

FEMINIST EMBODIMENTS OF SILENCE. PERFORMING THE INTOLERABLE SPEECH IN THE WORK OF REGINA JOSÉ GALINDO

Giulia Casalini

Goldsmiths College, Londres, Reino Unido

Abstract

The essay explores how silence represents a «feminine language» that communicates through a non-uttered voice. The analysis of silence is here conducted in performance art practice by focussing on the work of Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo: by using her works, the essay shows how the artist bears witness to trauma and to gender-related violence. This investigation approaches silent performance as capable of articulating and triggering both ethical and political considerations.

Keywords: Silence, body, trauma, performance, feminism.

Résumé

Incarnations féministes du silence. La performance du discours intolérable dans l'oeuvre de Regina José Galindo

Cet essai explore le silence comme «langue féminine» qui communique parmi une voix qui n'est pas vocalisée. L'analyse du silence est ici conduite dans l'art performative dans le travail de l'artiste Guatémaliennne Regina José Galindo: à travers ses travaux, cet essai montre comme l'artiste représente le témoin du trauma et de la violence basée sur le genre. Cette investigation approche le silence en performance comme capable d'articuler et activer des considérations éthiques et politiques.

Mots-clés: Silence, corps, trauma, performance, féminisme.

Resumo

Incorporações feministas do silêncio: a performance do discurso intolerável no trabalho de Regina José Galindo

Este ensaio explora o silêncio como uma «linguagem feminina» que comunica através duma voz não-vocalizada. A análise do silêncio é aqui realizada através do foco no trabalho da artista guatemalteca Regina José Galindo: através dos seus trabalhos, este ensaio mostra como a artista testemunha o trauma e a violência de género. Esta investigação aborda a *performance* silenciosa como capaz de articular e enunciar considerações éticas e políticas.

Palavras-chave: Silêncio, corpo, trauma, *performance*, feminismo.

Embodying silence

*It was terrible. No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here... When they burnt people – Jews – every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now*¹ (Jeffrey Skoller, 2005: 109).

Silence can communicate much more than a simple pause – more than an intake of breath or a suspended thought. Silence is imbued with meaning, distributed in our language as the words that compose it. All the same, it is extremely painful to talk about it, trying to rationalize its supposed «nothingness». It was only back in the end of the XIX century that the approach towards silence changed: thanks to psychoanalysis, silence first started to be analysed in the medical field as a trace that bears a certain meaning. Among the first studies on this subject there are Freud and Breuer's diagnoses on women with hysteria, suffering from muteness or from difficulties in articulating their own speech (Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, 1991: 164-165). From the symptoms to the source of trauma, psychoanalysis for the first time tried to give an effective interpretation of the silences that the hysterics carried in their everyday life: in Freud's words, hysteric women suffered from «reminiscences» (*ibid.*: 165). Memory itself comes to the surface in the form of a loss of linguistic articulation: the patient unconsciously rehearses the memory with visible gestures or behaviours that are the result of their traumatic nature. French psychologist Pierre Janet dissociates the «ordinary» from the «traumatic» memory: the first is social while the second one is personal and it can be evoked over time, bearing the same intensity as the trauma that originated it. The traumatic memory is then rehearsed, over and over again, always exposing the same original trauma: traumatic memory, far from being a mere documentation or record, distinguishes itself for its performative status. It cannot therefore be narrated or expressed with our rational linguistic tools since it mainly implies gestures, behaviours, omissions and silences: it is in fact through performance that the witness can give a *meaning* – and not just deliver *information* – to what s/he wants to express (Cándida Smith, 2002: 2). Memory then is not just based on a text but it also predominantly relies on its own performativity. All the gestures that confer a meaning to the enactment of memory confirm the performative status of the traumatic memory as such and at the same time they perform the crisis concerning its representation. This crisis is embodied within the traumatized witness itself, who performs a subjective, incommunicable experience: trauma is not only impossible to communicate to 'others' but also to one's own. As Shoshana Felman writes

¹ Auschwitz survivor Simon Srebnik speaks in Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah* (1985).

