IMAGINING OTHERWISE: CRITICAL INTERVIEWS WITH ARTISTS

Edited by Elham Rahmati

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FOREWORD: THE CASE FOR CRITICAL ARTIST INTERVIEWS

Elham Rahmati

Artist interviews offer a means of encountering artworks through the voices of the artists who create them, voices shaped by years of thinking, experimenting, researching, and refining. They not only construct an artist's public image and increase their visibility but also contribute to the commercial and cultural positioning of their work. Yet artist interviews should not be treated merely as contextual additions or supporting material, as they constitute a key genre in their own right, positioned at the intersection of art history, inquiry, and dialogic aesthetics. Attending to the artist's voice is essential if we are to democratise overlooked artistic narratives, diversify the foundations on which art histories are written, and open up new conceptual ground for contemporary discourse.

But not all interviews fulfill this potential. Critical artist interviews differ substantially from promotional ones in their intentions, methods, and depth. Whereas the latter tends to highlight biography, networks, neatly packaged narratives, news about forthcoming exhibitions, or market positioning, a critical interview opens a space for genuine inquiry, engaging the artist in a process of reflection—a rare opportunity to explore the intellectual, cultural, and political contexts that shape their decisions. These conversations do not seek to present a seamless narrative. Instead, they welcome complexity, disagreement, vulnerability, and contradiction. They probe conceptual frameworks, test assumptions, and expose the uncomfortable questions that lie beneath surface impressions. In this way, critical interviews contribute to the intellectual ecosystem of art discourse, offering primary-source material that reveals not just what artists make, but *how* and *why* they make it.

This mode of interviewing is particularly important for curators, as they hold unique power in determining how artworks are interpreted, mediated, and ultimately historicised. Learning to interview beyond the shallow or celebratory allows curators to move past the role of facilitator or promoter and toward that of interlocutor. A critical interview can challenge an artist to see their own practice from perspectives they haven't considered before, to articulate processes they have never verbalised, to confront tensions within their work, or to situate their practice within broader social, political, or philosophical frameworks. Through this dialogue, which can at times be difficult, artists gain a sharpened understanding of their intentions, while curators find richer interpretive tools, deeper contextual insight, and a closer proximity to the thinking behind the work.

At a time when arts journalism risks collapsing into publicity, critical dialogue offers something that cannot be produced by artist/curator statements or press packs: it creates a space where ideas are tested rather than merely presented. For curators, developing the ability to sustain such dialogue is not just a matter of professional polish but a vital practice for keeping critical thinking alive, a skill increasingly undervalued in arts education. These conversations enable them to encounter artistic practices in the midst of their formation, rather than only at the point of display, and to recognise the uncertainties, instincts, and unresolved questions that usually remain invisible. Such exchanges help nurture a culture in which engagement with the arts emerges from real intellectual encounters, not just interpretation at a distance.

This publication brings together interviews produced as part of the Praxis—Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art course *Conducting Critical Artist Interviews* run by me at the Academy of Fine Arts at Uniarts Helsinki. Students were tasked with interviewing artists participating in the research exhibition *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries*, held at the Kuva/Tila gallery from 5–21 December 2025.

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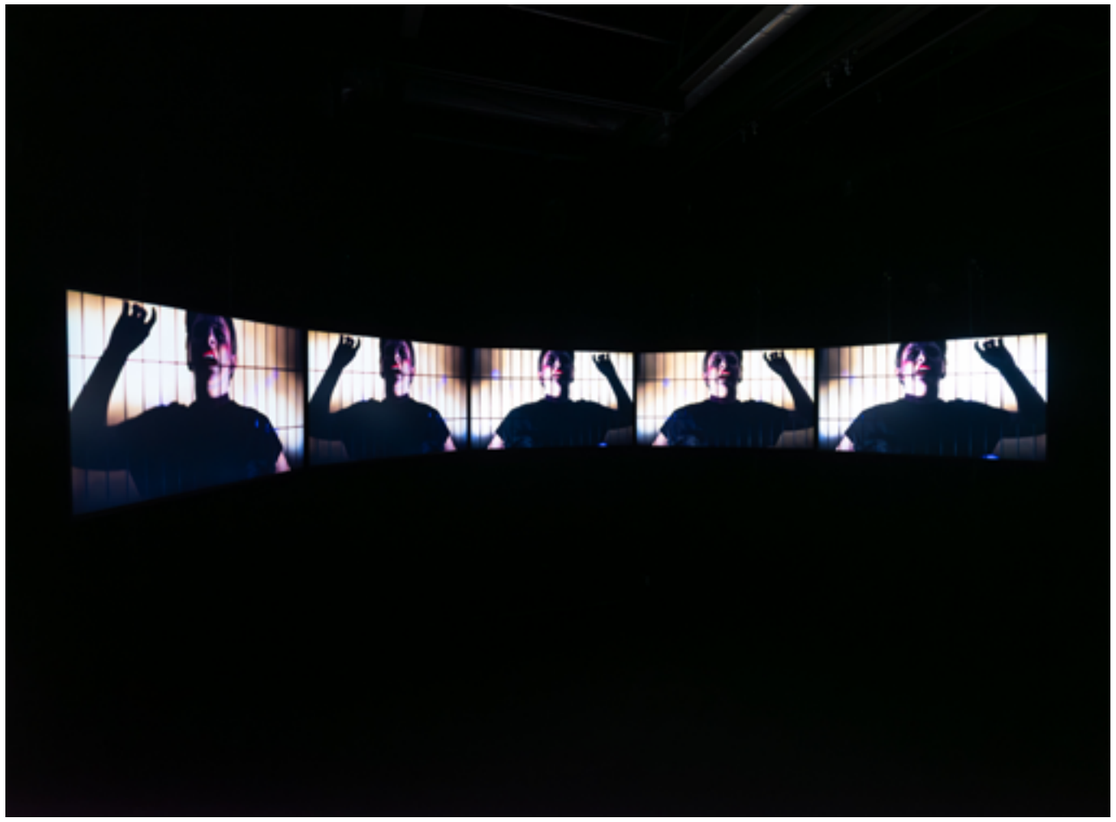
Elham Rahmati is a visual artist and the co-founder and co-editor of NO NIIN Magazine.



Amanda Beech: *Map of the Bomb. Different registers for difference* (2022–2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

MAPPING COMPLEXITIES: INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA BEECH

Isa Lumme

Amanda Beech is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. Her video work Map of the Bomb is exhibited as a five channel installation at the Idiorrythmic Imaginaries research exhibition at Kuva/Tila in Helsinki.

Map of the Bomb is a noir adventure drawing inspiration from the story of the invention of spread spectrum frequency hopping by actress Hedy Lamarr and musician George Antheil in the 1940's. The work explores themes of communication, mapping complexity and pursuits in understanding reality *in itself.* To tackle this, it operates with a set of episodic narratives where two parallel realities unfold in a fragmented setting of time and space.

In this interview, Beech discusses the conceptual foundations of *Map of the Bomb*, including the significance of its title, its temporal and spatial dislocations, the interplay between criticality and freedom in art, the nuanced relationship between art, politics and violence, and the influence of noir aesthetics in her work. The conversation illuminates how the work maps not only the self but also the worlds we inhabit, revealing the tensions, constraints, and possibilities that shape contemporary life and imagination.

Isa Lumme: *Map of the Bomb* is an hour-long video work with a fast-paced and layered script. During my first viewing of the film, I kept thinking, *what is the bomb*? Afterwards, I realized the answer was indeed in the script, twice even, when the female characters echo eachother with the lines, "The bomb is my head. This is a map of the bomb." But I'm still stuck with the question about the bomb, or now perhaps the question about the bomb as a head. In relation to the title of the work and to this doubling within the piece, could you elaborate on that question: what is the bomb?

Amanda Beech: That is the question: if the bomb is one's head, then what is it to map such an incomplete, explosive device without falling into disastrous tautologies and solipsism? The connection between understanding and explaining what we are and do and the 'immediate' sense of our physical bodies in the world, carrying memories and experiences becomes a site of tension in this case. This question relates to how we understand what reality is, that is, how we can understand reality as something indifferent (even with us in it) when our collective and individual social constructions are often centered on psychological interpretations of us in the world. Inside one's head it's possible to imagine something beyond our lived experiences. This site of the imaginary is also a site of reason, for as we know science, logic and analytical work has been able to *imagine*—write and deliver forms of knowing that exceed subjective perception. But the question of our subjectivist psychology cannot be expelled here. For example, we can explain how the brain works, or we can explain evolution, but this does not map onto an explanation of the complex experience that is the alienation of the human in capitalist society. What the work speaks to, and asks about, is the possibility for a map at all when the compulsion to make such a map is in itself an 'explosive' activity and then furthermore when the thing that this map depicts has its own fragmentary violence. So the piece raises the question of these two forms of violence—what we are picturing and how these are set in new forms of activity in realist art. It also explores how much our lived reality constrains our imagination and whether, in the present moment, we are actually able to imagine anything beyond the conditions we currently inhabit—even the capacity to see what subtends the reality we live in, not necessarily the imagination as a tool to invent a world beyond it. If we can't, then the important question becomes: how can a map made by our rational imagination act as an inscription of freedom but also by manifesting this, be a bridge to other possible futures?

Map of the Bomb is about understanding how our imagination, physicality, perception and phenomenal reality work in the world. It invites us to consider what it takes to navigate toward possible futures and what forms of labor are required to do that. In the video, it is clear that the character of the female protagonist (played by two actors) can't do it alone. Mapping her own sense of self isn't enough, because her world is constituted not just by herself but by other people, other things, and even another version of herself in another dimension. Indeed, the feminist standpoint is central to this question, for in that sense, there is no self, other than what is constituted by the other. Mapping the self necessarily becomes a mapping of everything we are entangled with, all the illusions we believe in, but also the things we don't yet know or understand because there is something incomplete about this process. So, it remains a productive question to ask: What is the bomb? If the bomb is her head, what is her head and where is it historically, physically, and psychologically? And moreover, we can ask the same question about the rootedness of the act of mapping.

In the video there's a deliberate sense of disorientation. The temporal collisions of the parallel narratives make the viewer aware of the abrupt cuts in time, but they also seem to mirror a larger cultural condition of confusion that we might collectively experience today. How does this mixing of anachronistic references shape the work's understanding of reality and time?

The piece is spatially disorientated and temporally anachronistic. It collides different locations while implicitly claiming that what is presented in the video is happening at the same time. The video was shot in Beirut, in Texas, and in Los Angeles to further this sense of disorientation but also potential simultaneity. In each of these places, the same narrative unfolds but with two different actors each playing the two roles. Regarding the geographic disorientation, having different actors helps signify that these things are happening in different places. The tempting reading here might be that one of the two people who represent the same role is actually *less real* than the other, or that there is a main character, and

the other is playing that character, like a play within a play. But each figure who acts out the same compulsions, reasons and decisions are each as valid as the other. The fact that they are not 'individuated' does not make them horrific (referring to the trope of the monstrous double) or trivial (the emblem of the machinic identity).

