



PERFORMING THE EAST HOW IT WORKS ALBANIA BELARUS BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA BULGARIA CROATIA
CZECH REPUBLIC (EAST) GERMANY **ESTONIA** HUNGARY KOSOVO LATVIA LITHUANIA MACEDONIA MOLDOVA
MONTENEGRO POLAND ROMANIA RUSSIA SERBIA SLOVAKIA SLOVENIA UKRAINE BLOG CONTACT

Flo Kasearu

There are several themes that Flo Kasearu explores in her work: her Estonian heritage, the current political and economic climate, and the position of the artist in that society. She employs a range of techniques, from creating performances and interactive events, to surreptitious interventions in public space. All of her work is cleverly done and thought-provoking, and raises a number of issues universally relevant to contemporary society.

One of Flo's earliest pieces was a live sculpture entitled *Estonian Sculpture* (2005), which involved the artist dressed in national costume, raised on a pedestal, bearing a sign that read "I am dead." The piece points to concerns about the potential loss of national identity in the wake of EU accession, a common fear among the smaller nations of Europe that have only just shaken off the shackles of the previous "Union" and are keen to assert their unique

cultural heritage on the European and world stages. Later, Flo lived in Germany as an Erasmus student, where she thought a lot about her homeland and what it means to be Estonian. While there, she created the short film *Multi Travels* (2007), which depicts a young Estonian woman in national dress walking around the city and promoting “Estonia” as a nation, brand, or even religion. She walks up and down the subway car, not begging for money, as one might often witness in such situations, but providing information to the locals about her faraway land, Estonia. “In Estonia we have East European time zone,” she announces. The girl eventually goes and stands on a pedestal in front of the Estonian Embassy, a representative of her country abroad. While she tries to integrate and adapt, eventually, she escapes by running into the forest. When Flo returned to Estonia, she worked on a piece entitled *Keep in Touch* (2008), where she posed as a tourist in her own city, taking Polaroid snapshots of herself in front of the displays at the Estonian National Museum.

Connected with her interest in her own national cultural identity are concerns regarding the local political situation in Estonia. With the economy shrinking following the economic crisis of 2008, politicians made promises that they could not deliver, because of material shortages. Flo used her artistic talent and innovation to make good on a promise that Estonian politicians made to repair all of the roads (a common problem in much of Eastern Europe in the post-Soviet period). Since the government wouldn’t fix them, she filled the cracks in the road with green paint, creating a playful artistic design where there once was an eyesore (*A Promise*, 2008). Later, when the government erected a controversial Freedom Monument in the city center, on Tallinn’s Freedom Square, the artist created a stir with her surreptitious intervention in the public space. Plastering the city with blank sheets of paper headed with the words: “FREEDOM/we announce a contest to find the best solution,” she silently invited citizens to contribute their ideas with regard to the meaning and significance of the word “freedom.” Although not overtly critical, the poster campaign indicts the government for not consulting the general public about the design. In fact, only two people with an artistic background were on the jury that chose the final design; the other eight were politicians and one priest. Some speculated that this was an advertising campaign, but what the posters did was to make visual the varying public opinions with regard to the monument. Denied their freedom of speech with regard to adorning their city, Flo uses her art to give a voice to the public.

The economic crisis affected individual citizens in more personal ways, including the artist. In response to that, Flo created a short film about her mother’s corner grocery store. Since the budget she had available to her was relatively small, she improvised, and instead of using real actors she used cardboard cut-outs of pictures of famous Estonian actors, with their permission, of course. The film presents the trials and tribulations of dealing with employees and customers in challenging economic times (*Best Before is Over*, 2010).

One way to stimulate the economy is to create jobs, and Flo did just that, with her interactive piece *Artificial Queue* (2010). The artist commented that she had never seen people lining up for an art exhibition, although they line up for the opening of a new hypermarket all the time. In fact, during the Soviet times, since there were not many other forms of entertainment, people could often be seen queueing for art exhibitions, especially for shows by popular artists. In April of 2010, Flo announced in the newspaper that the first 100 people to arrive at the Tallinn City Art Hall on April 4th would receive 100 Estonian Kroner (roughly \$8). When the guests arrived in the hall, they saw that the room was empty – *they* were the exhibition. While some were disappointed, they were reassured by being

told that they could meet and observe one another. This action reminded me of a similar gesture by Croatian artist Nemanija Cvijanovic, who also created an exhibition in Rijeka by inviting members of the public to participate, offering them a small fee in exchange.

Flo's interests also extend beyond her own national borders. One project, a filmed action/intervention, *Basic Navigation for Chisinau* (2010), follows two tourists through the Moldovan capital, asking for various streets and landmarks. The language is carefully crafted, with laugh-out-loud funny interactions between locals and foreigners. For example, one visitor asks, "Where is Freedom Street?" to which one local responded, "no one knows anything about Freedom here." When a younger person is asked where Lenin Street is, she has to call her mother and ask her what that street is called nowadays. At the end of the film, the two are asked where they are from. When they say "Estonia," the local responds, "Oh, Riga!" Flo described Moldova as swinging "like a pendulum between East and West." The literal map of the city that exists below citizens' mental map of their whereabouts reflects not only the changes that the city and country have gone through over the past century, but also those that it has yet to witness, as it prepares for entry into the EU.

Being the resourceful artist that she is, Flo has found her own solution to existing as an artist during difficult economic times. She has created the "Flo Kasearu House Museum," a living museum where the artist resides, creates, stores her work, and shows it to the public. The museum is the artist's family home, which only recently returned to fully being in the family's possession. During the Soviet period, the house was carved up into apartments, and it took several years for the residents to de-camp after independence. Flo commented that she wanted to create the museum now, because she didn't want to wait until she was dead – a phrase that reminds me of Miervaldis Polis's words when he created his Memorial Room exhibition in Riga in 1995. Most artists have museums dedicated to themselves after they are dead, so why wait? Flo found a solution to getting gallery representation by establishing her own gallery. She found a solution to storage space for her work by installing it in the house. While the building contains her work, it also inspires it, for example, the artist has created a series of works based on the fears that most homeowners face – for example, fire and other type of damage.

Flo's work presents a unique array of actions, events and interventions that respond to a range of issues relevant on both a local and universal level. Her work invites the viewer in and asks him to participate. How many artists do you know that would invite all of the general public into their home so openly?