

## ABSTRACT

This research is focused on the development of a new methodology to curate political performance art from the Baltic countries and Sápmi. Sámi and Baltic artists share a colonial history connected to their traditional lands, which is often why they work with such politically loaded themes. A more complete understanding of their artworks by audiences can contribute to opening up a social dialogue about these issues, which could have the effect of lessening the notion of Other and erasing the hierarchies of cultural centre and periphery.

Performance and live artwork can generally be experienced by the audience only once. Thus, the audience has only one chance to grasp the artwork and understand it. Here, the curator's task is to establish a close dialogue with the artist and shape the meeting point with the audience in order to lower the barriers between the artist (and their artwork's content) and the audience.

How can curators work with live art and performances by Baltic and Sámi artists themed around postcolonial memory and decolonisation to give international audiences a more coherent understanding of such artwork?

The results of my research, key points towards a new curatorial methodology, are useful for the education of curators. The methodology developed could be used by art institutions such as art centres and galleries that work with performance art and present artwork from the Baltic region and indigenous Sámi artists, which often deals with the themes of decolonisation and postcolonial memory. Lastly, the methodology could increase engagement and connectedness with audiences to the performance artwork they experience.

## keywords

BALTIC  
SÁMI  
ART  
CURATING  
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PROXIMITIES

# Curating as Care in Performance and Live Art:

## A case study of Lithuanian and Sámi art

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### Introduction

The focus of this article is to extract key points from an analysis of selected curatorial cases dealing with Indigenous Sámi and postcolonial Lithuanian live and performance art. Performance and live art have been broadly defined as ‘experimental time-, body- and action-focused art practices that we have come to group under this catch-all term ‘performance art’, or its later variant, ‘live art’ (Roms 2020, 117). While both concepts have similar meanings, ‘live art’ is the more recent iteration. According to Charles S. Garoian (1999), performance art is rooted in the exploration of personal, cultural, and historical issues; as such, in certain cases the artist(s) in question may come from territories with colonial histories, with this type of narrative entering the artwork from a personal perspective based on familial connections. Live and performance art are politically charged and understood here to be connected to the personal background of the artists and to a particular narrative of their histories and respective lands that experienced colonial oppression, with the personal perspective being infused with what is understood as postmemory, or memory narrated through several generations (Hirsh 2012). In this way, the memories and national and cultural identities of the artists in the cases presented are interconnected.

Art’s connection to the social and political context of the artist, the concrete location where the artwork is shown, and the location of its creation position it as a powerful agent for societal change (Busch 2009). Both Sámi and Lithuanian

artists share a common colonial history. Lithuania is tied to the Soviet occupation, which often leads artists in this region to explore politically sensitive themes. The colonial history of Sápmi is tied to its division by borders into Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia, as well as the cultural restrictions imposed on Sámi culture by these countries. Lithuania, an independent state since 1991, and Sápmi, with its current Sámi representations in the parliaments of Norway (from 1989), Finland (1995), and Sweden (1993), share a common discourse that emphasises their respective cultural identities. Oppression against Lithuanians in the Soviet era led to their relocation to the Arctic North of the Soviet Union and Siberia, and the forceful inclusion of farmers' lands into collective farming arrangements. In Sápmi, families were coercively relocated due to the introduction of the state borders of Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Russia; industrialisation of the landscape and restrictions on Sámi culture and language later ensued.

Curators who effectively provoke a comprehensive understanding of performance artworks by Lithuanian and Sámi artists can facilitate a broader social discourse, thereby potentially reducing the perception of 'Otherness' and dismantling hierarchical notions of cultural centres and peripheries. Performance and live art possess a unique quality, in that they are experienced by the audience only once. Consequently, audiences have a single opportunity to engage with and comprehend the artwork. This brings to the forefront the curator's role in establishing a dynamic dialogue with the artist and in shaping an interactive space for the audience. Such an approach should aim to break down barriers between the artist, the artwork's content, and the audience. However, the extent to which the curator should assert their authority in exhibition design and event curation remains unclear, as does the extent to which a dialogical approach should cross the boundaries of traditional curatorial norms within art institutions and creative spaces.

Colonial history perceives the maps of colonial regimes as a homogenous closed construct, with mapmaking occupying the core of colonial thinking (Huggan 1995). Mapmaking thus resulted in Sápmi being divided over the borders of four separate countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia. In the case of Lithuania, meanwhile, the result was that country's integration into the map of the Soviet Union. This mapmaking approach is present in the artworks of artists from Sápmi and Lithuania in the cases presented here. Memory here is postcolonial memory, which builds on Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory. Postmemory is interconnected with colonial history and mapmaking and the artists in the cases introduced here work with themes of the colonial past through the narratives of their families and ancestors. The notion of 'Othering', meanwhile, is based on a twofold definition that accounts for difference that needs to be acknowledged, and the negative impacts of asymmetrical power, systemic inequalities, oppression, and inequity.

In this case, ‘Othering implies *otherism*, a psychological, sociological, or institutional position that, like racism, is only ever negative’, where the idea of a ‘Close Other’ (Kukaine 2023) seems to acknowledge differences in the pluriversal manner in which many truths can co-exist (Escobar 2021).

