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RAFAŁ JAKUBOWICZ'S KEY WORDS

Words can be like little doses of venom:
they are swallowed unnoticed,
and seem to have no effect
and yet the poison acts some time later.
Victor Klemperer, *LTI A Philologist's Notebook*, 1946

On the almost black wall of a Cracow apartment building, beneath a red-and-blue MultiBank ("Pay How You Want") billboard of the same (standard) dimensions, and above some aggressive graffiti from the summer of 2002, there is another AMS billboard. On a light gray background that tells us nothing, looking as if it were typed on an old typewriter, is a blurred, uneven inscription: "Seuchensperrgebiet." That's all. Cars of different colors drive down the wide street, a couple of people move along the sidewalk, and someone gets into a car parked underneath the "inscription." What is the sense of this inscription? Any meaning it has gets lost by the end of the first, strange-sounding and strange-looking syllable? The word is made up of eighteen letters typed, it would seem, by the unskilled hand of a beginner secretary who clearly seems to have had trouble spelling out such a complicated word. We sense hesitancy, determination, impatience, and perhaps relief that a successful conclusion crowned the effort. The word is written correctly. The characteristic font of an old Erika, a worn-out typewriter that functioned in a countless number of offices and offices for almost a hundred years, and the uncomfortably long, incomprehensible word, ineluctably evoke the stack of documents and records, faithful copies of which were available to the members of the public in attendance at the exhibition *The Holocaust*, which opened in Berlin in January 2002. Almost all the documents are typed in that very same font. In those records, there were a great many words in the German language made up of a dozen or, at times, more than a score of letters: *Himmelfahrtkommando* (an SS unit carrying out an *Aktion*; a name universally known and used in the vicinity of the town of Koło, Poland, by both the Germans and the local residents); *Sicherheitspolizeilich* (security police safety); *Durchfallstation* (Block no. 19 in Auschwitz Concentration Camp, where diarrhea [*Durchfall*] was treated, a hospital block – HMB (*Häftlingskrankenbau*). The young Germans reading the documents made available to them studied those papers raptly. They looked at pictures taken by German soldiers depicting *Abtransportieren* (send away, meaning more precisely: exterminate); *Aktion* (an operation – the mass slaughter of people). "An old expression with a new meaning that is, unfortunately, universally known," writes Nachman Blumental, "used in all countries where the Nazis set foot. An expression befouled by the Germans. "It occurs not only in colloquial language and folklore (*'zrodila akciyu'* goes a Ukrainian song; 'An operation in August, an operation in February' runs a Polish song from the Janows camp), but also in official language in its monstrous meaning."

Hauptbekleidungskammer (clothing chamber, where the garments belonging to the people gassed in Majdanek were stored). The official language of the Third Reich represented a characteristic mendacity in the face of the necessity of naming things, actions, and phenomena that could not be named openly. The official language was soaked in lies resulting from the complicated structure of German word formation. Old, familiar words lost their original meaning. Nachman Blumental called them "innocent," which means that they were ostensibly innocent in relation to the meaning they carried. But these "innocent" words were the expression of criminality. Combinations of words in the classical German language were carried out in such a way that they came to carry meanings, information, and definitions that were simultaneously unequivocal and camouflaged. They disoriented the uninitiated and left them guessing; to those directly interested, these words were transparent formulations.

Seuchensperrgebiet is the word in German. This is the key. The artist responsible for the billboard is Rafał Jakubowicz, 30, a graduate of the Fine Arts Academy in Poznań who is now doing a doctorate at the Art History Institute at Adam Mickiewicz University. His article on the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans, "Rückleitung des Leerzuges," reveals the memory of the Holocaust that is seen to be dominant in the Belgian artist's work – a memory that he cannot expunge from his consciousness, and does not want to, any more than he can free himself of the feeling that the experience of a terrible future has stigmatized forever our *now*. In the contemporary world there are no words, things, places, or images that have not been contaminated

by an evil history. Succeeding generations of artists and scholars have taken up the challenge of trying to bear the burden of Holocaust memory, which neither time nor anything that happens afterwards can erase from human recall.

