ABSTRACT: In this article, I examine encounters with an artist and his art: Cambodian exile filmmaker Rithy Panh. In his cinematographic and artwork, Rithy Panh comes to terms with his childhood, the death of his family, and the suffering of his people during the Khmer Rouge regime and the genocide in Cambodia. Conflict and displacement are themes usually approached by researchers using language-based methods, which do not give us fully adequate insights into the “felt and experienced” temporal/spatial aspects of conflict and displacement. I frame my discussion through the reflective interaction between art, an artist with violent conflict and displacement background and the audience—a researcher. First, I examine how taking the *sentipensar* approach to research through art encounters and researcher as a thinking-feeling person contributes to a different understanding of personal trajectories, experiences of, and emotions connected to conflict, war, and displacement. My second aim is to analyze how artistic practice of Rithy Panh contributes to coming to terms with and to creating alternatives to the official public discourses about the past and the present, at individual and societal levels.

KEYWORDS: art, Cambodia, conflict, film, genocide, justice, memory, *sentipensar* knowledge

“To tell a story is to say: this is the important story. It is to reduce the spread and simultaneity of everything to something linear, a path. To be a moral human being is to pay, be obliged to pay, certain kinds of attention.”

— Susan Sontag (2007)

“For Me Cinema Means Freedom”: Art, Alternative Stories, and Alternative Knowledge about Genocide and Displacement

When I arrived in France, after four years under the Khmer Rouge regime, I wanted to live very simply and forget everything, including my mother tongue. The past no longer existed. Nothing at all. I behaved as I had just been born. I wanted to be a carpenter; I learnt how to draw and how to paint. I wanted to forget, but every night, nightmarish images returned. I tried to write, but nothing succeeded in curing me. I moped around. It is then that I began to make small films in Super 8, to calm myself. Somebody told me about IDHEC [l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques, a prestigious French film school], I took the entrance
Since about 2012, I have been following Rithy Panh, a renown contemporary Cambodian exile artist filmmaker living in France, and his creative practice. He survived labor camps and genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and witnessed his family members die from starvation, disease, and torture under the Khmer Rouge regime. As an 11-year-old, he endured overwork and “reeducation” under the Pol Pot doctrines and, four years later, escaped alone to refugee camps on the Thai border. In 1979, aged 16, he came as a refugee to France. For Rithy Pahn, filmmaking became a way to deal with the past and the present.

The subjects of genocide, displacement, exile, and conflict are recurrent in his multimedia work. While some of Rithy Panh’s films can be considered fiction, most of them fall into what Deirdre Boyle (1997) calls “the hybrid film” category—neither fiction nor fact but something in between. He is best known for his reenactment documentaries of the Khmer Rouge terror, such as S21, la machine de mort khmère rouge (S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine) (2003), and Site 2 (1989) about refugees housed in what was the largest Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. The autobiographical filmic tryptic starts with The Missing Picture (L’Image manquante) (2013) and confronts the history of the genocide. As the film’s director, he goes in the search of invisible evidence of first-persona narratives about the Khmer Rouge that have been erased by the regime. The Khmer Rouge destroyed most of the four hundred films made in the Golden Age of Cambodian cinema (1960s to the early 1970s) and created their own filmic propaganda about the revolution and Cambodian history. The Missing Picture documents the search of those missing images. It received the recognition of certain regard at the Cannes Festival in 2014. Other autobiographical documentaries focus on Rithy Panh’s personal history; Exil (Exile) (2016) discusses displacement, time, memory, revolution, and resistance, and Graves without a Name (2018) deals with violence, trauma, mourning, and reconciliation as it narrates the director’s search for the remains of his family who died during the genocide. Rithy Panh was the only one from his immediate family who managed to escape.

In this article, I reflect on my engagements in conversations and encounters with Rithy Panh. His work does not only document and present; the process of filmmaking has been an important step in his coming to terms with his childhood, the death of those close to him, and his exile as well as the suffering of his people under the Khmer Rouge regime and the genocide. His filmmaking process does both the work of history and of mourning. It has allowed him to progress beyond grief, in a process that combines individual and collective memory. The overall quest of his work is to reconstitute humanity through (re)creating narratives and experiences that have been erased in the genocide. It is both a personal quest, as he says, and more of a collective aim that I see as emerging through his artistic practice.

In what unfolds, I bring together different ways of knowing—as a feeling sensing researcher—through the method of sentipensar (Fals Borda 1988) in the encounters with art and an exile artist. In this way, I attempt to reveal different understandings of the temporal and spatial aspects of conflict, displacement, and reconciliation. What types of embodied, sensual experiences that are often difficult to communicate through words can be excavated in the encounters between artists, their art, and the audience (researchers), thus creating a new understanding of coming to terms with violence and conflict? In this way, a creative space for alternative narratives about displacement is opened up; as I argue, alternative ways of “telling stories” about and by exiles.

My first aim is to uncover what forms of knowledge arise from the anthropological engagement with displaced artists and their art, focusing on Rithy Panh’s work. I interrogate different ways of researching violent conflict and displacement through the reflective interaction between
art, an artist, and the audience—a researcher. In this way, I examine how art contributes to a different understanding of personal trajectories, experiences of, and emotions connected to conflict, war, and displacement, and hence speak to alternative, decolonial constructions of knowledge (see Hoagland 2020; Lugones 2010; Smith 1999; Minh-ha 1989).

My second aim is to examine how artistic practice is a way to come to terms with and to create alternatives to the official public discourses about the past and the present in violent conflicts. With the focus on the work of Rithy Panh, I consider his quest of creating particular cinematographic archive of genocide and displacement in Cambodia that was erased from the history of the country. How does his creative practice provide spaces for individual and communal contestation of public practices and narratives of mourning and reconciliation after the conflict?