Hierarchies are discussed here from the perspective of artist-run initiatives and institutional curatorial work. In the first case, artists take on the role of curators; in the second, individuals are trained as curators (or have backgrounds in art theory or art history). For example, an artist-curator is working as a curator within the institution of the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art, but also working with particular projects, such as the ‘Nomadic Radical Academy’. Therefore, in this research, the perspective of the curator is that of the artist in an artist-run initiative, but also that of the artist taking on the role of an institutional curator.

Ecology, as the angle from which the colonial critique is advanced, is discussed from a posthumanist perspective of ecology as a more-than-human agent, where the question of ownership of land arises (ie Do we have ownership over the more-than-human agent?). This question was addressed by the artists in three of the cases presented. Specifically, as Willow (2016) discussed, the process of extracting natural resources for the sake of state prosperity within colonial contexts is connected to the cases here, specifically in terms of how both collective farming and the industrialisation of the landscapes are relevant when discussing ecology and colonial history.

Some of the challenges of performance art and curatorial work are that the curator needs to provide care towards different stakeholders, such as the artist, the audiences, the staff at the event venues, and the artwork itself, and communicate the content coherently in a pluriversal way to multiple audiences. Here, curatorial and performance work are intertwined to create a space that serves as a meeting point for several stakeholders.

The present research is based on an analysis of artist-organised and curated art of a historical and politically loaded nature that was created in Sápmi by the Máze group (Hætta 2020) and in Lithuania for the AN88 and AN89 performance art festivals (Griniuk 2020). These examples share the format of an artist-run activity that promotes a distinctive national and cultural identity. The two contemporary live art cases, curated by both an individual curator and one within the institution of Sámi Center for the Contemporary Art, will be presented and analysed to show how politically loaded live art is curated and communicated for audiences today, and what methodological approach can be discerned in this alignment of historical and contemporary artist-run live art from Lithuania and Sápmi.

How can Lithuanian and Sámi artist-run curating as care be analysed from the perspectives of colonial history, the notion of ‘Othering’, existing hierarchies, ecology

as an angle of colonial critique, memory, and national and cultural identity? In attempting to answer this question, this article comprises several parts. First, a description of all four cases included in the research is presented. These cases include one from the Māze group, in the northern Sámi language Māzejoavku, and AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989) from Lithuania. These works serve as examples of historical artist-run activism in these two regions. The members of these two artist-run initiatives have never met or had any kind of collaboration, yet they are united in this research by the timeframe of their artistic activity and by their approach to artistic activism as a means towards freedom and decolonisation. The contemporary cases have been represented by the Nomadic Radical Academy (2019, 2020) in Lithuania and in several art projects and exhibitions at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok in Sápmi in the period 2022–2023, all of which were curated either by the project curator or the curator within the exhibition venue. Both cases used live art and performance as tools for communicating the projects' content to various audiences. The content of all the projects discussed here is colonial history and ecology, as well as live art within a particular place and site as expanding empathic connections between art and audiences. The cases are followed by an analysis and key findings. The results of this research point to the importance of artist-run curating and curatorial curating as care in representing colonial history, the notion of 'Othering', existing hierarchies, ecology as an angle of colonial critique, memory, and national and cultural identity in Lithuanian and Sámi art. It is hoped that such an approach can contribute to the deeper development of curatorial practices in the postcolonial context of art institutions, such as art centres and galleries that work with performance art and present artworks from the Baltic region and by Indigenous Sámi artists, which often deal with themes of decolonisation and postcolonial memory. Finally, the methodology of new curating could increase engagement and connectedness with audiences through the performance artwork they experience.

## State of the arts

### Sámi and Lithuanian art and colonial histories

Since this research brings together Sámi and Baltic performance artists, it draws on two key sources of literature: contemporary Sámi performance art and performances by Baltic artists, with the meeting point between the two being a thematic approach to postcolonial memory, decolonisation, and ecology. In recent years, Nordic universities have collaborated on research into contemporary Sámi art (Aamold

<sup>1</sup> Examples of such artists include Hilde Skancke Pedersen, Marry Somby, and Pauliina Feodoroff.

<sup>2</sup> An example of a Sámi artist who takes this approach would be Skole-Petter Anna.

<sup>3</sup> For example, consider the artworks of two Lithuanian artists, Evelina Simkute and Marija Griniuk, and artworks displayed in the AN88 and AN89 festivals, and those of two Sami artists, Tomas Colbengtson and Lena Stenberg.

et al 2017; Danbolt 2018; Lien 2020; Thisted 2012) and ethno-aesthetics (Arke 2012), the latter of which can be applied to the case of Sámi live art. The growth of interest in this domain has been notable (Jørgensen 2017), given the rise of large-scale art events, such as the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2022) and the presentation of *Girjegumpi* by Joar Nango at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2023), which have increased public interest in Sámi art. Nevertheless, the focus of these studies and projects on live art and performance is still far too restricted (Aamold et al 2017). While some Sámi artists often work in the performance medium alongside sculpture, installation, painting, and printmaking practices<sup>1</sup>, others identify themselves as working exclusively with performance.<sup>2</sup>

