

Flo Kasearu in conversation with Camila Nichols

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In her multi-disciplinary work, Estonian artist Flo Kasearu employs humor as an unlikely segue into dense political and existential subject matter. Since 2013 the artist has served as director of the *Flo Kasearu House Museum*, in which she transformed her living space in Tallinn into an institution, bypassing the local gallery system and admitting the visiting public to view her work by appointment. With an unrelenting penchant for the absurd, much of Kasearu's recent work has grappled with systems of classification—social, geopolitical, or otherwise—and the structures that sustain them. In doing this, uncertainty, ambiguity, and irony reveal new possibilities and ways of understanding.

For Performa 17, Kasearu created *Ainult liikmetele (Members Only)*, a site-specific work in the New York Estonian House, a cultural club for the local Estonian-American diaspora. Over two nights, attendees were guided up three stories of burgundy-carpeted stairs to encounter performance vignettes—an incoherently monologuing woman pouring an impossibly long-running stream of water into a flowerpot, or a young singer in a sequined dress seated onstage, staring vacantly ahead, in silence—within each of the building's ten rooms. I met with Flo at the Performa Hub in SoHo following the premiere of *Members Only* to discuss immigrants' reconciliations between tradition and assimilation, national identity, the flimsiness of “membership” as a concept, and the role institutions play in reinforcing perceptions of difference.

Camila Nichols: As a part of this year's biennial, you've converted the Estonian House into a museum and are leading tours on the half-hour—how did you start conceptualizing this project? What does it entail?

Flo Kasearu: *Ainult liikmetele (Members Only)* is a site-specific project where the house becomes one of the characters alongside members of the Estonian-American community here in New York. My house museum in Tallinn consists mostly of installations, but in creating a new project for Performa taking place over two nights, it made no sense to produce objects or installations—it made sense to work with the community. So members of the community become living sculptures within the Estonian House.

There are around ten different spaces in the house, with one person per room. The people, just like the rooms, are all different—but they're united by the idea of being a member of a club and being a part of the Estonian community in New York. The community is small, and people live different lives in different parts of the city. Listening to their stories, I was inspired by their shared good news and their problems as well, especially in light of their immigrant status—struggles with things like green cards—having these different situations. The young aspiring dancers or actors, and their survival strategies for this big city inspired me. Taking all of this into account, I created different scenes in different rooms.

For example, in one room I took content from the Estonian-American community Facebook page and edited the posts and comments into short poems read aloud by this one of the performers. The performance was in the room where the Estonian house publishes its weekly newspaper—but it might be dying out because the younger generation doesn't need it; there aren't so many readers anymore, and they are considering going exclusively digital.

The house has been, and continues to be, an important place to maintain Estonian traditions and bring members together. It was purchased at a time when Estonia was not free—we were under the occupation. Many refugees escaped the Soviet Union, came here to start their lives and then became members of the house.

Could you speak a bit more toward the history of the Estonian House as a cultural locus for immigrants?

In 1946 the Society of Estonian Education bought this house to establish it as their institution's official home. Before that, the Society was in different places but didn't have its own building.

Since '46, they have had mostly the same traditions. They have the choir once a week; they have a folk dancing group, and the newspaper. The management office facilitates celebrations of things like Estonian Independence Day, Christmas, and various national anniversaries.

Parents bring their young children twice a month on Saturdays to learn about Estonian language and culture. On those days the entire house is full of young Estonians. And there is the bar, which is open three times a week in the evenings.

The site-specificity of Members Only is layered. The work is not only responding to the physicality of the building—and the personal histories embedded within it—but also to the symbolic nature of the space as an institution, which sounds like it is evolving quite a bit.

How do the traditions maintained by the institution manifest themselves in your performance?

In the club, I didn't want just to show the same folk dancing, or the same national singing, which you can go and watch at the house on normal days. I wanted to make it an abstraction inspired by these activities, using simple images to represent the sentimental atmosphere of the house overall.

