

Photographic Archives in the Works of Contemporary Art. Using the Stroop Report as a Source of Artistic Expression

Abstract

Jürgen Stroop was a German SS commander during WWII, who served as an SS and police leader in the occupied Poland. He led the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and prepared the so-called Stroop Report, a book-length account of the operation with 53 pictures contained in a report produced by Stroop and Franz Konrad. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising cost the lives of over 50,000 people. The subject of this paper is devoted to the photos from the Stroop Report. One of the images from the Stroop Report is often described as the famous Holocaust image. Four artists are discussed in this article: Władysław Strzemiński, Samuel Bak, Gustav Metzger and Nir Hod. The author addresses the use of original photos from the Stroop Report in the artists' works analyzing how the artists have transformed and manipulated the photos, which present the victims and witnesses of the Holocaust in Poland.

Keywords: Holocaust, contemporary art, documentary photography, the Stroop Report

Creative people who address the subject of the Holocaust explore sources of its remembrance. One of the most important of these sources are registered recollections, a history handed down by those who had survived, as well as documents preserved in various archives (often private and informal), including visual records such as pho-

tographs and films. Because it is believed that photographs are objective records of events due to the mechanic reproduction, they are considered useful instruments of reporting.

The administration of the Third Reich had a “strongly rooted habit of registering every kind of bureaucratic narcissism, to save and to photograph everything” (Didi-Huberman 2008: 30).

Photographic registration, from a practical point of view so easy to make yet so rich in information, enters into a complex relationship with the fact, the document and the recollection. Documentary images of the Holocaust were usually the ‘works’ of its perpetrators. Photographs and films on which war crimes have been recorded are becoming broadly available online.

Materials of different quality, repeatedly copied and sometimes retouched, are now being organised, catalogued, tagged and made available online as parts of various databases. Documentary photographer Janina Struk writes: “Archives are not neutral places, they give photographs their own meaning” (Struk 2004: 30). The use of photographic images depicting the Holocaust in works of art has become commonplace. However, the scope of the presence of the photographs from the album attached to the Stroop Report is exceptional. This article is dedicated to this subject.

The Stroop Report, titled *The Jewish residential district in Warsaw no longer exists!*, was intended to be seen by the highest dignitaries in the SS—Heinrich Himmler, and Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger. It was produced to provide information about the definitive elimination of the Warsaw Ghetto and the suppression of the Jewish uprising. The Report, compiled by General Jürgen Stroop, the head of the SS and Police Leader of the Warsaw District, who also led the operation, consists of three parts. The attached photography album containing fifty-three prints is the third part of the Report. Stroop picked thirty photographs himself. One of the recognised authors of the photographs is Stroop’s chief of staff Max Jesuiter who was present at the side of his superior (Wulf 1984: 283).¹ “The size and order of the photographs differ. [...] three photographs present identical scenes, but they were taken a few moments apart and at a slightly different angle (photographs 7, 15 and 17)” (Rousseau 2009: 76). In September 1948, during an interrogation in Warsaw, Stroop explained:

“After the end of the *Aktion*, according to Krüger’s wishes, three copies of the report were made: one for Krüger, one for Himmler and the third for me. The manuscript was stored at the SS and Police HQ in Warsaw by Stabsführer Jesuiter” (Kunicka-Wyrzykowska 1984: 283).

¹Another ‘photographer’— according to the Internet sources—of the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto was Franz Konrad. He was an Austrian mid-level commander in the SS-Hauptsturmführer and an administrative officer of Nazi Germany. See Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust—<http://www.lamoth.info/index.php?p=core/search&subjectid=8213>; https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Konrad (09.02.2020)

One of the copies of the Report is kept at the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem. The copy shown during the Nuremberg Trial has been considered a 'duplicate' and is held at the American National Archives in Washington D.C. The copy that the Nuremberg Judges considered to be 'one out of three' is kept at the Institute of National Remembrance, in the archives of the Central Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. The third copy has not been found. More than one hundred additional photographs were compiled at Stroop's house in the German city of Wiesbaden. Currently, these photographs, known as the Stroop Collection, can be found in the National Collection in Washington D.C..

