

How to Talk About Work? Imaginary Archive as a Method

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This paper explores interdisciplinary artistic research on gender, labor, memory, and artistic envisioning in post-Soviet space, culminating in a film project. Drawing on interviews, the author synthesizes insights from her MA theses on labor dynamics during Lithuania's transition to market capitalism, while also engaging with broader academic research, activism, and curatorial work. The thesis material functions as a way to academically interact with interviews, providing context for the author's background and intentions.

The methodologies are anchored in the concept of the *Imaginary Archive*, with personal reflection addressing public post-colonial discourse and societal taboos surrounding the post-Soviet past. By employing interview materials and experiences from curatorial and activist contexts, this research aims to amplify marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives. Ultimately, the paper poses a crucial question: What is the best way to engage with the Soviet past—a trauma that lingers in today's post-Soviet society? It investigates whether artistic practices can offer deeper understanding and open pathways for reconciliation with this complex history.

Keywords: artistic research, women, workers, interviews, imaginary archive, post-Soviet.

This paper presents my interdisciplinary artistic research, which explores gender, labor, memory, and artistic envisioning within post-Soviet space, framed through an extensive filmmaking process. Through collaborative interactions with collected interviews,¹ I aim to synthesize insights from several of my MA theses on labor dynamics during Lithuania's transition to market capitalism, as well as from my subsequent academic research, activism, and curatorial initiatives. I see my thesis material as one way of engaging with the collected interviews on an academic level. In this paper, I start from outlining my academic intentions to provide a fuller picture of my background.

Further on, I seek to delineate the methodologies for my artistic practice, based on the concept of the *Imaginary Archive*. Through personal reflection, I navigate complexities surrounding public postcolonial discourse and academic inquiry, while also addressing societal taboos linked to the complicated post-Soviet past. By carefully using interview material and curatorial and activist experiences as primary sources, my research aims to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and challenge dominant historical narratives. Ultimately, I envision translating these scholarly pursuits into a film project that focus on the artistic interpretations of industrial heritage and collective memory within the broader Western-Eastern European context. However, I leave the main research questions open: What is the most meaningful way to engage with the Soviet past, which is still a suppressed trauma of today's post-Soviet society? Can artistic practices offer a deeper understanding and means of reconciliation with this past?

Archive as Part of Biography

I have been collecting women workers' stories since 2016, the year I decided to focus my MA Thesis in Political Studies at Vytautas Magnus University on the changing labor relations during the 1990s in Lithuania and the Baltics—a period also known as The Neoliberal Turn.² The thesis was

1 Until now I have conducted 34 interviews with women workers in Lithuania, across different stages of my life and work, which I describe in this paper. Locations include Kaunas, Alytus, Rumšiškės, Panevėžys, and Neringa. All personal names have been changed and exact locations are not specified. Before directly using visual or audio interview records in my work, I always ask the interviewees for permission. They gave explicit consent for the use of interview quotes in my writings.

2 Jason Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," in *A Foucault for the 21st Century: Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in*

organized around the transition from state capitalism to market capitalism, which led me to define the feminization of labor forms in Lithuania during that time. I drew on Michel Foucault's³ and Carole Pateman's⁴ theories to explore how the seemingly neutral, freely contracting economic-civil subject is immersed in gendered and classed power relations. To define the feminization process, I applied Pateman's concept of patriarchal contract, particularly her argument that today's marriage contract is based on the historical slavery contract. I linked it with Foucault's analysis of neoliberal individual whose individual freedom is grounded in the restriction of others' rights. I merged both theories into a materialist analysis of gender exploitation, which is explained based on the devaluation of women's reproductive labor. For the thesis, in 2016, I conducted approximately 11 interviews, transcribed most of them, and included them in Supplement A of my main text. The interviews—originally filmed and archived—remained with me until they gradually resurfaced as material for artistic projects. Before incorporating any footage directly into my work, I always seek and receive consent from the interviewees.

During my studies, I was living in Kaunas, the relatively small yet second-largest Lithuanian city, in which I had grown up. I actively participated in a social movement that protested against the high living cost and gradually against the new Labor Code in Lithuania⁵ in 2016. As a result of the movement and protests in Kaunas, the main government building's steps were occupied for two weeks in the capital Vilnius. The experience of protesting sparked a broader desire for collective change. As a result, I became actively involved in organizing the social center Emma, the leftist media page www.gpb.lt, and later, Gegužės 1-osios profesinė sąjunga (May 1st Labor Union), which seeks to unite the most precarious workers in Lithuania, such as platform workers, students with temporary contracts, and freelancers.

the New Millennium, ed. Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 25–36.

3 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–79* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

4 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988).

5 „Iš Kauno atvykę protestuotojai prie Vyriausybės pasistatė palapinę: reikalauja atšaukti Darbo kodeksą," *15 min*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/is-kauno-atvyke-protestuotojai-prie-vyriausybes-pasistate-palapines-reikalauja-atsaukti-darbo-kodeksa-56-645819>.

