



ENOUGH  
Violence:

*Artists Speak Out*

Society for Contemporary Craft

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# Utoya Reckoning: On Culture and Craft as a Response to Catastrophe

By Stephen M. Gorelick, PhD

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It is amazing how long I clung to the self-deception that prolonged study of acts of crime and violence had provided me with some degree of emotional immunity. Sure, there were moments of pain—even tears—when I viewed explicit photos of carnage or spoke with teenage survivors of a shooting, but I could quickly retreat to a safe academic distance.

The events of 9/11—and the pervasive images of falling bodies and furious explosions—blew up my illusion. And the string of school shootings that began with Columbine, each with their sadly familiar scenes of first responders and stricken family members coming and going, had become progressively harder to watch. But as I moved from tragedy to tragedy, I found myself troubled by contradictory feelings. On the one hand, I felt more susceptible to grief. Tears flowed more freely. But sometimes I would imagine I was losing the ability to feel at all and retreat into the spreadsheets that so effectively aggregate and obscure the rich texture of human experience. Scenes of anguished people escaping from buildings began to look alike.

But my distance could not withstand Utoya.

In April 2012, I hiked the length of a stunning and deserted island 24 miles from the Norwegian capital, Oslo. Only seven months earlier, Utoya had been the scene of unimaginable carnage, as white supremacist Andres Behring Breivik—after planting explosives that killed 9 people in the capital—drove the 24 miles to Utoya and gunned down 69 young people attending the annual youth encampment of Norway's Labor Party.

Now I was visiting as part of a group of American social and behavioral scientists invited to provide advice and assistance in the aftermath of that tragedy.

The visit began simply enough: a Norwegian government official lead us from the site of one killing to another, describing in detail how each victim had died. But I started to feel queasy, and when I reached into my dwindling reserve of clinical distance, I came up empty. I quickly found an old tree trunk and sat down, unable to continue as I flashed on all the victims who had been the same age as my teenage daughter. At least, I told myself, I would hold myself together enough to avoid making it harder for our hosts, one of whom was still nursing her daughter through months of rehabilitation from the effects of multiple gunshot wounds. I followed the rest of the party, head down to hide my grimace.



Utoya sight of final shooting

The small object on the ground was my undoing.

No more than a few feet along, I saw four tent pegs that someone had linked together into a small sculpture and planted firmly in the ground. I had no idea when this object had been created, but found myself imagining it being made by one of the young people on the island the previous July. Had it been assembled innocently before that horrible day or did someone purposefully create a makeshift memorial?

Tent pegs.

Had the little assemblage been a collaborative effort? Had it been put together while a group sat together enjoying the sun and fresh air? Had someone sitting alone simply been bored, fit the pieces together, and forgotten about it? Perhaps one of the investigators who later combed the island for evidence had put them together in a spurt of nervous energy. Was it made in a moment of carefree playfulness or terror? Was it embedded with any intended meaning, perhaps a message or a symbol? I had no idea, but I left it where I found it, resting in that consecrated meadow.

Fast forward to the summer of 2013 when I first saw some of the provocative work of the 14 American and European contemporary artists whose works are featured in the Society for Contemporary Craft's ground-breaking exhibition *ENOUGH Violence: Artists Speak Out*. I thought of that object and was reminded just how frequently and quickly objects are created and placed in public in the hours and days immediately after catastrophe. Stunned by acts that completely upend basic assumptions about how the world works, people create everything from sculptures to photo collages, decorate public spaces with poetry and personal objects, and start what they hope will be a journey to healing and closure.



Makeshift Island memorial



Sunset from Utoya

The artists featured in *ENOUGH Violence*, though, seem to be up to something quite different. They may grieve and rage like the rest of us at senseless violence, they may even be bystanders or victims, but their work makes clear just how much they see themselves as charged with a special responsibility.

Some people express their emotions immediately after a traumatic event, but these artists take more time. Their work emerges at that awkward moment when the initial shock of a traumatic event has begun to evolve into the dull ache of long-term grief, when we are forced to confront the folly of even imagining that closure is possible. Public indignation has cooled, the early "sense" we made of the senseless has begun to seem less comforting, and simple notions of good and evil have given way to frustrating, long-term moral ambiguity. We may crave the solace of straightforward answers, the comfort of clarity, but at some point we have to accept that we might as well be waiting for Godot.

Yet, as we can see from the penetrating work in this exhibition, artists who take inspiration from honest confrontation with the uncomfortable seem to thrive at just these moments of existential paralysis; excavating the raw material of creative expression in places where we may see only devastation. We may not always welcome their work. We may see their honesty as heresy when, instead of soothing balms, they offer unsettling images that complicate feelings and perceptions and threaten to throw us back off kilter.

The meticulously crafted objects in this exhibit remind us that the purpose of art is not necessarily to comfort or to strive for conventional beauty. Indeed, the provocative and the disconcerting are sometimes better lenses on the profound, especially when we ourselves may lack the courage—or the stomach—to face the truth head on.