Dani Ploeger

fronterlebnis

8 December – 13 January

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[Now] we have the strict inhumanity of technological murder and the bureaucratic surveillance of all aspects of everyday life.

[…] Our task is to find a new heroic figure, which is neither the return of the old figure of religious or national sacrifice, nor the nihilistic figure of the last man.

Alain Badiou – "The Figure of the Soldier" (2011)

arebyte Gallery is pleased to present *fronterlebnis*, an exhibition by Dani Ploeger.

In 2017, Ploeger made several journeys across Europe to examine the co-existence of conventional weapons and digital culture in everyday life. *fronterlebnis* – the title refers to Ernst Jünger's proto-fascist concept of the 'front experience' – brings together work in different media that emerged from an encounter with soldiers on the frontline in the Donbass War in Ukraine.

Over the past two years, Ploeger has engaged with the recent (re-)militarization of civilian spaces across Europe in the context of omnipresent digital culture. Heavily armed police officers and soldiers are conspicuously deployed on the streets of Western European metropoles, while a growing number of volunteer militias equipped with Soviet-era weapons are training for – and participating in – conventional war scenarios in Central Europe. Meanwhile, experiences of the public spaces in which these developments take place are highly determined by advanced (mobile) consumer technologies. Starting from his own ambiguous relationship to firearms, which is driven by a paradoxical combination of childhood fascinations and critical theory, Ploeger's solo show frontlerlebnis examines the ways in which mobile phones, action cameras and other gadgets now co-exist with seemingly old-fashioned weapon technologies and their associated symbolic cults of masculinity, strength and heroism.

The four works of *fronterlebnis* process two journeys through Ukraine, during which Ploeger was embedded with soldiers on the frontline in the Donbass War, and explored shopping malls, weapon stores, monuments and flea markets.

about Dani Ploeger

Dani Ploeger combines performance, video, computer
programming and electronics hacking to investigate
and subvert the spectacles of techno-consumer culture.
Re-purposing, misusing, and at times destroying everyday
devices, his work exposes seemingly banal and
taken-for-granted aspects of digital culture as objects
of both physical beauty and political power.

Among others, he has worked with traditional metal
workers in the old city of Cairo to encase tablet computers in
plate steel, attended firearms training in Poland to shoot an
iPad with an AK-47, made a VR installation while embedded
with frontline troops in the Donbass War, and travelled to
dump sites in Nigeria to collect electronic waste originating
from Europe.

Ploeger's artwork has been shown at transmediale (Berlin),
WRO Media Art Biennale (Wroclaw), Dutch Design Week
(Eindhoven), and Arse Elektronika – a festival of sex and
technology (San Francisco). Reviews and features of his work
have appeared in The WIRE, VICE Motherboard, VICE Creators,
Times Higher Education Supplement, La Libération, and on
ARTE television, Deutschland Radio, and Dutch national
public radio. He holds a PhD in media, performance and
cultural studies from the University of Sussex, UK, and
is currently a Research Fellow at The Royal Central School
of Speech and Drama, University of London.

patrol *(2017)*
16mm film loop (1'58")

I recorded a firefight on the frontline in East-Ukraine with my smartphone. Soldiers are alternatingly handling mid-20th century firearms and state-of-the-art digital devices. The video footage was transferred to 16mm film, a medium connected to the era of the weapon technologies represented.

artefact *(2017)*
assault rifle handguard, found digital model, digital video loop (3'41")

A wooden handguard from an intensively used Kalashnikov assault rifle is displayed like an archaeological artefact. Abrasion of the varnish shows the points of contact with the hand of the previous owner. A high-resolution 3D scan of the object was inserted into a slick digital model of an AK-47. The weapon rotates against a standard backdrop of a blue sky.

worse than the quick hours of open battle, was this everlasting preparedness *(2017)*
military backpack, tablet computer, digital video loop (20")

A damaged tablet computer is inserted into the front pocket of a manually repaired Russian army backpack from the Aghanistan War era. A screensaver shows a fragment from Ernst Jünger's proto-fascist novel *Storm of Steel* (1920), which describes his experiences on the frontline during the First World War.

frontline *(2016-17)*
wooden enclosure, LED light, 360 3D video, multi-channel sound

In the middle a sterile white space, filled with a spectacular war soundscape produced in a movie studio, a VR headset shows uneventful video documentation of a frontline position in East-Ukraine. A group of soldiers appear stuck in an endless smoking break.

