

MATERIALS

A Great Silence Lay Upon the Land: Secreted Histories of Ireland

Ailbhe Smyth

Explanatory Note

In 2013, Liz Burns¹ was invited by the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to curate an art event on the theme of Memory and Testimony in the historic but now run-down building housing the DIT's Fine Arts department, located on the site of the former St. Joseph's Convent, an "Asylum for Aged and Virtuous Single Women." The DIT wanted to commemorate the Institute's twenty years in the building, before a major move to a new location, and to extend and support artistic frameworks and programs around the idea of contemporary art debates and the period of commemorations Ireland was entering into at that time. In light of the shocking revelations since the 1990s of widespread and brutal clerical and institutional abuse of children, young people and women in Ireland, the curator was interested in exploring how artists respond to the themes of memory, testimony, silencing and redress. The event included an exhibition and live performances by members of the Performance Collective (Pauline Cummins, Sandra Johnston, Frances Mezzetti, and Dominic Thorpe) entitled *It Has No Name*. I was asked to participate in a panel discussion with artists, academics and activists during the event, and Liz Burns later asked me if I would write a reflection on *It Has No Name*.

The exhibition and performances affected me deeply. The artists have widely differing practices, preoccupations and personal histories, and each performance in its own way was unsettling and disturbing. I felt exposed somehow, jagged, uncertain. They demanded direct engagement, but I wasn't sure I knew either what or how. Maybe trying to write my way through to some sort of understanding—however inadequate that would be—was what I needed to do. The writing unnerved me. Re-reading it is still unnerving.

Ultimately, the key, it seemed to me, was that what happened so brutally, criminally, and scandalously to so many for so long, was about all of us. The Catholic Church must bear the brunt of responsibility for the abuse of thousands of babies, children, young people, and women by individual clerics and nuns and in institutions run by the Church on behalf of the state. But there is no hiding place: at some level of our collective being, we knew. We must all bear witness. That is a moral imperative.

A Great Silence Lay Upon the Land was how I responded in 2013. I'm writing this now just after the papal visit to Ireland (August 2018). Pope Francis encountered a very different country to the Ireland of the last papal visit in 1979. In 2018, Catholics paid their respects to the head of their Church, although in far smaller numbers than anticipated, and with more questions and reservations than adulation. The people's anger was upfront and palpable during the two days of what was promoted as a "historic occasion." Our anger at the shameful history of countless wrecked lives and the Catholic Church's contemptible failure to accept its primary responsibility for the evil wreaked upon the vulnerable. Expressions of sorrow and shame by the Pope and members of the

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ecclesiastical hierarchy were noted. But they cut no ice. *Hollow words from the hollow men.* The Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) was explicit, the people were explicit: words are not enough, they are never enough. They must be backed up by full acknowledgement of responsibility, and above all by concrete and time-specific action to root out the evil of abuse and punish all those, without exception, who betrayed the people's trust, hurt them, and concealed the truth. In the Ireland of 2018, there is nowhere for the Catholic Church to hide.

The damage, the sorrow, the shame, and the anger are with us still. How could they not be? Resolution comes haltingly, and for those who have been severely hurt, may not come at all. All the same, I think it was a "historic occasion." We made it clear to the Pope and much more importantly to ourselves that we would no longer tolerate silence to lie upon the land.

A Great Silence Lay Upon the Land

Turn away now, this is not a pretty sight. This contains disturbing images, unsuitable for the fainthearted, for charlatans, Corinthians or Pharisees, sophists, sophisticates, tricksters, dissemblers.

Leave now if you will, because this does not—even—bear the patina of scholarship.

The balm of oubli can descend with stunning totality on those who have abandoned the academy.

This is about secrets and silence and bodies and sex. It's about lies and cruelty and cover-up jobs, all intricately interwoven—merged and submerged, depending.

It's about people, children and women, and about what happens to them when the powerful eschew humanity, decency, and truth.

At the end of the day it is, to be sure, about power: how it is wielded, denied, hidden, where and how it lies, and where and how its force is felt and lived.

It is also, I hope, indirectly at least about how it may be reimagined when its sequelae are uncovered, its secrets exposed.