For more than five years of my involvement in these activities, I categorically distanced myself from artistic practice, seeing it too far removed from reality. The need to organize an alternative new left movement seemed more important and urgent. The activist experience has continuously informed my sensibilities and understanding of how people's diverse experiences can contribute to envisioning alternatives to neoliberal individualism.

Over time, I continued to collect interviews of women workers in various contexts, always centering them around the topic of work. The interviews became the foundation of artistic research practice, providing a shelter of certainty when I felt lost or unsure of which direction to take. It felt as if the women were always with me, present. To date, I have gathered thirty-four extensive interviews in various formats, primarily audio, with Lithuanian women mostly ranging in age from their late forties to late sixties. These recordings have traveled with me on my hard drive, and I felt the need for more time to fully engage with them and integrate them as a central part of my artistic practice and, in this case, the film project.

While collecting interviews for my first thesis, I developed a close relationship with the chairperson of a Kaunas factory workers' union, composed mostly of women. I almost felt like a member myself since the chairwoman Rasa introduced me to more union members. During the interviews, the women shared their life stories that were often entangled with their work and were marked by both nostalgia and despair. This quote from one of the interviews illustrates the common, deep-seated fear, and shows how repetitive work movements transform and harm the body:

...when I came to work, I started to care about the work safety for me it was very interesting, also I had some experience in this workplace I already had some encounters with work safety, we have already started the ways to talk about occupational diseases and we have already...simply the women, they were three or four, were diagnosed with occupational diseases, most often people work...get sick and they are afraid to seek for help, because such myth still exists, that it's impossible to acquire the recognition of occupational disease (I am interrupting: to prove, that it's occupational) to prove, but apparently

everything is possible, nothing is impossible really, but from the other side, then automatically employer doesn't want to keep such worker in the workplace and he tries really hard to fire them, they are the first ones to be fired, that the rest would be afraid, it's just like that, so here we have already withstood this kind of pressure here, the first person wasn't fired, after that neither the second, nor the third, and the fourth so I had the practice already really and one woman showed up from [...], the member of the union, who was really sick and practically she wasn't able to work, it was hard, she had surgery of her two arms, it was Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (I interrupt: so it was clearly related to work) very much to work, she was...the bottles, they were loading the bottles by hand there, so for her it was...that she says I won't be able to hold a bottle, she could barely hold a pen after the surgery, certainly there is a rehabilitation period, maybe after some time it recovers, after half a year or a year something gets better, but in her case it was that...she was fired, the reason was that we cannot provide you any work, according to your limits, so it is... [I am coughing] I tried to help her really, tried to say "don't go alone to the staff manager, let's go together, you are the member of the union, I have a right to represent [you?]" but it [the firing] was done very smoothly, the staff manager was very smart there, she's gone. (imaginaryarchive.org)

This excerpt touches on a highly sensitive issue—one that was not openly addressed during Soviet times: hazardous working conditions. The interviews make it abundantly clear that some industries, including textile production—officially designated in Soviet times as “light industry”⁶—were far from light in terms of work conditions. Workers were treated as part of the machinery, expected to function as machines in brutal environments.⁷ Injuries, chronic diseases, and unbearable back pain are all part of the narrative which is overshadowed by ideological discussions on whether the workers had agency in Soviet times.

6 A. P. Biryukova, “Special Protective Legislation and Equality of Opportunity for Women Workers in the USSR,” *International Labour Review* 119, no. 1 (1980).

7 Joseph Shapiro, “The Industrial Labour Force,” in *Perestroika and Women*, ed. Mary Buckley (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14–38.

Grounding the Artistic Research as a Subjective Archive

Later in life, it became personally important for me to find a middle ground between being an activist, an academic, and an artist. While it is not uncommon for artists to become activists or vice versa, I also briefly felt like an academic—especially after completing my MA in Social and Political Critique in 2016 and continuing with a second MA in Gender Studies at the Central European University (CEU).

The interviews with women workers, stored in a “secret folder,” accompanied me during the intense period of study at the CEU. At the university, knowledge production related to Soviet studies was highly developed, supported by a rich library and a team of highly engaged professors, particularly within the context of decoloniality. This environment made me rethink how the collected interviews should be treated and further developed, with a heightened focus on the Soviet past evolving into historical research in the State Archives. I found myself searching for a non-existent subject from that time: a feminist. In my MA thesis, I wrote:

In order to develop a thorough analysis of women’s councils,⁸ the complexity of the relation between women and [the] state and subsequently, the gendered division of labor, the Soviet modernity needs to be reconsidered, including industrial development as bringing about the commodification of labor. Only doing so it is possible to understand the complexity of the relation between the women and the state, regarding women not only as representatives of family and the private sphere, but also as fully subsumed participants of Soviet labor market.⁹