In his *Seuchensperrgebiet* design, Rafał Jakubowicz attempts to stir our memory and sensitivity by drawing attention to the significance of the words and language in which we were taught to name that which, in its essence, is inexpressible. Placed on a billboard on a building in central Cracow, it evokes a feeling of discomfort; reading this back-breaking combination of conjoined words, which must mean something, is difficult. It requires concentration and a knowledge of the German language. Jakubowicz places the passerby in a position where this awkward word, the German neologism, this product of the language called LTI (*Lingua Tertii Imperii* – the language of the Third Reich) penetrates our hurried, everyday existence. The semantic differentiation, the fading of individual letters, the darker "p," "g," and "b," and the blurred and indistinct "e" suggest that this uncomfortable word typed by an uncertain hand on a typewriter the worse for wear was pounded out by a woman working in an office somewhere. The artist shows at the same time how the "difficulty" of this meaningless concept, which most of those walking past will not even bother to read to the end because the billboard is hung high above them, hides an evil history and a truth that can be revealed by our memory and our act of concentration, and that the most horrible experiences of the modern era are hidden behind it.

Seuchensperrgebiet – a district where there is an epidemic.

According to Jan Chodera and Stefan Kubica, the authors of the German-Polish Pocket Dictionary published by the Universal Knowledge State Publishers' (WP) in Warsaw in 1966, *Seuche* is a noun denoting "1. (medicine) contagion, endemic disease, epidemic; 2. (veterinary) murrain; 3. (figurative) epidemic, plague; *Seuchen* (in combination) epidemic; *Seuchengebiet* infected district; *Sperrgebiet* closed district."

In his book about the language of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer wrote that "National Socialism sneaked into the body and blood of the mob through individual words, expressions, and sentence forms that came into force through being re-

Photo: Daniel Rumiancew.

Rafał Jakubowicz, *Seuchensperrgebiet*, billboard (Krasińskiego Street 7, Krakow), Zewnętrzna Galeria AMS / The AMS Outdoor Gallery, *NewOut*, The Festival of Young Art *novart.pl* – edition 2002 (*spójrz na mnie* / *look at me*).

peated millions of times, and which were adopted mechanically and unconsciously."

In the official language of the Third Reich, this one, long, uncomfortable word was used to describe and designate a place where European citizens of Jewish origin were assembled and, against their will, cut off from the rest of society during the Second World War.

By coincidence, Rafał Jakubowicz's installation *Seuchensperrgebiet* was presented during the 2002 Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow. Its subject matter was the structure of our memory – wounded, repressed, banished, reconstructed, recovered. It seems to be a mute sign of warning against the danger of hatred, and xenophobia, and shines a light on the persistence of old wounds. Despite its "ordinariness," and nevertheless dispassionately informative, the inscription that the artist elevated to the status of the unnatural dimensions of an urban billboard, is integrated into the iconosphere of the contemporary city – silent, incomprehensible, and demanding an effort from anyone who aspires to read it. In the rhythm of the city, it is almost impossible to read that word from its initial segment, *Seuchen*, to its final segment, *gebiet*.

In 1947, the Central Jewish Historical Commission published a book by Nachman Blumental titled *Słowa niewinne* [Innocent Words], which was a concise lexicon for research into the fate of the Jews in the Second World War. It is an attempt to understand the Nazi vocabulary from the point of view of its ambiguity, since apparently familiar and innocent words contained meanings that were fearsome and horrible were a feature of the Nazi diplomacy of murder. Each of the words listed and explained in the book is accompanied with a document or eyewitness testimony and is a description of the crimes committed in German-occupied Europe. These crimes, I feel, still have consequences in our lives and remain fixed in the collective memory.

Under the letter "F": *Fleckfieber* – typhoid fever (p. 203); *Für Juden* – for Jews (p. 212). Under "G": *Ghettoräumung* – cleaning [out] the ghetto (p. 232). Under "H": *Höhenmass* – measure of height (p. 256).

Apparently important, clear, and precisely formulated information is addressed to those who do not want to come down with typhus – a contagious disease requiring treatment. There is communiqué about what is assigned to the Jews and what to the non-Jews. There is information about keeping the ghetto clean. There is information for those who were assigned to perform measurements of height, which conceals within itself the terrifying truth about mass graves, about dying, about children who wanted to use the word *Höhenmass* to describe the height (1,50 cm.) required to survive. Blumental's book is 256 pages from "A" (*Abbruch* – demolition) to "I" (*Israel*), with short entries based on documents and eyewitness testimony.