The other aspect you mention is temporal disorientation. This piece is inspired by events from the early 20th century, but it's not an adaptation or a documentary. It's interested in how to invent their new model of encrypted communication Lamarr and Antheil first needed to understand how natural language works at a structural level. Several aspects of this story are compelling: the role of Lamarr as an actress with a secret life as an inventor, the way this invention was developed in the art studio, and how a device that was built for secrecy became the groundwork for what we have often called the 'open' space of communications today in high speed wi-fi and cellular communication systems. Messages are split across different bandwidths, which could hop so quickly between channels that they did not take up the bandwidth that would typically result in dropped calls. We are able to talk to each other on the Internet right now and hear each other in real time because of this invention. In terms of natural language, their system mimics the way we speak in an everyday sense. And for their invention, the technique of encryption was not to encrypt the actual message by asking for people to speak in code, but rather to encrypt the means of communication itself. This made the encryption the medium, not the message. This was flexible, changeable, unrepeatable. When we see how this system of encryption operates in capitalism, and contemporary communications, we can say that the implicit rules in natural language becomes totally invisible or even unnecessary to know in this model. We do not question the rules of communication, and this unveils a new form of secrecy that represses the idea that there is a 'secret' or an implicit rule at all. I've been interested in the question of infrastructure of language or what subtends the way we communicate in the context of capital where its forms of mediation have such power in defining meaning for us. Does the medium of the rules of communication alter what we say *with that language* and does what we say through these rules change them?

So, in terms of your question about time, these themes brought up by Hedy Lamarr and George Antheil are not bound to a single historical moment. To sum up, I would say that their system acts as a metaphor for how capital obfuscates its laws and principles to the point that we can believe that they simply are inexistent. Secondly, it also touches on these abiding questions of communication, mediation and meaning that recur throughout human history. Those "forever-problems" rub up against the way capitalism has naturalized itself to the point that we cannot tell the difference between how humans communicate and the modalities of the value form in capital that mediate this communication.

It's said that Lamarr and Antheil's frequency hopping invention was motivated by the challenge of encrypting the Allies' communications for torpedo signaling during The Second World War. It's a story that carries a militaristic resonance, yet, historically, wartime has been a constant condition shaping human culture on a global scale for a long time. We like to imagine the arts as separate from violence, but there may be deeper connections to warfare and militarized innovation than we tend to acknowledge. How should we understand this entanglement between artistic creativity and violence?

When we consider these revolutions in technology or the means by which we communicate, what's interesting is that they have the potential to produce a very different reality in the social situation for humans on the planet. Whilst we can say that these things have great potential in terms of the emancipation of people and bringing equality and social justice to the world, they also carry the potential of violence in the way you describe. What's particularly interesting to me is that Lamarr and Antheil's invention occurred not in a lab, but in a music studio. It was two people, an actor and a musician, playing the piano and through that playfulness discovering *something*. It came out of a practice of discovery and invention. It didn't emerge out of nowhere like some diamond bullet hitting them with an idea, but rather a process of playfulness in a creative cultural environment.

The arts still has this lingering historical problem of the idea that making art or any cultural work is always already a common good. Lamarr and Antheil's work exemplifies this tension. On one hand, we can look at it and say isn't it remarkable that artistic practice contributed to a technological innovation that has profoundly shaped communication for everyone. On the other hand, this same innovation had militaristic aspects and transformed the speed by which capitalism operates working for the Nation State and late-capital, in a fairly seamless way, thus highlighting that cultural practices are entangled with violence in ways that are morally complex and allowing us to see that to assume that art is exempt from or does not have a role in aiding and abetting such forms of violence is to be completely naive.

There's a persistent desire within the art world to engage with political futures, but these futures are rarely neutral. When culture and arts or any other cultural pursuit does play a role in a political future, it might also be extremely violent, scary and very right-wing. It might be supporting war, nation state or autocracy. There is this naivety often on the side of the art world in saying *we need to be more involved in political futures*—or others saying *we are apolitical and must retract ourselves from the political altogether*. Both views seem to mythologize their own sense of voluntaristic autonomy. Views that hold the pessimism of historical materialism come up against other issues because they believe that autonomy is an illusion that is solely owned by dominant power and we end up in these forms of semantic pessimism where what we say means nothing.

I think in this piece there's a desire to test these various positions, from naive optimism to deep pessimism to the possibility of manifesting labors of epistemology. As the characters say, the military might be "controlled by Chopin," but the consequences of creativity aren't purely aesthetic or benign. These two apparent opposites of instrumentalized art and free labor come to be coalesced in an enmeshed cultural landscape that is fraught morally and ethically. We can't say necessarily that the characters in the piece are good or bad people. There is an exploration of that kind of violence that is embedded in creative processes and that's why I think the word *bomb* is useful. The bomb can be generative. It can explode all the conditions that need to be gotten rid of in the world. But the idea is also incredibly violent and difficult, for it might have collateral damage that no one can predict. The role of culture in that violence is, as I say, often overlooked or ignored. We really do have to think about the role philosophy and culture play in producing forms of fascism and neoconservativism—these difficult things that we don't think a "good" culture would be involved in.

In a recent interview[1] you spoke about constraints in making art in relation to the tension in contemporary practice, that is, that artworks or artistic research can end up producing the very conditions they set out to critique. I've been thinking about this alongside another issue: whether certain conversations are moving into the art field because research in other disciplines is becoming more restricted, or because art is still imagined as a space of openness, experimentation, and discursive freedom. I'm still working through this question, but I'm curious: how do you understand the relationship between criticality and the idea of art as an "open" space?

That goes back to a problem that I have no clear answer to! It concerns what it means to have an artwork be vigilant regarding its own critical method, which has historically relied upon a commitment towards the *openness* of art, for example, that an artwork operates as a site of opening possible futures that we cannot yet know, but also that the artwork itself cannot explicate or identify in its presentation. In this sense the artwork might be seen to be a leap into the field of possibilities that are also beyond it, but of which it is the key. But I argue that the idea that art is a place where *anything can happen* is untrue; there are so many constraints proposed in a work and there are certain modal possibilities that the artwork holds. As such the artwork for me is not to be seen as a leap to an unknowable future but more insistently as the possibility for a bridge, that is in its act of extended out of a situation a form of decision in the world but also leads to other possibilities as well. It can therefore engage with its own projections rather than be divorced from them entirely in the dark. The notion of art's freedom is an invention, of course. In some ways it might be a useful invention, because it's important that we have spaces for experimenting and developing play and to have certain freedoms that aren't afforded to us in other places. So, in a way, the pragmatic idea of art's freedom as real can be useful. But believing art to be a totally open, unconstrained and unfettered place is a very Romantic and trivialized idea of art. I think it's about understanding the dichotomy and dialectical space of art. These two apparent opposing forces of freedom and constraint are being played out in the same dynamic. What is it to claim to work through that space, and can art be self-reflexive about this tension as well? In my work, I try to create landscapes where multiple worlds are unfolding simultaneously. There are also stories within stories, digressions that take us down different paths, but for me, these don't bring us back to a closed circle but rather they lead *somewhere*. I don't have all the answers for those questions, but I do think we need to consider that an artwork isn't a closed circle nor is it a space where "anything goes." These two options coalesce in kitsch.

When an artwork becomes public, it also pushes back against the idea that art operates in a closed circle. In an exhibition, the viewer's world inevitably interacts with the artwork's world, though questions of agency within that exchange remain. How do you think about installation and exhibition in your practice?

Map of the Bomb in this five-channel format is a literal and crude device in many ways, because the five channels act as metaphors for the broadcast signals of hopping signals between channels, as the original invention worked. It can also be understood like a player piano scroll: the spokes on the wheel dictate the presence and absence of notes, creating the impression of a piano playing itself. Similarly, the images, sound and script depicted in the five channels come in and out of presence and absence throughout the piece, simulating the arrhythmic sense of an analogue broadcast signal. But of course it's not live, everything is pre-recorded, that's the conceit of it. The signals suggest communication, but there is no actual interaction between the work and the audience in a literal sense of them being able to respond to someone *on the other side* sending the message. I'm not interested in creating interactive work in that sense! Rather, the piece is story-based and representational where the work is a kind of message and it sends a message as well. It explores the idea of this doubly mediated encounter, one that gestures toward connection, transmission, and communication.

Your work draws on noir, a genre characteristic of dealing with themes of alienation. How do you understand the connection between noir and alienation, and what does noir allow you to explore about the forms of estrangement shaping our lives today?

Noir is an abiding fascination for me. These episodes are also reclaimed references to many different aspects of noir. When we think about noir, we might think about the typical LA noir, where there's a cop walking through the dark streets talking to himself but also an unknown audience. He's usually got no friends, no family—depicted as equally intoxicated and isolated, yet driven to seek some form of justice beyond the scene of capitalist power. This factor of alienation is key, because often these detectives in these stories are poor and unpaid. They exist beyond the normal value systems of economics but also beyond the value systems of family and heteronormative society as well. They are alienated by society—in that they are a symptom of capitalist alienation, but they are also manifest forms of another alienation that is one born out in consciousness and knowing. In that sense these figures of detectives often seem to possess an alternative understanding of a reality and aim to bring that back to the world, much like the characters in *Map of the Bomb*.

I like this motif of noir and I use it a lot in my work. I use it literally with aesthetics from noir movies, such as long shadows and estranged characters, but also as a philosophical space. Today, we experience forms of estrangement in contemporary life where our actions, whether in activism, work, or daily social interaction, often feel disconnected from meaningful consequences. We don't have a strong connection between our agency and its consequences in the larger political frame of things. I think many people feel a sense of darkness or feeling lost today in the midst of these different forms of alienation, so I wanted to try and capture a multiplicitous notion of the estrangement and alienation that noir offers at the political, cultural and philosophical level. At the same time, noir as a cultural aesthetic anchors these references to a certain time. Hedy Lamarr, for instance, appeared in many noir films during the post-Depression era. In my work, I aim to pull together noir into its real and contemporary terms, exploring what it looks like today aesthetically, politically, psychologically, and structurally.

Isa Lumme is a student in Praxis – curating and writing in contemporary art MA program at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is part of running SUNNYSIDE art space in Munkkisaari, Helsinki.

[1] Link to mentioned interview: https://twelvetengallery.com/documents/beech-von-sternberg-interview

Kerstin Schroedinger & Angela Melitopoulos: *Industries of Denial, stage 10: from Musa Dagh to Port Saïd* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

NARRATIVE DEVICES: AN INTERVIEW WITH KERSTIN SCHROEDINGER AND ANGELA MELITOPOULOS

Isa Lumme

Kerstin Schroedinger and Angela Melitopoulos investigate infrastructures as part of nation-building narratives.