Fear

How are we to do it? Can it be done at all?²

The fear of getting it wrong, of misunderstanding. Fear of omitting, misrepresenting. Fear of our failures of observation, interpretation, empathy. Fear of the false note, the false gesture. Fear of not enough and too much. Fear of our own petty vanities and the intrusions of ego. Fear of hurting the very ones we seek to honour and cherish. Fear of betraying those whose trust was so profoundly violated. Fear of betraying a trust we have no right to assume

Who am I to be trusted?

Can I be trusted, can I trust myself, to bear faithful witness to histories gathered, as all histories must be, after the fact? Histories that come to us as fragments of lives, shards of pain.

How can I bear witness to histories almost beyond bearing, beyond belief?

He befriended me. . . . I felt very secure . . . he was a friendly figure . . . that's all he did that night . . . each night he did more and more . . . he told me not to be ridiculous, he wasn't doing anything wrong, priests couldn't do something wrong. I turned from being a happy-go-lucky little girl to one who didn't trust anybody my life spiralled out of control. (Collins 2009)

The work is “to fit the pieces together, piece by piece.”³ Taking pains to feel the weight and shape, the heft and reach of each and every one. Staying true to the detail of the fragments that survive. Peeling back the decades of denial, secrecy, shame, horror. Taking great care in the laying bare of what is uncovered.

Labour of love.

Truthfully, I don't know if I can do that, or if it could ever be enough. Why should it be? Cruelty can never be erased. So much suffering. Words, gestures, images, sounds, all the compassion, all the wishing in the world—nothing can ever take it away. It is unbearable because we can't change it.

But there is nothing else; *agape* is what we have.⁴ We have to try to bear it, to listen, to understand. We cannot leave those who have borne the suffering all their lives to carry it alone for posterity. It's our human responsibility, our love's labour, those of us who were safe, those of us who were spared that suffering, to bear witness.

Love—is anterior to Life—
Posterior—to Death—
Initial of Creation, and
The Exponent of Earth—
(Emily Dickinson, Number
917, 432)

Silence I

In the dead quiet of these bare rooms, I hold my breath, feel the power of a silence broken only by the necessary choreography of gesture and movement: chisel scraping wood, dripping tap, hands shaping some strange matter, faint rasp of spooling lengths of tape, scrape of chair swivelling across the diagonal, brush swishing through a mane of hair, screaming madness barely contained, the echoless weight of intense concentration.

In the dead quiet, I hold my breath, listening, waiting, suspended, outside time.

Listening out for myriad untold stories, or if told as yet unheard, making their halting way to the surface of memory.

I hold my breath, waiting.

This is not the silence of those reduced to speechless terror, cowering under the monstrous brutality of those in whose care they had been placed.

Nor is it either the “really dangerous silence”⁵ of prohibition, denial and secrecy, self-serving and vainglorious, wreaking havoc with tender lives, ravaging and devastating.⁶

We will not stand for that.

This, we hope, is the silence of possibility, making way for understanding, a silence which usurps no voices.

It is our responsibility to listen out for it, and to hold it when we find it.

We need to know how to bear what has not yet been spoken.

A young woman sits quietly listening as we talk about the work we have seen. After a while, she joins the circle and begins to speak about what she has learned, what she hadn’t known before. The pain inflicted, the damage done, year after year of cruelty, so many children injured, so many lives blighted. The young woman stops speaking and weeps. There are times when sorrow and shame are beyond words.

It has no name.

There are times when silence is necessary so speech can begin and myriad stories can be told.⁷

That silence may be a kind of balm for the soul.

Silence 2

It was not done in our name, we say. No, but it happened within living memory, within shouting distance.⁸ All done behind our backs, discretely turned to keep well out of it. We closed our eyes, closed our ears, turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the cruelties done to others.

Not guilty M’Lud, Sir, Mrs, Father, our Lord who art in Heaven.

And we saw
What we saw
And we didn’t see
What was hidden.

Rita Ann Higgins

Oh we have our reasons and excuses alright.

“We never knew,” we say, “we had no idea, not an iota of what was going on, sure how could we?”

