

WOMEN'S CULTIVATION PRACTICES
IN POST-SOCIALIST RURAL CONTEXTS

This research seeks to navigate the cultural practices of soil cultivation and demonstrate how they represent examples of feminist resistance in post-socialist rural contexts.¹ Three key regions with histories of socialist collective labour strategies are the Komi Republic (Russia), Armenia, and East Germany.² The focus is on the period after the end of the Soviet Union, from 1989 to 1999; an unstable time marked by dramatic historical change. Soil cultivation practices involve working the soil, tending gardens, visiting forest, preserving food, and cooking. These practices are historically vital, embody cooperation, and hold living knowledge about soil, food preservation, and community life, passed continuously through generations. The site and methods are

- 1 While the study considers cultivation practices as feminist acts of resistance, it is important to recognise that these activities may not have the same meanings everywhere. In the concrete post-soviet contexts studied, they embody survival, self-sufficiency, and communities adapting in response to systemic crises and economic change to capitalism economy. However, in other contexts, gardening and food preservation may be associated more with domestic responsibilities or even gendered expectations rather than acts of resistance. With this in mind, I argue that rural women's knowledge study has not only local but also global significance. At its core, my autobiographical inquiry is driven by a commitment to amplifying the voices of communities whose experiences and knowledges deserve recognition. These stories have the power to inspire critical discussions at multiple levels, particularly in a world grappling with urban-rural divides and persistent gender inequalities.
- 2 The research is conducted through the lens of autobiographical artistic practice. I follow the symbolic and physical route from my first indigenous grandmother in the Komi Republic (northeastern Russia) to my second grandmother in Armenia. By connecting the stories of Eastern women from these regions with my story as a migrant woman in Germany, I explore how we resonate in a contemporary world where the Berlin Wall has long since fallen, yet the memories of women in the (former/current) East endure.

production of two artworks (audio and video documentations), a series of teaching (seminars and workshops), as well as educational and curatorial practice.



The workshop *From the Place of Soils*, Revolt Centre, Syktivkar, Komi Republic, Russia, July 2024 / from part 1, *Cruising Landscapes*. © Anastasia Kolechkova

At historical *tipping points* (Milkoreit et al. 2018), we turn to the soil, looking for spaces for reconnection, resilience, and recovery. Following the post-soviet economic crisis during the 1990s, we³ in post-socialist contexts have revived the cultivating/agricultural knowledge of our mothers and grandmothers, joining them in their vegetable gardens in various ways between urban and rural spaces in different forms and shapes, re-learning relationships with soil, society, and politics. How do we understand, communicate, and engage with each other through the soil (Brevik et al. 2015) during these pivotal times? How do we reconstruct knowledges about care, compassion and love (Mies and Vandana 1993)?

³ “We” refers specifically to those who have lived through the post-socialist transitions or are connected to them through shared cultural memory, actively engaging with the intergenerational cultivation knowledges of women in rural spaces, including myself as a researcher with personal relationships to these histories, and women like my grandmothers, mother, friends, neighbours, who carried these practices forward—revived the cultivating/agricultural knowledge passed down continuously.

Tipping points are moments of upheaval, when life is irrevocably altered, and we find ourselves in a new reality—sometimes in another country, sometimes in another world. These events shake the ground beneath our feet. What actions do we take in these moments of crisis? How do we keep from falling?

This workshop complicates the notion of *tipping points* by examining soil cultivation practices—especially women’s agricultural labour—as a form of continuous feminist resistance in post-socialist spaces. Through complicating the notion of such events, the workshop looks into soil cultivation practices, particularly women’s agricultural work, which serves as feminist resistance (Federici 2019). These critical moments, where gradual changes result in sudden, irreversible transformations, impacted every aspect of life in post-socialist East. After the dissolution of collectivized farms and the re-privatization of land, many women returned to agricultural work, revitalizing cultivation practices passed down through generations. By reclaiming and transforming these practices, they turned *tipping points* from moments of breakdown into opportunities for renewal, where traditional practices sustained communities and fostered resilience.