that «the desire not to read, and not to talk, stems from the fear of hearing or of witnessing, oneself. The *will-to-silence* is the will to *bury* the dead witness inside oneself (Felman and Laub, 1992: 225)». When interviewing Auschwitz survivors, Felman realises how difficult it is to hear oneself witnessing what is unbearable to hear: before speaking about the trauma in public, in fact, the survivor has to hear her/himself confessing what s/he wants instead to bury. This phase is the most delicate for the trauma survivor to undertake in order to recollect her/his own memory: the victim, facing a dissociated memory, has to give voice to the discourse that instead struggles to remain silent. The trauma survivor refuses first and foremost to witness her/his own story – impossible to communicate to the others and to oneself. Also, three years later, Derrida notes in *Archive Fever* the impossibility of recording one's own traumatic memory: the French philosopher in fact states that the archive is constituted «at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory» (Derrida, 1995: 14). Recording, documenting or transcribing one's own memory for a future use may be possible just when recognizing the impossibility of the action itself: the archive is finally made impossible because of its «death drive». It then can just create an «impression» or a «notion without a concept» of the memory that it conveys (*ibid.*: 22-24).

Is there any other possible way to express the incommunicability of trauma if, as just seen, it cannot be recorded nor simply transmitted? The solution that Felman and Laub gave – followed by Derrida – is based on the impossibility of bearing witness. This paradigm may be resurrected throughout the analysis of and the engagement with the traumatic memory as a result of paradoxes: it is determined and yet does not have a place, it accuses and yet it is the victim, it speaks and yet it stays mute. These contradictory features are also related to the symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), which are at the same time linked to the re-experience and the concealment of the trauma: people with PTSD may in fact «relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings... (American Psychological Association, 2012)». Not willing to give testimony, the witness suffers from a difficulty in articulating what has been experienced in trauma. This dysfunction is mostly manifested in language, which is performed with omissions: what is meaningful is not what has been told but what is still left to know. The *unsaid* is the most urgent aspect for the delicate comprehension of one's trauma and for its cure. From a medical perspective, it is the expression of trauma through linguistic articulation that can enliven the status of the traumatised person (Pennebaker, 1990: 10).

In the following chapters I will explore how in performance art silence has been chosen as the medium of expressing trauma and as a space open to collective healing. The works that will be analysed belong to Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo (lives and works in Antigua, Guatemala)², with whom I have personally been in touch since April 2012.

The ethics of silence

How to remain silent in front of a 200.000 person genocide? How can one not lend their voice to the 100,000 women who have been repeatedly raped, tortured and humiliated during the Guatemalan civil war?³ Performance artist and poet Regina José Galindo chooses not to speak. In her performances she stays silent and mute as if she is dead. She struggles to produce a space of tension between her body and the one of the public. Nevertheless, a milieu of communication is created, but it does not follow a linguistic rule. In *Meanwhile, they continue to be free*, 2007 (figure 1) Galindo lies on a table, during her eighth month of pregnancy. Her hands and feet are tied with an umbilical cord. The image she presents of herself recalls the experience of the aboriginal women from Guatemala (many of whom were also pregnant) who have been tied up and tortured by the soldiers who repeatedly abused them just in order to kill the foetus and (if they survived the rape) to invalidate the woman's future possibility of pregnancy. The performance takes place from the enactment of the stories of those women who survived the atrocities: the year after the peace accord was signed in 1996 (when the Civil War ended), an international commission called Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) started to collect the many primary testimonies of the still undocumented genocide. The final text is called *Guatemala: memory of silence* and it can be accessed entirely via web (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999). The text is a collection of more than 9,000 testimonies of survivors: no official document has in fact been left about the events of the genocide and, as it happened for Auschwitz, only the survivor's testimonies could fill in the historical silence⁴.

