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On Eyes and Death

Death Will Come and Have Your Eyes. Goran Bertok gave this title to a retrospective selection of works from the last twenty years of his oeuvre, currently, as I write, on display at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Celje, in the former palace of the Counts of Celje, beneath which one can descend into an archaeological underworld and look at what lies beneath the earth. As a child, Goran Bertok wanted to become an archaeologist. The title addresses me so directly that there is no time even for the possible resistance that certain elements of his work might awaken in me. It is a line by Cesare Pavese, and also the title of his posthumously published collection of poems. A surprisingly kindred line can also be found in Slovenian poetry of the 1920s: Anton Vodnik tells a woman, called sister in the poem, that death has her eyes. Death and eyes. Are the eyes of death those dead eyes which, in Bertok's photographs, we see beneath half-open frozen eyelids, in heads separated from bodies after death, severed, cut off, or sawn off? Jean-Luc Nancy says of the dead body: nothing-to-see. With his photographs, Goran Bertok makes this nothing visible. Or are they the eyes of the photographed young anorexic woman, covered with a veil or pieces of white cloth? Or is Goran Bertok showing me that they are simply my own eyes? Is there always something in the gaze that is bound up with death? That bond between death and the gaze which is thematised in Holbein's The Ambassadors? But the gaze does not coincide with the eyes; the gaze is outside the eyes. Is the connection between the eyes and death precisely there? Or does the fact that death has my eyes mean something for death itself, something that changes it? If its eyes are not its own, but mine, is death still death?

In December 2024, ten years will have passed since the death of Tomaž Šalamun. When I firstmet him, I was eighteen. Šalamun had read my first book of poems, which contained poems about Death, with a capital letter. He was fascinated by the fact that in those poems Death was experienced as an erotic object; he said he had experienced something of the kind only once, in one of his dreams. It seemed to him that I was so close to that Death that he did not dare look me in the eyes. He told me this later, and after his death I also found it written in one of his notebooks. Yet when I myself remember that meeting, I remember him looking intently into my eyes the whole time, with unusual intensity.

What is it that I look in the eye when I look at these photographs by Bertok?

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To people today, Bertok's photographs appear shocking; they show something that seems as if it should not be seen. Something expelled from the field of visibility of contemporary civilisation. Something that appears extreme. And yet we may recall that only a few decades ago, even in this part of the world, the sight of corpses was much more integrated into life; when someone died, family members would wash and dress the dead body at home. Not to mention the customs of some other peoples, who lived in their dwellings together with the mummies of their ancestors. In churches, relics were venerated, and these were often not only bones but whole bodies or parts of bodies. Even today, in the church of San Domenico in Siena, we can see the head of Saint Catherine of Siena, and in the Venetian church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, her foot. That anorexic female body which in Bertok's photographs horrifies us and may lead us to ask whether it is ethical at all to approach such a body aesthetically, is probably very similar to the body of this saint, who for many years ate nothing except consecrated hosts; precisely her complete emaciation was regarded by society as an outward sign of her holiness. Outside towns, decomposing bodies hung from gallows; the sight of bodies punished in this way had a pedagogical function. Today we admire Baroque Ljubljana, but we probably do not keep in

mind that even in the eighteenth century its city gates were “adorned” with pieces of corpses, heads and hands fixed to the gates as part of the process of public execution. Documents have been preserved specifying the costs of such executions; the executioner’s fee included money for wine, and for a time in the eighteenth century the fee of a painter, who painted the execution, was also a compulsory part of these costs. The execution would not have been final without the painter’s gaze.

In the experience of looking at a decomposing corpse, decomposition provokes disgust; yet within it one can also recognise a certain surplus of life. Georges Bataille, an author particularly dear to Bertok, writes in Erotism about the kinship between reproduction and death, and says: “Life is always a product of the decomposition of life.” And: “The generative power of putrefaction is a naïve belief which springs from the horror, mingled with attraction, that putrefaction arouses in us. This belief is the basis of the idea we had of nature, of evil nature, which arouses shame: decomposition contained within itself the world from which we came and to which we shall return; in this image, horror and shame were linked at once with birth and death.” And again: “Those swarming, foul, warm substances of dreadful appearance, in which life seethes, substances in which eggs, germs and worms crawl, are the source of those decisive reactions we call disgust, repulsion, revulsion. Beyond the approaching annihilation that will fall with full force upon me, upon this being who still expects to be, and whose true meaning lies not so much in being as in awaiting being, as though he were not an existing presence but a future I await and which is not me, death will announce my return to the putrefaction of life. Thus I can in advance feel, and await, this bubbling decomposition, which already celebrates within me the victory of disgust.” But the corpses Bertok photographed are corpses from which precisely this has been taken away. At first glance, these photographs are very close to the photographs of corpses taken before him by Andres Serrano. Yet there is a great difference in meaning: the corpses photographed by Bertok are frozen. They are corpses from which the decomposition out of which new life could arise has been taken. And for that very reason they appear even more desolate. Bertok is not simply bringing before our eyes what our civilisation has made taboo; he is also showing the violence that our civilisation commits against corpses themselves.

The painter Božidar Jakac portrayed the faces of the dead in the belief that the expression inscribed on a face at the moment of death was the most authentic expression of the soul. But what can we say about the expressions on the heads of dehumanised frozen corpses that we see in Bertok’s photographs? Bertok photographs corpses degraded into material for medical discourse. The fact that these faces have expressions at all, and such intense expressions, as if they wanted to tell us something, makes it seem as though something has appeared on them that should not be there. It is horrifying precisely because it shows how horrifying what we have accepted as “normality” really is. Bertok’s photographic gaze is reconciled to nothing.