Despite its everyday nature, cultivation requires deep engagement, creating spaces for informal learning and sharing knowledges. Gardening, picking mushrooms and berries, or making provisions are practices that allow women to remain independent, managing supplies and supporting families in times of instability. Moreover, it can be seen as a way to strengthen social cohesion and joint resistance, where women can gather, talk and create a kind of ‘care networks’ among each other.

From *the Place of Soils* examines diverse landscapes through decolonial approaches, grounded in the critical insights of feminist theorists. This framework is enriched by ecofeminist thinkers Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, who investigate in *Ecofeminism* (1993) the intersections of feminism and ecology, arguing that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature stem from deeply entrenched patriarchal and capitalist systems. Silvia Federici’s *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the*

Commons (2019) further highlights the necessity of a feminist approach to reclaiming communal resources, as women are often at the forefront of resistance against their destruction. Federici advocates for a “re-enchantment” of the world through practices focused on shared well-being, care, and ecological sustainability—prioritizing these values over the pursuit of capitalist profit.

The workshop aims to create a space between memory of the years following the end of the Soviet Union and present-day realities, fostering collective learning through a temporary collective *Ogorod*⁴ *Space* by using tools such as connecting and co-making, remembering and embodying knowledges, questioning the boundaries between theory and practice.

As an outcome, a collective glossary of cultivating practices is currently being published. As a methodology, the workshop uses collectively selected readings, conversations with family members and neighbours, local garden visits and critical discussions, to gather diverse perspectives and practices.

A preliminary version of the workshop was conducted at the *Revolt Center* in Syktyvkar in July 2024 as part of the my field study on cultivation practices in post-socialist contexts. This initial iteration included three key components: *Cruising Landscapes*, *Seeds and Winds*, *Publishing Glossary*. The additional component, *Cultivating Memories*, emerged as a future proposition, informed by the significance of visiting vegetable gardens and each other’s homes—a vital practice in rural communities, after the critical conversation with participants.

The participants include people actively or formerly engaged with cultivation practices, remembering the craft of cultivating and people seeking to reconnect with their histories and memories from their mother and grandmother gardens, between rural and urban post-socialist contexts. With this intergenerational approach, it also travels around past and present, re-connecting through our memories.

The classroom is a performative space, cultivated through the participation of bodies and narratives. A temporary *Ogorod Space*, imagined as a site of dynamic exploration and interaction, proposed to be built inside and outside as a method of immersive performative workshop format.

CRUISING LANDSCAPES

We create a metaphorical garden, merging theoretical discussions with personal soil memories. This space serves as a way to embody knowledge and challenge the divide between history and practice. We look into how cultivation practices reflect feminist resistance and function as tools for resilience during societal transformations, in the context of the diverse landscapes of the former Eastern Bloc. The soil itself becomes both a metaphor and a tangible point of reconnection during periods of crisis. We look into our stories of resistance through cultivation—for example, the practice of rural and urban gardening during the 1990s economic crisis, when women in post-soviet villages and cities turned abandoned plots into vegetable gardens, reclaiming the land and self-regulating food production from it (Zavitsa 2003). Along these lines it is engaged with the global contexts of land movements, such as Brazil’s *MST* (Landless Workers’ Movement) and *La Via Campesina* (International Peasants’ Movement), navigating us through diverse landscapes of land-based struggles.

For the broader discussion, we engage with the theoretical works by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (*Ecofeminism*) as well as Silvia Federici (*Re-enchanting the World*), examining how their thoughts apply to other contexts. How does interdisciplinary feminism evolve across different settings? Can it reconstruct itself through tipping points? Through these readings and discussions, we learn how feminist practices adapt and regenerate in moments of societal rupture.

4 from Russian: vegetable garden.

