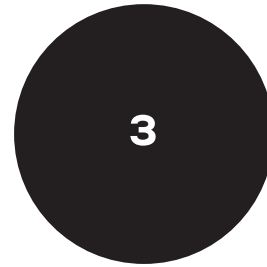




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The Gesture of Realism. Andrzej Wróblewski's Photo-Memory of War¹

Katarzyna Bojarska

'Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?', is also the question whether any art now has a right to exist...²

One mustn't move or judge too quickly in these matters. At present it is probably not right to suggest that there are two possible attitudes in the face of horror: one being the refusal to consider horror, with the stress put on the beautiful side of things, and the other being the resolution to struggle against the presumed causes of this horror. Currently, there is no doubt: one must struggle and only struggle.³

When writing about Jean Fautrier's *Hostages*,⁴ Francis Ponge argued for the necessary transformation of horror into beauty. He claimed that in order to oppose the idea of the torture of man by man, one necessarily needs to turn to beauty. Why necessarily? And what are other possible ways for producing images of war? One begins to wonder whether beauty provides an ultimate remedy against the powers of horror. It seems to me that Andrzej Wróblewski's choice of a very specific kind of realism in his war paintings can be read as a gesture of withdrawal away from beauty, on the one hand, and towards testimony and a constant struggle against the "presumed causes of horror" on the other. His works disorient "taste" and disturb the senses in the most upsetting of ways, negotiating between the photographic and the painterly. How is one to relate to the momentary destruction of a human figure that takes place in these canvases? It lasts too long; a second expanded to fill the whole length and width of the frame overcomes perceptive and representational limitations. Wróblewski mimics here not so much the process of perception as the arduous process of (re)presentation, of the retrieval of an image from memory, and even from the unconscious.

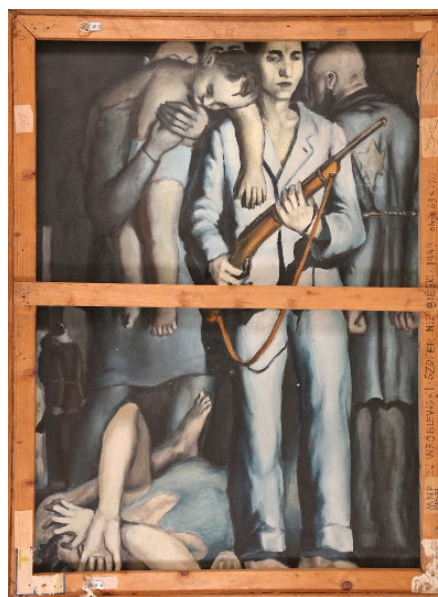
Andrzej Wróblewski's war paintings include not only the *Executions* series but also

paintings from the years 1948-1949; *Painting About the Horrors of War*, (*Fish Without Heads*) (1948), and *The Liquidation of the Ghetto* (1948) painted on the reverse of *Blue Chauffeur* (1948), also *The Walk of the Lovers* (1948), and, painted on its reverse, *Mother with Dead Child* (1948), as well as *Married Couple with a Bouquet* (1949), *Husband Killed in the War* (1949) in both of which a woman walks arm in arm with a dead (blue) man, as well as *Death of a Son* (1949) and *Child with Dead Mother* (1949) painted on the reverse of *The Walk of the Lovers*, and lastly, *Self-Portrait* (1949).⁵ My claim is they should be readdressed today in order to rewrite or revise the readings of the artist's oeuvre,⁶ as well as in order to approach the many challenges faced by contemporary art, the shape of Polish post-traumatic culture, the structure of memory and postmemory, the urgent issue of political and social engagement of art, and the question of the demand for realism vis-à-vis trauma. These are but a few problems that can be listed in the many recent non-canonical readings of the artist's works on war.

suffering demands

Theodor Adorno wrote convincingly that in times of horror (or after such times), art remains trapped in an unresolvable paradox: on the one hand, suffering demands art's continued existence, on the other, it prohibits art as such. However, "it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realized this. The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as formalism, give them a terrifying power."⁷ This voice can be found in Wróblewski's war paintings, which, more than anything else, work against oblivion and repression. That which one might want to reject at all costs comes to the surface of these canvases and recurs: the images of the fragmented body, of humiliation and death, as well as the historical conditions of postwar times, especially the ambivalent status of survivors: those who stood by and remained.

