

SilentCell Network
Ich Lubbe Berlin!

“In times of urgency you have no choice but to choose from the options that those in power present to you.”¹

Berlin, 27 February 1933. Adolf Hitler has just become Chancellor, but Germany remains, at least officially, a Republic. At 9.25 pm a fire station receives a worrying alert: the Reichstag, the seat of the German parliament, is on fire. When the police arrive, in the building they find Marinus Van Der Lubbe, a Dutch revolutionary Communist who has recently arrived in Germany. When Hitler, who is dining with Goebbels, receives the news, he immediately interprets it as the sign of a Bolshevik conspiracy against the fragile German nation. The next day, while the papers describe the fire as “the most monstrous act of Bolshevik terrorism in Germany”, Hitler passes the *Reichstag Fire Decree*, appealing to the state of emergency, and suspending the majority of civil rights.

The next step was the Leipzig trial, where the Nazi party attempted to ascribe responsibility for this apparently isolated act carried out by Van der Lubbe to Comintern, also accusing three Bulgarian Communists: Georgi Dimitrov, Blagoi Popov and Vassil Tanev. Sentenced to death, Van der Lubbe was decapitated on 10 January 1934.

History’s view of the Reichstag fire is still somewhat controversial. While historians agree on the involvement of Van der Lubbe, it is not yet clear whether he acted alone or under the orders of a third party. But just who was Marinus Van der Lubbe? A crazed pyromaniac, as claimed by Soviet propaganda, and in the 60s, the journalist Fritz Tobias? A Communist working for Comintern, as the Nazis asserted? Or the scapegoat in a plot hatched by the Gestapo, as the German historians Bahar and Kugel attempted to prove in the 90s? One thing for sure is that the Nazis benefited enormously from the Reichstag fire, which in actual fact paved the way for the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship².

12 December 2005. At 10.39 Mare Van der Lubbe (the pseudonym of Mare Bulc, member of the Slovenian artistic collective **SilentCell Network**) reenacts the Reichstag fire. It is not a canonical re-enactment, for obvious reasons: not only due to the historic ambiguity of events, but also its terrorist nature - any attempt to stage it literally would actually be another attack. This is why SilentCell Network opted for a “diminished” re-enactment, which could be described as “symbolic”. It is significant that SilentCell Network also avoids playing with the sources, interfering with the event’s posthumous history, namely with its historic reconstruction, as happens in other works in the *Re:akt!*

platform. However it would not be exact to interpret this re-enactment as a simple parody. On the contrary, SilentCell Network seems interested in re-interpreting the Reichstag fire in the light of a present that has much in common with the situation generated by the original event. Like 1934 Germany, we too are the children of a terrorist attack, that some have described as the 21st century's greatest work of art. We too live in a state of emergency, with Western democracies "forced" by terrorism to pass legislation which severely limits its citizens' freedom of thought and action, and interferes with their privacy.

We too find ourselves forced to make radical, final decisions in a context where the distinction between good and evil is increasingly blurred. As Jan Verwoert wrote: "In times of crisis, events of historical importance always seem to be impending and thus decisions always seem pressing. 'Are you with (the) US or against (the) US?', the president asks, demanding an answer right away... In times of urgency you have no choice but to choose from the options that those in power present to you."³

In times of crisis, Mare Van der Lubbe knows that for liberty to survive, it must assume subtle guises and a veneer of conformism, and adopt a playful, ironic approach. It was in this spirit that on 11 December 2005, he left Ljubljana Airport, heading for Berlin. Fearlessly he faced the check-in controls, controls that, like the symbol on the plane's safety instructions indicating that flammable liquids must not be taken onboard – should serve to guarantee the safety of travellers, but end up merely generating an attack of nerves. Like any normal tourist, Mare passed through the non-places on the way to his destination, distractedly taking in the symbols, gestures and messages that organize, plan and control our daily lives: the airport signage, passport control, the map of the underground. Once in the underground he became immersed in a book on the Russian revolution, the symbol of a threat that afflicted the Western world for many years, before it was defeated by the events of history.

The same is true of Mare, whose actions at the Reichstag - the emblem of the rebirth of Germany after the wall came down, and visited by thousands of tourists every day - do not now represent a source of fear. His protest is not disruptive, like that of his predecessor 77 years previously, nor does it spark off any explosive political consequences. No-one notices him but the neutral eye of the camera that follows him from the start of his journey, while he throws little cardboard flames into the bins around the Reichstag. His gesture is minimal and silent, but this is precisely where its power lies: he moves away from the choice between black or white, in search of a third way, a less significant but effective third way. His action takes the form of a minimal comment, a note in the margin of a system of control

which gets progressively more ambiguous the more it hides behind the pretext of an alleged “state of emergency”.

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¹ Jan Verwoert, “The Crisis of Time in Times of Crisis”, in Anke Bagma, Steve Rushton, Florian Wüst (eds), *Experience Memory Re-enactment*, Piet Zwart Institute 2005, pp. 37 – 40.

² For the details of this reconstruction, see the *Wikipedia* entry for “Reichstag Fire” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichstag_fire

³ Jan Verwoert, “The Crisis of Time in Times of Crisis”, quoted.