Thus, the primary focus of my second thesis was women’s participation in Women’s Councils and Trade Unions in Lithuania. Considering the

- 8 Women’s Councils (*zhensoveti*) in the Soviet Union focused on local issues, regional or structural problems concerning women. Their activities included mediation between family and school and facilitating negotiations between workers and factory management. They worked in four main areas: mass work, ideological and moral education of women, improving living and working conditions, and strengthening the family and enhancing its role in the education of the younger generation.
- 9 Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė, “Multiplied Burdens or Honorable Duty? Working Women, Trade Unions and Women’s Councils in Soviet Lithuania 1985–1988” (Master’s thesis, Central European University, 2019), 9.

employment policies of the Soviet Union and the five-year production planning model, I analyzed women's participation in these organizations within the context of the workerist doctrine of the Soviet state. A key overall issue addressed in the research was the exclusion of Soviet industrial relations from the historical analysis of Women's Councils and trade union activities in the Soviet Union and specifically in Lithuania.

My main research material consisted of meeting minutes from trade unions and Women's Councils in six primarily textile-focused factories in Kaunas. Delving into the archive was, for me, a remarkable experience. My primary focus was on the period of Perestroika just before the major transformations, the intensified struggle for independence, and the neoliberal turn, among other events. Despite numerous gaps in my research—which I now view as both an incomplete artwork and as a feminist political project that has kept me immersed for years—I feel a persistent need to develop the research into something substantial, although the exact final form of my archive remains uncertain.

Gaps are what I always look for in history. When reading historical narratives, there is always a sense that something is missing. This absence is not only about the exclusion of certain groups or communities but also about the rigid certainty that limits interpretation. Therefore, for me, filling these gaps means indulging in the imaginary.

To define my approach to the collection of interviews, I turn to works by Clare Hemmings, who developed a methodology known as the *imaginary archive*.¹⁰ This methodology establishes a relationship with historical figures and their political sentiments based on the researcher's own political passions and contemporary political concerns. Hemmings applied this method in her book *Considering Emma Goldman*, drawing on queer theory and post-colonial literary studies to reconstruct sources and create a new archive that "has yet to be written or read."¹¹

Hemmings writes: "I want to engage her [Emma Goldman] in order to disrupt the relationship between past and present, to challenge a critical certainty that there is a singular story that we can tell about how we got to where we (think we) are now."¹² Similarly, I seek to create my own imaginary

10 Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginary Archive* (Duke University Press, 2018).

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Ibid., 20.

archive, engaging in an open-ended dialogue with the women workers I have interviewed and remained in conversation with ever since. Therefore, I refer to my entire research project, including my artistic practice, as the *Imaginary Archive*: a living, open-ended, and always evolving body of work that creates dialogue with and connections to the past. Hemmings's methodology offers a starting point for engaging with such a complex past.

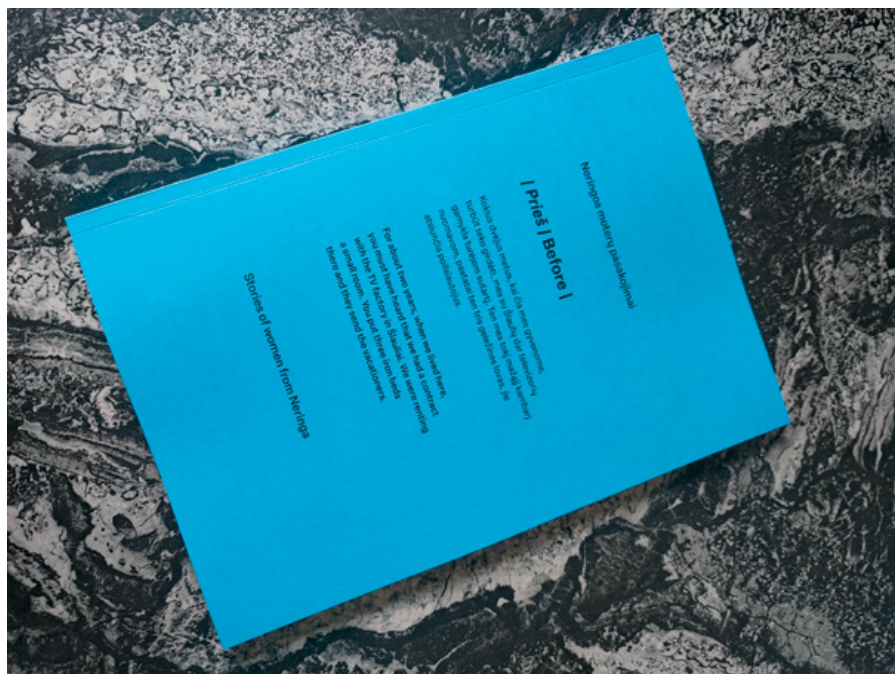
Towards Unwanted Subjects of Imaginary Archive

Until today, very few authors and artists in Lithuania have found the courage or patience to delve into the fantasy of how people might have lived and what they might have thought during the Soviet regime from today's perspective. How might this living experience have looked like for someone working on the factory floor? Who were they, people working in the factories? Is it possible that they did not actively participate in the state's ideological apparatus? I cannot find reflections of my mother—who worked in a factory during that time—or someone like her in literature, art, or films in Lithuania today. If someone like my mother does appear in films, her portrayal becomes fragmented, focusing on what is more relevant from a male perspective. For example, the nation, collective grief, or similar sentiments tend to be analyzed from a colonized perspective. However, the gaze remains patriarchal and one-sided.