² Regina José Galindo was born in Guatemala City in 1974 during the civil war. Her work has been the subject of solo and group shows around the globe and she has participated to various biennials, among which the XV Biennale Donna, Ferrara (Italy), the 17th Biennale of Sydney, the Habana Biennale (2009), Valencia Biennale, (Spain, 2007), III Bienale of Tirana (Albania, 2005), Venice Biennale (2001, 2005, 2007 and 2009) and the III Bienal in Lima (2002, Peru). In 2011 she wins the Principe Claus award and the Grand Prize Award at the 29th Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts. In 2005 she was awarded the Golden Lion for young artists at the 51st Venice Biennial. Two monographs have been published on her work (Cazali, Flórez, *et al.*, 2001 and Savorelli, 2006), together with her book of poetry *Personal e Intransmisibile* (Galindo, 2000).

³ The silenced story of Mayan victims of mass rape is one of the cruelest consequences of the Guatemalan conflict, lasted from 1960 to 1996. Violence and rape against women still continue today, as a result of the perpetuated impunity against those executioners (e.g. 685 women were killed in 2010). Only the 1% of these cases goes to trial (De Pablo, Tremlett and Zurita, 2011).

⁴ Galindo enacts testimonies like the following one: «I was consequently raped, almost for 15 times, from both the soldiers and the men who dressed like civilians. I was seven month pregnant – in few days I aborted» [my translation] (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999).

Figura 1

Regina José Galindo, *Mientras, ellos siguen libres (Meanwhile, they continue to be free)*, 2007. Performance.



© Regina José Galindo.

Regina José Galindo, performing the trauma of these many people slaughtered with no human respect, also contributes to a discussion about human rights, gender violence and human sensitivity. By denouncing the violence that she bears witness to in front of the public's eyes, Galindo's silence represents the one of the many «dead witnesses» – of the victims who could not speak. Looking into the deepest territories of trauma, the artist also needs public's action in order to cure it: the trauma is indeed not only personal but also collective. It therefore implies a collective elaboration and a participatory catharsis. Whilst not speaking, the artist is compelling the public to take a position in response to what it is witnessing: it is not through her voice but through her face (her *faciality*, to quote Levinas) that she confronts the public with ethics. By performing violence and its traumatic memory on her body, Galindo is not only the witness of her own trauma but she also uncomfortably engages the spectator, who becomes witness at her/his turn. The public therefore becomes an active element in the performance, thus refusing the role of a passive spectator: activated by an ethics of responsibility the audience moves from the position of spectator to performer. In this case, the performative work places «responsibility» before the knowledge of the Other and «humanity» before any principle of recognition or identity (Levinas, 1984: 84). The silence that Galindo embodies is then a speech act in itself: an articulation that can be as comprehensible as voice.

There is a similarity that runs between silence and trauma, which goes beyond the simple cause-effect relation: trauma, as silence, is a language that

everybody can speak or experience and which, potentially, can be the point of departure for the making of a common history. More than that, silence is subversive: it takes place in the position of a not-yet articulated speech, which is imbued with a higher potentiality of expression. Silence renounces the linguistic rule in order to adopt one that precedes language, which could be described by Julia Kristeva's *chora* as «a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic» (Kristeva, 1984: 48). For Kristeva, language is formulated as a lack derived by the necessity of naming what we are missing (e.g. when a child misses its mother it says *mama*). Particularly in the pre-linguistic phase, the *chora* is determined by the expansion and the connection of sensitivities other than one's own. Before language, the subject is in fact interrelated to the other, occupying a fluid space in which all the real is embraced through a heightened state of perception. In this dimension the body and the subjectivity recognize themselves in continuity with (and not in opposition to) the Other. In silence, as well as in the first months of an individual's life⁵, the symbolic level does not determine the subject as such, since it has not access to language yet: «neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specialization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm (Kristeva, 1974: 94).» The *chora* is then a space of rhythm that precedes figuration (i.e. reality) and that belongs to a former «feminine» phase, which identifies the child in continuity and in relation with the mother (Cavallaro, 2003: 84). The subject will then be formed through what Lacan calls the entrance into the *symbolic order*, which is knowable thanks to the confrontation with the Other via language (Lacan, 1966: 54). The use of a form of speech that refuses the phallic order has instead been brought to attention by feminist theorists and contemporary artistic practices, which have adopted silence to formulate a «feminine language». We have noted that from the end of the '70s and onwards, in post-modern, anti-essentialist feminist vocal practices (from cinema to music theatre)⁶, the performance of female voices has been characterized by chronological fractures, visual-verbal tensions, polyphonies and silences (Llewellyn-Jones, 1994: 5). The concept of silence and the multifaceted political possibilities it opens up to, has often been used as a tool for investigating trauma through a feminist perspective.