We engage in hands-on gardening activities. This method draws inspiration from the 1992 performance *Огород Малевича* (Malevich's Garden) by the St. Petersburg art collective Tut-i-Tam (Tut i tam 1997), which reimagined public spaces as temporary communal gardens. In this part, we adapt that concept by transforming local gardens—whether collective or private—into sites for collaborative cultivation and dialogue around historical narratives.

The garden visits, connected to the post-soviet historical context, attempt to become a living archive. The garden's caretakers could participate in introducing the space and guiding us through its history and landscape. This practice embodies knowledge through cultivation, prompting reflection on questions such as: How do we remember our stories through these everyday practices? How do we physically embody our knowledge and experiences?

SEEDS AND WINDS

We embody memories tied to the soil. We reflect on family, neighbours, and community histories and contexts, to gather diverse perspectives.

Each participant is asked to contribute a word, term, or practice to a collective glossary—whether it's a specific technique, a concept, or a memory linked to soil cultivation. After that participants visualize this word in the form of illustration. This documents the various practices and meanings of soil cultivation. What does this word mean to us? How has history changed its meaning?

Afterwards we gather for tea and a collective discussion, and focus on finalizing glossary terms. Participants present their contributions, with the word on one side and the illustration on the other, allowing us to connect new terms with shared memories. This reflective session deepens the connection between personal stories and collective *knowledges*, bridging old and evolving meanings in our shared glossary.



Photo 2: The workshop *From the Place of Soils*, Revolt Centre, Syktyvkar, Komi Republic, Russia, July 2024 / from part 3, *Seeds and Winds*. © Anastasia Kolechkova

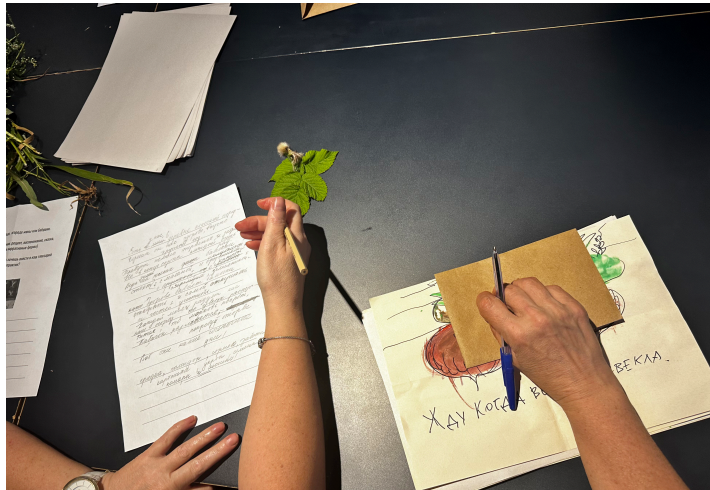
PUBLISHING GLOSSARY

In the final session, participants gather to publish the glossary, which serves as an archive. This self-published document encapsulates the diverse soil-related practices explored throughout the sessions, and how these traditions have adapted and persisted through times of crisis.

We reflect on how the practices both respond to and challenge the idea of *tipping points*—not only as moments of collapse but as opportunities for renewal and resilience. The completed glossary represents the dynamic and evolving *knowledges* we have cultivated together, becoming a lasting record of our shared experiences and collective learning.

From the Place of Soils connected personal and collective histories, offering a platform for critical reflection and artistic experimentation, capturing the adaptability and continuity of soil-related knowledge while emphasising the transformative potential of cultivation during the times of crisis. It could be seen as an artistic method, named *Ogorod Space*, which opens the possibilities for collective exchange and participatory research through feminist and decolonial

perspectives. As a next step, I am planning to implement the workshop in Armenia and East Germany, opening the material up for these contexts, examining the glossaries between landscapes, and creating broader discussions.



The workshop “From the place of soils”, Revolt Centre, Syktivkar, Komi Republic, Russia, July 2024 / from the “Publishing Glossary”, part 4. © Anastasia Kolechkova

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