For example, in the choir room, instead of *singing* patriotic songs, the notes are played on an electronic switchboard by a woman sitting at a closed piano and are all made of this sound (makes kissing noise). It's my symbolic gesture. The emotion and nostalgia associated with singing these national songs become abstracted. This way it's more open to interpretation and humor comes in, because the sound of this kissing is so exaggerated.

I put a young couple into a series of “goodbye and welcome” scenes taking

place in the window between the lobby and outside, in response to the house's role as a place for meeting up or departing for many members. In these scenes, the couple's poses visually support the same ideas as the kissing sound coming from the choir rehearsal room.

The work is inspired by the traditional activities that happen in the Estonian House, but are brought to some other level, which gives distance and another viewpoint to the subject matter, while also looking to become more open; not so closed off, or only understandable to certain people.

Were any other features of the Estonian House particularly exciting or challenging to work with?

I was inspired that there is a bar place where people socialize. It's active when they have the choir or other activities. However, when I was researching on Friday nights, I was the only customer there. It's a huge house, with so many possibilities, but most of the time it's empty. The Estonian House is in a comfort zone where it gets enough funding from membership fees and members' wills, and probably State support, so they don't need to search for new ways to actively open the house up for the community. They are a real representation of the members-only club, with these kinds of luxurious events...

The sense that I'm getting is that they prioritize carrying forward these conventions, these symbolic events, these tropes of national pride—

Exactly.

—rather than focusing on the interpersonal relationships?

Yes.

Your project transforms this space into something very personal. You've enlisted real members of the cultural club to perform, or serve as "living sculptures" situated in the tableaux that visitors encounter on the tour of the "museum." Could you

Speak more about how their personal stories inform your work?

I mixed together personal stories and fake facts. No scene was *exactly* connected with any one person. There are these inside stories and relationships within the house that are not visible to outsiders, but which make sense to local members. For example, the lady who welcomes everybody near the house's entrance and hands out newspapers used to be the bartender, but no longer works there. I put her in this same position where she welcomes and feeds the buzz, because she knows everybody and cares for the people—because of her story.

There was one other performer, who isn't a real member, but sometimes visits the house. She was in the basement.

The artist that had a gallery in the fish market?

Yeah, exactly. She's the most Americanized cast member.

She is the only person on the tour who speaks from her lived experience. All the others are staged, and I have really brought them into this abstract, absurd level; but she was already *herself* on this same level.

It was such a pleasant surprise to discover that her story was real and not staged like the others, because as a visitor on the tour, her monologue seemed so perfectly in line with all of the other stories, an absurdist reconciliation between different value systems. She explains that she once dreamed of having a Corvette while working at a fish market...

She has these great hobbies living in New York, and there was no point to stage her some other way. I just brought her crazy interests out. The others don't talk about *themselves* directly, but they talk more about life in New York from the perspective of the *community*. You don't know if their stories are real or fake, even though the performers are all real Estonians in New York. This is another level in the performance—the border between truth and fiction, and when you go over the line.

Another example is the part of the tour where visitors stand on the roof, open a skylight, and look down into to the housekeeper's apartment. She is lying there on the ground, with her body wrapped in Christmas lights. This came from the fact that in talking with the housekeeper, she said that she feels as though she's never seen and listened to; nobody cares about her. So, I wanted to really *show* her, to give her the most beautiful view, and to put her in this beautiful lighting. She will be *there*, and everybody will look at her and care for her at this moment.

It's a "reveal" moment, an instance of exaggerated visibility. This moment contrasts with many other situations in this work, where there's a strong sense of obscurity or not quite fitting in—being incomprehensible or behind closed doors.

There are also notions of belonging, and specifically, national identity, that play heavily into the performance. One would think that these are all very serious things, but in your work, they don't necessarily have to be. How are humor and irony valuable to you in grappling with this subject matter?