⁵ The pre-Oedipal phase belongs to the first six months of one's life; then, for Lacan, the child is confronted with its image (in the so called 'mirror stage'), which forms its subjectivity through *lack*.

⁶ Kaja Silverman has shown this aspect in 1989 in her *The acoustic mirror* with reference to the development of the feminine vocality in cinema; Susan McClary instead engendered music for the first time in 1991, with the book *Feminine Endings*.

Figura 2

Regina José Galindo, *No perdemos nada con nacer* (*We don't lose anything by being born*), 2000. Performance.



Photo credit: Bella de Vico. Courtesy: Rollo Gallery.

One of today's main issues in Guatemala still involves the daily violence that is perpetrated against women, who are not only murdered and dumped far away from their homes, but also inhumanly tortured and raped for days or weeks⁷ (Amnesty Magazine, 2006). This denunciation is clear in the work *We didn't lose anything by being born*, 2000 (figure 2), where Galindo uses her female body as the litter of society: put inside a plastic bag, she is then thrown away in Guatemala City's garbage dump. Galindo's death-like silence represents the speech that is intolerable to hear: her performances have to speak to everybody, and not just to those who possess the critical instruments to interpret language. For this reason the artist chooses not to use speech in order to communicate, but to develop instead her embodied silence as voice. The artist then speaks a *lingua franca* that anyone can hear: she makes her body speak. Her female body is not a mute image but a communicative act: through her presence, Galindo succeeds in making her body a text – the same way Hélène Cixous suggests to her feminist fellows⁸. By offering an image of herself that is pervaded by her traumatic and

⁷ In 2011 the number of the victims of femicide was 631 and in the last 10 years amounts to 5,700 approximately (Amnesty International, 2012b: 7). The title of the work *Meanwhile, they continue to be free* refers to these many unpunished criminals – the same ones who participated to the genocide in the '80s.

⁸ In *The newly born woman*, Hélène Cixous says: «Write yourself: your body must make itself heard» (Cixous and Clément, 1975: 97).

traumatised presence, the artist is indeed activating – and not just *showing* – her «intolerable speech». As Jacques Rancière would say, the merit of Regina José Galindo's activism lays in its own negativity – in her not saying everything (Rancière, 2009: 90). Despite being silent, the artist refuses indeed to offer a mute image of trauma.

When speaking about her work, Galindo frequently refers to the power of her voice and to the effects that this can have: voice bears a high relevance in her practice since she is also a poet. Her activism is indeed entangled within her artistic, private and political life. In the work *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas? (Who can remove the traces?, 2003)*, which consists in a silent and solitary march from the Court of Constitutionality to the National Palace of Guatemala (i.e. the path that a new president has to walk once nominated), soaking repeatedly her bare feet in human blood and leaving the traces on the floor, she describes the genesis of the action with these words: «When it was announced that Efraín Ríos Montt had managed to win acceptance as a presidential candidate... I decided then and there that I would take to the streets with my shout and amplify it. I had to do it (Goldman, 2006)⁹». Galindo's silence, whether self-imposed or generated by her personal trauma, opens up a ground for interaction that is anything but non-communicative: silence, when a product of trauma, does not represent 'nothingness' or 'absence'. On the contrary, it is woven with memory as the sounds are. Western phallogocentric discourse has nevertheless relegated the role of silence to a position where it can no longer have theoretical or practical usage, as David Toop describes: «Though silence is supposedly an absence, the withdrawal of noise (in all its senses) is replaced by a louder phenomenon, a focussing of attention, an atmosphere, which we mistakenly describe as silence» (Toop, 2004: 42).

