

## Can Visual Art Intensify the Existential Debate on Genocide? With Reproductions of Several Art Works

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### **GPN ORIGINAL**

*Editor's Note: This touching essay, accompanied by reproductions of several works, and concluded with a moving "kind of biography" touch the heart of the reader with the author's pain and sensitivity to her own and to all of our human suffering, and touches the reader's mind with basic questions about artistic representations of genocide.*

Can visual art intensify and deepen the necessary debate on genocide prevention? For good reasons the question is mainly met by hesitation. Art is generally known to act only within its own field of force. But a journey of experience as a visual artist has taken me to the conviction that in some cases, in some ways, to a certain degree, it eventually can.

I promised in the last issue of *GPN Genocide Prevention Now* to account more in details for this journey connected to two works in my production, *The Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing* from 2004, and the series of multimedia drawings *Bystander on Probation* from 2007. I start with what so far represents a terminal of the journey, the 18th Biennale of Sydney in Australia, for which the latter work was selected. The series was exhibited between 27th of June and 16th of September 2012 at Cockatoo Island in Sydney, which housed some interesting artistic participations in the Biennale.

As I will explain, *Bystander on Probation* raises the question of guilt. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary 'probation' refers to 'a system of suspending the sentence of an offender', so it means to be free but not acquitted. If by a freak of fate or by an explicit choice by the artistic directors of the biennial, Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, the series was shown in the building of the former prison on Cockatoo Island. So the bystander can paradoxically be said to have ended up in jail!

It was the *Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing* that established the context and final interpretation of the Bystander figure. The scroll is indeed a main part of the history of the Bystander series. And how did I come upon the idea of making the scroll?



*Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing*, 2004, Detail  
 Photo by Isabelle Pateer



*Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing*, 2004, stitched linen columns with digitally printed texts, 1.6 cm x 147 cm. In the background the series of mixed media drawings. *The Object*, 1988. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Isabelle Pateer

I am not sure that it all started with Israel W. Charney's *Encyclopedia of Genocide*. There was a specific situation. I was preparing a major exhibition at C.C. Strombeek in Brussels, to be combined with the international symposium on which I reported in the last issue of *GPN*. I was going to summarize my artistic-and-theoretical research into psychological trauma. I had written texts – the first was *Modernity as a Mad Dog*, written in 2001, published in 2004 in the anthology *Over Here*. I had created works of art such as *Birth Mask*, and I was planning a video on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to be called *Beyond Depiction*. It was all based on my personal experience of being

traumatized through persecution and harassments as a black artist in the European diaspora.



A frame of the video, *Beyond Depiction*, 2004, with a self-portrait of the artist, projected at the exhibition *Crossing the Void* in Brussels 2004. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Isabelle Pateer

The *Birth Mask* series consist of assemblages on canvas covered with metal netting and referring to the trauma of having lost unborn children. *Beyond Depiction* is the attempt of a subjective explanation of what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder means and how it occurs.

These references to personal experiences conferred authenticity to my testimonies. Only, there was a reverse of the medal. It tended to make the exhibition self-centered in a way that I did not intend,. The 'self-absorbedness' of victimhood is to me a problem as it is something that always is difficult to avoid. But after all, post-traumatic stress disorder, the psychological scars of overwhelming stress caused for instance by war, genocide or natural catastrophes is such an enormously widespread plague that you do not want to let it be reduced to an individual affliction. How to introduce a wider perspective?

It was now I happened to read a review of *The Encyclopedia of Genocide*. What! An Encyclopedia - not a pamphlet? I ordered it and read. Oh my God! Its double tome told of genocides all around the world! And all through history! I stopped *OH MY GODing*. It has happened, it still happens and it may happen again, if we do not prevent it... I decided to use the knowledge represented by the Encyclopedia to widen the concept of the exhibition. The rest is history. I wrote to Professor Charny asking for his permission. I had to treat his encyclopedia in a rude way, edit and cut pieces from it, supplement with texts from other sources including from my own research.