Rafał Jakubowicz's installation *Seuchensperrgebiet* is about one word. It is, in itself, a sign of remembrance that is legible, precise, and free of commentary. The author seems to assume that the meaning of this German word is still present in the memories of the inhabitants of a Polish city, and that explanation or translation into Polish would be supererogatory. He believes that the historical experience persists in each individual. This single word attached to the wall of a Cracow apartment building and hung in a billboard frame, will force us to be interested in what district infected by an epidemic it refers to. What epidemic? Who is it supposed to warn? The deciphering of the compound German word is the key to the history that has been shown on the movie screen, recalled by documentary photographs, or published in books about the Holocaust of the Jews. On page 241 of the Polish edition of Adam Czerniakowski's *Warsaw Ghetto Diary Sept. 6, 1939-July 23, 1942*, there is a photograph with the caption "Dec. 4, 1941 – Typhus epidemic raging (Infected district – Epidemic. No Stopping)." The unclear, blurry photograph presents a street in the Warsaw ghetto in December 1941. The small silhouettes of pedestrians turn into the city alleys. Snowdrifts reach to the level of ground-floor windows, and snow lies thick on roofs, window sills, balcony railings, and the iron fixtures of the streetlights. The severe frost and the particles of frozen snow blowing on the wind give this photograph a spectacular look. It recalls the picture *Spaziergang* (1989) by Luc Tuymans, the Belgian painter who is a favorite of Jakubowicz's. "A banal scene," writes Jakubowicz. "Small, sketchily painted figures of strolling people. In the background, the outline of treetops. White predominates. A sunny

winter day. A painted representation that alludes to a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, but that also refers, the artist says, to a certain photograph of Hitler leaving his headquarters in Berchtesgaden and setting out, along with his escort, on a walk."

Another project of Jakubowicz's, titled *Arbeitsdisziplin* (2002), is an illuminated, long light-box with the projection of a photograph of a detail of the Volkswagen factory buildings in Antoninek near Poznań, Poland, and a short video featuring a watchman walking. The video was shot through the fence, covertly. It was the artist's intention to use the photograph as the basis for another billboard. The "panoramic" shot of the tower bearing the logo of the German car company that was founded in 1937 to build low-priced, mass-produced cars for the less affluent levels of Third Reich society, stands out sharply against the background of a sky filled with dark clouds, lighted by the diagonal rays of the setting winter sun. In the foreground, we can see part of the fencing and barbed wire. The shot of the tower bearing the familiar Volkswagen sign against the background of the sky and "guarded" by the barbed wire inevitably summons up images in which crematorium chimneys figure. So obvious that they are dubious, these associations are reinforced by a word written in German in a font similar to that used in the *Seuchensperrgebiet* billboard. Here, the word is *Arbeitsdisziplin*. Both of these words, *Volk* and *Arbeit*, have been burdened by history with the memory of the language of the Third Reich.

The Romantic concept of the *Volk* was introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder to define the existence, language, and historical character of a nation or people sharing common roots. As a part of compound and derivative words, the term *Volk* took on a special, racist coloration in the language of the Third Reich. Victor Klemperer writes that "The *Volksgemeinschaft*, the national community, was one of the basic concepts in Nazi ideology, defining the German people as a community bound together by ties of blood, a shared destiny, and a shared, national socialist political faith."

The innocent word *Arbeit* (work); *Arbeit macht frei* reads the inscription on the gate leading into

Rafał Jakubowicz, *Arbeitsdisziplin*, postcard, 2002.

the Auschwitz camp, and also into the camp at Sachsenhausen. The list of words beginning with the particle *Arbeit* in Blumental's dictionary is a long one. The language of the Third Reich was the obedient servant of the system. It explained, simplified, classified, selected, stripped away individuality, and stifled personality. History has burdened both these words, *Arbeit* and *Volk*, with wartime memories. This very memory of phantom memories forces the contemporary photograph to reduce our perception to images of/associations with the experience of Auschwitz. Our past (like our future) is still encompassed in our memory of it.

Arbeitsdisziplin – the printed legend on the photograph rivets our attention with its compound construction of two German words that stubbornly carry associations with that gate above which the Nazis placed the cruelly ironic inscription "Work will set you free."

Arbeitsdisziplin – work discipline.

"Beyond the moral and political dimension," writes Maria Orwid, "the phenomenon of Auschwitz can be understood as the end product of the reductionist paradigm. The pseudo-scientific reduction of the human being to the apparent concepts of deviation, race, norms or pathology inevitably led, in the end, to what it led to."

From the point of view of a psychiatrist, Orwid analyzes the syndrome of the memory and the responsibility of the generations for those great crimes in *Europe after Auschwitz*, published by Universitas in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. In 1945, European society was divided into "victims," "perpetrators," and "passive eyewitnesses." In the final years, Orwid states, new generations came along that not only assumed the inheritance of each of these groups, but also outlived them, which means that they are going through a special kind of grieving. This is grieving that has arisen in contact with mass death, and that emerges only when there was no personal connection.