Industries of Denial is an ongoing artistic research project by Kerstin Schroedinger and Angela Melitopoulos. The project traces counter-narratives to nation-building histories embedded within the industrial and infrastructural projects of the early 20th-century Ottoman Empire. Unfolding across multiple chapters, the first iteration of the project was presented at the 2022 Istanbul Biennial. The next presentation—though not the second chapter—will be shown at the *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* research exhibition at Kuva/Tila in Helsinki.

Focusing on the past infrastructural projects financed by German private and state actors, such as the plan for the Berlin-Baghdad railway, the artists examine how technologies of connection can simultaneously generate geopolitical division, historical erasure, and contested memory. Through moving image, archival research, and spatial installation, they explore the train as a transitory space in which personal, communal, and imperial histories converge.

In the following conversation, Schroedinger and Melitopoulos discuss the evolving research process, the politics of archival material, and the challenges of navigating the historical tensions that continue to shape the regions and narratives they engage.

Isa Lumme: As an ongoing research project, what has changed since the first display of Industries of Denial in the Istanbul Biennial in 2022? What is the setting for this chapter shown at the Idiorrythmic Imaginaries exhibition?

Kerstin Schroedinger: We're still very much in the middle of the project. Participating in a research exhibition provides a possibility to have a work shown without it being the final version. A lot has happened since 2022 in terms of the work and in a global scale of politics of course. At the time of the Istanbul Biennial we were at the beginning of the research. We had just come out from the first month of doing field research in Anatolia after several road trips. We've been back to Turkey four times since then. What we are presenting now is one chapter among several still to come. It's not the first chapter either in that sense, it's actually towards the end of the larger narrative, but this is the point at which we've begun shaping the material into a more cohesive form. This chapter remains tied to the idea of a train ride. The installation will replicate a train wagon with screens functioning like windows into the landscape of Asia Minor. There's an element of the window as a view into the archives or the past, but there are also other elements that interfere with the idea of the train ride. From the very beginning, we were drawn to this idea of the train as a transitory space where people could meet and have chance encounters and conversation. That was the premise for our performance in Istanbul in 2022. In Helsinki, however, it will be an installation, so the encounters unfold not through live performance, but through the interplay of sound and multiple screens.

Angela Melitopoulos: The train is a very paradigmatic space that is referred to in many films in the 20th century, such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. There are many references of how the Near East has been, and continues to be, perceived and imagined from a Western perspective, especially along the train routes once connecting cities from London, Paris and Berlin to Baghdad. At the same time, the Baghdad Railway itself is tied to the geographic imperial politics of the German Empire and its ally, the Ottoman Empire prior to the First World War. The British Empire and colonial France were also competing to execute massive infrastructural projects in the region. This makes the railway a strongly debated space in geopolitical terms—a site where different powers projected their visions onto a geography. The tensions surrounding the Baghdad Railway stemmed less from cultural differences than from the material power dynamics inherent in carrying out such monumental infrastructural projects.

The first layout of our project for the Istanbul Biennial came together quite fast; we only had a few weeks to arrange our research materials. The moment of presenting was difficult insofar as the organizers were concerned about the topic of our investigation, namely the genocidal politics of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. The denialist politics are only now, a century later, slowly unfolding not only in Turkey but also in Germany. It took 100 years for some historians to reframe the national narratives surrounding the genocides in the Ottoman Empire. What has changed now is that digital archives are online and can be publicly debated. Over the past 10 or 15 years, a new and expanding body of history books on this topic has emerged. We were able to dig in deeper in this historical material and in the different perspectives that are attached to them. But as the material grows, the way of handling it is also becoming more difficult. Since finishing the fieldwork, we have been working on editing and looking at available solutions in terms of dealing with this vast amount of material.

IL: How did you carry out the field research trips?

KS: We did two major trips along the railway line. Today the train does not go all the way to Baghdad, but we did one trip from Istanbul to Antioch, which is in southeastern Turkey, very close to Aleppo on the Syrian border. Then we did a second trip a year and a half later from Mardin, which is also in the east. In between these two trips, in February 2023, there was a massive earthquake that destroyed a lot of places in the region, so the area had transformed a lot between these two trips. We have done several other trips in addition to these. We were in Istanbul again last winter and we went to several other places in Turkey.

AM: We traveled in various ways because we were also doing another project with a group of people from the area in Turkey and Greece along the borders in Izmir, Mardin, Mytilene

Kerstin Schroedinger & Angela Melitopoulos, *Industries of Denial: from Musa Dagh to Port Saïd*, multi-channel installation, 2025.

and Skopelos. This was a project that was specifically trying to understand and question how we can obtain and exchange knowledge without hierarchical structures. This project gave us the chance to get in contact with different scholars and artists. Some of them took part in our first performance at the Istanbul Biennial, where we invited them to the "train ride" to have a conversation while a video played behind on a screen as the window of the "train." We also realized four workshops during these past two years and even though they were not directly focused on the Baghdad railway, the topic was always present as a historical tension. We were in an agreement that the fight for this narrative about "what happened" in the beginning of the 20th century was still central for many people in Turkey. Our project there was called *The Hidden School.* It had its roots in reformed methods of feminist practices but also reformative psychiatric work, with practices in fieldwork and organizing walks—alternative storytelling practices.

IL: When you mention this tension that you were met with at times during your research, what was it pointed at particularly? How do you navigate this tension while working on the research and setting the context for *Industries of Denial*?

KS: It's the tension of history of genocide. The Armenian genocide, the Greek genocide, the Assyrian genocide – you're not allowed to speak about these in public in Turkey. We were researching something that is still not openly acknowledged. There were very tense moments at times because we met people who were actively denying what happened. It was sometimes very difficult to speak to people; you had to circle around the topic. The work is also about German complicity in the genocidal politics of the Ottoman Empire. We were invited to Istanbul the first time by the Tarabiya Cultural Academy in Istanbul, which is part of the Goethe Institut, the German cultural institute abroad. The residency is located in the summer residence of the German Ambassador in Turkey. It was given to Germany as a present to Kaiser Wilhelm II by Sultan Abdulhamid. We were, in a sense, in the central space of our investigation topic.

AM: In the last two years, the topic of genocide became the front page worldwide. In a way, people were confronted with another type of denial because there was an online presence of genocidal politics. It is important for us to connect the imperial politics during the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to the issues of today. This includes – as a form of imperial technology—the planning and materialization of railway lines. The railway became a central tool for genocide and war in the Ottoman Empire. The war was dependent on the train, perhaps in a different way than originally planned. So, there is an enlargement of contextuality as the project debates the issues of technology, logistics and temporality.

The chapter that will be presented in Helsinki is set in Musa Dagh, at the southern end of Turkey on the Mediterranean coast. There are famous stories about the resistance movements in Musa Dagh, including the book by Franz Werfel, *The 40 Days of Musa Dagh* (1933). The title alludes to the time frame, namely 40 days (even though it was actually 53), meaning the delay achieved through the Armenian resistance during the genocidal politics of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The delay enabled people to organize an escape. Musa Dagh is in the mountains; it's very inaccessible; there are no trains anymore, no connections. People had to practice *knowing* the mountains – the geography, the geology of the place – in order to make their resistance.

In this context, resistance refers to having the time needed to escape. It is important to consider the possibility of having time to grasp what's happening in order to organize resistance and escape. Technology plays an important role in this. Train technology offers a very figurative and palpable way of understanding different space-times – inside the moving vessel and outside of it. Nearly everyone has some experience of train travel and a sense of passing through regions and landscapes. Although mobility has changed today, certain fundamental conditions persist, such as the experience of remoteness tied to one's location. This chapter will address that form of resistance and present what we discovered through our fieldwork, the archival materials, and the published literature.

IL: In *Industries of Denial,* you address counter-narratives to official nation-building histories. You also mention the de-territorializing forces embedded in the infrastructure projects involved in those stories. Could you elaborate on what you mean by these de-territorializing forces? How do you understand the notion of connectivity within these narratives coinciding with infrastructures?

KS: There are multiple layers to this. One is that, if you think of the train, it cuts through the landscape and thereby destroys ancient trade routes or pastoral routes, which would have belonged to non-sedentary communities. The railway has this promise of connection between places, but at the same time it's a dividing line. Literally, in the eastern borders of Turkey, in 1923 the border was drawn along the existing railway. It's de-territorializing in the sense that it disconnects people from their lands, but also it obstructs the crossing of territories. It ends up as the opposite of what it promises.

AM: There are more borders now than before and less mobility between places by train, because the routes are restructured to go from capital to another and do not stop in smaller places. The mobility that people have to engage with in this area is not trains anymore, but more or less buses. After all this praise of technology and progress from the beginning of the 20th century, what we now ended up with is the inability to travel with the train as you could maybe in 1950. The other important point is that the transportation of goods with trains and containers is separated from the possibilities for people to travel. The production of goods operates on just-in-time production schedules, with highly optimized logistic systems and delivery chains. In big cities like Istanbul, kilometers of container yards make visible the scale of these operations.

Although we have more technology and more ways to connect, the opposite is happening in terms of truth, history, and dialogue. Supposed connectivity is increasing, while knowledge and understanding of the past is diminishing. The detail of everyday life increasingly contradicts the panoramic vision. It is a political crisis. For instance, last year in Greece, protests erupted after the train accident in Tempi, exposing the consequences of neglected infrastructure. These demonstrations, which encompass the entire society, criticize the systematic erosion of public infrastructures. Across southeastern Europe, hospitals, schools, universities, and other public institutions are deteriorating. What we are witnessing is a landscape of ruins shaped by debt, financial capitalism and the failure to deliver on the promises once associated with the state as a caretaker.

IL: How do you situate your own practices and points of view regarding your research?

AM: In both of our work the topics of industrialization and colonization play a central role. I'm coming from the point of view of memory and migration in film, a kind of special witness perspective that is often disregarded because eyewitness is not considered an empiric fact. Engaging with archives and looking into the industrial level of production becomes liberating, because it moves beyond the point of view of a victim perspective. This potential is present in all of my work. Here, the work expands into a broader critique of financial capitalism, industrialization, and imperialism.

KS: My position is coming from the interrelation and interconnection between the invention of photography and the processes of industrialization. There are these landscapes that inscribe themselves into photographic and image-making processes. We can look at the images in retrospect and they have already become mnemonic sources. "Mnemonic" for me means something that is happening in the present rather than in the past. So it's an activity that is being brought about. Working with archival photographs and bringing them into the present is something that is sourced from a process of industrial production, and I think that is something very crucial here, as the train line is an industrialized process as well.