John Cage has instead tried to reintroduce silence as the positive counterpart of sound within the Western discourse by challenging these traditions and drawing from the Zen Buddhist theories that conceive silence as the way to experience Truth. It is not coincidental that the theoretical reintroduction of silence in the Western thinking has consciously been formulated in the '50s, after having experienced World War II and the extermination camps: silence is in fact intertwined with the recollection and with the formulation of memory and trauma. It also provides us with an ethics that goes beyond language – its prerequisite is to keep an always-open communication, which precedes the one of *logos*. The latter is here discarded because of the role it plays as a normalizing agent, imposed by the Christian-hetero-phallic-western-white discourse: «One point of silence, then, is to dissolve the oppositional by freely allowing other voices to be heard» (Katz, 1999: 51). It is *logos* that Aristotle sees as the rational principle at the basis of humanity

⁹ Just on 26 January 2012 the Guatemala City criminal court finally ruled that General José Efraín Ríos Montt must go on trial for the 1982-1983 genocide of thousand of Mayan people. Almost half of the human rights violations happened in the year 1982 (Amnesty International, 2012a), after he seized the power with a *coup d'état* supported by the U.S.

and not silence that has generated «monsters»: it is the presumption of imposing one's speech over the different others that has produced Auschwitz and that still produces those monsters that haunt people's «different» lives (e.g. Black, Asians, Muslims, homosexuals, women, ill bodies...). Only *logos* – the «reason» – can produce what animals could have never conceived. As it happens in John Cage's aesthetics then, silence is here¹⁰ not seen in the typical Western negative perspective nor in an oppositional way (i.e. against sound), but as a bounding element that encompasses all the differences and that creates continuity among its silent agents. Silence is then «queer» because it unites instead of opposing, thus becoming the base for accepting all contradictory differences (*ibid.*: 51).

When Regina José Galindo engages with silence, she does so not in order to reduce herself to the status of victim, but to embody the speaking voice that denounces those crimes. The image that the artist gives of herself is not one that the public can indifferently look at: in all her performances, the image of reality that she presents is not a «dead» one. The image she portrays, rather, has a deep, real implication with *biopolitics*: it decrees the emergence of «life» as a main political end. Life is what is at stake in her works and what calls for a responsibility towards the individual as such. It is the individual as a *living being* – devoid of any other political character – that matters in the biopolitical age. «For millennia», Foucault states, «man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being in question» (Foucault, 1976: 143).

Aristotle, indeed, divided the human from the animal in relation to their voice: the human condition is related to the capacity of articulating one's voice into speech (the voice is then «speech», or *logos*); the animal instead is the voice that cannot speak (the «mere voice» or *phone*). This division brings to the discernment of two different forms of life: the animal (*zoe*) and the human (*bios*). Nevertheless, is not the «animal» also part of the «human» condition? Is it just the voice as 'articulated speech' that can decide what is human to what is not?

Feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero observes that the Western philosophical approach to voice has always subordinated the signifier to its signified, the word to its concept (Cavarero, 2003: 34). As a consequence, the semantic articulation is strictly connected to the delivery of the concept itself, which makes the signifieds audible. An error then occurs in this discourse, which is to equate reason to the *logos-as-speech* (*ibid.*: 35). In biopolitics, *speech* is not an end in itself. It is instead the respect and the confrontation with other lives' silences. The contradiction that has been generated by separating the animal life from the human one lays then the bases for rethinking what being human really means and what is then the ethical approach to be undertaken in the contemporary, post-Shoah,

¹⁰ This discourse can be made on Galindo's work as in more general terms within performance art – as many performances do not use uttered words but their own bodies as a vehicle of speech.

biopolitical society. The biopolitical individual is, as Giorgio Agamben describes it, «bare life»: it is pure being – bare existence – naked body. All the bodies in the biopolitical society must therefore be approached with the same ethical responsibility: their lives are equally sacred, because of their primary condition – their *being animal*. It is then *zoe* that determines a new form of man: the *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998: 124), which is devoid of its political rights and that represents the new paradigm of ethical responsibility.

