
**Three Sisters: Tanja Muravskaja
at Tensta konsthall
5.2–22.4 2019**

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Tensta konsthall

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Video installation on two screens; ca
15 and 20 minutes, respectively
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During the early spring, a sound and video installation by the artist Tanja Muravskaja (Tallinn, Estonia) will be shown in the art centre's reception gallery. Two women are displayed – one on either screen – each facing the camera, with their gaze focused on the viewer. Both appear to be in their twenties, and they wear the same serious facial expression. Their facial features are quite alike, which, based on the title of the piece, leads the viewer to believe that they are sisters (in actual fact, they are cousins, but the Ukrainian language uses the same word for sister and cousin). On the screens, angled towards each other, the two women describe their respective understandings of the Ukrainian political situation, and the positions they have taken within it.

One of the women lives in Kiev and has taken part in the demonstrations held at Independence Square, in which protesters took a stand against Russian involvement in what many interpret as a repressive response to Ukraine's fight for independence. The Kiev 'sister' tells of her involvement there and reflects upon the likelihood that her understanding of the opposition's point of view is the result of propaganda.

In the other video, in parallel, the second woman voices her opinion on the political involvement of her 'sister', of which she is very critical. Similarly, however, she believes that the protest movement has been corrupted by skewed information and destructive forces. Neither of the 'sisters' is approached or interrupted, and each talks, undisturbed, for 15 to 20 minutes about their experience of the state of things.

The third 'sister' in this scenario is the artist herself, a neutral, listening actor. The title, **Three Sisters**, refers to Anton

Chekov's 1900 play of the same name.

In the Autumn of 2013, citizens of Kiev gathered in Independence Square to protest the dismissal of an agreement that would have granted Ukraine increased independence from Russia. The protests escalated swiftly into riots, and the ensuing clashes claimed several lives. For many generations, the country's Ukrainian-speaking population has lived alongside its Russian-speaking one. In general, the people have lived harmoniously, albeit under conditions of slight segregation. This course of events, however, upset the state of relative calm, something that Tanja Muravskaja – herself a Russian-speaker – aims to demonstrate in the video installation through interviews with her own relatives. She uncovers the subtle cracks that appeared within families, showing how political events have the capacity to damage not only what had been a relative harmony between countries, but also what society considers to be the strongest type of bond – that of siblinghood.

Tanja Muravskaja explores how the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has affected relationships between relatives, using her own family as a point of departure, some of whom live in Ukraine, and others in Russia and Estonia, having moved there during the Soviet era. Her film shows how the Euromaidan has managed to politicise family relations by revealing existing political divisions within the family – and in so doing, cementing the dimensions of the conflict. Muravskaja's piece poses an eternal and deeply human question: For what reason does hostility arise among family members?

A Conversation between Tanja Muravskaja and Paulina Sokolow

Paulina Sokolow: What gave you the idea for this video?

Tanja Muravskaja: When the conflict began in 2013 and continued in 2014, I witnessed all the conflicts within my family and between relatives that live across Ukraine, Russia and Finland. Those of us who don't belong to the youngest generation of adults realised that it was those around 25 years old who had the most polarised opinions. They had completely contradictory perspectives on what was happening. When we have family reunions, we usually meet at my grandmother's place, which is in Ukraine. It was here where we realised that political issues were being brought up in conversation in a very central way – a way in which they had never been before – and that this was due to the younger generation. The older generation took things far more lightly, some of them because of their experience of the political ravages of earlier leaders. One of my sisters (who is actually a cousin) chose to become an activist at Maidan, the big square in Kiev. That news hit pretty hard. It became obvious to me that even the school system had become polarised, and evident that education forms young people in a definitive way. In Ukraine the school system is nationalistic. I tested a few different ideas of how to evoke this conflict, and this ended up being the best visual format for me. They are monologues that are based off an interview. In this sense, I am the third sister; but in order to keep it more neutral and to limit my role to that of a listener, I edited out my questions and turned them into uninterrupted monologues.

PS: Was there anything in the sisters' responses that surprised you, or were the answers quite predictable?

TM: I'm happy that they were so honest, and that they explained their point of view in an open and direct manner that was coherent and well

suited for my video. At the same time, I realised the degree to which people are products of the system in which they find themselves. We exist in bubbles. As an outsider, I can't see it from either a Ukrainian or Russian perspective, because I get my information from European media. To my ears, their words sounded exactly like they do on TV: like propaganda television. The phrases and explanations that they came up with were very clichéd and emotional. Of course, you want to be emotionally independent, but your feelings search for confirmation for your opinions; thus, it is easy for your ideas to be formed from the media's manipulated images. This is precisely what I witnessed at my grandma's place. It became a warning sign for me, too. The piece became a lesson for me to be more careful with what I hear and read. The same applies to a place like Tensta, which itself is a sort of parallel media construction.