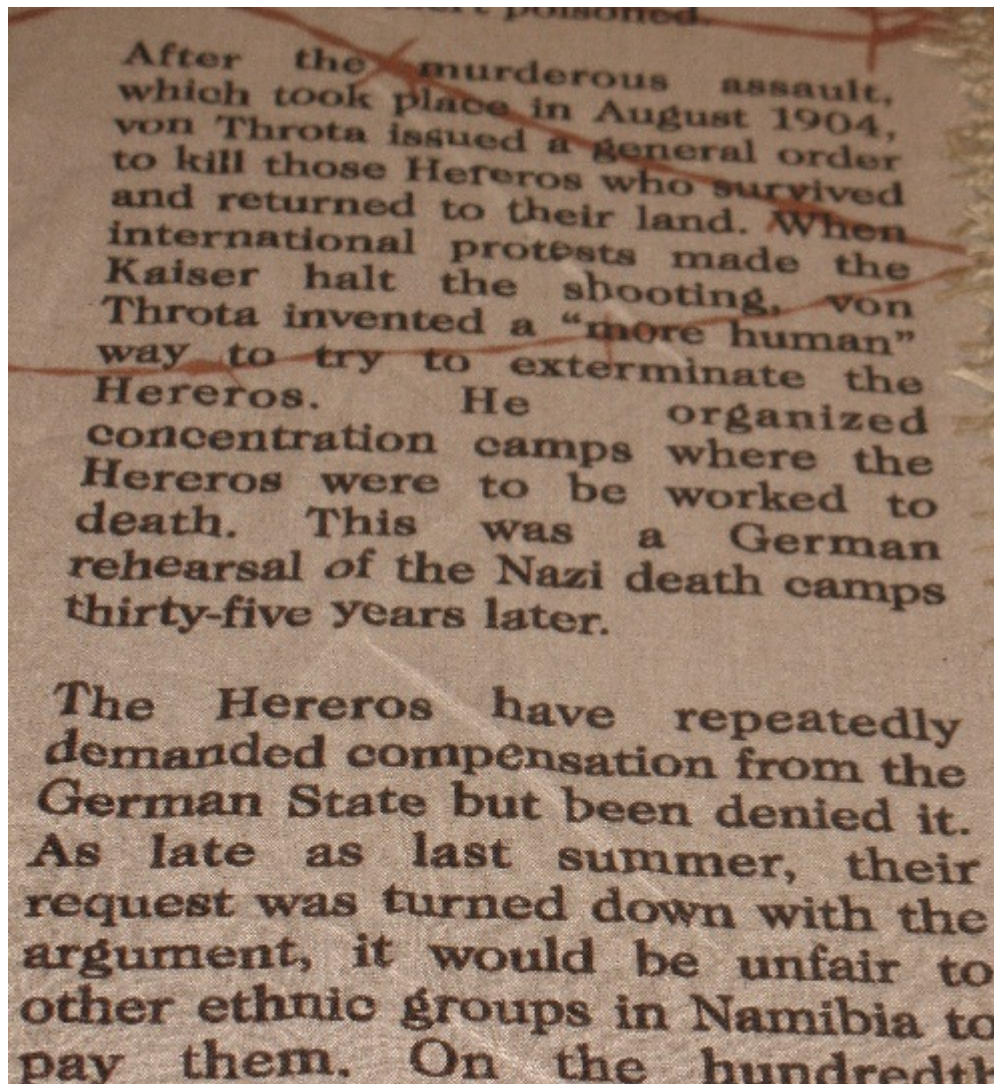




*Birth Mask No.3*, detail 2002, assemblage on canvas, covered with metal netting, one of a series of trauma-related works honoring lost unborn children

I got his blessing. I pointed out that I missed the history of my own native country, Tanganyika, today Tanzania, where once the German barbaric repression after the Maji-Maji uprising, which included scorched earth tactics, diminished the population by two thirds. He agreed that it should be counted among genocidal catastrophes and could be included in a future edition of the Encyclopedia.

It took me a long time to make preparatory research, to get the texts digitally printed on linen and to stitch the pieces of linen together to a sixteen meter long scroll. Sitting on the floor, with a special needle and linen thread in hand, I slowly advanced by stitching and stitching again and again. From Auschwitz to Rwanda, from the German genocide on the pastoral Hereros in what is now Namibia to the genocide in Cambodia, from King Leopold II's cutting the Congolese population by at least a half to the Armenian genocide and the genocidal massacres of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila.



Detail of the Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing (2004) referring to the genocide executed by the Germans on the Hereros in South West Africa

I lingered at a quotation by Tzvetan Todorov; “Every event, and not only the most traumatizing among them, the judeocide, is absolutely unique. Only to talk about the horrors, is it not unique, the close to total destruction of the population of a whole continent, America, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Is it not unique, the massive reduction through slavery of another continent, Africa? The imprisonment of fifteen million prisoners in the Stalin camps, is that not unique?” He summarizes there what was my intention with the work, which I called *Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing*.

