

Miklavž Komelj

Photographs as Emanations

1.

Goran Bertok has entitled the cycle of photographic portraits of people who survived the extermination camps of World War II, *Survivors*. Yet this is no longer the type of survival that is the postponement of death (each survival of this sort is merely temporary). Everything here is beyond life and death.¹ The way in which the image connects the presence and absence of the photographed being, life and death in relation to it no longer represent a simple opposition. Just like momentariness and continuance do not mean it either. (Proust wrote to Madame Straus in a letter that photography is “*the momentariness of that which lasts in a person.*”)

A gaze from eye to eye beyond death and life.

The emanation of that presence of the soul from which death can no longer take anything (more).

This is what I saw in Bertok’s exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary History in Ljubljana.²

The photographs that were exhibited had been processed so that the effects of light and dark converge in a kind of twilight – but at the same time also in this approximation of darkness, the light glows all the more. (In the photograph as such, light and shadow mysteriously – and paradoxically – come together precisely at an extreme disunity. Possibly the oldest poem in the Slovenian language to talk about photography – published in 1868 by Fran Levstik – praises photographs as “*the images arisen from the sun’s rays*”, whilst at the same time marking the photograph as the shadow of shadows.) The first impression I got as I walked into the space was as if the light of yet undeveloped negatives was shining into me. As if the film was directly illuminated by souls. As if these positives were the negatives of souls. Goran Bertok has managed to make me see these positives as the negatives of souls.

But at a point I exclaimed within myself: “These are no longer photographs, these are photograms of souls!”

I got the feeling that through the photographs of Goran Bertok, I met with the souls of the people photographed more intensely than most people I usually meet with in the flesh in daily encounters and conversations.

¹ Yet – also survival as endurance; how harrowing it was at the exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary History in Ljubljana to read the book of impressions accompanying these photographs and the note dated 7 March 2014 which said: “We have survived. We are still here. Internee H.”

² This was on 15 March 2014; this text was written between 15 March and 12 April 2014.

These faces were looking at me with the closeness and distance of the faces that I meet in my dreams.

With this power of evocation, Goran Bertok comes closer to the greatest painting than most of those that nowadays smear paint off their brushes onto canvas.

And yet: there is absolutely no similarity to painting here. There is something entirely different at stake here. It is the specific nature of the photograph, which is precisely in this, that it has nothing in common with human painting, pure emanation. Not the emanation of the photographer. The emanation of the photographed being. Photography is the illuminated emanation of the photographed being. (Brassaï writes about this really nicely in his book on Proust.) Emanation, precisely because this is vision without human feelings, without human contamination. (Brassaï writes exactly about this: a-human vision, identification with the vision of the photographic lens, as a kind of catharsis of the eye.) Merely a trace left by light on a sensitive substance, without memory, without fantasy. *That* is the emanation of souls. Like every body is an emanation. Like every face is an emanation. And yet: the face – is not a part of the body.

And yet: memory. Montesquiou: “*Photography is the mirror that remembers.*”

The face is the emanation of the soul precisely in the way that each of its features embodies the memory of all the movements that have produced it through repetition. Each unrepeatable feature is the trace of repetitions.

As I look at these photographs, a conversation is taking place beyond the conversation, an encounter beyond the encounter, a vision beyond ...