In the Baltics, while some investigation has taken place into the postcolonial themes of contemporary performance artwork, these such attempts have largely focused on single projects and resulted in single publications (Griniuk 2021; Kristberga 2018; Orav 2017). As performance is a relatively new medium the Baltics, its lack of tradition thus limits the amount of research undertaken on performance art thus far. The use of performance as an artistic tool to challenge certain restrictions and political ideologies was first discussed by Brygzel (2018) and later by Kukaine (2023) in reference to feminist performance artworks. To develop a methodology of cross-border curatorial communication of live artwork dealing with themes of colonial memory (Griniuk 2021; Jørgensen 2017), it is important to involve artists from these two regions (ie Baltic performance artists and Sámi artists). Artists connected to these lands aesthetically approach the themes of the past, identity, and prohibition by using their own languages, cultures, traditions, ancestral lands, and colonial oppression to open up visual discussion about colonialism and its connection to Soviet occupation (Jørgensen 2017) and about the notion of 'Othering' (Jensen 2011). Belonging to the land and its community by having parents and/or grandparents is the history that these artists address in their work, which makes these artists narrators of that history from their families' perspectives, as they employ their identities as the active components of the narrative. In this way, the artists work directly from the perspective of transgenerational memory and find its expression through artistic work.

The concept of transgenerational memory finds its roots in the notion of 'post-memory', as introduced by Hirsch (2012). Transgenerational memory pertains to the process of recollection that is inherited by succeeding generations, particularly following an era in which previous generations directly endured traumatic experiences of political oppression, such as the Soviet era in Lithuania. Archives of the past, such as photo collections, seem to be echoed in many artistic practices from the Baltic and Sámi regions and have become an integral part of these artworks.<sup>3</sup>

## Performance

Performance art has been discussed as being capable of impacting the communities involved in its creation (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) and is therefore perceived as a means of mitigating the effects of Othering. The curation of performance art requires that the site and its space be effectively managed, leading to the notion of the 'Close Other' as an interplay of strangeness and familiarity (Kukaine 2023). In other words, the notion of the Other via the performance space may be transformed into a 'Close Other' (Kukaine 2023), as this is a step towards lessening the barriers built by colonial regimes. Coloniality and Othering share asymmetrical power relations, which are mitigated or dismantled on the pathway towards pluriversal values (Escobar 2021).

Performance art and its host environment shape the concept of space. The term 'space' refers both to the physical world and to mental states (Stock 2015), and it interconnects with the *placeness* of the performance, the backgrounds of the artists, and the backgrounds of the audience members inhabiting a particular space for the duration of a performance. The curator's role here can be understood as that of a mediator of the performance space, in close collaboration with the artist, to enhance the experience of liveness for the audience. In this context, space refers to connected entities, actions, and ideas (Stock 2015). Time and location in a performance are crucial to defining space (McAuley 1999). Therefore, the two pillars of the literature around Sámi and Lithuanian performance art are connected to the space and placeness of performance.

## Curating as care and decolonising space

The first of the two conceptual frameworks is curating as care and decolonising space. Decolonisation here is understood as the dissemination of narratives from the perspective of the Indigenous Sámi or Lithuanian artists that promote more advanced social awareness and reflection on the colonial pasts of these lands (MacDonald 2007; Cosley et al 2008). Understanding the relationship between performance and space is crucial for curating successful performances. The curator must work closely with the artist to create a space that enhances the performance and engages the audience; as such, the curatorial role is that of a caretaker of stakeholders involved in the performance's creation and presentation. The concept of curating here is interpreted as both a care space and a decolonising space. The concept of care in live and performance art and curatorial contexts has been

explained by Sarantou (2014) in terms of the pivotal role of care narratives in the creation and portrayal of artefacts originating from Indigenous and marginalised backgrounds, which emphasises their intrinsic values and identities within exhibition spaces. The concept of care is connected to decolonisation in research within art education, in which artistic processes are compared to healing in decolonising contexts (Tabor et al 2023). According to Arnold (2013), art spaces – which include exhibitions and live and performance art – are spaces of knowledge dissemination, and when expanded to include the digital spaces of artistic interventions, the aspects of care and decolonisation have a central role.

## Curating and dismantling hierarchies

The second conceptual framework is curating care as a process of dismantling hierarchies. Here, the hierarchies addressed are those of the centre and periphery of culture, which are understood through the artist-run and curatorial activities that take place in the established institutions, as well as those that emerge as historical and contemporary art cases. The idea of curating performance comes from the context of Fluxus art in the early 1960s (Ferdman 2019). Curating as the creation of an input-output system, regulated by the practical consciousness (and embodied cognition) of artistic codes and conventions (Acord 2010), is practiced by the artists in the artist-run context and extends their artistic activity as practitioners, while in the institutional context, curators may have different backgrounds – often theoretical – and also be artists working in the institutions as curators (Adamopoulou and Solomon 2016), as in the current cases, where the curator is a performance artist affiliated with the institution. It has been argued that it can be difficult to distinguish the artist-practitioner's artistic work from their curatorial work (Adamopoulou and Solomon 2016). Accordingly, if the hierarchy in the art world is understood as artist-run opposition to established art institutions and museums, an interesting discussion emerges as to whether the fact of artists working as curators in these same institutions lessens the hierarchies of the centre and periphery within art.