Diana Damian Martin
Bodies of waste, bodies of conflict

In 2014, with the fleeing of former president Viktor Yanukovych, Russia annexed Crimea and reinforced support for mercenary fighters and separatists in East-Ukraine. Since then, sporadic fighting has continued in Donbass. This is now a region of sniper rifles and automatic grenade launchers, marked by domestic life of civilians caught in the midst of a conflict that is in equal measure local and global. There is no state of crisis, there is the incendiary dullness of irregular conflict, of discarded Coke bottles and cigarettes, of smartphone breaks and laminated table cloths.

Fronterlebnis engages with the borders between fiction and reality at a time of planetary warfare, a politicised digital and media culture, a global arms trade and state surveillance; in other words, it is an exploration of the poetics of immersion by means of the documentary. Ploeger takes the social temperature of the warzone, and examines the effect of the spectacular on armed conflict and the politics of protection in a region where place is both domestic ruin and battlefield.

Ploeger's previous work has explored the poetics and politics of digital culture and technology, and its inextricable relationship to politics at a global level- by means of an examination of electronic waste, or occupation of a porn site through an application, *Ascending Performance* (2013), in which repeated stroking of the artist's body on the screen leads to an erection, itself ending in a dark screen, a kind of anti-orgasm. The body, then, is as central to discussions of digital culture as the device; be it by means of the effects of technological recycling on labouring bodies in Nigeria, or notions of masculinity in images of terrorism in the UK. *Fronterlebnis*, however, delves further into these issues, by connecting the ways in which consumer technologies, often emergent from within state funded army programs, inhabit and represent armed conflicts that often are on the periphery of media debates, and equally often woven into moralising and politicised discourses of Russia and its colonial relationship to Eastern Europe.

As artist and thinker Hito Steyerl argues, 'data, sounds and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter'. Images are not renditions of 'a pre-existing condition', they are appearances that become matter, and this in itself begins to occupy the physical landscape of our day to day lives. We can no longer speak of the documentary as a means of archivisation, nor can we conceive of the digital as something that is immaterial, displaced from the everyday (by means of what Thomas Elsaesser calls the military industrial entertainment complex). *Fronterlebnis*, with its concern for how the cinematic and self-made representation construct landscapes of armed conflict, responds to an increasingly visible Western European discursive culture about the morality of war in the East of Europe (in the same way as it did with the collapse of former Yugoslavia). This plays out as a confrontation with the global economics of arms trade and the political purposes of active militarisation and displaced support for local conflict. Yet our engagement is itself displaced by means of representations that we encounter through domesticated technologies, the same that soldiers use to watch match reruns or YouTube recordings of other armed conflicts.

As Steyerl proposes, our reality consists of images that invade everyday life; this context configures the ways in which we conceive of the digital and its relationship to the material. It is then, significant to consider war artefacts that speak to these conditions in *fronterlebnis*. In *worse than the quick hours of open battle, was this everlasting preparedness*, a used USSR army backpack reveals a tablet computer displaying a fragment of a German officer's chronicle of the first World War by means of a highly graphic account of trench warfare (Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*). A poetics of change and stasis, all wrapped in an image that is uncomfortably both digital and physical, fictional and real. The screen, then, is less twilight zone, and more a shifting border.

The rotating Kalashnikov rifle in *artefact* gains cinematic life through the integration of a found digital model and a high-resolution 3D scan of an obsolete wooden handguard from an actual gun. It's a groundhog day-experience in which the obsolete feels mobilised, in which the time and place of documentary warfare become both deconstructed and politicised.