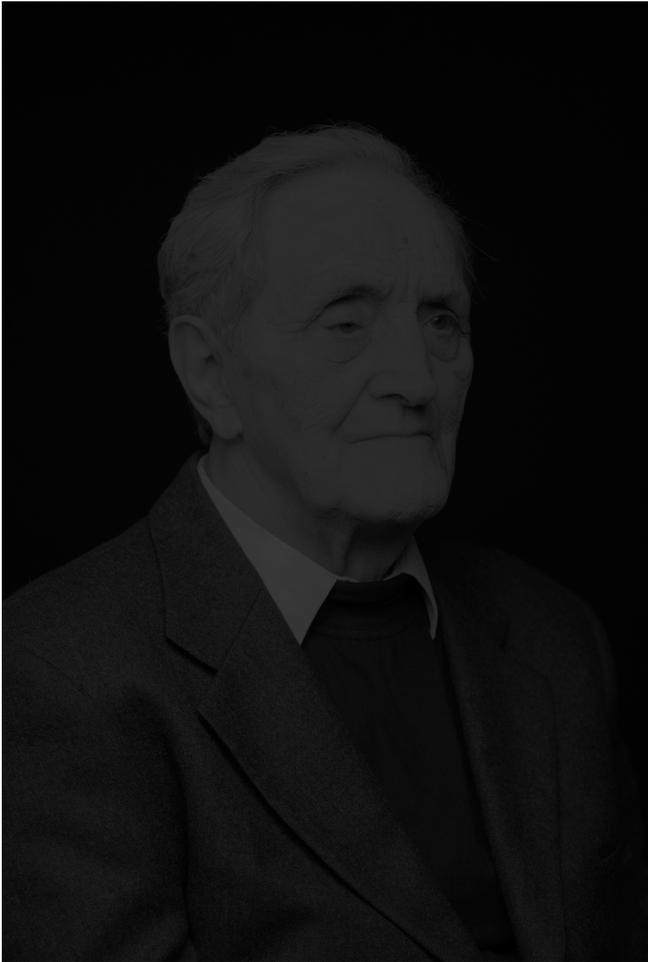
Four of the photographed faces have their eyes closed. Regardless of whether the eyes are open or closed – they see.

2.

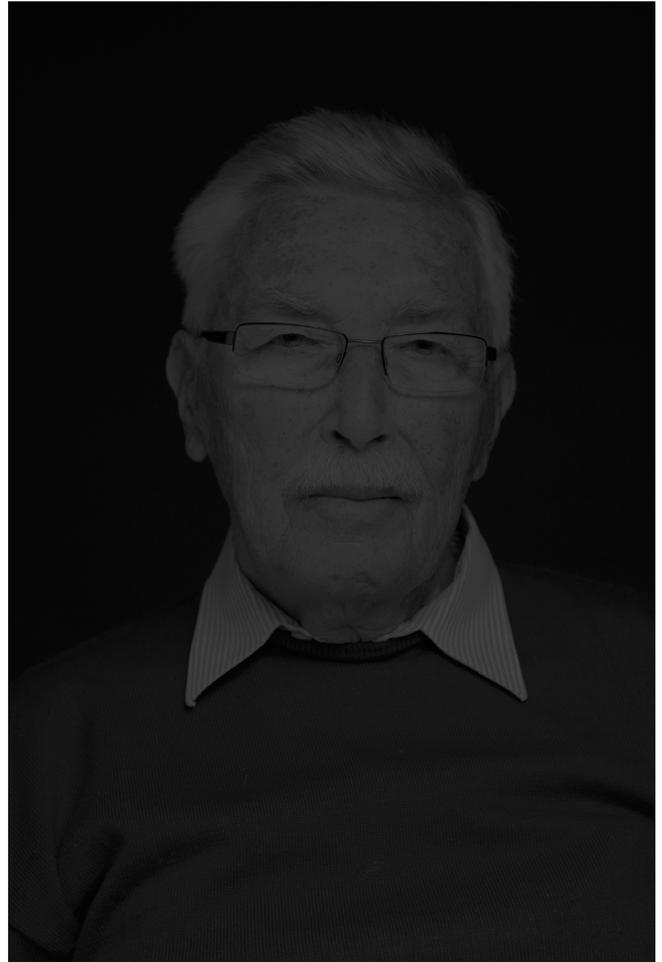
These faces are placed into a common area in relation to the same gaze.

Which? Whose?

Jean-Luc Nancy wrote in his text on Henri Cartier-Bresson that the gaze as the gaze is always the same, “*a part of the infiniteness of all gazes, as vision itself is always the same, vision of a person who contemplates the world,*



Goran Bertok, *Jože Hlebanja, Deported to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp*, 2013, photograph, 66.5 × 100 cm



Goran Bertok, *Miloš Poljanšek, Deported to the Neuengamme Concentration Camp*, 2013, photograph, 66.5 × 100 cm

contemplates someone in the world and contemplates the world of that someone in the world.” (As I was looking at Bertok’s photographs, I discovered the intensity of the gaze that was looking at me, through me, in every detail; at a certain moment I was surprised how every detail, including a button on a shirt, could shine with the same intensity of the soul as the eye.)

But there is something here that is outside of the world. These are the people who survived the Holocaust. Their gazes are placed into a relationship towards something which is (was) not the world. (In Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, a member of the Polish resistance movement speaks about his illegal visit to the Warsaw ghetto with tears in his eyes: “This was not the world ... This was not the world ...”)