So where did we think they went, all those boys and girls, secreted away from family, community, society, out of sight, out of mind? Who did we think lived in those dark forbidding places? What did

we think happened to the people behind those closed doors and high walls, down the road from where we lived or over beyond? Did we dream of them having high jinks, balloons and streamers with cake for tea, contentedly doing their sums and their spellings, taught by kind teachers, nuns and priests, who smiled at them, patted them gently and gave them sweets, bathed in sunlight every day, and tucked up tenderly every night in their little beds?

No, truly, what did we think became of those children sent, taken, sequestered? Who did we think took care of them, did we care who took care of them, and did we care if they didn't? Did we ever go looking for them, ever ask the odd question?

What of the girls and women who worked in servitude—slavery a more precise word—in middle-class homes? Where did we think they came from and did we wonder where they went when they left? Did we ever ask why they chose to work in “domestic service”? Did we think it was strange, when we employed them, that mothers had to leave their own babies behind to come and look after ours? Did we ever think it was cruel? Did we ever notice how they cried as they fed our bonny babies?

Did we ever wonder how they lived, if they were warm, if they felt safe, if they had enough to eat, if they were paid, if they had hope, if they were sometimes happy, those girls and women who washed our sheets and pillowcases, our table cloths and napkins, our shirts and underwear?

“The nuns,” we said, “the nuns have the laundries. Sure aren't they great, and all they do for those poor girls, no better than they should be.”

What in the name of all heaven were we thinking of?

We never looked, so we never saw. We never asked, so we never knew. If we had, we would have known, we could have known. We would have known about the cold, the hunger, the hard labour, the hard beds, the physical punishments and psychological torments, the sexual onslaughts, the cruel indifference, the loneliness, the desolation of the spirit, the despair.

If we thought about those things and more, we never talked about it, never said it out loud, never named whatever it was we thought. Perished the thought as soon as born. We learned our lessons so well. We were taught never to question, never to probe, never to answer back or speak up for ourselves. We were taught to obey, to curtsy, to bow, to take it on the chin. We learned fast to stay silent in the face of authority, whatever was said or done. We learned that bodies and sexuality were shameful and unspeakable.

But deep down, we knew about the dark places, knew them from our history and in our bones. We knew what was going on. We knew very well and we buried the knowledge. Just as we buried their bodies in unmarked graves.

Unmarked, uncounted, unremembered. Tender thin bodies of the hungry, the ill, the exhausted, the abused, the beaten, the violated, the tortured, the always vulnerable and powerless. Because their lives didn't count. You don't give a name to what doesn't count.

A great silence lay upon the land.

A silence of hiding lives, hiding suffering, hiding brutality, sadism, cruelty, indifference, hiding what didn't fit the image of valiant victimised holy Ireland, hiding all we didn't want to acknowledge.

Great pools of silence into which we were careful never to gaze.

The institutional abuse of children and young women and men was a national secret, a collective crime committed behind closed doors, pushed down by fists of iron beneath the register of official records and histories.⁹ We were all complicit.

And it isn't over. Our criminality and complicity are not confined to the safety of history. Every day, news trickles through of present risks and dangers to those who are most vulnerable and most in need of our love and care.

"Each new discovery," he said, "a stunning blow."

The wrong done to people whose only sin is to seek refuge, asylum. The inhuman treatment of those who are too young, too old, or too infirm, too incapacitated to defend themselves. Wilful, scandalous neglect, abuse, and cruelty. Outrage after outrage. We are a cruel people, at best indifferent. Which is unforgivable.

But we will guard silence no longer, we will break it, using every means at our disposal. No more secrets, no more lies.

We will not stand for it.

"True evil lies not in the depraved acts of the one, but in the silence of the many."¹⁰

Martin Luther King

What is Left

I am the hollow woman
 Husk scraped bare
 Shorn, sheared
 exsanguinated
 defleshed
 flayed
 chiselled bone
 scaffolding
 I am space where nothing rests
 Only the deepest pain

What have they done with my heart?