Public discussion of the Soviet past (Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, Vaiva Rykštaitė, Simona Serbintaitė, Karolis Jovaišas, Andrius Jakučiūnas, Tomas Sinickis) has grown increasingly narrow since 2022, the year the war in Ukraine began. A certain segment of society was silenced, allowing anger and despair to fester and erupt into culture wars. Those who dare to reminisce about their youth during the Soviet regime as happier than today are often considered unwanted citizens or simply dismissed as *vatnikai* in public discourse.¹³ Reconsidering the Soviet past, especially the late Soviet period, is still not an easy topic after more than thirty years of Independence. Therefore, my sense of urgency to explore situated knowledge deepened and evolved into different forms of representation.

13 „N. Putinaitė: sąvokos „vatnikas“ vartojimas rodo posovietinį mentalitetą,“ *LRT*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/tavo-lrt/15/167315/n-putinaite-savokos-vatnikas-vartojimas-rodo-posovietini-mentaliteta>.

In 2020, I spent a month as an artist-in-residence at Nida Art Colony, located in the Neringa municipality on the Curonian Spit. I continued to gather interviews—this time with local women—and subsequently published a small compilation of stories from women who had worked in Neringa between the 1950s to the 1990s. Some of them had moved to the area in the 1950s to assist their brothers with fishing, while others had been appointed there by the state. All women were informed about the intended result of my research, they knew where I am coming from and what final form the research would take: a publication titled *Before/After*.



1. *Before / After. Stories of Women from Neringa*, 2023. Publication resulting from a residency supported by the Neringa Municipality Scholarship, in collaboration with Nida Art Colony and Vilnius Academy of Arts

Before / After. Stories of Women from Neringa, 2023, Neringos savivaldybės stipendijos, bendradarbiaujant su Nidos meno kolonija ir Vilniaus dailės akademija, rezidencijos rezultatas

In relation to how voices from the Soviet past are denounced, I must note that Neringa's women retained a sense of pride, rooted in the feeling of being exceptional in their exclusive environment. I see this as proof that the degree of marginalization also depends on one's social and economic status. Today, Neringa is as a luxurious resort catering for upper-middle-class citizens and tourists, and its residents have the opportunity to earn substantial income during the summer months.

In the book *Before/After*, I aimed to create a collective narrative showcasing the diversity of workers' stories from that time—a narrative that is both infinite and complete. I selected specific excerpts from women's testimonies to be included in the publication. Thus, the narrative became not only theirs but also mine, underscoring that objectivity was neither the research's purpose nor a desirable aim. What mattered more to me was collectivity, reflecting the sense of belonging within the community. Moreover, it was also an ethical choice to present their stories as one narrative, considering that Neringa is a small town, where residents know each other well, gossip frequently, and are not always kind in their judgements.

I was born in Preila. We had an apartment there. I remember those times very well. I was fourteen years old, maybe from the age of nine I was already planting the forest. What vast areas between Preila and Pervalka those were! Then there was a seed plot and we used to weed it since nine or ten years old. When I was fourteen years old, I worked in a restaurant there, washing dishes. It's not that we lived very well but we had food on our plates. After all, we didn't need anything. There used to be a variety of things you could buy, but now they are not available anymore. Japanese things. Later I worked in a shop in Preila. There were Finnish products as well. At first, I got into school. When I was there, I cleaned tables at a restaurant. I really wanted to make my own money.¹⁴

In the interview, a resident of Neringa includes macro-history in her narrative. She recalls the collective planting of the forest. Neringa has a long history of forestation, and this legacy naturally continues to live in the memories of the residents. However, I asked the residents to remember

14 Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė, *Before/After: Stories of Women from Neringa* (Nida Art Colony of Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2023), 24.

their stories of this work. It is just a small example of how the history of the area is interwoven into a personal story. I always try to trace the affect in the person I interview: how they reflect emotionally on historical events such as the history of occupation, elements of the colonization, and the movement for Independence. Most often, I notice a tendency for the daily struggle to survive to diminish reflection on greater political events. Allowing women to share their memories opens space for imagination in the context of storytelling and personal narratives. It gives them the agency to expand the narrative and interpret history in their own way. Simply letting them speak freely and tell their stories for hours can sometimes become therapeutic. It can be draining too, but it also confirms how forgotten many people feel.