How many manipulations on these themes happen over and over again! Here though – just an eye-to-eye encounter. Goran Bertok has not put these people together in order to use their faces to illustrate a story, an experience, but has looked each one of them in the eye. Open or closed. These people are not an illustration of something, but – each with

their own life – united in that which they have seen. Each of them is completely singular. Each of the faces of these people has formed in their deepest solitude.

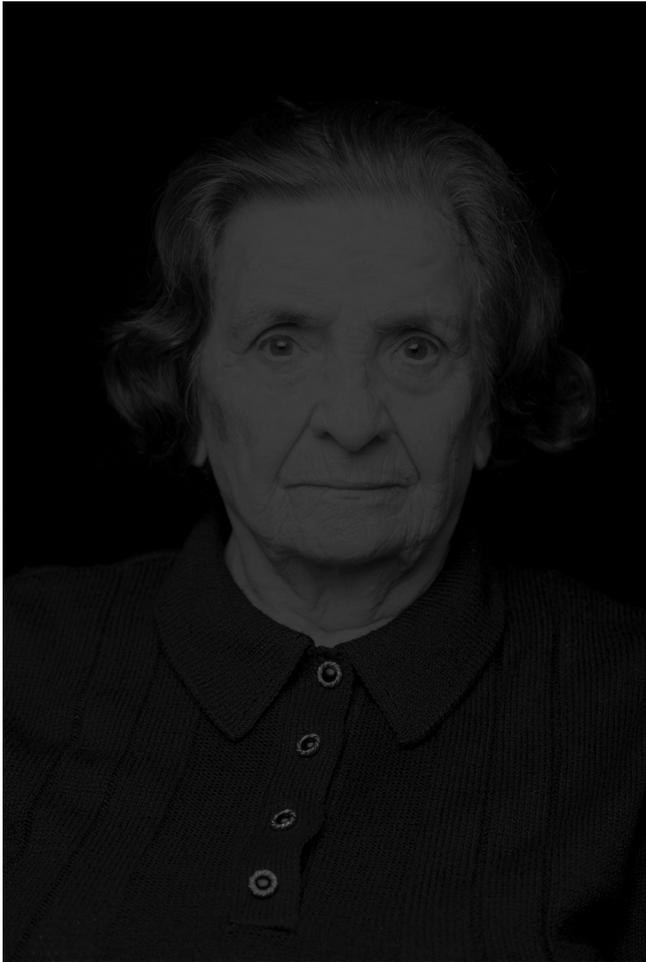
And yet – they are connected by the same gaze. A gaze into the unimaginable, into that which can not be the world. Known are the testimonies of the Nazis, who told people upon arrival at the concentration camps that even if they would survive and wanted to testify to it, that no one would ever believe them because what took place there could not be inscribed into the symbolic structure of the world.

Goran Bertok does not confront this with some sort of humanism, but with a gaze that has never retreated in the face of anything.

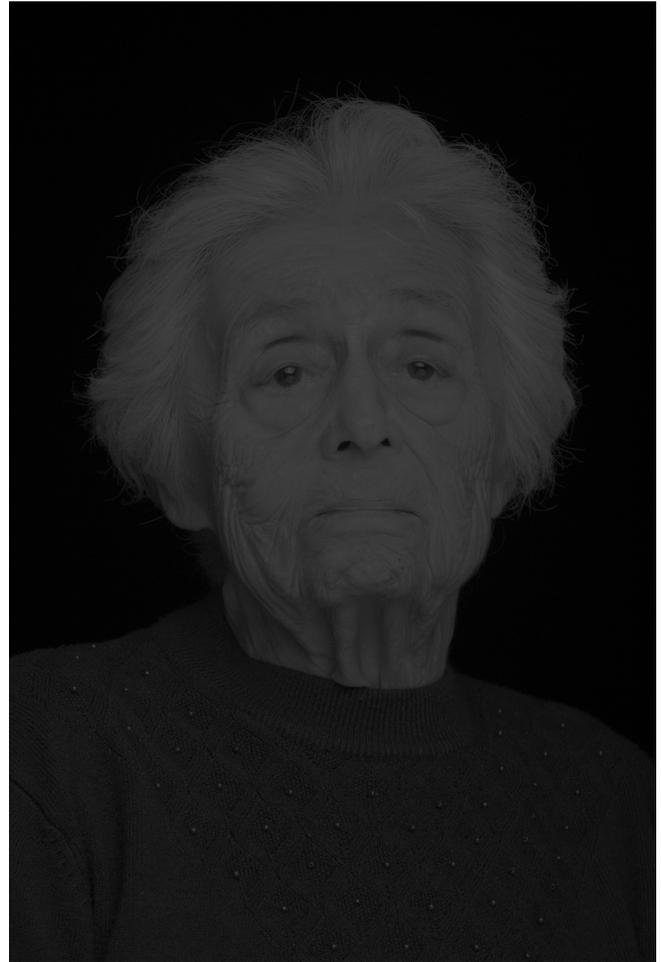
The gaze of the camera is not the gaze of man.

