

# Verstörungen

## A Photo Project on the Image of the Soldier

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*Verstörungen*<sup>1</sup> was a project of staged photography dealing with images of the soldier. My collaborator, Andrea Lühmann, and I worked with an art class from the local secondary school. We wanted to examine the construction of soldier images, and to use our analysis to produce some photographic studio work. The art teacher, Dörte Kopitz, proposed to realise the project with a group of ten students aged between 16 and 18 years old, who were just starting their final exams.

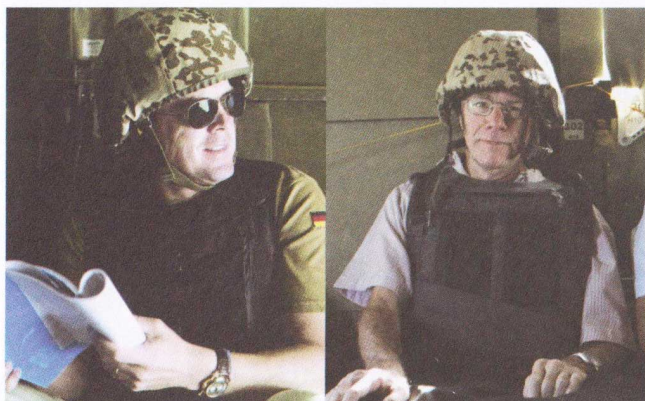
This project took place in September 2010 within the framework of the art-learning programme of the Edith Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg in Germany ([www.edith-russ-haus.de](http://www.edith-russ-haus.de)). The Edith Russ Site is an exhibition space presenting international contemporary media arts.

The workshop *Verstörungen* related to the exhibition *My War: Participation in an Age of Conflict* (2010) that was shown at Edith Russ Site in collaboration with ISEA2010 (International

Symposium on Electronic Art) and FACT Liverpool (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology). It dealt with the question of artists' interventions in an age of media-based warfare. German involvement in current wars has been official since the participation of the national military in the Kosovo conflict in 1999, and throughout the exhibition the nature and justification of this involvement was a much-discussed topic. The exhibition also coincided with a public discussion around traumatised soldiers returning from the military operation in Afghanistan, which hit the German television stations and newspapers at the same time.

### Preparations

With the ambiguous title *Verstörungen* we aimed to disturb and subvert the soldier image. The decision to work with staged photography was made because, far away from actual sites of warfare, not many other photographic approaches were available. An image search in the internet and



in newspapers confirmed that the combination 'portrait' and 'soldier' yielded more results than combining 'portrait' with other terms like 'civilian', 'victim', 'partisan', or 'terrorist'. This indicated to us that a soldier is deemed to have a status worthy of a portrait. On a symbolic level, the soldierly portrait confirms the subject's status, and their right to exist. This is one reason why military websites like to present such portraits in public.

We wanted to deconstruct stereotypes of the soldier by introducing deviations from the normative thinking that only white, young and strong men would be members of the military. We researched pictures showing female soldiers, some from non-western contexts, or injured soldiers, or soldiers in civilian clothes, and mixed these with 'normal' representations of white, male soldiers. We also included 'fakes', showing pop stars in military fashion clothes, actors from war movies, or students in disguise. The fact that

diverse images stood side-by-side was meant to sharpen the awareness of the formal qualities of the photographs and of elements which served to authenticate the image. We wanted the participants to experience and question photographic and cultural constructions. Some days before the project started, an impressive and highly rhetorical juxtaposition of two portraits of politicians dressed in military clothing made it to the front page of a German newspaper. The discovery of this double portrait showing in a very positive light the young, sleek Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the then Minister of Defence,<sup>2</sup> during his stay in Afghanistan, and in contrast ridiculed Norbert Lammert, Chair of the Lower House of German Parliament on the same occasion, made clear the strength of such visual composites. Thus, we decided to work towards creating image pairs.

### The Project

We arranged five project sessions with the group: an introduction, three practical sessions, each of which was four hours long and were to take place in the seminar space of the Edith Russ Site, and one short, final session. The first meeting with the class took place in the school. It started with a brief introduction of the issues and the result we were aiming for: a series of photo portraits showing each of them as a soldier and as a disturbed soldier. The next step was a competition: Who could recognise the 'fake' and the 'real' soldiers out of 45 internet images Lühmann and I had collected? The images

The uniforms were tried out for the first time and the small group arranged – with a lot of laughing and changing of clothes – for a group photo, which I took. After this, we talked about how to persuade the other four students to turn up the next time.

