Revealing the image, revealing truth

Daniel Hernández-Salazar’s visual memory of the genocide in Guatemala

Révéler l’image, révéler la vérité. La mémoire visuelle de Daniel Hernández-Salazar du génocide au Guatemala

Je onthult het beeld, je onthult de waarheid: Daniel Hernández-Salazars visuele geheugen van de genocide in Guatemala

Daniel Hernández-Salazar

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During Guatemala's 36-year Civil War (1960-1996), the military government engaged in a brutal “counterinsurgency” campaign against all forms of opposition. The rural Mayan population especially was singled out as the government accused them of siding with revolutionary armed groups. In the 1980s, the army and its paramilitary groups applied a “scorched earth” policy, resulting not only in the systematic assassination and relocation of indigenous communities, but also in the destruction of entire villages and sacred places. Guatemala's Truth Commission (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico) reported in 1999 that 83% of the 200,000 victims of the war were Mayan and concluded that the State violence against the Ixil Maya people amounted to “acts of genocide”. A peace accord was signed in 1996, but this has not resulted in the construction of a collective and inclusive memory of the genocide in Guatemala, nor has it succeeded in providing justice for the victims. In May 2013 human rights organizations hailed the “historical” conviction of Efraín Ríos Montt, Chief of State at the height of the military campaign (1982-1983), for genocide and crimes against humanity. A few days later, however, the sentence was revoked by the Constitutional Court on procedural grounds.

With his pictures of the exhumations and protests, photographer and human rights activist Daniel Hernández-Salazar brings the plight of the survivors and the victims’ families into the public eye, endorsing their call for recognition and social justice. His picture depicting a mestizo angel with wings made from the scapulae bones of one of the nameless victims of the genocide has become an iconic image in Guatemala. The artist’s work is currently on display at Kazerne Dossin.

Daniel Hernández-Salazar, can you tell us about your professional background and how you came to be a photographer?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Taking photographs has always been a passion for me. I started taking pictures from a very young age. Nevertheless, I decided to study
architecture, which actually influenced the way I think and perceive things – and the way I make photographs. There I learned about composition, light and colour. When a major earthquake shook Guatemala in 1976, I began working on the reconstruction of the cathedral of Guatemala City. I was hired as a draftsman to outline the reconstruction process but also began to take pictures of the project. That was the beginning of my career as a professional photographer. I continued studying architecture for several years while working as a photographer but eventually decided not to continue my studies and to focus on my photography instead.

At what point in time did you make the transition from being an architectural photographer to a chronicler of Mayan culture and especially of the darker chapters of Guatemalan history, namely the genocide and its effect on Guatemalan society?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: I have always been very sensitive and aware of the power of communication and of the role and influence media have on society. That became more clear when I started working as a photojournalist for newspapers in Guatemala, and later as a correspondent for press agencies. The period when I worked for Associated Press coincided with the last years of the war. Being a journalist at that time helped me to decide which direction I wanted to take with my work. I have always been attuned to social issues, but working with the press helped me to understand how to use photography as an instrument, as a tool to convey a certain message to make people aware of important events taking place. I understood the importance of leaving traces, graphic documents of what happened.

The exhibition in Kazerne Dossin seems to be very different from the one in Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck in Antwerp when it comes to “documenting” the genocide.

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Indeed, the exhibition in Kazerne Dossin focuses more on the photojournalistic documentary work I have done and continue to do. It reveals my interest in preserving what I would call a “visual memory” of the genocide. The exhibition in Antwerp shows another side of my work. I used a different method to create the pieces I presented at Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck to convey emotions and make them more personal. I cut the photos in pieces and afterwards reconstruct them with nails or scotch tape to represent rupture and pain. Another layer is added to the truth-value of the pictures, a more metaphorical and subjective one that refers to universal human themes like life, death or love, and transmits my artistic intention. During my career as a photographer, I have tried to combine both the need of communicating a message to the outside world and the need of expressing myself through my work. That is still true today, but I am more conscious of it now. I believe both approaches work, for me and for the public.

How do you conceive of the role of art – of your art – in society? Should all art “work”?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Well, I believe art has a specific function in society. Some people think art is just for fun or to decorate a house: “the painting or photograph should match the rug or the curtains”. I do not agree

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BIOGRAPHY

1956 / born
1974 / starts studying Architecture
1978 / starts his career in Fine Art Photography
1980s / works for several international news agencies (Reuters, AFP, Associated Press) and starts documenting the Civil War in Guatemala
1993 / receives a replica of the Nobel Peace Prize Medal from Rigoberta Menchú Tum
1998 / his polyptych Esclarecimiento/ Clarification appears on the cover of Guatemala: Never Again, the final report of Bishop Juan José Gerardi’s “Recovery of Historical Memory” project (REMHI)
1998 / is awarded the Jonathan Mann Humanitas Award for his artistic work on human rights issues
2004 / publishes his first anthology, Guatemala, Memoria de un Ángel (Kage Shobo)
2005 / is decorated and made Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture and Communications of France
2007 / publishes Para que todos lo sepan/ So That All Shall Know (University of Texas Press)
2014 / presents two exhibitions in Belgium.
with that. Art for me is expression, freedom of expression, and commitment. Not necessarily commitment to social issues – there are indeed many forms of commitment – but commitment is a basic requirement for making art. If there is no commitment, there is no art.