Was it political art? There always exists around every instance of conceiving and producing a work of art a cover of surrounding temporal, geographical and finally political human conditions. For some artists, the strategy may be to isolate the artistic intervention from the outside context more or less in the way one isolates the manipulation of radioactive materials. And it is probably the right thing to do for them. For my part, I accept that there may arise a contaminating touch between the artwork and the outside. That is probably why I prefer time consuming processes of visual production, during which so many reflections pass through my head.

My intention was to make our frightening collective memories and history visibly present at the exhibition, which I believe is a slightly different experience from reading about them in books. It is instead an experience similar to that of looking at an assemblage. Assemblage means to assemble objects within the aesthetic frame of a visual work of art, thereby giving them the status of symbolic signs, symbolizing themselves and their presence.

A kind of assemblage principle was in fact applied in the case of the *Reference Scroll*. It is a dimension that should be understood as both represented by the assemblage procedure and by the aim of making the work function in dialogue with the rest of the exhibited works. I was able to build exhibitions around the Scroll in Brussels, Brixton and Kendal, UK.

The *Reference Scroll* has been very differently evaluated. One art historian even hesitated to discuss it in aesthetic terms, while the Indian art historian Partha Mitter brought out the scroll as an example of what to his opinion ought to have been included in the authoritative American survey *Art Since 1900*, beside works by artists like Wifredo Lam and Jamini Roy. He talked about 'Everlyn Nicodemus's profoundly moving representations of global genocide.'

It was the exhibition in Kendal that made the Bystander figure of immediate importance to me. Here I want to insert a bit of history. The figure had appeared in my visual production already a decade earlier. From where he emanated and what he represented, I simply don't know. Slightly leaning back and obviously attentively watching something, he suddenly figured in the margin of some purely abstract experiments with space that I was making in 1997. I used him to strengthen the impression of space: the space into which he was looking. He thus functioned as a kind of a marker. But marking what? An art critic writing about the works suggested he might be a visual incarnation of the philosopher Rene Descartes.

At first this made sense to me. Together with the Italian Renaissance painters' linear perspective, Descartes' mathematical concept of space dominated European art for centuries. It could be described as a hierarchal way of establishing geometrical law and order in the representation of what we see. Thereby it could be said to subordinate the world under the viewer's dictatorial gaze. Not without reason has it been called 'a colonizing gaze'.

But at the end my odd character - this anonymous, somewhat shabby, European philistine, who might be anybody and everybody - did not persuade me that he could be seen as the Cartesian controller of the world. Could perhaps the perspective be reversed? Could he instead be defined by what he sees? Was he an onlooker hooked on what he was watching rather than somebody subduing it? Could he simply be perceived as a bystander?

This kind of dialogue between an artist and a work of art in progress is something the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin has described regarding literature. To my opinion it can also occur in the studio of a visual artist. After having come so far in my ongoing discussion with the Bystander figure, I was invited to exhibit my *Reference Scroll on Genocide* at an international women's festival in Kendal, United Kingdom. I wanted this time to surround the texts of the Scroll with visual works directly related to them.

And I created a series of multimedia drawings with the Bystander figure replicated in them, sometimes presented as a couple, sometimes collectively.

The *Bystander on Probation* was technically produced in a combination of drawing, print, collage and stitching. The repetitive character is intentional. It has to do with the threatening repetition of the genocidal catastrophe he is supposed to witness.

It was now that my antihero began to disclose his potential significance. Each of the genocides has had its perpetrators and its victims. But there has also been a third category present, the bystanders, who witnessed the murderous violence but who could not or would not intervene. Each inhuman event referred to in the *Reference Scroll* had had its bystanders. The pathetic figure was there to represent them all, taking upon himself their anxiety, shame and eventual accessory culpability.

As the dialogue progressed, he became more and more questioning and challenging. How are we to judge our own contemporary role as passive bystanders in situations where we witness via modern media and in real time human catastrophes and inflicted suffering occurring somewhere in the world.? *Are we then all accomplices?*

Let me be very concrete. Humans who lived in the vicinity of Auschwitz could see the smoke, could watch the goods trains arrive at the camp, could smell the stench from the ovens where corpses were burnt. Most of these people seem to have managed to stay indifferent. We tend to consider them implicated as passive bystanders in the ongoing barbarity, even as a kind of accomplices. Now let us change the situation into that of our own living room. We are watching the tele. Something horribly inhuman happens before our eyes. By watching it, are we in the same sense bystanders? Is the only difference that we don't smell anything?