The following day all ten students turned up. This was a positive moment, although it made the structure of the session more complicated. We had to include the new pupils without boring the ones who had been there, and at the same time prepare all of them for the last studio session when the final portraits would be taken. My project partner presented a number of portraits by artists and photographers and discussed different visual languages and the possibilities of staging. Then we asked the participants to draw up concepts for their self-portraits. In discussion, the term 'Verstörungen' (disturbances, derangements) came into focus, in contrast to 'Zerstörungen' (damages). How was it possible to make a disturbance, a derangement visible? Andrea Lühmann and I realised at this point that we had attributed different meanings to the title: disturbing the picture surface with photographic means, and representing a deranged persona.

It also became clear that the decision either to let both meanings affect the photographs or to decide to concentrate on one of them would change the nature of the outcome. Andrea Lühmann was more in favour of focusing on one of the meanings

of disturbance, while I tended to mix them. The moment when this difference became obvious in the discussion with the class was very important. It made clear that the idea behind a word can influence a material output – the photograph – decisively. We framed this as 'conceptual fine-tuning' and said that we needed to discuss it between ourselves before the next meeting.

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All ten students arrived for the last studio day. We were in a rush, because 20 portraits had to be taken in four hours, plus the changes in clothing or styling that had to be made for the second 'disturbed' portrait. I had agreed to do the test shots and Andrea Lühmann took the final photographs. During the test series the protagonists tried out some poses, playing with features and sometimes accessories, assisted by the teacher who proved to be a helpful and critical observer. After each test, we downloaded the





pictures and the best pose then entered the final production phase. Sometimes the downloading and viewing was not quick enough and the pupil entered the final photo session without having seen the tests; in these cases, the test served as a rehearsal.



The feedback from the group was very positive, both in the last session and after the end of the project, when they were asked to write a comment for the upcoming publication.<sup>3</sup> They said they felt seen and treated as individuals by the artists, and that they liked learning about staging themselves,

as well as learning about the arts/photography as a profession.

### Visual Politics: Disobedient Viewing

During the preparations for the project, I read an article dealing with image politics after 9/11 by the art historian Linda Hentschel. The text was not discussed with the pupils later, but her theoretical ideas on 'visual disobedience'<sup>4</sup> illuminate the decisions that were taken and the photographic results.

In the article 'In Search of "Disobedient Viewing"' Hentschel makes the effort to formulate a visual ethics. Confronted with the use of photographs of tortured or dead persons in the so-called 'War on Terror' she develops her thinking from the theories of Judith Butler.<sup>5</sup> Hentschel does not distinguish between artistic, journalistic and private image production in terms of their potential for 'visual disobedience'.

In the 'War on Terror' a 'civilised' West arms itself against a 'roguish' East Islamist culture which is equated with mortal danger, with something inhuman or pre-human, that could only be dealt with by persecution and killing. As trophies, photographic images play a decisive role in this war. Photographs of tortured convicts, or of dead terrorists give 'expression to the omnipresent abstract fear of "terror" and "Islamism"'.<sup>6</sup>

The question is: how to criticise this dehumanising policy of images? Calling for 'resistance against these images of horror'<sup>7</sup> Hentschel develops a concept of 'disobedient viewing'. 'Judith Butler's idea is very simple,' Hentschel writes. 'Vulnerability is a general living condition.'<sup>8</sup> Thus, any visual ethics must be based on the fact of universal vulnerability, and set itself against the endangerment of any human life. Disobedient viewing stands up against images as trophies, which are used to present the alleged superiority of a nation (and its allies). In order to combat those triumphal regimes of images and media, critical images have to show – according to Hentschel – their tendentious and biased framing. 'Especially in the viewer's vulnerability, visual disobedience flashes up.'<sup>9</sup> And: 'The blunting of my response to other deaths can only dissolve when the acknowledgement of my own vulnerability in the field of the visual is exposed.'<sup>10</sup>

Hentschel is not arguing for a devotional masochism, savouring one's own suffering or displaying oneself as a martyr. Instead, she is aware that non-violence does not originate in a peaceful place, but is the result of an enduring tension in all of us between the fear of suffering violence and of causing violence. Accordingly, critical images have to grasp both the desire to hurt and the fear of being hurt.



She admits that it is a challenge to achieve this impression in only one image. 'It seems more reasonable to assume in a series of images and contexts, where single images are not critical per se, but their arrangement can display moments of critique by disturbing the hegemonic narrative. Practices of "disobedient viewing" imply raising the awareness that a visual regime relies on invisible pre-conditions.'<sup>11</sup>

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## **Making the first portraits, which represented sovereignty and power, was more challenging for most of the students than producing the deranged characters**

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The pairs of images produced in *Verstörungen* collectively convey a visual critique. They show the same person as a 'complete' sovereign subject with a heroic habitus on one side; on the other side the same person can be seen in a deranged mode – that is to say as physically or mentally injured, as ridiculous, or as a partly beast-like personification of the soldierly. Both representations are images of the same model and thus endowed with ambivalence. Looking at the series as a whole, it appears that some of the students feel more

comfortable in the role of the un-deranged soldier than others. But I would argue that making the first portraits, which represented sovereignty and power, was more challenging for most of the students than producing the deranged characters.