## Method

The overall method used in this study is arts-based action research (ABAR) from the perspectives of a Lithuanian curator, the director of the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art, and a performance artist, Marija Griniuk, who curates live art events



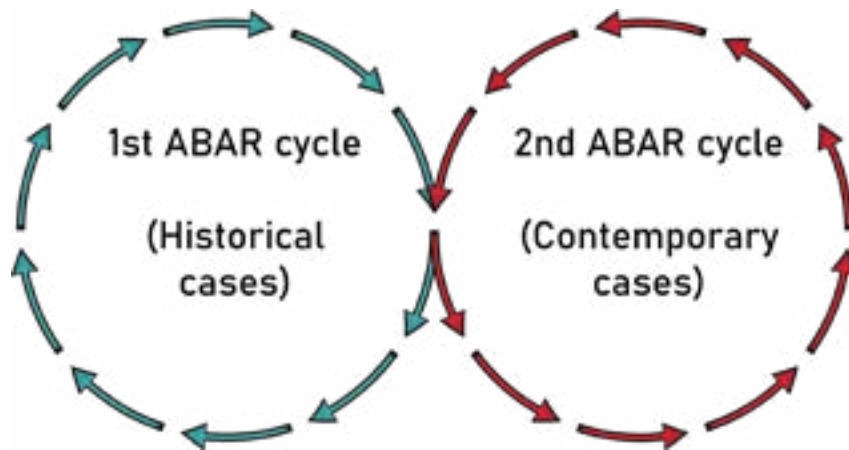


Fig. 1 – Research cycles of the current study developed by Marija Griniuk.

at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art. ABAR was developed by a group of scholars at the University of Lapland who intended for the approach to be used by artists, teachers, and researchers to recognise existing problems and envision a plurality of possible solutions (Härkönen et al 2018; Jokela 2013). ABAR consists of arts-based research and action research and therefore comprises various research cycles (Härkönen et al 2018; Jokela 2013). The arts-based component of ABAR involves the use of various artistic mediums, such as visual art, music, and performance, to gather data and insights into a research topic. The action research component consists of working with stakeholders to identify potential solutions to the problem at hand. In all three cases, the author-artist-curator has an insider position within the projects. In the case of the Måze group the author-artist-curator read the research by Susanne Hætta and had conversations with her about the Måze group. In this way, two action research cycles are completed – one addressing the comparison of historical cases and one addressing contemporary cases [see Fig. 1].

Action research requires the direct involvement of the researcher in the content of the project with the aim of enacting change. The iterative research cycles of ABAR involve ongoing reflection, analysis, and adjustment of the research approach as the project progresses. In the present research, the case study was grouped into two research cycles, leading to analysis and findings that outline an answer to the posed research question. The ABAR approach aligns well with the goals of this research project. By combining artistic practices with action research, this method can help illuminate the unique challenges faced by Sámi curators, artists, and communities in the contemporary art world when engaging in performance and live art in postcolonial scenarios.

## Cases

This study addresses four cases, two of which are from the context of historical and political artist-run activities in Sápmi and Lithuania, and two of which are contemporary cases of performance art in Sápmi and Lithuania dealing with decolonising and postcolonial memory in these respective areas. The historical cases are a Máze artist-run collective in Sápmi (1973-1983) and AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989), which were artist-run performance festivals in Lithuania. Together, these phenomena can be classified within the zeitgeist of the 1980s, which was a period of awareness-awakening towards art and a call for decolonising narratives. Besides their similar timeframe, these historical cases share an artist-organised, non-institutional take on the management and organisation of artistic practices within a collective or community, which was a means by which a counter narrative, a narrative based within the community, could be created from the perspective of that community. It is important to understand the historical context of art in Sápmi and Lithuania before describing these contemporary cases. For the contemporary context, cases are drawn from the live art projects of the Nomadic Radical Academy in Lithuania (exhibited in 2019 and 2020) and the interconnection of live art and performance presented in the exhibition spaces at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok in 2022-2023.

In all four cases, art transgresses the frame of aesthetic production and serves as a tool for communicating the need for political and societal change. All the initiatives described here are artist-run; although one of the cases from the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art has the status of a foundation, its current management and curatorial work is artist-driven. Liveness and activism are the values that underlie the interest in expanding traditional object-based art into the space of experience and learning. Performance functions in all four cases as the medium or actions through which an expression of value and a call for freedom can take place. As in the case of Máze group artists, even though their individual artistic expression was mainly object-based, they were involved in collaborative, performative productions, such as *Point Zero* (Hætta 2020), as well as in political actions.

### Máze group in Sapmi

The Máze group (1978–1983) was the first collective of Sámi artists whose artistic work was inseparable from political activism. Such activism was exemplified in their movement against the building of a hydropower plant on the Alta River, which was called the Alta Action (Hætta 2020). Alta Action was defined by Hætta (2020)

as the first eco-Indigenous uprising in Europe. The village of Máze, the source of the title for the Máze group, has a majority population of Indigenous Sámi people and was chosen as the homebase for the activities of the group. The members of the Máze group were Aage Gaup (d. 2022), Trygve Lund Guttormsen (d. 2012), Josef Halse, Berit Marit Hætta, Rannveig Persen, Hans Ragnar Mathisen, Britta Marakatt-Labba, and Synnøve Persen. All these artists had formal art academy education, through which they were able to infuse their traditional Sámi knowledge in the development of their artistic style, which for the Sámi community was a significant innovation demanding a new terminology, such as the term 'dáidda', which was used to refer to contemporary art (Hætta 2020). The Máze group of artists, in particular Synnøve Persen, outlined and defined the categories of artistic expression in their contemporary Sápmi context. For instance, Persen served as the editor of the Sámi artist lexicon.

## AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989) in Lithuania

The AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989) were the very first performance art festivals held in Lithuania, arranged by a group of young musicians and artists in the last years of Soviet occupation before Lithuania became independent in 1991. The festivals were organised in the town Ažuožeriai in the Anykščiai region, an area around 100 kilometres from the capital city. The titles of the festivals, as in the Máze group case, were bound to the geographical location of that particular region. The choice of this host area was quite deliberate, since the content of the performances featured strong political symbols and demonstrated a longing for Lithuanian independence, which was especially evident in the inclusion of the three-coloured national flag in the performance or the ironic comments that glorified war actions and veteran routines (Griniuk 2021). In 1988 and 1989, such themes in artworks could lead to the imprisonment of artists. Therefore, Ažuožeriai was the peripheral, safe location for such artistic actions, as was explained by the organiser of the events, Gintaras Sodeika (Griniuk 2021).

An example of one of the artworks presented within AN88 is *Bureaucratic Hitchhiking* by Sodeika (1988), which sought to underline the nature of the political system and bureaucracy of Soviet times (see Fig. 2). The artists staged an accident that attracted the attention of drivers passing by. Each driver who stopped by the staged accident received a gratitude paper for their performed care to another human being; in this way, the gratitude letter was a comment on the other documents of honour circulating routinely in the Soviet system. The participating artists and composers at AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989) were Tomas Juzeliūnas,



Fig. 2 – *Bureaucratic Hitchhiking* by Sodeika, 1988. Photo by Arvydas Baltrūnas.

Šarūnas Nakas, Arūnas Dikčius, Ričardas Kabelis, Rytis Mažulis, Arvydas Baltrūnas, and Austė Nakienė, among others. AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989) represented a completely new approach to media for Lithuanian creators – performance art had only just begun in the Lithuanian context in 1988 and 1989. The position of the author here is that of a researcher into the projects AN88 (1988) and AN89 (1989), with this investigation being based on conversations with the artists and on examination of archival material containing videos and photos.

### **Nomadic Radical Academy (2019 and 2020) from Lithuania**

The Nomadic Radical Academy was initiated as an artist-run project at the gallery of Meno Parkas in Kaunas, Lithuania, and consisted of one edition per year for two years. The project was one of a participatory performative space, meaning that the audience entering the artwork was invited to actively join in the live action



Fig. 3 – The Nomadic Radical Academy, First Floor, 2019. Photo by Antanas Untidy.



Fig. 4 – The Nomadic Radical Academy, Second Floor, 2019. Photo by Antanas Untidy.

within the two-week take-over of the art gallery; the scenography of the project included tents and shanty-town elements built into the space where the artists and participants would inhabit (see Image 2, 3). The participants of the project were children and young people aged 13-16 years old, some of whom were accompanied by adults.

The project was developed in 2019 by Marija Griniuk who invited the participating artists, including Tue Brisson Mosich (DK/LT), Nanna Ylönen (FIN), Anne-Louise Knudsen (DK), Anders Werdelin (DK), and the Kaunas-based Lithuanian artists and art initiatives, for example Evelina Šimkutė. The goal of the project was to

communicate the importance of eco-friendly behaviour and awareness of environmental care and responsibility to young audiences. The project's theme was grounded in the local issues of soil and water pollution, which were the result of decades of massive pesticide and herbicide use in the Soviet collective farming regime in Lithuania. In this historical context, the majority of the land was exploited through the enforcement of collective farming in the Soviet Union. This international team of artists approached this theme from the angle of their own practices and experiences. The project was a way of finding the means for visual expression and narrative interpretation through the performance of ecology- and decolonisation-related themes, all specific to the Lithuanian context but still relevant to global discussions. Site specificity is considered a theme, as the stories within the performances were built around local narratives, and the audiences responded from their own local perspectives and the lived experiences of their ancestors. The position of the author in this case was that of artist-curator and one of the artists behind the development of the project.

### **Live art and performance within the exhibition spaces at Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok in 2022-2023 in Sapmi**

Live art and performance within the exhibition spaces at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art usually accompanied the openings of exhibitions, forming part of the public event in order to extend the audience experience after official talks and exhibition presentations. Nevertheless, there are certain limits to what a performance can be and do within the site of an exhibition. Exhibitions can serve as the stage and dramaturgy of performance, providing a background for interpreting the work of performing artists. Therefore, in 2022, the decision was made to expand the notion of what a performance can be in the context of the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art visitor experience. Performance was thus proposed as the format for further exploring exhibitions and opening discussions.

The first attempt at such a performance within the exhibition space was in 2022, with performance workshops being held for a multicultural group of children from the Troms and Finnmark areas in Norway. This particular performance was designed to help these children understand and interpret the *Treasure Chest* exhibition of Sámi art at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok. In this case, diversity was understood in terms of both age (the children were aged between seven and 16 years) and cultural representation (some were Indigenous Sámi, while others were from mixed international families). The children at the Sámi Center for Contempo-

rary Art were divided into small groups and asked to choose their favourite artwork (see Image 5). They then worked together to create a short performance, with each child taking on individual roles and actively contributing. Some children interpreted a painting through their movements and gestures, while others used sculpture to create a new story and act it out. The performance, even though it was abstract, was effectively used to explain and interpret specific ideas and concepts. Performance in this case was employed as a tool to bring together diverse voices and perspectives, which created a sense of community within the learning space and enhanced the creative process, through which the final product was presented.

