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- I** Zlatko Kopljar  
*From K9 Compassion, 2004*  
colour print on synthetic foil  
225 × 180 cm  
Private collection  
Photo Christian Nguyen
- II** Luc Tuymans  
*The Mission, 2000*  
oil on canvas  
84 × 130 cm  
Private collection  
Photo Ben Blackwell
- III** Zlatko Kopljar  
*Shot from K2, 1997*  
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Photo Stanislav Cigoš
- IV** Luc Tuymans  
*Der diagnostische Blick VIII,*  
1992  
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Photo Ben Blackwell
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- VI** Luc Tuymans  
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- VII** Zlatko Kopljar  
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- X** Zlatko Kopljar  
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Photo Mario Kučera
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Photo Boris Cvjetanović
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Photo Ben Blackwell
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*From K9 Compassion, 2004*  
colour print on synthetic foil  
225 × 180 cm  
Private collection  
Photo Christian Nguyen

# LUC TUYMANS ZLATKO KOPLJAR

# MERCY (POLITICS)

ORY DESSAU,  
ed.



MER. BOOKS

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# INTRODUCTION

Ory Dessau

8 December 2022 saw the opening of *Mercy*, a joint exhibition by Zlatko Kopljar and Luc Tuymans at Galerija Vartai in Vilnius, Lithuania. The relationship between the two artists is long-running and dates back to when the two of them both participated in the 26th edition of the São Paulo Biennial. In 2010, Kopljar took part in *The Reality of the Lowest Rank: a Vision of Central Europe*, an exhibition curated by Tuymans (together with Tommy Simoens and Edwin Carels) in six different locations throughout the city of Bruges. In 2018, Tuymans included works by Kopljar in the second version of his exhibition *Sanguine/Brotherhood: Luc Tuymans on Baroque* at the Prada Foundation, Milan (the first version of the exhibition was presented earlier that year at the MuHKA, Antwerp). Lastly, in 2019, Kopljar was the subject of a humble solo exhibition at CASSTL, a non-profit art initiative run by Tuymans together with Carla Arocha and Stéphane Schraenen.

It was the personal and professional history that the two artists share, and the fact they both celebrate in their practice the consequences of historical narratives, that provided the background to their joint exhibition in Vilnius, a city in which the ghosts of history are actualised on a daily basis. Galerija Vartai's invitation to curate an exhibition was not just an opportunity to express my interest in the work of the two artists, it was also the underlying conceptual foundation which justified the combination between them.

To distinguish the exhibition from previous presentations by Tuymans in Eastern and Central

## II

# ZLATKO KOPLJAR

interviewed by

# ORY DESSAU

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## 1

ORY DESSAU

Zlatko, there are different points of entry to your work, which, to a large extent, is focused on the role of the artist with regard to his/her immediate surroundings, as well as to geopolitics and global systems of power. Therefore I thought to start our conversation with *K9 Compassion* (2004), a series of staged photographs, performative gestures-to-camera, in which you position yourself in relation to US American institutes of imperial power. The images show you from the back, while kneeling in front of landmarks such as the US Stock Exchange, the Guggenheim Museum, Brooklyn Bridge, Times Square, etc.

figs.  
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ZLATKO KOPLJAR

I came to the US in 2003 after receiving a grant from The Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art to develop a work which was to be shown at the Kitchen, a very up-to-date place for performance art, theatre, and music, even nowadays. Prior to *K9 Compassion* was the video work *K9*. In it, I tackled the visual regime of the capitalist spectacle by using the screen as a vibrating snowy surface which shows no discernible image. *K9* also undermined the synchronisation of sound and image. The soundtrack was Erland Josephson's obscurantist monologue in Italian

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fig. 28 From *K9 Compassion*, 2004



fig. 29 From *K9 Compassion*, 2004

from the 1983 film by Andrei Tarkovsky, *Nostalgia*. *K9* stemmed from resistance to capitalism's high visibility and somehow also to the hegemonic, all-encompassing Americanism. In *K9 Compassion*, my resistance began to dissolve, as insinuated in its title. Adding the word "Compassion" meant that I was no longer driven by resistance towards the place I had arrived to shortly before, towards American people, American culture. You underlined the fact that the institutes in front of which I was kneeling were American. Indeed, they are on US American soil, but for me they were never merely American, since their impact is global, superseding America.

