

## **Children and War**

### **A photo-pedagogic project into Kosovo and its effects**

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#### **Aims**

Our project was entitled "Children and War" and had been triggered by the war and the political events that shook Kosovo in 1999 and 2000. The city of Cologne was affected by these developments inasmuch as a significant number of Kosovarian refugees had found shelter here. At the same time, media coverage had raised the awareness of students and teachers in the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences to the living conditions of children in the refugee camps. Our project (which was part of the "Intercultural Education" academic focus program) was designed to show how children who have been through dramatic events (escape, displacement, violence and death of relatives) cope with their experience, and which pedagogic tools are suitable for supporting them in this process. We found photography to be both an easy-to-use and pedagogically helpful medium, both on site in the Kosovo and during subsequent work in Cologne. For a more in-depth approach to the subject of "Children and War" we had advised our students to conduct research (library and Internet based) on both the subject in general and the Kosovo conflict in particular. We were not interested in abstract theoretical study; our objective from the start was to find ways to make our findings public. Were there historical pegs or local connections? Which specific aspects had to be taken into account? Since the subject was both politically and emotionally engaging, it was easy to keep student interest awake and to face and overcome the attendant difficulties, some of which proved quite formidable.

#### **Contents**

##### **Medium**

In approaching the subject "Children and War", the project initiators from the Cologne University of Applied Sciences' Faculty of Applied Social Sciences adopted photography as their medium, in the specific form of inexpensive Fuji snapshot cameras. The cameras had been distributed to Kosovarian children by German students in the summer of 1999, shortly after the peak of the Kosovo conflict. The children were requested to use these cameras to document their lives and environment in pictures, following their return from refugee camps. The result was a collection of about 1,700 photos returned by 56 children.

This camera was the instrument of choice because it is easy to operate and a photography project of this type is straightforward to launch. The relevant part for the students was the image processing, the digitalization and subsequent presentation of the pictures. For them to cope with these tasks, our students needed to be familiarized with photographic techniques as well as with the fundamentals of image processing and exhibition organizing (the exhibition opened on November 14, 2000).

## **Target group**

The photography project – and, subsequently, its photographic output – was chiefly aimed at students from the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences (as part of their training in media pedagogy), the German general public (to inform them about an explosive political event), and academic instructors at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences. With regard to this latter group, the aim was to introduce them to the special potential of photographic work in a pedagogic context and to provide a glimpse of the technical and didactic implications and possibilities of computer-assisted image processing. Such skills are increasingly gaining importance in the social pedagogue's professional context, for without some degree of IT expertise, social work too has become all but impossible in our day and age.

Up until the end we had a group of 5-6 students who contributed to the project through all its phases, from the work in Kosovo to the subsequent image processing through to the preparation and implementation of the planned symposium (which took place in Cologne on November 14th and 15th 2000), thus benefiting from the learning by doing approach.

## **Photographic activities and their impact**

The history of photography, since the invention of the technique in the 1830s, has essentially consisted in compiling enormous collections of pictures – a collective effort that is continuing to this day.

Thus, we have the collection of human faces known as portrait photography, the collection of urban views and buildings reflected, for example in travel and architectural photography, as well as a collection of images documenting the terrors of war.

Each single photographer, whatever his individual history, adds to this huge archive through his work, usually without intention or awareness.

All of the aforementioned photographic genres can be found, albeit in rudimentary form and quite individually realized, in the photographs received from the Kosovarian children. What distinguishes them is the specific historic situation.

These photographs were taken within a period of about one week, in late July 1999, following the end of NATO attacks on buildings and Serbian troops and the return of Kosovarian refugees to their home towns from the camps in Macedonia.

In reviewing the photographs taken by the children, one striking feature is the absence of any identifiable plan underlying the exposure of the 56 or so films. No order-imposing "brain" has defined the content to be documented. A chaos of motifs that is difficult to unravel reigns both within the individual series of photographs and throughout the collection as a whole.

It appears that the children, boys and girls aged between 8 and 14 from various places in Kosovo, used the camera spontaneously, like a reflex, as they responded photographically to people, objects and events immediately following their return.

This spur-of-the-moment, reflex-type response (some rolls were exposed within an hour or less) imparts a fragmentary quality to these images. Only rarely can the viewer identify a thread linking the pictures in a given roll (such as war ravages only, or exclusively family scenes). Often the motives "jump" from one picture to the next, implying an absence of coherent visual conceptualization. The beholder is unable to identify a context, each individual picture remains closed in itself.

One might compare this – unintentional – method to a stage performance made up of short individual scenes which are not, or barely, interrelated.

The photographs taken by these children do not moralize, they point to objects, like an extended index finger. It is true that in some cases a message or intention is discernible behind a sequence of frames, e.g., when a child has recorded scenes of destruction only. But as a rule, each series of photographs (they are included on the CD-ROM "Children and War") shows an unbiased juxtaposition of widely different contents: destroyed buildings, a child with its mother at the stove, children playing in

the ruins of a mosque, people in a streetside café and so on. This means that the pictures reflect immediate acts of perception, yet without any interpretation of the perceptions made.

Now what is the context in which these photographs were taken, the context that might explain the undramatic gesture of pointing? In all cases the photographers were children; they had suffered expulsion from their home towns, with all the terror and fright evoked by threats and destruction and, frequently, the death of friends, parents and close relatives, they had felt fear on their way to the camps, uncertainty regarding the whereabouts of their parents, they had witnessed the return to their home towns, been concerned about the state of their cities, houses and apartments, but also experienced the protection offered by KFOR.

