Existential Archaeology

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He told me, afterwards, the damnèd spot
Was blood, his own. "Well, blood is dirt," I said.
"Blood's dirt," he laughed, looking away
Far off to where his wound had bled
And almost merged for ever into clay

… Wilfred Owen, *Inspection*, before 1918

Think how it wakes the seeds,—
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew high?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

... Wilfred Owen, *Futility*, before 1918

Werner Zellien's photographic installation *The Ditch*, 2010–11 consists of two suites culled from material he shot while in South Africa in 2009. The crisp color images depict the side of a ditch and an intersection, with their reddish, ochre and chalk white striations in the earth shown in cross section. The photographs refer to and are structured along three physical directions.

[1] Wilfred Owens, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owens*, London 1963. Sitert fra 1974 paper back-utgaven, sidene 79 og 58. *Inspection* og *Futility* er blant de såkalte "War Poems", skrevet ved fronten under den første verdenskrig.

The photographer's gaze and the camera are aimed straight at the side of the ditch, and we viewers look straight at it as if it were a wall. Almost like a visual scan of vertical layers, the photographs give us a slice of reality we do not normally register on a daily basis, one which is both charged and striated, with all its attendant associations. There is a horizontal axis here as well, influencing our perception of the work as one long row of photographs depicting the intersection and ditch at actual size. It is these three physical situations that give the work its visual form. And it is the metaphorical potential that gives the images a possible meaning.

The physical is of course inseparable from what relates to meaning here. Contemplating the side of a ditch is like looking at the wall of a dug out pit or down into a hole, with all the thoughts and emotions those acts imply. Looking at this depiction of sluggishly elapsing, geological time right in front of us provides a glimpse of not only geological but also historical time. An incision in the earth's crust is what archaeologists make when they are excavating their way back in time – time heals all historical wounds, quite literally. Prior centuries' battlefields are today long forgotten; scorch marks are buried, and over bloodstains there lies new soil that fosters grass, flowers and trees. Cutting an incision down into the earth's layers is what the grave digger does to return a deceased body to whence it came. Digging an incision down into the soil is what the trench digger does to afford the soldier temporary haven from the enemy's ammunition. A haven that was not quite sufficient, however, for the poet and soldier Wilfred Owen and his fellow poet/soldiers Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), John McCrae (1872–1918), Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918), Alan Seeger (1888–1916) and Edward Thomas (1878–1917), as well as Siegfried Sassoon (the war poet who survived the trenches and lived until 1967). Wilfred Owen died at age 25 in an exchange of fire seven days before armistice was declared ending the First World War in 1918.

The First World War is a benchmark here, with its significance in the development of the super power politics which led to the Second World War and to the divided Germany that is Werner

Zellien's (b. 1952) frame of reference, both as a person as well as an artist. The First World War becomes a reference here also because an unusually gifted group of young, well-educated poets participated in combat, and as many as six of them died in battle or of illness or injury incurred at the front. Their works provide an eye-witness account in the form of deeply considered, emotional poems. In the trenches, in the dawn over the expanses where the Battle of the Somme took place, this is where historical and existential time converges. In these trenches there is a cross. Not a physical cross we can see, but a cross where existential time, the metaphysical situation in the moment between life and death, and historical time are depicted along the axis of an outbreak of war, troop advancement, battle-waging, retreat, truce, peace settlement.

The vertical axis, physically embedded in the human body, bears existential time for each individual person. It is this person who can keel over or look down into a grave. It is this person who can comprehend such a statement as: *I will show you fear in a handful of dust*. It is this person who, when contemplating the side of a ditch sees both his/her own grave and an authentic, non-representative image of historical time's sediments. This is the existential subject which moves along the side of the ditch in real time; it is this subject which becomes ideal for the viewer who is presented with this migration as artwork, and who, in encountering the work, must repeat this suffering's path in his/her own time.

