

When I Eat: Silencing the Difficult Pasts

A text by Elisabeth Kovtiak

*What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the
secrets of others.*

– Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,
The Shell and the Kernel

This text is a reflection on a performance that was part of the Summer School “Communicating Difficult Pasts”, organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art. The performance “When I Eat” was made by the SILENCE collective at the Kuldīga Artists’ Residence Gallery on August 6, 2019.

Summer school participants were divided into four working groups to explore different topics: the history of Kuldīga, colonialism, empathy and silence. The groups followed an interdisciplinary paradigm, involving artists, scholars, curators, art critics, etc. On the last day of the program, all four groups prepared a presentation of their research results, with formats ranging from a documentary to an educational game, and from a group meditation to a performance.



The script of the performance (*published as written pre-performance*):

SETTING:

The performance takes place in the coffee break room.

There is a table in the center of an empty room. Nine stools are placed around the table. One chair at the head of the table is pushed under the table.

PERFORMANCE BEGINS:

MARGARET brings the PERFORMERS and the AUDIENCE into the room.
PERFORMERS are among the audience.

NINE PERFORMERS step out from the audience and sit around the table.

HRISTINA arrives from the storage room with a knife and stands next to the watermelon. She cuts the watermelon into slices and gives them to the performers next to her, they pass it on to other performers without leaving their seats or talking.

PERFORMERS eat the watermelon in a natural way.

When only one slice remains, Hristina puts the knife aside on the table, takes the chair from below the table, sits on it and eats the slice.

When the performers have finished eating each slice, they leave the skin on the table.

When the performers have finished eating, they put the skins on a dish in the middle of the table. Hristina puts the knife on the dish with skins.

HRISTINA takes the dish with the skins to the storage room.

PERFORMERS reunite with the AUDIENCE.

THE END.

To me, the beauty of this performance was in its many layers. Several months afterwards, I am still re-evaluating what it meant to me. Each time I talk about the performance with the other participants, I am amused how differently they experienced it. Although they took part in the same process, their distinct backgrounds give other meanings to the same things. Thus, this text is a personal reflection rather than an expression of the collective idea of the performance. Writing this, I position myself both as its co-author and an art critic who works with collective memory. Hence, this text includes both my insider ideas of the performance, as well as a psychoanalytical reading of silencing as a problem.



The initial aim was directed towards finding artistic means to articulate the way silence about the past poses a problem. On a political level, silence is encouraged by the ruling elite. Muted recollections about the horrid events in Eastern Europe do not cause problems of contesting narratives. Therefore, the vernacular memory of those who experienced trauma does not contradict the official narrative of the past. One of many examples would be Holodomor in Ukraine—a period of man-made famine that took the lives of millions of people. Holodomor had been silenced for decades, as it contradicted the narrative of the generous and kind Soviet government and Ukraine being a rich and prosperous republic. However, memory cannot be altered as easily as the official version of history. Recollections of those events were silenced, but they were still present, haunting the living and poisoning their lives.



Not only did the actions of the performers matter in communicating the message, so too did the symbolism of the objects used. Although all the watermelon skins were carefully hidden in a classic Soviet soup pot, the seeds and red stains from the watermelon pulp remained on the table after the performance. It manifested the impossibility of silencing the haunting past, as its traces cannot simply be wiped out. The watermelon's red pulp represented the bloodstained past and its traumas. The seeds were intentionally left on the table, symbolizing the continuation of trauma's transmission within subsequent generations. If the silenced trauma is not articulated and the society does not take any steps to reconcile with the traumatic past, the trauma will continue for future generations. The idea of this performance was to make visible the tension the silence creates and to experience how it feels to live through something traumatic on one's own, surrounded by people who bear the same burden, yet unable to share it with them.

There was another participant in this performance: the audience. They were excluded from the act of eating the watermelon and were not informed of the concept or even the fact that there would be a performance. Their role was to heighten tension and to explore the idea of how silence can affect even those who are not directly connected to traumatic events. In an everyday situation, they would be invited to have a piece of the fruit. Instead they had to figure out what to expect and how to behave on their own, without any instructions. Similarly, those who live with survivors are unaware what exactly they faced and how they ought to deal with it.

The name of the performance *When I Eat* is the beginning of a Russian idiom: “When I eat I am deaf and mute”. This is told to children when they try to have a conversation during a meal. In Soviet culture conversations were considered an unnecessary part of family dinners. However, in many other cultures having a meal is a pretext for families to assemble and share stories. This performance questioned the many traumatic stories silenced within families. What is it like to sit in silence while dealing with the haunting past on your own?



For me this performance was a wordless negotiation of the problem of not communicating traumatic events. Secrets about the traumatic past are held in families. Trauma is silenced but it is very present and unconsciously influences all family members. Secrets haunt people like ghosts. Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham (1994) see a ‘ghost’ as an unconscious entity that has never been conscious, as it is transferred from a parent’s unconscious to a child’s. The ghost may be silent, but it influences the lives of family members, usually manifesting itself in two or three generations (Schutzenberger, 2014). It is not surprising that negotiation of difficult pasts is happening now, as we are the third and fourth generation after those who lived through all the turmoil and horror of the beginning of the twentieth century.



What shall we do with the haunting ghosts of the past to reduce their influence and the pain they bring?

Though no ready formula is available, the way is implied in the very nature of what returns to haunt, on the nature of the thing “phantomized” during the preceding generation, “phantomized” because it was unspeakable in words, because it had to be wrapped in silence. Reducing the “phantom” entails reducing the sin attached to someone else’s secret and stating it in acceptable terms so as to defy, circumvent, or domesticate the phantom’s (and our) resistances, its (and our) refusals, gaining acceptance for a higher degree of “truth” (Abraham and Torok, 1994: 189).

Communicating difficult pasts may be helpful. However, sometimes it is barely possible, as the memory of traumatic or shameful events may be buried so deeply that it’s a struggle to find the words to talk about it. Indeed, it is hard to express our feelings and it is even harder to work with the feelings of our ancestors; although we might have incorporated them in our bodies and souls, if we believe the psychoanalysts. Thus, communicating through art may be an option: eating your feelings, inviting the dead to sit at the table, while making the silence “visible”.



Participants (as seated at the table, clockwise):

Hristina Tasheva
Cristina Moraru
Margaret Tali
Tamta Melashvili
Rūta Spelskytė
Vilius Vaitiekūnas
Cristina Nualart
Sergey Fadeev
Maria Veits
Elisabeth Kovtiak

Works cited:

Abraham, N. and M. Torok (1994). *The Shell and the Kernel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Schutzenberger, A. (2014). *The Ancestor Syndrome*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.