

The voices of women across the generations

The one who wins the war, he writes history.

There, I said it all...

In this article I reflect on the process of making the video project *Red*, 2015, (21:45 min.) and a sound installation *The White Wall*, 2015 (9:30 min.) about post-Soviet times and transgenerational silence about experiences with the Soviet Union.

by **Kati Roover**

On a sunny day in 1989, I stood amongst others, with my family, in a 600-kilometer-long human chain. We had to drive for a long while until we found a suitable place where we stopped. Thousands of people had already formed a line for a long continuous stretch. I remember that we stood there for a long time, waiting for something. People stood hand in hand along the road. We sang. I had never seen so many crying and happy people simultaneously. Everyone with the hope of freedom in their minds. Freedom.¹

The film *Red* was finished in 2015 and installed in a room with bright red walls. Later in the same year I also finished the sound installation *The White Wall* about the silence/unspeakable and fear in my family and the post-Soviet time. It was a ten channel/speaker sound installation hidden inside the white wooden wall.

The color red from the red flag of Soviet Union was the initial starting point for my film. I tried to remember the right shade of the Soviet flag and I was interested if my memory about the color was correct. Later I learned that there were many shades of red flags like the many faces of the Soviet Union; there were warmer and colder shades of red. The color is also reminiscent of spilled blood and the racial and familial bloodline. The red color also has the function to mark certain chapters in the film and bind

it together. The color anchored the film in the room and made the viewer entirely submerge in an installation that conveys an ambivalent bodily sensation. The affect could be described as attraction and repulsion: simultaneously attracted whilst overpowered, overwhelmed by an underlying uncanny feeling.

The film *Red* is based on my own family's history and develops as I interview three generations of women I am related to. My family background is Estonian and Finnish-Ingrian. Both of my grandmothers Estonian and Ingrian lost their families and homes early in their lives, because of their family roots and the Soviet repressions. My Ingrian grandmother was transported to the Klooga concentration camp from Ingria, and some years after that she was taken to the Siberian forced labor camp. My Estonian grandmother was escaping from a similar destiny, living in constant fear for many years of her life.

The film is divided into three sections, in accordance with the three generations I interviewed. It progresses chronologically, starting from the repressions in Estonia during the Soviet era. Each section has its own distinctive visual aesthetic, and a new section is marked by a longer fade to a red color. Within the sections, archival footage is mixed with testimonies of women of the same generation to form an experimental collage of many layers. In some of the sections, the persons of the same generation are bound and blended together, merging into each other and forming new virtual subjects. Expression is given to this wedge

of hostility that authority inserted between neighbors and tribal brethren, a strategy which has repeatedly deepened alienation, culminating in a selfish possessiveness when Communist authority finally collapsed.

The subject is difficult and serious; tragic fates, traumas affecting a whole family, a nation, and perhaps half a continent. A persistent suppression leading to untreated traumas stacked from one generation to the next. Life stories filled with anxiety and repressed raw emotions that slowly rise to the surface, as the film advances. Grief, fear and anger. The previously unspoken, difficult feelings are expressed and transmitted by the pauses between the words, in the small gestures of the witnesses' bodies, in the timbre of their voices and sighs.

Ground zero

In his article *Tell What You Remember*, Jyri Reinvere describes the process of liberation from trauma: In order for the process of liberation from the trauma of the past to begin, two events are needed, both collectively and individually. In addition to being able to remember the time when there was no trauma, the events of the trauma must be clearly identifiable: when, where, under what circumstances. In other words, trauma has a ground zero. The event can be clearly defined and tied to the moment of understanding. And most of the time it is impossible to achieve. The German word *Erkenntnis* means a series of complex insights: a central understanding of facing and encountering a past event and taking responsibility for the traces of the event. The way the trauma continues to control the causative agent, the target, or a combination thereof, is also identified. In a broader sense, *Erkenntnis* is also a recognition. There are no

ineffective traumas. Only the target or the cause itself is responsible for how strongly untreated trauma dominates.²

I chose the moving image as a tool for this project because it is capable of capturing the language of the body, and may reach for something of a human experience that cannot be expressed by any other means. According to Ilona Reiners, "The camera can record unintentional gestures and expressions that carry with them signs of the past. The film's ability to create physical and physiological perspectives on the surrounding reality makes it an accurate observer of history. Not only does the film capture unintentional signs of the times, it also makes it possible to visually examine the traces left by the past as well as their presence in the present."³

Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985) was one of my cinematic examples when I decided to film and interview women in my family separately, at different seasons and in as different ways as possible. The impossibility of describing, vocalizing, and remembering traumatic personal and historical events is repeatedly present in the Shoah. The various stages of the film were born without a script, as a result of improvisation. I let people be who they were, and I only influenced where and how the situation was filmed. I did all the vocal interviews separately from the shooting situation, in different seasons during 2014–2015. At the time of the interviews, I also shared what other interviewees had said about the same things and we also discussed it.

