

Performing the (Im)possible: A Utopian Silent Dinner in Barcelona.

A conversation between the artist and curator after *Utopian Tomorrow* exhibition at the Goethe-Institut Barcelona, 2015.

Honi Ryan: Last year you curated a Silent Dinner into an exhibition in Barcelona under the moniker of *Utopian Tomorrow*. For you, what is it about the performance that should be included in this theme?

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: A utopian vision comes from mingling together a robust imagination and a hearty will of change. Dealing with utopias means dealing with challenges, and is also related to the idea of imagining and conceiving what is commonly considered as impossible. I think that most of your art practice responds to a utopian vision, through a utopian approach, with a specific focus on human presence, awareness and communication.

This atmosphere of imagining and conceiving the impossible — if you want — is something that happens commonly in cinema and in several art practices. What is interesting in your work is that you bring this dimension to the social realm, to human life, without having to use special effects.

In specific regards to “The Silent Dinners”, I would say that it’s a project that stimulates a transformation in human communication; it shakes our convictions and our position as human beings living among other human beings; it questions our inner existence and our outer co-existence with the others.

We definitely know that all humanity is suffering from huge communication deficits and we are all in a desperate search for better empathy and understanding. How to solve it? The Silent Dinners, through their focus on the diversity of human communicative behaviour, address this utopia.

HR: Utopia also promises peace, and as we are starved for inspiring, living examples of what peace is, the idea allows us to imagine what it might be, for us, here, now. And as you say, utopia can reference the impossible, or the idea of no-place, and in that make itself unattainable or overly idealistic. So utopia at once evokes peace, while placing it out of reach.

What was meaningful for me to be involved in performances around a Utopian Tomorrow in Barcelona was that we got to enact that state, live it out, play with it, consciously, in person, among people, in our comfortable everyday environments. One of the core ideas in the Silent Dinner project is to provide an experimental platform for peaceful exchange, the lack of verbal or written language alleviating some of the boundaries to it. Through these experiences we can create living embodied memories to carry into our lives and societies.

Having said that, the encounters at the Silent Dinners have not always been entirely peaceful, but they are usually convivial. The Barcelona SD was your first Silent Dinner, you have since attended more, but if you can place yourself back there, how was your personal experience of the event?

HBM: I have lots of good memories related to the Silent Dinner in Barcelona. My personal experience was really deep and intense, not only because I attended the SD for the first time as a diner-participant, but also because I was involved in envisioning and organizing that specific episode as a curator.

As you know better than me, even if you have to follow the same set of guidelines, every SD is a different experience, which relates to the location, cultural environment, atmosphere, human presence, energies, etc.

Each event gives place to different stories and reactions, and that's also why — I would say — we are now engaging with this deeper reflection through this publication project.

Focusing back on Barcelona, and trying to be concise, I could highlight three specific moments (plus some additional details) that were somehow remarkable:

1) The arrival and attendance on the terrace

When I arrived most people were already there, standing or sitting on the exterior terrace of the house. The scene was epic, an improvised set up at the boundaries of theatre, performance, magic and the world of psychological introspection. We were together and alone, with our bodies and our shadows, waiting for something big to come. It was not only a moment of observation, but there was an inner force growing fast. It reminds me Antonin Artaud when he said: "If our life lacks a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force" .[\[1\]](#) In that moment we were starting to be impelled by this magical force.

2) The gaze exchange moment

Looking inside and outside was a constant process during the SD. Suddenly, a natural and collective moment of exchanging deep gazes pervaded the scene and paralysed all other activities. We rarely find the time and the right approach to look into others in this way. That moment was a real treasure.

3) The final joyful explosion

The pleasant and magnetic development of the dinner lead to a final explosion where all participants greeted the opportunity to stay longer and exchange feelings and thoughts, finally in words, with the other diners. The ensuing flow of conversations were

nonetheless unusual, conscious of the previously wordless state of our ritual. I remember a warm and sincere expression of gratitude from everyone towards you and the overall situation.

Beyond these three specific moments, I think that in Barcelona we had a perfect combination of aesthetics, meaningfulness, concentration, communication, inspiration and joy. Talking in metaphor, it was a journey through several phases, and we learned how to silently share our time and space with the other diner-travellers.