## **Methods**

On the whole, the exemplary method employed – i.e., to address a subject in depth to increase understanding (intercultural knowledge) while also acquiring skills (know-how in media pedagogy) – was found to be very helpful. The explosive theme "Children and War" required diversity of method, apart from permitting experimental work in some instances.

To enable the students and teaching staff (the managing team consisted of three academic instructors) to cope with the sheer number of the pictures submitted, it was necessary to

- provide an introduction to digital image processing in groups;
- familiarize the students with exhibition techniques (from technical through to planning aspects);
- combine students and instructors into a working team capable of developing and implementing a symposium concept;
- overcome the new challenges posed by CD-ROM production techniques.

In all activities it proved helpful to adopt a group-based approach and to make clear-cut agreements that would result in an effective division of labour. A major factor specifically for the students was the close contact with professors and the public orientation of the assignment – they were, quite simply, taken seriously. This facilitated the achievement of genuine project results.

## **Best Practices**

Perhaps it is this background of experience which makes the photographs appear like an unexcited stock-taking effort, an act of staking a terrain that is both familiar and alien, of documenting what is incredibly distant yet remarkably close: the mother, friends, the garden, the newly born kitten, and then again a burning house, the destroyed national library, the shelled and ravaged residential buildings.

This individual and, to an extent, collective search by 56 children has thus evolved into a rudimentary archive of a people, covering the dramatic events in their history of July 1999.

Fourteen-year-old Fjolla Latifi from Pristina (Kosovo) has obviously grasped the meaning of archives for our collective memory: "I took a photo of the library because it's a place where all kinds of books are kept. It is a source and a treasure that any people should possess."

In this, the pictures differ from the professional photographer's work. The children are not in search of the sensational. They illustrate their everyday post-war world: the

KFOR soldier going for a pizza, cigarette vendors in the street, children playing in the ruins of houses.

Above all, these different eyes belong to children. The post-war world approaches them in a different style. One that is emphatically friendly, as documented in the picture of a "child-hugging" KFOR soldier. Or else emphatically terrible: How enormous must the destruction of the old Post Office in Pristina appear from a young child's perspective? And what is it like for a nine-year-old to stand before the ruins of his home? Arta, a boy from Pea (Kosovo), has attempted to document this. He took pictures of his house, from the basement to the top floor: of the destroyed balcony, his ravaged room, the charred roof timbering.

Life after war - children settle into it in a quite amazing manner. This, too, is evident from the photographs. Farije from Vitie e Kosovos opted for a self-portrait in a flowery meadow. Schoolchildren from Prizren took snapshots of each other making soap bubbles, or releasing red balloons into the sky. The pictures thus also testify to the children's secret wishes, their yearning for a normal life, for security and peace. However, there is no reason to sound the all-clear signal. As childhood in Kosovo remains tenuous. Creating an awareness of this fact was and is the function of our cultural pedagogy project "Children and War".

### **Feedback**

Summing up our work on the "Children and War" project we may state that the photograph exhibition and the CD-ROM have served the intended purpose. The CD-ROM is still in demand.

Moreover, we have succeeded in raising the awareness of the German general public, and in giving our students a unique opportunity for learning and gathering experience. No small achievement, indeed. On the other hand, it must be said that some objectives could not be attained. The planned "photo picturebook", a printed version of the exhibition, could not be realized for shortage of time and funds. We have also failed to take our exhibition to other venues. In many cases much more time would have been required. More significantly, the input of a larger number of students would have been welcome. On the whole, the amount of time and effort that went into the "Children and War" project was enormous, specifically when viewed against the amount of public attention generated, which was ultimately not as great as it could have been.

Nevertheless, all involved – students, teachers and countless supporters – benefited from what they experienced as an exceedingly fruitful cooperation. In addition, the project spawned a number of diploma theses and publications, so that our joint labours did, after all, produce results beyond their ephemeral topicality. To all who contributed, the project was exceedingly stimulating both emotionally and intellectually, despite the strength it required. We managed to raise the level of cultural awareness both among participants and in a wider public, and to sensitize people to intercultural issues.

### **Evaluation**

Another target group was a broader public, both in the region of Cologne and throughout Germany. For this audience we compiled a thematic selection from the bulk of the images taken and exhibited these pictures on the premises of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences. Faculty colleagues from various departments, and again students and other interested parties, participated actively in this stage. The exhibition met with significant public interest, drawing 200 visitors on the opening day

alone. It was supported by the rectorate of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences and the German Unesco Commission, under whose auspices it was held.

The "Children and War" exhibition had extensive reverberations. It was covered in numerous newspaper articles and radio features, as well as two extensive TV broadcasts (these are documented on the CD-ROM "Children and War", which was developed in the wake of the exhibition and symposium and has been available in its finished form since May 2001).

### **Services:**

"Children and War" CD-ROM (editors: Albert Dost, Jürgen Fritz, Winfred Kaminski), Faculty of Applied Social Studies, Cologne University of Applied Sciences, Mainzer Str. 5, D- 50678 Cologne

<http://www.sw.fh-koeln.de/kiki/index.html> (website with material on "Children and War")

"Fotopädagogik" (special issue) in "Praxis Spiel und Gruppe" December 2002, Mainz, Grünewald Publishing Co.

Schafiyha, Liliane: "Fotopädagogik und Fototherapie" [Photo pedagogy and photo therapy], Beltz, Weinheim/Basel 1997