Another approach was to extend the exhibition experience by asking the musicians to produce a performance specifically in the context of the exhibition. As in the exhibition by Lena Stenberg called 'Borders' (2023), which was themed around the separation of Sápmi across the national borders of Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia, the music performance was designed to extend and explain the theme of the exhibition through sound and music-based experience. The musicians Hildá Länsman and Lávre (see Image 4), two yoikers and musicians of the younger generation in Sápmi with mastery of both the traditional forms of the Sámi vocal technique *luohti* (yoik) from their respective areas and of experimentation with modern expressions, presented the three sequences of the performance, each discussing the issue of the contemporary division of Sápmi through their performance. The exhibition experience was also enhanced by tools involving DIY technology, with visitors able to spend time at the Techno-Lab in the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art and build their own instrument to explore the site and space with sound-based interaction. This experience was available every Saturday as an additional activity.

One could say that in both cases the performance took on a pedagogical quality that helped the curator communicate the content of the exhibition in a different, non-static way within the space and site of the exhibition. By expanding their sensual experience of the space, audience members were able to explore and enhance their ways of moving through and within the exhibition space, which is particular to the performance. The position of the author within this case was that of the facilitator of the meeting between the artworks, the audiences, and the curator of the exhibition, as demonstrated in the example of the Lena Stenberg exhibition.

Fig. 4 – Hildá Länsman and Lávre perform at the Lena Stenberg exhibition.

Fig. 5 – Exhibition experience through performance facilitated by Marija Griniuk at the *Treasure Chest* exhibition of Sámi art at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok.





## Analysing the cases

These four cases, two from the historical context of Sámi and Lithuanian art and two from the contemporary context, will be analysed through the perspectives of curating and care as decolonising, of artistic practices as a reflection on colonial mapmaking, and of hierarchies of cultural centres and peripheries. The first perspective focuses on the curatorial tools, the second looks into the content of the artworks as what is being curated, and the third considers the position and context of the artwork, meaning where it takes place, from what platform it speaks to audiences, and how curators are involved in these artist-run and institutional platforms.

### Analysis from the perspective of curating and care as decolonising

#### *Who Is the Curator?*

In the historical cases examined in this article, the artists are interpreted from today's perspective as artist-curators. In the contemporary cases of this article, curators work within art institutions – in the project in Lithuania, the curated project steps into the institution as an external pop-up project; in the Sámi cases, the projects occur as part of an annual institutional curated event and exhibition programme. The same person, the artist Marija Griniuk, was involved in all of these curatorial contexts, specifically as an independent curator of the Nomadic Radical Academy and as an institutional curator at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art. As the main person behind the event who sets it up in a particular way in a particular space, be it from an artist-run perspective or from an institutional perspective, the role of the curator is focused on building meaning around the artwork, its place, its context, and the artist behind it. In the contexts of the two lands of Lithuania and Sápmi, the colonial past steps into the artwork by forming part of the context and by the artists' identities representing these nations. The curators here are the artists, and the events are artist-run in the cases of the Máze group and the AN88/89 projects; accordingly, decision making in these locations and actions arose directly from the artist-curator perspective. It must be noted that the curatorship of artist-run works is being interpreted from today's perspective of the writer, which implies that specific people, in this case the artists within these groups, acted as curators. It was an artist-organiser, or a group of artist-organisers,

who were doing the same tasks as the curator does today, which consist of communication with fellow artists, the planning and conceptualisation of events, the choice of their location, and their implementation, to name just a few. Curatorship was definitely at play in these events, albeit conducted by the artists as internal participants in the groups.

### *Decolonising*

What does such a curatorship of decolonising entail? What does it mean to be decolonised, and how does this happen? First, the fact that these artworks speak in the way they do is itself a gesture of decolonisation, insofar as the freedom of the artworks to narrate the past, including painful stories of postmemory (Hirsch 2012) told to the artists by their grandparents and ancestors, inspires the creation of such artworks. The fact that the artworks speak and in this way claim their freedom of artistic expression, particularly in times of colonial oppression, as in the case of the Soviet regime in the cases of AN88/89, is a decolonial fact. In the historical cases, the speech of the artworks is achieved through the risk taking of the artists who challenged the established regimes and political norms. In the Máze group, this risk taking was expressed as a demonstration that challenged the authorities to keep the Alta River as it had been for generations (not industrialised) through the Alta Action. Here, the colonisation of Sápmi aligned with the assumed authority to intervene in ecosystems (ie in the nature-human connection, as it had been in Sámi culture) for the sake of industrialisation. In the AN88/89 projects, the organisers moved the events to the countryside to lessen the risk of the Soviet authorities knowing they had taken place, which would have led to the suspension of the events and/or harm to the artists, as the artists explained when talking about organisational decisions within the project. In this specific case nature also became one of the stakeholders, insofar as it served as a hosting ground for the event to take place. This role of nature was especially evident in the artists' performances of protest against the Soviet regime. From the present perspective, these performances can be interpreted in the following way: the Soviet regime brought about massive industrialisation of land, nuclear power plant building, collective farming with extended use of pesticides, leading to the logical conclusion of performances of resistance taking place in nature. Colonial mapmaking is challenged by the notion of nature having its own narrative, as in the case of Sámi art by Lena Stenberg and the performances within her exhibition, which challenged prevailing political borders.