This indicates that the display of vulnerability – which is regarded as highly valuable by Hentschel and Butler – was very welcome during this production and indeed necessary for the success of the project. The fact that the students – partly as result of negotiations with their teacher and the photographers – staged 'deranged', weird, or trashy versions of their characters and sometimes had fun doing so, is a sign that they had become sensitive to the production and disruption of hegemonic heroic narratives. Students staging characters with mental injuries avoided a direct gaze into the camera, whereas the most 'threatening' depictions of soldiers displayed direct eye contact. In my perspective, the photographs represent a diversity of attitudes towards masculinity, femininity and militarism.

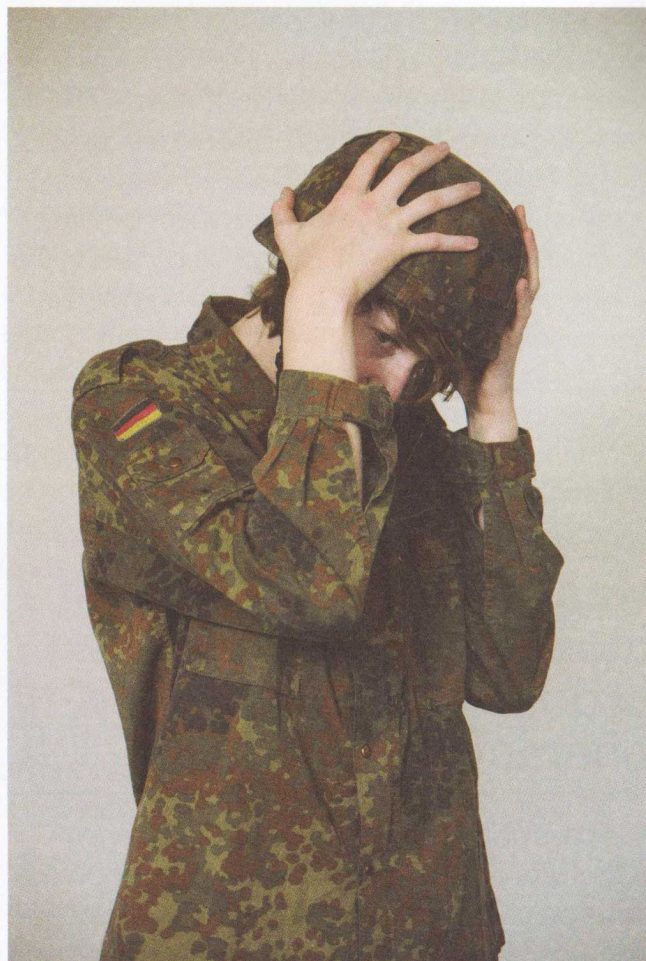
### **Role Distribution**

I have alluded to difference between myself and Andrea Lühmann as co-ordinators and producers of this project. Although we were equal partners in the discussions with the group, in the first sessions I was more responsible for creating 'openings' in our pretty tight structure, while Lühmann was more forthcoming about her own standards of an



artistic outcome. Managing time and content was a challenging task for both of us in every session, especially because of the ground we had to go over in the third meeting.

Put simply, Lüthmann may be considered more a serial photographer who wanted to produce



a coherent work, while I was involved deeply in questions of representation and visual analysis, inducing the combination of two portraits of each participant.

While I tend to work in a team-oriented way in educational settings, she rarely shares authorship

and responsibility for a visual production, and hence in the planning phase, Lühmann always placed an emphasis on her aesthetic agenda. In participatory photographic projects she has done with young people or adults, she adopts the role of a director. This is why a mix of photographic styles was not thinkable for her. I compromised and agreed that she would do the final images, but as I wanted to be present also as photographer, I insisted on working with the camera too. This resulted in me doing the test photos.

Andrea Lühmann and I had talked about authorship briefly before our arrival at the school. Knowing that this is always an important question for participants in such a project, we talked about what images we would offer to the participants in the end. We agreed that each pupil would get a pair of their own portraits in a medium format and that the Edith Russ Site for Media Arts would pay for the prints. At this point, it seems important to address the questions of payment and distribution of duties as a whole. I have been responsible for the education programme at Edith Russ Site for three years now, so I was doing this project within my overall contract with this exhibition venue. I was responsible for the acquisition of the participating group, the preparatory communication with the teacher, the organisation of space and technique (apart from Lühmann's camera which she brought with her) and the administration of the project

before and after it was realised. Andrea Lühmann works as a freelance photographer, artist and educator. She was invited into the education programme at the Edith Russ Site and was paid a fee for the project only. Together we were responsible for the concept and realisation of the project.

