

LESASERMA POKHUNAKIS

Extended background tekst by Rebecca Diependaele

Fake news

Just a few years ago, we never heard these words, yet now they are used on a daily basis: *fake news*. Fabricated stories, conjured up with the express purpose to feed the public false information, often meant to discredit political opponents or competitors. Lobby groups, too, create doubt in people's minds to serve the interests of whoever pays them, whether it's the fossil fuels industry, *big pharma* or some agricultural giant. Even if the falsification is eventually discovered, the damage can hardly be undone. On a larger level, even historical facts are manipulated, or at least strategically ignored. This mechanism can be noticed in many forms and contexts, ranging from active indoctrination to a more relatable eagerness to strengthen one's own position – better known as the confirmation bias. The immense amount of propaganda that launched Germany into World War II, is just one example. Today, critical minds face an enormous challenge. Which sources are trustworthy? How do you deal with vast amounts of information, when the search for a nuanced answer also leads to more questions? The makers of *Lesaserma Pokhunakhis* have built a labyrinth where every shred of information about their mysterious heroine leads to further riddles, whilst they themselves remain in the shadows.

Lesaserma Pokhunakhis

Four young composers - **Sergey Khismatov, Alexander Khubeev, Alex Nadzharov and Marina Poleukhina** – together tell the unusual life story of **Lesaserma Pokhunakhis (1926-1991)**. Pokhunakhis was a maverick writer who lived in Soviet Russia. She was born in Greece; her father was a literature professor, her mother a painter. As communists, they taught their daughter Russian, so she would be able to read contemporary Russian authors in the original language. During World War II, she joined the armed resistance. It was probably in those years that she met Yannis Xenakis, who she referred to in her diaries as “the one-eyed architect”. The large-scale prosecution of former members of the resistance forces her to flee her home country in 1947. She was granted asylum in Russia, but soon collided with the Soviet regime. Eventually, she got arrested and was sentenced to prison. Not exactly being a model prisoner, she was transferred to a labor camp. During a transfer between two camps, her convoy got lost in the woods and she managed to escape. After wandering around in Siberia for a long time, she finally ended up in Yerbogachen, where she led a quiet life. In her free time, she lay the basis for an impressive artistic oeuvre. All her literary works, both poetry and prose, add up to one gargantuan book, *The Brown Soil*. However, it was never published. Only after her archive was discovered in 2014, fragments appeared in academic and literary journals. Even since, there has been an increasing interest in her work. The concert *Lesaserma Pokhunakhis*, along with the accompanying texts, video's and exhibition, tell of the fantastic life of this introverted artist. Parallel to this story runs the turbulent history of 20th century Russia.

When nothing goes, everything matters

In his autobiographic memoir *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushie states lapidary: “When nothing goes, everything matters”. At times when the powers that be use all means at their disposal to control the populations hearts and minds, then every word and every action count. The

critical, investigating character or the arts gains importance, as does its ability to dream of alternatives when people are made to believe that there are none. Here, a composition is more than a piece of music: it's a stronghold of free thinking.

This thought opens up a perspective on the ideas that lay beneath the surface of *Lesaserma Pokhunakhis*. With this piece, Poleukhina, Nadzharov, Khubeev and Khismatov have written their own history. A history that functions as an indirect mirror, shedding light on mechanisms and strategies that have defined countries and societies for decades, and are still actively deployed today. Now that the *post-truth* era has been declared, our free and critical thinking is once again at stake.

At the same time, the four composers bring a heroine to the stage. Lesaserma endures imprisonment, forced labor, danger and deprivation, but that doesn't stop her. She knows her individual life is no more than dust in the universe. Nevertheless, she lives by her convictions. She may be poor, displaced and isolated – her mind is free.

Biography Lesaserma Pokhunakhis

Lesaserma Pokhunakhis (°1926 Thessaloniki, Greece – + 1991 Yerbogachen, Russia) was a Soviet maverick writer and painter of Greek origins. All of Pokhunakhis' literary works in several genres of prose and poetry compose a single gargantuan book *The Brown Soil*, no parts of which were published in her lifetime.

After the discovery of the writer's archives by the Irkutsk scholars led by E. Kamyshev in 2003, several fragments appeared in academic and literary journals, sparking a public interest in Pokhunakhis' work. In 2005, work began on cataloguing the writer's archives and preparing a critical edition of *The Brown Soil*. As of 2016, it has not been completed yet.

Early life in Greece

Lesaserma Pokhunakhis was born on September 5, 1926 in Thessaloniki. Her mother Adresteia was a painter, her father Theophilos, a linguistic professor, recently appointed to the newly established Aristotle University. An active member of the Communist Party of Greece and a sympathizer of the Soviet Union, Pokhunakhis' father taught her Russian so that she could read Lenin's works in original language. In 1943 Lesaserma Pokhunakhis joined Greek *People's Liberation Army* and became part of the armed resistance against Nazi, and later pro-monarchy British forces. Kamyshev speculates that she might have met the famous composer *Iannis Xenakis*, as some passages from *The Brown Soil* mention a « one-eyed architect ».

Imprisonment in USSR

In 1947, the new Greek authorities began persecuting left-wing former resistance members. In fear of being arrested, Pokhunakhis crossed the border to Bulgaria and travelled to Odessa as a stowaway on a cargo ship. After an exhausting interrogation, she was granted an asylum. She got a job at the local bakery plant and a bed in a barrack. Raised as a free spirit, Pokhunakhis was appalled by the Soviet living condition and the totalitarian state, of which she wrote to her father. Little did she know that as a foreign national she was subject to correspondence review. Shortly after sending out the letter, Pokhunakhis was arrested and charged with counter-revolutionary activities. She was sentenced to 10 years of prison.