In the world after "the great execution," it is no longer clear on which side of reality



Andrzej Wróblewski *The Liquidation of the Ghetto*, 1949. Courtesy of Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

those who survived the shooting stand: do they hold hands with the dead, do they share the spoils, do they wear their clothes? In 1949, these questions must have had both ethical and political urgency, and seemed crucial for the formation of the community. Just so, the question of the gaze and the image: what were they to do with the images they saw - store them or repress them? Transform, reproduce, or maybe reject them?

I read Wróblewski's war paintings as a self-conscious and seriously engaged attempt at taking a stand, at creating an image-record of a particular historical experience, which can be summarized as the war experiences of a non-combatant, of a civilian – the protagonist of modern times and modern wars; a bombed, deformed, and disfigured subject. This urge to take a stand emerges as an alternative to the nationalist vision of non-civilian Polishness. His rejection of sentimental pathos and occasional harsh matter-of-



Andrzej Wróblewski, *The Blue Chauffeur*, 1949. Courtesy of Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

fact-ness makes it possible to locate this oeuvre within the context of an anti-heroic Polish postwar culture revolting against traditional, post-romantic strategies of representation and self-representation. Living in the rubbles of their former lives, in ruined cities and towns, having seen death that was most “unnatural” – rapid, dynamic, violent, and modern that is – artists, writers and filmmakers reached for means that would allow them to stay as close to this reality as possible.

I am not interested in reading the artist's war paintings as a narrative sequence whose linear structure would be dictated by the order of dates and numbers; rather, I suggest looking at them from awry and reading them in a seemingly mismanaged manner, which should allow one to extract some new sparks of recognition and avoid some old interpretative solutions and traps. This reading is based on a strategy of discontinuity and juxtaposition as a methodology for thinking about these war images outside of art historical reflection. One of the inspirations here are Giorgio Agamben's reflections on *gesture*, where human historicity, mediality and the ethical-political dimension meet:

What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in

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other pictures. Wróblewski referred to poetics of figuration which, as Elżbieta Grabska pointed out, could not have been fully developed in Poland at that time, and whose source was not so much aesthetic convention as an ethos of personal engagement. The critic saw in his works "a new version of a realistic guide in the world where a particular role is assigned to the signs of memory."¹³ Therefore it seems necessary to explore these images as a structure that is inseparable from the processes involved in producing memory, history and identity. It was precisely this experience of memory (of an inner image) and a certain urge to testify and to take responsibility for the image of reality that pushed Wróblewski to depict, in his most disquieting paintings, the world after the catastrophe, falling apart and losing integrity.¹⁴

Death in Wróblewski's war paintings is the death of the body: its torture, disintegration, disarmament and disfiguration, which turns a human figure into a blue mannequin, and a collective into a faceless pile of corpses. These figures are organized by the painter within the strict logic of the rectangular canvas. The frame itself seems to play a crucial role in the organization of both the field of vision and of the field of death. In the painting *Execution with a Boy* of 1949, on the left we spot a figure beheaded by the frame of the canvas, a man in a dark suit with his hands behind him, and next to him a boy in shorts, looking down, his figure reaching from the upper to the lower border of the canvas, his hands behind his back, his shadow behind him, against a blue wall. Between the two figures, a pile of bodily parts: legs, head, arms and a trunk in a pool of blood, or a shadow. The young, living man is not there to bury the dead – who does not even look like a dead man, but rather like a dismantled doll – he is there to stand by, to look (down) with his empty, black eyes. There is very little space in this scene, all the figures are as if packed into the frame (both dead and alive are 'packed' in the canvas as if in a coffin; some did not fit,¹⁵) and the pile on the bottom is neatly arranged so that it doesn't fall out of the picture.

