

# An Artist Transforms Her House into a Living Museum

At Flo Kasearu's House Museum, velvet red ropes serve as partitions between those rooms in which "real life" takes place and the public spaces from which visitors can peek in.

[Meghan Forbes](#) 17 hours ago



The Flo Kasearu House Museum (photo by Kristina Ollek, courtesy Flo Kasearu)

TALLINN, Estonia — In early September of last year, I pulled up in a taxi to [Flo Kasearu's House Museum](#), a multistory home in a row of wood houses in the Pelgulin neighborhood just west of Tallinn's Old Town. I had shown up some 15 minutes before my scheduled tour but rang the doorbell on arrival, hoping someone might heed my call. Flo Kasearu's head poked out from an upstairs window, and the museum's technical



director, Tõnu Narro, opened the door, letting me in on his way out. As Kasearu ran about the house readying it for our tour, I sat on the steps of the foyer watching a video of a fictional scenario that depicts the wooden house's demise by fire. Meanwhile, a tenant in bath towel passed nonchalantly by.



Flo Kasearu at the Flo Kasearu House Museum (image courtesy Flo Kasearu)

In the video, “We Are on the Way,” from 2012, a fire truck heads through the streets of Tallinn towards Kasearu’s house. Trams, bicyclists, and pedestrians outpace the slow-moving rescue vehicle, even as the urgency of its mission is underscored with cuts to scenes of smoke billowing out of an upper-floor window of the house (the very same window from which Kasearu’s head had popped out moments before). Fortunately, the house was not actually in danger and did not burn to the ground — the video is just one of many of Kasearu’s artworks that envision all sorts of potential catastrophes that could envelope the building, from brutal urbanization to natural disaster or war.



Flo Kasearu, "A selection of Fears of a Museum Director"  
 (2014/2016), page from Flo's Book (Lugemik: Tallinn, 2016), 48  
 ) (reproduced with the permission of Flo Kasearu)

As Kasearu told me on our tour, the house was built in the early 1900s, occupied by her great-great-grandparents, who kept a spice shop on the ground floor and rented to tenants in the main building. After 1945, when Estonia became a part of the Soviet Union, the house was nationalized, and the family was forced to leave their home. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they began a nearly 20-year period of restitution that was ultimately successful. The story, while remarkable, is not singular to the experience of Kasearu's family, and she uses her personal story to explore universal concerns related to domesticity and displacement. Flo Kasearu's House Museum brilliantly and playfully conjures all kinds of contemporary anxieties — from regressive nationalism to hyper-masculinity — while also offering a lens into the particular push and pull of Estonia's cultural history and fragmented identity, wedged between Scandinavia to the north and Russia to the east.





“Pillory” (2013-ongoing), found drawing documentation of tenants late on rent or fees (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In 2013, on the artist’s 28th birthday and with a one-year-old son, Kasearu officially turned her family home into a museum. Like her ancestors before her, she also keeps tenants; a series of drawn portraits by the front door depicts those who are late in paying their bills. Kasearu, who also exhibits regularly in international venues, is both building manager and museum director, offering tours by appointment to individuals such as myself, or to larger groups, from local high schoolers to curators from the Tate, whom she logs on the museum’s [Instagram](#). The house is quite literally a living museum, with velvet red ropes serving as partitions between those rooms in which “real life” takes place and the public spaces from which the visitor can peek in.





Visitors viewing the Collection of Artefacts at the Flo Kasearu House Museum (image courtesy Flo Kasearu)



The gift shop at the Flo Kasearu House Museum (photo by Kristina Ollek, courtesy Flo Kasearu)

By setting up a museum in her own home, Kasearu coyly reclaims what is typically the domain of the long dead and very famous white man. [Hemingway's house in Cuba](#) comes to mind. With sardonic humor, Kasearu — living artist, and also woman, mother, and landlady — inverts the trope of the House Museum, while preserving several of its tenets: there is a gift shop (more a glowing vitrine of miscellaneous objects), a library (a stack of books in the bathroom), an archive (in the attic), and an artist's study (a bedroom blocked off to the public by velvet rope, and barely visible in a room beyond, the sleeping quarters of the artist's child). The things a house are made of are made strange: it is a process of defamiliarization that is the very "tool of art," as the Russian literary theorist and writer Viktor Shklovsky would have it — "in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone

feel stony.”

Or a plant ... planty? At one point along our tour, Kasearu lingered over some houseplants, waved her hand over them dismissively and said, “this is just life,” before we carried on in search of more art. I paused and contemplated them nevertheless. (Apparently these “just life” plants are not to be confused with those that comprise her artwork *Collection of Dead Plants*, 2016–ongoing.)



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Flo Kasearu in her study (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Behind the house, Kasearu has accumulated all the outdoor accoutrements



of a distinguished personality: not native to the property itself, she has constructed a landscape with an ocean view, a mountain, and a Korean garden. Situated some kilometers from Tallinn's seaport, the museum has its oceanfront view in the form of a huge, translucent painted banner of a tsunami. Rather than a placid coastal scene, Kasearu has rendered a constant, sobering reminder of the impending "Great Flood," one of her many imagined demises to the museum.



The garden of Flo Kasearu's House Museum (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Kasearu's art practice also extends well beyond the house, where she often confronts more seriously what it means to not have a safe home. Writing about Kasearu's work, Polish curator Joanna Sokołowska notes that one in five women in Estonia have experienced domestic violence (though Flo herself thinks the number is closer to one in four, accounting for those who do not report) and it is an issue that Kasearu has addressed for some time. A year-long project in 2018, titled *Festival of the Shelter*, was situated inside a women's shelter (which Flo's mother established) in her



hometown of Pärnu, and for reasons of security, is only accessible to residents and employees. According to Kasearu, artworks — not unlike the structure of the House Museum — were installed across living spaces and corridors, and in the kitchen. In one series of images on view, called *Handsfree*, classical reproductions of the male body are printed on bright pink paper and the anatomical parts associated with causing violence towards women are blurred.



Flo Kasearu, “Festival of the Shelter” (2018), Parnü Women’s Shelter (image courtesy Flo Kasearu)

From the *Festival of the Shelter* to her House Museum, Kasearu’s projects are reminders that the deeply intimate and private extend meaningfully into social, public spheres. Kasearu’s approach is both compassionate and playful, employing a biting wit that cuts right down to both the beautiful wonder and terrible truths of daily life.



Flo Kasearu, from the *Handsfree* series, part of “Festival of the Shelter” (2018), Parnü Women’s Shelter (image courtesy Flo Kasearu)

[Flo Kasearu’s House Museum](#) (*Pebre 8, Tallinn, Estonia*) is open to visitors [by appointment](#).