror. The danger lies in the generalizations and looking for similarities, since this produces hierarchies which, in turn, result in the desensitization of material and the competing of memory narratives. However, as Michael Rothberg pointed out with his term “multidirectional memory” – memory is “a subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing”.⁴⁴ A certain framework has been developed in order to understand past events and it is largely based on comparison and relating to different experiences.

In Estonia, the democratization of society during the 1990s paved the way for the plurality of histories, which was not accepted by the previously existing totalitarian regime.⁴⁵ This openness resulted in the rather fanatical collecting of people’s life stories in order fill in the gaps or the blank spaces left by the rupture of the Soviet regime⁴⁶ in the narrative of the Estonian nation. This was all conducted in terms of rather binary (and political) oppositions – the Soviet era being bad and the independent Estonian being good. There was a need for this sharp division at that time. However, over the last decade there has been a shift in this position that has allowed this time to speak for itself,⁴⁷ and this has permitted a more nuanced investigation of the period.⁴⁸ This kind of working through, which is also true of “Displaced Time”, will not enable us to know the future, as Hannah Arendt has said, but it will reconcile the past with/in the present.

Conclusion

The exhibition project “Displaced Time” investigates certain aspects and mechanisms of the Soviet period in Estonia by using a specific visual language and strategies that allude to the representations of Holocaust memory. Its aim was not comparison, but rather to open up a wider and more nuanced discussion on the subject of archives, images and repression. The site-specific exhibition created a physical and temporal space for subjective experience, a reflexive present, through the stark contrast of sublime images and the dark prison cell block that they illuminate, and it managed to communicate a very specific aspect, the exploitation of the dark potential of the archives, something which characterizes totalitarian regimes.

The project centers around 10 landscape and scenery photographs that used to belong to the restricted collections of the archives. By taking these images out of their original context, it is possible to trace the complex dynamics of looking, seeing and capturing that are part of the photograph. When analyzing these images in different contexts, it is clear how the meaning of an image is dependent on the context. Images are active; they are archives in themselves. They have the power to captivate,

seduce and activate certain narratives of the past. These 10 images also turn attention to the way in which we are looking when we are looking at nothing – the way we look at nature, frame and conquer it, in order to make sense of it and control it. This dangerous and dark side of nature that is carefully framed in these photographs is also part of what makes them sublime.

The photographs do not differ much from the snapshots we take with our phones today, yet the narrative they unfold – the mechanisms of repression, the conflict of memories and the dark side of the archives – is quite unfamiliar to a generation that has been born into an independent and democratic country. Many of these details have been left without attention due to the long prevailing binary logic of good and bad when talking about the Soviet era. The shift in this approach has allowed for a more nuanced and open investigation. However, the present pasts, the ghosts and the remains that are present in contemporary literature and the arts, coincide with the current era of rethinking the past, in the hope of reconciling past terrors with a better future. ❌

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- Holocaust memory has become central in academic studies as well as in the arts. However, many artists work with local repression and trauma, such as artists who reflect on the dictatorships and violence in Latin America (e.g. Doris Salcedo, Marcelo Brodsky, Lucila Quieto, Inés Ulanovsky, Beatriz Sarlo), or photographers and artists who reconstruct the silenced past and the trauma of the executions and mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (e.g. Jorge Barbi, Bleda y Rosa).
- For example, the colonial past and Western centrism, the addressing and discussing of which still creates considerable unease and discomfort among the former colonial countries, even though this colonial past has been shaping the world economy, ecology and much more since the 15th century, and is inevitably present.
- The term “male gaze” was coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, a landmark in feminist theory, which addressed the tradition of objectifying women in visual culture. In the context of this text, the term “gaze” has been used to highlight the process of looking and seeing that is associated with photography.
- For more on non-human photography, see, for example, Joanna Zylinska “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography”, *Photographic Powers* (Helsinki: Photomedia, 2014), ART + DESIGN + ARCHITECTURE (Aalto University Publication Series: Helsinki, 2015). Also see *On the Verge of Photography. Imaging Beyond Representation*, Eds. Daniel Rubinstein Johnny Golding & Andy Fisher, (ARTicle Press: Birmingham, United Kingdom, 2013).
- From these 10 albums from which the photographs were selected, only a few photographers are known: Hans Vilper and David Poska. The rest of the photographers are marked as unknown.
- Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape, Photography, Culture and Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), 6.
- American landscape photography has a rich history in this genre, a key moment being the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition that opened in 1975 and included photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon and Stephen Shore.
- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, (Hill and Wang, New York, 2010) (1981), 76–77.
- Jean-Paul Sartre, Imagination*. F. Williams, Ann Arbor, (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 142.
- Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts – A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2017), 283.
- Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.
- W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.
- Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape, Photography, Culture and Identity*, 1–2.
- Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, viii.
- The separation of culture and nature can be traced back to the revolution of science in the 16th and 17th centuries. For further information, see Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, viii.
- Ibid.*, 6.
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 41–42. “The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear. The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects – to fight against boredom.”
- For example, from “VI Rahvaväe regiment in the War of Independence” during the Republic of Estonia to “VI Rahvaväe regiment in bourgeois Estonia’s war against Soviet Russia” during the Soviet occupation.
- Protocol no. 7 of the Committee for Restricting Documentary Materials, November 29, 1962 (Dokumentaalse materjalide salastamise komisjoni koosoleku protokoll nr 7. Koostatud 29. novembril 1962).
- Luis Ignacio Garcia, *Políticas de la memoria y de la imagen. Ensayos sobre una actualidad político-cultural* (Santiago de Chile: Colección Teoría, 2011), 30.
- Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 11.
- Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1973), xxii.
- Ibid.*, 452.
- Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 208–209. In comparison, the information from the Stalinist archives is quite contradictory and very little factual knowledge is available on Mao’s communist dictatorship in China (Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, xxiii–xxviii).
- Aija Sakova, *Valu, mälu, kirjandus. Kirjanduskriitikat ja vestlusi aastatest 2004–2017*, (Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2017), 10.
- Ibid.*, 21.
- See Aili Aarelaid-Tart, *Cultural Trauma and Life Stories*, (University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2006). And Ene Kõresaar, *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafiline minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*, (Eesti Rahvamuseum, Tartu, 2005).
- However, when talking about the role of visual arts (and literature) in memory work, it is also important to discuss the crisis of representation and the question of ethics. These traumatic experiences of the past are being reconstructed somewhere on a scale between forgetting and fetishizing. On the one side there is the silence and the void, while on the other is the exploitation of the traumatic past as something that is uncanny and exotic. The latter is the case with the Holocaust industry, but on some other level it is also the case in the use of Soviet aesthetics in the mass media by a subsequent generation that has had no direct experience of Soviet repression.
- van Alphen. *Caught by History*, 10.
- van Alphen. *Staging the Archive*, 207.
- Max Silverman, “Staging Shared Memory. Je Veux voir and L’Empreinte de l’ange” in *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, Eds. Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 38.
- Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.
- Jüri Kivimäe, “Mnemosyne köidikud” *Vikerkaar* no. 10–11 (2003), 85–86.
- Ene Kõresaar, *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafiline minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*, (Eesti Rahvamuseum: Tartu, 2005), 107.
- Johanna Ross, “Ideoloogia ei ole ainus, mis inimese kogemust loob. Vestlus Epp Annusega” in *Keel ja kirjandus* no. 8–9 (2019) 751.
- Giorgio Agamben has also discussed the need to abandon this binary logic in his *State of Exception. Homo Sacer II*, 1.