Works of art that allude to the Auschwitz catastrophe, like the artists that make them and the people that perceive them, fall under the category of "survivor." The Holocaust functions here as a symbol of all the man-made catastrophes of the second half of the twentieth century. The way in which we decode the message of the *Seuchensperrgebiet* and *Arbeitsdisziplin* billboards is an outer sign of the contemporary phenomenon that American and Israeli researchers have termed "the psychiatry of man-made catastrophes," a syndrome of border -line situations, experienced in a literal or symbolic way, of a threat to life itself. We live in relation to memory and the recollection of our survival.

Zygmunt Bauman says: "This problem marks the societies of Europe after Auschwitz – the experience of the psychological injury (the traumatization of the mind) never ends. It constantly renews itself in new generations. The psychological wound never heals. We live with a feeling of abstract fear and guilt."

In its primary sense, the work of Rafał Jakubowicz alludes to the work of two important contemporary artists: Mirosław Bałka and Luc Tuymans. Jakubowicz consistently and methodically points us towards the things that fascinate him and the things that make him uneasy, and towards his sense of the state of memory. His ascetic, discreet art forces the anxiety it evokes to confront us with the question: "Why?" Why does that word on a billboard, which looks frozen, as if it were covered in frost, yet executed with modern printing techniques, contain within itself the ambiguity of something mechanical and bureaucratic (typewriter fonts) that is nevertheless also human (the awkward typing style that corresponds to the condition of the body)? Why does the photograph/postcard with a detail of the buildings of the Volkswagen car factory insistently open old psychological wounds? And why does the

Rafał Jakubowicz, *Arbeitsdisziplin*, video film, 2002.

tower bearing a neon company logo against the background of a sky filled with dark clouds summon up the image of the crematoria chimneys at Auschwitz? That image is in fact our collective grief, which contemporary psychiatrists are trying to understand – the grief that must inevitably accompany mass death.

The experience of the Holocaust has given birth to art marked with the consciousness of the catastrophe that distorted forever the way that we perceive certain images, and the way that we use certain things and words. For Rafał Jakubowicz, as for other artists of the generation born after the war, art has become a manifestation of the struggle against a world in the process of absolving itself of its sins, and freeing itself from responsibility and memory. It is precisely the artists, and not the politicians, who have taken upon themselves the responsibility for laying bare the repressive mechanisms of power, and unmasking the violence that is permanently present in the systems by which societies are organized.

The concentration by contemporary artists on the things that are vestigial, the things contained within the memory of the human body – in its warmth, its weight, its remains – to name only a few such well known artists as Mirosław Bałka, Robert Gober, Mona Hatoum, Zuzanna Janin, Luc Tuymans, Sarah Lucas, or Rachel Whiteread – can be understood as their struggle for the right to dignity, to be different, which also means being sick, dying, and dependent on the care of others. The acknowledgement of the right to be different stretches back to Auschwitz, to the time of the Holocaust, and it is an attempt to reject the paradigm that became the foundation of the ideology of Nazism. This problem extends beyond the direct victims of the Holocaust to all people who have suffered any kind of discrimination because of their views, the color of their skin, their sexual preferences, or their sickness. This fight for the right to be different is connected with the issue of individual freedom, individual dignity, the right to choose the way one lives and dies, and the right to experience one's own pain and one's own happiness in whatever way one chooses. Its roots surely lie in the time when all those values were debased. The right of the terminally ill to euthanasia is exceptionally important to "Europe after Auschwitz." "Euthanasia," in Maria Orwid's analysis, "is the extrapolation of the acknowledgement of the individual's right to decide about life and death, and the formal right of the physician to take the patient's life at the patient's wish."

This experience contains within itself the principle of the right to have the freedom to decide about one's own fate, and above all is inseparably linked to the time when one man had the right to pass judgment about the value of another person's life.

…There can be no denying and no belittling of great historical and individual conflicts. Catastrophes that cost millions of people their lives cannot be erased from memory. Future generations will be wounded by the feeling of guilt and the knowledge that those catastrophes were so inhuman in their nature. The Holocaust is the experience that transcends the borders of time and intrudes upon the ostensibly civilized reality of the contemporary world. In the art that arose after the war, with its existence dependent upon the structure of the reality that surrounds us, the most innocent associations of meanings, objects, words, and images have been combined into a desire to express a personal relation to the experience of the Holocaust, without the necessity of saying things straight out. The Holocaust has stripped words and images of their initial meanings. Art aspires to express a way to overcome the feeling of degradation, and also to express the necessity of living in the face of the memory of the Holocaust. By enduring, art aspires to convey the truth. As Julia Kristeva said, it should be "the fulfilling of the task of mass – transfiguration – where the symbolic becomes corporeal, and the corporeal becomes symbolic."

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