In 2020, the world is experiencing the reality of mass death in a way we have never before. For many people, the Holocaust and other mass killings are either part of a heavy, dark past or are events that took place in distant countries. They are out of sight, out of mind, from our daily lives. But the coronavirus (Covid-19) has changed this. The pandemic has struck nearly every country around the globe, from advanced economies to vulnerable populations. The current omnipresent fear can serve as a reminder of forgotten civilian deaths and sufferings that we never cared for or knew about.

In the twentieth century, even within recent memory, mass killings and genocides have occurred in many Asian countries, especially as colonial empires began to collapse after World War II and as Cold War tensions escalated. These include Taiwan’s 2.28 massacre (1947); South Korea’s Jeju massacre (1948); China’s Great Leap Forward and the resulting famine (1958–1962); the Indonesian mass killings (1965–1966); the Bangladesh genocide (1971); and Cambodia’s killing fields (1975–1979). Cultural representations that convey victims’ experiences of these traumatic events are quite rare, especially in the West. In contrast to the massive visual representations and remembrances of the Holocaust, many of the aforementioned tragedies are disappearing into the fog of time, leaving little to no mark in history or wider global public memory.

Can art be a form of historical truth?

Stony Brook University’s Charles B. Wang Center presents Forgotten Faces: Visual Representation of Trauma and Mass Killing in Asia, an exhibition that will run from 25 August through 12 December 2020. It features artists Kim Hak (Cambodia), Kumi Yamashita (Japan), Federico Borrelli (Italy), Lim Ok-Sang (South Korea), Noh Suntag (South Korea), Choi Byungsoo (South Korea), Jung Min-gi (South Korea), Lee Yunyop (South Korea), Yi Seung-jun (South Korea) and Gary Byung-seok Kam (South Korea), Tenzing Rigdol (Tibet), Tung Min-Chin (Taiwan), and Joe Sacco (United States). Forgotten Faces traces the cultural phenomenon of mass killings and political trauma in Asia.

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge army began its brutal rule over Cambodia, which would last for almost four years. During this brief period, it would kill a quarter of Cambodia’s population. Although forty-five years have passed, little can escape the all-seeing lens of the photographer, as Cambodian photographer Kim Hak demonstrates with his series Alive. Kim looks for survivors of the genocide scattered around the world and illuminates the pain of those victimized by state violence. His evocative photographs capture victims’ personal belongings, items they risked their very lives to protect against Khmer Rouge’s destructive vision for a utopian Cambodia under communism. These trivial items hold immense historical and emotional weight – death, fear, anxiety, confusion, and a struggle for life and survival: English-language books and family photos that risk exposing an individual’s identity, small Buddha statues that could be hidden in one’s palm, a kettle used to cook a stolen chicken, among others. Each of these pieces memorialize the two million souls murdered in Pol Pot’s march toward ideological purity. (Fig. 1)
War seems almost inevitable in our increasingly fragmented, dehumanized world. Yet Korea is one of the rare places where the traces of humanity are hollowing out their social safety nets and social services, increasing the fragility of all our lives as our communities wither. This individualized instability makes it much harder to collectively tackle these problems and meet the basic needs of citizens, invest in our societies, and provide for current and future generations. This increases the chances of mass killings, whether through capitalistic negligence or through the slow rotting of rights and necessary services. Taiwanese artist Tung Min-Chin’s sculptures defy the impossibility of representation of mass massacres and posttraumatic expression. Tung, in his art, creates a complementary and contradictory sense of witnessing. On the one hand, his work bears witness to the physical reality of a historical event; on the other, it shows the inner psychological reality of the event’s aftermath. In his The Birth of a New Hero II (2018), his sculpture of a child tattering on the edge of an enlarged razor blade bitterly criticizes the South Korean government for its focus on commerce and trade at the expense of its underfunded welfare system. The cheerful posture and gestures of the girl belie the piece’s darker metaphors. Jung Min-gi portrays deep scars, terrible sorrows, betrayal, anger, and despair by casting powerful images on canvas with extraordinary technical virtuosity using ink, paint, and free-motion quilting. His four-meter-long A Country Where Mothers Mourn (2020) depicts the faces of the forgotten victims. The Portrait

Italian photographer Federico Borella sheds light on this different kind of tragedy, one of environmental and sociocultural disaster in Tamil Nadu, India. A five-degree increase in temperature does not sound like much, but it can have extraordinary effects on climate and, accordingly, agriculture. Farmers in this region face ever worsening conditions and droughts that are devastating their livelihoods and their communities. A combination of low farm yields, falling agricultural prices, limited labor, lack of government support, and difficulties repaying large debts have led to an astonishingly high rate of suicide, a rate that continues to rise. Borella eschews violent or graphic content, instead vividly capturing the despair of widows whose farmer husbands have taken their own lives. This is a slow catastrophe, a mass killing brought on by a globalized society that values profit above all else. Borella reveals the awful negligence caused by rapid industrialization and environmental degradation in his photography. (Fig. 3)