### **Shared Authorship**

Our handling of shared authorship was only possible because we talked beforehand about it and, as we did not pin down every detail in advance, because we knew each other well. Authorship was not only shared between ourselves, but with the student collaborators. For reasons of analysis I would split the contributions to the final series roughly as follows, though it is important to note that the contributions are intertwined and interdependent.

Each of the students invented her or his own appearance as a soldier/disturbed soldier. They were supported by other students, the two photographers and the teacher. My contributions were the initial idea, the conceptual framing, the planning of the process and mainly the examination of the source material and (visual) politics involved. Andrea Lühmann was very focused on the introduction of artistic examples, as well as the aesthetic coherence and differentiation in the final series. Together, we chose the pictures to be included in the collective



body of work. The art teacher (with yet another artistic background in drawing and sculpture) was acting in the background – a common pattern here when schools work with artists as partners is undertaken. However, Dörte Kopitz did not limit herself to a disciplinary role, but intervened in conceptual as well as practical discussions.

### Summary

The students considered their pairs of images also as a before-and-after-series. Reading the photographs this way they implicate an (abstract) anticipation of what the involvement in war missions can do to a person. When I asked the students during our last session ‘if their images express their attitude towards armed forces’ nobody answered this question. The teacher, Dörte Kopitz, added later that much is captured in the photographs that is not easy to express in words. Evidence of a deeper understanding and reflection was expressed in the written feedback.

A presentation of the series, for example at the school, could further deepen the process of reflection begun by the project. A presentation could provide the students with an opportunity to experience how others see them ‘through’ their photographs and to talk about what can be seen in them. In such a moment the visual disobedience could evolve into a disobedient ‘given-to-be-seen’.<sup>12</sup> If the presentation were to happen at Edith Russ Site, this would certainly strengthen

the profile of the project within the institution. The photo series was briefly presented during a team session, and was received positively, but there is certainly more communication to be done before educational projects such as *Verstörungen* have a crucial impact on how the institution perceives itself.

*This project was a co-operation between Edith Russ Site for Media Art and Haupt-und Realschule Alexanderstrasse (Secondary School Alexanderstreet), Oldenburg in September 2010. Artists and educators: Andrea Lühmann, Nanna Lüth, Teacher: Dörte Kopitz. Article translation: Claudia Lehmann, Nanna Lüth*

### Notes

1 ‘Verstörung’ is not an everyday word in German. Its meaning shifts between ‘a disturbed state’ and ‘perturbance’; the sound of the word is close to the term ‘Zerstörung’, which is much more common, so that the connotation of ‘destruction’ or ‘damage’ is always present.

2 Meanwhile, zu Guttenberg had to be dismissed from his position, because it turned out that the larger part of his doctoral thesis in law had been copied from other authors without quoting them.

3 Lüth, N. (ed.), (2011), *Medien Kunst vermitteln* (Mediating Media Arts). Berlin: vermittlung-erh@web.de

4 Hentschel, L. (2009), 'Auf der Suche nach dem "ungehorsamen Sehen"' (In search of 'disobedient viewing'), in: *Kritische Berichte*, Vol. 37, Issue 4. The title and quotes from the article are translated by Claudia Lehmann and Nanna Lüth.

5 Hentschel refers to different sources by Judith Butler, *Folter und die Ethik der Fotografie* (Tortures and the Ethics of Photography), in *Bilderpolitik in Zeiten von Krieg und Terror. Medien, Macht und Geschlechterverhältnisse* (Image Politics in Times of War and Terror. Media, Power and Gender Conditions) by Linda Hentschel (ed.), (2008); *Gefährdetes Leben. Politische Essays* (Original: Precarious Life. Political Essays (2005); *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (2009)

6 Ibid, p. 67

7 Ibid, p. 64

8 Ibid, p. 68

9 Op. cit. Hentschel (2009), pp. 64, 65. Here she refers to the philosophy of Judith Butler. Mourning (or being endangered) should not be excluded from the political field. On the contrary, according to Butler, they should play a central role.

10 Ibid, p. 69

11 Ibid, p. 70

12 See also Lacan, J. (1964), *Das Seminar. Buch XI. Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse*, Berlin 1980, p. 122

#### Images in order of appearance

1 'Two in Afghanistan.' Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU, left) and Norbert Lammert (CDU, right) side by side on the plane to Afghanistan. This juxtaposition appeared on the front page of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 30th August 2010. The commentary introduced zu Guttenberg as someone 'born with this outfit', and Lammert as 'the embodiment of a republic alienated to everything military.' Photos: Reuters, ddp.

2 Producing *Verstörungen* (disturbances). Photo: Laura Somann for Edith Russ Site for Media Art

3 From *Verstörungen* (disturbances)  
© 2010 Lühmann/Lüth, with Sina Demski

4 From *Verstörungen* (disturbances)  
© 2010 Lühmann/Lüth, with Roman Kammer