AM: It's crucial to understand that the position Germany has inherited is rooted in the industrial revolutions of the mid-19th century. What Berlin is today is indebted to that development of the train and metal industries. The Berlin-Baghdad railway was financed by a private-public partnership between the German Reich, the banking sector of Germany and the metal industries. We have to understand these structural realities and give space to develop our subjectivities within these realities that are often so hard to grasp. Infrastructural operations are very strong actors. There's an investment somewhere, and then elsewhere an entire landscape, geography or economy changes. And if a conflict arises, there is no negotiation, but war which is veiled in a narrative of a cultural war. That is an untrue and misleading narrative in my understanding. Such narratives instrumentalize politics of identities for their own ends, while international and global corporations themselves are indifferent to these cultural distinctions.

IL: Your work together and individually has manifested in various forms, such as film, performance, sound and public talks, to mention a few. It seems video and moving images are still the foreground for your practice. What anchors your practice in collaboration?

AM: What feels important now is to stay inclusive. There are so many historically formed differences – positions that critique one another or appear to stand in opposition—but it's essential to remain inclusive and to recognize how these perspectives can merge. We need conversations on an everyday level, and we need to bring these viewpoints onto common ground. This is necessary to embrace the possibility of something new for each of us: new ways of thinking, doing, proceeding, working, and engaging the whole situation. In the past, I would value the dispute, debate, arguments and differences as a productive area. But in this time, I think it is coming to my mind that the inclusiveness of the argumentation that we build towards is very important.

KS: I very much agree with that. Speaking with our dear friend Marina Vishmidt in mind, we need infrastructures of alliances, solidarities and collaborations, to be able to maintain critical discourses in the ongoing denialist and silencing political situation.

Isa Lumme is a student in Praxis – curating and writing in contemporary art MA program at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is part of running SUNNYSIDE art space in Munkkisaari, Helsinki.

Joanna Kalm: *A basal animal; location: home* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

CELLULAR ECOLOGIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANNA KALM

Amalia Kasakove

Joanna Kalm is a dance artist-researcher and somatic movement educator working within the Body-Mind Centering approach. The interview traces how somatic sensing, cellular memory, and porous embodiment guide an artistic practice that is attuned to slowness, fragmentation, and relational complexity.

In speaking with Joanna across two conversations, I recognized the subtle alignments in our backgrounds, in our shared training as dancers, and in our gradual shift toward somatic practices. What stays with me is not only the attention to cellular processes unfolding at the threshold of language, but the tension these practices hold against the dominant tempos of artistic and institutional life, tempos marked by acceleration, speed, and academic discourse. I became curious about the impulse of language to rush in, to resolve, stabilize and codify experience, and how Joanna's practice might persist or be apprehended beyond the domain of the linguistic. From this, languaging appears not as a way of fixing meaning but as a way of being alongside somatic and artistic processes, allowing experience to both escape and exceed words, resisting their closure, while still being curious about their texture, formation, and articulation.

We spoke about fragmentation and entanglement from various perspectives, one of which drew on Karen Barad's[1] concept that beings are not fixed units but relational phenomena, continually reconfigured through matter, histories, and environments. This orientation complicates any singular narrative of embodiment; instead, it situates somatic practice as a site that thinks, remembers, reorganizes, and becomes with and through its context.

Amalia Kasakove: My first question is a way of entering your work and asking what informs it. Considering bodies as sites where histories, materialities, and temporalities co-produce, what specific histories, lineages, and temporalities inform your work?

Joanna Kalm: I have a background in dance and choreography, but I quickly became dissatisfied with the short-scale nature of the work, and the landscape in Estonia felt extremely unsustainable. I turned more toward a somatic approach as a counterculture to hyper-physicality and mind-over-matter approaches. I decided to pursue a master's degree in cultural anthropology, looking for a more expanded way of thinking about dance, later followed by the ongoing doctoral program [Kalm is currently a PhD student and junior researcher at the Estonian Academy of Arts].

I keep returning to the question of specificity and how specific I really am. The tendencies of how I function is inclined to diversity and hold an inclusive lens on embodiment, to the point where it becomes overwhelmingly plural, dynamic and contentful. Within my practices, there have always been the notions of re-materialization and an attraction toward undoing—a morphological space. I work particularly with and from organismic aspects of embodiment, leaning on evolutionary becoming, and observing if and how they are included or expressed today. The practice of Body-Mind Centering[2] invites us to sense that everything is accessible through cellular memory. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen talks about how certain patterns can be dormant, how something in the nervous system pathway and in the physiology might not have fully expressed itself. I feel that in my own dance history, it's not always active; some things didn't really become a pattern.

How does your attention to somatic and cellular sensing as forms of affective, embodied knowing, negotiate the tempos of rigor, pace and urgency that structure artistic and academic life?

It begins with actually understanding what we mean when we say certain things. My first artistic work was centered around self-listening as a practice of attention. The notion of "listening to your body" and "coming back to your body" have become almost overused, but there are many misconceptions about what embodied work means. For me it is about noticing minute felt sensations in relation to environment and context, and letting them become thematic so that they become content in themselves. Everyday embodied awareness often gets subsumed into the perception of the environment, so part of the work is to differentiate, to make the ephemeral tangible. I like to work with ephemeral and tiny things because they counter the dominant tendencies toward the big, the loud, the productive. It's a vulnerable space to inhabit because this kind of sense-making is often not recognized as knowledge.

So, when you ask how I negotiate tempos of rigor and urgency, I think it is precisely through this micro practice of slowing down, of returning to felt knowledge. We keep embodying the same structures, in terms of our physical engagement, but my work proposes a kind of guerrilla embodiment practice—one of embodying otherwise, essentially queering our materialisations. I work slowly, sometimes almost ridiculously slowly; I require settings that afford long processes. It's through somatic awareness and cellular sensemaking that I can sustain thought and practice in a world driven by acceleration.

In a practice that largely unfolds in a realm beyond language, how do you allow for ambiguity and resist reason as the dominant mode of sense-making?

I do think that everything has a sense-making, a logic, and a process. That being said, I understand that my first sense-making is in feeling, and I need to find the language that resonates with that. I realize things with a huge delay, and oftentimes it takes me a long time to find the right discursive doors to go through. This is also tied to the multiplicity of discursive registers and the different values that they are assigned culturally. It simply takes time to metabolize.

How does your work navigate the sense or tension between deep entanglement and deep fragmentation, that things are both connected and separate?

Videostills of a somatic practice session in the office room at Estonian Academy of Arts

It is in the paradox of overlapping and coexisting. It's a continuous lineage; there hasn't been a stop. In that sense it's like a cell embodying another cell. Symbiogenesis describes how we can engulf other organisms, and how we keep on living in these ongoing relationships. Karen Barad attends to these concepts through intra-activity, and how we emerge in relationship. Our qualities are emergent; they're not given.

In Body-Mind Centering and cellular biology there is the notion that decision-making happens on the boundary of the membrane. The membrane is not a wall; it is a living interface. It can be very porous and fluid and it can also become more closed and rigid. Its fluidity shifts depending on personal and contextual circumstances. I recognise in myself that I have often been very permeable and affected, because I have a hard time closing myself off. So the tension is not resolved.

In a moment marked by division, polarization, and the amplification of reactionary discourse, how does your work cultivate *idiorrhythmic imaginaries*: spaces where difference and coexistence can both exist?

I've been thinking about fragmentation and how the body-space is differential. It can be contradictory. Embodied reality isn't one harmonic story. You can have a deeply fragmented experience of what is happening. I'm wondering about coherency and decoherence, not only as metaphysical concepts but also in how resonance happens between bodies—and how this starts to create crystalline structures in oneself and between something and someone else. And yet, underneath fragmentation, there is a desire for feeling coherence in ourselves. I don't know what we need to do in our evolution in order to feel entirely comfortable living in this fragmentation and decoherence. The struggle is there on an embodied level because there's a deep cellular memory, so to say, evolutionary habit of "optimal" coherence.

In working with the idea of a fluid, multicellular and non-differentiated body in the stillness of an exhibition space, I wonder how you allow the work to remain present and attuned to its environment and context? And furthermore, how do you think about the invitation to enter your work *A basal animal; location: home* at the *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* exhibition? What cues or guidance do you give to audiences meeting your work without simplifying its intricacy?

The exhibition context is quite unfamiliar to me. My work is usually like an experiential object, and I often have a pivotal role in facilitating the room so the person can have an experience of themselves in relation to the practice. But I think the film component offers a conceptual entrance. There will also be an audio score that functions as a somatic meditation as well as a physical membrane that a person can enter. So you can have an experience of a kind of partial boundedness and the permission to have your attention land closer to yourself.

I do not mean enclosure in the sense of separation. I find some of that language in embodiment and some somatic circles problematic, especially the idea of "letting the world melt away." Somatics is always ecological, always ecosomatic[3]. Separation is not the point. Yet, paradoxically, in order to deepen awareness of ourselves, we sometimes do need to bring our attention inward. That may mean that the world becomes dimmer for a moment. Our attention simply has a limit. So yes, there may be a phase of narrowing our attention to hear better, especially at the start of deepening one's embodied awareness. But for me, now, they are coexistent: a double awareness of my own body-space with/in the surrounding space. Your own body is the interface for feeling the surrounding space.

When you give space and time for bodies, there is a capacity for reorganization. We can feel this after something like meditation because we actually allowed something to settle, restructure. Embodied spaces allow resettling, reorienting and restructuring. The membrane offers a small space for your own restructuring. My bodying as part of the video work acts as an interface, as an affective example supporting an entrance to the work.

My sense is that the program text for the exhibition gestures toward a somewhat narrowed sense of what's possible. How do the imaginative modalities in your practice negotiate this: do they sustain, resist, or reconfigure the horizon implied? Or what sustains your capacity to imagine at all?

What sustains my capacity to imagine is simple: listening to my body and listening to others. Through embodied listening, there is potential to widen, to diversify. Even though there is a lot of movement towards making our lives more embodied and more inclusive, our daily embodiments remain still relatively narrow. Somatics is often understood as merely body awareness and a sensing process. But somatics is supposed to gear us toward action that is in communication with our bodily-material setting and in relation with everything around. It can hide the seed of activism underlying the practices. It's supposed to be the foundation for acting differently and revolting.

Somatics has been absorbed into self-care culture to a great extent, where it can become about regulating discomfort away. I have used somatic practices to self-regulate in complicated and difficult times, but that is not the end goal. The end goal is still to hear what is happening in our mattering and use that to push off in a different direction.

Somatic approaches challenge the classical understanding of dance and movement by often taking place on a smaller scale (movement within the body-space: morphological space and physiological space) and also by reforming movement expression itself. So, when I receive feedback that somatic practice is not visibly expressive and performative, I think it comes from a larger and shared tendency of not having been taught how to recognize somatic bodying as an action, mostly because it defies our habitual parameters of action.

Amalia Kasakove is an artist whose work resides in the field of dance and choreography. Their practice spans across performance, publications, and curatorial processes, alongside being a student in the Praxis Programme in Curating and Writing at Uniarts Helsinki.