I argue that as testimony, commentary, and embodied knowledge about violence, displacement, and exile art provides for the researchers and artists themselves both an individual and a collective space for counternarratives and reflexive coming to terms with remains of conflict. While bearing witness is important for coming to terms with the past, with the evidence erased it is often impossible to do. This is why the work of artists with experiences of violent conflicts is so important: they can “create and imagine” and through this process open up a possibility of bearing witness when actual records has been destroyed.

Art as a Way of Knowing Otherwise

The importance of art as a challenger to academic knowledge is widely acknowledged (Bell and Desai. 2011; Danchev and Lisle 2009; Harrington 2004; Möller 2016; O’Neill 2013; Rancière 2000), including specific role of film and visual in anthropology (e.g., Banks and Morphy 1997; Banks 2000; Pink 2011). Alex Danchev and Debbie Lisle emphasize the importance of art in society: “Art matters, ethically and politically; affectively and intellectually. It is another way of apprehending the world. It has consequences. Not only does it make us feel, or feel differently, it also makes us think, and think again. It is in a certain sense irrefutable.” They call for critical understanding and observation of art, “there must be a politics in our observation” (2009: 775).

Further, Austin Harrington says, “The knowledge art can convey about society is no substitute for the methodical knowledge of social science; but neither is it inferior or subordinate to the latter” (2004: 4). Rex Nettelford (keynote presentation to the “The Arts and their Custodians Symposium” Northampton University, June 2007) eloquently pointed out, “Arts have a frontier role in building knowledge. We have to come to terms with the dilemma of ‘difference’ without feeling threatened by the Other . . . Engaging the creative process through the Arts brings meaning to humanity” (quoted in O’Neill 2013: 45). Importantly, in my way of co-constructing knowledge through encounters with artists with lived experiences of violent conflict, war, and displacement and their art, I related to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2013), who associates art with a process of struggle over what can be sensed through constantly determining the relationship between seeing, hearing, doing, making and thinking. What Rancière points to is the role of art in engaging the senses to invoke visibility, audibility, sayability, thinkability, do-ability of certain ideas over and in contrast to others. The result is that art is posited as political, rather than something that can merely comment on politics.

Sentipensar and Knowing through Art

While the potential of art as means of alternative knowledge production is recognized by social scientists, there are few studies that systematically show what this knowledge looks like and how
to bring it about (see de la Fuente 2007; O’Neill 2013; Schneider and Wright 2010). As such, through this article I attempt to fill this knowledge gap.¹

In expanding these debates, I am relating to the decolonial theory critiques Western representation of the “other.” By engaging with Rithy Panh’s own representations of his experiences on his own terms, I attempt to move beyond the politics of Western knowledge dominance and rendering the “other” as an object of knowledge (Mignolo 2007; Said 1978). As Anibal Quijano (2000) argues, the coloniality of knowledge keeps us from accepting the idea of knowing subjects outside the confines of modern epistemic rationality. For Enrique Dussel (1995) and Walter Mignolo (2007), “within Western intellectual practice, the coloniality of knowledge is a process of translating and rewriting other cultures, other knowledges, other ways of being, presuming commensurability through Western rationality” (see Hoagland 2020: 49). Instead, by integrating the theoretical lens of placing Rithy Panh’s own ways of knowing and expression through his creative practice, it enables me to understand knowledge as situated and decolonial. That is knowledge that is embedded within a social, cultural, historical, and political time and place that reflects contextual features and lived experiences (Haraway 1988). By working into the analysis the dialogical interactions with Rithy Panh and his art, I speak to the merits of the decolonial feminist theory (e.g., Hoagland 2020; Lugones 2010; Smith 1999) that values all knowledge and lived experiences as equal, and in so doing provides a new framework within the geopolitics of knowledge production, one that demands respect for the plurality of differences.

**Artistic Practice and Its Potentials**

I have chosen this particular artist because, in my view, Rithy Panh engages in “critical art” on his own terms. Rancière (2010: 178) refers to “critical art” as “an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world and therefore create a commitment to its transformation.” Some creative practice creates ruptures when it introduces new sensations, ideas, and forms of life to people’s perceptions and experiences, broadening the nature of societal discourse. For the artists and art to be engaged in social transformation and counternarratives, the art needs to penetrate the veneer of certainty in a dominant social order, to open up a different way of seeing. According to Rancière, this is a relational process where the artist, the art, and the audience work out meanings through cocreative practice.

As existing research (Boyle 2009, 2010, 2014; Roos 2010; Zinn 2004) on art and artists in times of war and displacement illustrates, art can both construct and reconstruct dominant narratives, as well as question or unsettle them. While some have emphasized the alternative discourses that artists create in times of war, conflict, and political upheaval are often cultural counternarratives (see Zinn 2004), they cannot be always equated with challenging the existing power structures and providing a counterwar or conflict narrative (see Grabska and Horst, this issue; Roos 2010). Social justice can be understood in a variety of ways, and how it is presented or represented depends on artists’ own political and ideological standpoints. The “dark times” (Arendt 1968) can often generate art that maintains official propaganda. Artists can be thus legitimizing power structures and maintaining the official take on the history of conflict, past and present. In this article, I am interested in the practice of an artist who creates counternarratives and through his art resists the official take on war and conflict. The critical art of Rithy Panh and his stand on art provide an example of an artist who “transcends [their] moment” to critique power and inspire others to challenge authority (see Zinn 2004). For him, as he argues, cinema provided a freedom that he chose, to heal, exist add reconcile, both at an individual and at a collective level.
Research through Encounters with an Artist and His Art

Meeting the Artist and My Own Positionality as a Researcher

Rithy Panh’s films intrigued me for two reasons: they are powerful, poetic, and beautifully shot, always balancing on the verge of personal documentary and fictional story. As an amateur photographer and filmmaker (see Grabska 2022), I was particularly drawn by his aesthetic visual approach. His entire catalog of work is characterized by an imperious need to look horror straight in the eye, “to look for the causes, to create imperfect images so as to change the world” (see Lemercier 2020). My interest is also linked to my personal and academic inquiry into how war and conflict affect social change and transform power, and especially gender, relations.