In addition to being committed to something external, art also has to be committed to itself. By this I mean that the artist has to be conscious of the importance of creating his or her piece with great care and technical skill. For example, I use aesthetic criteria like the Golden Rule of proportions, the choice of the adequate light and the “Zone System” in black and white to produce a photograph. Even though I now work with digital cameras I still love the traditional dark room. I like to combine digital and analogue photography to make and develop my pictures.

The poster of the exhibition shows your most famous picture, that of the angel calling out and drawing our attention. Can you tell us more about the genesis and role of this angelic figure that has become a symbol for the human rights struggle in Guatemala?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: First of all I want to say that in its origins, the angel is not a saint or a sacred being, but a messenger – that is the meaning of the Greek word angelos. I took the image of the angel from Christian tradition and started to transform it. Instead of a blond, white skinned, ethereal, nonsexual being, I gave him a more indigenous-mestizo look and photographed him naked in a very human, material way. The angel in my picture is a man of flesh and bone like the rest of us and is even a bit sensual. Conceptually I think the idea of the angel works very well because in Guatemala people are very religious and therefore familiar with religious iconography. Even if some of them are uneducated or illiterate, they grasp the concept of an angel.
They recognize that it is some kind of superior spiritual being that is trying to draw their attention. This is a key element that makes this image very powerful.

In Guatemala, this image of the angel is very much associated with Bishop Gerardi and his work for the Recovery of Historical Memory, and with the war. During the genocide trial of Ríos Montt in 2013, I did an installation or intervention in Guatemala City. A dozen public transport buses in the city carried big reproductions of the angel around. There was a difference with previous installations: this time above the picture of the angel there was a text: “Si hubo genocidio” (Yes, there was a genocide). The buses travelled in the streets, carrying the image throughout the city.

The exhibition in Kazerne Dossin displays photos of these “interventions”. What is the effect of the Angel removed from its safe museum environment and planted in public space?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Well, I feel that art galleries are in a sense very exclusive places. The number of people going to galleries is very limited and there are not a lot of people who have the means to buy a picture or a painting. Museums are a bit more inclusive, especially in a country like Belgium, but this is not the case in Guatemala. In my city, most people do not visit galleries or museums, and in the countryside the situation is even worse.

When Bishop Gerardi was killed [on 26 April 1998, two days after the publication of the memory recovery report (REHMI)], I became aware of how the public space could be used to transmit a message. There was a big demonstration after the killing. People were carrying posters with the four angels I made for the cover of each one of the four books of the report. When I saw those images on the streets, I decided to use the street as a means of communication. At that moment I became aware that public space is where the collective unconscious dwells. That unconscious floats in the streets; it is the place where you can really address a large audience.

These ideas had been brewing in my mind since I saw the work of two other artists. One is the Cuban artist Félix González-Torres, whose work I discovered at an exhibition in the Rufino Tamayo Museum in Mexico City. I really appreciated his suggestive and metaphorical images, his representations of absence. More interesting to me was the fact that his images were not only displayed in the museum but installed in several public places in Mexico City, without any comment. In this way González-Torres created a very interesting dialogue between public and private space. Another artist who has worked a lot with public space is of course Christo. In his installations he places giant curtains in natural landscapes, or he wraps up entire buildings to communicate his ideas.

I think art can be very powerful when you can reach the masses. With this in mind, for the first commemoration of the assassination of Bishop Gerardi, I wanted to do something that would mark the occasion. I combined all these thoughts and influences and came up with the idea of placing the angel on big posters in symbolic places around the city.

The locations were chosen very carefully?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Yes, I chose these locations on three different criteria. First, there had to be a direct connection between the locations and Bishop Gerardi’s assassination, the perpetrators of this crime, and with the civil war in general. The second criterion was that the place should have large audiences passing in front of the angel, for instance a highway crossing, or a red light where cars would stop, or a place next to an important monument or landmark that had a special meaning for people in Guatemala. The third criterion was more personal and subjective: the place had to appeal to me. I think the locations that worked better were the ones which combined all three criteria. I selected thirty-five places and together with a team of friends from the Human Rights movement we set the installation up on the eve of the first anniversary of the killing of the Bishop. Then I kept taking pictures of the posters for some time in their environment, to see what happened to them and to study their interaction with the public space.