The first decolonial perspective, then, is a product of the location of the events that allow for their interpretation from the perspective of a decolonising ecology. The second decolonising perspective is found in the curatorship itself as a manifestation of the internal organisation of the Māze group and of the AN88/89 projects, respectively. Curators are artists, and the artist-run format can be interpreted as an act of decolonising art management itself, given how it challenges the institutional structures of art and value. The question of such hierarchies will be further addressed later in this discussion.

### *Care*

In the contemporary performance cases, the theme of nature and ecology is moved into the gallery space, and here, ecological issues become a part of the exhibition as the site and dramaturgy of performance. This was evident in the images of the industrialisation of Kiruna, including its mining and relocation to the next geographical place, as found in Lena Stenberg's exhibition. Plants inhabited the exhibition space of the Nomadic Radical Academy, including the wild medical herbs presented by the Elder of the community of gardeners in Šilainiai, and the zucchini plants, taken away from their natural location and moved into the dark space of the art gallery, with its artificial spotlights. These constructed spaces served as scenography for the performative action by the artists and curators, which gained one more layer of narration as the performances began, and which were themselves also curated by the same curators who worked at the exhibition space. The exact location of the performance is of the utmost importance, as the viewers directly connect what is happening with where exactly in the exhibition space these things occur. As discussed by Sarantou (2014), the care narrative outlines the care and carefulness to take place on the site as a prerequisite of the performative action. The performative action underlines and reinforces once again the statement made by the site of the performance. It is as if the same narrative is spoken twice: once by the site, and once by the performance. The care towards the place of the action allows for this speaking to speak and speak again, which ensures that the audience is exposed to the layered narrative in a loop that reinforces the statement within the artistic story that is spoken in the artwork. The process of healing and the decolonising context (Tabor et al 2023) can be seen in this layered narrative and its care in being spoken by different channels: the static channel of the exhibition, and the time-based live channel of the performative action.

### *Curatorial Care Towards the Narrative*

In all the cases, care in curating the narrative is a means of focusing on the theme presented by the artists through different methods. This was done, for instance, by locating actions within the AN88/89 festivals in the Lithuanian countryside, or by making exhibitions in institutions sites in which performances were to take place. Through this action of care, artists thus experience art as the power of political action; art as medium is allocated as the medium of political action, and the artist is the carrier of political action. At the same time, art as a political action is a collective, multi-voiced action. For the artists, care is a form of attention and respect for the theme addressed in their art, and other artists are invited into the space to think and interpret their art through their live media, as Hildā Lānsman and Lāvre did at the Lena Stenberg exhibition, and the young people in the *Treasure Chest* exhibition. In such a curated place, everyone joining in can be seen as both the carrier and expander of this artistic performance into political action.

### *Curatorial Care Towards the Artist*

If care is a means of ensuring that the artist's voice is heard, and that the artist is seen, it must also mean that the artist should not be harmed by the prevailing regime, as in the case of the AN88/89 projects, which were thoughtfully allocated to the countryside as a safe zone under the Soviet regime. The role of the curator is, in this way, a balancing act between allowing artists to be heard and ensuring that they are not harmed. Harm here refers to physical harm as well as emotional harm, and the task of the curator seems to have been fulfilled in the AN88/89 cases, insofar as the events included only those people who were internal to the art scene, without the interference of the military or authorities, who were unaware of the event taking place.

Care towards the artist in the contemporary cases of this article seems to overlap with care for the narrative. The story within the artwork is connected to the life story of the artist and the artist's ancestors. Taking care of this story as worthy of being heard and well understood by the audience, and letting other artists perform and interpret this story in a respectful way, is an exemplification of caring about the artist.

## Artist-Run curator care and institutional curator care: hierarchical notions of cultural centres and peripheries

### *Towards a close other*

The concept of the Close Other was introduced as a way of mitigating barriers and Othering. There must be some understanding of difference and care for the difference itself to emerge, which provides a pluriversal approach to accounting for the many different aspects that co-exist equally in one world, as explained by Escobar (2021) in the context of pluriversality. Differences here refer to different ontologies (in other words, truths) that are equally valued and pluriversally cared for (Escobar 2021). Escobar provides a specific example of Indigenous cultures existing within the global culture. In the cases examined here, the Close Other is manifested through the artists' self-organised activity, which in the context of the 1980s is a means of achieving artistic empowerment beyond established institutions. Here specifically, professional, art-academy-trained artists, in the case of the Māze group, or students undergoing artistic education at the Vilnius Academy of Arts in the context of AN88/89 projects, show that artists are somehow navigating between being a part of established art institutions (if we interpret formal art academy education as an institutional context) and participating in bold artist-run actions. The fact that the same people belong to these two activities calls forth the notion of the Close Other, as artists have excellent knowledge of how both institutional and artist-run formats operate. In all the contemporary cases from Sápmi and Lithuania, the same person took on multiple roles (eg independent pop-up project curator and institutional curator with internal knowledge of artistic processes and the ability to perform as an artist-practitioner). This combined role of artist-curator, like the historical cases, allows us to assume that the same person has knowledge of how different processes function and in this way bridges the gap between independent and institutional curatorship, with independent and institutional curating becoming a Close Other in relation to each other. While these contexts do not overlap, the content of curatorial work crosses over into both as institutional-curatorial-artistic work.

