
RESEARCH ESSAY

A History of Violence

Photography and Writing as an Experience, Experiment and Insight

Kai Ziegner

Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), CH
kaiziegner@yahoo.de

The material presented here in the form of excerpts was taken from the book “A History of Violence” by Kai Ziegner. It represents the artefact of a PhD in artistic research that is soon to be finished at Linz University of Art and Design (UfG) and Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

The main focus of my PhD thesis lays on the artistic examination of my own personal experience of violence. Being born and raised in GDR I wanted to investigate the effects of the political turnaround in my home country more profoundly. I have therefore chosen the time frame from 1986 to 2016 and 21 specific events that are related to different acts of violence as the subject matter of my work. The research methodology that I have developed is hybrid – it encompasses archival research, documentary and conceptual photography and experimental writing. Central topics of my research work are guilt, pointless violence, misleading role patterns, dysfunctional father-son relationship, placelessness, disorientation and various entanglements into historic and contemporary Nazism. I travelled to all 21 places to photograph each site on color and b/w medium format film. Later I reviewed these photographs and started to write about it in different textual forms (i.e. short stories, fictive dialogues, aperçus, metareflexive journal). Eventually I transformed all the material into one experimental book. I consider it to be a means of communication and labour, that enables deeper understanding of severe social change. It is a polyvocal composition intended to be used as study material in teaching or as a template for further artistic processing (e.g. screenplay, playbook, piece of music, dance piece etc.). I have shown excerpts from the book at different international events mostly in the form of performative lectures and/or close readings, in which I actively involve the audience.

4 5



A

B

 U

67



 T

There was an older boy at H. School in P. who went after me for a while. I can't exactly remember his name, let's call him R. He was strong and athletic and did well in intimidating younger students. One afternoon I walked home from school down the hill to my uncle M.'s house. Shortly before the intersection, I bumped into R. and his followers. He pushed my face against a house wall. My tormentors continuously insulted me as a Jew and left no doubt that they were ready to tighten measures. I don't recall how I reacted to that, but I remember that I was really scared.

Although I managed to survive the encounter with R. and his friends without major injuries, my parents later had a discussion with R. in the headmaster's office of our school. He claimed that he didn't mean it like that and promised to improve himself. We shook hands on it and since then I have erased R. from my memory. I guess I must have been 11 or 12 years old at the time.

AB

February 19, 2018

Dear Laura, I am sitting here in the dark at night and I am happy that I could finally start writing my journal. In January I met Giaco in Berlin and he brought up the subject of the *Sudelbuch* or waste book. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, German mathematician, physicist and writer and also the German writer Kurt Tucholsky collected aphorisms, observations and ideas in form of a *Sudelbuch* – texts that were not refined and noted as they came to mind. The term probably stems from business language and describes a notebook in which all the necessary notes on daily business have been collected. The English term for it is “waste book”. What a nice contradiction it is to take the trouble of noting something that is considered to be waste in the first place.

In preparation for the introductory seminar on artistic research, that we are holding together soon at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) for master students in fine arts, I remembered Henry David Thoreau's book “Walden” (Thoreau, 1854/2016). I don't know exactly how I came up with it. Maybe I was wondering how Thoreau has spent his time alone at the pond. Obviously he was writing. German novelist Esther Kinsky mentioned in an interview on Deutschland radio Kultur last week that she considers Thoreau's journals to be his greatest literary achievement (see Gerke, 2018). I have again read fragments of it on the internet and also got myself a German book edition to be able to provide excerpts for the students. I am delighted to show how he has moved from precise observations of nature to a profound analysis of the work of ancient authors and, besides that, how he developed his own writing. I'd like to suggest that we might read extracts from his texts (Thoreau, 1838/1951, pp. 14–27, pp. 179–220, pp. 247–307) together with our students in April. Since we focus on autobiographical artistic research, the “journals” might also be useful for you and the development of your own research. What do you think about that?

Hope to see you soon in Zurich on February 26th, K

February 20, 2018

Valie Export (Austrian artist) speaks during Berlinale about “her” research center in Linz. It was found in an old tobacco factory, from which the artist took her name – Export. As a child after Second World War, she went foraging in the Austrian Mühlfeld region, to get enough food to stay alive. During these raids she always came back to one of these old factories, but never entered it. »The life of the artist never ends«, says the radio host (see Bürger, 2018).

