Free us from the photo icons in our visual database.

**Kill our Icons!**

Photo curator Frank van der Stok pleads for a rethinking of the iconic photos that are part of our collective memory. We must dare to reconsider them in par with the fluid image and network culture which marks our age.

*By Frank van der Stok*

Translation: Taco Hidde Bakker

Design: Herman van Bostelen

*The Kiss of Death*

Credit: Mikhail Gorbachev and Erich Honecker at the celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the GDR (East Berlin, 7 October 1989). Reporters / Associated Press / Boris Yurchenko
Thinking of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the photos that were taken in the evening hours of 9 November 1989 immediately come to mind. Masses of excited people climbing the wall. Hands in the air to help each other up-and-downwards. Some people are armed with a friendly fire of the UN peacekeeping force. Kevin Carter followed them three months later, committing suicide.

Credit: A shooting in Soweto, 1993. PictureNET Africa / Ken Oosterbroek

The other face of Apartheid
This snapshot by photographer Ken Oosterbroek, made in South Africa during the latter days of the Apartheid regime, does for a moment obliterate the transitory achievements made by Bosnian Serbs. The informal chat is completely out of tune, considering the drama which happened shortly after. Almost none of the men survived the deportation.

Credit: Film still from video recording from the Tank Man. Everyone knows the photo of the student uprising in Beijing in 1989, but hardly anyone knows the one of Bratislava, 1968. Both express a similarly universal self-sacrifice, the readiness to die for the good cause.

Credit: On 21 August 1968 Russian tanks entered Czechoslovakia, entering Prague as well as Bratislava. The plumber Emil Gallo posted himself before a T-55 tank and shouted: “Is this for my wife?”. It fits the ways in which we tend to simplify the multitude of events, before we are able to consume them in the form of succinct headlines. A schematic representation enables us to interpret events. And it subsequently gets, in a neutralized format, a place in the canon of our historical consciousness. But is the image thus created in line with reality?

What marks the true key moment related to the fall of the GDR and its then leader Erich Honecker? In unravelling this history, one arrives at an alternative reading of the received view.

People could climb the Berlin Wall, because Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had decided to deny the GDR any use of military force to crush the rebellion. No images exist of that historic decision - in words, images and sounds. After all, we cannot give each event in history equal thought. Moreover, plenty of opportunities remain available to those who wish to inform themselves in a more nuanced way. The downside of our classifying impulse is that we have come to believe in a hyperreality, filled with dramatic turning points and spectacular fault lines. Photography adds a little extra;
Coincidence does not exist
Popular historiography is marked by a great deal of projected interpretation. For example, by retrospectively ascribing a relatively minor incident with a decisive meaning for the course of history. Thus, the murder of Franz Ferdinand, Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip would have been the spark that started World War I. Although the killing by Princip and his accomplices seemed to have been carefully planned, several earlier attempts had failed. Only after Princip abandoned his plan, he suddenly came face to face with the Archduke’s car that had taken a wrong turn. Without second thought, Princip fired his gun. In more than one interpretation. For example, by retrospectively ascribing a relatively

The liquidity of the digital image culture causes new images with iconic potential, or of monumental power of expression, to not take root anymore. We rather play a movie clip, in which a tsunami’s destructive power occurs, than look at a hundred photographs still lives showing its devastating effects. Whereas previously new service presented itself with some sort of authority – through official media such as the newspaper, the magazine, radio or television – nowadays it comes down to a globalized, internet-based, do-it-yourself menu. Herein, all forms of hierarchic cohesion have disappeared. In turn, the broadening of our horizon paradoxically offers a tsunami’s destructive power occurs, than look at a hundred photographs still lives showing its devastating effects. Whereas previously new service presented itself with some sort of authority – through official media such as the newspaper, the magazine, radio or television – nowadays it comes down to a globalized, internet-based, do-it-yourself menu. Herein, all forms of hierarchic cohesion have disappeared. In turn, the broadening of our horizon paradoxically offers a

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We only need to wind back to the lesser known moments surrounding the well-known facts (including the accompanying icons), and we will be presented with new and stimulating sightlines. Non-iconic photos can stretch the received view on a subject to that extent, so to form a counterbalance to the one-sided representation with which it was illustrated before. Let us give priority to those images that, in spite of their apparent triviality and inferior aesthetics, know how to divert the committed spectator away from the hard news and take him to a meaningful vista on different aspects of the underlying story.

We have a staggering amount of alternative images at our disposal. Even the images of a speculative nature could smoothly function as present-day counterparts to the eroding image cannon. It would fit our times if they may contribute, in retrospect, to a critical reconfiguring of our visual memory.

Frank van der Stok (1967) is an independent curator, editor and critic. He is the co-founder of the art program The Past in the Present, that exists of exhibitions, publications, commissions, lectures and debates.

Hoax
At a meeting of the U.N. security council on 5 February 2003, the United States Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the ‘indisputable’ evidence for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. His story formed the legitimate reason for the invasion of Saddam Hussain’s country, six weeks later, by a coalition led by the United States. Eleven months later, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a crushing report, exposing that high-ranking U.S. officials deliberately fooled the world about the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. If we had known earlier about Powell’s story to be a hoax, would Hussain still have been deposed?

Credits: Luc Delahaye (Courtesy: Luc Delahaye & Gallery Nathalie Obadia)