



# Ritual for the hidden

*Tereza Bušková is an artist interested in Czech and Slovak ritual. Her work Hidden Mothers is an art-event that uses that tradition to highlight the experience of motherhood. It has been delayed until next year and she talked to the Review about Covid, her plans for the performance and her work.*

You had a very public artwork – entitled *Hidden Mothers* – planned for this year, can you tell us what the work was and when it may happen now?

I have been working on @hidden\_mothers\_project for almost two years now... this baby has been a slow bake due to unexpected turns with its installation location and Covid. However, I am determined to bring *Hidden Mothers* to life in summer 2021.

The project *Hidden Mothers* consists of an exhibition, performances and an art installation in a public space. It draws from Czech and Slovak folk traditions and connects these with the present-day architecture and up-to-date social topics – bringing women together through universal themes of motherhood, traditions and togetherness. *Hidden Mothers* is a Central and Eastern European-themed public art project, focusing on the empowerment of migrant and refugee mothers and women facing isolation and vulnerability in the UK today. I am working with local communities in Birmingham and London to create a processional performance. The performance will be infused with Central and Eastern European symbolism and culminate in the installation of a Slovak-inspired cottage facade, as a statement of togetherness and of being home.

The title of the project is inspired by the genre of Victorian photography “hidden mothers”. While taking a baby’s portrait the mother was hidden under a piece of canvas so as not to be seen. At the same time, she

could hold the infant and it would remain calm throughout. In contemporary society, certain aspects of motherhood remain hidden and numerous mothers face disadvantage at work. This project celebrates the values of motherhood and draws attention to the social benefits of families, togetherness and traditions.

This cottage, which is co-designed by *Hidden Mothers* and an architect and a director of Studio Polpo – Mark Parsons – will be placed over an existing building, Chats Palace, which is the Arts Centre in Hackney, London. The London Festival of Architecture would like to include this art installation in their 2021 festival. I remain feeling confident, excited and hopeful. What would have been a celebratory procession in 2020 would have become more like a death march which risked amplifying the infection. Like so many arts institutions Chats Palace is existentially threatened by the pandemic, leaving the final location in flux. Instead I had to re-evaluate and get online, often connecting with families through creative art workshops, which inspired a new limb of the project called ‘unstitched mothers’

A lot of your recent work is described as community or public artwork. When and why did you begin to focus on these sorts of public and community works of art?

My work took on a larger scale when I moved my project from an enclosed intimate studio space into an open space. I guess it began in 2009 when I traveled to the oldest

village of Moravia in the Czech Republic to film my work, *Spring Equinox*. It was supported and exhibited at The Zabludowicz Collection, a major London Art Foundation. Together with my performers, including my mum who has been assisting me, we travelled to Ratíškovice, where to this day the local women wear their folk costumes to their Sunday church service. I was planning to quietly observe their Easter rituals but when the mayor of this village found out about an artist filming, he arranged the entire folk dance group to perform for my film. It was going very differently to how I envisioned it, but I just went with it and filmed what I found interesting. This experience gave me more confidence and a hunger to be present at other customs and rituals, like when I made *Masopust*, which was inspired by a unique ritual called “the Rose ritual” performed in a village called Doudleby in the South of Bohemia.

Filming these rituals was always more to me than just footage that I needed to make for my video... they were very special because we were taken among the villagers. It was a special experience for us all. The next project was *Baked Woman of Doubice 2012* which was quite different as I invented a baking ritual together with the residents, all women. Because the village Doubice, which lies in the North of the Czech Republic was a place where I spend my adolescent years, I felt confident making the work there. The largest project, which was very much a public community-based project





Previous page: procession from *Clipping the Church*, Erdington High Street, Birmingham, 2016. Photo by Gwynne-Gybbons Photographers.

This page: Collage for *Hidden Mothers* by Mark Parsons and below, Tereza Bušková, photographed by Dora Martínková.

happened here in Birmingham in Erdington, 2016.

I revived and re-interpreted an almost forgotten English christianised pagan custom – Clipping the Church – which is linked to Mothering Sunday and consists of people clasping their hands all around their local church. Prior to this clipping ritual several workshops around Birmingham took place during which people and children made salt dough decorations, which were placed on the facade of St Barnabas' Church in Erdington High Street. On the day of the performance, there were over 200 people taking part and leading a procession through Erdington High Street. I involved passers-by too. The local police were so supportive of my work that they made sure that all traffic stopped for the duration of the procession. There was a strong presence of energy and unity on that day. This took place only two weeks before the Brexit referendum, so seeing people of all religions and political views holding hands together restored hope in me.

Now we have been living under restrictions at one level or another for most of the year. Is there damage done to our sense of community in that situation?

I think it made our community stronger. Many people were and are in great need of help and the amount of positive response that I am witnessing is amazing. People say that British people are keeping their heads down and keeping to themselves, but I don't think that's true. I think Brits are great at



building communities and supporting each other. It's been very dark for all of us, so I feel that we need art more than ever. Especially when our community is involved and the purpose is significant and important – a celebration and acknowledgment of mothers out there, especially those who have been more hidden during the lockdown.

Is there solidarity or division to be found in this communal suffering? Will the story of the year inform or influence the nature of your work, quite apart from the obvious impossibility of arranging public art events?