My engagement with Rithy Panh’s work came partly from my first trip to Cambodia in 1997—the year of the first democratic elections in Cambodia and my encounter with memories of the Khmer Rouge genocide and authoritarian regime. I remember visiting the museum of Tuol Sleng, the “Genocide Museum,” a former prison in Phnom Penh where some 17,000 prisoners were killed, and being very much affected by wandering through the cells in which the Khmer Rouge tortured and killed opposition members. There was also a room filled with paintings made by one of the former prisoners. Rithy Panh also visited this museum in 1990, when after years of exile in Paris and trying to forget his link to Cambodia, he decided to come back and find traces of his perished relatives. This site of remembering genocide, as my own family history during the turbulent history of Poland, visit to Auschwitz in 1995, and living with the memories of war, the Holocaust, and the communist regime, affected me deeply. While the experience of genocide might have been a connector, I was always careful to acknowledge my positionality as a white European woman with a particular geopolitical personal history in relating to the experiences of Rithy Panh and the Cambodian people. Sensitivities to not being able to understand experiences of others, as well as carrying out research in an ethical way, informed my methodological approach to research.

The research for this article stems from my long-standing feminist anthropological inquiry into the lives of refugees, forcibly displaced, those living in and affected by war and conflict. My longitudinal ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork is also informed by my interests in arts and creative practice and in arts-based research methods that might allow us to access other ways of knowing (see Grabska 2022). Thus, the research is based on more than two decades of “hanging out” and collaborating with refugee artists, visual, writers, filmmakers, and musicians in different places, including Cairo, Beirut, Phnom Penh, Khartoum, Nairobi, Warsaw, Accra, Lyon, and Geneva. Recently, I carried out research on the role of artists, mainly women musicians, in the uprising in Sudan (see Aziz and Grabska 2019; Grabska and Aziz 2019). I also practiced collaborative arts-based research and filmmaking with refugees and exile artists, engaging with visual story telling in my own research (see Franck and Grabska 2020; Grabska 2022).

Fieldwork through Encounters and Conversations

The fieldwork for this article embodies both the “traditional” ethnographic and qualitative research, including attending meetings, interviews, and conversations with Rithy Panh in Geneva about his work and the meanings of his work. At the same time, I am also an audience of his creative practice. Here, I see the embodied experience of knowledge creation, through the interaction with the artist and his art. By attending screenings of Rithy Panh’s films (2013–2019) and his multimedia installation of Exil (Panh 2017), as well as reading The Elimination (Panh and Bataille 2014) and interviews with the filmmaker, I see research as a process where “think-
ing, feeling persons” (sentipensantes) and their views “on the research experience could jointly be taken into account” (Fals Borda 1999: 13). By developing this inquiry, I would like to probe to what extent and how art in its different forms informs our understanding of lived experiences as social scientists. While watching Rithy Panh’s documentaries, I had always a deeply bodily experience of them, with their flicking images, and poetic narration affecting how I was imagining the experience of hunger, revolution, and genocide. The images of an empty bowl with rats being cooked by the main narrator, Sang Nan, and the alter ego of Rithy Panh in Exil gave me a deep sense of “feeling” hunger and despair. In Graves without a Name, the close-up of Rithy Panh hand-sieving through the earth and finding pieces of bones and buttons of clothing from the remains of bodies while searching for his perished relatives gave me a deep sense of loss, provoked bodily reactions of suffering and mourning, something that words would not have done. By emerging myself in the visual story, I was present during the moment of Rithy Panh’s confrontation with the past and thus was allowed to witness the search for coming to terms with trauma and reconciliation.

**The Praxis of Sentipensar and Sensual Knowing**

I locate these discussions within feminist standpoint, situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and decolonial sentipensar methods (Fals Borda 1988)—in order to avoid binary thinking—incorporating refugees’ own experiences and creative reflections on the experiences of exile, violence, and conflict. In this particular method of sentipensar, I see the possibility of generating sensuous understanding of lived experience of individuals and the society through different forms of knowing, and different ways of accessing knowledge. As Maggie O’Neill and colleagues (2019: 147) argue, “the sensory, relational processes highlight researchers as embodied “knowing body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962), as well as “thinking-feeling persons” (Fals Borda 1999: 17; see also sensual and sensuous ethnography, e.g., Pink et al. 2010; Ingold 2000; Stoller 2010). By working with ethnographic methods and with films, books, and exhibitions, I explore how experiences of violence, conflict, and exile are communicated through other media than speech (interview) and how these media allow for different situated knowledges to emerge. As a viewer and as an audience, I am also allowed a space to engage with the artist through his creative self.