During the Middle Ages, defleshing was a mortuary procedure mainly used to transport human remains over long distances. It involved detaching the head, arms and legs, and removing skin, muscles and organs until only the bones remain. The process leaves telltale cuts on the bones.¹¹

We will work, then, with the bones. We will scrutinize the scars, the telltale cuts. We will hold them up to the light. Nothing will be left behind.

We will proceed with due care and attention.

When you dig into the experiences of others, you can hurt them.

We will attend lovingly to what we find. We will mind it, in every way we can.

It will never be enough, but it will be something, it will be heard, it will be seen, it will be held, it will be named.

“The guilt that cannot be assuaged for one generation will haunt the next.”

Darian Leader¹²

Remembering

First, we will refuse the casual brutality of our unremembering, of all we were taught to ignore, deny, suppress, avoid. We will dig deep within ourselves and bring to the surface what has been secreted for so long. We will feel it in our bodies, in our bones, in our hearts. The fear, the shame, the guilt, the appalling pain. Every blow, every assault. Every act of spite, malice, and sadism. The rejection, the coldness, the cruelty, the brutality. The disempowerment, the disdain, the disrespect. We will not flinch, deflect, or turn away.

Then we will set about the slow meticulous work of re-mem-bering: scrupulously retrieving and reassembling, repairing where necessary, every detail, fragment, shard, and iota. We will cherish every scrap we find, treat it as a treasure beyond compare. We will hold it close and take it deep into our hearts, until there is no more “I,” no more “You,” no more “They,” only the one.

We will go on until we believe we can do no more because it hurts. And then we will begin again for the work of remembering is never truly done, once and for all. It is a life-long task.

We will do it separately, each one to our own remembering, and we will do it together, hand in hand, refusing the obscurity of mass amnesia, until we have an intricacy of imbricated memories. And then we will begin again.

We will do the work of remembering to honour those in the past to whom great wrongs were done by people who had the power, the privilege, and the knowledge to do better.

We will do it for those who remain, in the hope of bringing them some small comfort and balm.

We will do it for ourselves, in atonement, because we are not now and never were innocent.

Our work will be strong, firm and constant, but, in the nature of all things, it will also be fragile, mutable, and ephemeral.

“Nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.”¹³

Notes

1. Liz Burns works as an independent curator. She worked for the Fire Station Artists' Studios in Dublin where she curated the visual arts program. She curated the exhibition *It Has No Name*.
2. In the aftermath of the horror of the Second World War death camps, Theodor Adorno wrote of Paul Celan's poetry that it was "permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation" (Adorno 1984, 444).
3. This was the phrase used by the late Mary Raftery, whose pioneering work unearthed these cruel, tragic histories (Raftery 1999).
4. Agape: Greek word meaning love in the spiritual sense. In its original meaning, it had no particular religious connotations.
5. "The demand for obedience translated regrettably into clerical child abuse and was translated into a really dangerous silence." Mary McAleese, cit. Mark O'Regan, *Irish Independent*, October 22, 2012.
6. "The [Ryan] Commission's report said testimony had demonstrated beyond a doubt that the entire system treated children more like prison inmates and slaves than people with legal rights and human potential, that some religious officials encouraged ritual beatings and consistently shielded their orders amid a 'culture of self-serving secrecy,' and that government inspectors failed to stop the abuses." "Irish Church Knew Abuse 'Endemic.'" *BBC News*, May 20, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8059826.stm>.
7. For all the reports we have had over the past several years, so many stories have still not been told, may never be told indeed.
8. Child protection policy was slow to develop in Ireland. Public awareness of clerical child abuse did not surface until the early 1990s, with the revelations of the Brendan Smyth case. See Keenan 2012.
9. See Smith (2001) for a discussion of what he calls "Ireland's architecture of containment," a system comprising both legislation and official discourses which effectively conspired to suppress information about the incarceration of so many vulnerable people.
10. Quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr.
11. See the entry on Excarination in Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excarnation>.
12. Darian Leader, "Bi-polar memoirs: What have I done?," *Guardian*, April 27, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/26/human-touch-in-bipolar-times>. See also Leader (2009).
13. "Wabi sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete, the antithesis of our classical Western notion of beauty as something perfect, enduring, and monumental" (Koren 1998, 7).

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