In July 2005, while European heads of state attended memorials to mark the ten year anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide and court trials continued in The Hague at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Bosnian-American artist Aida Sehovic presented the aftermath of this genocide on a day-to-day level through her art installation in memory of the victims of Srebrenica.

Drawing on the Bosnian tradition of coming together for coffee, this installation, 'Što te Nema?' (Why are you not here?), comprised a collection of tiny white porcelain cups ('fildzans' in Bosnian) arranged in the geographic shape of Srebrenica in the lobby of the United Nations building in New York. It was to represent Europe’s worst mass killing since the Second World War, which took place in July 1995 in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica. Up to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) men and boys were killed when Bosnian Serb troops overran the internationally protected enclave (The Guardian).

The cups were gathered from Bosnian families in the United States of America and Bosnia & Herzegovina, and in particular from members of 'Zene Srebrenice' ('the women of Srebrenica'). Each of the 1,705 cups represented one exhumed, identified and re-buried victim of the Srebrenica genocide (1,705 at July 2005). The cups were filled either with coffee or, in the case of victims not yet 18 and therefore not old enough at the time of their death to have participated in the coffee tradition, with sugar cubes. The names and birth dates of the victims were recited on an audio loop.

Genocide is the methodical destruction of the existence of a people. It is noted through the 'UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide' that genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity throughout history (UNHCHR). Tribunals, such as the ICTY, with their focus on justice, are formal and responsibility-based modes of responding to genocide. Society seeks justice, but raising awareness around genocide through the telling and hearing of the individual story is also required. Responding to genocide and communicating its existence through artistic expression has been a valuable way of bearing witness to such a horrendous and immense crime against humanity.

Art can address the gaps in healing and understanding that cannot be addressed through tribunals. From Picasso’s 'Guernica', to the children’s pictures triggered by the Rwandan genocide, to the 'War Rugs' of Afghanistan and to vast installations such as Peter Eisenman’s recently opened Holocaust memorial in Berlin; art has proved a powerful medium for representing such atrocities and attempting to find healing after genocide.

Artworks such as Sehovic’s 'Što te Nema?' give insight into the personal experience of genocide while challenging indifference and maintaining memory. For the affected communities, this addresses the impact on individuals; the human cost and the loss of everyday experiences. As Srebrenica survivor Emir Suljagic comments, "when you tell someone that 10,000 people died, they cannot understand or imagine that. What I want to say is that these people were peasants, car mechanics or masons. That they had daughters, mothers, that they leave someone behind; that a lot of people are hurt by this person's death" (qtd. in Vulliamy).

'Što te Nema?' transmits this personal dimension of genocide by using an everyday situation of showing hospitality with family and friends, which is familiar and practised in most cultural experiences, juxtaposed with the loss of a family member who is missing as a result of genocide. This transmits the notion of genocide into the sphere of common experience, attachment and emotion. It acts as an invitation to explore the impact of genocide beyond the impersonal statistics and the aloof legalese of the courtroom drama.

Beyond providing a representation of the facts or emotions around genocide, art provides a way of responding to a crime, which, by its nature, is generally difficult to comprehend. Art can offer a mode of giving testimony and providing catharsis about events which are not easily approached or discussed. As Sehovic says of 'Što te Nema?' (it) is a way of healing for Bosnians, coming to terms with this terrible thing that happened to us ... it is building a bridge of understanding where Bosnian people are coming from, because it is very hard to talk about these things (qtd. in Vermont Quarterly Magazine).

For its receiver, genocide art, with all its capacity to arouse our emotions and empathy, transmits something that we cannot see or engage with in the factual reporting of genocide or in a political analysis of the topic. Through art, it is possible to encounter genocide at an individual, personal level. As Mödersheim points out, we seem to need symbolic expressions to help us understand, and deal
with the complex nature of events so horrific that reason and emotion fail to grasp their magnitude. To the intellect, many aspects of these experiences are unfathomable, and yet to keep our humanity we need to understand them ... where words and explanations fail, we look for images (Mödersheim 18).

An artist’s responses to genocide can vary from the need of survivors to create actual depictions of the atrocities, to more abstract portrayals of the emotional response to acts of genocide. Art that is created by survivors or witnesses to the genocide demonstrates a documentation and testimony to what has occurred – a symbolic act of transmitting the personal experience of genocide. Artistic responses to genocide by those, such as Sehovic, who did not witness the event first hand, express how genocide “remains deeply felt to the point where we could not say it has ended” (Morris 329). Such art represents the continuation and global repercussions of genocide.

The question of what ‘genocide art’ means to the neutral or removed viewer or society is also significant. Art is often associated with pleasure. Issues of mass killing and war are often not the types of topics one wishes to view on a trip to an art gallery. However, art has a more crucial function as a social reflector. It is often the reaction of non-acceptance of such artworks which indicates how society wishes to consider questions of genocide or of war in general. For example, Rayner Hoff’s 1932 war memorial ‘The Crucifixion of Civilisation 1914’ was rejected for display because it was considered too confronting and controversial in its depiction of a naked, tortured female victim of war in a Christ-like pose. As Picasso commented, “painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy” (qtd. in Mödersheim 15).

In discussing the art that emerged from the Sierra Leone Civil War, Ross notes, “as our stomachs and hearts turn over at such sights, we get a small taste of what the artists felt. Even as we look at the images and experience the horror, disgust and anger that comes with knowing that they really happened, we realise that if these images are to be understood as reports from the field, serving the same function as photojournalism, it means that we have been sheltered from this type of reporting from our own news sources” (Ross 39). Here, art can address the often cursory acknowledgment given to ‘events which happen in faraway places’ and lend an insight into the personal.

As Adorno notes, “history in artworks is not something made, and history alone frees the work from being merely something posited or manufactured” (133). Here we see the indivisibility of the genocide (the ‘history’) from the artwork – that what is seen is not mere ‘depiction’ but art’s ability to turn the anonymous statistics or the unknown genocide into the realisation of a brutal annihilation of individual human beings – to bring history to life as it were. What the viewer does after viewing such art is perhaps immaterial; the important thing is that they now know.

But why is it important to know and important to remember? It has been argued that genocides which occurred in places like Srebrenica and Rwanda happened because the international community did not know or refused to recognise the events to the point of initially declining to apply the term ‘genocide’ to Srebrenica and settling for the more sanitised term ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Bringa 196). It would be nave and even condescending to argue that ‘Što te Nema?’ or any of the myriad other artistic responses to genocide have the possibility of undoing a genocide such as that which took place in Srebrenica, or even the hope of preventing another genocide. However, it is in transporting genocide into the personal realm that the message is transmitted and ignorance to the event can no longer be claimed.

The concept of genocide can be too horrendous and vast to take in; art, whilst making it no less horrific, transmits the message to and confronts the viewer at a more direct and personal level. Such art provokes and provides a starting point for comment and debate. Art also stands as a lasting memorial to those who have lost their lives as a result of genocide and as a reminder to humanity that to ignore, underestimate or forget genocide makes possible its recurrence.

References


Citation reference for this article

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