Work/Labor Choreography

More than a decade ago, Aki Kaurismäki said in an interview¹⁵ that he cannot create anything without including the topic of class. This prompted me to question whether that was what I was seeking in my own exploration of the obscure past of the periphery, particularly in relation to the topic of labor. Around 2018, when I still imagined myself as an activist, I applied to several PhD programs, including History at Bonn University and Social Sciences at Södertörns Högskola. I felt a sense of hesitation, wondering if my proposal might be too narrow and one-sided. Yet, at that time I saw immense potential in analyzing women's organizing in Trade Unions during the 1990s in Lithuania. Though it may sound obscure, the 1990s was a period of significant upheaval and complexity which also shaped much of my formative years.

I must confess that I have never been interested in describing the era or recounting macro-history. That type of narrative feels exhaustive and ultimately incomplete—there is always another hero to celebrate, such as a pilot of a military plane during the Second World War. So, I was not too disappointed when I received rejection letters from PhD programs. For me, straddling the realms of art and academia always felt more natural and accessible. It is worth noting, however, that making artistic research your main focus is definitely much easier if you come from a middle-class or higher social background, as is often the case. Nevertheless, occupying this liminal space

15 Eric Kohn, "Le Havre" Director Aki Kaurismäki: 'I'm not interested in the upper class,'" *IndieWire*, October 20, 2011, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/interview-le-havre-director-aki-kaurismaki-im-not-interested-in-the-upper-class-51557/>.

of artistic research brings both challenges and various opportunities—discoveries that might be impossible in the rigorous academic world. Yet, it can also take a toll on one's self-esteem. Ultimately, one learns to cope with it—often by working double shifts, much like being a super productive woman worker in the Soviet Union and its satellite states: an *udarnik* of today.

Luckily, as I continued my work with the imaginary archive of (women's) labor, I was commissioned by the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum to conduct research, which was subsequently transformed into a sound and textile installation. The exhibition, titled *Women's Voices: Stories from the Textile Industry in Kaunas*, revealed a multifaceted history of women who worked in Kaunas textile factories during the late Soviet era and the first decade of Independence. This polyphonic narrative consisted of personal stories, memoirs, and a soundscape by artist Ugnė Makselytė. While the historical textile factories in Kaunas no longer exist—most having gone bankrupt at the beginning of the 2000s or earlier—their stories endure in the imaginations, dreams, and memories of the women who worked there, becoming part of their collective experience.



2. Photo from a worker's archive, *Women's Voices. Stories of Kaunas Textile Industry*, Kaunas Picture Gallery, 2023

Nuotrauka iš darbininkės archyvo, *Motery balsai. Kauno tekstilės pramonės istorijos* Kauno paveikslų galerijoje, 2023

The stories of eight women who worked at Drobė (Canvas), Kau-no audiniai (Kaunas Fabrics), and Liteksas (an abbreviation for Lithuanian Textiles)—totaling ten hours of recording—were transformed into a 55-minute-long audio composition. It became a kind of fiction, resembling radio theater: a play about work and the emotions it evokes, including feelings toward work, machines, and materials. The choreography of the exhibition was intentionally unsettling; the soundscape played in near darkness, surrounded by grey curtains. Additionally, I created two cloth artworks displayed under dimmed lighting. The cloth was given to me by the women workers I interviewed.

Much remained unsaid in those interviews, in those stories of the hardships of work. To emphasize this point and highlight the gaps, I stitched a formal phrase onto the cloth with my own hands. The act of stitching seemed a metaphorical way to fill the gaps, and by inscribing a formal historical fact, I aimed to make a statement that nothing in the installation can be seen as purely formal. To further amplify the message, I sewed bandage material onto the cloth, reminiscent of the menstrual bandages women used during the early Soviet years. Reflecting on this, I sought to underline both the physical and societal limitations these women faced and to question whether it was today's public discourse that silenced them, or my presence as an outsider. If a stranger is asking questions, one is not obligated to answer fully. That is where the imaginary enters—into the realm of the unsaid, always looking for the unsaid.

We used to get into conflicts, how to say. If I came and found that mixture, I put my hand in the mixture, and it was hot. So how can I not get angry? Because there was a shift foreman, he had to go through the mixture during the shift, to get some of the mixture out so that it doesn't get hot. That's what conflicts were like. The driver said that the head of the spinning shop was going to Oriya with the director in the car and the driver said, Alma, you watch out for Darbinienė because, he said, she was always yelling about you. But the director didn't say anything to me. Then what did they start doing to me? Ai, they removed the head of the laboratory. When they removed the head of the

laboratory, they put me in. But they took him off, rightly so, because he didn't do any work. Absolutely. He wasn't interested. We used to give him reports, and there were production [meetings] going on for a week. We gave him summaries of everything... Well, in a word, we were not satisfied. And he was such a scammer [kombinatorius]. A scammer, well, a crook. There were rumours that the textile factories, in a word, were all thieves and so on. He was one of those. Thus they were afraid of me at first because since I was the director's favorite, they were kind of avoiding me. But in the end, it was a good collective. I used to choose the lab assistants based on beauty. Well, I'd see a pretty lady, and I'd be invited to the personnel department, let's say. So I, how do you say, if she's pretty, I accepted her. I like beautiful people. So... Anyway, I worked there. And then Darbelevičius, the man who was the engineer, started... I did well, that's it. But I tried really hard. How can I say, I wasn't lazy, and I was interested in finding out for myself, and I'd make a control batch myself, something like that. I enjoyed the work (imaginaryarchive.org, 2024).¹⁶