For me, the process of research has been dialogical, whereby I instantly became reflexive as a viewer and as a researcher. After each screening and discussion that I attended with Rithy Panh, I had strong bodily reactions (of stomach pains, headaches, body aches, and nausea) to the type of loss, brutality, and suffering that I witnessed in the films. The embodied experience of the magnitude of personal loss, suffering, and invisibility of human condition accompanied me during the visit of the multimedia installation of Exil (Panh 2017), which premiered in March at the International Human Rights Film Festival in Geneva. The installation was conceived by Rithy Panh and prepared during his one-month long residency in Meyrin, near Geneva, in 2017. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) gave him access to its archives of photographs. He also solicited local residents who became refugees in Geneva to share their images and memorials that related to their experiences of flight and exile. Conceived to be experienced at night, walking through between four circular walls suggestive of camp enclosure, with more than two hundred photos collected by the artist in his attempt to honor all exiles and respond to the current refugee experiences, gave me a deep sense of connection between the Cambodian genocide and the global nature of refugee condition. To evoke the daily life of the migrants on the roads, on the waves, of these generations of men, women, and children sometimes remaining their entire lives in camps, clothes hang in front of photos, images, subjected as those travelers to the misfortune, to the sun, to the rain, the cold of the night. Between the
blocks, white birds, the same as in the film *Exile*, were projected over the moving images of Rithy Panh.

As Boyle tells us, Rithy “Panh believes photographs can do something that news footage fails to achieve—arrest one’s gaze so that a dialogue can emerge between viewer and subject”

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**Figure 1.** Exhibition *Exile*, Geneva, 17 March 2017. Photo courtesy of the author.
(2017: 14). My senses were stunned by the photographs of people’s experiences across their dis-
placement journeys and the video images of waves and birds: the sounds of crashing waves, the
moving images of birds, the bodice of a nineteenth-century woman’s dress resting on the rocks,
and a raft with a torn sail at one end and sand at the other end. Hereby, this process of refl ex-
ive research (interviews, viewing, witnessing, participating, feeling, and reflecting) allowed me
to have a different sensual engagement with the situated knowledge of the artist and with me
as a seeing, sensing, thinking, and feeling audience revealed more fully the co-created nature
of knowledge production. In adapting this embodied approach to knowledge creation, I am
building on Ingold’s argument that “looking, listening and touching, therefore are not separate
activities, they are just different facets of the same activity: that of the whole organism in its

The sensuous knowing, the embodied knowing of how I read and understood the films and
exhibitions are part and parcel of my greater understanding of the artist’s experiences of vio-
ence, conflict, displacement, and coming to terms with the past. They allowed me to experi-
ence, sense, and feel the moment, the individual and the collective, the visual and the invisible,
and beyond words experiences of conflict, violence, and displacement. As a viewer and as a
reader of art products, and adopting deeply refl exive approach, I become therefore exposed to
other ways of knowing rather than mainly the interviewing and observational methods. This
approach allows me to better understand how the situated decolonial knowledge (Fals Borda
1988; Smith 1999) is shaped by the artistic encounters.

The Artist and His Art of Telling Stories

Restoring Memory through Visual Archives: Constructing Alternative Knowledge

Between 17 April 1975 and 7 January 1979, nearly 1.7 million Cambodians were killed. The
arrival of Khmer Rouge marked year zero, whereby “an entire people was emptied of its past.”
The creative sector, including the Cambodian film industry was eliminated as part of the “larger
systematic ruin of Cambodian memory and humanity” (Barnes 2016: 191). While several other
Cambodian filmmakers have addressed similar themes, the documentary cinema of Rithy Panh
has played a significant role in the effort to overcome the traumatic heritage of the Khmer Rouge
era in Cambodia (see Hamilton 2003). Rithy Panh decided to become a filmmaker upon his visit
to Cambodia in 1990, as he was unable to get rid of his recurring nightmares (see opening quo-
tation). Thus, his career was informed by his personal history and his own efforts at recuperative
memory (Barnes 2016; Boyle 2017a, 2017b; Hamilton 2003: 12). Rithy Panh’s films contributed
to opening up a discourse on Cambodian genocide “through the creation of a cinema of witness
unique in its dialogic mode and claims for truth” (Hamilton 2003: 7). Some of his most import-
ant films came out when national and international efforts to bring to justice the remaining
Khmer Rouge leadership were far from certain. As many have argued, Rithy Panh’s films played
a significant role in the final creation of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (Hamilton 2003).

As a survivor, Panh in his early films was searching for the ultimate truth about what hap-
pened through the confrontation between survivors and perpetrators. In his book, Rithy Panh
notes, “I believe more in pedagogy than in justice. I believe in working in time, in the work of
time. I want to understand, explain, remember—in this order exactly” (Panh and Bataille 2014:
304). His efforts are visible in the films S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine (2003) and Duch:
Master of the Forges of Hell (2012), and the accompanying book The Elimination (Panh and
Bataille 2014), which recounts Rithy Panh’s conversations with Duch, a notorious Khmer Rouge
perpetrator. For Rithy Panh, the distinction between perpetrators and victims was necessary for the reconciliation process to happen:

I don't know exactly, but when I started to make S-21, nobody was thinking if there's a necessity to judge Khmer Rouge or not. It wasn't the right time to talk about a trial. It was a time when people talked a lot about reconciliation. The problem for me is: who do I reconcile with? If you talk about reconciliation, it must be between victim and perpetrator. If you do not know who the victim is and who is the perpetrator, how can you reconcile? (Boyle 2016: 40)

In these films, he creates a possibility of encounter between the survivors and the perpetrators and, by giving space to both sides, opens up a possibility to narrate the different experiences. Even though the perpetrator denies his role in the genocide, Rithy Panh displays his responsibility. As Didem Alkan argues, “in doing so, he depicts the reality that these former guards are unwilling to accept while precising the necessity of this awareness process” (2020: 276). Through the visualization in his films of these encounters, Rithy Panh emphasizes the importance of the shared experience and the collective effort that is necessary for the reconciliation process. His creative practice allows therefore for alternative messages to appear and thus to shape the individual and collective debates of healing and reconciliation experiences.