The intimate domestic space, the energetic human presence and a balanced, good number of participants were definitely successful ingredients of that SD. One extremely important point, in my opinion, is that most of the diners didn't know each other. This is a significant point: I think that the Silent Dinner is not a dinner between friends, but that we need that kind of mystery in order to make our mind fly: who are these people? What do they do? What language do they speak? The unknown plays a very important role in the silent dinners.

We were really touched by the potential of that gathering. Some of the participants cried, showing that we reached beyond any idea of entertaining, and were experiencing the depth of human communication in all its naked, raw material.

I talked too much! How was your experience back there and what are your thoughts in regards to the aforementioned points?

HR: The Barcelona SD was indeed utopian, bringing together many ideal elements with around 25 guests mostly unknown to each other; being hosted in a private domestic space where the home owner was present and active; and the food being cooked in collaboration with a local food enthusiast with local, seasonal produce. It was also nostalgic for me, reminiscent of the early years of this project when I would mount these events independently in people's homes wherever I was travelling at the time. More recently, it has not always been possible to have all of these elements in place, and it was lovely to be able to experience it in that form again. Having said that, I don't think that these elements are necessary conditions for the profundity of the experience. The Silent Dinner project by nature shifts and changes in dialogue with the place and time it is being held in. These shifts are an exciting, living part of the work; allowing elements of culture and contemporaneity to emerge and bring meaning to the action.

You touched on two important parts of the evening, the arrival, and the breaking of the silence. Upon arrival, and for about half an hour after that, people are adjusting to their new, shared state with anticipation. It is a time to allow yourself to feel awkward, submerged in the unknown, and to have the conviction to work through it without rejecting it on first impulse because it's foreign. It helps us to practice the patience needed to tolerate difference.

It's true that in Barcelona, after the two hours were up the silence was broken at the table and we talked, debriefed, cried, consoled and celebrated each other around the table for hours more. But it does not always happen like this, and it is my strategy to not give the group any guidance in how they are to resolve the silence. It is up to them. It is a brave move to be the first to talk, and somehow difficult after resolving oneself not to.

To consciously alleviate words is to place them in very high regard, and in this we can understand the multitude of meanings of 'silencing'. Some participants would rather not break the silence, relishing the opportunity hold the uniqueness of the experience, and leave before people begin to talk. However, most participants usually find a way to discuss the event together afterwards. Then, and as it was in Barcelona, there is usually some correction of details that were misunderstood, but those things are quickly let go of to highlight the ways we *did* find to communicate with each other, with a heightened awareness of the importance of words and language, and a deepened sensitivity to the other ways we perceive information.

Every group develops their own language over the short course of the evening. A set of symbols and gestures form, each departing from one moment of understanding to the next. Language is so innate to humans, and surprisingly quick to create.

HBM: It's interesting to see that even if some actions, gestures, reactions and behaviours, repeat themselves in different contexts and locations, every Silent Dinner stands ultimately as a unique experience. There is a combination of predictable elements (all social patterns and behaviours reveal themselves over dinner: the shy, the extrovert, the analytic, the entertainer, the bored, etc., just as a few examples) that merge with totally unexpected ones. In fact, no one knows exactly how they will behave in total silence and every single person is exposed to a situation that is mostly unknown to them. It comes from deep concentration on your own. I think this is also one of the strongest points of the project: its capability to become a mirror to the self. This brings us back to the Greek ancient maxim 'Know thyself', which can be understood as the main and basic paradigm of communication.

In Barcelona we had this stimulating mixture of elements: on the one hand the subjective and intimate individual focus, and on the other hand the collective and emphatic sharing of the experience with the group. The cosy domestic space, as well as the inclusive and affable welcome that you and the host offered to all guests, created that peaceful and deep atmosphere.

Suddenly, in the course of the Silent Dinner, silence becomes not an obstacle to overcome, but a language and an accomplice with which to coexist.

By Herman B. Mendolicchio and Honi Ryan, 2017.

[1] Antonin Artaud, *The theater and its double*, Grove Press. NY, 1958. Page 8.