Communicating Difficult Pasts: A Latvian initiative explores artistic research on historical trauma

Cristina Nualart

In an idyllic village in the Baltic countryside…

… a large Jewish community was completely wiped out during the Holocaust. Historian Ilya Lenski has mapped how museums, sites and monuments in the Latvian town of Kuldīga present the erasure of half of its population. An aseptic wall text by the entrance to a synagogue ‘neutrally’ informs passers-by about its history, without hinting at the violent events or the guilty parties that caused the building to become obsolete from one day to the next in the 1940s. This non-disclosure contrasts with the town’s approach to its colonial past, an older, almost forgotten history that is re-emerging in public spaces. A short walk away, Lenski points to a contemporary public monument that seems to suggest – through its literally two-sided appearance and equally ambiguous title – that the native Duke of Courland, who colonised Gambia and Tobago in the seventeenth century, is a local hero.

The innocent-looking, country town of Kuldīga is thus a fitting location for thinking about how art, architecture and public spaces manifest uneasy pasts. Two dozen artists, curators and researchers met in Kuldīga in August of 2019 to do just that, brought together by Ieva Astahovska

and Margaret Tali, the curators of Communicating Difficult Pasts, the sixth summer school organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA), in cooperation with Kuldīga’s Artist Residency, the Art Academy of Latvia and the Estonian Academy of Arts.

The contested histories of art from eastern Europe, particularly from the Baltic States, were the backbone for this experimental education situation put together by Astahovska and Tali to foster impromptu affective research in a sunny Latvian village. The widest waterfalls in Europe rippled in the background as a sequence of talks and workshops laid bare events that have been forgotten, distorted, and/or artistically documented. These difficult histories, and approaches to rescue them, will be the focus of the commentary that follows, with many questions left intact, before ending with a brief discussion on the format of the summer school as an example of curatorial research and experimental education.

The widest waterfalls in Europe are in Kuldīga, Latvia, photo courtesy of the author 2019

Ghosts demand justice

When does religion trump nationhood in the construction of an individual’s identity, I wondered, as theorist Adi Kunstman introduced their lecture and situated position. ‘I am not Russian, I am Jewish’, stated Kunstman, exploding in one line the space between personal and wider political narratives. Kunstman recalled the crisis of representation that surfaced in anthropological discourse in the 1970s, and Kamala Viswewaran’s call to do ‘homework’ and attend to one’s own backyard,

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1 The title takes the adjective from two books that informed the curators’ research: Sharon Macdonald, Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009; and Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E Milton and Monica Eileen Patterson, eds, Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011

ignored for too long and outshined by ‘exotic’ and faraway cultures to research. The knowledge of intolerable matters occurring close to home often dies from neglect, but ‘ghosts are here to demand justice’, Kunstman says, using the term ‘ghost’ to refer to the notion of an elephant in the room. In this usage, ghosts could arise from negating a family member’s sexual orientation, for instance. The composite term Palestine/Israel signals another example of sighting ‘ghosts’ – the victims that turn a blind eye or become perpetrators themselves. Time has shown that the criteria that situate some people as ‘heroes’ and others as ‘enemy’ can become blurred, or even flip a haunting situation. But ghosts demand justice, and that means repairing damage. The escalating problem of unspeakable issues drives Kunstman’s session surprisingly gracefully to its principal objective, to put methodology under the spotlight:

Having long been interested in violence – its affective economy and its cultural imageries, its seductive power and its bargaining value – I am particularly attentive to the ways violence produces silences in archives, collective memory and even research, and the ways in which these silences can be conceptualised.

While some researchers seek to decolonise theoretical frameworks, pushing back against the dominance of Western knowledge production, Adi Kunstman, who lectures on digital ethics, gives as much thought to prevention as to reparation. Researchers must contemplate how to prevent the colonisation of the forms of remembering and commemorating newly born in the digital age. Since the past is not our own, it is essential to research the painful ghosts in our midst, and gatekeepers of memory must consider the impact of their work, rethinking research ethics with an awareness of contemporary technology. The task might be planned more comprehensively after exercising our imagination with a scenario Kunstman proposes: how might future learners gain awareness of their multiple pasts?

