

## THE CAVE

'The Idols of the Cave are the idols of the individual man. For everyone (besides the errors common to human nature in general) has a cave or den of his own, which refracts and discolors the light of nature, owing either to his own proper and peculiar nature.'

Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*

My childhood was spent in a small stanitsa (Cossack settlement) in Kuban region, Russia. After spending 15 years in a megalopolis, I experienced a desire to escape to the country. It has now been four years since I voluntarily isolated myself in a cosy cave of maternity, living in a country house in Ulyanovka, Leningrad Oblast. I deliberately restrict social contact and limit media consumption - my whole life is bound up in my home, children and art practice. Against all expectations, however, this life - free of any obvious negative external factors - is far from calm and quiet.

The notion of the cave has become, for me, the quintessence of what a personal experience is made up of. In ancient myths the cave is a sacred place, often compared to a mini cosmos. It was the birthplace of gods, a site where sacred knowledge was shared and a place where gods went to die.

Our ancestors viewed the cave as the beginning of the world, the womb of the universe. The notion of the cave has been connected with the Anima and the cult of the earth mother, the symbol of fertile soil that both gives life and takes it away. Plato's Cave was the starting point for the whole metaphysics and became the seminal idea for the European mentality. Francis Bacon, developing the idea of Plato, stated that the 'Idols of the Cave' arise from education and custom - the past of each individual determines how they see things. In psychoanalysis the cave is a symbol of regressive desires and the unconscious.

For me, isolation in my own cave triggered a childhood trauma that had not been resolved emotionally - a stress disorder triggered by a series of four deaths and a suicide in the family over a very short period of time. The secluded setting of a country house resurrected memories of tension in the family, and of a pompous and theatrical provincial funeral. Alongside this, an inadequate connection with my external environment caused an increase in anxiety, while the children contributed to my irritability by continuously violating my personal boundaries. As a result, I began to experience problems with self-control. This was coupled with a sense of inadequacy: I would not go out for fear of having an accident and I was scared of the future. The bursts of anger were happening more frequently and I started to take my frustrations out on my husband and children.

In the project I am constructing my own personal cave: combining pictures I made in my parents' house - the site of my unresolved fears - with pictures of the place I am living in now. I am recording the experience of a physical presence in Sablinskiye Caves, near our house in Ulyanovka. Just as sensory deprivation, like that experienced in a real cave, can lead to hallucinations, my memory and imagination produce their own illusions - an imaginary threat - in the closed space of the house, resurrecting scenarios and ghosts from the past.

At the same time, motherhood, social isolation and the awakening of primitive instincts such as aggression and fear of death make every moment of life extremely intense and meaningful. An 'in-cave' living boosts creativity: it becomes a personal myth, makes a plot for the project and initiates reflexive processes.

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\* Sablinskiye caves (also Sablino caves) - artificial subterranean caves in Ulyanovka, Leningrad oblast. The outcome of silica sand mining for glass production in the end of the 19th century. At the present moment there is no trustworthy map of the caves system, but it is considered that there are no less than 20 twisting passes creating a network of 5.5 km long. <http://www.sablino.net/>

\*\* Sensory deprivation - a situation when sensory input to the brain is reduced naturally or deliberately. Although short periods of sensory deprivation can be beneficial, relaxing and even pleasant extended periods have detrimental

effects, often causing (among other things) hallucinations, delusions, hyper suggestibility, or panic, distorted perception of time and space, distorted sense of self. Perceptive deprivation/isolation is sometimes viewed as a significant reduction of the important for a person information, however other senses receive enough stimuli. Psychology and Pedagogics Dictionary. 2013.