On the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 we were reminded of the true meaning of "real time", to watch something occurring at exactly the same moment as we watch it. How it blows away any distance, putting us at the scene of the crime, wherever it takes place. Since then we cannot avoid the question. Can we, seated in front of the screen, end up in a potential bystander situation?

To exhibit the *Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing* and the series *Bystander on Probation* together, as I did in Kendal, had an effect I had not dared to foresee. The combination of the challenging ethical provocation implicit in the *Bystander* series and the globally wide documentation of genocides represented by the *Scroll* incited a lot of questions and intense discussions. The one was like the point of a fencer's epee aiming at our chest, the other made it more or less impossible to escape. Together they proved to constitute a surprisingly efficient machinery powering a continuing debate on genocide. The debate mainly focused on how to prevent genocide from happening again. Is it possible?

To indicate the scope of these discussions, let me shortly touch on some differences related to generations. Many pensioners, who have retired from intellectual professions in Britain, choose Kendal as residence, attracted by the beautiful nature of Cumbria. One of the most devoted discussions that I witnessed being arranged at my exhibition was between senior citizen, among whom some were old enough to have experienced as reflecting youngsters the



shocking disclosure to the world of the horrors of Holocaust. They remembered how everyone repeated: NEVER AGAIN! NEVER AGAIN! And then it happened again. And again everybody exclaimed NEVER AGAIN! The debate got its heat by their life experience and recognition. It got its strength by memory. At the same time it was characterized by a certain melancholy. Nobody could suggest how we should come out of the vicious circle of repeated genocides. The big problem is, as Todorow points out, how to turn memories into examples to learn from.

Meanwhile, secondary school children, who discussed the question, were no less involved. But for them it was about their future, not about the past. They were asking themselves: What are the roots of genocide, where does it begin? And their politically mature answers were that it may begin in their own everyday life, for instance in bullying in the playground and in discrimination of and ignorance about other humans. To prevent the growing of these germs into future wildfires like genocide they were organizing anti-bullying activities in the school and cultivating relations with school children in African schools, even visiting them on school journeys.

For the generations between these two it is mainly a question of political awareness and of how to keep memory and vigilance alive, which is the main field of action of *GPN*. It is of course also a question of psychology. Professor Emeritus Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University for example has written a book about how good people turn evil, *The Lucifer Effect*, in which he studies the psychology of both victims, perpetrators and bystanders.

Finally visual art can sometimes play a role as incitement to reflections and discussions. That has been my experience of the journey I have tried to reconstruct here.



### **A KIND OF BIOGRAPHY OF EVERLYN NICODERMUS**

The snow is melting on the top of Kilimanjaro. To be born in 1954 on its slopes meant growing up with the independence of Tanzania knocking at the door. Independence was attained when I was six. We were the generation of hope.

Having spoken our local language Chagga at home and communicated with the linguistic Others in Swahili, in school we got English as the language of learning. After all, it was from being a British colonial protectorate that the country acquired its right of self-determination.

To continue depending on colonizers' languages, French, English, Portuguese, has been a problematic fate of the majority of African countries. Thus it was a bold experiment when Tanzania decided to make the widespread African lingua franca Swahili into its uniting national tongue.

The experiment was possibly encouraged by the historical experience of unity in fighting for freedom in the Maji-Maji war against the original colonizers, the Germans.



It had ended up in a genocidal catastrophe with the German military using brutal scorched earth tactics to crush the uprising by laying the country waste, making it one of the poorest parts of Africa.

But the collective trauma it left behind was turned pro-active. When I look back at those post-independence years, I remember the pride and the spirit of pioneering regeneration. For instance, school girls and boys, participated in the huge project of literacy teaching, going out in the villages to teach grownups and old folks to read and write. I also remember how the language fluctuations we experienced made the feeling of national identity open-minded. As teaching materials in Swahili were sparse, my generation had to change to and fro between Swahili and English in school. In 1973 I emigrated to Europe to become a world-weary black woman.

There are around 120 different languages in Tanzania representing different cultures. And still the country does not suffer like many other countries in Africa from serious inter-tribal tensions and antagonisms. They are settled with a joke, *mtani*. Racism and xenophobia was something I was only abstractly aware of during my African childhood and adolescence. But I was painfully confronted with those phenomena in Europe. This partly explains why I chose to study Social Anthropology. I wanted to understand human nature and behavior. It became a love-and-hate affair. While I have kept the inquiring mind that drove me to it, many aspects such as its collusion with imperialism made me abandon the studies.