Digital obsolescence is going to destroy some data along the way, and systems of archiving will inevitably contain insufficient or biased information. These issues must be central to the creation and upkeep of virtual museums, digital archives, internet forums, cloud storage and social media. And if the financial cost of the maintenance of hardware and software is rising, what are we to make of the social cost of research, given all the implications? Further questions deserve some bullet-points:

- How can we avoid the digital decay that will destroy existing knowledge?
- How will biometric governance, access to selfies and the politics of ‘opting out’ of digital communication change research practices?
- Who has the right to be digitally forgotten? Who controls the narrative?

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3 See Kamala Visweswaran, Feminist Fictions of Ethnography, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994

4 See the summer school’s Communicating Difficult Pasts brochure, 2019, p 8

• Does the work’s value justify the environmental damage caused by the digital technologies employed throughout?

The stumbling blocks of research in the young field of Memory Studies concern professor Violeta Davoliūtė, for whom too many narratives have fallen between the cracks of scholarship due to competitive memories. She peers into the cracks to illustrate her point: ‘the horrific Holocaust experiences of direct survivors outweighed and snuffed the experiences of Soviet exiles’. Yet those unheard stories were not exceptional occurrences.\(^5\) Polish, Jewish or Lithuanian historiographies have not covered the multidirectional, multilingual and transnational stories of deportations. Almost 30,000 Lithuanians were arrested, imprisoned or deported by the Soviets, yet the life stories of the deported were absent from the ‘return of memory’ that took place after the Soviet Union collapsed. To combat the ‘competition’ of traumatic memories, Davoliūtė recommends a theoretical tool, ‘multidirectional memory’, whereby researchers should seek and recollect forgotten life stories. Gathering the testimonies of women is particularly useful, since their lives have generally been less documented, Davoliūtė adds.

Artists too can help build multidirectional memories, although their role is not without its challenges, as was discussed after watching Mama makes pancakes, a film by Lithuanian artist Jonas Mekas (1922–2019). The dilemmas are best enjoyed in question form:

• Under conditions of foreign occupation, is the duty of the artist to speak out against injustice and stop creating, or to create in order to preserve culture?

\(^5\) Between 1940–1958, over 690,000 people disappeared or were killed or displaced by the Soviet regime; for comparison, according to Davoliūtė’s data, about 340,000 people were killed or displaced by the Nazis between 1941–1944
• Is silence an acceptable survival strategy or coping mechanism for the artist during the occupation? And in the years following the occupation?
• Is the term ‘useful idiot’ a fair critique of intellectuals who lend their support to a foreign regime?

An artist invited to the summer school precisely to share his concern about the ethical challenges of documentary practice is photographer Harri Pälviranta. Pälviranta, like Adi Kunstman, is interested in violence but not, in his case, for any personal or private issue, rather as a phenomenon that is challenging to document without appearing voyeuristic. The complexities of documentary practice have even led Pälviranta to break personal boundaries of comfort; a must, he says, when addressing societal violence. Ultimately, documentary images carry a trace of the makers’ morals, since ethical choices are embedded in any artistic practice that involves living creatures from the moment that the work is planned. Since philosophical ponderings never yield simple answers, Pälviranta redirects the thought process with a shortcut: will making or showing this body of work cause harm to anyone?

Documentary ethics are easier to handle when the maker is also the subject. The Samulionytė sisters, Jūratė and Vilma, have done just that, albeit involving close family members who appeared willingly, if somewhat begrudgingly, in their 2017 documentary Liebe Oma, Guten Tag! Strangely, the English title, What We Leave Behind, leaves out the word ‘grandmother’. Wanting to know more about unspoken family matters, the two Lithuanian sisters conceived their film project to break the silence around their German grandmother. They asked awkward questions of relatives and dug through archives in order to trace the love story that had led their Oma to flee Germany. Over five years of filmmaking, they slowly learnt about their grandmother’s unhappy life in Soviet Lithuania, discovering also a chain of suicides in the family. The fascinating visual narrative integrates uncut footage of the authors’ evolving thought processes and emotional responses to the findings they make, resulting in a film that contains its own making as it lays bare the process of utilising affective research.

Personal plights also underpin the work of Máret Ánne Sara, who left journalism in order to be an artist. As a means of expression, she says, art can include so much more: ‘it can amplify the discussion, and it doesn’t restrict you to a number of articles per page’. Máret has chosen to make art to give visibility to her community, the Sami, a native people of northern Europe who live on land now colonised by Norway, Sweden and other nearby nations. Suicides are on the rise in the Sami community, and particularly among the young because of the difficulty in surviving that they experience. Máret and her ancestors were affected by Norway’s brutal colonising processes that banned the use of the Sami language in schools and, she claims, led to the killing of Sami shamans.

