

**John Stathatos**  
**A READING OF PEETER LINNAP'S *SUMMER 1955***

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Ten large, vertical black and white prints march along the wall, abutting at slightly different heights, in such a way as to maintain a constant horizon line in the picture planes, but only at the expense of strict order; there is also a triptych consisting of two verticals and a horizontal. Just under a metre high, the prints have obviously been produced from scratched and battered old negatives; the images, which nobody has bothered to retouch, are rendered slightly indistinct, partly by the excessive enlargement but also thanks to a network of fine marks and stains on the original negatives. The effect is rather as if we were viewing them through a filter – a sheet of old plexiglas, say. The title of the piece is *Summer 1955*.

What is going on? A dozen or so young men in rather ugly military uniforms are playing with guns on a grassy embankment. Their uniforms consist of oddly flared tunics with high collars, leather belts, jodhpurs and calf-length leather boots, an ensemble with a vague but unmistakable East European flavour. The five-pointed star clearly visible on certain belt buckles identifies the men as Warsaw Pact troops of some kind – a detail confirmed by our knowledge that the author of this work comes from Estonia, a country only recently released from a reluctant membership of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

A work of appropriation, then, since Linnap, born in 1960, could hardly have been responsible for exposing the original negatives – clearly, also, a work of art which cries out for a strictly formalist reading; and yet, it is impossible to avoid the temptation to continue this apparently banal, almost reductive reading of the images. What can we tell about the young soldiers who were the protagonists of this idyllic summer day nearly four decades ago? (We know it was a summer day because the title tells us so, and that it was an idyll because of the wonderfully fluffy clouds in an otherwise blue sky, and because the soldiers are engaged in nothing which a military mind would recognise as constructive). We also know that these are mere soldiers, because on none of the uniforms are there any badges of rank – not an officer or NCO in sight, not even a corporal. They are not otherwise a particularly homogeneous group, ranging from a dashing young Elvis Presley look-alike to a studious fellow whose forehead, under his absurd cocked cap, can be seen to have gone prematurely bald.

What they are up to, in this presumably brief holiday from authority, is playing with guns, specifically medium-calibre automatic pistols; which means indulging in the quasi-universal adolescent male activity of posing with handguns, particularly as one of them has had the foresight to bring along a camera with which to immortalise the theatrics. Whatever else it may be, this is emphatically not an officially sanctioned training session: the pistols are being flourished in all kinds of quite irregular, devil-may-care ways; one of the gunslingers is brandishing two at once in a

bespectacled imitation of Clint Eastwood; another has collected no fewer than three guns, two of them stuck in his belt at imminent danger of blowing a hole in his private parts; all in all, even the slackest of sergeants in any normal army would have arrested the entire party on sight without a second's thought.

A further element is introduced by the middle image of the triptych, a horizontal composed almost entirely of sky and white cumulus clouds, except for a narrow band of dark foliage along the bottom edge. Just visible in the sky is a small, old-fashioned aircraft which seems about to land in the fields beyond the hedge; were it not for the fact that it is so perfectly positioned in the sky, one might legitimately doubt whether the photographer was even aware of the aircraft's presence in his viewfinder. In any case, there is such a quality of silence to this image that I feel the aircraft must have been a glider – the shape is certainly right. The distinction is important, for a landing aeroplane *powers* its way to the ground, while a glider *drifts* down.

But what is the purpose of such analysis? Has it told us anything further about *Summer 1955*? Oddly enough, yes. To be of any use to an artist, photographs must be rooted in a context, in a past; there is no such thing as a context-free photograph, and abstract photography is good for nothing but record covers. These images of Estonian university cadets undergoing military training in the Soviet armed forces were taken by Enn Kiiler, Peeter Linnap's father-in-law. Rediscovered by the artist and subjected to a process never dreamed off by their progenitor, a process extending not just to their enlargement but, most importantly, to their forcible co-option into an undreamed-of cultural and aesthetic context, they acquire an iconic status – which is merely to say that their meaning, and the readings they are subject to, has gone from the particular to the general, from the here-and-now to the timeless. They are no longer Kiiler's, nor even of course Linnap's: they have acquired an independent authority.

This strategy is hardly original, depending as it does on the nostalgia and pathos which all old photographs generate. The problem with *Summer 1995* is, as Jan-Erik-Lundström has perceptively noted, that “these particular photos somehow refuse to settle”, “oscillating between seriousness and prankishness”. They can perhaps be read as a comment on the Soviet occupation; but on the basis of these images alone, service in the armed forces of the occupier does not seem to have been particularly arduous. We can also find in them a paradigm of ritualised masculine behaviour, a parody of militarism, or a parable of Estonian resistance to the pretensions of their occupiers; they can certainly support all of these readings.

There is, however, an additional dimension to this work which has to do with a certain disconcerting innocence present in the images – disconcerting, because innocence is not necessarily a quality one associates with representations of gun-wielding young men. It is present

in the self-mockery evident in some of the poses, in the determinedly non-martial air of certain participants (the photographer among them), in the same small, fluffy cloud which hangs just above the young men, in the stillness of the windless day, and – above all – in the silence of the stalled glider which is for me at the very centre of *Summer 1955*. If this work is about anything other than stillness and recollection, then it is about the infantile nature of power and of the means by which it seeks to perpetuate itself; and so it may after all, as staged by Linnap years after the event, also speak to us about resistance to power.

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