In his meditation on the *corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy wrote:



Andrzej Wróblewski, *Execution with a Boy*, 1949. Picture from the catalogue *Andrzej Wróblewski*, Z. Gołubiew. ed. Warszawa 1998

The world-wideness of bodies is also announced in this way. Bodies murdered, torn, burned, dragged, deported, massacred, tortured, flayed, flesh dumped into mass graves, an obsessing over wounds. The cadavers in a mass grave aren't the dead, they aren't our dead: they are wounds heaped up, stuck in, flowing into one another, the soil tossed right on top, no winding-cloth to define the spacing of one, and then another, death. There's no scar, the wound's still open, the bodies don't retrace their areas.¹⁶

The torture of the body or its suffering find their summary in the grotesque heap of broken limbs. Would that be the quintessence of the historical body, the body as the subject of that century's politics and history? How to access this body, how to give it a space in one's image when one's imagination is so completely filled with bodies, how to reveal it? The viewer is immersed in the composition, crowded with the others, and yet there seems to be no specific place designated for him/her. This disorientation comes hand-in-hand with the impossibility of identification. Both organize the viewer's experience: "No secret of the body to be communicated to us, no secret body to be revealed to us. "Revealed" is the fact that bodies are more visible than any revelation."¹⁷ The bodies are visible dead and alive, they exist on the same ontological level in the image, and as the image. At the same time, these are not bodies that would haunt the world of the living as ghosts or specters, but rather, bodies as the actual, material existence of corpses, heaps of limbs and other remnants living – even if underground – among the living, those who remained; with them and despite them. This seems to be the core of the material aspect of Wróblewski's memory.

His decision to use disfigured figuration to speak of the real past and present experience should not be rejected on the grounds of being too faithful a depiction of historical atrocity, as if the artist himself were responsible for a world in pieces. An anecdote about Picasso perfectly sums it up: "An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: 'Did you do that?' Picasso reputedly answered, 'No, you did.'"¹⁸

In his 1955 text *On Deformation*, Wróblewski wrote:

What is the meaning of deformation in painting? If one uses art as a tool in political and social struggle, his painting cannot boil down to the

photographic, descriptive rendering of nature, but rather should concentrate on depicting the most crucial, striking features of a phenomenon, event or model. ... Deformation as such is nothing new: what is new, however, is its emancipation in modern painting, when expression caused by violent and logical juxtaposition of proportions of scale and movement becomes the major task of the painting of immense impact.¹⁹

Wróblewski's version of history painting is not concentrated on a merely descriptive rendering of facts, or on providing a commentary about them. The paintings discussed here are not so much pointing to the crisis and exhaustion of historical painting as a genre as they are offering an alternative by demonstrating how an event such as war can still exist in painting, while painting can still provide a form for taking a stance and for commitment. The obligation to work out an artistic idiom that would contain the "political and social struggle" drove his formal choices.

Painting About the Horrors of War, 1948, (Fish Without Heads) depicts a group of green headless fish. It is direct and quite cruel: an ordinary massacre, an everyday scene that – framed by its title – gains both weight and meaning.²⁰ One could say that the painter was already practicing the strategy of chopping, cutting and piling; a year later, the animals would be replaced by people, but the sense of the ordinary remained, intensified in the recurrent motif of a grey jacket – so common and yet so defamiliarized. Emptied jackets and trousers would turn into signs of lives lost, similar yet singular. As a member of the "lost generation," Wróblewski saw crowds of the living and the dead, belonged to them: the same people in similar clothes, with similar faces dying similar deaths and surviving to wear the clothes of the dead, to be named after the dead and to mourn the omnipresent absence.



Andrzej Wróblewski *The Painting about the Horros of the War, 1949.*
 Courtesy of Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation,
www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

the movement of the image that invades feeling and thinking

What is crucial for the construction of the war paintings is the relation of body, movement, time and memory. The endless and open form of the latter continually bothers the present in search of even provisional closure or fulfillment. Wróblewski

renders time according to the logic of trauma. The past seems impossible to delimit: the then-and-there invades the territory of the here-and-now. The painting thus turns out to be a gesture, a form of work on the means of being in time.