PS: You have an education in journalism, and evidently you are interested in people and political events. Can you recall how, and at what point, you switched over to art, and why?

TM: At some point near the end of the nineties, I had a sudden insight that Russian, my mother tongue, had gone from being a language for over 100 million people, to being for a small group of around 300,000. The Russian-speaking population had shrunk dramatically. It took me a while to realise that after Estonian independence, the area of use for my language had become much smaller. I began to analyse the situation, which meant that I started taking pictures instead of trying to tell a story with words. Pictures can be understood by far more people. I realised that my journalistic method had to be modified, so I applied for art school in Tallinn with my photographs.

PS: The title of this piece is an obvious reference to Anton Chekov's play from 1900, which is about three sisters from an upper-class background whose lives don't turn out the way they predicted,

due to changes in society. What sort of parallels can be drawn to your piece, and what would you like to highlight?

TM: It's a female solidarity, which is free and bold. Sisterhood can be a model for this type of space. Nowadays families are so small, with only one or two children. But these close-knit relationships among cousins are a type of family too, with important implications. The whole wide world can be fit into an intimate space which is traditionally associated with female relationships.

PS: The sisters seem to care for and respect one another. Still, they seem to deeply mistrust one another's sources of information and evaluation of these sources. Why do you think that is?

TM: The interviews were done during the worst stage of the conflict. Today, both would probably have a far more relaxed approach to it all, and they would most likely smile when reminded of the strong feelings they had at the time. Their relationship is much better [now]. Not least because of this piece! They were pleased that they got the chance to express their experience of it all and to explain this to the other sister. They also felt seen by me and enjoyed the attention that they received, and that they were listened to. That is why I decided to make two separate films. Each film shows its own perspective without being interrupted by counterquestions.

PS: Lately you've become interested in the military presence in Estonia. Could you tell us some more about that?

TM: With the Soviet era now past, we need new narratives. The presence of NATO bases is a necessary measure to protect national sovereignty. Do we understand the difference between the past and the present? And how do we build the modern identity of post-Soviet and national Estonia, given the current military might of multicultural NATO? Do we look at young Estonians in the uniform of the Kodutütred (homeland daughters) and the Noored

Kotkad (young eagles), both volunteer militia led by the Estonian Defence League, as exemplary of national identity, or instead as the mythologisation of the purity of the nation? Can we talk about a new form of nationalism that allows both difference and inclusion? The two extremes are trans-local globalisation, on one hand, and national identity, on the other, which must be combined through the contemporary values of freedom and independence. I have just published a book of portraits of Estonian soldiers at a military base, a piece commissioned by the curator Katerina Gregos for the exhibition *The State Is Not a Work of Art* (Tallinn Art Hall, Tallinn, Estonia, 2018), which is about safety, identity formation and nationalism. Among other things, I photographed American soldiers working for NATO and young girls and boys participating in a sort of Sunday school or scout school, which is like a military school for children. The girls are trained to do traditionally female tasks such as looking after wounded soldiers. Everything except for weapons. Simultaneously, they take history lessons. All of this is financed by the state. I want to try and understand how Estonian identity has been constructed since Estonian independence.

PS: What other projects are you working on at the moment?

TM: In May of this year, Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn will be opening a solo exhibition of my work on the Estonian writer Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971), curated by Elnara Taidre (*Garden Exile: The Tuglas's Home Garden through Tanja Muravskaja's Camera Lens*). Tuglas was harshly criticised by those in power, both during the prerevolutionary and in the Soviet era. The garden by his house became more than just a refuge and sanctuary. I see his industrious garden work as a sort of protest action with a message. My exploration of this is about trying to see whether or not this type of activism could still be relevant today.

Self-Presentation

Tanja Muravskaja (b. 1978, Pärnu, Estonia) works and lives in Tallinn. She studied photography at the Estonian Academy of Arts (2002–2010) and the University of Westminster, London (2004–2005). She also studied journalism at Tallinn University. Muravskaja rose to prominence in the Estonian art world during the second half of the 2000s, with solo exhibitions presenting mainly photographic portraits dealing with (new) nationalism. Many of Muravskaja's works focus on conflicts which to a significant degree were caused by nationalistic animosity and overkill situations fuelled by an inflated sense of patriotic pride in the recent history of the 'new' Estonia. The artist strives to analyse and understand the new Estonian identity vis-à-vis the country's heterogeneous ethnic make-up. Her works are represented in the collections of the Kumu Art Museum and Tartu Art Museum. Muravskaja is a joint winner of the 2018 Köler Prize Grand Prix, also awarded to Anna Škodenko, which was presented at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia.

Thursday and Saturdays, 14:00

Open introduction to current exhibitions

Thursday 21.2, 14:00–15:00

Artist's Presentation

Tanja muravskaja about Three Sisters

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