The interview offers a candid account of a textile worker's experiences during the Soviet era in Lithuania. As a supervisor, she recalls her responsibility to address issues related to the production process, emphasizing her diligence in ensuring quality and safety. She also shares insights into workplace dynamics, including her appointment as head of the laboratory following the removal of an ineffective predecessor. I thought it was worth quoting this interview because it subtly references the interviewee's homosexuality. The woman told me how she selected lab assistants based on their appearance, emphasizing the preference for beauty in her workplace. Despite the challenges, she expresses a genuine passion for her work, demonstrating commitment to experimentation and maintaining high standards in textile production. Thus, from today's perspective, one might imagine her as a strong, exceptionally powerful woman who enjoyed the company of young, beautiful women. As this imaginative reading plays against the hypothesis that all women in Soviet Lithuania were victims¹⁷ of authoritarian state, she thus becomes a perfect character for my film script.

16 Personal research/artist's portfolio, www.imaginaryarchive.org, 2024.

17 Dalia Leinartė, *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women, 1945–1970* (Rodopi, 2010).



3. *Women's Voices. Stories of Kaunas Textile Industry*, exhibition view, Kaunas Picture Gallery, photo by Darius Matonis, 2023

Moterų balsai. Kauno tekstilės pramonės istorijos, parodos vaizdas Kauno paveikslų galerijoje, Dariaus Matonio nuotrauka, 2023

Possible Directions of Imaginary Archive

At times, feminist researchers hesitate to acknowledge the partiality inherent in feminist research and overlook the exploitative element in the researcher-interviewee relationship. Joan Sangster¹⁸ argues that feminist research is inherently unequal, and its potential to challenge hegemonic discourse—particularly the masculinist, objective universalist approach, depends on questioning the power dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee. Therefore, according to Sangster, oral history as a method focused on women's stories is not inherently feminist unless it actively resists the dominant historical narrative. By creating collective narratives, emphasizing the personal over the historical, following the traces of the unsaid, and tracing the gaps, I believe my oral history archive—or imaginary archive—embodies an inherently feminist practice.

Lithuania is on the margins of Europe, and Kaunas is a marginal city when viewed from the global perspective—a mere dot on the map of ambitions, empires, and wars. In the words of Lithuanian feminist Dalia Leinartė,

18 Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029400200046>.

the women I engage with in the *Imaginary Archive* are victims of the regime who believed in the Soviet Union's emancipatory project and were therefore misled by state propaganda.¹⁹ Following Leinartė's perspective, I find myself in dialogue with individuals labeled as fools, losers of history. As a result, I recognize queer dimensions within my research, particularly as they manifest through the aesthetics of "bad taste," by engaging with society's so-called "losers" and incorporating their voices into the artistic discourse.

Another queer aspect lies in performative interruptions—such as exhibitions, publications, and other public gestures—that disrupt normative narratives and modes of presentation. These acts resist linearity and fixed meaning, echoing the queer strategy of ambiguity. Furthermore, the collective identity of the marginal *Imaginary Archive* (IA), composed of multiple and often conflicting personal narratives, embodies a queer temporality and relationality—where authorship is decentralized and identity is fluid, layered, and constantly in flux.

Nevertheless, I prefer to view my research as part of potential history, as articulated by Ariella A. Azoulay, which challenges the boundaries of the discipline of history and its commitment to an imperial, neutral temporality.²⁰ This concept of potential history also guided my curatorial projects like *Nepadorūs vakarai* (*Obscene West*), which I co-curated with my friend and colleague Edvinas Grinkevičius. This interdisciplinary project explored shifts in cultural contexts related to sexualities during the 1990s, a period marked by social, political, and cultural turmoil in Lithuania following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first part of the project, *Nepadorūs vakarai. Meduje* (*Obscene West. In Honey*), focused on women artists active during the transformative 1990s. Named after artist Eglė Rakauskaitė's 1996 performance-video installation *Meduje* (*In Honey*), the project analyzed gender roles and sexualities of the era and explored manifestations of the feminist movement in Lithuania and neighboring post-Soviet countries.²¹ Again, I sought to

19 Leinartė, *Adopting and Remembering*, 27–34.

20 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019).