The working of this distorted logic can perhaps be best demonstrated in the *Surrealist Execution*, 1949 (*Execution VIII*), which depicts a man (and his shadow) in various stages of disfiguration and decomposition – from a deforming convulsion, through the loss of colour, to a disintegration of the body. The moment of death lasts through the sequence of subsequent figures, it is thus expanded in time and in space: on the canvas. The painter analyses it in the greatest detail, meditates, possibly even laments. A contemporary photographic camera could record this sequence move by move, gesture by gesture, grimace by grimace. The traumatised attentive eye sees it in its own way: with necessary scaling, reversals and connections (as when the dead and the still-living hold hands). Movement as a physical reality is thus translated through Wróblewski's work of painting into a psychic reality. The images that made it onto Wróblewski's canvases seem to be animated by the well-known modern antinomy between the reification of an event in an image (recollection within voluntary memory) and an uncontrolled eruption of the event through an image (flashing in the epiphany of involuntary memory or in traumatic flashback).



Andrzej Wróblewski *The Surrealist Execution*, 1949. Picture from the catalogue *Andrzej Wróblewski, Z. Gołubiew. ed. Warszawa 1998*

memory is a warm gun

What is specific about the traumatic events of 20th century history is that their occurrence coincided with their photographic (and/or filmic) record and then archive. The relationship between photography and war has a long and complicated history, which can possibly be rivaled only by that of the relationship between photography and death. Modern death functions as a snapshot in the context of historical events, and the pressing of the shutter release at times equals the squeezing of a gun's trigger. Photography seems to change not only the character of deeds committed in war, but also the very nature of facts and the sense of remembering: the perpetrators document their actions, pose for pictures, stage them, so that torture becomes an element of a play in front of the camera

(itself a means of torture). The victims document their miserable condition in secret so as to be able to prove it to others and to be able to recall it themselves.

Wróblewski's paintings seem to be aware of these ambivalences, even if the painter himself did not mean them to be. These (historical) war paintings could only appear in the era of photography. And it is to photography that they owe their very modern awareness that no image of violence can be innocent.

In *Executed Man*, (1949), (*Execution VI, Execution with an SS-man*) we see an execution scene against a white background, devoid of any trace of setting; any landscape, any support. Two figures seem as if they were suspended in the air, or placed on a shadow-less table in a photographic studio. In the foreground there is the headless figure of a perpetrator – “beheaded” yet again by the frame of the canvas – with his back to the viewer. He has a classic holster on his hip, one hand behind his back, and the other, invisible, pointing at the other man, who is already blue, broken in half: the upper part turned upside-down and reversed. The perpetrator's right arm is bent; however, one cannot see the gun. Why? Is it possible to think that Wróblewski intentionally left a narrow margin for doubt and imagination? What if instead of a gun, the perpetrator holds a camera? The victim reverses and breaks exactly like the image of the figure in the camera lens. This possibility cannot be rejected nor fully confirmed. Instead it remains as a possibility for reading that scene, and for thinking about the relationship between the image and the event, the one who looks and the one who renders visible.



Andrzej Wróblewski *Executed Man*, 1949. Courtesy of Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

The position of the artist's I in the paintings seems extremely ambivalent (it is difficult to understand and accept today, not to mention 60 years ago). He is not pushed against the wall with those being executed, even though there are some signs of similarity between him and them, nor is he on the side of the oppressor (though one can also trace some troubling affinities between him and them), nor is he fully on the side of the on-looker, the by-stander. Instead, the artist's I oscillates and shimmers among these subject positions, assuming an almost impossible position that allows him to continually point at that “grey zone” (as grey as the

jacket), both ethical and epistemological.²¹

gesture of a wounded jacket

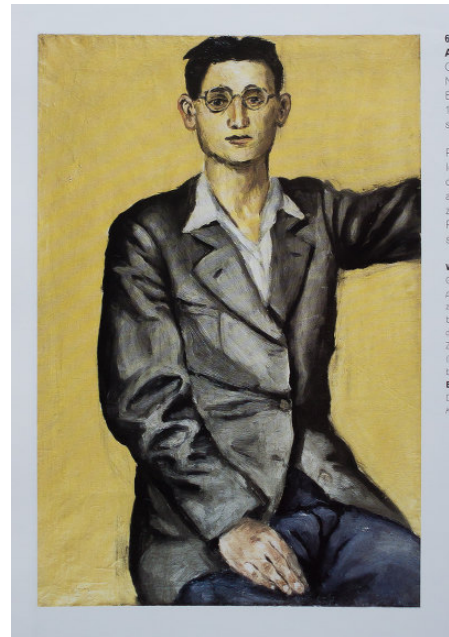
A quote on the same painting:

Against the white background untouched by paint, cut out from behind (as if in a cinematic take), the half-silhouette of an SS-man firing a gun, in front of him, caught up in a terrifying momentum the figure of a man who was being shot – trousers, jacket all flying up in the air, pathetic, embarrassing. I saw the image of killing that I knew from experience: people run over by tanks whom I watched in the last days of war looked alike. Only the clothes remained, man flew away, not allowing himself to be killed.

I looked at Andrzej. It was his jacket.²²

Andrzej Wajda recognized Wróblewski's jacket, depicted in nearly every one of his war paintings. And that fact seems to have troubled Wajda. The jacket recurs one more time, and seems most pronounced in the *Self-Portrait* from 1949. Why dress the painted self in the jacket worn by the executed others in the paintings, if not in order to say: I too could have died then and there? There are several other options: I am one of them, not in the sense that I too am a victim, but that I belong with them, I wear the same jacket and live in the same world as they do (only they are dead); I am wearing the jacket of one of those who were shot, I wear the dead man's clothes (this is my heritage), I was shot then, my contemporary form of being is that of a zombie. Let us have a closer look at the figure: he sits rather relaxed, against a yellow background, his right hand rests on his lap, his left arm stretched to the side gets "cut off" by the canvas' frame. This body also did not escape fragmentation.

If one looks closely at the painting and at existing photographic self-portraits of the artist, one immediately realizes that the painting was most probably based on one of the photographs Wróblewski took of himself in the mirror. Therefore, the hand that is not in the picture is the one holding a camera, the right hand, as the whole



Andrzej Wróblewski *Self-Portrait*, 1949. Picture from the catalogue *Andrzej Wróblewski*, Z. Gołubiew, ed. Warszawa 1998

image is a photographed mirror reflection. The painter looks himself in the eye, looks at himself and records an image of himself. The hand that executed the image (actually both images: photographic and painterly) is the hand that cut itself off (the image), thus creating the image of an already fragmented body. That which allowed for the image to come to existence, cut the fragment of the body depicted, as if to say that the two things are equivalent, making images and torturing, or inflicting pain. And so we look at the artist looking at himself (and possibly seeing all the other men in grey jackets) and the more we seem to be excluded from the composition, the more we belong there.



Andrzej Wróblewski *Photographic Self-Portrait in a Mirror*, undated.
 Courtesy of Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation,
www.andrzejwroblewski.pl

“The author's gesture is attested to as a strange and incongruous presence in the work it has brought to life.”²³ writes Agamben in a short essay entitled *The Author as Gesture*. The place of the work – or, rather, its taking place – is therefore neither in the content of what is supposedly communicated (the horror of war) nor in the artist (as author) nor in the audience: it is in the gesture through which the artist and his audience enter a play within the image (and the text which necessarily surrounds it) and, at the same time, are infinitely withdrawn from it.

Here, the death of a human being is an image that is deposited in the other's memory which becomes a repository of history as image, detached and estranged from the narrative mode into the mode of montages: cutting, reversing, juxtaposing. Gesture is the giving of a form, which in the case of these images means removing them from a certain expected framework (that of images of war – photographic depictions or documentations of executions of civilians), out of a context that does not so much deprive them of their power of horror as fix them in their meaning. By cutting through these images, Wróblewski undergoes his own torture: he looks at them, stumbles over them, reverts, deconstructs and arranges them anew. He stutters, unable to express what he feels about them, what he feels about what has happened and is happening. This gesture needs to be situated at the very limit of bearing witness to both the power of historical horror and the power of image.

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Footnotes

1 This essay is a reworked version of a presentation given at the conference “Andrzej Wróblewski – From Within / From Without” organised by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, September 6–7, 2013. I owe my gratitude to Marta Dziewańska for the invitation and to Magda Ziółkowska and Wojtek Grzybała for their generosity and help.