Alternative visual archives of everyday life under Khmer Rouge are also created by Rithy Panh in the film The Missing Picture (2013), challenging the narratives and images of genocide in Cambodia (Sánchez-Biosca 2018). For years, the filmmaker searched in vain for this “truth-image” of the genocide in the archives and from witnesses. Most of the evidence he was searching for was invisible or destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, so through his particular approach to filmmaking, he engaged in a quest to restore Cambodia’s memory, “without which the country has no hope of imagining a future “(Panh and Bataille 2014: 191). As Rithy Panh says in an interview in March 2019 in Geneva, “No image bore witness to this mass crime.” With his approach to the way L ‘Image manquante was filmed and staged, he found a different way of telling a story. Rather than searching for a perfect image, he created it from clay figurines, re-created settings, photographs, and audiovisual documents presenting scenes that do not exist in any archive. In an interview before the premiere of the film in 2013, he said: “What I give you today is not an image, or the quest for one single image, but the image of a quest: the one that cinema allows.”

The created image is a way to bear witness, to (re)create a memory of genocide, to come to terms of the past, to give visibility to the past. The visual metanarrative that is constructed by Rithy Panh in this film is done through “crafting new models of remembering.” In this way, the film fills the gaps “in the historical evidence as well as in the filmmaker’s own life, testifies to the need for the aesthetic to capture the enormity of genocide in its past and present manifestations and to the power of the artist, as melancholic witness, to counter the abstraction of violence (in statistics concerning the dead, for example) with singular representations of loss” (Barnes 2016: 198). This is why the work of artists is crucial in situations where bearing witness is impossible due to the destruction of actual records. They create and imagine and provide a space for, what I see as, witnessing otherwise.

Rithy Panh has a very personal, narrative way of presenting his own take on the genocide, through the prism of his own family story. The films represent the struggle to recuperate some form of memory in the politically difficult setting of Cambodia where formal evidence relies mainly on testimony and witness. These films, therefore, become the pillars of a particular genre of Cambodian cinema: the cinema of witnessing (Hamilton 2003), constituting the missing visual archives. They are also examples of public resistance to the profound individual and collective injustice that many of the victims of Khmer Rouge experienced. They represent what Kay
Schaffer and Sidonie Smith refer to as ways of “allowing marginalized people to narrate their trauma and to “remember otherwise”: “through acts of remembering, individuals and communities narrate alternative or counter-histories coming from the margins, voiced by other kinds of subjects—the tortured, the displaced, the overlooked, the silenced and the unacknowledged—among them” (2004: 16–17). The colorful, childlike clay figurines juxtaposed against black-and-white archival images of Khmer brutality bring to life the everyday life of Cambodians. They narrate the memories, individuals, and families that were all eliminated in 1975, thus “allowing to remember otherwise, and enable new forms of subjectivity and radically altered futures” (17).

Rithy Panh’s creative practice unsettles what was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime and thus directly intervenes into the debates around justice. This practice speaks to the anthropological analysis of the politics of memory of conflicts, violence, and processes of reconciliation (see Castillejo Cuéllar 2005; Halilovich 2013; Kleinman et al. 1997; Mamdani 1996, 2000; Yazir and Grunebaum 2005). Through his artistic practice, Rithy Panh provides a testimony but also a possibility of witnessing, issues discussed also in cultural studies, including literature and cinema (e.g., Barnes 2017; Bryoni and Wake 2013; Grassilli 2005; Grunebaum-Ralph 2011; Torchin 2012).

In his cinematographic work and in art installations, Rithy Panh produces missing alternative images and messages about the genocide, displacement, and reconciliation. In this way, he also questions what knowledge is and how knowledge is produced. His films become part of an alternative visual archive of individual and collective history of Cambodian suffering under the Khmer Rouge. By using archival footages, archival documents, and reconstruction of figurines, Panh constructs a continuingly shifting cinematic that forms more intricate patterns of testimony. But more importantly, his films, through creating missing images and giving space to those whose narratives been erased and marginalized, restore the voices and subjectivity of these individuals. They allow for the process of reconciliation to take place.

**Accessing Different Experiential Knowledge of Violence and Displacement through Art**

Once you have been exiled, refugee, you carry it with you for life. (Interview with Rithy Panh, March 2017, Geneva)

In his acclaimed film *Exile*, Rithy Panh holds up a mirror to his own life under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. I watched this film at the Geneva Human Rights Film Festival in March 2017 and attended a meeting with the filmmaker. The film is a free-flowing essay in which he reflects on his experiences between 1975 and 1979, when he was forced from the capital of Phnom Penh during Pol Pot’s dictatorship. *Exile* uses quotations from Mao, Baudelaire, and others to unpack the nature of revolutionary ideology and to explore the gap between Rithy Panh’s understandings as a teenager and his perceptions now, as a grown man exiled in Paris. In the conversation with the audience after the screening, the filmmaker said bluntly: “I experienced exile more intensely than childhood.” He also attached great importance to his own responsibility as a filmmaker to tell a story of this experience.

In the film, the narrator, Nan, reflects on what it was like to spend his adolescence devoted to a single idea—the Kampuchean revolution—and how slogans that once seemed beautiful to him no longer do. Ghostly visuals contribute to the sense of disorientation and the feeling of time standing still. In some shots, Nan is superimposed over himself; in others, he floats in the air. This creates a meditative mood, to slightly lulling effect. *Exile* is set in a single hut whose contents—luggage, a typewriter, fans—change and gather dust over the years. The film
is extremely powerful visually. During discussions of famine, for example, we see a rat being cooked on a bonfire and hear anecdotal mention of men who prized their spoons above their wives. These staged scenes are interspersed with the régime’s propagandized archival footage, often intercut in counterintuitive or arty ways. In one section, we see hands wave red books in front of a black-and-white reel. Movies flicker in a bowl of water. Moon imagery increases the sense that the story is being told from a cosmic remove. Some of the most poignant visuals show the hut filled with imagined clothing or family photos on the wall disappearing.

