

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Millie Chen, *Tour*

Curated by Laura Brill, Albright-Knox Art
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Reviewed by Gary Nickard

When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out stop. When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries too fall like rain in the summer.

Bertolt Brecht (1976: 247)

**Gary Nickard is an artist
and educator living in
Buffalo, New York.
gln@buffalo.edu**



Millie Chen's *Tour* (2014) is an audio/video installation that engages the physical location of four historical acts of genocide: Murambi, Rwanda; Choeung Ek, Cambodia; Treblinka, Poland; and Wounded Knee, USA. Chen relates in her artist's statement that her intention was to grapple with "how such horrific histories can possibly be represented, and how to maintain the critical specificity of the local within a narrative about the global." In order to accomplish this Chen has exercised amazing restraint restricting her visual engagement with the locality of each atrocity almost to the level of abstraction – a slow-motion walk over each of the now grass-covered



Figure 1

Millie Chen, *Tour* (2014), still from video of Murambi, Rwanda. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

killing fields to the sound of a mournful lament in the language of those slaughtered at that location. Chen engages these locations in terms of what Jill Bennett (2005) describes as “empathic vision,” i.e. speaking through the expressive rather than the literal, the generative rather than the representational – a highly effective artistic approach to crimes designed to remain both invisible and unrepresentable.

To take just one of these genocides, for example, is to consider how the sheer viciousness is impossible to comprehend, as is its vast scale. In the 100 days of terror orchestrated by the Rwandan Hutu Power faction in 1994, militias known as *Interahamwe* (“those who attack together”), ruthlessly murdered close to one million of their fellow Rwandans (Tutsis and moderate Hutu alike). Their victims were not just killed, but were systematically raped, tortured, and mutilated, leaving the tiny verdant African nation strewn with the rotting bodies of men, women, and children lying where they had been felled by the machete blows of their neighbors. The more those bodies piled up, paradoxically, the more invisible the crime seemed to become.

Much discussion of the Nazi Holocaust, perhaps influenced in part by Hannah Arendt, invokes the phrase “radical evil.” According to Immanuel Kant (1960), what he called “radical evil” is *a priori* – a deep inherent flaw of the human species, a flaw present even in the best of men and women. Despite his judgment that it is impossible to extirpate “radical evil,” Kant does suggest that it can be transformed into good. But Kant’s definition of evil is essentially theological in its basis and is articulated in what seems an incomprehensible technical language when he speaks of the will. The implications of these

abstractions become blinding before Kant's noumenal dragon's lair – for when one speaks of evil, of what is one speaking, if not about will? In a 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt wrote that she was distancing herself from her earlier assertions about Kant's idea of "radical evil" and now was seeing things in light of what she famously referred to as "the banality of evil:"

It is indeed my opinion now, that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can grow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought defying," as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is "banality." Only the good has depth and can be radical. (Arendt 1964: 250–1)

Genocide is, by its very nature, designed to be unrepresentable, a crime that resists visibility and aspires to no historical record. It has embedded in its structure the attempt at denial, for how could its perpetrators otherwise face history? Genocide is a crime that exceeds the ability of representation and indeed even cognition – the very conditions Kant specifies for the sublime – thus, in contemplating it one is forced to enter a realm where the question arises of what it means to be human and how can it be that so many are willing to step over that line. There is a contemporary catchphrase to describe this failure of apprehension; people say that crimes of genocide "defy comprehension." A common assumption is that this equates with being so awful, vast, and hideous that they cannot be intellectually grasped – a variety of Kantian sublime. But this is decidedly not what Arendt meant. She actually meant the opposite – these crimes arose from an evil that was totally ordinary and totally banal.

The result is what Kant would call an *aporia*. How can evil be both "radical" (i.e. "sublime") and "banal." And what is the responsibility of the artist – when faced with the inherent unrepresentability of such an extreme event? In *Tour*, Chen seems to argue that this distinction arises from a question of scale. Viewed as a whole these terrible events do indeed qualify for the Kantian category of "radical evil" and the "sublime." Yet, on the level of the motivations of the individual perpetrators, Arendt's formulation of "the banality of evil" is all too accurate a description. Chen (2014) states that "As the viewer traverses the land, what initially appear as harmless, even banal, details of local flora take on a much more haunting and menacing presence as the sorrowfully comforting vocalization unfolds and the location is revealed." The ethereal chanted lullabies hover over the gently undulating leaves of grass as a powerful *j'accuse* invoking a Proustian *mémoire involontaire* ("involuntary memory") of each of the four genocides.

Chen's artistic response to genocide is consistent with Arendt's definition of responsibility not in legal or moral terms, but rather in terms of political presence. Presence is manifest the work itself – in its making, the artist had to physically journey to each “scene of the crime.” Presence is also manifest the viewer's experience of it – *Tour* implicates the viewer and “activates the landscape” through its sound element – the haunting “hummed and chanted melodies” that emanate from the cultural traditions of the massacred (Chen 2014). In “Reflections: Truth and Politics,” Arendt stated that “I form an opinion [...] by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is I represent them” (Arendt 1967: 49). As a result, Arendt used the concept of presence to describe making “absent others” present in one's own mind. Millie Chen's *Tour* engages the crimes of The Rwandan Genocide, the Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields, and the Genocide of First Nations by standing in direct opposition to the “banality of evil” by representing the voices of those absent others.

References

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