21 Justė Vyšniauskaitė, „Feministinio projekto „Nepadorūs vakarai. Meduje“ kuratorė: „Aš nenoriu lygybės tik „ant popieriaus“. Pokalbis su Agne Bagdžiūnaite,“ *Artnews.lt*, December 20, 2021, <https://artnews.lt/feministinio-projekto-nepadorus-vakarai-meduje-kuratore-nenoriu-lygybes-tik-ant-popieriaus-pokalbis-su-agne-bagdziunaite-68636>.



4. *Obscene West. Naglis*, final event *One Night Stand* at Kaunas Artists' House, photo by Gražvydas Jovaiša, 2023

Nepadorūs vakarai. Naglis, baigiamasis renginys „Vienos nakties nuotykis“ Kauno menininkų namuose, Gražvydo Jovaišos nuotrauka, 2023

imagine what was most likely absent at that time and space. The 1990s were the period of many possibilities for the imagination, since it was framed as an era of freedom and relentless capitalism.

In 2023, the second part of the project investigated the emergence of queer culture in the 1990s and its relation to the social environment in Lithuania and the broader region. *Nepadorūs vakarai. Naglis* (*Obscene West. Naglis*) consisted of a diverse program of eight events, including performative readings of *Naglis*, a gay journal published in the 1990s, a performative queer tour, an exhibition by Ukrainian artist Anton Shebetko, a video art program curated in collaboration with Latvian and Estonian curators, and a performance evening-party that transformed a public institution into a queer club for one night.

Neither part of the project sought definitive conclusions. Quite the opposite, *Nepadorūs vakarai* (*Obscene West*) remains ongoing (with a third part focusing on masculinities planned for 2025), moving away from the

presumption that the 1990s were something spectacular and instead concentrating on the ambivalent side of history that presents the picture of the 1990s as more blurry than bright. As curators, we acknowledged the impossibility—and the undesirability—of conclusively restoring or closing the historical narrative of the 1990s in relation to the history of sexuality during the early years of Independence.²² The cultural aspect of sexuality and gender in formation is the key focus of this project. We attempted to imagine what it would be like to have a queer club, a queer magazine, or a gender studies department in a university today in Lithuania or the Baltic states—a blast from the past.

Always in flux, the *Imaginary Archive* functions as a research process for a film, unfolding through multifaceted and overlapping stages of script-writing, character development, object creation, and collaboration. At the same time, the archive serves as a source for writing a script, selecting characters, conducting auditions, and creating objects for film scenes. While I am not a fan of *Synecdoche, New York* (2008, dir. Charlie Kaufman), it serves as a distant example of how I envision the further development of my research—a continual, collective, and collaborative process where the director is not the central figure. All creative processes in the *Imaginary Archive* involve collaboration with fellow artists, activists, comrades, and researchers. Clare Hemmings's concept of the *Imaginary Archive* emphasizes the ambivalence surrounding gendered, racial, and sexual inequalities, urging engagement with these complexities as dynamic, living histories rather than static narratives. This approach challenges traditional interpretations of past and present, encouraging a politics of ambivalence that allows for a richer understanding of inequality and offers opportunities for intervention and transformation.

Slow Conclusion

Analysis of the industrial past and reflection on it remain underdeveloped in Lithuania, partly due to the postcolonial context. Therefore, my research faces obstacles stemming from the cultural sensitivity surrounding

22 Rokas Vaičiulis, „Nepadorumo permainos ir posovietiniai afektai. Pokalbis su projektu „Nepadorūs vakarai“ kuratoriais Agne Bagdžiūnaite ir Edvinu Grinkevičiumi,“ *Artnews.lt*, January 15, 2024, <https://artnews.lt/nepadorumo-permainos-ir-posovietiniai-afektai-pokalbis-su-projekto-nepadorus-vakarai-kuratoriais-agne-bagdziunaite-ir-edvinu-grinkeviciumi-104422>.

the Soviet era, which evokes strong emotions and a reluctance to engage in discussions about painful historical traumas. This postcolonial context complicates public discourse, while recent geopolitical events, such as the war in Ukraine, have further heightened national sensitivities. Furthermore, the lack of thorough exploration of this historical period through the lens of trauma limits available narratives, as current societal attitudes often prioritize forward-looking themes over critical reflections on contentious pasts. A persistent question guides my work: How should I approach these obstacles? What if my research took the form of a workplace soap opera in the style of Emily Wardill's video work *Full Firearms* (2011), with multiple angles? What if it became a dramatic and engaging thriller with a twist? At times, it might even resemble an actual stash of soap hoarded in a worker's basement, stealthily taken from the factory during Soviet times.

The *Imaginary Archive* is more than a collection of memories; it is an active, evolving process that challenges dominant historical narratives and reclaims marginalized voices. Through my artistic and research practice, I have sought to document the lived experiences of working women, particularly in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts where their labor has often been overlooked. By engaging with oral histories, I explore how personal recollections intersect with broader socio-political events, exposing gaps in official histories and opening new pathways for understanding the past.