2 Theodor Adorno, “Commitment”, trans. F. McDonagh, *New Left Review* 1/87–88 (1974): 84. The first part of the quotation includes a fragment from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Morts Sans Sépulture*.

3 Francis Ponge, “Note on the ‘Otages’, Paintings by Fautrier”, trans. O. Fetlham, in: *Be-Bomb. The Transatlantic Was of Images and all that Jazz, 1946–1956*. eds. S. Gilbaut, M. J. Borja-Villet (Barcelona, Madrid: 2007) 216.

4 A French artist, associated with the Resistance movement, Jean Fautrier was arrested by the Nazis in January 1943. Upon release, he sought refuge in a mental institution in the suburbs of Paris called Châtenay-Malabray. The Nazis tortured and executed prisoners in the forest near the clinic. The screams of the victims could be heard clearly, even though nothing was seen. This traumatic experience found its expression in one of Fautrier’s best known series of paintings and sculptures, known under the collective title, *Hostages (Otages)*. The artist played with the elements of figuration and abstraction, thus conveying both the individuality of the victims and the amorphous materiality of anonymous corpses in mass graves. See: C. L. Carter, K. K. Butler, eds. *Jean Fautrier 1898–1964* (Yale: 2003).

5 See: Z. Gołubiew ed. *Andrzej Wróblewski* (Cracow, Warszawa: 1999).

6 This task seems to be undertaken at present by many art historians and critics working on postwar Polish and international art. See: Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznan 1999), Marcin Lachowski, *Nowocześni po katastrofie. Sztuka w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* (Lublin 2013), J. Kordjak-Piotrowska, ed. *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1957* (Warsaw: 2007), M. Ziółkowska, ed. *To the Margin and Back* (Eindhoven: 2010).

7 Adorno, *Commitment*, 83.

8 Giorgio Agamben, *Notes on Gesture*, in his *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis, London: 2000) 57-8.

9 Adorno, *Commitment*, 86.

10 Ibid., 86-87.

11 Cf. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and others, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: 2007).

12 J. Michalski ed., *Andrzej Wróblewski. Nieznany* (Cracow: 1993) 114.

13 Elżbieta Grabska, *Puisque réalisme il y a*”, czyli o tym, co w sztuce powojennego dziesięciolecia nie mogło się dokonać, in: *Sztuka polska po 1945 roku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*. (Warsaw: 1987) 382.

14 Cf. Waldemar Baraniewski, "Wszystko w obrazach jest na wierzchu...", in: *Przekształcenia. Andrzej Wróblewski 1956-57, ex. cat.* (Warsaw: 2004).

15 I owe this remark to Dominik Kuryłek.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. R.A. Rand (New York: 2008) 77.

17 Ibid., 59.

18 Adorno, *Commitment*, 189.

19 *Andrzej Wróblewski. Nieznany*, 174-175.

20 In some of his sketches for the *Executions* in addition to people there are also animals: dogs and horses, pushed against the wall, waiting to be executed. As if Wróblewski was thinking of a more total vision of an executed world. See: Ibid., 78-95.

21 I am thinking here of a specific epistemological rather than ethical grey zone – by force alluding to Primo Levi's "grey zone" as described in his *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi concentrates on the ethical dimensions of this problematic zone in which the differences between victims and perpetrators tend to blur, whereas I am interested in the epistemological dimensions of this zone. Primo Levi, *The Drowned*

and the Saved, transl. R. Rosenthal, London: 1993. Giorgio Agamben claims that the "grey zone" was Levi's most significant discovery. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, transl. D. Heller-Roazen, (New York 2000) 20-21. For a critical discussion of Agamben see: Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit*, (Ithaca: 2004) 144-194.

22 Andrzej Wajda, *Wykład na inaugurację roku akademickiego 1979/1980 w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*. Quoted after Iwona Kurz, *Twarze w tłumie*, (Warsaw: 2005) 198. Translation author's own.

23 Giorgio Agamben, "The Author as Gesture", in *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort, (New York: 2007) 70.