When Bataille writes of the corpse, of horror, of anxiety and of the feeling of emptiness we experience as nausea, he says: “In reading these lines, a void might open in us. This void is the only meaning of my words.”

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The exhibition is conceived as a passage through spaces which become darker from room to room. As if it were an entry into the space of certain mysteries, although the very first cycle on display, Seven Signs, which would acquire its proper meaning if exhibited in its entirety, shows that the artist refuses to accept any metaphysical supports; sacred symbols of religions are placed by him on the same level as signs of money, which, as Marx showed, cannot be understood without theological logic. Bertok sets these symbols in relation to death; without judgement, without commentary. One could say, banally, that these are symbols in whose name people have died; or, a little less banally, that these are symbols through which people have

tried, and still try, to transcend death. But one can also see in all this a considerably more serious and at the same time very simple point: that death is an effect of the symbolic. As Yeats writes in the poem that ends with the line: "Man has created death." Opposite this cycle stands Survivors, a cycle of moving photographic portraits of survivors of Second World War concentration camps. In the next room comes Hunger, with images of an anorexic young woman, and in the next Post mortem, with photographs of frozen corpses, until we arrive at the final room, completely darkened, where two videos of the interior of a crematorium furnace are shown. In one, the space is empty; in the other, a corpse burns, filmed in such a way that what we see cannot easily be identified: the flesh disintegrating in the fire appears as the formation of a kind of "Chinese" landscape. At the same time, with this spatial video installation, Bertok wanted to create the impossible feeling that the person entering the room was themselves inside the crematorium furnace, burning there. Paradoxically, this last and darkest room is also the brightest. Here we experience death as life, though not in the sense of that regenerating life which arises from decomposition, as Bataille spoke of it in relation to the corpse, but as the life of fire itself. In this sense, the path we take through the exhibition might even be seen as an image of an initiatory path. Shamanic initiations often included the shaman's contemplation of his own skeleton, stripped of flesh. The path into ever darker spaces is also a path from darkness into fire, which links us once more to the exhibition's first cycle, since Bertok, more than two decades ago, already connected fire with the symbol of the cross in a project made in collaboration with Dean Verzel, which caused a considerable scandal.

Bertok is constantly working at the boundary. As if he were investigating where the limit of the acceptable lies. But in relation to this exhibition, when it comes to the boundary, another question arises: where is the boundary between life and death?

In addition to the photographs and two videos, Bertok has also exhibited an object: an urn covered with gold leaf, into which he has placed his own half-burnt hair. The title is The End, First Rehearsal. Made in 2023, the work is accompanied by the following text:

> It began with a question from the magazine Maska: What project will you realise in 2023? At the time, in 2006, the year 2023 lay in some distant future, and the choice of project was an easy one. I will die. A completed death certificate followed: 9 September 2023.
> Seventeen years have passed, then another two weeks and a few days, and I am still alive. The statement regarding the date of my death is both a stance and a kind of joke. But this does not apply to my friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who, in the meantime, have actually departed, died. All more or less suddenly, all too soon.
> Maks Soršak, Damir Domitrović, Dušan Merklin, Eleonora Marendič, Sašo Cerovac, Dejan Prša, Aleksandra Kostić, Matjaž Vidali, Igor Naglič, Blaž Horvat – he too is dead. And others.
> After them, only ash remained, a few charred bones.
> In the urn in front of you are my ashes. I am in the urn and yet alive, alive and already partly in the urn. That much.
> The End, First Rehearsal.
> See you at the next rehearsal!

When we look at Bertok's photographs in this exhibition, perhaps the most horrifying sense that
we are looking at death comes with the photographs of a person who is alive, in the Hunger cycle, and who, as such, personifies death. The title Survivors acquires an uncanny resonance if we consider that these are photographs of people not long before death, since today the great majority of those photographed are dead. It is similarly bizarre when people say that doctors, for example, saved someone's life; perhaps they prolonged it, but who has ever saved it? And

what is it that justifies the title Survivors? Precisely that these people had, in a certain sense, already passed through death during their lives. That they had left their death behind them.

For the Jesuits, the ideal of obedience was for a Jesuit to submit to divine providence through his superior as if he were a corpse. It is interesting that through this they acquired a truly eerie power of action. But at the price of subjection. A pact with God is no more innocent than a pact with the devil.

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A few days after Goran Bertok and I had visited his exhibition together, along with the archaeological layers beneath the palace of the Counts of Celje, I attended the performance Arthanatos by Magdalena Germek and Vasko Atanasovski at Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana. Goran Bertok was also in the audience; he was the last to enter the hall. I wrote down some of Magdalena's words. Among them: "The human being is a being who literally fights the fear of death with the fear of life." And her quotation from Elias Canetti, a magnificent cry against giving death meaning: "If I accepted death, I would be a murderer." I thought: if, in a world in which all meaning comes from death, I refuse to consent to attributing meaning to death, what happens to the world? And a voice answered me that the real question was what happens to death. Goran Bertok was sitting in the half-darkness; I looked at him several times and was not sure whether it was him or not. I could not see his eyes.

ARTWORDS/Likovne besede 128, 2024