The saddest thing for my family has been that open grieving has not been possible so far. It has been impossible because there are fears that something with consequences would be revealed. I tried to discuss it with the women of my family, and it was very diffi-

“TRAGIC FATES, TRAUMAS AFFECTING A WHOLE FAMILY, A NATION, AND PERHAPS HALF A CONTINENT.”



cult to bring it up, to show directly how much untreated grief has been passed down from generation to generation to be carried and unloaded. At first, I was interested in making my family's grief present, facing it, not actually translating it into cinematic form.

For me, grieving and the experience of loss is a process with no goal or end point.

In the Soviet era people developed two simultaneous self-images, one of which felt and thought as not officially accepted, and another that met official requirements. Richard Pipes, professor of history at Harvard University, has found that people's adaptation to two existing realities had a high cost, a disintegration of spirit and personality, leading to a schizophrenic state where their own true thoughts were mostly rejected and sometimes rarely shared with family and friends closest to them. At the same time, people pretended to believe every word of official propaganda. "It caused tension, which made life in the Soviet Union impossible to take. It also left a psychic mark that will last longer than communism itself."⁴

DURING THE INTERVIEWS, I asked about the memories of the Soviet era and modern times and the relationship between them. Soon, the Soviet Union began to take shape: its beginning, its center and the time of its disintegration, the first years after Estonian independence, and the events of 2014 in Europe. While making the video piece, I became interested in the thoughts of Grant Kester, Professor of Art History, about ideas related to community art, where meaning formation takes place together with the group.

In this case, the group involved in the artwork were women of my family. Grant Kester's dialogical aesthetics provide a space where the artist has the opportunity to accept their own dependence and vulnerability in relation to the viewer or audience. This is made possible through openness and listening. In his text, Kester presents his notion of an aesthetic in which the greatest value of a work of art or artwork lies in the process of discussion that seeks change before it. Internalizing the model presented by Kester requires thinking from a new perspective and understanding the meaning of communication in a more multidimensional way. In dialogic aesthetics, an open-minded interaction that values the individuality of the interlocutors is important. The opposite can be seen as an object-oriented way



The girl didn't understand the matter at all.

of discussing, which lacks reciprocity. According to him, a work of art should be understood as the communication process related to the work, not so much the physical object created as a result of the communication. Kester considers works like this to be performative, because according to him, the identities of both the artist and his collaborators are built in such encounters.⁵

I chose a female perspective for my work because I had a good connection with the women of my family and was able to interpret their physical means of expression more easily. I am also interested in the female body as a place which gives birth to something new. During the process, I thought of the body of the women of my family as a place where there is a lot of the unknown and where a lot of troubling and even painful things are buried. Thinking of the body as a kind of meeting place for different experiences also brought the distance I needed to be able to receive so much emotional information. At some point I decided that I would leave some of the stories out of the video piece just because they were too harsh on an emotional level. I only left some sentences because there are so many sad stories to share. For me, part of the artwork was an experience already completed during the interview phase, a work of community art.

The conversation between different generations united people in a new way because they talked about something that hadn't been talked about before. Awareness of the existence of a common past and present increased. The interviews also raised some unresolved issues between generations and between mothers and daughters.

WHILE I WAS WORKING with this project I was interested in the following questions:

- How is the past present in the present time?
- How is history interpreted, edited, remembered?
- How do the specificity of the object of remembrance and the changing historical context change the conditions of remembrance?
- Where are the limits of presenting suffering and forced silence?
- How to find the visual language of displacement and trans-generational silence about difficult issues?
- How to recognize and make visible the violent energies that are hidden in the present?



Think about what life was like then.



How do you find words that have been frozen for generations through fear and confusion?

How do I interview a person who has been repeatedly interrogated and silenced during her life?

I started by interviewing my grandmothers, who had experienced the early days of the Soviet Union including the loss of family as well as home. The interview with my grandmother living in Estonia was the most difficult. Most of the events and things she told were formed into words for the first time. Interviews with both grandmothers lasted several hours. I also paid attention to bodily expression and how things were expressed linguistically, how difficult it was to find the right words. At times, it looked like a physical struggle. In his book *Memory of Art*, Reiners mentions Jean Francois Lyotard, "who names the infallibility of communication with the concepts of strife and injustice.

The realm of controversy – or unspoken suffering – is characterized by an experience of linguistics that requires the search for new forms of expression in order to be expressed.

According to Reiners, such suffering is characterized by the intertwining of perceived injustice and languagelessness, the silence of the victims, which stems from the impossibility of proving the wrong done to them. The most demanding task of a philosopher, historian, and artist is to describe such escaping areas of language. For Lyotard, this means focusing on "what cannot be described by the rules of knowledge."⁶

"HOW DO I INTERVIEW A PERSON WHO HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY INTERROGATED AND SILENCED DURING HER LIFE?"