In regards to the space of performance as one of strangeness and familiarity (Kukaine 2023), and in regards to coloniality, when the approach is to build a direct narration from the perspective of an artist, the creator of the artwork, or a fellow artist who interprets the static artwork through time-based performative action, the Close Other is a curatorial provision of a direct artistic voice, which does not

overlap with theoretical interpretations or text-based materials. All the cases presented featured an artistic action within a space, and this was the content provided to the audience, as one layer of artist expression overlapped with another layer. In the pluriversal approach, both artistic expressions address the same theme through different artistic identities and media. In this way, the artistic content is made available for a possible third layer, which would be interpretation on the part of the pluriversal audiences witnessing the live events. If an audience member does not have a deep knowledge of Sámi or Lithuanian history, this third layer of interpretation would be the emotional and empathic meeting between one's own lived experience and the static artwork interpreted in the live artwork. In this way, the audience experience becomes an extension of the live interpretation of the static artwork. By not involving leading text or educational material-based explanations, the curator cares for the audience members' extension of the witnessed context, and in this way mitigates barriers between institution, artist, interpreting artist, and audience members. In none of the cases was extensive information provided in the exhibition space; the only information available about the artworks was their titles and visual and performative content. This erodes the hierarchy of truths in the institutional space; there is no dominant truth designed by the art institution – the space is the embodied meeting space of many co-existing truths – and the artistic space becomes a pluriverse (Escobar 2021), which allows for a gesture of care to be made by the curator towards the audience while looping the narrative through different artistic media, as the extension of the artists' theme in the work is also a gesture of curatorial care towards the artist.

Curatorial work is based on the model of the 'artwork-interpretation-extension of interpretation', which can be seen in the above analysis of the cases. The images and titles of the artworks are very concrete and are thus connected to concrete stories of the concrete lives of people in concrete places, such as Kiruna, in the case of the artist Lena Stenberg. In any case, the curatorial gesture of care in facilitating multilayered interpretation also extends the relevance of the images, stories, and experiences to many audiences, each coming into the space with a different background.

### *Relation between curator, artist and institution*

Artists establish art-run galleries and project spaces with the aim of exploring alternative avenues for exhibiting their works independently of established curator-led galleries. Within these artist-run spaces, artists adopt a peer-to-peer approach, thereby seamlessly integrating their artistic practices with the responsibilities

inherent in artist-run initiatives. This often results in artists assuming multiple roles, including those of the practicing artist, author, director, curator, installer, designer, manager, fundraiser, cleaner, runner, and practical assistant.

In the context of artist-run endeavours, individuals engaged in self-organised artistic activities must possess fluency in project presentation, adept promotional skills, and, most crucially, effective fundraising abilities to bring their projects to fruition. These activities unfold in the presence of and in collaboration with individuals directly involved in the projects and serve as the intended audience for these endeavours.

As stated by Jones (2004), 'Art in artist-run organizations needs to embrace principles of critical exploration to challenge its precepts of cultural construction, including the authorizing context of the artist-run organization itself' (59). As shown in the cases presented, the artist enters the institution in the role of curator and manager. This is seen more often today than ever before as interdisciplinarity has entered artistic practices. For artists, it seems a self-evident extension of their practice to take on the roles of institution leader and curator. As another example, consider Michelle Olga van Wyk, the artist-researcher who recently accepted the position of director at the National Art Gallery of Namibia.<sup>4</sup> Artists taking on roles as curators and art managers are making curator-artist-institution relations closer, as such institutions are now run by the artists themselves. If traditionally artist-run initiatives held the responsibility of offering a critical perspective on commercialised art spaces, the artist-curator-manager in today's art institution deploys practice-based knowledge from the perspective of the artist-practitioner in the institutional space.

<sup>4</sup> The announcement of the appointment of the new director on the National Art Gallery of Namibia was released on social media: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=775432651249357&set=a.522438073215484>.

## Conclusion

This article analysed four cases, two historical and two contemporary, of Sámi and Lithuanian art from following perspectives: curating and care as a decolonising process and the dismantling of cultural hierarchies. The role of the curator is pivotal in shaping the meaning around artworks, whether in artist-run or institutional contexts. In the historical cases, the artists themselves took on the role of artist-curators, which allowed them to challenge existing norms and authorities. The artist-curators within the historical cases demonstrated care towards the narratives presented within the artworks and towards the artists themselves. This care involved providing a platform for artists to express their voices freely while ensuring their physical and emotional safety. In contemporary performance art, curatorial care extends to the exhibition space itself, with nature and ecology

becoming integral parts of the narrative. The care directed towards the place of action allowed for a layered narrative that reinforced the artistic story through both a static exhibition and live performance. This, in turn, built a model of interpretation for static artworks that extended to performance and live artworks, which was extended further to individual interpretations of the audience members in the pluriversal perception of the artwork's narratives. The absence of dominant truths allowed audiences to engage emotionally and empathically with the artworks, thereby extending the relevance of the stories to their diverse backgrounds. The concept of the Close Other was introduced as a means of bridging the gap between institutional and artist-run contexts. Artists in the cases presented took on roles as curators and managers in art institutions, which blurred the lines between artist-run and institutional spaces. This shift brings artist-practitioners closer to institutional spaces and helps infuse institutional practices with the practical knowledge and perspectives of artists. The cases presented here highlight the multifaceted roles of curators, artists, and institutions in challenging colonial legacies, caring for narratives and artists, and reshaping the hierarchical landscape of the art world. Together, they exemplify the ongoing process of decolonising the art world and the importance of embracing a pluriversal approach to artistic expression and interpretation.

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