

Tartu Art Museum

Flo Kasearu

ENDANGERED SPECIES

TARTMIUS

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21.02.20-31.05.20

Tartu Kunstmuuseum

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Introduced in Translation. 2020. Photo: Epp Kubu.

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ENDANGERED SPECIES

Laur Kaunissaare

A small shop in the suburbs of Pärnu. A barbershop in Puhja. An accounting office in Maardu. Estonia advertises itself to the world as a place where founding a company only takes a moment. Great. What about ending business activities? In the 1990s, many were glad to exploit the newly liberalised opportunities for entrepreneurship and haven't stopped doing business ever since, although continuing their entrepreneurial activities hasn't been their heart's desire for a long time.

Small businesses, or more accurately micro businesses, form about 95% of Estonian companies. Most of them have only a couple of employees, often only one: the owner. 28% of all entrepreneurs are women. Great. Of these women, 72% are solo entrepreneurs. How many of them think about quitting each and every day?

Once a male prime minister said that those who have been entrepreneurs for twenty years are heroes since they are brave enough not to give up. He said this some years ago. Last year, a male owner well above fifty decided to sell his large car sales company to Finns, and the daily business newspaper *Äripäev* named him the entrepreneur of the year precisely because he dared to quit. What does this say about Estonia? How many people dream of a soft landing?

Flo Kasearu's
personal exhibition
ENDANGERED
SPECIES in the Tartu
Art Museum
21.02.-31.05.2020.

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Annika Kedelauk
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Tatjana Makejeva
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Supporter:
Cultural Endowment
of Estonia

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The market says when
you wake up.
The market says when
you go to sleep.
The market says whether
you celebrate St John's Day.
The market says when
your birthday is.
The market makes you
hate Christmas.



Flo Kasearu in front of Oma shop. 2019. Photo: Epp Kubu; photo editing: Flo Kasearu.

Interview with the small business owner Margo Orupõld, whose shop is the protagonist of the exhibition

Questions by Hanna-Liis Kont & Flo Kasearu

How was your small grocery store born?

I didn't have a childhood dream of running a shop. It was just chance, as happens in life. I have been living near this store most of my life and shopped there as a child. The store stood empty for many years when the Soviet era ended and state-owned commerce ceased. Nobody wanted it. It seemed tempting to create a place of employment for myself next to my home. I bought the store and that's how I became a store keeper. Since I had a higher education in economics, that lowered my worries and decreased the risk.

Everything went really well, but over time the process became routine, and routine kills.

What sort of help did you get from the local government, state funds, private supporters or your family throughout the years? What was the thing that you missed the most?

The local and state governments are not interested in entrepreneurs who can manage on their own. You seemingly don't exist. The state becomes interested if you are on a trip and you forget to send in some report. The bank repeatedly offered me a loan and I repeatedly refused. Back then there were no training programmes that would tell you how to make things easier on yourself.

My family has been associated with all stages of having the shop. My mother and daughter have worked behind the counter and my husband has repaired broken pipes or windows at night or has shovelled snow and thrown sand on slippery roads.

Why did you decide to close the shop in January 2019?

I had been running it for over twenty years but for about two years it had become routine. There

was no excitement and it didn't offer anything for my development. I had new side projects that were more interesting. The routine stuff takes up a lot of your time: you can delegate some of it, but you are still responsible. And then you ask yourself, "do I want this?" Owning a small shop is no real challenge. What miracles can you introduce or develop? I wouldn't introduce a robot to say hello: the clients don't need it. The customer wants to interact with a human being or wants to get his produce quickly and go home. Where is my personal development in all of this process?

I even started selecting a different route to go home, since I didn't want to pass by my own business. In such a situation, something has to change. The decision-making is the hard part. They aren't just snap decisions. What will become of the employees? Will I become a person who makes others' lives more miserable?

Today, the biggest problems are with the staff. The staff always have so many rights and no obligations. They are like children: all children know their rights but they don't know their responsibilities. They don't want to actually work, and only do so when they have to. All of the cashiers would try working somewhere else but understood that the situation was no better. And they didn't dare tell me that they had been trying out other jobs.

A regular employee only thinks about their own salary but not about where the money for it comes from. I don't want to say that an employee should think about the business earning a profit every day but the world view of people should be wider in this day and age. And there is a certain attitude towards me as a businessman.