I have done other works in the past dealing with a topic of national identity that are quite serious, like in *Estonian Sculpture* (2005). In this piece, which was also an exhibition of living sculptures, I wore the full national Estonian costume on a podium, not moving at all and holding a sign reading, "I am dead for six hours."

Later I did a video in Berlin, *Multi Travels* (2007), about the same topic, with more humor. A woman in full national clothing follows another girl, reminding her about Estonian national identity, always smoking and chasing her.

Then I did *Estonian Dream* (2011), a video collage of YouTube clips from an Estonian girl who lives abroad in Texas. She's doing posts about how she's homesick and trying to stay in touch, so I created a collage of her videos. She's like, a hostage of love. She can't enjoy her national identity, and in America she's like, "Just keep smiling all the time!" This work goes

more into the direction of abstraction and irony.

Ainult liikmetele (Members Only) is again about national identity. It's Estonia's 100-year anniversary in 2018, but they are already celebrating now—I feel like it's too much already. So in this project, I covered all of the flag's colors at the Estonian House. I put the flags away and covered the poles with an entirely new identity.

At the moment, dealing with national identity instead of making visible the *same things* all the time, I wanted to hide our national elements in the house, to show that being Estonian actually means being just a member of some club. I am generalizing the idea of “membership,” so that other people can relate and think about their own clubs. Estonia is a small country with a population of about 1.3 million, so it's a very small club, and I don't think we should be only a members-only club.

All of this points to the politics of migration in Estonia. We don't have many refugees living in Estonia. Estonians have a language-based identity, and our distinctive language is probably the only reason we exist as a country. As our language is difficult to learn, it creates difference and language gaps. So it often feels like *Members Only* in Estonia.

Handing out what you call “badges” at each stopping-point on the tour—going around to all the visitors and adhering these stickers with colorful, abstract shapes to their shirts—directly implicates them in this. It's an ironic gesture of validation or inclusion that debunks membership as a concept and exposes its arbitrariness.

Yeah. The badges are a gesture of validation, referring to the ritual of becoming a member through the bureaucratic process of completing all necessary steps and getting all necessary stamps. It also indicates the act of tagging people or grouping them up based on their origin or other criteria.

You mentioned earlier that while members of the Estonian House all grapple with common issues, they also have their

own distinctive, personal problems. I think your use of humor and irony in your work not only serves an important purpose in addressing these greater national and political dilemmas, but also functions on a more personal and human level, as well. Could you speak about that?

Even though there are many serious topics in my project, humor is something that you can relate to and that allows you to get *into* the thing. If you digest political subject matter through a human level, through humor and irony, then you get to the emotions. This is what I enjoy. In this way, being more positive—as opposed to serious—presents an opportunity.

You're engaging with a wider, and more complex, array of human emotions and emotional devices.

The performer in the sequined dress onstage in the basement came to New York to conquer Broadway, but at the same time, she's also a young woman alone in the big city. I think the attitude or the energy of the work is positive, but I'm not bringing out *only* positive things. The scenes that these participants are performing are somewhat sad and humorous at the same time. I wanted to bring out—not sad, and not negative—but somehow not the most positive things. I could have staged her *singing*. She can sing very well, you know...instead, she does not make a sound, and appears to be waiting. I wanted to show her being on this clock in this big city. Right now she is young and still beautiful, but at one point, you know, her time (like everybody's time) will be over, so she's like a living clock—ticking and waiting.

Maybe what I am showing in the house altogether is one possible future, where melancholia and nostalgia are also still recognized.

Flo Kasearu is an artist from Tallinn, Estonia. Kasearu works in different mediums, and the nature of her work is seasonal and explorative. She is interested in vertical and horizontal relationships, monumental and unstable things, as well as socially and politically loaded themes in private and public spaces. She values irony more than aesthetics. She has

served since 2013 as director of the Flo Kasearu House Museum.

Camila Nichols is an arts writer and administrator based in New York. She is currently a graduate student at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

