Closely tied to the corporeal and its elimination is the history of political art. In the early nineteenth century, Francisco de Goya showed, in his print series The Disasters of War, the inhuman cruelty with which the bodies of political opponents were tortured, mutilated, and finally done away with. A good century later, in 1937, Pablo Picasso created the best-known antiwar painting of the twentieth century in the monumental Guernica: his direct reaction to the destruction of the old Basque capi

tal by a German air squadron, in the course of which several hundred people were killed. The painting’s continuing validity and timeless resonance in the twenty-first century was apparent in February 2003, when the tapestry copy hanging in the United Nations headquarters in New York was covered up while Colin Powell, US Secretary of State at the time, and Hans Blix, head of the UNMOVIC weapons inspectors, told the international media of their strategies for a possible war against Iraq. It was deemed unfitting that their remarks should be made in front of the antiwar painting, with its shrieking victims, so it—and the victims’ mutilated bodies—were summarily hidden beneath a veil of blue fabric bearing the UN symbol. Thus the bodies of the victims of war were done away with (this time indirectly) for a second time.

Particularly after 1950, against the background of World War II, the Cold War, and other military conflicts worldwide, the spectrum of politically motivated art was constantly expanding, with the killed or wounded victims the focus of most portrayals. Susan Sontag observed that the Vietnam War, “the first to be witnessed day after day by television cam eras, introduced to the home front new tele-intimacy with death and destruction,” while artists, for instance Martha Rosler from the US, created works that used collage techniques to drag the bodies of Vietnam War victims pictorially right into the middle of the undamaged world of Western consumer-citizens.2 „death is a master from Germany“ is a much-quoted thought from Paul Celan’s Todesfuge (Death Fugue). Also as regards poison gas, this is sadly true. Since the start of the twentieth century, German scientists and German businesses have vied with one another in developing this chemical warfare agent. The chemist Fritz Haber was among those on the German side respon sible for poison gas development and for its first use in combat operations. Born in Breslau, Haber joined the staff of the Technische Hochschule Karlsruhe (University of Applied Sciences) in 1894, ultimately becoming professor of physical chemistry and electrochemistry before, in 1911, taking on the directorship of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Physikalische Chemie und Elektrochemie in Berlin. There, after the outbreak of World War I, he began to research chlorine gas. And it was in part the introduction of poison gas that made the rapid development of aerial reconnaissance necessary as a response, for only from the air could the

network of trenches containing the bulk of the enemy fighting strength be monitored and the positions of artillery batteries and poison gas projectors located.This last aspect in particular made aerial reconnaissance highly necessary during World War I. The first use of poison gas on Germany’s

western front in 1915 highlighted a fundamental change in the strategy of warfare, which, according to Peter Sloterdijk, „“consisted in targeting no longer the body, but the enemy’s environment.” 5 And so the “discover y of the ‘environment’ took place in the trenches of World War I. Soldiers on both sides had rendered themselves so inaccessible to the bullets and explosives intended for them that the problem of atmospheric war could not but become pressing.“ Although the use of poison gas was outlawed throughout the world in 1925 under the Geneva Protocol, many nations have not been deterred from repeatedly making use of this barbarous weapon. And over the decades, German firms made good money from dealing in death. For example, the poison gas Sarin was developed in Germany by I.G. Farben and, just like the mustard gas that Haber had developed, used to kill insects and then, during World War II, also employed as an invisible weapon against humans. In general, most antiwar art is concerned with criticizing actions and objects, or topics, on a theoretical-visual level, that is, with representing a range of disasters and problems in pictorial form and considering them critically in the process. There are only a few artists who in their artworks or installations make use of the objects and materials of war (and hence death) itself. One unusual exception is Louisa Clement’s installation transformationsschnitt (Transformation Section, 2015). For this, which in formal terms looks like a hybrid of Minimal and Land Art, she has used the poison gas Sarin, one of the weapons used in Syria by the dictator Assad against his own people—not the gas actually used in

that civil war, but some that was first delivered to Syria and subsequently rendered harmless by the UN. Some 600 tons of chemicals that could be used to make poison gas were confiscated from the Assad regime and then rendered harmless aboard the US special-purpose ship MV Cape

Ray. Finally the deadly makeup of the gas was destroyed in special ovens in Germany at over 1,300 degrees centigrade and melted down into glass. These gleaming brown-black chunks of glass that would otherwise have been used in road-building were discovered by Clement and used for her art. For this installation, which is variable in form, she has hitherto used some 8 tons of the material, most of it dispassionately set out in abstract geometric arrangements. The lumps of glass, varying greatly in size and many of them bulky, with jagged, broken edges, are almost innocently spread out before the onlooker. One could take them for precious relics of some exotic culture, because of the material’s unusual look and because the multitude of pieces lie in no particular conjunction with one another, and so give no clue to the possible purpose of the original solid mass. It is fundamentally a very aesthetic presentation—provided that knowledge of the once deadly gases incorporated, like radioactive waste, into molten glass does not resurrect memories of the wealth of horrid images of the victims forever in the media. The massive physical presence of the lumps of glass makes the strongest possible contrast to the obliterated corpses of those who fell victim to the gas. But alongside such political aspects, what Transformationsschnitt is taking for its theme is also, and above all, the presence and yet simultaneous absence of the physical. This artistic strategy runs through Clement’s work like a scarlet thread, and so it is detectable in fracture (2014), Head (2014–15), and Avatar (2016). “The technology–humanity thematic complex is something I see rather politically; above all I find disembodiment fascinating and suspenseful, and I attack it in my work,” says Clement. Because of its totality, the absence of bodies (literally meaning the non-presence of human individuals), for example in the photographic series on one’s way (2013), is very clearly an important theme in Clement’s work. In the skillful artistic presentation of this absence can be seen one of her work’s great strengths. The apparent contradiction between presence and absence is also evident at another level in photographs of objects derived from warfare, or at any rate the use of force, as, for instance, in the series Weapon (2017).