Rithy Panh skillfully addresses the issue of representation in the film, as he chooses to represent a single person’s mindscape and bases it on a personal experience. These glimpses into the personal experience animated by photos of his family gives audiences insights into how he himself experienced famine, genocide, authoritarian regime, and exile. The hut, a typical interior of a Cambodian countryside residence, remains symbolically as the only space that is his home against the totalitarian darkness. Through this powerful cinematographic choice, as the film’s viewers we are captured by the story, not being able to escape its horrors.

Here, the potential of films and our engagement as the audience of these media, “we can therefore start to understand such images not as visual objectifications of experiential realities, but as texts that suggest or invite routes through which other people’s multisensory ways of knowing in movement might be imagined or imaginable” (Pink at al. 2010: 3). Through the visual technics employed by Rithy Panh, I become immersed into his own story, and hence am simultaneously a viewer and a participant in his narratives.

In an interview published in *Le Temps* (Chardon, 2017), when talking about his own experience of exile, Rithy Panh said: “Exile—not only of the body, but the exile of the interior.” In the film, “exile” refers to the hut in which the main protagonist sees his only refuge when faced with the outside’s totalitarian system and ongoing genocide. It is a poetic form of resistance—according to Rithy Panh. This form of resistance that is both public—in terms of film as a medium—and private—as an expression of one own’s story of interior power struggles.

After watching the film, I went to see the installation *Exile*. As Rithy Panh explained in the talk, he wanted to reflect on the individual and collective experiences of exile, and situate the stories within the context of cosmopolitan Geneva. By bringing together photographs that were in UNHCR and Agence Francaise de Presse databases with photos that were sent by individuals, those are exiles and refugees in Geneva, Rithy Panh created a possibility of a dialogue. He argues that when seeing moving images on TV or on the internet, we feel compassion and then forget about them very quickly. But in an exhibition in a photographic exhibition, we have the opportunity to have a dialogue with a photograph—to stop for a bit, to reflect, to see the details, to contemplate—to feel. This experience creates a space of sensuous knowing, embodied knowl-
edge creation process. Here, we enter sentipensar, as Orlando Fals Boarda (1988) argued. Rithy Panh explained:

I try to tell a story with the images of others, I try to create a dialogue between those images in the data bases and give them a life, a new force. Once you have experienced exile, you became a refugee, you always carry this status with you, the whole life. You feel well and not well everywhere. Exile is not a happy choice; it is an absence of a choice. No one leaves their place of origin, their village, their home, their family easily. (Interview, March 2017)

Through a conversation with Rithy Panh, but also through art installation and the film, I, as a researcher and audience member, got a much better understanding of the way exile has been experienced by Rithy Panh in his personal trajectory:

To be exiled, means to be uprooted, to cut your roots. Even after 30 years of exile, you can come back, the roots do not grow back. One loses a lot. Our time of exile is a suspended time. We are always not in sync with the present, with the time and life that continues in the country that one has left.

His reference to the temporality of the experience of exile would have been difficult to comprehend only through words. The artistic metaphors and means that Rithy Panh employs in both his films and his installation give a deep sense of the temporality and spatiality of this experience. The moving images, the presence of the past in the present through photos, flickering images, clothing, figurines, the going back and forth between times and spaces in the film. Rithy Panh translates artistically this deep connection with the past in the experience of exile. This point links directly to Harrington's argument that an anthropology of art should show “how aesthetic frames of perception enter into textual aspects of metaphor, analogy and vignette, into sensuous media of data analysis such as visual images and life-story narratives; and into conceptions of theatrical qualities in social action” (2004: 6). While analyzing Rithy Panh's work, it becomes clear that the main focus of such anthropological approach is the type of knowledge art or an artistic approach produce when people embrace and engage with art rather than only the materiality of an art or artwork.

This section demonstrates clearly how knowledge production in the encounters with art and artist brings to light a deeper personal sense of knowing and the role of artists to provide ways of witnessing of the past when the evidence has been erased. It allows us to move toward not only Gayarti Spivak's (1994) point of whether the subaltern can speak but also, being directly faced with the narrative of “the subaltern,” a narrative that brings us toward a decolonial ways of knowing by privileging the teller of the story as the knower without the need for the translation of his/her experiences into the scientific colonial language (see Hoagland 2020; Lugones 2010).

**Filmmaking as Rebuilding Own Humanity**

I am going to search for the graves of my parents. I know I won't find them. But it's about the journey. (Rithy Panh, interview, Financial Times 2017)

The third auto-biographical film is *Graves without a Name* (2018), which I watched at the Geneva Human Rights Film Festival in March 2019. I also attended a talk with the artist before the screening. Through his search of graves of close ones, including his mother, we see his personal journey of coming to terms with, finding peace, and reconciliation with the dead and the past through a Buddhist ritual of honoring the dead. Yet, his personal journey has a collective dimension, as through his film, Cambodians and all those who have lost close ones in genocide
and holocaust, are invited to participate in this journey from the present, to the past, and toward the future. The film awakes a powerful and profound feeling of loss, of memory, and of death and of coming to terms with these experiences. But it also represents the deep necessity that Rithy Panh attaches to make films and to rebuild his own (and others’) humanity:

For us, genocide is continuous, you get it for all your life. At the beginning when you come out, you have to fight first to rebuild everything, your capacity to be a human being again, because the process of dehumanization is so strong. It is like you are drowning and you cannot breath . . . Part of me says, “Don’t talk about this again,” but another part says, “No, you have to talk about it.” I have been making films for more than 30 years . . . I don’t feel better after making a film but making it is a necessity, like a process for me to rebuild my humanity. (Rithy Panh in conversation with Boyle 2016)

While we feel shaken by the images of hundreds and thousands of buttons that are found in the ground while searching for human remains, we remember the scenes of clothes, hair, and bones from the concentration camps during the Holocaust, and the destroyed graves in nonexisting Palestinian villages of Nakba (see Grunebaum-Ralph 2011). The image of human remains serves as a symbolic visualization of the past. Such images allow us to access an understanding of loss and death, a dehumanization process, as experienced by the filmmaker. Through the personal story (of the filmmaker), I was able to recuperate the connection between the present and the past, as well as between different geographical spaces. This was also a sentiment expressed by several other members of the audience in my discussions after the screening.