In the immersive experience of *frontline*, it is the body that's confronted with the paradoxical: after an initial confrontation with a violent, spectacular Hollywood-like war soundscape, one enters a kind of affect-led exploration of preparedness and boredom, tension and danger; soldiers wait around endlessly; in the background, quiet sounds of the wind, men shovelling in a trench. A selfie, of sorts, that refuses to dramatise, yet is vehemently, insistently dramatic by nature of its commitment.

Recording a more eventful incident, process is particularly pertinent in *patrol*: a transfer of digital footage made with a smartphone to 16mm celluloid film, one documentary medium to another. This is both about the language of capture, if such a term is even possible, and the circumstances of warfare as they play out in its visual landscape: old firearms and new technology. A search for the grainy poetics of mid-20th century warfare in the sharp imagining of contemporary conflict: who takes part, what remains.

There's more imminent connotations too, of the mediality of conflict representations (and their authorship) as and through museums – think of the recent re-deployment of a tank from a museum's plinth. The Second World War IS-3 'Joseph Stalin' tank was re-deployed between April 2014 and July 2014 by pro-Russian separatists in East Ukraine.[1] The selfie in front of the painting, the selfie in the midst of a warzone. There's the globalism in which masculinity often traffics, and the networks of surveillance that link the process of spectating across different media; there's the ignorant representation of certain bodies as debris, and the fetishisation of ruins in warzone landscapes. This is no longer the emergence of a post-cinematic representation; it is a confrontation, a

destabilisation of normalised representations that wash over the affective temperatures and realities of armed conflict, and that refuses to maximise distance or wash out discomfort. Desire is matched with a deliberate awkwardness of stasis. A kind of active waiting in the midst of rubble.

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1. see Hito Steyerl's *Tank on a Pedestal: Museums in the age of Planetary Civil War*, e-flux 70:2016.

Diana Damian Martin is a writer and researcher. She co-hosts Something Other and Department of Feminist Conversations, projects that examine the intersection between writing, performance and politics. She is a member of Generative Constraints, a committee that practices open-ended collaborative research into art, politics and theory, and is a Lecturer in Performance Arts at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Dani Ploeger
One hour on the frontline
14 March 2017

"Get your helmet", Bear tells me," but leave that blue flak jacket. I'll give you one of my own. It's better". I leave my ballistic vest with the "PRESS" label behind and quickly fill my bag with the essential stuff: phone, 360 video camera rig, water, medical pack. Minutes later I find myself on a bumpy road in a beaten-up van with old lettering from a Dutch company on its side, together with a curiously mixed group of fighters with beards, bandanas, Cossack haircuts, and uniforms with all sorts of adventurous-looking insignias. They remind of the weird and wonderful mix of action heroes in Sylvester Stallone's Expendables series, albeit without the body builder physiques and less carefully manicured. And they are all white.

We are on our way from the unit's base camp to what they call 'zero', the line of contact, on the edge of the destroyed seaside village Shyrokyne, about 20 kilometers east of Mariupol. The men are members of the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps of the Right Sector, a far-right nationalist movement. I found them through my fixer and translator, Dima, who had organized a driver to lead us to uneventful army positions in the so-called 'Anti-Terrorist Operation' zone, the frontline area with the separatist forces in the Donbas and Luhansk regions. I am here to make immersive video recordings for a VR installation on the mundane practice of waiting in war situations.

Bear – this is his nom de guerre – is the commander of the unit. The insignia on his camouflage baseball cap shows a picture of a cartoon-like bear holding a rifle. In the dark safe house we just entered, a swastika flag decorates the wall above his bed. "Put this on". He gives me a camouflage-coloured ballistic vest as promised, but I notice that the bundle he pushes into my hands consists of a lot more. I am handed over an entire Ukrainian army uniform with various insignias attached to it. Around me the others are gearing up

weapons. Each one of them attaches multiple magazines to their belt, old AK74s are checked and adjusted, and a bazooka is prepared to be carried along. Bear hands an insignia with a Finnish flag to a soldier who is introduced to me as Steinar the Fascist. At the same time, various action cameras are being prepared and some of the soldiers are fiddling with their smartphones while getting dressed. When I unpack my 360 rig, one of them is particularly interested in my cameras. "What kind you have?", he asks, while he shows me his new GoPro HERO 4.