Afterwards I decided to install the Angel photo in public spaces abroad in order to put what happened in my country on the world map, with the intention of making people in other countries aware of it. In Europe there is very little knowledge of Guatemala’s war and genocide or culture. People are much more aware of the mass violence and forced disappearances in Chile and Argentina. I am not really sure why. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the United States was deeply involved in our history and supported the coup against the Jacobo Árbenz democratic regime, installing Carlos Castillo Armas as President in 1954. From that moment on, the USA continued to prop up the
Guatemala’s army for decades, training officers as well as providing technical assistance. Another reason, I think, is that the majority of the victims in Guatemala were “just” indigenous people. This of course brings us to the question of racism.

Your Angel has now arrived in Belgium. We’re standing on the fourth floor of Kazerne Dossin, where you present a selection of your documentary work. How did you conceptualize the exhibition’s scenography?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: From the very start, I sought to integrate my exhibition into the style and atmosphere of the rest of the museum. I did not want to come and invade the space but instead engage in a dialogue. I was very aware of how I wanted the exhibition to look – I think this comes from my architectural background. I used existing elements, trying to harmonize the central volume of this exhibition with the building, so that it looks as if it had always been here. I think I succeeded and I am very happy with the result.

In terms of positioning the pictures, I tried to organize them into three concentric rings of information. On the outermost ring I presented the perpetrators, those who killed, massacred and persecuted the people. It feels like they surround you, like they are set up in an ambush. The next ring represents civilian society and its struggle. I further divided this ring into four series of photographs to represent four narratives: the struggle for Human Rights, the desperate search for relatives, the process of mourning, and the search for justice. To represent this last theme I used pictures of the Ríos Montt genocide trial. Finally the central ring is a place of pain and suffering. So the three rings represent different moments of the same subject, of the same society.

Why was the inner space designed as a “black box”?
Daniel Hernández-Salazar: I imagined it as a covered space, a kind of box or shrine, where I would display the most tragic photos. To avoid sensationalism, I presented them in an intimate space where people would meditate on the magnitude of the genocide. I wanted this inner space to have a roof in order to give it a reserved aspect, like a grave or a sanctuary. When I was imagining the exhibition, I always referred to this room as “the Shrine”. When they enter the inner space, most people automatically start to move silently and start speaking in hushed tones. On the outside they
When entering the exhibition room, we see an enormous photo of a luscious Guatemalan landscape (on the bottom left). It is a beautiful scenery, but a very complex and layered picture as well.

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: I decided to hang that image there because I wanted people to know what Guatemala looks like. Guatemala is really a beautiful place, the countryside is marvellous. The lake in this picture, Lake Atitlán, is on an old volcanic caldera. We say it is the most beautiful in the world and perhaps this is a bit presumptuous (smiles). The longest distance across the lake is 19 kilometres, which gives you an idea of its size. It is a magnificent place. That picture and others is a way for me to show the natural and cultural richness of Guatemala, instead of merely focusing on the political side – the violence, the military and the demonstrations. In other pictures, you can see the country’s identity: people wearing traditional clothes and handcrafted bags with an embroidered quetzal, the national bird.

However, the Atitlán picture contains many different layers because this beautiful place has been the setting of enormous tragedies. Tragedies that marked the landscape, tragedies that are literally buried underneath. On the photo next to the lake you can see the place where I went to photograph several exhumations. When tourists look at such idyllic landscapes, they do not realize many people were killed and buried there in mass graves.

All the pictures in this exhibition have been selected using very strict criteria to address specific issues. For example in this picture (next page, upper left) you can see the parish church of Chichicastenango, a very famous indigenous village. At first glance it looks like a photo of a simple tourist attraction. You see the church where traditional ceremonies are held, people in traditional clothing and a Mayan priest. But in fact

Lake Atitlán.
Getuigen tussen geschiedenis en herinnering – nr. 119 / december 2014

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wat je ziet is een begrafenis van slachtoffers van de oorlog. Mensen dragen kisten die de resten van honderden mensen bevatten die werden uitgemaakt. De afbeelding van deze kerk is door de Guatemalteekse toeristische commissie gebruikt voor decennia om de land te promoten – om “te verkopen” zonder enig vooroordeel of betrokkenheid met de mensen die we zien in de afbeelding. Ik kies deze foto omdat alles overeenkomt: de Mayakeramiek, de begrafenis van de mensen die werden uitgemaakt in de oorlog, Guatemalische cultuur, historische architectonische achtergrond en de Opportunistische “perfecte afbeelding” voor toeristische consumenten.