Today I read a short story in Alexander Kluge's book “Case Histories”. Excerpt: a fictitious conversation with a concentration camp security guard about an experiment in which a couple of prisoners were forced to have sexual intercourse, observation: a horrible moment is made tangible solely by language (cf. Kluge, 1986, pp. 142–145). Effect: The snapshot of a room of horror is shaped by the supposed factual questioning of the security guard in contrast to his indifferent way of describing the ferocity of the scene. Klaus Theweleit (German literary scholar): »Male Fantasies« – see his montage technique! (Theweleit, 1977).

February 21, 2018

Tonight I caught a purse snatcher on Uferstrasse together with my father. The thief was muffled, small, and had Asian features. We drag him into the warm lobby of the church. I throw him to the ground and step on his hands so that he cannot escape. He stays amazingly calm. My father calls the police. The room we are in is full of old furniture and a large double bed that is pushed to the wall. A couple of children or teenagers sit on it. I can't really see them in the semi-darkness. I shout at the thief. Obviously he doesn't understand me and hesitantly hands me his passport. His name is Tomkoko. In Cyrillic letters it says that he is a doctor and apparently a woman. I raise her up. We sit together on the bed next to the children, who, judging by their behavior and appearance, are no children anymore. Tomkoko says that she comes from a small country at the border to Mongolia and fled to Germany with her friends after she finished her studies to work as a medical doctor.

Sadly though they didn't made it beyond Berlin. It's hardly surprising in the current winter conditions. When they ran out of money, they began to rob passers-by and tourists at the riverbank. Suddenly I hesitate. Should I really extradite Tomkoko and the others to the police now? The sirens are closing in.

UT



Together with my colleague R., a cameraman with whom I had worked frequently, I once went to a gay café in S., which is a nightlife district of B. We were both hungry and tired after work. We sat down, had a bite to eat and a beer and soon left the place. In front of the café we were approached by a middle-aged man who probably was of Turkish descent. At first he asked us some irrelevant questions about the quality of the coffee we had, but his tone became increasingly sharper and he started to ridicule us as gays. We told him that our sexual orientation was simply none of his business. Suddenly he pulled out a knife and started to threaten us. R., who was taller and stronger than me, was initially able to fend him off. But the offender did not let go of us instead he followed us down the main road. He shouted at us that he would call in some of his friends by phone and threatened to kill us. We decided not to have a fight with him and fled. He followed us a few more yards and swung his knife. He cursed us and all other homosexuals. I had celebrated my 26th birthday shortly before that incident.

TU

We took our sons and my father out to a medieval market at the C. abbey, which is close to B. It was a sunny Easter Day shortly after my 41st birthday; many visitors flocked to the ruined convent that day. We had lunch together, bought some small presents and went back to our car. At the bus stop in front of the ruin we ran past a young man wearing black jeans and a grey hoodie. My wife walked to the left of me; I was in the middle and my father on the right. We were holding our baby boys in harnesses in front of our chests. Shortly before we encountered the man, we cleared the way to let him pass due to the narrow pavement. I noticed from the corner of my eye that he clenched his left fist and grimaced. When he went past my wife he rammed his elbow into her left side. She screamed with pain and I asked her what happened, since I did not manage to see exactly what he had done to her. She told me that he hurt her. We ran after the guy and stopped him close after the bus station. I tried to confront him. He started to insult us as non-residents of his home region. I screamed that I would smash his face in. As a result he pulled out his smartphone, started to film us and threatened to call his lawyer, who would sue us for not giving way to him on the pavement. I called him a coward. If I had not had my child with me that day I would have beaten that guy up. Whenever I come back to the bus station, I do remember the triumphant expression of his eyes.

After my presentation about the methodology and use of photography as a research tool, she also mentions the photograph of the bus stop that I had shown – which is the final picture of my story – and tells me that similar bus stops were the main meeting places of striking miners in the UK. Maybe this aspect could be a central starting point for her own research. As in summer 2018 in Finland, I am again the only participant who does artistic research.

