

The Transition of Gender:

How Mare Tralla's *Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* Represents the Post-Soviet Transition in Estonian Women's Gender Roles and Expectations.

In the August of 1991, the Baltic states successfully restored their national independence. In the early months of 1992, the once mighty Soviet Union ceased to exist and fifteen independent nations, including Estonia, emerged from its wreckage (Robinson, 1997.) While created fifteen years after Estonia's reestablished independence, Mare Tralla's *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* (2004) offers an intricate commentary and reflection on the construction and, importantly, the reconstruction of femininity during Estonia's transition into what we classify as a 'Western' capitalist democracy. First, it is essential to briefly clarify what I mean by the word 'Western' as 'The West' is as much a concept, a meta-narrative, as it is a geographical location. By 'Western,' as stated by Stuart Hall in his Volume 2 of *Essential essays*, we habitually mean: "a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern. "(Hall, 2018: 189.) This concept will become important when analysing Tralla's work contextually with the emergence of the 'Western' influence and ideas on Estonian gender roles and expectations. While this influx of influence on Estonia is immeasurable, a commentary on more specific ideas and ideologies imported or resulting from the growing significance of 'The West' is found within the work, these primarily being: nationalism, 'Western' feminism, capitalism and, along with it, consumerism. For *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* to be understood as a representation of the transition in Estonian women's gender roles in the 1990s, these fundamental ideas must be explored within the socio-political context and then applied to the artwork, aiding the understanding of the contextual significance of artistic choice. Comprehending the emergence of Estonian-Feminist art and Tralla's voice within it helps to frame the intended meanings placed within the work. When partaking in global feminist discourse, it must be understood that having been exposed to 'Western' feminism as a 'Western' person, my preconceived notions of what constitutes feminist art may and should be contested. The influence of my own subjectivities when analysing contemporary art can be detrimental to the overall analysis of the artwork, especially when the cultural context of the work differs greatly from my own (Pachmanová, 2009.) However, through utilising the words of the artist herself and making sure to consider writings from those, such as Katrin Kivimaa, who have dedicated themselves to the study of post-soviet contemporary women artists, I will hopefully refrain from approaching feminism from a strictly 'Western' perspective. I will deter from describing the entirety of *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*. Instead, as we go through this essay, I will identify

key imagery, essential references, and vital parts of the video that regard, critique and reflect on Gender Roles in both the USSR and post-soviet Estonia.

With a length of 3 minutes and 42 seconds, Mare Tralla's *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* provides a fast-paced yet multifaceted commentary on women's labour, both past and present, within Estonia (Chalvin, 2003.) Emphasis must be placed on Estonia here as the country's name is not mentioned in the work's title; the indicational term we are given for this work's topical geographical location is 'Post-Soviet.' We must challenge the 'Western' tendency to group and classify post-soviet countries together, condensing various characteristics into a single composite picture of the reality of widely different nations (Hall, 2018.) Analysing the work at a national, more isolated level allows a deeper understanding of specifically Estonian gender roles that will not necessarily be the same as other post-socialist spaces. With titles such as *Estonian Girl* (1999) and *This is how we gave birth to Estonian feminism* (1995); Tralla's home nation of Estonia is an integral subject matter and source of material for her practice, correlating to the imperative nature of Estonian identification and national sovereignty to Estonian people (Huber, 1992.) Regarding the consequences for the female experience, nationalism may have liberated Estonia in many ways, but the liberation of the nation did not automatically liberate women from the enduring patriarchal structure of the country. The new nation glorified women as caretakers and child-rearers in the domestic setting as a notion of 'true' Estonian femininity (Kaskla, 2003; Kivimaa, 2001.). This restored glorification of the domestic was, in stark, contrast to the 'New Soviet Woman' of the USSR, who was to be an embodiment of heroic femininity, emancipated from the chains of domesticity and an equal part of the workforce (Černá, 2006.) Tralla has frequently commented on the influence that soviet 'heroines' had on the societal construction of femininity as well as her personal development and experience as a woman:

"When I was a child I had many idols based on the female heroines of the Soviet time... My parents valued hard physical work, which is very typical of Estonians. Our national poet Tammsaare wrote: 'You have to work hard to get love.' This suggests why our idols were always workers and why the communist propaganda succeeded to show workers as heroines: female tractor drivers, milkmaids, weavers and so on..." (Tralla, 1997: 58.)

Within *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*, the two idealised forms of femininity contradict and interrupt each other in a visually disruptive and jarring manner. Black and white archival footage documents various women undertaking industrial labour in a soviet factory. The interjecting footage shows Tralla, in full colour, applying makeup and styling her hair seemingly at home. A noticeable distinction between the presentation of the factory workers and Tralla as the 'modern' Estonian woman is the importance given to the curation and visibility of female beauty. Concerning the rise of nationalism, women's bodies have been frequently positioned as signifiers of cultural tradition; due to being essential to the continuation of the family, as well as the nation and as the object of both sexual and territorial desire (Chapman, 2019; Faria and Fluri, 2022.) It is very much true that with the rejection of the Soviet Woman came the championing of the feminine and the domestic: the liberation from imposed labour, the rejection of the masculinity attached to this labour and, notably, the freedom to be feminine in a more traditional sense (Kaskla, 2003.) Tralla presents the clash of these two very different



Figure.1

Mare Tralla

The Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour
(2:19)
2004.