Veel foto’s in deze tentoonstelling tonen uitgravingen. Doe deze uitgravingen symboolmatig je documentaire werk, als een soort mise en abyme? Is het je doel om te onthullen wat is verborgen?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: In feite, twee jaar geleden heb ik een tentoonstelling gehouden genaamd “Revelance: De kracht van de herinnering in het Land van Oblivion”. Ik gebruikte de woorden “ontsluiten” in het Spaanse, “revelar”, dat twee betekenissen heeft: iets onthullen dat mensen kunnen zien wat voorheen verborgen was, en ook “ontwikkelen”. In het Spaanse zeggen we “ontsluiten” een foto wanneer je de foto ontwikkelt. Zo ben ik de titel van de tentoonstelling grijpend voor beide ideeën: de onthulling van de waarheid en de onthulling van de afbeelding.

Dit is wat ik do: ik “ontsluit” dingen. Mijn doel is om een visuele verarming te maken van de tijd in welke ik leefde en van de gebeurtenissen die ik waarnam. Van dingen die ik geloof niet goed te zijn. Ik hoop dat mijn foto’s dienstdoen als een referentie voor de volgende generationen en dat ze jongeren aanzetten om de manier waarop de samenleving wordt georganiseerd opnieuw te bekeuren en te veranderen.

Waarom is het belangrijk voor je om je werk te tonen hier?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Ten eerste, Kazerne Dossin is een grote museum en een lot mensen komen hier. Hier kan ik de massa’s bereiken. Maar wat nog belangrijker is dat het niet is een museum is dat het enkel een museum is dat heeft de zeer specifieke doel van het onthulLEN van de Joodse genocide wat, van alle genoegens die over de hele wereld geschiedenis, de meest “bekend”. Maar dit museum breidt de onderwerp uit naar andere genoegens en mensenrechtenproblemen, bijvoorbeeld in Rwanda of Guatemala. Toon mijn foto’s in dit museum geeft ze authenticiteit, een validatie en erkenning van het Belgische gezelschap. Dit zal de Guatemalische tragodie in België en Europa bekend maken, en tegelijkertijd zal het een grote impact hebben in mijn land.

Je weet, zelfs al hebben we van alle die geweld, we soms niet realiseren hoe slecht het echt was – en is. Wanneer je het geweld al dagelijks ervaring had, dan eindig je er in de euforie te denken dat geweld normaal is. Iedere dag in Guatemala worden mensen gedood, vrouwen gedwongen tot proventies en buschauffeurs doorgraven. We hebben het geweld alweer aan de hand sinds de Spaanse plundering. Nu onze oorlog, onze massagraf representeerd door mijn foto’s zijn hier in dit museum verbonden met de Holocaust en Auschwitz – evenementen die veel mensen in Guatemala als iets gruwelijks erkennen omdat ze films hebben gezien over dit. Misschien na deze tentoonstelling zal de moord op inheemse mensen, studenten, intellectuelen tijdens de Burgeroorlog in Guatemala, hun tragodie en hun lijden, er worden erkend door Guatemalen als iets even gruwelijks. Dit is essentieel voor me.

Wat verwijst naar de trivialisering van geweld in Guatemala, nog steeds vandaag. Wat zijn de hoop voor jouw land?

Daniel Hernández-Salazar: Ik wil niet pessimistisch zijn, maar ik denk niet dat tijdens mijn leven ik zal zien een echte verandering in Guatemala. Dit betekent niet dat ik zal stoppen met het strijden, maar ik denk dat we miste oorlogsmomenten. De presidentschappen van Juan José Arévalo Bermejo en Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán van 1945 tot 1954 waren echte gelegenheid voor Guatemala om een volwaardig democratie te worden. Maar in 1954 werd de President werd ontslagen door a
coup, which was followed by a period of dictatorship, military rule and corruption that never really ended. In 2013, with the trial of Ríos Montt, we had another opportunity to redirect our future. If that trial had been successful, our country would have engaged in a new path, and other people would have been brought to justice as well. But many people feel that oligarchs and ex-military that were involved in the genocide put pressure on the constitutional court to reverse the verdict, thus crushing all hope for change.

In Guatemala we have a certain system in place, on which the wealthy classes depend heavily. They systematically block any attempt to transform society. I think this unwillingness to embrace change comes from their insecurity and personal spiritual weakness. Those people want to preserve the old model of owning large estates and having modern day slaves – poor people whose produce they buy at very low prices. They wish to keep the middle class population ignorant and obedient, so they would never dare to challenge their position. Guatemala keeps going backwards. From the outside, the country looks like a sick person who does not want to be cured. People in Guatemala are losing hope. They are walking dead, they stopped dreaming. This is why I am so pessimistic about the future. I hope change will come, but in my heart I do not really believe it will come anytime soon.

Anneleen Spiessens & Janiv Stamberger

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