As a result of the conference in Lancaster, e-mail exchange with Shelan about Claude Lanzmann's documentary film »Shoah« (see Lanzmann, 1985). A distinctive feature of Lanzmann's method: he does not show any image of the horror of the concentration camps, but instead lets only victims and some of the perpetrators talk about their experiences on camera (cf. Busche, 2014). In addition to the interviews, Lanzmann only incorporates landscape photography of places where atrocities have taken place.

April 15, 2019

I'm heading to the Ostbahnhof train station in the morning. A white Mercedes G-Class stops just behind me. A man in his mid-thirties in painter's clothes gets out of the car to enter the kiosk close by. He tells the driver that he is now going to meet the "traitor".

April 17, 2019

I show my PhD thesis as part of a practical seminar that I am holding together with two of my PhD colleagues for students of the master's program in fine arts at Zurich University of the Arts. This time it is obviously more difficult for the students to engage with my research work. With the exception of a young woman from Japan who used to live in Weimar, all the other participants of the seminar seem to be barely familiar with GDR history. I had prepared a script with excerpts of my work for the presentation and again incorporated the lecture performance approach, to actively involve the students. Nevertheless, the following discussion of the topic that I brought up is fruitful.

Thesis of Robin George Collingwood (British philosopher, historian and archaeologist): one of the most important tasks for historians is not to rely exclusively on documents and relicts from the past in their research work. The historian should instead try to revive the past in his own mind and thereby make it more understandable (Collingwood, 1946/2014, pp. 282-284). The main goal of this kind of "re-enacting" or "rethinking" is to speculatively approach the world of experience of historical figures.

April 18, 2019

Dear Laura, I regret our conversation yesterday. Your observation is correct, we have been somewhat out of sight in the past few months. I read your last letter a few times to guess what your phrase "things I like to talk to you about" might mean. What you consider as my falling back on just bureaucratic formalities, I would consider a caring reaction to the ongoing mental and physical overload you are exposing yourself to constantly. I didn't want to be yet another burden on you, hence I dissociated myself from you. We should have talked about that earlier I guess, but unfortunately there was no time to even chat during the conference in Zurich in March. The monthly commute to Zurich and also the other trips that I have to do for my PhD studies meanwhile have pushed me to the limits mentally, familial and financially. Hopefully we will find a way back to the quality of the discussions we had with each other last year. Let's try please!

Kind regards, K

April 21, 2019

While working on my book, I see the pictures of the bombings in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa on TV. Shortly after there is a video circulating on the internet that probably shows one of the attackers. In sandals, packed with a large, black backpack, he walks into the church building, which is open on every side.

The Easter mass was underway at that moment. The attack was later considered a reprisal for the attack on Muslims in Christchurch (cf. Fährnders, 2019; FAZ, 2019).

May 01, 2019

During our visit, my father casually mentions that today the »3rd Way« neo- Nazi party will hold a rally and march from Wartburgplatz through the city center of Plauen. Around noon we try to get closer to the demonstration route together with our children, but the local police has managed to cordon off the area around the Upper railway station with mounted police forces, motorcycle squads and Bavarian auxiliaries [...]

BA



My father is a small, but still strong man. In his youth he was a keen gymnast. He had to grow up without his father since he was four, that's why it was always difficult for him to play his role properly. He had never learnt what fatherhood really means and what it takes to raise a child. When I was around 14 years old I started to steal money from my parents' wallets. Not that I really needed it, but the act of stealing was exciting to me. At that time my parents earned quite a bit of money as engineers in the GDR. Since there was hardly anything to buy in our country, money wasn't very important in everyday life. Since I had learnt very early from my father how to ride a moped, I decided to extend my criminal activities also to vehicles. Once I was caught by the police on a raid at night. My father had to pick me up at the police station and was noticeably disappointed. Later at home in our kitchen, we had a little fight, from which in my memory I did not emerge as a loser. That was our first and last physical confrontation.



12 13

The wall plaster was crumbly. No plastic facade as it would be usual today. I remember how my head got pressed against the house wall. Later I still felt sand on my cheek. My first day as a Jew. Never understood why he did that.