In a discussion before the film screening, Rithy Panh was asked about the political nature of art, and the role of art to awake consciousness. He paused before expressing his doubts. For him, such a statement is too simplistic. From his perspective, what is important in all artistic forms is to pass the message that a choice exists, that we can transform things and situations: “The fight between the good and the evil has been there since the beginning of humanity, it is an unequal combat, but the possibility of a choice gives meaning for each civilization.” This statement points to, on the one hand, a clear sense of an obligation to tell a story, an important story, and on the other hand, an obligation to explain that there is a choice, and that it is up to us, each of us, to make a choice. Here, we become aware of an important dimension of Rithy Panh’s political artistic engagements. From the beginning to the end of the film, we see Rithy Panh’s fruitless searching for the remains of his parents. Despite never finding them, the process of searching initiated the ritual of burying them. During this ritual, he questions whether he is dead or alive. He shares with other survivors the sense of being dead, even though he survived. As he expresses in one of the interviews, filmmaking makes him feel alive; it gives him proof that he is alive. Shooting in close-up, he combs through the earth with his fingers, finding blood-stained scraps of fabric or buttons—evidence of the millions whose lives were lost. While he may not have found his parents, he found evidence of unique lives that “vanished in the wind,” as he says. As Boyle elegantly puts it, “making art for Panh is
proof that he has survived, that the Khmer Rouge did not win: they did not succeed in elimin-
ing him. It is a practice he is compelled to re-enact and an action shared with his talented team of collaborators” (2017b: 4).

Perhaps even more signifi cantly in Rithy Panh’s commitment to ethical recuperation and witnessing, is his involvement in the creation of the Bophana Audiovisual Resources Center in Phnom Penh. With support from the Ministry of Culture, an open-access library and database has been established to contain digitized copies of every surviving fragment of audiovisual material related to Cambodia. Due to the destruction of almost all cultural products during the Khmer Rouge era, the collection of the surviving heritage materials was a diffi  cult process involving sources all over the world.

He also supported training of young Cambodian fi lmmakers who were born aft er the geno-
cide and have been for the past 20 years making important contributions to nonfi ction cinema in the aftermath of the trauma. As Annette Hamilton argues, Rithy Panh’s “cinema of witness advances claims for the restoration of memory as an ethical imperative, and his fi lms have provided encouragement for the claims of justice for survivors. Witness and reenactment are central to his mode of address” (2003: 13). His fi lms and exhibitions point to the necessity of memorialization and a form of recuperative justice based on recognition and acceptance of the realities under the Khmer Rouge. Rithy Panh’s ability to present these complex issues through an array of aesthetically powerful cinematographic techniques have made a powerful impact on how Cambodian history is understood inside and outside of the country.

For Rithy Panh, cinema and his own approach to making documentaries reveal his deep commitment to speaking about the present from the perspective of the past. For him, the main purpose of his fi lms is the creation of a platform from which witnessing can take place. In this way, they create a possibility for coming to terms with violence, genocide, loss, and exile. By bringing together the survivors, victims, guards, torturers, executioners, ex–Khmer Rouge cad-
dres, and bystanders, he creates on-camera situations in which all of them can comment on their actions. In these on-camera encounters, the history of Cambodia is framed in human terms,
with the filmmaker who is off-screen yet always present, as the viewing audience. Here, the audience/viewer is invited to share their own recollections, which then become part of collective memory. As Hariz Halilovich argues in discussing the research among Bosnian diaspora on the memory of conflict and violence, “while separation of collective and individual memories may be methodologically justified, these two types of memory do not exist independently from each other” (2013: 79). With the public engagement with memories of violence through his art, Rithy Panh thus builds up collective and social memory.

I was drawn to Rithy Panh's films by the powerful personal ethical imperative that I felt was emerging through his work. From the beginning of his career, as he argues, he has been using the medium of cinema in order to “understand” and “demonstrate” what happened in the past. In one interview, he says, “people can call it cinema of reality, cinema of truth, but there is no truth in the image” (interview, March 2017). His role, as he sees it, is not to convince people of ultimate truth but rather to give a sense of the reality behind testimonies or “sounds of everyday life and filmed speech” (Norindr 2010: 189). This is clearly visible in the most of his films, where he sees himself as part of the reality that he depicts:

You make a film with people and not about people. When you make a film with people, you must be with them. When they are in the rice field, you are in the rice fields. When they are in the water, you will be in the water.

... When I make a film, I don't think about philosophy, or about aesthetics. The only thing I focus on is the dignity of people and ethics, some few things that can compose a morality of filming. This element, I have to integrate in myself before filming. When I film, I let things come, I go with that. That's why it takes me a lot of time for each film. (Boyle 2016: 44, 40)

This ethical approach shapes Rithy Panh's cinematography, emphasizing the moral responsibility of filming.