Footnotes:

[1] Karen Barad is Distinguished Professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz, with an affiliation in Philosophy. Barad's Ph.D. is in theoretical particle physics and quantum field theory.

[2] Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®)[1] is an integrated and embodied approach to movement, the body and consciousness. Developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, it is an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind. Source: https://www.bodymindcentering.com/about/

[3] Ecosomatics is a somatic practice that situates the body not as a separate entity, but as part of larger ecological systems; breathing, moving and thinking in relation to all life.

Kerry Guinan: *Tangible Earth* (2024)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

TANGIBLE EARTH: AN INTERVIEW WITH KERRY GUINAN

Anna Stuart

In this conversation, Kerry Guinan speaks about her research at the Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary, her interest in 'invisible artworks' and what has contributed to her shift in focus in the last few years.

Kerry Guinan's practice has been politically engaged for a long time. She was the chairperson of *Praxis: The Artist's Union of Ireland* and in 2016 ran as a candidate for Dublin Central in Ireland's general election. While undertaking her PhD, however, Kerry made the decision to expand her thinking. Works such as *The Red Thread* marked a shift—away from local politics and towards themes of globalisation.

Tangible Earth, a touch-based artwork, demonstrates a further expansion—into the planetary. Set upon a plinth and heated from within, *Tangible Earth* takes the form of a limestone rock. When touched, a slow, faintly tangible pulse can be felt emanating from its core.

During the course of this interview, Kerry sheds light on this drive to expand her thinking as well as her desire to develop artistic methodologies which orientate the human within large-scale and, ultimately, planetary systems. An artist who engages with academia in conjunction with her practice, we hear of Kerry's research at the *Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary*, the factors she believes are contributing to the crisis of political imagination today and whether this work, previously shown in an exhibition entitled *Apocalypse Anxieties,* now exists on the registers of living or survival.

Anna Stuart: You are currently undertaking a post doctorate at the *Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary* in Gothenburg. How would you describe the influence academia has had on your approach to artmaking?

Kerry Guinan: I have found the more I engage with philosophy, the richer my concepts become and the more I am able to critically contextualise my work. When I have not engaged in research and academia in tandem with my practice, my practice has noticeably suffered. I think it's a vital part of my work to be engaging with the biggest ideas possible—and then trying to express and test them through art. I've always been influenced by themes of the imagination and have developed artistic strategies that provoke people to imagine differently—not necessarily to imagine alternative proposals but to deconstruct how they are already imagining.

I understand myself as a conceptual artist—ideas are the medium of my work. I don't adhere to any one material, but I have ideas I would like to communicate, and the clarity of the concept is really important. I'm interested in making art that makes people think differently. So, I aim to produce works that don't only have an aesthetic or an emotional effect but a critical thinking effect, where the audience is prompted to deconstruct something mentally and use their own critical imagination to fill gaps within the work.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your research on the concept of the 'Imaginary'?

I have two research projects at the centre. I am co-leading a research project with Mick Wilson, called *Mapping the Political Imaginary,* its objective being to identify the divergent usages of the concept of the 'Imaginary' across a range of fields—including artistic research. According to this research project, there is no singular thing as the 'imaginary'—our aim is to find the divergent ways in which it has been constructed. The 'imaginary' refers to the ways all social life relies upon imaginative creations that are collectively shared. The 'political imaginary' looks at it in relation to the sphere of politics—the codes, symbols and everyday practices that support political ideas and systems. There are many ways that this phenomenon of 'why do social groups act in similar ways and think similar things' has been theorised—but what potentially sets the imaginary apart is the emphasis it places on creativity.

In my own research project, my idea is that maybe the 'imaginary' isn't as useful a term as we might think. Maybe we can overemphasise the freedom and creativity of the imagination to the detriment of understanding the limits of it and how much it relies upon what we have already seen and have been exposed to sensorially. The imagination relies on our perceptual system and our senses and is structured by our unconscious. When it comes to trying to access the majority of phenomena or imagine things that exist at highly differentiated scales, we are inherently disabled—our imagination works at a human scale.

An underlying hypothesis I have is that this is what's contributing to the crisis of political imagination today. It is possible to imagine political alternatives, but it is not possible to imagine how they would scale up to the level they need to get to, to overcome our planetary crisis or the globalisation of capital. It's our inability to place ourselves within these large-scale systems that makes agency feel much more diminished. So, my research project is identifying and developing artistic methodologies for rendering hyper-scaled phenomena more sensible at an immediate human scale.

Can you expand on the decision to invite participants to experience this work through heat and touch—alternative or 'invisible' forms of perception?

When it comes to trying to make work that represents climate change, there's so much visual culture that we are exposed to that I don't want to add to what is already an overly saturated culture. I've always been interested in invisible artworks—where you have to rely upon your imagination to complete the gaps.

We have all seen the graphs and statistics of the temperature rising on Earth and the images of wildfires and red skies, but the human body cannot imagine heat reliably. Touch is an ephemeral sense. If you touch an object and draw your hand away, you don't retain a memory of what that felt like. So, we abstractly know about the Earth getting hotter, but we can't imaginatively project it—it's beyond our imagination. The objective of my research project is to get at phenomena which are at the limits of the imagination.

All my work has had either interactive or participatory elements to it. Our sense of touch is as subjective as our

Tangible Earth (2024) by Kerry Guinan at The Luan Gallery, Athlone. Photo: Ellen Rose Wallace

sense of sight or hearing. One of the technicians who helped me on this project found that the rock felt quite cold because the skin on his hands is roughened by working with metal. I am a more computer-based person, so it felt much warmer. Some people have a higher pain threshold than others. Some people have emotional responses to sensory shock, feeling adrenaline, anger or sadness. If you have a chronic illness, the work might feel different. If you're a child, it will feel different because your skin is softer. So, the participant is completing the work by touching it.

It was interesting to look at the set of particular and subjective factors in the person—and then the rock. At any given moment of time, it is in a unique set of conditions, depending on the temperature of the room, the internal breakdown of minerals within the rock and its water content. If you touch it and someone else comes along afterwards, they will be picking up on this other person's heat. So, it's quite a complex and beautiful system of transference between the two things. Each person has a unique moment and relationship with the rock. Of course, this is the same for all art, but it's not something that people might be consciously thinking about as they're interacting with it.

Tangible Earth was originally part of an exhibition you guest curated, _Apocalypse Anxieties_—a show which responded to an underground nuclear bunker installed by the Irish Government under Custume Barracks, Athlone, during the Cold War. What does it mean to show the work in Finland today, in a research exhibition where the focus is now on ways of living together rather than surviving?

KG: I think we are still surviving—survival is still on the table. The exhibition is proposing ways of living and being together, but against a backdrop of crises—this was part of the conceptual framework in *Apocalypse Anxieties* too. It had gestures of connection to other humans and non-humans throughout the work—modes of kinship, but against the backdrop of survival. I don't think it exists on one register or the other; I think it can inhabit both conceptual frameworks. On the one hand, the piece is gentle and inviting. It's one that talks about interactivity with materials and forms of animism in objects that we don't perceive—there's a sentimentality to it. On the other hand, you could see it as threatening. It's an object that people are sometimes afraid to touch—touching a hot object is inherently risky. It's got a beating heart, which feels strange and uncanny. I was quite influenced by the EcoGothic as I was making this piece.

This kind of environmentalist or ecological politics that I'm developing is unromantic and unidealistic—especially as I'm opening my mind to planetary and cosmic events. Nature is a sublimely threatening force that we cannot control. The environmentalists cannot control it any more than the enlightened capitalists can. It's something to be feared and respected, not simply adored and projected onto. So, I'm sitting between both.

Has this research exhibition changed how you think about the work?

I don't think the conceptual framework changed the work. I wouldn't change a work based on a curatorial prompt—it has its own integrity. I've made changes to it that I had already been curious to make; to exhibit it in a bright space, mainly. I felt that the lighting conditions in *Apocalypse Anxieties* made it evident that this was a work of media art—it was exhibited in a dark room, which codes it as a technological installation. It was spotlit under a suspended orange bulb, which had an inviting presence but also illuminated the rock in a very unnatural way. I am curious about what it will look like and feel like this time in bright lighting conditions, for it to seem like a completely ordinary rock simply existing on a plinth. It won't be immediately clear that there's a quite complex technological device at work within the system.

Can you talk a little bit more about the decision to shift your focus from local to planetary politics?

I have a trajectory of constantly trying to expand my own thinking. When I graduated, Ireland was essentially under the control of the IMF [i]. I had been engaged with local and national politics, in political organising and activism—but it began to feel insufficient. The core concern of my work has always been; why can't we imagine alternatives to capitalism? Why is it so entrenched and seemingly immutable? The problem couldn't be addressed locally—it's a globalising problem.

For me, I like to learn by doing, art-making is a pedagogical experience. I began to make work within global supply chains, and in reaching out and making these international art projects, I am also learning about the system I am inhabiting. It came from a drive to expand my own awareness, contextualisation and thinking—and a sense of political urgency around these issues. The local in Ireland cannot exist in isolation of these other sets of relations, which I am now exploring.

After completing my PhD, which had been very focused on globalisation and international supply chains, I began to criticise another gap in my thinking—the absence of environmental thought. This felt like an urgent thing to be addressed, especially in the context of goods being shipped around the world and the extraction of materials that underlie them. The material realities and consequences of that were feeling like an elephant in the room. So, I made the proposal to the Centre for the Political Imaginary that I would start incorporating planetary ideas and planetary politics into my work to address this and to continue my own learning journey.

You spoke about the absence of environmental thought in your work; how would you differentiate the 'planetary' from the 'environment'?

There are three concepts which are useful to define. There's the concept of *globe*; which is an entirely human-made and human-thought-of thing. It's the way in which we have mapped and organised ourselves across the earth through our infrastructures and our sets of relationships. This has been modelled through cartography and items—such as a physical globe.

Then there is the concept of *earth*; the idea that earth doesn't actually contain the whole planet. It's the part of earth that is liveable—the few kilometres above and below where we are, from which we draw our material, and which sustains life. This has historically been thought of as Gaia.

The *planet* is the totality of the Earth and its interaction with the cosmos it exists in. It's a cosmic entity which is affected by forces that are incomprehensibly distant from our own living environment. It is what is happening deep in the Earth's core and in the upper echelons, beyond the Earth's atmosphere.

I did a residency last year (for a different project) at the National Space Centre in Ireland. I was tasked with doing work about space junk—the debris left over from satellites up in the Earth's atmosphere. I consulted with scientists about the possibility that some of this junk might leave the atmosphere and end up merging with natural geological material in space (there are as many rocks orbiting the Earth as there is space junk) and, in deep time, end up in the bedrock of new planets. The scientists confirmed my unlikely hypothesis, and I made an artwork about it.