In 1980 I turned to art, marking the change of course with an exhibition at the National Museum in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Only, I didn't make the change in order to settle down comfortably in an artistic studio career. As soon as I felt full-fledged enough as a self-taught painter, I embarked on an outgoing adventure that I called *Woman in the World*. It consisted of in-residence projects and exhibitions in three continents, Skive in Denmark, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Calcutta in India. It dominated my years 1984-86.

Field work played an important role played in each place consisting of dialogues and group talks with women about what it is to them to be a woman. Out of these talks I painted paintings and wrote poems exhibited together in situ. In retrospect I have noticed that there was quite a lot in the conversations, in which I invited sensitive and difficult testimonies, that resembled psychiatrists' therapy vis-a-vis Holocaust survivors. I summoned up the experience in my doctor's thesis.

On one level the project functioned as a strategy of intercultural transgression, using women's parallel experiences in patriarchal societies as points of recognition in order to overcome existing biases about cultural otherness. On another and principally perhaps more important level, it represented a radical attempt to give women a space where to speak against the grain of the phallogocentric tradition. In her text *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Spivak compares the relationship between woman and silence with that between a colonized subaltern and non-speech. 'If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow'.

*Woman in the World* was very much about female trauma.

In 1988 I was invited to be a guest student of the Japanese-American sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri at the Art Academy of West Berlin. But for the rest, the years that followed were marked by harassments, persecution, isolation and exiles. It culminated with a traumatic breakdown that occurred in 1988. When I regained consciousness, I took to my drawing utensils as to something real to hold on to. The result was the series of drawings, that I called *The Object*.

It was executed in a tight combination of charcoal, pencil, ink and rubber. With small but crucial alterations it repeated one and the same scene of utter forlornness, about which Jean Fisher was going to write in a catalogue text in 1997 that nowhere is the period of creative isolation more eloquently expressed.

The setting is a room, windows are indicated, but no light penetrates this bleak interior. Its sole occupant is a hunched figure seated in a chair so unstable that it provides no sense of repose (...) Above all, the figure's sensory, motor and conceptualizing faculties - hands, feet and head - are all but withdrawn into the swollen bulk of its body. We might say that this self "has taken leave of its senses." If sound is evoked here, it is that of an inner throbbing.

The breakdown, which marked the beginning of my suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder, included a typical near-death experience. Five years later, having once more emigrated, now from Alsace to Belgium, I embarked on a series of bigger and bigger oil paintings, in all 84, representing a ballade about the experience of meeting and fighting death and returning to life. I gave it a camouflage title, *The Wedding*. Returning to life meant re-occupation of the space of my body, of my surroundings and of the world of my thoughts, which had all been obliterated in the situation represented by *The Object*. Because I wanted to make this pictorial representation tangible, I chose constantly bigger sizes. The final works measured more than seven square meters.

When the series had decided it had come to its end, I made a radical turn. From working on seven square meters I turned to working on seven square centimeters using as foundation sheets of handmade paper bound into books. The fragility of the paper made it impossible to handle the books, which I called *Blackbooks*.. Thus the works couldn't be exhibited. And this was partly my answer to the imposed isolation. But it was also a stage of my experimentation with sizes and what they mean for reading an image, an experimentation leading towards the sixteen meter long *Reference Scroll of Genocide*.

Of course I was aware that in a time of mechanical reproduction, which includes image projection, size is freely changeable. Walter Benjamin, who launched the reflections on mechanical reproduction, belongs to my theoretical companions. Later on I tried out a compromise, making a video out of one of the *Blackbooks*, which I called *Turning Pages*. Thus that book can be exhibited as a closed, non-accessible object in a room surrounded by wall sized projections of its content. But for me the difference is not so much about the aura of the original as about its quality of presence, a central aspect of the Scroll.

The images in the *Blackbooks*, in all kinds of techniques, representing a flow of visual reflections of the world, included the beginning of my experiments with assemblage. Wrapping string paper enabled me to include objects like dried flowers,

mini puppets or hair between the book pages. And when my isolation was broken in 1997 - mainly by an invitation to exhibit at the University of Alicante, Spain - I developed this assemblage technique in the form of assembled objects covered and kept against canvas by metal netting. This technique, which I called *Internetting*, combining the notion of being kept inter netting and the notion of being a prisoner behind chicken-wire, proved to be a solution when I began working with visual trauma testimonies as in the series Birth Mask. I had come across the kind of 'memory taboo' of which international trauma studies give us plentiful examples. And I found that what I could not represent by conventional pictorial procedures I was able to present in assemblages.

With this I have accounted for the biographical background of research and experiments leading to producing the *Reference Scroll of Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing*, which is where my journey began.

## Literature

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