My work is continuously evolving, shaping and changing. I felt disappointed when my project didn't happen a year ago due to changes for my cottage installation and I was even more disheartened when it was stopped again due to Covid. However, I do believe that things happen for a reason and that they will happen when it's the right time for them. Actually, I feel that my project grew even stronger and definitely more meaningful – there are most likely mothers who are even more hidden from our society and more vulnerable.

Public art events can serve as a unifying moment or experience for those attending. Is your intent to bring about that sort of feeling in a community?

We need a community. We need to feel that we belong. My neighbours in our community became an integral part of my life as my family is split between the UK, Czech



Republic, Ireland and Norway. They have become my extended family and we matter to each other. In the past, people would collectively perform rituals, make processions like clasping their hands around their villages to bring good luck and prosperity... or to secure a good harvest. Just because we live in the 21st century or in the city doesn't mean togetherness isn't important to our lives.

**How does artistic endeavour and the artist's voice reach us in these circumstances?**

I have been taking part in artist online residencies where the online platform is a great way of reaching a wider audience. It really gave me focus and strength to keep going and sharing my project with others. Because *Hidden Mothers* is not taking place until summer 2021 I wanted to do something meaningful with my local community – a fun and creative extra project called *Unstitched Mothers* which would enable women/mothers to celebrate the comfort of their home. It is an embroidery project together with Birmingham-based needlepoint maker and community builder Tina Francis, who together with me will design embroidery kits which will be handed out to mothers from the Central and Eastern European communities here in Birmingham. Mothers will be invited to embody the living Slavic goddess Mokosh by making an embroidery for themselves as well as a piece which will be later added to the main *Hidden Mothers* costumes.

**You are interested in tradition and ritual in your work. Can we create new ritual that will become tradition or is that only a possibility for those with power?**

I think we all have the power to make things and to make an impact. Since my *Clipping the Church* project, people asked me if I can make this their annual ritual. Although I like the idea of bringing traditions and customs to life I think that such artistic work cannot be easily repeated. I don't see myself as an expert, an ethnographer... I see myself as a woman... artist... mother who is communicating with the world around her through visual art. A curator and a friend Bar Yerushalmi once told me that he sees me as a social changer. He said: "Tereza, you have a special talent of bringing people together through art... don't lose that."

**Does your work intend to somehow point to the peculiarity of common human ritual or is it perhaps to create new ritual with a symbolism more in tune with modern ideas or possibilities? I'm thinking specifically of your *Hidden Mothers* piece.**

I make new rituals because folklore is about taking something existing and retelling its story. Folklore always evolves. We all know that mothers are important, but to this day there is stigma and judgment which comes with pregnancy and early motherhood. The support of the local community for many mothers has reduced over time. Today's society too often adopts a patronising, utilitarian attitude which blinds it to the particular needs of parents and families. As a consequence many new mothers experience feelings of loneliness and isolation from their social networks, unknown to them before. Some feel actively ostracised and judged when they should be encouraged and cherished. Personalised new rituals offer me and other mothers an opportunity for expression rather than being trapped in the confines of the past. It



offers all of us in society the opportunity to re-explore the value of ceremonial celebrations without the shackles of certain orthodoxies.

**Your own Czech story has a presence in your work. Can you give us a clue as to how you view costume in your work?**

When I was at the Royal College of Art, I went to a library where a book on traditional Czechoslovakian folk costumes fell into my hands. It said that traditional folk costume didn't just serve an aesthetic function, but also a healing, magical and erotic function. Folk costume was also defining the status of who was wearing it, every embroidery or a colour had its significance and symbolism. I view the costume as a mask... the idea of becoming somebody else... there is so much freedom there.

I was always drawn to the cinema and theatre. Growing up in an artistic and creative family allowed me to be surrounded by visual images. My family tree had poets, printmakers, architects and well-known wood carvers, both my twin brother and my dad are successful graphic designers. I guess that's why I don't just replicate what has been before, I experiment with so many different media and processes. I see myself as a visual artist. My background is printmaking and I enjoy adding layers, colours over each other when working with video, film, performance... I use the same process. In fact, the process is often more important than what's there at the end.

Someone once described it, while watching my live performance as a visual poetry. I work with professional dancers and performers such as Zoe Simon who I see as my muse, but I also involve the general public, friends and family. I have a clear vision, but not all the necessary skills, that's why I work with others to bring my ideas to life. Mariana Novotná who is a costume maker based in Prague has been part of my creative process since 2009. Just as with Zoe Simon, we have this amazing connection and most importantly shared passion for folklore. I had seen my *Clipping The Church* costume in a dream before it was made. I remember I called Mariana the next day and told her that I know what it must look like, she said "Amazing! Draw it and I will make it."

**Tereza Bušková (b.1978, Prague) completed her Fine Art Printmaking MA at the Royal College of Art in 2007. Buskova's work has been exhibited at *Rituals*, David Roberts Art Foundation, London (2008); *A Tradition I Do Not Mean To Break*, Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2009); *Rituals Are Tellers Of Us*, Newlyn Art Gallery, UK (2013); and *Reality Czech: The Czech Avant-Garde*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, London (2015). She has exhibited, performed and lectured in a broad range of different spaces, including Lincoln's Chambers Farm Wood (2010), Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo (2014), and Erdington High Street, UK (2016).**

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**Images on this page: Designs for *Hidden Mothers*.**

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