So, I'm interested in these extremes. *Tangible Earth* is referring to the seismic activity that's deep underground that we don't ordinarily sense. When I decided that there was an absence of natural thinking in my thought and practice, I immediately became interested in gravity and magnetic fields. These things are entangled in the environment, and gravitational pull, for example, is affected by climate change, but we don't think about them in the same category as trees and animals. So, I think this concept of earth versus the planet—I'm not talking about *life* necessarily, but planetary systems and geophysical forces.

Rather than directly name specific offenders/systems of power, the work is relatively pared back and can be seen as an abstracted view of the rising temperature on Earth. What place do you think abstraction holds in critiquing and affecting societal issues?

I think that written statements and statistics are abstract. They are abstractions of phenomena that cannot be reduced to language. These abstractions are part of the problem. I think what you're identifying isn't a move towards abstraction so much as a move towards thinking more affectively, as in *affect*. I'm interested in art's particular strengths—its ability to evoke emotion and feeling that cannot be reduced to these numeral or textural categories.

I think the directness of my work has remained consistent—there's always a point that is being made. I think each work can exist as a sentence or a statement. It has become less spoken and less institutionally critical. I have found that I have been increasingly interested in the power that objects have in this consistent project I have of making people think differently. Thinking differently also means feeling differently, sensing differently and perceiving differently. Seeing the totality of how we construct our reality systems across those different psychic models and trying to subvert all of them at the same time instead of merely communicating an entirely cognitive or conceptual idea.

Would you consider this artwork a form of activism—do you differentiate the two?

I've never considered my work to be activism. I think activism is too important for my work to fall into that category. If it is activism, then it is very poor activism. I believe activism should be done well and should have a particular set of targets and ways of evaluating those that I don't want to apply to my own artistic practice. I would consider my work to be politically infused—it has a transformative gesture at its core.

Anna Stuart is undergoing her studies in *Praxis – Master's in Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art*. Underpinned by an interest in phenomena and the non-human, her practice seeks to explore and reconsider ways of being. She has a background in sculpture and holds a BA (Hons) in Art from Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dublin.

[i] The International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Jaime Belmonte & Paola Fernanda: *Aquatic Universes* (2025)
Performance at *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition* in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

AQUATIC UNIVERSES: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAOLA FERNANDA AND JAIME BELMONTE

Anna Stuart

In this conversation, Jaime Belmonte and Paola Fernanda discuss their upcoming work; Aquatic Universes, their thoughts on transdisciplinary collaboration and reflect on the need to make space for a multiplicity of perspectives in Finland today.

Bodies of water are more than just vast swathes covering the greater part of half the planet. Depending on your story, they can come to represent different things. For some, they are associated with division, conflict and even destruction. But of course, despite coexisting alongside these non-human bodies, our relationships with them are not necessarily universal.

In their most recent work, *Aquatic Universes*, Paola Fernanda and Jaime Belmonte gather the stories of those coming from a multiplicity of backgrounds and ask us to reconsider our own relationships with water. Approaching this project as an opportunity for connection, Paola and Jaime have invited the Global Music Department from the Sibelius Academy to collaborate on the project.

During the course of the interview, Paola and Jaime shed light on their experiences of transdisciplinary collaboration at the University of the Arts, the importance of making space for a variety of diverse perspectives and the changes they have witnessed—not necessarily for the better, in Finnish society since their arrival in 2013.

Anna Stuart: You both come from different disciplines—Paola, you have a fine arts background and studied at Kuva, while Jaime, you are primarily a composer but also teach Transcultural Composition at the Sibelius Academy—as well as being the conductor of a choir. Both fields have an association with individual geniuses and solitary producers. Can you tell me about the decision to work on a project which explores the porosity between the two fields and how you navigated the dynamics of a shared authorship?

Paola Fernanda: The way we met was through our studies, on a course called 'The Orchestra as an Instrument'. They brought together students from the Time and Space Department and from Composition in the Sibelius Academy. I soon realised that with Jaime, we share a language; I'm from Colombia, and Jaime is from Spain.

Jaime Belmonte: I had been very interested in interdisciplinary collaboration in general. Coming back to your question about the solitary creator, I have always felt that it doesn't work for me—I guess I like people. In 2017, when I was in the first year of my masters studies, I went on exchange to a programme called 'Transcultural Collaboration', organised by the University of the Arts in Zurich. This programme actually took place in Hong Kong. It was four months together with a group of artists, all from different places and disciplines—and I really liked that. This isn't really happening so much in Finland, or at least at the University of the Arts.

So, I was trying to actively find people who could work this way. This now forms part of my doctoral research. I initiated this project and invited Paola on as a main collaborator—we have other collaborators who are global musicians as well, but the project originally started with just the two of us.

PF: I understand that it's necessary for artists to be alone, to focus and to have time to concentrate, but there comes a point for me, in my practice, where it is good to connect with others—and when it comes from different fields, it enriches the work.

AS: Do you feel transcultural collaboration is something that is prioritised in Finland?

JB: It depends. In my opinion, it should be promoted much more—facilitated much more. I think when speaking of the University of the Arts, we speak about three different universities. There are attempts at putting people together that are beautiful, but there isn't really a conception that we are just the one university. Transcultural collaboration is clearly happening in the Global Music Department, but the Global Music Department is a closed bubble. I think it should happen much more in the whole university.

PF: When I studied at Kuva, it used to be much more international. Now, if you come from outside Europe, you need to pay a fee—and I have heard that it will increase next year. So, this strongly affects what is going to happen to the international community in Finland. Culturally, it's quite hard for all of us. If they increase the fees, the Global Music Department will be one of the most affected. When I arrived in Finland, it used to be free for everybody, for the whole world. You needed to pay enrolments, but it was a free education system.

JB: Outside of the university context, Finland can be seen in many ways as quite cosmopolitan, yet it still operates on an underlying assumption of monoculturalism. I understand that Finland is a relatively young country, with a complex and sometimes problematic history concerning its national identity—and while I recognise that this sense of identity is important, I feel that the presumption of a unified national identity often limits the possibilities for transcultural exchange within Finnish society. The underlying expectations of integration and assimilation into Finnish culture can be problematic. Although this issue operates on a socio-political level, I think it also shapes the ways in which we collaborate as artists and influences the overall dynamics of the artistic field.

AS: Did you both find that you had to assimilate quickly when you came to study?

JB: Not necessarily. The university—or at least the department I was in, was quite diverse. But society is not the same as the university. When I came to Finland in 2013, it was different. I felt that I had to learn Finnish to know what was happening. Some of the compulsory courses were in Finnish, and for those of us who didn't know Finnish, it was a problem.

Aquatic Universes (2025) by Paola Fernanda and Jaime Belmonte. Photo: Paola Fernanda

So, we had to adapt. Thankfully, this has changed quite a lot, but to some extent it is still there.

PF: I was lucky to have my sister here at the beginning—she was studying in Finland, and by then she had a Finnish partner—so I was able to ease into the culture quite naturally from the start. I was introduced to the traditions, the sauna—it was very exciting. I was 21 when I arrived in Finland—I was so young and super excited. If someone looked at me with bad eyes, I couldn't care less. But after a while, I started to understand that in this society, there is another level of communication that you have to deal with, and people are not that open when winter comes. So, I think it changes depending on your age and the time in which you are living.

Helsinki has become much more international, but this new government has created a scary view of Finland. It is not the most positive towards foreigners. When I arrived in Finland, we always joked about *True Finns*—that they would never get into government, so now (that they have), it's very scary.

But here we are. Even though I have the passport, I would never say that I'm a Finnish person—my Colombian is in me. I think it's so important to embrace others to come. It creates hope when more foreigners come with positive energy and knowledge—and we combine this with the Finnish community. It's collaborating. And that's what we want, as foreigners living in Finland.

AS: Would you be able to explain how you landed on the title *Aquatic Universes*? I understood (from previous interviews) that for you, Paola, the aquarium came to represent your family in a way. How did Jaime's perspective affect the project, and what do you both hope the audience will take away from the work? Bodies of water can be seen as unifying forces but also eroding and divisive.

JB: It's funny that you mention water as a boundary because for us, it was discussed as a form of connection. I remember Paola telling me about her family—they were all living in different coastal cities. Her sister was in New York, her brother in Spain, and Paola in Helsinki. Her parents were in Columbia, which has an Atlantic coast, but they live in Bogota—in the mountains. She also told me about the first time she saw the sea, with her grandma. It was really powerful.

PF: I use it as an analogy for the connection between me and my family. But this is how we opened up the discussion (for collaboration) with the musicians. We began by sharing and discussing our relationships to the sea.

JB: The sea is something I have always taken for granted. I was born in a city 20 kilometres from the coast—not quite a harbour city, but my life has always been very close to it. My brother is a sailor, and my brother-in-law works in the Spanish navy. Actually, right before the summer I moved to a coastal neighbourhood in Helsinki—so it has been a beautiful encounter to reconsider my relationship with the sea and with water in general on this project.

These were the things we have been trying to discuss and explore with the rest of the participants in the project. There are two participants, for example, (from the Global Music Department); one is from a coastal city in Portugal, and for him, the ocean is incredibly powerful—it's noisy, and there are a lot of waves. For the other—a Finnish woman, the nature of water is still. So, we're trying to gather and understand—as human beings, the multiplicity of perspectives we have with different bodies of water.

AS: Can you tell me more about the Global Music Department's collaboration on this project? Who comprises this department, and what does 'global' mean in Helsinki?

JB: If everything goes to plan, we will have ten participants from the Global Music Department. But this is a fluid constellation of musicians.

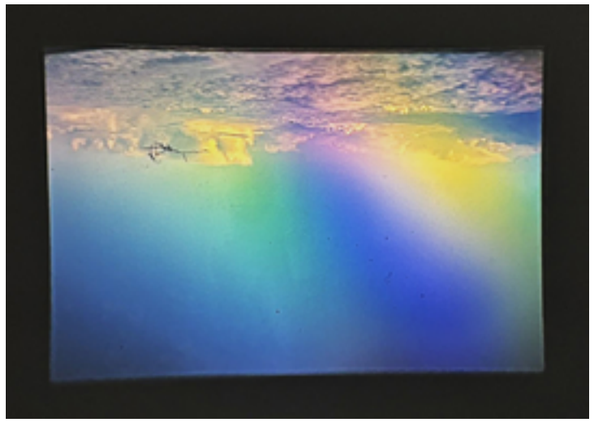
They come from really diverse backgrounds. There is a very small minority of Finnish people, and of those Finnish people, they have some kind of 'global' profile. So, they are not your typical Finnish person born and raised in Finland.