The black and white photographs registering the extermination of the 'Jewish quarter' remain a testimony to events whose consequences reach 'outside the frame'. The meaning of the images — their messages — is associated primarily with perception. "To read the last (or first) level of a picture, knowledge based on our perception is needed," notes Roland Barthes (Barthes 1980: 272). An artist processes documentary materials, and the interpretation of these materials creates an additional layer of meaning. In the case of 'processing' documentary materials in a work of art, materials such as the photographs from the Stroop Report or photographs showing the Holocaust in general, the artist confronts the viewers and himself with historical records. Photography serves to confirm the truth. Artists, using photographs, "the medium to transport us into the land of absence [...] exorcise death. The photographic image is always and only death and cannot show anything except the world that is no more, then (according to the reception of Jacques Derrida) such a photographic death never happens once" (Michałowska 2009: 709).

Further in the text I will discuss the work of four artists, for whom the documentary photographs contained in the Stroop Report were the key sources of inspiration.

Already in 1945 or at the beginning of 1946, Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952), one of the most important artists of the Polish avant-garde, began to work on a series of collages dedicated to *My Jewish Friends*. The works were not dated by Strzemiński, and are not signed either. The collection consists of nine drawings or collages made with ink on white, grey or yellow paper. "Strzemiński's technique of a double collage, drawing on images from the press and his own work, commands us to see the cycle *My Jewish Friends* as an attempt to express the artist's entire wartime experience in connection with the tragedy of the Holocaust" (Turowski 2000: 228). A photograph that Strzemiński used for a collage entitled *Ruins of Pulled Eye Sockets. The Stones, Like Heads, are Paved*, shows a man — the 'last' inhabitant of the dying Warsaw ghetto, at the moment of being found in his hideout [Fig. 1.]. Although this photograph is not in the Stroop Report, we may think that it belongs to the set of photographs taken at the time. Viewers are confronted with these faces, pictures bearing the tragedy of the survival of a lonely man. Three figures in the photograph (the victim and two soldiers) are opposite the photographer's lens. He places these people as witnesses to the crime of which he was the perpetrator.

One of the best known photographs from the Stroop Report can be seen in the 1995 series *Historic Photographs (The Fields of Death and Terror and Oppression)* from 1995 by Gustav Metzger (1926-2014)² [Fig.2]. The artist tries to force viewers to re-engage with the known scene. He has blocked the picture with a construction made out of rubble, transforming the process into a more immersive and frustrating experience. Metzger takes archival photographs that he finds disturbing and tries to deal with them. Concealment was a remarkable mechanism in Metzger's *Historic Photographs*. The artist expects an active posture, and reminiscences to be discussed. According to Metzger's words, in the work entitled *Extinction of the Warsaw Ghetto, 19 April — 28 days, 1943* the artist presents in the viewer's mind a significantly enlarged photograph from the [Stroop] Report.³ The photo is marked with number 14 and Stroop's comment: "Bandits pulled out of the bunkers."⁴ [Fig. 3]

This photograph is in both existing copies of the Stroop Report. The well-known photograph presents a scene of the evacuation the ghetto population. According to the research carried out by Rousseau, the location seems to be confirmed by the presence of the SS officer Josef Blösche⁵ in the photograph. Blösche also appears in other photographs included in the Stroop Report. The punctum of the photograph is the figure of a small boy, visible in the foreground. The child, raising his hands under the threat of the German soldiers' rifles, is wearing a coat and a cap with a visor, and has a rucksack on his shoulders. The boy is in a group of adults and children of all ages. Metzger's life-size enlargement of the photograph makes the viewer become one of the people in the scene. Planks and scattered debris that cover the lower part of the work give it a three-dimensional 'casing', so that a sculptural form is created. A curtain provokes you to look behind it, to make the picture 'complete' with what the memory tells you. The futile attempts to see what is hidden leave the viewer convinced that the meaning of the photograph is still not revealed. The readability of the image has been disturbed, the viewer cannot reach the whole picture, an element of uncertainty has arisen, but this uncertainty is the result of the artist's intentions. In an auto-commentary to his

²Gustav Metzger was born in Nuremberg in 1926 to a Jewish Orthodox family with origins in Poland. In 1939, he was sent to Great Britain as part of the Refugee Children's Movement and thus survived the tragedy of the Holocaust, which claimed his relatives. To this day he lives a stateless existence—he never claimed any citizenship. The 'travel document' he uses contains an entry reading 'Polish nationality'.

³Alison Jones: 'Did you have an ethical problem using Holocaust photographs for artistic purposes?' Gustav Metzger: 'No, because I can fully justify their use; after all, I obviously do not use them. I present them in the mind of the viewer' (Zachęta National Gallery of Art 2007: 43).