Among these are photographs of weapon cases that in their cropped sectionality appear almost abstract; because of their close-up non-representationalism, their purpose is almost unfathomable. In contrast to Goya’s drastic portrayals, showing war’s hanged and mutilated victims, today it would be superfluous for art to take up the horror-story documentarism of the press or the Internet-spread flood of atrocity images, or to emu late their stress on savagery. For most people, the real events of war are not imaginable; they are every bit as abstract as Clement’s transformationsschnitt with is poison gas rendered harmless or the representations of weapon cases. And even today, when the news media ply us so frequently with so many images of death and terror, murder and destruction, the suffering of those directly afflicted still remains every bit as unimaginable.

In her work, Clement does not fall for the simple pictorial rhetoric of explicitly representing real facts; she does not work with imagery downloaded from war zones and depictions of the dead and injured. The absence of weapons in the storage modules photographed, along with the absence of the physical contents of the gun cases, nevertheless has a drastic effect, both via the aestheticism of the obscene glossy displays and via the inherent associations of those weapons’ potential uses. Clement’s latest installation takes as its theme physicality and its ambivalent existence between presence and absence. In Schmerzraum (Space of Distress, 2018), she has created a walk-in environment dimensioned 360 cm high, 450 cm long, and 125 cm wide.9 The walls of the room are

completely covered with a high-tech fabric, a so-called “e-dermis.” This fabric, which conducts electrical impulses, was developed by Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to enable wearers of prostheses to experience once again sensations of touch and pain in their missing extremities.10

On the one hand, the oblong, corridor-like spatial installation is completely empty; on the other, the person who enters is “surrounded” as though in skin by some twenty-one bodies, assuming that the e-dermis is mimicking human skin.11 Even though the gray material has a very technical feel, it creates an almost oppressive sensation when imagining the fabric “translated” into human skin and corresponding bodies. The “bodies” (i.e., the material) may be touched, which triggers the transmission of a purely hypothetical electrical stimulus. However, this provides no feedback, and it is irrelevant whether or not the entrant knows that their touch is ineffective, because the artist is primarily concerned with the increasing discrepancy between the actions of real bodies (i.e., individuals) in a real world—whatever is meant by that—and the impact of the actions of

actual individuals in a digital, and hence virtual, world. Due to the breakneck pace of development of the digital world, fields of action and areas of operation are constantly expanding, and the boundary between illusion and reality is becoming more and more blurred. Where the elimination of the physical aspect of military operations (mentioned above) is con cerned, there is a real-life example in the problem of a “Playstation mentality in the operating personnel”12 controlling combat drones—to some extent “armed conflicts are increasingly turning into a kind of real video game.” Here, real bodies (i.e., real people) are eliminated via (digital) remote control; for the operator, the effects of individual action are thus virtualized and triv ialized —in the starkest contrast to the real effects on real people being killed or injured.

In tackling human interaction and social functioning in an increasingly digital world, Clement’s work is addressing a topic as up-to-date as it is important. On the one hand, we live and communicate more and more digitally, ergo incorporeally, and many times a day we can or must legitimize ourselves by means of codes and passwords; on the other, the human body is increasingly being observed and measured. However, the more we act digitally, the more important individual-physical evaluation

becomes. So, for example, it is now almost impossible to travel without the validation of biometric data, since biometrics decide identity. “Those who cannot ‘identify’ themselves by means of their biometric attributes are stigmatized and effectively expatriated,” as a recent report on an Indian registration communication, we are or will become increasingly dependent on the body and its integrity. In order to evaluate identity-confirming data, more and more parts of the body or biometric characteristics are called upon: rang ing from simple fingerprints to irises, facial recognition to DNA and even voice. However, the more verification strategies by means of biometric data are developed, the more opportunities for manipulating this data multiply (catchphrase: deepfakes). So, for example, it is no problem to (almost) authentically reproduce an individual human voice.

Another of Clement’s series has sprung from this preoccupation with biometric data and also makes play with the strategy of a certain decorporealization and with the presence/absence paradox: heads (2014 –15). The starting point was the failed attempt to create a biometrically correct passport photo “Then there arose questions like ‘When do I fit the standardization that this kind of photo demands, and when don’t I?,’ ‘What does that sort of fitting actually mean?,’ and ‘What has that got to do with society?’”17 In the course of this clash of meanings, Clement noticed the faceless mannequin heads, which she ultimately “portrayed” with the smartphone camera; she subsequently framed each individual head in the resulting fifty-part series as tightly as possible. One could read these heads as a contemporary reinterpretation of Gerhard Richter’s “photorealistically” paint ed 48 Portraits (1971–72) of important figures of the twentieth century.18 Whereas Richter has portrayed only men, Clement provides beings stripped of identity, bereft of any biometric traits, that could even begin to be used to establish what sort of “personalities” these are. The mannequin heads, with their avatar-like quality and absence meaning presence stand for a social development that at least partly eliminates physical appearance as the most immanent metaphor for what is human. State

or official institutions do still call upon the human body to establish and mon itor identity whenever possible, but that will not halt the trend toward disembodiment. “Where will our society be going when we are completely digital?” In a series like heads, this is the question that Louisa Clement asks of us as viewers.19 With a new virtual reality work underway, she will go on delving into the thematic complex of the physical and the artistic. We are all agog!