

Lukasz Zaremba

*Holes in the Ground*

1.

If only it were possible to say, with reasonable accuracy, that the photographs show graves. Armed with pertinent quotations (from Barthes, Blanchot or Belting) and with volumes, whole libraries almost, of theoretical reflections (from theology to psychoanalysis), we could spin one of those tales about the relations of death and images, two phenomena so often, and so convincingly, presented as twinned. Focusing on the medium of photography: a death mask, a grave – or on the image as such: a crypt, a tombstone, an empty grave, a mark of death, an absence – we could hunt for the meanings of the works from the *Holes in the Ground* series. Which, by the way, are physically large enough to suggest to the viewer that a premature try-out of a suitable hole in the ground may actually be an option. In the worst case, therefore, we would see the series as a suggestive *memento mori*. It would not have to be at odds with the automatic associations rooted in Polish culture, in which the earth and the grave, even mentioned separately, constitute a sort of interpretative filter or visual complex that are most difficult to eliminate (all those graves in various places, scattered on foreign soil or dug in native soil, anonymous graves etc.).

In the best case, it is not impossible that the act of identifying an image-grave would turn our attention to the most basic self-referential character of these photographs, to the fact that they could be called meta-images. After all, in such an equation death is usually considered the key to understanding the status of the image as non-familiar. In this arrangement, an image about death or an image in the place of death is the most literal representative of this status; paradoxically, it is also a story about this status, at least in some cases. Thus, they are images about images.

2.

But why not graves, really? If these are five vertical, two-metre-high photographs in “non-ageing” frames (made of wood etched with acid), they are indeed images about images (although which images are ever not about images? – true, but these are so more than many others), most of all perhaps because they point to the fundamental impossibility of making a final statement, of giving an unequivocal, objective and final answer to the question: “What do we see here?”. They remind us that even the very first step of an iconological analysis is never unambiguous. Ambiguity does not mean falsity, however. The diagnosis is directed against the unshakeable truth of perception rather than envisaged as a radical relativisation of perception.

Orski's small, three-image cycle *Stones* (2012) played on this very trait mainly by referring to the traditions and attributes of photography. Yet, on the fundamental level, it set a general-image mechanism in motion. The duck or the rabbit – an optical illusion from the satirical magazine *Fliegende Blätter* as filtered through Freud, Wittgenstein, Gombrich, Mitchell, once intimately familiar to us from the symbol CPN petrol stations, and today from the Carrefour logotype – is the first thing that comes to our minds upon seeing stones that “look like meat.” Of course, in the case of *Stones* this visual play was deliberately made literal and revealed beforehand in order to entice the viewer to consider the photographic operations (the change or loss of scale, the change of the background to non-realistic, isolation, with a concurrent echo of the assertion that a photograph “is what was” – the assertion that is here not so much questioned as deprived of a basis and placed in a void). Yet this illusion is effective based on the general principle which is to joggle the act of seeing, to mobilise the sense of sight. Thus, this is not about the truth/falsity of photography, but about the duck or the rabbit, meat or stone, never both.

In the case of the *Holes in the Ground*, graves are probably a more or less justified association in this ping-pong of visual memory; it is, at least, impossible to deny that this association has some visual grounds. At the same time, however, it is impossible to consider it final. Even before it arouses visual doubts – there is no simple either-or here, after all – the title is disconcerting. This time, it does not reveal (like meat – *Stones*), it generalises: *Holes in the Ground*. It is broader and at the same time more literal.

### 3.

The title points directly to the designate, but it explains little. The fabled indexical power of photography does not reveal meanings. “He dug and dug, and so / his day went past, his night”<sup>\*</sup> – but who did and what for? The artist with a spade, wandering up and down the country in search of various types of earth – the forest soil with a tangle of roots, the clay of a marsh, the finest, purest sand – “did not grow wise, invented no song, / devised for himself no sort of language”.<sup>\*</sup> But it is not digging alone that matters here. Orski's declarations concerning his attempts at making a distinction between working on art and the dominant system of labor must be recalled; this “aimless” (i.e. non-productive, not aimed at turning out production surplus) hole-digging may then be perceived as a political gesture.

Above all, however, it is necessary to emphasise that at the source of these photographs lies aimless digging, not an object discovered by a practised eye. Here, contrary to the *Stones* trick, the photographer does not look with an eye sensitive to detail and to all kinds of disturbance (and with an eye that is fused with the camera lens,

which internalises automatic seeing); he does not discover another object in the one at which he looks. Instead, he creates himself an object that does not serve any other goal than the final image. It is, in practice, less of a component of the effect than a phase that must be passed through.

#### 4.

Faced with *Holes in the Ground*, associations with other artworks naturally appear. Yet if the most obvious of them, that is land art, does operate in this context, it does so at a second remove: as a photographed installation and as a photograph that reduces objects made on an inhuman scale to a safe denominator and to a viewpoint from which it is possible to encompass them. Such a photograph forces us to consider the issue of scale and the transforming operations. It also brings to mind the era of technical reproduction, but at the same time it does not threaten us with the option of losing access to reality in favour of the universe of images. Above all, it points to the most fundamental reversal: to most “viewers,” land art exists thanks to the operation of transforming an image from a paper or electronic album; that is, it exists as a mental action relying on changing the scale and viewpoint, an action whose departure point is most often a small-sized but all-inclusive photographic reproduction, most often an aerial photograph.

A similar reversal is caused by associations with crime investigation techniques, which are increasingly often linked with art, and with crime investigation aesthetics (by some called “forensic aesthetics”), as well as by associations with the more traditional archaeological work, which the act of digging holes in the ground distinctly resembles. It is a view of the “uncovered” research area – a view which reveals the relations between objects and which is intended to serve the archaeologists in further analytical and interpretive work. In the same way, a model, a rendering, a reconstruction or a simulation are to provide evidence in the visual investigations that come under the heading of Forensic Architecture.

#### 5.

Dug exclusively for the needs of producing an image and then immediately abandoned, these holes in the ground even more seriously disturb this sequential relationship, the one that tells us what came first and what can be cognised on the basis of what. The object is preceded by the image, also in the literal sense. The holes are ten times larger than the negatives that would later serve to produce the image; but this is the phase we do not get to see. This is because the photographic film is then used to produce further enlargements, this time not numbered with full numbers. We are thus faced with images for which “reality” – understood in the traditional manner, that is, as the source or

beginning of an image, especially a photographic image – does not constitute a point of reference, but rather is only a stage (and not the first stage, either). These stages are subjected to entirely arbitrary transforming operations, the effect of which is finally viewed by us.

These operations, even though mathematical, are not precise. Yet they do not aim at making the images fully unreal. The strokes of a spade, the leaves and grains of sand are still discernible, and the graves – or, more generally and in keeping with the declaration in title: holes in the ground – can be distinguished. Thus, these operations do not lead to abstraction understood as departure from figuration. They evidently break with the understanding of representation as a reference to reality existing outside the image and prior to the image. First and foremost, however, they take naturalness away from the very procedure of producing the image, making it subject to entirely different, unclear and arbitrary rules. It is those procedures – ones which perhaps ring with a distant echo of the seemingly transparent principles of economics – that abstraction, ever present in images, is sought.

translated from Polish by Klaudyna Michałowicz

\* The essay contains paraphrased quotations from Paul Celan's poem *THERE WAS EARTH INSIDE THEM* as translated by John Felstiner.