In the group, we have Livia; an Italian flautist, Linda from Finland, Aizhan from Kazakhstan, Daniel from Syria, Mehrnoosh from Iran, Juho who is Finnish but has been living in Japan for many years, Kata who is Finnish but in very close contact with Brazil and Portugal, Melissa from Turkey, João who is from Portugal and Genevieve who is from the US.

The origins of the department are that the students come from very different places. They collaborate and have transcultural ensembles, global orchestras and places where they come together and share their own musical traditions and backgrounds. They put all this together and create something unique.

PF: I think coming to Finland and meeting many different cultures has been an enriching experience for me. In Colombia, you are usually with Colombians. I think this has been one of the most important aspects of this project; we want to hear the experiences of those coming from different parts of the world in relation to water. The stories are really different, and I think that's important.

AS: When thinking about how cultural identities and collective memories are shaped by relationships with bodies of water, was there ever a fear that combining such a multiplicity of perspectives could potentially homogenise the experiences of those coming from such diverse and specific communities?



Aquatic Universes (2025) by Paola Fernanda and Jaime Belmonte. Photo: Paola Fernanda

JB: Well, we don't know yet. But I think this is something that we are trying to explore—how this multiplicity of perspectives can exist together. Of course, lived experience is so rich. Even if you try to express it, you're never going to get the full picture. But you can always share something. Maybe the person on the other end gets something, or maybe what they get is not exactly what you intended—but it's something that they can relate to in their own background. We are not trying to communicate the real 'truth', but something a bit more fluid.

PF: I would say that our project is like an ongoing lab. It's like this: how do I understand and communicate these stories without doing it literally? Of course, we all come from different places, but it's about how to play with these different meanings in the space. From beginning to end this will be in construction. We're collaborating—we don't want to divide.

JB: The stories are the seed—for reflecting and creating. When someone proposes a story, Paola thinks about an image; this image then triggers some music. The media affect each other. So, the goal is not to provide a catalogue but to make people reconsider their own connection with water.

AS: Did you have a specific audience in mind—be they Finnish speaking or not, when making the work?

JB: For me it's much clearer when I am composing a piece for a concert, as I know a large percentage of the audience will be either people I know or who come from the field. Now that we are exhibiting in *Kuva/Tila*, I really don't know who is going to come. Before the summer, I was on a plane and met an artist who had graduated from Kuva years ago—he told me he would come see this exhibition. Suddenly, I began thinking of all the different audience members who I hadn't previously considered.

PF: I think it is a very good thing that the location of the gallery space is in a way mixed with the Theatre Academy. It gathers students, teachers, researchers and even children—people from different backgrounds. I think the fact that people will be able to walk through the piece will be great; it's going to be relaxed and approachable.

AS: Despite coming from different disciplines, there seems to be a strong mutual interest in performance and the mechanics of performance. When I was speaking with Jaime, he described how the work would transform over the course of the exhibition through various interventions—existing as this sort of open/living work, evolving and being affected by its environment. Could you tell me more about the significance that the work leaves behind some kind of trace or has a 'memory'?

PF: I think you say it very beautifully. It's not a work which will be settled from beginning to end. It's very important that there is a continuous conversation. We are co-creating together; the sound creates the image, and the image creates the sound. We are performing with it.

JB: I have dealt with trace extensively in my research. A piece that I premiered this summer was all about this. I made a reflection about what happened last year—the huge floods in Spain, the fires in California, and the war in Gaza, and gathered excerpts and fragments from news broadcasts and put them together. Some movements were about global issues, and some were about family. There is one movement, for example, which is all children's voices. So, it's collecting traces from the past and exploring how they live on in different environments. What stays after something has passed.

Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher, theorises what he calls 'intersubjectivity'. It's a difficult concept to understand, but it has two main ideas—one is the *face,* and the other is the *trace.* The face is something which resembles our identity and humanity. The trace, on the other hand, is what is left after the face is gone—something which is still present. Trace leaves an imprint on you. This imprint is very difficult to define; it is somehow fluid.

I find this idea beautiful, as it has so many potential meanings. In the case of our work, the musician's interventions leave a trace on the static components of the work—so we are literally changing things on site. Coming back to your first question, it's a way of tearing up this myth of the creator as a solitary figure who comes up with the work alone and it being perfect.

Anna Stuart is undergoing her studies in *Praxis – Master's in Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art*. Underpinned by an interest in phenomena and the non-human, her practice seeks to explore and reconsider ways of being. Her background is in sculpture and she holds a BA (Hons) in Art from Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dublin.

Kristiina Koskinen: *Metsän määritelmä / Definition of Forest* (2024)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

BECOMING ENTANGLEMENTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTIINA KOSKINEN

Tuija Huovinen

Kristiina Koskinen is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Design in the University of Lapland. In her work she delves into the ideas of nature and how those conceptions are formed.

In her doctoral thesis (2022), Koskinen examined the nature documentary series Avara luonto by the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE and developed a method to help understand the nature concepts these films construct through their narrative strategies and cinematic form. The aim was to produce knowledge and to contribute to the discussions on forests from an unconventional perspective.

In the *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* research exhibition, Kristiina Koskinen's short documentary film Definition of Forest (2024) is presented alongside a performative extension in which movement of a dancer spills into the exhibition space. In her practice, Koskinen examines conceptions of nature and how they are formed through posthumanist and new materialist thinking that seeks to dismantle the opposition between the knowing, acting human and passive, mute nature.

In this interview Koskinen speaks about the world as a continuous, open process of becoming material and meaningful, which gains significance and form as different agential possibilities are enacted.

Tuija Huovinen: The central theoretical framework in your practice is built around physicist and philosopher Karen Barad's notions of agential realism and intra-action, which challenge individual-centred ideas of agency. According to Barad, seemingly distinct entities and agencies are continuously entangled with one another in ongoing processes of becoming, affecting, and existing, unfolding simultaneously in multiple directions. Boundaries and properties of different life forms always take shape in relation to others, through processes of intra-action. How do video and short film function as tools for thinking and knowledge production within your artistic research?

Kristiina Koskinen: In my PhD thesis, I examined the ideas of nature conveyed by television nature documentaries. I felt a need to concentrate specifically with mainstream, large-audience productions and understand, through them, how audiovisual narration carries notions of nature. I was intensely interested and excited by the affective potential of nature documentaries and by how much richer that field is than what everyday thinking often assumes. Later in my practice and research, I applied Barad's theoretical thinking to the Finnish forest ecosystem, imagining how it could be translated into sounds, images and narration.

I consciously try to avoid an approach that points out what is "wrong" in the narrative gestures, methods, or modes in nature documentaries. But of course, throughout the research process, I encountered many ideas about what should be done differently and how it could be done. Because of this, after completing the PhD, I had a strong urge to try these thoughts out in practice. Definition of Forest concretises the research process by tying high-flying, abstract and partly inherited ideas to the very concrete pragmatics of production. The richness lies precisely in having to consider what thinking otherwise means in practice at a mundane level: What kinds of choices—often very small and simple—do I make, and why?

Baradian thought carries a critique of representation, which I relate to. From the perspective of agential realism, the forest is impossible to grasp through a representationalist framework, because representationalism strives for an external perspective that assumes a fundamental separation between the representer and the represented, the one who knows and what is known. We cannot claim that our depiction substitutes for the "original" forest, which is always becoming and changing depending on different vantage points. Instead, we can try to acknowledge the practices through which the depiction is produced and experienced. According to Barad, these practices are performative—they consist of material-discursive intra-actions that do not just describe reality but actively participate in shaping it. She emphasises that agential realism is specifically tied to posthumanism: This means that agency is not restricted to humans but that the non-human world also participates in the emergence of reality and the materialisation of meaning.

You describe the forest as an active agent. In what concrete ways does this influence your decisions in your work; writing, directing, shooting, framing, or editing?

My urge to question and express this questioning is tied to my own path. Questioning the conventions of defining the forest reflects my background in forest sciences, where discussions about the agency of the forest or critiques of the language used were not part of the curriculum or discussions in my time. My thinking about what a forest is has evolved over the years as I moved from studying forest sciences to studying the arts and later completed my doctoral research in ecocritical film studies and the environmental humanities.

I have also worked in environmental organisations as a forest specialist, during which time I was highly engaged with forest conflicts. The work proved emotionally draining, and I could not continue as I felt the same cycles repeating again and again. I struggled to understand what produces such intense polarisation and the division of people into opposing camps within forest politics. One explanation may be the different conceptions and relationships to forests and, on the other hand, how we grow into understanding what a forest is.As a researcher, I produce knowledge that is inseparable from who I am and where I come from. At the same time, the focus of the research shapes both the knowledge produced and me as a person—the epistemic presentation influences both the site of the inquiry and the researcher. Barad's posthumanist performativity guides me toward ways of depicting the forest in which the goal is not to produce a transparent, "objective" representation but to openly acknowledge and foreground subjectivity and the act of representation itself.

In the process of screenwriting, I identified three groups of phenomena. The first consists of ecological and sustaining processes in the forest, such as decomposition, photosynthesis, respiration, and various flows. The second group emerges from discursive, relational cultural struggles over the definitions of forests: research, news, experiences, discussions, conflicts, pedagogical textbooks, films, fairy tales, and so on. The third one lies in the processes of corporeal intra-action: we breathe the same gases, and the same minerals circulate through us; materially, we are connected and porous.

Filming Definition of Forest took place some time ago, but one example that immediately comes to my mind is the process with dancer Elina Valtonen and choreographer Favela Vera Ortiz. When I first approached them (and later the rest of the team), I introduced the Baradian thinking underlying the work. We then continued the process by discussing what it might mean from the perspective of each person's expertise.

My approach with the whole invited working group was to trust everyone's professional knowledge. This is how I wanted to work—not by telling others how they must film or edit, but by bringing in the thinking, allowing layers of everyone's skills to accumulate so that we can work collectively. Of course, it also helped that everyone involved shared an interest in the themes. For the dancer and choreographer, the process meant spending a great deal of time in the forest together, searching for movement language, exploring connection, and testing how intra-action might manifest through movement.

Favela began sending me short videos of their time in the forest. What was striking to notice was how even tiny gestures and actions produced strong associations—sometimes unwanted ones. It was very easy, for example, for the idea of a kind of goblin-like creature to emerge—a figure behaving oddly in the forest. Another surprising influence came from footsteps: when several steps appeared in the frame, a path was formed, immediately placing the human's journey at the centre of attention. Although forests contain tracks of many more-than-human beings, human movement seen by human eyes is visually dominant: when a person takes a step, the eye follows, and we begin to imagine where the figure is coming from and where they are going.

How did the idea of including a dancer arise? And more broadly, how do you navigate your own position when trying to attend to the agencies of more-than-human beings without othering them?

That is a good question! I don't remember exactly how the decision emerged. I recall having seen previous collaborative works by Favela and Elina in which Elina expresses complex environmental and posthumanist themes through her body. I have always been deeply moved by dancers' ability to express strange and elusive phenomena through movement. The idea to explore intra-action specifically through the dancer's body developed gradually.