The situation worries me. All this feels very different from the forecast Bear gave me when we were at base camp. With Dima, I had discussed the situation with him. I told him that I was interested to film uneventful frontline positions and had asked him if there was a lot of activity at their outposts. "Not really", he had responded, "a mortar shell can fall anywhere around here, either on our front positions or here at base camp, so it's not that much different over there". I am worried but at the same time curious and excited. The guys are friendly and they immediately give me a strange feeling of being accepted and cared for. My common sense tells me this is a situation I must leave as soon as possible, because of both the threat of physical danger and the political ideology these people seem to advocate. But at the same time I feel drawn to this warm social community and sense a perverse desire for adventure.

Shortly after, I am walking through the shot-up village in a tiny patrol with Bear, Steinar and Carpenter, a jolly middle-aged man with a beard, wearing a red and blue jumper under his open uniform jacket. He is carrying a reel with an electric cable on it. Our task is to install a new communication connection to one of the outposts on the line of contact.

On our way to one of the small houses on the end of the last row of buildings next to the no man's land, we pass by a group of soldiers who are digging a new trench through the field, which will eventually connect the houses we are heading for to the main street where the safe house is.

The trench is far from finished though and after about 30 metres we get to a part that is no more than 50 centimeters deep. As soon as our bodies stick out from above the grass we hear automatic fire. "Down, down!" Bear yells. We duck down into the shallow trench. My breathing accelerates. "This is it", I think, "real war". I wasn't planning to get involved in a situation like this, but I knew there was always a chance for it to happen. I am scared but at the same time strangely excited. This feels like a danger of the all-or-nothing kind. There are no ifs and buts here. In a confusing way I experience a sense of relief: at last, here is the real thing, after the hundreds or maybe even thousands of representations I have seen on TV, in the cinema, and during computer games.

After about a minute the firing stops. Steinar and Carpenter, who were in front, get up and turn around. "So we are going back?", I ask, but to my surprise, Bear reponds "Go!" and indicates that I should run ahead with him. We get to a foxhole and after checking if the coast is clear he gestures me to get in. He runs around the edge of the hole towards the house and when there's no response with gunfire he gestures me to follow. He seems to really do an effort to take care to minimize the risk for me.

Steinar and Carpenter follow a few minutes after. It turns out they went back to get the bazooka. They take position next to some holes in a wall and open fire. I take cover, putting into practice my Hostile Environment Training as good as I can, while filming with my smartphone. Steinar fires with one hand while holding his smartphone in the other. A Go-Pro camera is put into my hands and the men indicate that I should film them from behind a little wall. Carpenter runs out into the open field next to the house with the bazooka on his shoulder, while Steinar and Bear follow him to give cover with automatic fire from their AKs. Right after the grenade is launched they run inside again and immediately continue to film the damage with their phones from one of the holes in the wall. Apparently, Carpenter hit one of the buildings across the field. While we are seated on the sofa that was dragged behind the house they exchange devices to check the footage. They seem pleased with my recording of Carpenter's grenade launch.

When things have quieted down a bit we walk back towards the safe house. Somewhere in the middle of the unfinished trench Steinar finds an unexploded mortar shell that was fired by the separatists. When he picks it up I ask him to please leave it behind. If this thing accidentally drops it will most likely explode. Smiling at me, he insists to carry it along and suggests that we blow it up for fun. "No way", I tell him, "I'm not coming along". "No problem," he giggles and turns a different direction with Carpenter while I stay behind with Bear. When we meet them again a bit later, they euphorically show us their video on Steinar's phone. We see Steinar dropping the shell in an old barrel, running away just before a spectacular blast shoots rubble into the air.

Credits:

patrol
digital to analogue transfer: Bernardo Zanotta, Amsterdam
film processing: Haghe Film, Amsterdam

artefact
3D scan: Volo Bevza, Berlin

frontline
sound: Shelly Bar On, Cinéphase Studio, Paris
360 video editing: William J. Bates, Equirec Studios, London

Photos: Alexia Manzano, Berlin

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