
Postcard from Tallinn

DECEMBER 29, 2013 *by Ellen Mara De Wachter*



10 x 10 Meters, 'Human Forestry' (2012). Photo by Tanel Rander

I'm sitting with artist Eva Labotkin in the offices of the Estonian Center for Contemporary Arts (CCA) in Tallinn. Labotkin, a small, birdlike woman with wispy blonde hair is telling me about a performance she and her artist collective 10 x 10 Meters did in October 2012 in Helsinki, Finland, a city just a two-hour ferry ride away from Tallinn. The collective, named after the standard dimensions of a black-box theatre, is made up of a core group of six Estonian artists who put on Fluxus-style performances ranging from humorous interventions in the fabric of everyday life to art-world oriented actions delivered with pointed social critique.

It's hard to imagine Labotkin in the situation she describes, but she has a video documenting the action. It shows a large dump truck offloading a pile of enormous wooden logs on the pavement outside Kiasma, the contemporary art museum in Helsinki. The artists, dressed in Soviet-style navy blue work wear are rolling the logs into the museum and up the ramp to the galleries, while Tanel Rander, one of the group's members and a qualified lawyer, reads the manifesto he has written for the occasion. Before they get to

the exhibition space, things get complicated, and a cast of Kiasma workers starts to panic, telling the performers they have to leave immediately and take their logs with them.

Human Forestry is a microcosm of labour relations between Estonia and Finland played out in real time. Estonians are the largest immigrant population in Finland, their numbers having overtaken those of Russians in 2010. With between 30,000 and 40,000 Estonians living in Finland, most of whom are young and working for low wages, Finland, as Labotkin puts it, 'gets much of its human resources from Estonia'. Finland has a healthy social welfare system, an area in which Estonia is sorely deficient, making immigration an attractive prospect for young Estonians. As an artistic allegory of this situation, Kiasma's rejection of *Human Forestry* and its symbolic materials – the logs were considered by 10 × 10 Meters to represent 'units of labour' – is symptomatic of the conflicted attitude of the Finns towards their recently arrived labour force.



Migration, in relation to both Estonians emigrants and non-Estonians living in the country is a popular theme among artists working in Estonia. It is one of several complex issues relating to the national and cultural heritage of post-Soviet republics. I discovered that it is almost impossible to write about contemporary art in Estonia without referring to historical specifics, so my knowledge of Estonian history is gleaned from my conversations with artists and curators. The Estonian Republic gained independence twice in the 20th century: first from the Russian Empire in 1918, after which it was a sovereign state until the Second World War, when it was occupied by the Nazis in 1939–40. And then from the Soviets, who occupied the country from 1940 until the end of the war, and immediately incorporated it into the Soviet Union. Estonian feelings towards the Second World War and its outcomes are understandably mixed. The Russians may have liberated Estonia from the Nazis, but the Soviet era does not appear to have left many happy memories among the people I met during my visit.

The Russian population of Estonia is about 320,000 – roughly a quarter of the country's population of 1.3 million inhabitants. Since the collapse of the USSR, former Soviet citizens who are not of direct Estonian parentage are considered stateless and are issued Estonian Alien Passports. Photographer Tanja Muravskaja's 'Estonian Race' project (2010) deals with the concept of a pure Estonian race, or what she calls 'the right Estonian', emphasizing the moralistic tone of such debates. Her series of close-up portraits of young male Estonian soldiers shows them as exceptional specimens of threatening male beauty. Muravskaja has Ukrainian parents and underwent the process of naturalization herself, although she is resigned to the fact that she will never be the 'right' kind of Estonian.



There is currently a lively debate around how the cultural sphere in Estonia ought to mark the centenary of its first independent Republic in 2018. Some feel that the country is ready for an international biennial such as Manifesta. Estonia's chequered history and present-day geopolitical issues might be fertile terrain for this peripatetic institution that thrives on latent conflicts and loaded histories, and attracts international attention and visitors. But hosting Manifesta is a costly endeavour, and the Estonian government may prefer to spend its anniversary budget to support local artists.

To me, it seems that the prospect of hosting Manifesta stands to do more for the city, which still needs to convince locals that contemporary art at its best attracts tourism and provides a platform for constructive debate. However, Estonia may still have a problem with promoting critical art that posits a serious critique of nationalism and other issues facing the country. When Kristina Norman represented Estonia at the Venice Biennale in 2009 with her work *After-War* (2009), it was only after an extremely difficult time during which the Estonian Internal Security Service asked her to abandon her project, part of the work itself was confiscated by police during a public performance, and the national media demonized the artist for interfering with accepted narratives about the Second World War. Norman's work investigated a troubling incident in 2007 in which the monument to the liberators of Estonia, sited on Freedom Square and a popular meeting place for Russians, was relocated to a cemetery on the periphery of the capital, provoking riots throughout the city. This debacle suggests that there may still be some way to go before the popular understanding of successful art accommodates healthy and creative dissent. Happily, the young artists and curators I met in Tallinn look to be working hard to move things in this direction.

__Ellen Mara De Wachter __

About the author



Ellen Mara De Wachter is a curator based in London, UK.

1 Montclare Street, London E2 7EU, UK, +44 (0) 20 3372 6111

