

## ***Ethical Portraits***

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**Companion Essay to Barry Salzman's**

***The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim***

Leonardo da Vinci's instruction manual for a painting of war is as follows, 'Make the conquered and beaten pale, and the skin above the brow furrowed with pain ... Make the dead partly or entirely covered with dust ... and let the blood be seen by its colour flowing in a sinuous stream from the corpse to the dust. Others in the death agony grinding their teeth, rolling their eyes, with the fists clenched against their bodies, and the legs distorted'. This view is now convention – suffering too possesses its aesthetic. That the painting of suffering shifted to photography, and consequently proved more difficult to grasp, has everything to do with its denatured quality – how to convey death, when the recoding machine is death itself?

As Susan Sontag notes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 'Ever since the camera was invented in 1839 it has kept company with death ... a memento of the vanished past and dear departed'. Photographs, as such, are abductions – they separate us from the moment in the instant of their recording. It is unsurprising that, in the light of this elision, we acutely sense our own passing, our own lives as a quicksand. No medium has more poignantly expressed the divide between the living and the dead, none more witheringly expressed the inevitability that is death.

Reflecting on images of murder and the horrific carnage that is war, Sontag notes that 'not to be pained by these pictures, not to recoil from them, would be the reaction of a moral monster'. She is right, and yet in our age, saturated with images of dead bodies – which we desire almost as much as we desire naked ones, notes Sontag – one cannot ignore the fact that our ethical and emotional intelligence has atrophied, our interface with death and dying become cauterized and amoral. 'If the horror of war could be made vivid enough', Sontag resumes, 'most people would take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war'. Truly? Given the current atrocities worldwide – most declaratively in the Ukraine – I am not certain that there is any means to make the horror of war 'vivid enough', least of all the camera.

How so? Because the photograph a camera generates, in addition to the machine itself, are existential mediums and means which indelibly record the annulus between being and nothingness, existence and inexistence. No

matter how instantaneous or constructed an image might be, it cannot override the fact that it is fundamentally the agent of Thanatos. As such, Sontag is mistaken in assuming that 'pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being "properly" lighted and composed ... by flying low, artistically speaking, such photographs are thought to be less manipulative' – incorrectly so. My point being that an accidental record is no less artificial, my further point, that artifice is necessary if we are to restore ethics to a desensitised and amoral world.

Barry Salzman's photographic series, *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim*, has, like no other image repertoire, compelled me to rethink why photographs matter – despite their ubiquity, and the economy of death built therein. Unlike Leonardo da Vinci, he does not construct death and war as a dramatic tableau. Unlike Susan Sontag, Salzman does not suppose that his images will rehabilitate a 'moral monster'. That he speaks of his images of the exhumed remains of the Rwandan genocide, in which over a million people were slaughtered in a hundred days, as portraits is profoundly revealing, because there are no bodies in these photographs, only the clothing and accoutrements of long dead personages.

Humanity is generic, a personage – elevated despite the lack of rank – a consecration. For this is what Salzman has designed. One cannot ignore the artifice – the rearrangement of objects, a shirt, a school bag, the presumptive inclusion of words – and yet, neither can one ignore the potency of Salzman's strategy. He speaks of 'the overwhelmingly emotional feeling that I was shooting portraits of people, and not documenting objects'. Twenty-four years had passed since the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda when the mass grave where this work was made was discovered in Kabuga Village in 2018. For Salzman the experience, as a witness, remained acute.

Given this is not Salzman's first record of slaughter, that he has made it his business to revisit the world's killing fields, long after the fact, means that his photographs accept distance – though never as a psychic barrier, for what Salzman seeks to present to us is not the fact that a photograph is 'a memento' of a vanished life, but that it traffics in the archaeology and psycho-geography of death itself. As Nietzsche blithely remarked, the dead outnumber the living, a sentiment which reaffirms human fragility and superfluity, and yet, for Salzman, the more its preciousness.

Salzman's photographs of the killing fields of Poland, Ukraine, Rwanda, Namibia and Bosnia in his project *How We See The World: (a century of genocide)* are 'landscapes' shot long after the fact – studies in the unerring

power of nature to renovate human horror. The case of *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim*, however, is different. It is not the land that assumes centre stage but the body, or rather, its unearthed raiment. Here, I must return to Da Vinci's choreography of dust and 'sinuous' blood, for one cannot unsee the daubed earth, the 'personal belongings ... pulled from the ground, still damp with earth'. These are not sanitised objects. The choreography required to reproduce them, while artful, remains ethical. In fact, Salzman's take is never acquisitive or fetishistic. Rather, as ghostings of lost lives, his photographs are profoundly and agonistically embodied.

That Salzman has chosen to include fiction – a written accompaniment to each image – is also fitting, given, as Sontag also notes, that words are inextricably bound up with the muteness of images, their role ventriloquistic, empathic, a further subliminal sonar in the benighted chamber of the viewer's body. 'I Was Wearing My Favourite Party Dress ... I was Wearing My Favourite Shoes. But One Got Lost ... I Was Carrying My Doggy Backpack ... I Was Wearing My Light Green Slops. But Most The Flowers Got Destroyed...'. Salzman uses capitals throughout, these are not spoken sentences, but echoings of bodies and things, enmeshed, obscene – Anthropocene – because inorganic things, like 'slops', endure. At once telegraphic and deeply personal, Salzman's images and words are unearthings – from the land, from the photographer's body – and, as such, a deftly precise conflation of the twinned deaths that inform photography as medium, as machine, as history and culture.

Countering the prevailing view, Sontag reminds us that 'war has been the norm, peace the exception'. What Salzman has done in *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim* is to personalise war – the abstractive and subtractive nature of death – and, thereby, free us from the 'moral monster' that controls and shapes us. His is Martin Buber's quest in *I and Thou*, to 'imagine to myself what another man is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in his very reality, that is, as a living process in this man ... The inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between one and the other, between men'.

Penned in 1923, before the Nazi deathcamps, in the painfully intimate aftermath of the 'Great War', Buber's thoughts remain profoundly significant today – they are our alarm. For today, it seems that empathy is vanishing, the world appraised and vicariously experienced as some 'detached content'. Therein lies nihilism, therein the living death of humankind. Against this psychic genocide, this death in life which defines our moment, Salzman has pitted his 'portraits' of lost lives, and reminded us, after Buber, that 'relation' between human beings matters above all else.

Threatened by numbness – atrocity does this to one – Salzman needed to calculate his actions, understand their ethical makeup, and the corruption thereof – because, of course, taking a photograph is never an innocent act. More than any other of Salzman's photographic records of genocide, this one – *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim* – has proved, for me, the most devastating. That it is a brilliantly calculated act does not diminish this fact.

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#### REFERENCES

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