TU

14 15

New Shore says the writing over the entrance. It 's shabby here. Even the street name sounds like filth – Potse. The word sticks in my mouth, clings between the teeth like old cheese. That area used to be gay, today it's hidden behind veils. I remember that I got darted with malignant glances wherever I lifted the camera. Oriental Textile it says on the billboards, New Shore and Mobile House. Winter- withered trees framing the misery. It was no fun to come back. I stayed across the street. Didn't dare to come closer. Didn't want to stare through the shop windows. To look at the winter suffering.

At first I see the snow. How it frames the scene. On the glass panels a breath of ice. Cold shadow. Behind it the monastery in bright sunshine. The bus stop does not belong here. It is too modern, too rational. Nothing that would endure for centuries. Same goes for the tarmac that is freshly done and smooth. On the right side the fences glow. The road marking points into the right direction. To the left the demesne edges itself into the frame. Massive and older than dirt. Nothing really matches here. I do not have anything against this place. But it 's in me. Part of my memory. When I close my eyes I see his. They are cold.

16 17

The PhD thesis presented here in the form of excerpts of an experimental book is a hybrid of writing and photography. It is neither a classical diary, nor is it a historical treatise that the readers are faced with. Instead it is a kind of alloy of different narrative forms and visual material based on specific historic events and personal memories. The goal of such a polyphonic composition is to provide a multitude of moments, observations, and different vantage points, which (should) illuminate one another and enable insight and replicability.

"A History of Violence" instead of "My History of Violence" is the final title of the book and that should signify that the story told here is just one of many similar ones. I do not consider my biography to be something exceptional, but specific biographical references can provide the basis for a more differentiated and critical examination of the aftermath of the profound social change that happened in East Germany in the 1990s.

The example of one individual story can show in which way power structures have been effective throughout contemporary history and also how authoritarian regimes have affected their citizens over three generations and in three different German states. Outbreaks of seemingly senseless violence are often treated as a mere side effect of disruptive change processes, as are ambivalent situations in which actors of social transformation find themselves when they are at the same time victims and perpetrators of such violent events.

Since personal memories and historical documents served as the basis for my research, the central challenge was to work out what can be generalized in an individual way and to find a suitable form for the presentation of various materials through experimentation in writing and storytelling. Important sources of inspiration in that process were various works like Alexander Kluge's "Case Histories", Primo Levi's "If This A Man", Walter Benjamin's "Thought-Images", Klaus Theweleit's "Male Fantasies", Georges Didi-Huberman's "Images In Spite Of All", Claude Lanzman's documentary film "Shoah", W.G. Sebald's novel "Austerlitz" and Michael Verhoeven's feature film "The Nasty Girl".

Closing Remarks (fragment)

18 19

Benjamin, Walter (1994): Denkbilder [English title: Thought-Images], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Bürger, Britta (2018): "Kunst muß aggressiv sein". Britta Bürger in conversation with Austrian artist Valie Export., in: DLF Kultur [German radio station], Im Gespräch/Archiv, February 20, 2018, <<https://www.dlf.de>>

deutschlandfunkkultur.de/valie-export-im-gespraech-kunst-muss-aggressiv-sein.970dehtml?dram:article_id=411217> (as from: February 20, 2018, last accessed: February 20, 2018), Berlin: Deutschlandfunk Kultur.

Collingwood, Robin George (2014): *The Idea of History* [first edition 1946], Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing.

Didi-Huberman, Georges (2007): *Bilder trotz allem* [English title: *Images In Spite Of All*], München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

FAZ, o.V. (2019): Laut Regierung. Anschläge in Sri Lanka waren Vergeltung für Anschläge in Christchurch, in: FAZ, Politik, April 23, 2019, <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/sri-lanka-anschlaege-waren-wohl-vergeltung-fuer-christ-church-16153349.html>> (as from: April 23, 2019, last accessed: April 23, 2019), Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Fähnders, Till (2019): Attacken in Sri Lanka. Anschläge in einem gespaltenen Land, in: FAZ, Ausland, April 21, 2019, <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/sri-lanka-anschlaege-in-einem-gespaltenen-land-16151249.html>> (as from: April 21, 2019; last accessed: April 21, 2019), Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Gerk, Andrea (2018): "Es ist so ein Buchstabieren von Welt". Andrea Gerk in conversation with German writer Esther Kinsky about her novel "Hain", in: Deutschlandfunk (DLF) Kultur, Lesart/Archiv, February 13, 2018, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/esther-kinsky-ueber-ihren-roman-hain-es-ist-so-ein.1270.de.html?dram:article_id=410683> (as from: 13.02.2018; last accessed: 19.02.2018), Berlin: Deutschlandfunk Kultur.