We have a sink somewhere that nobody has ever used. Not a single soul. We installed it because it was required. The plan for positioning the trash bin was reviewed for three years.

What has been the reaction of the local community to the closing of the shop?

The community is still waiting. I didn't tell them that I would close and that there wouldn't be a shop any more. I said it was for renovations. Yes, I haven't stopped being a shop keeper in my head. I still think about what to do with it. Maybe I need a short break.

The community wants to come in their slippers to buy milk, beer and cigarettes. Now they cannot do that. Now they have to think about what they will wear when they go to a shop. Before, everything was allowed. Everybody was part of the shop's family. The people would chit-chat with the employees. It was like a community centre.

In other words, the community no longer has a simple and nearby place to meet. People tape notes on the door of the shop where they demand that the opportunity to shop close to their home be restored. They run after me in town and ask when I will open the doors again. It's quite funny. A functioning shop started to harass the owner over time. Now the closed shop keeps harassing the owner in its own way.

I don't blame it on the fact that it was cheaper to shop in Latvia or people were buying illegal



Small business owner Margo Orupõld on the stairs of Oma shop. Photo: Pilleriin Järve.

cigarettes because of the economic downturn. That's part of life. Economic indicators showed that it was possible for me to continue but the customers made their choices: people from Pärnu went to shop in Latvia. And then they would come to the shop, would compare prices and the poor cashier would have to explain why the prices were what they were. It was somewhat traumatising for the cashiers. No one has talked about how Latvian shopping impacted people psychologically.

What do you value the most about small shops and what will society lose if they go extinct?

People will lose the chance to interact in a shop. Communication is generally a disappearing skill. My cashiers would worry if some everyday customer hadn't been in for a while. The staff might have been the only opportunity for interaction for some lonely people.

In small shops everything is personal and human. In large ones everything becomes anonymous. You and the cashier have to run around the shelves to find something because nobody knows what is exactly there. People get lost among the products and under the wheels of the shopping trolleys.

Each social period lasts for about twenty-five years. One is currently ending in Estonia. We have to survive this time where everything that comes from abroad is at first revered. We will get back to normal shops at some point.

What could the state or the local government do so that small shops do not disappear completely?

The state and the local governments can develop environments. If we have all the same rules for large and small shops and don't take into consideration if they have ten or one thousand square meters, then we will create conditions where only large ones can be successful. And you cannot demand that everything that can be had in a new big box-like building can also be had in an existing small space.

We know that it is more expensive to transport products to faraway small places, but if we want to preserve life on the borders of Estonia, then maybe state taxes should be lower in those locations. And we could ask small business owners what they themselves propose as solutions. We must also take into account that not everyone wants to use new technologies in the ever increasing shopping malls.

In addition to the disappearance of small shops, the exhibition also points out the vulnerable position that women have in society. What distinct features have you noticed when it comes to female entrepreneurship?

I recognised the role of women as entrepreneurs later. I was a solo entrepreneur. I didn't notice any difference even when I had to nurse my parents. It was actually my husband who stayed at home and took care of my mother. I didn't have to stop being an entrepreneur because of that.

It's mostly female entrepreneurs who participate in training sessions. Women are less likely to take risks. Sometimes they have two university degrees and still they don't dare to even start. For women, closing a business means failure, but for men it might be just another challenge.

What do you think about Flo being inspired to make art about your activities as an entrepreneur?

Children always reflect their homes and many children will continue what their parents have started. The methods and tools are merely different. Creative capabilities and needs win out but the themes remain the same. It is good to know that the things that you do are significant and that they are more important than the mere act of satisfying basic needs.

Who do you see as the audience of this exhibition?

All of us. The local decision makers and members of the government should also visit the exhibition. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications should hold one of its meetings in the gallery.

When the alcohol excise tax was raised, there was a lot of talk about small shops closing their doors. They did, but it was not so simple. It was not only because of the excise tax.



Soft Landing. 2020. Video still, 13:20.

Shop assistant needed!

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Flo Kasearu (1985) is an artist who works directly with various social processes, using her characteristic humour and irony. Her works include videos, photos, paintings, installations and performances, with the approach chosen to suit a given theme.

Flo has focused on various topical questions, such as freedom, public and private space, the economic crisis and the role and opportunities of women in society. She often turns to her own life and the lives of those closest to her for inspiration. Since 2013, she has been the director of Flo Kasearu's House Museum.

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Shop assistant needed!

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