⁴The photograph and its post-war history, depicting a Jewish boy with his arms raised, is widely discussed in the book: F. Rousseau *L'Enfant juif de Varsovie. Histoire d'une photographie*. Paris: Le Seuil 2009 (*Jewish child from Warsaw. The history of a certain photograph*).

⁵Josef Blösche 'operated' in the Warsaw Ghetto from autumn 1941 to May 1943. Accused of numerous crimes committed during the war and of criminal participation in the suppression of the Ghetto Uprising in April-May 1943, he was tried by a Court in Erfurt and sentenced to death on 30 April 1969. Josef Blösche was executed in Leipzig on 29 July 1969.

concept, Metzger said: “One aim of the *Historic Photographs* series is to put a photograph down: to indicate that we do not need its all-pervasive presence. The series gives a new lease of life” (Metzger 2007: 20). Historical photographs present not only one fragment of our history — they also tell us “about the inhuman treatment of some people by others. They spare us nothing. They are unbearable from any point of view” (Metzger 2007: 21).

In another version of this project, Metzger, by placing the picture behind a curtain of wood and stone rubble on the floor, makes the face of a young girl the essence of the work. The child is wearing a coat, and has a bag over her shoulder and a handkerchief on her head. With raised hands, she walks in a column of adults carrying luggage. In Metzger’s work, the silhouetted girl comes out from behind the wooden curtain: her face is visible, one hand raised, the adults are presented in a fragmentary way.

By manipulating the photograph, by framing the portrait of the girl’s face and causing the child to look in the direction of the ‘photographer’, thus making the unfolding drama current, viewers become witnesses to the event of the time. In this version, the girl’s character becomes the punctum, which Barthes wrote about: “The punctum of a photograph is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 1980: 42–50). The artist, by framing the girl’s face out from the group of people, individualises her experience and differentiates the experiences associated with the perception of this image.

The same photograph depicting the boy from the Warsaw ghetto was also of interest to Samuel Bak (b. 1933), an American painter with Jewish-Polish roots.⁶ As a child, Bak miraculously escaped from the Vilnius Ghetto during its liquidation. He saw the picture from the Stroop Report for the first time in Israel in the early 1950s. This is an important note, because at the time the issue of the Holocaust was embarrassing in the newly created state—in Israel, the Holocaust of Europe’s Jews was a silent shame. According to Bak:

“this photograph is a masterpiece of composition [...]. In this photograph, in addition to the structure and richness of details, the depth of narrative material is extraordinary. We have a group drama and the drama of a small boy, an individual. It concentrates everything that happens in terrible loneliness. [...] In my opinion, the boy from Warsaw represents a Jewish crucifixion. When I was in the Vilnius Ghetto, I was about the same age, and I was very similar to this boy” (Rousseau 2009: 146–147).

The artist’s work became a series of paintings based on the photographs of the Warsaw child [Fig. 4]

⁶ Samuel Bak was born in Wilno/Vilnius in 1933 (the city was part of Poland during the interwar period).

According to Bak, the photograph has been trivialised. His task was to protect the image of the child, to let the worship of life not be threatened. The painting responded to the needs of figuration and individualisation that many people demanded “to give some face to the murder of nearly six million human beings guilty of simply having existed — the crime, due to its vastness, is unfathomable” (Rousseau 2009: 146—147).

The last work discussed here is a series of paintings made as a provocation by the Israeli-born artist Nir Hod (b. 1970). He describes his biggest obsessions: beauty and death. His sultry works with these themes — along with gender, stereotypes, archetypes and his own good looks — have made him a pop culture star in his native country. For his solo exhibition *Mother* at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York in 2012, Hod created a series of paintings that refer to the iconic photograph *Bandits Pulled out of the Bunkers*. The image of a woman with raised hands has been isolated as the central figure in the *Mother* series [Fig.5].⁷ Hod features nine near-identical paintings of her in a row, plus one large one on the back wall, each rendered in a different tone. Stylistically, *Mother* can be traced back to other photograph-based paintings of tragic beauties caught in the sweep of history, such as Andy Warhol’s Jackie Kennedy, or Gerhard Richter’s semi-glamorised terrorist Ulrike Meinhof. But Hod’s goal is distinct. In his series, he is revisiting some of his obsessions, but on sacred ground. Summoning his boldness, his canny fashion sense, and his close study of Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter, Hod has turned the Holocaust into a fashion plate.