She served a short stint in the Vladimir Central prison, where she supposedly met the Russian poet-mystic *Daniil Andreyev*.

Later, the court lengthened Pokhunakhis' sentence to 15 years and changed it from prison to labor camp. In autumn 1949, she was moved to the Chukotstroy camp in Egvekinot, Chukotka. There Pokhunakhis, amongst thousands of prisoners, was forced to work on the building of the local seaport and later airport. Because of Pokhunakhis' frequent clashes with camp administration, she spent a lot of time in solitary confinement. It was there that she started her life's work, *The Brown Soil*. The short stories written in Egvekinot express a conflicted worldview: they describe the misery of the writer's prison experiences, while celebrating the technological wonders of the coming era. They composed the first volume of *The Brown Soil, Industrialization as the First Step*. However, all of Pokhunakhis' prison writings were confiscated and destroyed by the camp authorities. Only after settling in Yerbogachen did Pokhunakhis get the opportunity to write her prison stories down.

Yerbogachen years

In 1952, Pokhunakhis' rebellious behavior earned her a transfer to the infamous Chaunlag camp, where prisoners mined uranium in an open pit. Mysteriously, the whole convoy got lost in the woods. The circumstances of its demise remain unknown, as Pokhunakhis was the only survivor, and she does not mention the event anywhere in her writings. What can be learned from *The Brown Soil* is that, apparently, she spent the next two years traversing Siberia on foot, until she emerged in Yerbogachen in late 1954. The book's second volume, *On Earth and in the Sky*, is a detailed poetic travelogue of Pokhunakhis' journey through the endless tundra. During her wanders, she recorded the poems on tree bark. When she later wrote the poems down, she gave them titles that indicate the locations of the trees that hold the original recordings, e.g. *The Third Birch to the West of the Heart-Shaped Stone in the Thick Forrest Surrounded by the Stream that Flows from the Tall Eastern Mountain*. Attempts to locate them have proven mostly fruitless; only one tree was found to this day. In Yerbogachen Pokhunakhis met a young postwoman Antonina Ouvachan, who took her in. Despite vastly different backgrounds (Antonina only finished elementary school), the two women became close friends. The exact nature of their relationships remains unknown. While there is no direct evidence in support of that theory, it is speculated that they may have been romantically involved. With help from Ouvachan's family Pokhunakhis got a job at the regional forestry. The bulk of the texts that make up *The Brown Soil* were written in her small forester's hut on the edge of Yerbogachen. There she also discovered a passion for painting. The trauma of Pokhunakhis' years-long journey through Siberia left her with a compulsive fascination with earth and all things earthy. She started making paintings-assemblages using different kinds of soil and other unconventional materials. Art historian A. Kurganov characterized Pokhunakhis' style as « Siberian Arte Povera », although her earliest works precede Arte Povera by almost a decade. In 1957 Pokhunakhis made acquaintance with *Natalia Oyogir*, a practicing shaman. Spiritual traditions of Siberia's indigenous peoples had long caught Pokhunakhis's interest and for a couple of years she became Oyogir's apprentice. However, her teacher's deeply traditionalist patriarchal worldview clashed with Pokhunakhis' progressive beliefs, which led to their breakup. Pokhunakhis later developed her own unique brand of shamanism. She recorded her doctrine as the third volume of *The Brown Soil, Likbez – Science for the Masses*. There she proclaims the machines « man-made future gods born of Earth's bones ». She created a whole set of intricate techno-shamanistic rituals that were to « expedite the coming of the

prosperous Era of the Machine that will feed the hungry and comfort the miserable, the bright technological future when no one will be forced to work ».

Pokhunakhis' shamanic activities came to an abrupt end in 1971 when the great forest fire nearly destroyed the town. Caught in the fire she received severe burns and went almost completely blind. For the next twenty years she remained housebound, cared for by Antonina Ouvachan. Despite her predicament, Pokhunakhis continued to write and paint. She started using even more unconventional materials, including various foods, in her art, relying on tactile and olfactory sensations, as well as help from Antonina. Ouvachan also served as Pokhunakhis' literary secretary compiling her sayings and aphorisms into the fourth volume of *The Brown Soil*, titled simply ***The Truth***.

Death and legacy

Lessasserma Pokhunakhis died of a heart attack on December 28, 1991, three days after USSR was dismantled. Antonina Ouvachan maintained her partner's archive of manuscripts and paintings; however, she did not make it available to the public. Moreover, lacking necessary skills and knowledge she could not prevent the deterioration of Pokhunakhis' artworks made of unconventional materials. Pokhunakhis' legacy suffered even more after Ouvachan's death in 2003. Her heirs did not know who Pokhunakhis was, nor did they care for her highly experimental art and writings. The whole archive ended up thrown on the nearest scrapyard. In a fortunate turn of events, it was found by the V. Shishkov Local History Museum employee T. Inkina, who contacted the Irkutsk University professor E. Kamyshev. Realizing the significance of this discovery, Kamyshev formed a research group for cataloguing and studying the legacy of Lesaserma Pokhunakhis. At the same time, Inkina started collecting objects from Pokhunakhis' life in hopes of establishing a memorial museum of this incredible writer and artist. As of 2016, both projects are yet to be completed.