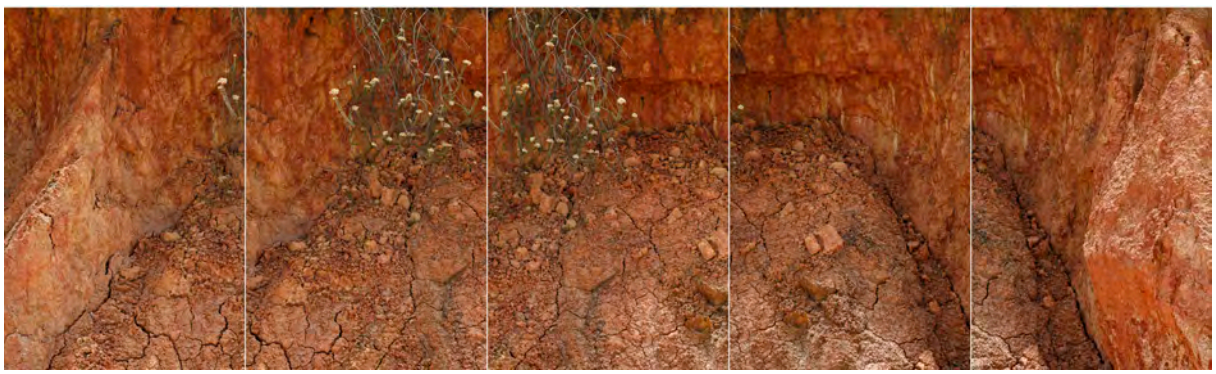
The title of this short essay could just as well have been "existential excavation" or "authentic path". But like the landscape, language has layers, language can also be excavated. In this instance, in the little clump of earth that this essay constitutes, the authentic, physically excavated lies like a layer under the surface, «existential», while the surface, «archaeology», lies over layers like a battlefield, the Hundred Years' War, Charlemagne's coronation, Christ's entombment, the outbreak of the First Punic War… A cross-section of the earth's crust reveals history's growth rings and suffering's C-14 isotope.

Comprehension of these images is therefore partly phenomenological, partly reflectively and interpretively formulated. Werner Zellien is a contemplative artist, one who undertakes his projects with a measure of philosophical reflection and poetic sensitivity. The phenomenological lies in the fact that the viewer has to imitate, literally repeat his sideways movements along the nearly 80-meters-long ditch. In one stretch the earth is reddish; along the other, chalk white. One moves gradually, following the road lengthwise and with the camera's eye fixed on a nearly vertical wall rather than out across an open space, seeking and seizing this wall as form. The phenomenological experience is a precondition for the existential. It is simply not possible to separate these two levels, they are so thoroughly intertwined. In this work there is no wordless, purely visual form of experience. Merely moving from shot to shot or, for the viewer, from image to image, becomes an imitation of a cultural ritual Werner Zellien, raised Roman Catholic, knows well. That is to say, the placement of the stations of Christ's sufferings within the interior of a church on an architectonic Via Dolorosa recreated and represented in the form of images of the 14 stations of the cross on the way to Golgotha, the place of the skull.

This is a clearly evident aspect of the work *The Ditch*. The path of suffering here is existential, beyond confession, but it is remarkable that purely coincidentally, yet purposefully coincidentally—just as Leonardo saw battle scenes in the water stains on a plastered stone wall – in one of the images from the chalk white path there is a figure which disturbingly resembles a human skull. In one of the cavities in this form there is also a large metal ball, a chance occurrence that is *unheimlich* or eerie. Looking squarely at this chalk white wall, at a wall with skull and ball, becomes, via the very physical position from which we experience the images—i.e., face-to-face, front-to-front—con*front*ation. It is this chalky soil that the indigenous folk have applied to their dark faces to mask themselves, verify themselves with an image, a re-presentation of oneself, such that the mask appears frightening, frighteningly like a skull, an outward reminder of the skull that lies under living skin. It is toward this inevitable death, limed like a grave, that we look toward something that seems devoid of activity. It is still, silent, bone dry. What we see is nevertheless something, something like what the poet sees when he, like T.S. Eliot, remarks: ”I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

This line is from the second verse of *The Waste Land*, “The Burial of the Dead”. The situation Eliot places his line in is remarkably similar to the situation Werner Zellien has photographed in the British empire’s southern outcrop, a place with cultural layers older than in the northern hemisphere. The following excerpt from Eliot’s poem ends with the famous line:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow…
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.



[1] T.S.Eliot, *The Waste Land*, London 1922, Sitert fra T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, (1963), paperbackutgaven fra 1985, side 63-64.

T.S. Eliot serves as another benchmark here. He himself belonged to “the lost generation”, one of the young who didn’t die. One of Eliot’s classmates at Harvard University was Alan Seeger, a poet he had written about, but who died at the front in 1916, six years before *The Waste Land* was published in 1922. Eliot’s poetry bridges the interwar period, from the First World War when, countries and civilization were destroyed, until the Second World War, with the work that earned him the Nobel Prize in 1948, *Four Quartets*, written from the mid-1930s and during the war and published in New York in 1943 and in London in 1944.