The series of paintings by Nir Hod, depicting a young woman with raised hands and an elegant bag on her shoulder looking towards the soldiers, became the subject of discussion between American audiences and critics. The work was shown in New York in 2012. From a European viewers’ perspective, the paintings are immediately recognised as an isolated frame of photograph No 14 from the Stroop Report. Hod uses this documentary photograph as a mass product. By manipulating the image on a computer, he intentionally incorporated a Nazi war crime document into the field of pop culture. The woman’s gesture has become ambiguous. We do not see anyone else. There are no soldiers aiming at the group of people. We do not see the crowd gathered on the street. Here, the photograph works outside the time in which it was made. According to the artist Noah Becker, American viewers read Hod’s work as a response to the aggressive advertising of fashion designers. The leather bag, visually enhanced in Hod’s paintings, was associated with the legendary expensive bags of Louis Vuitton. On the question posed by Noah Becker: “Upon visiting your studio a few weeks ago I found myself among this series of emotionally charged works painted in a repeated Warholian manner. I immediately knew this image of a woman with her hands in the air as being

⁷American critics (no names are given) reporting on the Nir Hod’s exhibition *Mother* point to Franz Konrad as the author of photograph No 14 (‘Bandits pulled out of the bunkers’) from the Stroop Report: http://asmgallery.com/exhibitions/2012-03-28_nir-hod/; <http://artis.art/edition/mother/>; <http://artis.art/2015/02/10/xxx/> (09.02.2020);

part of a historical photo of Jews during the Holocaust.” Nir Hod answers: “Yes, you are the first person to recognise that” (Art Observed 2012: np).

Processed and subjected to fragmentation, photographs from the Stroop Report — one of the most recognisable series of Holocaust images in visual popular culture — do not deny the facts, but they can build a different, ‘alternative’ story. This narration is created by recipients who, equipped with the potential of knowledge and sensitivity, may notice that the power of documentary photography re-interpreted by an artist can testify to the versions of events witnessed (Strzemiński). Metzger returns in his work to the events he escaped. Samuel Bak saw a picture of society in the early 1960s in Israel. Nir Hod who weaves the ‘photo-documentary’ of World War II and the extermination of Europe’s Jews into modern times, refers to the consciousness of the mass culture recipient who does not seem to distinguish an image of Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn Monroe from one of an anonymous woman at the *Umschlagplatz*. The photography in this work no longer tells the story of the Warsaw Ghetto or the history of extermination. This realisation reveals the artist’s personal dilemmas on the one hand, and how popular culture penetrates into consciousness on the other. It displaces the drama of events from the past to the sphere of the recipient’s perception. The process of blurring the past turns out to be inevitable. In order for the viewer to understand the sense of the work, commentary from both artists and critics is necessary. The selected artworks referred to above create different narratives about an event that really took place. Photographs from the Warsaw Ghetto from 1943 are known. Contemporary artists dissect the image of the Holocaust, and try to ‘transfer’ experience into performance. There is a special process of contemplating the nightmare of the past and analysing the images of ‘involuntary memory’ that arose in our consciousness under the influence of the media.

Rousseau asked whether, after all these modifications and shifts, the photographic trace is still a testimony of the truth. To be meaningful, images require precise and methodical contextualisation — only under this condition can they remain as historical documents. The task of art historians and critics is to go beyond the emotions behind Holocaust photographs, to focus on analysis and to strive to understand historical processes and carefully follow alterations. Of course, one cannot preserve traces of history in an absolute way. These traces of history — documents, photographs — cannot be read unambiguously. The work of the artist is to use this ambiguity within the document that allows to cross the boundaries of documentary, so that we can find the truth of the document and the knowledge about ourselves throughout what has been blotted and fragmented.

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Fig. 2 Photograph Nr 14 from Strop's Report. – "Bandits pulled out of the bunkers" (public domain, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem).

Fig. 3 Gustav Metzger, *Historic Photographs: No. 1: Liquidation of the Ghetto, April 19-28 days, 1943*, 1995/2011, black-and-white photograph mounted on board and rubble, Warszawa Zachęta National Gallery, New Museum New York. https://www.artsjournal.com/artopia/2011/06/gustav_metzger_the_remix.html (5.2.2020)

Fig.4 Samuel Bak, *Crossed Out*, 2007, oil on canvas. [http://ajwnews.biz/iconic-photo-of-boy-in-warsaw-ghetto-inspires-samuel-bak/\(3.2.2020\)](http://ajwnews.biz/iconic-photo-of-boy-in-warsaw-ghetto-inspires-samuel-bak/(3.2.2020)).