It is the reindeer, however, that are at present being killed by the colonial government, with the backing of its own laws. An official cull of reindeers was justified with the argument that the animals were destroying the environment. Arguably, these laws are a means to exercise some control over the nomadic lifestyles of a people living in the wild, and to deter traditional reindeer herding by making it financially unviable.
Exhibited in Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017, Máret Ánne Sara’s *Pile o’Sápmi* is a hanging installation of hundreds of reindeer skulls that were salvaged from a makeshift visual protest. The reindeer heads were originally intentionally piled up outside the courthouse where the artist’s brother, a young reindeer herder, was facing trial for not halving the number of reindeer in his herd to the figure demanded by law. The ongoing legal battle for indigenous rights in Norway has reached the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, yet this is rarely mentioned in media articles about Máret Ánne Sara’s work. The headlines about *Pile o’Sápmi* have focused on ecology and conservation and say nothing of the political message in the work. It is also, perhaps, no coincidence that mining, which is expanding in the region where many Sami people live, is rarely the subject of any of the headlines decrying environmental disasters.

Máret Ánne Sara thinks of her artwork as a witness. The context of its creation contains a cumulative view of history, encompassing politics, rights, society, culture, land and the way of life of a group. Nonetheless, the artist does not describe herself as an activist, although she understands that her work is sometimes read in this way. ‘Art can be a tool’, she says, but if she were to be arrested as an activist, she would be silenced. The attention garnered by her works with reindeer bones, and their visual impact, will be hard to forget or conceal since her works have entered museum collections. The artist voiced her concerns about allowing *Pile o’Sápmi* to hang in an important museum in Norway—‘What is the museum?’, she says, ‘It is the awareness of a nation’—given the tensions between the political content in the artwork and the museum’s links to the state, a state that creates regulations that a social group like the Sami find discriminatory. But her position is clear: the message in her work must not be compromised, even if that means not installing an artwork. History has given us examples of the political use of artworks, or the exhibition displays that have transformed a work’s intended meaning, but situations like these are complex, and allow us to reformulate a question that was asked by Violeta Davoliūtė: ‘Under conditions of foreign occupation, is the duty of the artist to speak out against injustice and stop her creations from showing in public museums, or should they be exhibited in public museums precisely because they get more exposure there?’

Harri Pälviranta considers it is time to open a conversation on practitioners’ ethics. There is almost no empirical research on artists’ moral decisions, he claims, although theoretical perspectives on photography and documentary studies have been published. The dialogue on ethics initiated by
Harri’s workshop broached other areas, such as institutional ethics, questioning the ethical responsibility of institutions in matters of gender balance, as in the frequent underrepresentation of women artists in exhibitions and museum collections, or in cases of censorship.

Two ethical issues were raised by a video made from appropriated digital material, an artwork presented by artist Jasmine Powell. One issue is appropriation itself, the old chestnut of plagiarism now transformed into a *marron glacé*, sugar-coated with the immaterial theft of intellectual property and other legal quandaries of the digital age. The other ethical issue raised by Powell was her artistic decision to work under pseudonyms. There have been plenty of examples of women writers or artists who worked under a male name in order to be able to sell their work or get a fair critique, but in the digital age usernames and fake identities often arise for other motives. Almost a decade ago, the internet theorist Jaron Lanier contemplated whether pervasive anonymity or pseudonymity online was a good thing, reasoning that anonymity allows the digital hive to grow at the expense of individuality. The first commandment on Lanier’s ‘save-the-world’ list is quite simply: ‘Don’t post anonymously unless you really might be in danger.’

On the other hand, anonymity, or not taking credit for actions, can be an ethical choice, as became apparent from the working practices shared by the Norwegian curator Espen Johansen. Commissioned by an institution to programme a sequence of standalone exhibitions, Johansen saw that the said institution had an exhibition history that was dominated by male artists. Consciously avoiding the feminist publicity bandwagon, he curated some interesting exhibitions of works that happened to be made mostly by women. Unbeknownst to the institution, his programming, which was well-received, contributed to partially redressing the gallery’s abysmal gender balance, and it did so without putting up fashionable neon signs advertising gender justice, or even by bringing attention to the sex of the individual artists.