Regina José Galindo impersonates this new, sacred animal, which is deprived of those rights that are forged by the authority of the state – an authority that, in many cases, is impossible to trust anymore. The «sacred authority» is instead acquired by the living being the moment it enters the world. Stripped of any other character that has been used to call itself «human», the public of Galindo's actions recognizes that humanity lays in the essence of life itself and not in the attributes that have later been imposed on it. The newborn ethical being, stripped even of its own speech, communicates through silence, which is a language that does not belong to anybody. Silence is both human and animal, it speaks for all the countries and it can be louder than words: «only the voice which is completely silent can 'overcry' all other voices. The voice of reason, silent as it may be, is the power of the powerless (Dolar, 2006: 90).» The response to the violence against a body that is similar to your own does not need speech in order to be activated: silence suffices for that purpose. In the post-Shoah society that we inhabit, *logos* is not the reason: *reason* is indeed the silent voice of our conscience and of our ethical existence.

Activating trauma: politics of silence

Through the use of her body, Galindo expresses the 'traumatic archive' of a repressed speech: the traumatic memory and its violence trigger the urgency to speak and the urgency to be heard by those who still are untouched by it. In opposition to Derrida's thesis (1995: 14), which sees the impossibility of archiving memory, Galindo's work shows how the ungraspable memory can be part of the present – and then become an archive – throughout trauma: it is violence that allows the materialization of the past (the death) into the future (the living). Theorists like Ann Cvetkovich sustain that the archive is the only possible means to create a history of what has been deleted from – or never added to – the official registers, as for example, the histories of Holocaust survivors, genocides, rape victims, AIDS inflicted people and other stigmatized communities. In *An archive of feelings* (2003), Cvetkovich demonstrates how «trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive»: as far as it archives trauma, memory is embedded in its narrative as well as in the material artefacts (Cvetkovich, 2003: 7). Memory can then be conveyed in an archive of «documented feelings».

The activation and the exposure of the past-trauma into the present time is nevertheless not limited to its commemorative purposes: when the past situates itself into new space and time coordinates, it also generates new discourses and produces new formulas of action. «Bearing witness» is in fact an urgency of the present time and the re-enactment of the past memory is one of the most direct ways to activate its politics. The need to reintroduce the images of the past into the present time is a performative process that uses the archival form as a strategy of enactment. In the archive's interstices is indeed possible to find the oblivion (or silence) of those who have been excluded from history¹¹. All the same, as a by-product of trauma, silence can also constitute the response to it through speaking and re-writing its own story: being re-enacted, silence acquires the speech that it could not otherwise have.

By becoming a «living archive», Galindo gives form to memory, challenging the rules of conventional representation for political purposes: the reintroduction of the witnesses of violent crimes into the present time is not just the artist's act of mourning towards those victims but also the possibility to install an ethical bind between the public and the object of mourning. Mourning is not just linked to melancholia¹²; on the contrary, it produces a reaction in the artistic enactment of Galindo, who approximates the status of the dead to the one of the living and undermines the separateness of the two spheres. In a similar way, AIDS activist, art critic and theorist Douglas Crimp, in his essay *Mourning and Militancy* revisited the concept of mourning in relation to activism (against Freudian 'melancholia') in the age of the AIDS epidemic:

...[M]ilitancy might arise from conscious conflicts within mourning itself, the consequence, on the one hand, of «inadvisable and even harmful interference» with grief and, on the other, of the impossibility of deciding whether the mourner will share the fate of the mourned (Crimp, 1989: 10).

The interference between the living and the dead then creates the ground for activism, which is also the possibility to produce change through voice: Galindo in fact makes the dead and the «never heard» return, giving back their own voice by re-enacting those experiences at the borderline of life and death. Galindo's artworks show how one's voice does not disappear after one's biological or symbolic death: it just becomes less audible (and it menaces to disappear if not re-enacted). Silence, then, does not mean: not having a voice. On the con-

¹¹ Feminist theorist Griselda Pollock – inspired by the unfinished Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* – speaks about the same possibility of constituting a «virtual feminist museum», originated by the encounter of images that have never been associated before (Pollock, 2007: 13): the archival form is indeed the one that better embodies this temporal and spatial «meeting».