Figure.2

Mare Tralla

The Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour
(1:36)
2004.

idealisations of femininity through not only the fast-paced and contradicting visuals, but through discordant, jarring musical melodies played behind it. There is arguably a commentary here on the nature of societal change, what 'type' of womanhood is 'ideal' as a consequence, and the conflict this may cause within female identity. While the melody remains unharmonious, it remains consistent, like another crucial component of the video: the presence of women's labour (we will further look into this later.) Absurdity and parody have been successful tools for Tralla throughout her career. Within *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*, the consistent use of discordant music leads to a mocking of the subject matter and suggests an absurdity in the way that femininity and women's labour has been co-opted and manipulated to serve the dominant societal ideologies of the time. Principally, the subject matter is serious, but the humour and absurdity injected do assist the critical commentary on how the fashioning of femininity, whether undertaken to support nationalist interests or to promote a production regime, is preposterous. Taking visual signs and qualities from differing and contrasting ideologies that had moulded Estonian beliefs surrounding femininity allows the artist to question them then.

According to Mare Tralla, the overt sexualization of society during Estonia's shift into capitalism was heavily facilitated by both consumerism and the job market (Tralla, 1997.) With this shift into a capitalist economy came the rise of another dominant form of woman's labour: the attending of woman's bodies and appearances. Not to say that before the 1990s, there was strictly no pressure on Estonian women to work

towards perceived beauty, but the importance and visibility of women's aesthetics became tremendously more relevant and a core part of women's gender position (Dimitrakaki, 2013.) It is evident that within *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*, gender



Figure.3

Mare Tralla

The Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour

(0:34)

2004

expectation and performance are undetachable from labour. Tralla shows us this new form of women's labour through three distinct visuals. The examples include a clip of Tralla taking cutouts of women's figures, most probably from magazines, and folding their heads over a taught string or wire that heavily resembles a washing line. The heads cannot be seen, and the bodies are left to hang there. Tralla, handling and hanging the anonymous female bodies, taken from a mass-printed magazine, is an excellent visualisation of women being inscribed in the capitalist culture as both consumers and commodities (Roberts, 1998.) Tralla acts as both the subject of sexualisation through her gender and also the consumer and our presenter of this sexualisation. The Estonian woman acting as both a consumer and a commodity is repeated, but using a very different method; this time, Tralla's own body is used to represent this concept. Played over the previously mentioned clips of factory workers and the artist applying makeup, a video placed in the bottom right hand of the screen shows Tralla undertaking several exercises. Accompanied with this is a Voiceover, notably with a 'western' English accent, giving commands and words of encouragement to the viewer, clearly a reference to at-home fitness DVDs. Angela Dimitrakaki states, in connection to Tralla's video work: "*Women's post-socialist labour centred on the production of the body- a production inscribed as a new type of mechanical, exhausting form of manual labour.*" (Dimitrakaki, 2013: 84.) The exercise undertaken challenges the preconceived notions of the domestic and places it within the context of a place of labour, a place of work. While Estonian women were no longer required to be a part of the workforce, they would continue to be enchained with the responsibilities of the home and the domestic labour that needed to be undertaken. Only now, the female today was the subject of increasingly aesthetic and sexualised labour. New women's industries proliferated, with modelling and prostitution becoming much more common (Kivimaa, 2001.) Tralla points to both aesthetic and sexual labour within the video, with the literal labour seeming strenuous and monotonous to perform. However, it becomes a constant presence, regardless of its form. References to mass media and communication are littered throughout the video. From the opening, which parodies soviet style TV intro-signals to the magazine cutouts, snippets from Estonian TV archives and the video of the artist exercising, which not only acts as a reference to fitness DVDs but as a sign language interpreter, placed at the bottom of the screen. Like an interpreter in traditional media, Tralla can translate to the audience the transformation, differences and similarities of Estonian women's labour in both the past and present, which is cleverly undertaken through her own physical labour.

Tralla was one of the first generation of artists to introduce the concept of gender into contemporary art and theory within Estonia (Dimitrakaki, 2013.) However, Estonian feminism is not the same as 'Western' feminism, which often is mistaken as the canonical method or framework for gender discourse. Feminism evolved significantly differently in Estonia, as it did in many post-socialist nations (Simpson, 2004.) Marx's theory on the relations of production has been a definable and fundamental driver of gender inequality within the feminist discourse. Unlike most societies in 'The West,' communist Estonia achieved seemingly full equality in the public workforce, and it was assumed that equality in other aspects of life would follow. Importantly, this outwardly presenting 'equality' did not prevent socialist states from defining women's bodies and developing gendered conceptions of the state and its population (Occhipinti, 1996.) Despite the lack of true emancipation, the disdain and reluctance for women artists to partake in Feminist practice was evident and inevitably tied to this history. The