Fig.5 Nir Hod, *Mother*, 2012, photograph, paintings (multimedia) – pigment print with hand-colored pastel and pigment powder on paper. <https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=nir+hod+mother&qv=nir+hod+%22mother%22&FORM=IGRE> (5.2.2020).

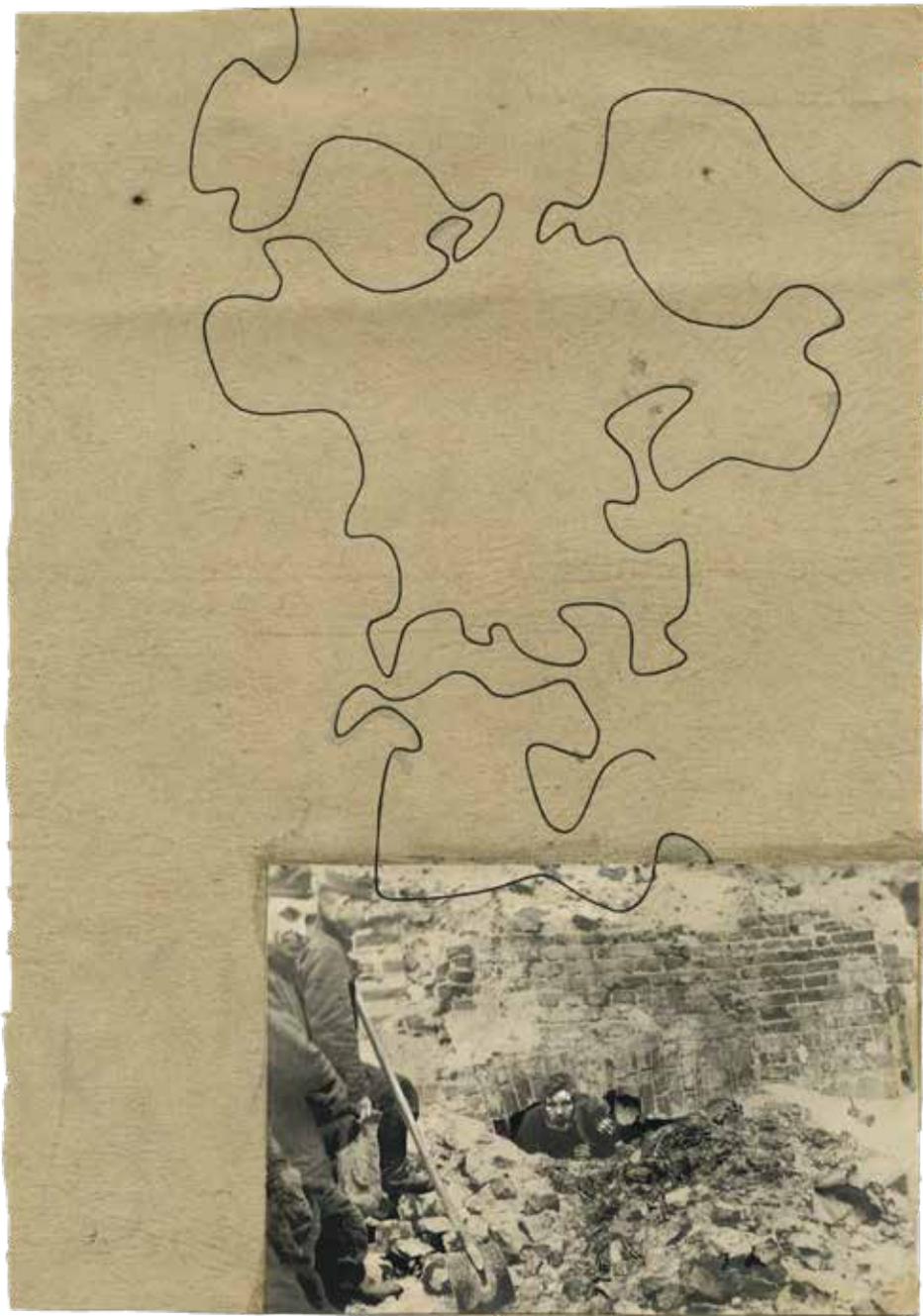


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