¹² In *Mourning and melancholia* (1917) Freud describes melancholia as a pathological state of inaction and helplessness.

trary, it is *quietness* that can preclude the voice from being heard. 'Not being heard' is in fact the very purpose of the one who stays quiet, whereas silence does not depend on the subject's will: «Silence and quiet are not the same condition. Quiet can be quieter than a silence, even though silence has pretensions towards the absolute. Silence is more of a social or technical condition... (Toop, 2004: 44)». Quietness is then the refusal to undertake an action whereas silence is its very possibility.

Through its re-enactment, silence refuses the perpetration of violence on the victim by dismissing the same logic of the centralising hegemonic language that «develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization» (Bakhtin, 1935: 271). Since language is imposed by a normative drive, this is also the result of violence – which is then inherent to society and to its own construction. Following Lacan, Slavoj Žižek calls this fundamental and invisible violence, which is «embodied in language and its forms», «symbolic» or «objective» (Žižek, 2008: 1-2). The consequence of «objective violence» is then a trauma that is shared as a common experience for all societies: silence then substitutes the language/*logos* with another type of speech, which includes also «non logic» elements like gestures, feelings and relationships. When silence is performed it can offer an effective alternative to the Symbolic patriarchal speech: it is in fact silence that can open up to an always-new discourse. As a result, subjectivity can renew itself without being always-already determined by another's speech.

It is from the womb that the new life is created: this womb can be seen, in Bracha Ettinger's definition, as a «matrixial aesthetic borderspace», where «partial-subjectivities» co-gender one another. This mutual influence is possible through a nomadic co-affection that creates «events of encounter» for the subjectivities in transition (Ettinger, 1999: 90-91). It is then thanks to the sharing of affections that two or more subjectivities approximate and are mutually influenced. In this sense, Bracha Ettinger's womb/matrix acts as an archive and as a «silence» that generates always-new discourses built on the encounter with other subjectivities. Because of trauma, the matrix/silence becomes an active factor for change and for the creation of a new ethics of response and responsibility towards the Other. Inhabiting the matrixial condition also implies making a backward step in order to become fragile and vulnerable to otherness. This vulnerability, provoked by trauma, needs to redefine its condition in order to produce another significance: vulnerability in fact implies a heightened sensorial perception and a predisposition to share other people's affections. The matrix, whose features can be approximated to the ones of silence, is then considered to be the ethical position to assume when speaking about feminism «after Auschwitz»:

The matrixial feminine becomes a means to think «after Auschwitz»... This concerns not a fetishization of disaster by rendering it the unspeakable sublime other or the voyeuristic locus of others' suffering. It means thinking about the structure of trauma as the condition of cultural becoming... (Pollock, 2004: 19).

As seen along this essay, silence represents a «feminine language», which disrupts – as Julia Kristeva theorises – the rules of the Symbolic Order: it is not a symptom of passivity but a place for resistance and for generating a substantial change. From a feminist perspective, silence does not represent a negative and sterile place but one that can reproduce a collective ethical responsibility through direct confrontation and co-emergence of subjectivities. In performance art practices this feature is enhanced by the use of the performer's body as a linguistic medium. As seen in Regina José Galindo's works, the body-made-text does not need to speak to the public in order to use its own voice: the artist's body becomes in fact readable because, despite its silence, it shows itself as a living archive of traumatic memory. In a performance art practice that is based on memory and trauma, silence can expose the ethics of the unspeakable and the politics of becoming.

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Giulia Casalini (b. 1988, Italy) is a London-based curator. She is the co-director of the platform and newsletter CUNTemporary, which organises events and exhibitions at the intersection of arts, feminism and queer. She graduated magna cum laude in Languages, Arts, History and Civilizations at Cà Foscari (Venice, 2011) and she received her MA with honours in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths College (London, 2012) with a dissertation on feminist-queer engagements in community art. e-mail: giulia.casalini@cuntemporary.org

Artigo recebido em 22 de outubro de 2012 e aceite para publicação em 11 de fevereiro de 2013.