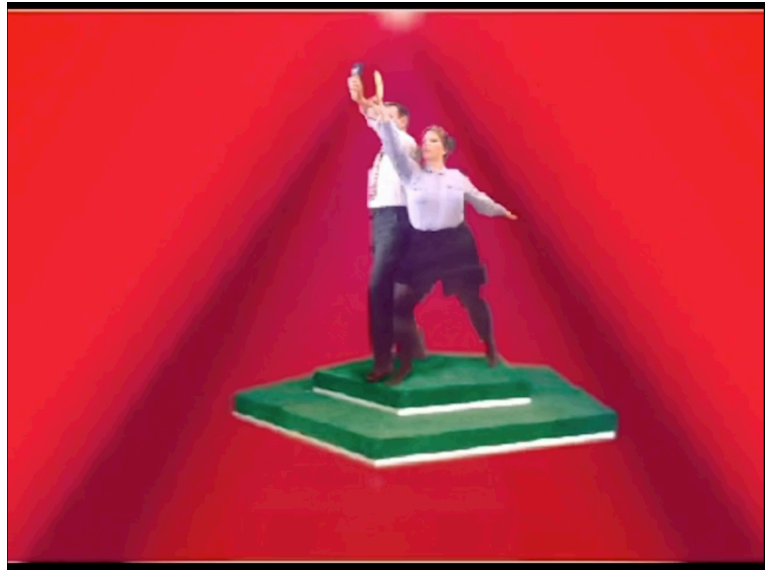


Figure.4

Mare Tralla

The Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour

(0:07)

2004.



Figure.5

Vera Mukhina

Worker and Kolkhoz Woman

1937

reception from the larger public was unsurprisingly critical, with Tralla being labelled the “Disgusting Women,” a name that she still goes by from time to time (Tralla, 1997.) While several women artists became the first to engage with gender and feminist-related art, most did so in a way that stressed individualism and the expression of the artist’s psyche. This, to a certain degree, included Tralla, who applied an “autobiographical approach” at the beginning of her career (Kivimaa, 2001; Kivimaa, 2007:17.) When we approach *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*, however, while Tralla’s experiences as a woman have an unchallenged and essential influence on the work (the commentary on the ‘New Soviet Woman’ and its influence on her as a young woman is a relevant example,) there is an undeniable and outwardly political challenge embedded within. This is in contrast to the practice of her contemporaries, who preferred to make little or no clear political statement under the label of ‘post-feminism’ (Kivimaa, 2001.) So, why is Tralla’s *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* so different? Since the late 1990s, the artist has been primarily based in London, and the influence of her engagement with various theoretical approaches to feminism, especially traditionally more ‘western’ feminisms, can be seen within her art. Cyber-feminism has become crucial to her practice, with the artist bringing her personal experiences and placing them within a larger and shared collective identity. This allows her to frame socio-political commentary through a lens of personal identity and semi-ironic nostalgia (Kivimaa, 2007.) The introduction of her video (a parody of soviet style TV intro-signals) is rooted in both nostalgia and parody, with the artist holding up a banana while mimicking the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, an iconic soviet statue. The complicated relationship that Tralla has to both Estonia’s representation of women and feminist discourse can be read through the semi-humorous elements of parody and the clashing representations of women that we have previously discussed.

The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour successfully presents an artistic reflection of the representation and mediation of ‘the ideal’ Estonian woman. The constructed representations of women are then deconstructed through a variety of methods. One of these is the bringing together of Tralla’s performances and Estonian archival footage, combining the post-feminist tendency of individualist expression of gender while still asserting a critical and political commentary, differing from the goals of many of her post-feminist peers. The deconstruction occurs through the examples and representations of gender in Estonian media. Tralla is an excellent example of an artist engaging in critical reflection and commentary through post-modern thinking. Within *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour*, there is an engagement of ‘Western’ feminism but through the

consideration of the post-socialist context and subjectivity. This is implemented through the differing representations of Estonian women and a commentary on mediated narratives surrounding gender. How artwork is received - both critically and publicly - can help uncover differing meanings taken from the work rather than solely turning to the artist to decipher one definitive meaning. Notably, public reception can provide insight into the work's success in relating to, or portraying, the subject matter (Shapiro, 1974.) Unfortunately, there is a seeming lack of resources to consider how exactly *The Heroine of Post-Soviet Labour* was received publicly and critically. A key reason for this could be the year it was created: 2004. While I am not arguing an irrelevancy of the work, it needs to be understood that this work was not made in the 1990s: with the emergence of gender-related art in Estonia and, therefore, not subject to the tides of backlash that came with it. However, the analysis of the work cannot be removed from the context of the 1990s. The emergence of gender-related art and the feminist critique within it is unequivocally tied to doctrines imported or resulting from Estonia's departure from the USSR and into the 'Western' sphere of influence.

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Mare Tralla

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(2:19)

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Figure.2

Mare Tralla

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Figure.3

Mare Tralla

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(0:34)

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Figure.4

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The Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour

(0:07)

2004.



Figure.5:

Mukhina, Vera

Worker and Kolkhoz Woman

1937.

Photograph taken by:

Willem van de Poll.

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