

## **THE PARTISAN WOMAN**

Video loop 14.29”

Participating sculptors – Jānis Noviks, Andris Maračkovskis, Agita Šteinberga, Laima Daberte, Gundega Evelone, Anna Rasmus, Anna Egle, Andris Landaus and Laura Kristlība

A conversation with Jānis Borgs

Ella Krugļānska and Saņa Kantarovskis  
especially for *kim?* 2014

The hand is an extension of the eye. This principle is very close to me, and, by making copies I have come to the conclusion that while you're doing it, the thing that I like the most occurs – the process of learning.

I discovered Vera Mukhina accidentally through my work as a journalist. I got an order for a review about a semi-documental movie shot in Riga, one of the key moments in it was, of course, the story about the famous sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. It's considered to be her main work, the peak of her artistic activity. I was interested in the question of whether it's true. The main goal of journalism is to doubt generally accepted truths. When one asks the question: „Is it really so?” In any given situation, 70 – 80 percent of the time the answer will be – no, it's not.

What I do is – I research totalitarian cultures. What better example than Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. Let's begin with the fact that it wasn't the artist having an emotional experience and deciding to work, it wasn't even a state commission. It was an order of the Party, without asking whether one wishes to do it or not – here's the theme, the Party has chosen you, be so kind, dear artist, and get to work. The process was more complicated than that, of course.

Let's remind ourselves that the reason for making such a sculpture was the participation of USSR in the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris. The year of the exhibition was also the very culmination of Stalin's Great Purge.

It's interesting to note that the Soviet pavilion was directly facing the Third Reich pavilion. They looked like two locomotives on one track, running towards each other, because the formal architectural composition of both were practically identical – tall buildings with a tower at the end.

Speaking about sculptures of Ancient Greece, early Greece, in art history, a similar sculpture exists – a sculptural pairing, standing with their arms raised heroically, two naked men. The sculpture is known under the name *The Tyrant Slayers* (Harmodius and Aristogeiton). It's a myth full of pathos about two men freeing the people from a tyrant, and what great guys they are. The tyrant is a real historical person, but I won't get into details now. The myth keeps quiet about the fact that he was a lover of culture and art, and also had an alternative sexual orientation – he was gay, that is.

Thank heaven Kremlin's establishment was not particularly knowledgeable in art history and humanitarian sciences, for, if Stalin would have found out about the inspiration of the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, heads would have flown. But, of course, no one knew and it wasn't advertised.

Five or six prominent Soviet Union sculptors were chosen, they had to work on the given task and present their offer. Vera Mukhina was among the chosen, and, of course, took part without any objections – her artistic solution was the most effective, most persuasive, and her version was chosen for the final material implementation.

The question of why her is unnecessary if we take into account her unique education – France, Bourdelle, Western Europe, all this culture, formal education, she felt form very well, not in a Social Realism or dilettante sort of way, but as an excellently educated person. Thus she created what I would call Social Realism's best work. Nothing better was ever produced by Social realism, nothing that would permit it to call itself art. There is an opinion doubting whether it's art, as it is, primarily, propaganda. Well, it is propaganda, but one cannot deny its artistic power.

Let's remember year 1937, the general vigilance, everyone is spying on everybody, and denouncing whenever and whenever possible, searching for enemies of the people, and Vera Mukhina fit the description of an enemy of the people better than anyone else. A question arises as to how she made it through intact, considering her origin and biographical facts.

During the making of the sculpture, a signal was received - someone had informed the authorities that somewhere in the drapery of the figure – long, wavy drapery – a portrait of Trotsky was hidden. Coded in.

Nothing was worse than Trotsky, even mentioning him was dangerous, not to speak about trying to portray him. A signal like that was received and hung over her head like Fate's axe. If it turned out to be true, she would have been eliminated.

At night, Staling came by a limousine. Projectors were switched on, Stalin had come, he smoked his pipe, walked around, looked. He did that for good 10 – 15 minutes, then said: „Tell comrade Mukhina that the Party is satisfied with her work”, got into the limo and left. Turns out that no matter how hard he looked, Stalin couldn't see Trotsky's portrait in the sculpture.

She was a Russian from Riga, non-partisan, and, what's worse, rich. A bourgeois, a millionaire with a Swiss bank account. It is rather unbelievable that she was granted permission to travel outside of Soviet Union, but, I presume, the hostage principle was at work there. Her husband stayed. No one dared to risk anything, aware of the consequences for the family of someone pronounced an enemy of the people.

Vera Mukhina was the daughter of a rich Riga merchant, who had made his capital during the times of tsarist and pre-war Russia, and she was its sole heiress. Family provided her with a very good education. This kind of social status was highly undesirable during a time when not only the bourgeois, but everyone was harassed and prosecuted, even communists, even people who seemed loyal to the regime. She was not touched by any of that.

Jumping further down the timeline, it's valuable to note that she received four or five Stalin Prizes, which is a unique record. It was somewhat akin to the Nobel Prize in scale and importance, to receive one was a joy, but such a flow ...

The source and reason of the beginning of art is the need for propaganda. If such a need would not exist, art would not have come into existence. The creative arts – that's a bourgeois phenomenon born in Renaissance during the development of capitalism.

I have not made any research detailed enough to tell whether she was loyal to the ideas of Communism. I have no such proof. But I think, again, stressing that I have not made any extensive research, still, I doubt her Bolshevism. I strongly doubt it. What I am absolutely certain of is that she was an excellent artist, and she knew how to combine this aspect with the ideology of Communism, in her other works as well.

She was, as they say nowadays, *in*, she knew how to merge her form, her art with the ruling ideology, how to make her art affirm that ideology. In the past, I mistakenly viewed Social Realism as an anti – Modernist, reactionary movement that contradicts the progress of art.

*Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* creates a great pressure on the mind of the society, this sculpture seriously influences society's brains. And, generally speaking, any expression through an art form, architecture, sculpture or painting, is sort of like comics. Only when mass education exists, Modernist things are created. Abstract art – that's not comics anymore.

You can look at works as much as you want, in museums or anywhere else, but if you will not repeat them by hand, in that parallel symbiosis of eye – hand, you won't understand what's happening there, you will only see the surface, passively. When you research and gain an understanding of what you've seen through the process of learning – that's the greatest feeling.