**O.D.**

True, you also kneel in front of the building of the United Nations, but the US controls the UN, doesn't it?

**Z.K.**

My intention was to put myself in front of the incarnation of cultural, commercial, financial, political, and global reach. The basic idea was to integrate into my work the operational structure of these institutes, the mechanism of their operation, of how they obtain influence, producing and increasing values, etc. We tend to perceive institutions as they are, without thinking of the evolution that brought them to their given form. Institutes are a product of our civilisation, and are necessary to its maintenance, so to speak. They are crucial to any organised society.



I wanted to demonstrate this necessity on a structural level, but also to reflect about these specific institutes at this point in time. I don't think I am kneeling there as an artist, but as an individual, a citizen of the world, of Europe, of Croatia, and so on. I wanted to manifest my powerlessness, or the individual's powerlessness in front of these places and what they stand for, to perform an awareness to my inability to change them and to my frustration within this state of things.

**O.D.**

More than anything, I think you located yourself, or situated yourself in relation to the systems that run the world, whether from a position of potency or powerlessness.

**Z.K.**

I posed the question with regard to my location, asking where I am in this story, the big story of the world order. As one might notice in the images, under my knees is a piece of fabric. It is not there to prevent my clothes from getting dirty, but to define a space of my own freedom. I am not only subjugated, I also claim my own space in front of these systems. And on the basis of this, I can also be compassionate.

**O.D.**

And how do you see the religious significance of your kneeling?

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**Z.K.**

Many interpreted the series as self-contradictory, which I somehow embrace. Yes, I am kneeling, but I am not praying, I am plunging and sticking myself like a nail into the constant flow of people in the public sphere. I am there as a sort of interference, which undermines the affirmative aspects of my act and carries it to other territories than a mere sanctification of, or subordination to, these institutes.

**O.D.**

When you are compassionate, you are also a bit like Jesus Christ. The series endows you and your work with a virtue; with the ability to spiritually elevate, redeem.

**Z.K.**

Definitely, the work resonates with Jesus on the Cross, and the biblical verse: "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

**O.D.**

Forgive who exactly?

**Z.K.**

The institutes, the people who are the institutes, and those who believe in them. I also point out the extent of deceit, ignorance, and evil embedded therein.

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O.D.

But, nevertheless, in a very subtle, somehow intentionally contradictory manner. And when I take the work out of the global perspective, I could also say that it highlights your status as a newcomer arriving to the big apple from what used to be Yugoslavia, not so long after the civil war, or "wars" as you often describe the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, ended there, mainly because the US intervened by bombing Belgrade.

Z.K.

We are all connected, you can look at it like this, and needless to say that the US played a very important role in solving the conflict. This aspect is included in the series, but the series cannot be reduced to this perspective, this angle of reading.

O.D.

Let us go back to 2002, the time following the end of the Yugoslavian civil wars and the breakup of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia into the constituent republics that formed it, and within it, the establishment of Croatian independence and a distinguished cultural climate. In 2002, Roxana Marcoci curated the group exhibition *Here Tomorrow* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. As part of the exhibition, you presented *K4* (1998–2002). The work was a twelve-ton block of reinforced concrete which sealed the entrance to the museum for the duration of the exhibition. Although it was after the wars had ended, this work summons the circumstances of war. It is an act of fortifying, protecting the building from bombardment, closing it off.

fig. 30

Z.K.

I will react on different levels. Years after the exhibition closed, I heard a simple outline, or timeline if you will, from a general in the Croatian army. He divided reality into normal, civil activities, and a situation of war, which on average lasts four to five years and ends in one way or another. Then, according to him, it takes three to four months to install a transitional military regime, which usually



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