And yet it is *his gaze*.

There is no emotional closeness in that. In the wonderful text *Proti fotografiji* [*Against Photography*], Bertok wrote about the photographers who pose with their cameras in their self-portraits:



Goran Bertok, *Frančiška Deisinger, Deported to the Ravensbrück and Ravensbrück-Grüneberg Concentration Camps*, 2013, photograph, 66.5 × 100 cm



Goran Bertok, *Elizabeta Fürst, Deported to the Auschwitz, Buchenwald-Gelsenkirchen and Buchenwald-Sömmerda Concentration Camps*, 2013, photograph, 66.5 × 100 cm

“Such emotional closeness with the Machine has always been alien and disturbing to me. I certainly see considerable simplicity, perhaps also innocence in this pose.”

When the human gaze and the gaze which is not human merge as the *same* gaze, they merge without closeness. This gaze is *the same* precisely in its absolute disunity.

Bertok recognises it as the disunity of photography itself:

“And so I’m battling with photography ... Actually, I’m battling with the disunity in photography.”

Only the gaze into the gaze of this disunity can confront this, by which the gazes of these people, with each one being absolutely singular, connect into the same gaze. What needs to be experienced in order for the gaze to meet with the gaze? (Even if the eyes are closed.)

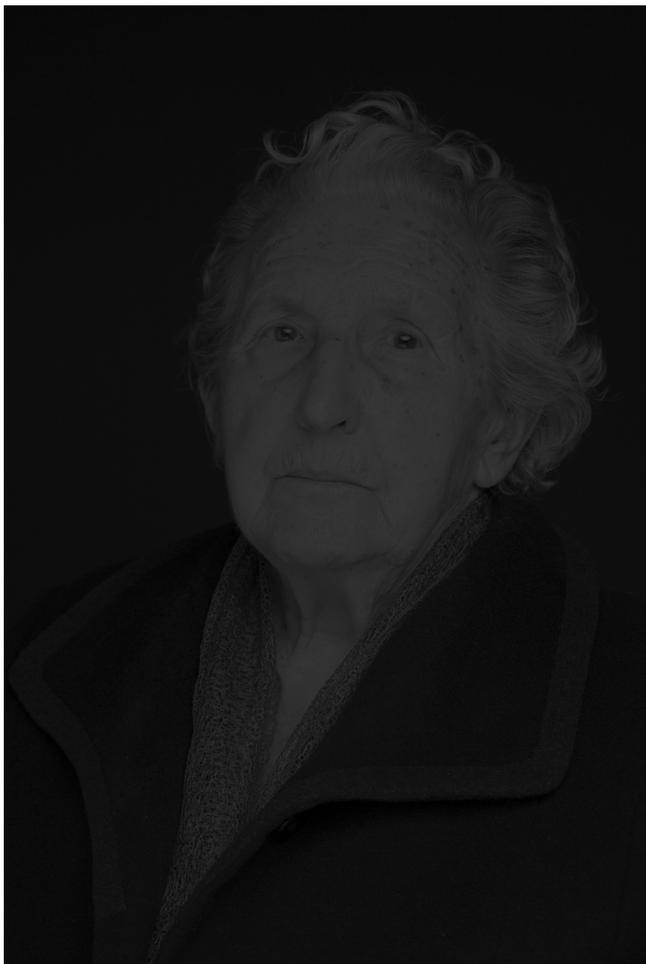
3.

He was able to meet with these gazes *in such a way*, confront only the gaze that never evaded the boundaries of life and death *in such a way*, only the gaze that endured the gaze upon very terrible things.

