1914: Magnus Plessen

More than a decade ago I bought an anti-war book from 1924, *War Against War*, by Ernst Friedrich. It deals with the atrocities of the First World War in writing and photographs, photographs so horrible that I can hardly look at them. I never thought that I could add anything to this material, as it speaks for itself. But I could also never forget about the portraits of soldiers looking at you with their faces blown apart.

--Magnus Plessen

Modern history, like the modernist history of art, is written backwards. Looking back from a single point in the present, the past appears to fatefully lead up to that very point, as if events conspired to produce the one and only possible outcome. World War I in particular has been seen thus: at the moment it began (by each party) as a necessary but undesired response to foreign aggression, and subsequently by historians as a tragic, inexorable chain of events. In 1924, on the tenth anniversary of World War I, Ernst Friedrich's *War Against War* parodied the sense of historical inevitability in a crescendo of photographs (many of them officially censored) captioned with ironic quotations from official reports: children playing soldier and heroic young men parading off to battle build to an inglorious climax of grievous wounds, mass graves, and ruined cities. Friedrich's historical satire was driven not by unlucky or unwitting actions, but by the wicked purpose of men who rule.

Just as Friedrich attacked conventional history, he wielded shocking medical photographs of facial wounds to counter the usual heroic representations of soldiers. In WW I, the German, French, and English armies— their generals still fighting the previous war—were inadequately prepared for modern trench warfare with automatic weapons; without helmets, the facial and head wounds were sufficiently horrific to be of scientific interest, photographed with a clinical coldness. The imagery, disturbing on many levels, has compelled artists of different generations, and over the past decade, Magnus Plessen has been repeatedly drawn to Friedrich's book. Each time Plessen opened the book, he felt a shock strong enough to stop time, the time of his own

present existence, which did not seem to resume until he closed its pages. For years he was reluctant to make use of the traumatic experience (his own or that of the soldiers), but as the anniversary of the war approached, he was moved to try. The result is Plessen's new series, *1914*, a body of drawings, collages and paintings that includes portrait heads cracked open by passages of black, as well as large, complex compositions in which body parts and bits of color form into objects, only to then deform and scatter. Raw matter coexists with visual (and social) expectation—what we want to see is disturbed by what can be felt but not understood.

The original concerns around the wounded soldiers-- in France, "broken mugs," in Germany, "men without faces"— often focused on the visual. Doctors experimented with plastic surgery techniques, which, even after dozens of operations on a single patient, usually failed to repair the extensive damage. Into this gap stepped artists: Francis Derwent Wood, a sculptor and lieutenant in the British Army, and Anna Coleman Ladd, a Massachusetts artist who went to Paris to work with the American Red Cross.[1] Wood and Ladd used plaster casts to create prosthetic masks of thin metal realistically painted with enamel. The purpose of the masks was aesthetic, in large part addressed to the sensibilities of those around the injured—family members and also the larger society. For example, the British hospital for facial wounds was located in a remote country estate, where benches for the convalescents were painted a special blue color (as in Plessen's *Blue Bench*), warning passers-by to avert their eyes.

Wood and Ladd also hoped to restore the appearance of the soldiers for their own sake. The desired effect was psychic as well as aesthetic, returning the man to his pre-war self, providing the continuity necessary to self-recognition (famously, mirrors were forbidden in the facial wound wards). Wood wrote in a medical journal, "I endeavor by means of the skill I happen to possess as a sculptor make a man's face as near as possible to what it looked like before he was wounded… The features may have been originally ugly or beautiful. As they were in life

so I try to reproduce them, beautiful or ugly; the one desideratum is to make them natural."[2] The photographs of the wounded in Friedrich's book, as Plessen says, "break with traditional representation, which aims to recognize a likeness and in that process reassure self-identity."[3] By contrast, the masks are the most conventional of representations, reinforcing self-identity so rigidly as to immobilize it, freezing in time a face that never changes, never ages. Plessen sees the cruelty of the alternatives: "Either you have no face and you are outside of society or you choose to wear a static face which is outside of the normal flow of time. Brutal!"

The continuity of identity, the shock and shatter of that most personal of forms, one's own face, are the content of *1914*. Approaching the photographs reproduced in *War Against War*, in early drawings Plessen began working with black charcoal to "swallow representation where a chin or a nose used to be." His drawings and subsequent paintings differ from their source material in that they, like all of his work, are places of metaphysical inquiry by way of materials: the blackness is a breach in vision, in form, and also in time. (Artist George Grosz tied these three things together, writing of his own war experience, "Of course each one of us had something missing, a leg, an eye or two, a stomach, a shinbone, a memory."[4]) But the black holes are not only negative, and not only abstract—they are not nothing, but *something*, something felt rather than recognized; the blackness manifests a lack of distance between subject and object. These works move us from ideology to lived experience, enacting, as the artist puts it, "a shift from ideal to matter, from blinding representation to blind representation."

Ernst Friedrich parodied the self-justifying belief in historical inevitability. Magnus Plessen insists on the contingency of action in paintings filled with multiple perspectives and realities, and the radically unknowable nature of physical presence. For Plessen, this content too feels urgent: "This movement in and out of representation is not just a game--it is directed by the belief that the world is shaped by forces which are so often not represented in text and image…"

[1] There is an extensive literature on these figures and in particular the "tin-noses shop," as the British Army hospital where Wood worked was called. On the British project, see Susanna Biernoff, "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain," *Social History of Medicine* vol. 24, no. 3, 666-685. On Ladd, see a chapter devoted to her in Mercedes Graf, *On the Field of Mercy: Women Medical Volunteers from the Civil War to the First World War* (Humanity Books: Amherst New York, 2010), 293-310.

[2] Francis Derwent Wood, "Masks for Facial Wounds," *The Lancet* vol. 189, no. 4895 (June 23, 1917), 949.

[3] All quotes from Magnus Plessen are taken from an email exchange with the author between November 2012 and August 2014.

[4] George Grosz, *A small yes and a big no*, trans. Arnold J. Pomeras (London/New York: Allison & Busby, 1982), 89.