It was colder, more like the colour of blood.



The human chain

The actual *Red* as artwork was more of an encounter and being present with this subject.

What I recorded and presented in the exhibition space was no longer an evident fragment of what the whole artistic process meant to me and the interviewees.

With the making of *Red*, I learned that what has happened in the past can also happen in the present. Someone is experiencing deprivation of liberty, mental and physical pain and suffering right now, somewhere. In that sense, humanity has not learned much from the past. I believe, therefore, that a repetition of the past in some way is also possible in the future, both for humans and other living beings. In some other form or in another place – for similar or completely different reasons – the same difficult circumstances can happen again. I wanted to make a work that would increase my own understanding of the history of humanity and my immediate surroundings; I tried to find answers to my questions, but was left with new questions that I will probably never find definitive answers to.

However, my understanding increased, and I believe that maintaining human conditions is paramount so that the atrocities of the past towards humanity do not recur. However, I take it for granted that the responsibility for preserving humanity lies primarily with the state and not with art or artists.

At the end of his book *Black Earth*, historian Timothy Snyder states:

The purpose of the state is to maintain human conditions so that its citizens do not have to experience personal survival as their sole goal. The state exists for the recognition, promotion and protection of rights, which means creating the conditions in which rights can be recognized and supported and protected. The state stays upright to create a sense of resilience. Thus, ultimate pluralism is related to time. If we lack a sense of the past and the future, the present seems to be a shaky platform, an uncertain basis for action. Defending states and rights becomes impossible if no one learns from the past or believes in the future. Historical awareness makes it possible to identify ideological traps and teaches us to doubt the demands of immediate action presented on the basis of sudden change. Confidence in the future can make the world look more than, in Hitler's words, a "precise area". Time, the fourth dimension, can make three-dimensional space feel less claustrophobic. Confidence in continuity is the antidote to escape horror and the tonic for demagoguery. In the present, one must create a sense of the future from what is known about the past, build the fourth of the three dimensions of everyday life.⁷

In between words

Together with the color red, sound had a great influence on how I experienced Soviet Estonia. Sometimes there was silence, a powerless tone of voice, sighs in between words, interrupted sentences, nervous laughter etc. Also I had a lot of non-visual memories that I couldn't really relate to, but that I still felt were important. For this reason, I composed a piece of work that was solely related to audio. I started out with a compilation of *The White Wall*, an installation, a collage of sounds, locations, times, and memories mixed together during the working process on *Red*. The concept came from the idea: What if walls could speak of what they have seen and heard? It consists of audio material that I searched for and edited to describe the feelings and thoughts that came to my mind from my childhood atmosphere and in the present time, then 2014.

The ten channel/speaker sound installation *The White Wall* is a composition of found footage, archival sound material and selected audio material from footage in which I interviewed my grandmothers. I asked them to tell me what it was like to start their lives in a society that had taken away all their property and their loved ones, in a society where life was overshadowed by the constant tension of uncertainty and fear. Something was conveyed especially between words, sighs and pauses.

It is at moments when we struggle with memory, when language fails us or our voice breaks, when our bodies are affected by inhibitions or prohibitions, that it becomes critical what values we attach to memory, voice and the body, and what roles

they have in shaping our sense of self and our relation to the world. Such suspension or habitual abilities may occur through a range of different experiences, including migration, trauma, or physical inhibitions like aphasia, aphonia or stuttering. It has become common to understand memory, voice and even bodily sensation and knowledge as something we don't simply have, but something we do, whether consciously or unconsciously. But when the ability to remember, feel or speak gets disrupted, exactly this sense that we are engaged in doing – in interacting with and acting in the world – becomes a question.⁸

The model for the sound compositions to *Red* and *The White Wall* were Marguerite Duras' films, in which sound rises to an important position so that the works seem in places to be imagined. The function of sound is not to act as a commentary track that reinforces the importance of images, but rather to subtly tint what remains in the mind of the listener-viewer, above all on the basis of the soundtrack. Although on the soundtrack, the story is clearer than in the pictures, the space and being in it creates its own visual rhythm for the film. Where sound and image form their own spaces, the variation in interior and exterior images also reflects a contradiction.

For me, working with the project *Red* was emotionally overwhelming process, dealing with difficult memories about Soviet repression and the marks it left on me and the women I am related to. While working with the project, my main aim was to give voice to the women of different generations and their thoughts about political/historical events that have affected their lives intergenerationally. With my project *Red*, my aim was to connect the different historical happenings, stories, experiences, knowledge and memories by sharing verbal and visual knowledge through one family. ✕

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references

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