For Werner Zellien the Second World War and its aftermath are an extension and conclusion of the First. And in England the First World War has its place in history and in the collective memory as “the Great War”. We are reminded that there is a mental and emotional continuum between the First and the Second World Wars by one of the postwar era’s greatest musical works, Benjamin Britten’s *A War Requiem*. The work is a large-scale piece for orchestra, choir and soloists in the great Western European tradition. It was commissioned for the consecration of the restored Coventry Cathedral, the gothic cathedral that had been destroyed by bombing during the Second World War and was rebuilt according to Sir Basil Spences’ design. Britten employs the Latin Mass for the Dead for his work. Yet for a modern lyric he opts not for a newly written text, a text from the Second World War or one from the postwar period; he chooses the war poems of Wilfred Owen. The entire second verse, quoted at the beginning of this essay, is sung by the tenor, accompanied by the choir singing the Latin mass.

The Ditch is a work that seemingly bears little resemblance to earlier work that Zellien is known for, such as the magnificent photographic suite *Villa Wannsee – Melancholy Grandeur*. The latter consists of black and white photographs taken in an abandoned villa, in and of itself a fine example of a neoclassical building in a park idyllically situated on the outskirts of Berlin. Yet the building is better known as the site of the tragic Wannsee Conference, where the administrative plans for the «final solution» legitimizing the mass extermination of Europe's and French North Africa's Jewish populations were concluded on January 20, 1942. Encountering the villa's empty rooms, and the photographs of them, demonstrates how important it is for one's experience of a particular picture to know something about its subject matter. Emptiness, absence, the time that has elapsed since 1942, none of these things is visibly present, they cannot be. But awareness of them brings a discomforting feeling to one's experience of these empty rooms. It is as if the photographer is saying with his pictures: "I will show you fear in an empty room." The absence here becomes meaningful insomuch as the negation has a direction; it is pointing squarely at what once occurred here and the horrific consequences of that occurrence. One has to be informed about what transpired there in order for the void to be discerned as devoid of something. It's in this way that silence can speak.

What these two, so very different places—a defined, historically fixed, physical entity such as the Villa Wannsee and a random spot on an enormous continent—have in common is the number of dead. The sheer notion of the six million Jews killed, the even more millions killed in wars and even more than that, those who just simply die, as we all do in the end. Imagining such numbers cannot

easily be done by trying to empathize with individual destinies, even though it can be done and it can be done meaningfully and with relevance for the vast majority, that which we cannot appreciate as other than a “mass”. Elias Canetti explores such questions in his book *Masse und Macht* from 1960. He calls it ”the invisible dead”. He elaborates on this with antiquated notions: ”Men usually believe the dead live together in a distant country, under the earth…” It is such notions, which Canetti observes in Gabon, Siberia, the Scottish Highlands, the Cap of the North and in South Africa, that have significance for the experience of a slicing into the earth’s layers. Citing an anthropologist he states: ”The old Bechuana, in common with all other South African natives, believed all space to be full of the spirits of the ancestors. Earth, air and sky were crowded with ghosts who could exercise a baleful influence on the living if they chose.” This is the South African soil that Werner Zellien has photographed; empty or full, it is a question of faith. Canetti ascribes to these fundamental attitudes a possible significance for piety as thus: ”It could be argued that religion *begins* with these invisible crowds.” When the churches are emptied, the society of the sacred is drained; when the earth and the air are emptied, the basis of faith itself disintegrates. This is the moment when fear seeps in, when hope evaporates. Is it only the unsuspecting sun, the indifferent heat again, that cared enough to wake the earth from its sleep? ”Was it for this the clay grew tall?”?

In one of Werner Zellien's photos there is a little flower, a sign of life in the midst of the entropic, mercilessly dry, parched landscape. A symbol of hope, just like the pear tree that survived the collapse of the towers at Ground Zero on September 11, 2001. The void there is filled with the names of the thousands of invisible dead. Monuments tend to be built of stone, steel and concrete. In a monument, art becomes metaphysical. In the photographic series *The Ditch*, Werner Zellien demonstrates how photography can be used monumentally, quietly heroic, like a *Denkmal*, just as an image of an empty space can contain so much. And like all monuments, these photographs must be experienced physically, with both mind and body, face to face, here and now—only then can one see the fear in a handful of dust.

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[1] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 1960, sitert fra den engelske utgaven fra 1984, side 42.
[1] Ibid., side 45