Kluge, Alexander (1986): *Lebensläufe* [English title: *Case Histories*], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Lanzmann, Claude (1985): *Shoah*. [documentary film], France: Les films Aleph Paris, Historia Films.

Levi, Primo (1993): *Ist das ein Mensch?* [English title: *If This Is A Man*], [2nd edition], München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.

Sebald, Winfried Georg (2003): *Austerlitz* [2nd edition], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Theweleit, Klaus (1977): *Männerphantasien* [English title: *Male Fantasies*], volume 1. *Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Roter Stern.

Verhoeven, Michael (1990): *Das schreckliche Mädchen*. [English title: *The Nasty Girl*], [feature film], Germany: Sentana Filmproduktion München/Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) Mainz.

Bibliography

20 21

23

A History of Violence, Places and Events (1986–2016)

A Path at H. school, southern suburb of P.: assault, insulted as 'Jew', age 11 or 12

B Kitchen at home, in the village O.: fight with my father, age 14

C Staircase, southern suburb of P.: punch on the nose by A.'s brother, age 14

D T-Square, midtown of P.: we build barricades to fend off soldiers, throw bottles and stones at them, age 14

E Discotheque, eastern suburb of P.: punch in the face by an older clubber, age 15

F Tenement building, southern suburb of P., defaced a wall with Nazi slogan »Juda verrecke!« to frighten a rival in love, age 15 years

G Bus stop, in the village O.: wrangling with S., tear his necklace, age 15

H Demonstration, in R.-L., after the riots: car search by police at city limit, my motorcycle helmet is confiscated, age 17

I Flat in the western suburb of P.: S. gives me a blank gun, always have it on me, later hidden in wardrobe, age 16 or 17

J Garage at home, in the Q village O.: convert an aluminium crutch into a tonfa, put two screws at the tip, confiscated by the police at a demonstration in I., age 17

K On the street, in I.: policeman holds a gun to my head, I later stand shackled in the yard of the headquarters, age 17

L On the street, midtown of M.: police encirclement after demonstration, later S at night arrest and imprisonment, age 17

M On the street, in front of dance hall T., midtown of P.: policeman hits me with a riot stick at demonstration against neo-Nazism, impact wound on my head, age 17

N On the street, close to F. hall, in P.-C.: firing metallic U ball projectiles at neo-Nazi group together with M. and L., age 16 or 17

O Apartment house close to train station, midtown of P.: together with F., write list of names onto door of neo-Nazi leader, age 16 or 17

P On the street, western suburb of P.: block off neo-Nazi car together with B. and L., shooting flares at it with blank guns, age 17 or 18

Q Lobby area of main train station, midtown of P.: fight with K., prevail, age 18

R Underpass near main train station, midtown of P.: try to attack neo-Nazi group, police intervenes with guns drawn, chase us through the city center, flee together with S., spend the night in the river E. under G.-bridge, age 18

S On the street, eastern suburb of B.: policeman hits me over the head with tonfa during demonstration, showed him my press card shortly before, age 25

T On the street, in B.-S.: leaving gay café together with R., local resident pulls knife and threatens to kill us, age 26

U Bus stop in front of monastery C., near B.: young man rams his elbow into U's. side, insults us as non-residents, I am with my wife, our children and my father, age 41

Biography

Kai Ziegner (born 1975 in Plauen, East Germany) has studied German philology, journalism and political sciences in Leipzig, photography in Berlin and fine arts in Zurich. He holds a Master's degree awarded by Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and is currently in the process of completing his PhD thesis in artistic research at the University of Art and Design Linz (UfG). Ziegner has worked as a journalist, filmmaker, photographer, artist and educator. He is currently teaching artistic research strategies at Zurich University of the Arts and has taught before at the University of Potsdam. The artist lives in Berlin together with his wife and twin sons.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Ziegner, K. 2020. A History of Violence. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 4(1): 1, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.72>

Published: 13 October 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 