5. *Genutė*, 22', still from video footage recorded during interviews conducted in 2016

Genutė, 22', kadras iš vaizdo medžiagos, užfiksuotos per 2016 m. atliktus interviu

Archiving, in this sense, becomes an act of resistance—an effort to preserve the nuances of women's lives and make visible the emotional and material realities of their labor. My work in Neringa and Kaunas has demonstrated how these narratives disrupt the patriarchal and nationalist perspectives that dominate cultural memory, opening space for more complex and polyphonic representations. Through sound, textile installations, and film, I aim to transform these stories into immersive experiences that blur the boundaries between history, art, and collective memory.

Furthermore, my research methodology embraces the speculative and performative aspects of the *Imaginary Archive*, resisting static interpretations of history. Drawing on feminist and queer perspectives, I engage with what remains unsaid, creating room for alternative imaginaries. The *Imaginary Archive* is thus an ongoing, collaborative project—an evolving biography that merges memory, activism, and artistic inquiry to challenge historical silences and imagine different futures.

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Santrauka

Kaip kalbėti apie darbą? Įsivaizduojamasis archyvas kaip metodas

Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė

Reikšminiai žodžiai: meninis tyrimas, moterys, darbininkai, interviu, įsivaizduojamas archyvas, posovietinis laikotarpis.

Tyrimo projektas „Įsivaizduojamas archyvas“ – tai tarpdisciplininis meninis tyrimas, kuriame susipina feministinė teorija, darbo istorija, kolektyvinė atmintis ir meno praktikos posovietinėje Lietuvoje. Projekte remiamasi ilgamečiu autorės rinktų interviu su moterimis darbuotojomis – nuo tekstilės pramonės iki maisto gamybos, paslaugų sektoriaus ar poilsio industrijos. Šie liudijimai aprėpia laikotarpį nuo sovietmečio iki nepriklausomybės atkūrimo ir pereinamojo laikotarpio į kapitalistinę laisvosios rinkos ekonomiką.

Tyrimo tikslas – rekonstruoti marginalizuotas moterų darbo patirtis ir pateikti jų alternatyvią interpretaciją pasitelkiant menines formas: tekstilės instaliacijas, garso kūrinius, performansus bei filmą. Pasakojimai apie fizinį nuovargį, profesines ligas, kolektyvinę dviasį ar baimę netekti darbo tapo medžiaga ne tik analizei, bet ir meninei vaizduotei. Projekto meninė forma leidžia šias patirtis perteikti ne tiesiogiai dokumentiškai, bet per poetinius, emocinius, pojūčiais paremtus kanalus.

Tyrimas grįstas Clare Hemmings „vaizduotės archyvo“ koncepcija – archyvas čia suvokiamas kaip gyvas, atviras, nuolat besikeičiantis laukas, kuriame susitinka praėjusių balsai, dabartinės politinės intencijos ir meninė raiška. Pasitelkiama ir Ariellos A. Azoulay „potencialios istorijos“ samprata, kviečianti atsisakyti imperinio, vienašališko istorijos pasakojimo.

Straipsnyje aptariamas ir asmeninis autorės kelias – nuo akademinės analizės iki aktyvizmo ir meno praktikų. Patirtis, dalyvaujant kairiajame judėjime, pavyzdžiui, proteste prieš naująjį Darbo kodeksą ar kuruojant projektą *Nepadorūs vakarai*, tapo svarbia tyrimo dalimi. Tai įrodo, kad meninė praktika gali būti ne tik estetiškas, bet ir politinis įrankis, leidžiantis įtraukti „nereikšmingas“ ar „nepatogias“ patirtis į kultūrinę atmintį.

Tyrimė reflektuojama apie tai, kaip sovietinė praeitis šiandien lieka traumuojanti ir neiškalbėta, ypač kai kalbama apie paprastų žmonių kasdienybę, o ne didžiąją politiką. Moterų pasakojimai tampa būdu ne tik įvardyti, bet ir įsivaizduoti – kaip galėjo būti, ką jautė, kaip matė save dirbančios moterys pereinamuoju laikotarpiu.

Kviečiama ne tiek užbaigti, kiek pradėti naują diskusiją apie tai, kokiomis priemonėmis – akademinėmis ar meninėmis – galima kalbėti apie praeitį, kuri vis dar formuoja mūsų dabartį. „Įsivaizduojamas archyvas“ tampa būdu užmegzti dialogą tarp ištrintos istorijos ir dabartinių politinių bei kultūrinių klausimų. Galutinė tyrimo forma – filmas, išaugantis iš šių archyvų, pokalbių ir instaliacijų, siūlo naują būdą kalbėti apie darbo istoriją, atmintį ir galimą ateitį, kai balsą turi ir tie, kurių istorijos dažniausiai lieka neišgirstos.