Goran Bertok has never shied away from terror with sentimentality and ideological appropriation. He has always known that beauty is, just as Rilke says, the beginning of terror that we are barely able to endure. And he has always explored, *to where* we can endure.

Goran Bertok had photographed the terrifying beauty of sadomasochistic rituals. Goran Bertok had photographed the heads of the dead, as they are blown up by fire in crematoriums. Goran Bertok had photographed the faces of frozen corpses.

Only the gaze that had confronted all of this, could have in such a way met, in such a way confronted *these* gazes.



Goran Bertok, *Sonja Vrščaj, Deported to the Auschwitz, Ravensbrück Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen-Haselhorst Concentration Camps*, 2013, photograph, 66.5 × 100 cm

Without a hint of victimological hypocrisy.

Goran Bertok is merciless enough to his own self to know that the photographer places the person portrayed into the role of the victim. In such a way, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was able to photograph most intimately, most subtly, most considerately, with the greatest respect, spoke of his sitters as consenting victims:

“If you want to catch the inner silence of the consenting victim when doing a portrait, it is very difficult to put the camera between the skin of a person and his shirt.”

4.

From where am I looking when I am looking at these photos? From which fire? Am I alive? What horror do those gazes see there, from where I am observing them?

Some people find the photographs of Goran Bertok murky. But no: the photographs of Goran Bertok are immensely beautiful and bright.

It is a long time since I have seen so much grace, light, beauty, tenderness and exaltation in a show. As I looked at these photographs, I exclaimed within myself that I did not know that even the faces of people can be so beautiful. Precisely because Goran Bertok makes them appear beyond any kind of human sentimentality. Something in them reminded me (not that I would want to establish any sort of comparison) of the beauty and tranquillity that I discovered in the photographic portraits of Henri Cartier-Bresson.

What does it mean to see a face? Alberto Giacometti could not make a portrait, without falling in love with the person portrayed during its making. But he fell in love once he recognized in her face the terrible, unsurpassable distances, the Sahara between the nostrils ... Love – that means “walking straight up to terror,” says Kurt Anders in *Passion*, a story of Djuna Barnes (based on a quote by Josef Pieper).

Goran Bertok knows that a strict formalization is required in order to endure unbearable intensity.

Our discussions are a great pleasure to me when we occasionally meet, as he usually tries to confuse me with bizarrely excessive subject matters, but in the end always speaks primarily about the rigorousness to oneself, about how people would have already disintegrated into an amorphous mass without rigorousness.

Beauty. Not aesthetisation. Auschwitz has discredited aesthetisation, not beauty.

In contrast to aesthetisation, beauty must be constantly redefined. We need beauty so that we can try to *confront* terror.

5.

We need the gaze. Goran Bertok makes us see how the gaze pierces the eye. ■

Goran Bertok (1963, Koper) graduated in Journalism from the Faculty of Sociology, Political Science and Journalism in Ljubljana in 1989. Since 1990 he has shown his work in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including: *Body, Flesh and Other Stories*, Kunsthalle, Feldbach, Austria, 2013; *Death Nature*, Galerija Simulaker, Novo mesto, 2011; *Post Mortem*, Photon Gallery, 2007; *Forbidden Death*, Center for Contemporary Arts Celje, 2009; *Borderline Biennale 2011*, Le Demeure du Chaos, St. Romain au Mont d'Or (Lyon), France, 2011; *The Magic of Art, The Protagonists of Contemporary Slovenian Art 1968–2013*, Villa Manin, Passariano di Codroipo, Italy, 2014.

Miklavž Komelj (1973) is a poet and art historian. He has published the collections of poems: *The Light of the Dolphin* (1991), *The Amber of Time* (1995), *Dew* (2002), *Hippodrome* (2006), *Unaddressable Names* (2008), *The Blue Suit* (2011) and *Hands in the Rain* (2011). He has also published numerous scientific articles and essays, including: *The Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, *Piero della Francesca* (2009), *How to Think Partisan Art?* (2009), *Ljubljana. Cities within a City* (2009) and *The Necessity of Poetry* (2010). He has selected and edited the manuscripts of Jure Detela, *Orphic Documents: Texts and Fragments from a Legacy* (2011). He also dedicates his time to translating poetry and drama (Pessoa, Pasolini, Neruda, Davičo, Vallejo, etc.).