In this last film, Rithy Panh is able to move the parameters of collective memory of conflicts, displacement and marginalization that have marked the lives of individuals from the apolitical to collective political realm. Through his films, he creates a space for voices of the past that have been denied existence in the presence. In this way, his artistic practice does what Heidi Grunebaum and colleagues (2009) describe as a process of reclaiming memory in South Africa's apartheid past. They argue:

To reclaim memory from its new curators and from the state is to initiate a practice of memory that is historical in that it carries potency and agency. This is when memory moves out of the neutralising and disconnecting realms of heritage and becomes political in the ways it can empower in order to recover. And one aspect of social recovery is the capacity to challenge the superimposed realities of the dominant, including dominant structures of perception and of historical meaning.

In his interviews, Rithy Panh tells us that he deeply senses the responsibility as an artist and as a human being to address these injustices, and to speak truth to power. As he says about some of his fictional films:

Fiction film is a way for me to tell myself that I’m not completely destroyed. I can make a fiction. It means I can imagine, I can transcend, I can direct people, I can think. I'm alive. They cannot destroy me. (Boyle 2016: 42)

What emerges from the discussion presented in this section is how Rithy Panh's artistic practice skillfully brings together different sites of resistance, and living in and with the conflict and genocide, and hence reveals the complexities and historically changing systems of power, and
his desire to stay alive. We see how artistic practice can be deeply political and transformative by opening up a space for contestation of public practices and narratives of mourning and reconciliation. Artists therefore contribute to the creation of alternative narratives about displacement, and hence opening up alternative ways of “telling stories” about and by exiles.

**Conclusion: Creating Possibilities From Encounters with Art, Artists, and Violent Conflict**

By focusing on filmmaking and installations as a visual storytelling, and reflecting on the encounters with Rithy Panh, I considered how storytelling by exiles and displaced populations who happen to be artists takes on a multiple possibility of knowledge creation and opens up for us as audience and researchers a possibility of knowing differently about their personal trajectories. Reflecting on this type of experience of knowledge production, I concur with bell hooks (1984), who argues that theorizing about personal experience not only posits the personal as critical to understanding socio-political social boundaries; but makes it possible to consider how the personal provides room to create alternative narratives. In my view, this method enlarges the repertoire of decolonial knowing with bringing he experiences and knowledge of those affected by the violent conflicts at the center of the knowledge production process.

Through the reflexive watching of Rithy Panh’s films and exhibitions, interactions with his art, and in conversations rather than interviews, I suggest there is a possibility for multiplicity of situated decolonial knowledges to emerge. How we engage with the narratives of displacement, exile, and conflict through visual or written storytelling opens up a possibility for multiple interpretations depending on the personal experiences and situated knowledge of the members of the audience. How each of us relates to artistic work is shaped by our own personal stories and situated knowledge. By bringing different ways of knowing—as a feeling researcher—through the method of sentipensar and decolonial feminist methodologies, in the encounters with art and artists, different understandings of the temporal and spatial aspects of conflict, displacement and reconciliation are revealed. In this way, a creative space for alternative narratives about displacement is opened up; as I argue, alternative ways of “telling stories” with and by exiles.

This alternative take on knowledge allowed us then to engage with the second set of questions: how the artistic practice is an approach to both deal with and create alternative narratives about violent conflict, war, and displacement. As Susan Sontag’s quotation at the opening of the article suggests, Rithy Panh engages with stories that are important to tell: about genocide in Cambodia. In this way, he is a moral human being, (cf. Sontag 2007), as he pays and feels obliged as a survivor to pay attention to those stories that have been silenced and erased. Cinema, as he argues, provides him with a freedom that he chose to tell a story, a personal and collective story, to create alternative narratives about genocide, displacement, and coming to terms with violence. Artistic capabilities of imagine and create allow to open up possibilities for witnessing to emerge when the evidence of the past horrors and suffering have been erased.

Rithy Panh employs a method of speaking about the present from the past. The past (war, displacement, conflict, terror, imagined home) is present in the present. Such an approach enables us as social scientists to understand better the links between the different temporalities, how the past evokes the need for artistic expression in the present. Past forms of absence can become significant mediated forms of presence (through media such as film, videos, novels) within the discourse of displacement and diaspora. Through such artistic creation, audiences have access to an expanded means of understanding and engaging with belonging, memory, and reconcil-
iation. Such artistic creation is a form of reclaiming a space of creating personal and collective claims for justice and recognition.

The artists and the creative practice presented here reveal also how their stories of war, conflict, violence, and displacement are also stories of creation, of possibilities, of remembering, coming to terms with the past, and the death. The films by Rithy Panh are to some extent a response to atrocious inhumanity, that attempt to represent inhumanity even though it is beyond representation. The issue of ethical responsibility in representing these traumatic events is central to consider when events are being recuperated, re-created, or constructed through cinema and literature. Rithy Panh’s creative practice and his strong sense of responsibility as artists suggest that, as Hamilton argues, “witnessing then becomes a way of bringing to collective communication moments of traumatic intensity in order to refuse their obliteration” (2003: 9). Through his narrative approach to his own personal experiences, he creates ways for us as his audience to employ empathy and emotions. He offers a deeply personal engagement with the past that is needed in order to transform the past and the present, individually and collectively.

Engaging with Rithy Panh’s work demonstrates that artistic practice is a way of not only resisting the erasure of humanity but also restoring it. The stories told in his films are not only important stories but also a place to deal with the story. Film, in general, can be viewed as creating both individual and collective platforms for coming to terms with violence, memory, recuperation, and reconciliation. Rithy Panh’s art is both a witness of atrocities, conflict, war, and violence, and a creator of new possibilities. Telling important stories (cf. Sontag 2007) is therefore part of the resistance to the inhumanity of atrocities such as genocide.

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NOTE
1. My work is located in the growing body of research within sociology and anthropology (the new “sociology of art” and so-called artistic turn).

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