**Affective learning**

The content selected for the Communicating Difficult Pasts summer school inspires a shifting of the gaze from selective or exclusive memories towards places where local erasures may await to be found. The oppression/omission of any group – Jewish, Sami, Estonian, Ukrainian, queer, etc – has given rise to ‘ghosts’ whose pasts, if known at all, hide subjectivities that can be brought out, while in the process transforming the current artistic landscape. There are moral choices to be made both by ignoring subjects of history – because that leads to their loss – or by making them visible as subjects of research, as this carries potential consequences for them and their relatives.

In themselves, approaches to research incarnate ethical stances. Avoidance of harm is a priority, but like competing memories competing harms will fight for dominance. A number of artists and academics turn their research back on themselves – doing ‘homework’, as Kamala Viswewaran called for – and digging into their own subjectivities. In this arena, research that moves away from the fallacy of objectivity and embraces feelings and affect is more likely to occur. While desirable

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because of the transparency of its situated position, affective research is an approach not to be romanticised. Affective practices are hardly immune to narcissism, disguised bias or even sadistic inclinations on the part of the researcher. Yet artistic research is better positioned, more so than academic research, to get away with accusations of that sort because of how society likes to conceive of the figure of the artist, and, furthermore, because the tenuous nature of feelings has much in common with art forms such as performance, relational situations or conceptual proposition: they all share a fundamentally immaterial quality.

Contemporary artistic practices seem particularly well suited for dealing with affect, as a brief list of examples presented at the summer school will show. Empathy’s mollifying properties can take hard and soft textures. Arguably more cerebral than instinctive, hard empathy is the intentional attempt to generate empathic sentiments. This process can be seen in the documentary projects made by Kristina Norman and Harri Pälviranta, artists who interact with strangers, actively seeking to learn and understand from the encounters. Soft empathy, on the other hand, operates like a mirror that shows feelings and their reflection, as seen in the artworks presented by artists Hristina Tasheva, the SLED collective and the Samulionytė sisters, for example. The artistic research employed by these creators burrows directly in their own persons and immediate family members. Their works, according to the goose pimples they raised, are glowing pieces of life-affirming and bonding power.

Conclusion

The effort behind the curatorial research required to organise LCCA’s summer school is, in effect, part of a larger, ongoing research project, destined to conclude with a forthcoming exhibition. As a standalone event, nevertheless, this initiative did a good job of curating education in aspects beyond curriculum design. Spatial concerns make a considerable difference to learning. Those gathered for the week in a small, quiet town were not lured by competing cultural attractions to spend time away from the artist’s residence gallery that hosted the sessions. The peaceful natural surroundings worked their

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restorative magic, with effects similar to taking a thinking/reading week, or attending a conference where new takes on knowledge can be grasped faster than downloading the latest literature.

The welcoming ambience and the open format of workshops and debates held inside the space of an art exhibition supported affective learning in ways that paralleled the methodologies used to create many works of art. Discussing how art projects are conceived, researched, trialled and finally executed makes apparent that sometimes the actual artistic process is more transformative than the final work, both for the maker and also for the interviewees, technicians and collaborators, before reaching, after completion, the spectators of the artwork. Experiencing works of art informed by affective research left no doubt about how seductive this approach can be in its capacity to transmit uncomfortable histories in closely personal and compelling ways. The summer school honoured its title by communicating difficult pasts, and by doing so gently, somewhat paradoxically, warming neurons as kindly as the wood-fired sauna that was lit on the last night in Kuldīga. Sitting almost naked in a sweat room in the Baltics was one of the final activities offered to participants and speakers who wished to continue engaging in heated debates on the violent pasts that lashed the twentieth century and remain in us like toxins unless cleansed away, preferably by artistic experiences.

The author’s sketchbook, with drawing of a reindeer skull in Máret Ánne Sara’s work, photo courtesy of the author 2019

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**Cristina Nualart** is a member of GIA (Grupo de Investigación Asia) at Universidad Complutense, Madrid. She is a researcher on the VASDiV (Visual Activism and Sexual Diversity in Vietnam) project, funded by an AHRC/GCRF Research Networking grant. Her publications in English include ‘Queer art in Vietnam: from closet to pride in two decades’ (*Palgrave Communications* 2, 2016), and ‘Contemporary Feminist Art in Vietnam: The visual emergence of agency’ (*Irish Journal of Asian Studies*, vol 4, 2018).