If we want to think of matter as an active agent and examine how our relation to the forest and its definitions are formed, do we ultimately have any other access point than our own bodies? For exploring new materialist notions of embodied being through audiovisual narration, working with a dancer who is finely attuned to her own corporeality felt intuitive and somehow right. Favela, Elina and I spoke a great deal about the established behaviours, gestures, and norms of being in the forest. The aim was not to create a ready-made performance for her to present to the camera, but to develop movement language that could be adjusted and re-sensitised responsively.

I wondered how to get close—visually or sonically—to the movement of gases or nutrients, for example. It became clear that these phenomena needed to be approached symbolically. And although I sought to move away from anthropocentrism, I felt the human still needed to be present, because humans play a significant role in this world. We cannot remove ourselves from the picture, nor do I believe we should. However, I think storytelling can actively marginalise the human.

I have grappled with the question of whether humans can de-centre the human in such an inherently anthropocentric field as art and cinema. I cannot discard my humanity—nor is it useful for the research to attempt that—since what I do is profoundly humane and made for other humans. I see this as a starting point I must accept—and within this context, work toward marginalising the human.

I know many people think differently, and I am aware of various debates. For example, eco-film scholars have suggested that documentary film might have the potential to approach the experiential world of other species and the more-than-human world: I find this beautiful, but one in which I cannot fully believe in practice. I appreciate and remain curious about such possibilities, even if I have not yet experienced them myself.

How do you relate to not-knowing and unpredictability?

I think that art, precisely, allows space for not-knowing, not-understanding, and even the discomfort that comes with. That is one of the reasons why I make art and do artistic research. A forest is neither stable, clearly bounded, nor controllable, and it is not possible to grasp a single, shared reality of forests. My practice is at times a chaotic tangle—but so is the forest! My work is often a messy situational image that keeps living on after the work is "completed".

By messy I mean disorder, randomness, and unpredictability; a worldview in which concepts like forest cannot be determined solely as scientific research objects or human-made representations but are contradicting and chaotic. A certain degree of confusion and complexity must therefore be tolerated when contemplating the nature of forests.

I have been reflecting the documentary dimension of my work and the concept of it, especially when pursuing to depict the forest differently: should I speak of a short documentary or a short film? What is an experimental short documentary, and what is the relationship between experimental, fictional and documentary elements? I ended up wanting to remain within the context of documentary, but in relation to this work, I think documentary must be understood as something other than the recording reality. What would be the correct conceptual knot? This, too, is still in process.

In your work, the dancer's language of movement is physically immersive; the moss is tactile and enveloping. What kinds of insights have emerged for you when approaching the forest through its entanglements, and sensuousness—rather than through human-centred definitions of nature?

Rather than relying on conventional definitions, an alternative answer might be to approach the forest more holistically and consider everything a forest ecosystem contains. Beyond the number of trees and their canopy, the forest includes other vegetation, animals, microclimates, soil and fungal networks, stones and bedrock, and the networks and agencies among them. The forest is a living linguistic and cultural phenomenon.

The working process was intensely physical and sensorial. When filming, the window of natural light was limited, and we had to work at a brisk pace. Since we carried all the equipment ourselves, it was also physically demanding. Weather was also significant—at times it rained heavily, which was also very meaningful. It was striking, to realise how the dancer continued working completely soaked, or how, when she immersed her head in moss, a ruby fire ant stung her near the eye. I could say that in the process of making the work, one was profoundly affected by the forest!

How did you choose the filming location?

KK: We considered many different potential locations: the availability of light, a reasonable distance, and what kind of forest would be visually engaging and suitable for the work. Strangely enough, I soon realised that the forest near my family's summer place would be a natural fit. This forest has been like a family member—always present in our lives—and I spend a great deal of time there. To me, it embodies something sacred. Certain places carry a powerful affective charge that cannot be fully explained, but which old forests often have. The same kind of charge old cities possess—spaces layered with history and intensity that resist easy description.

In this forest, I feel not only joy and deep meaning but also constant fear of its destruction, its vulnerability to logging. As I mentioned, I am a trained forester and studied environmental protection. The tension between logging and conservation is familiar to me. I believe modern Finns are deeply connected to timber industries. I try to remain aware that I, too, rely on forestry—which, as a form of primary production, is more tolerable as a neighbour than mining, for example. It could be practised sustainably.

Storytelling and imagination shape how we relate to the living world: they often carry emotional and ethical weight. Could you describe a moment in your work where human and more-than-human agents intra-act—co-emerge or shift each other's meanings? What kind of space does your work open for reimagining forest relations and the nonhuman world?

My first thought to this question was: isn't it present all the time? And then I asked myself why intra-action would be present in this particular work. Why not in a "traditional" nature documentary? Perhaps the difference is that my work seeks to highlight intra-action as the subject itself.

My film includes what I call unruly narrative voices. They function as reminders that human beliefs and understandings always develop in relation to the nonhuman world—that phenomena we perceive as cultural are in many ways shaped and bounded by various forces and other beings. In the forest, knowledge is always relational, co-emergent, and slightly askew. In one scene, a narrator speaks about logging. They say that one should not hesitate but take action and take care of one's property; at the same time, the image shows an ant crawling across the dancer's hand. What is care? Is it nurturing a beloved one or bringing them down? Whose forest is it? When the voice says that one must always do something, the dancer lies in the moss and makes a tiny wave-like movement.

The boundary between documentary and fiction is blurred, for example, by the fact that the narrators' lines are composed of material that actually exists and I have found from various sources and archives. Some of my own existing diary notes are also woven in. None of these statements are false or deceptive—rather, they are experientially true. The sound of the forest sometimes overrides the human voices; groaning, humming, and rustling drown out the human narration, which is also part of knowledge formation. Human verbal expression cannot be the sole determinant of what the world is. I think something strange must occur in the edit—a cut where the human cannot be separated as the knowing subject and the forest as the object—and for which there may be no words.

Culturally, going into the forest alone often represents a loosening of norms and social rules, a relief from societal pressures. The forest fills our everyday lives, memories, and countless images, stories, and representations. What matters is examining what we call forest, how we represent it, and through what processes the idea of a forest is formed. In the context of my work, when attempting to depict the forest and engage its definitions, it became evident that many rules govern who is considered competent to speak about the forest and how one should move in it to be taken seriously as a knowledge producer. In this context, bringing a dancer into the forest—rather than a "qualified expert" with an authoritative gait—felt somehow radical. Why shouldn't a dancer be considered a competent forest-dweller and an expert?

How do you see the role of the audience in relation to your work? How might they interact or intra-act with it—become something other than mere viewers?

This autumn the film was shown not only in the Research Pavilion but also for example at the Forest Sciences Day. Because both contexts differ from a traditional gallery exhibition—and because their audiences do as well—I am attentive to what will unfold.

I am fascinated by the idea that film can propose a bodily experience. As a spectator myself, I value this deeply. I still feel the moss scenes, Elina's movements among the ferns, and the child's reading of a Kirsi Kunnas poem in my own body. I hope these—or other moments—resonate physically for viewers as well. I contemplated for a long time how to bring the short film into contact with other works so that it would seep into adjacent territories, and I arrived at the idea of a performative extension. For the visitor, this may offer an additional layer for thinking-with the work.

I await with excitement how the exhibition will unfold, how the work will interact with other agents in the space, and what it might add to the already-finished video piece. I have a hunch it will work well—but I cannot know; I can only trust!

How do you see artistic research contributing to broader conversations on ecology, care, and co-existence amid today's ecological crises and fragmentation? What responsibilities does artistic research hold—toward the environment and toward how we understand life in relation with other forms of life?

In my opinion, artistic research can produce highly essential and meaningful knowledge that is difficult to access through other means. Its modes of publication also challenge traditional ways of framing knowledge and, in their diversity, can evoke valuable thought and understanding. Ideas of ecology, care, and coexistence arise within a living culture that nourishes such thinking.

I also see artistic research as action—and as maintaining the capacity to act in situations that might feel impossible and despairing. Concrete, pragmatic and rational actions easily reduce our role to something minuscule: we take plastics to recycling while a vast ecological emergency rages alongside. It is unbearable in many ways, yet amidst it all we must somehow continue to live and remain sane. Artistic research is connected to what can be understood differently, what unexpected solutions may be found, and what can be explored through the act of making.

Tuija Huovinen is a writer and curator who studies in the Praxis programme in the Academy of Fine Arts.

Sophie Durand: *Lighthouses for Vilnius* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

BEING IN AN EXPERIENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIE DURAND

Tuija Huovinen

Sophie Durand is an Australian artist based in Lithuania. Her artistic research seeks to produce and situate artworks in proximity to and in the ocean.

In her practice Sophie is looking at modes of collaboration and co-becoming with environmental systems and investigating notions of authorship acknowledging that there are multiple factors that contribute to the development of an artwork.

In the *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* research exhibition Sophie builds a scenography of lighthouse sculptures made from recycled material. The work is a spatial mapping of an area that Sophie has visited and traversed. Sophie is interested in the nature of spaces between different locations and the negative space that becomes present in between.

In this interview Sophie describes her practice of returning her natural collections and the ongoingness of different cycles where emphases and fragments are recycled and reused and then put together in different combinations.

Tuija Huovinen: How would you describe the gesture of returning in your practice?

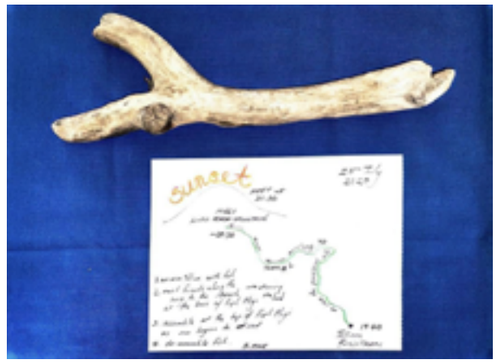
Sophie Durand: The last big body of work I made was a series of works that I made in Tallinn where I was visiting the Paljassaare area. Paljassaare is a man-made peninsula that is visible when you arrive in Tallinn from Helsinki by ferry. It's to the left when arriving and the right when leaving. Coming to Tallinn (in 2020) was initially perceived as a process of rethinking my practice: yet my practice fell into an old pattern of first finding small anecdotes and then elaborating on them into larger narratives. Part of this process engaged collected material that was either activated through social interactions or in installation systems. This production process was happening at a distance from the location the work was referenced and inspired by. Now based in Vilnius, I'm responding to the dichotomy between my installations and their references.

The question of how to maintain a connection to source material becomes a compass throughout this phase of research. In my doctoral studies I wanted to reposition my process to be more site-specific. It has however been a very roundabout journey. Scenography, a created situation where things happen, is still a key characteristic of my artworks. Throughout my candidacy at the Vilnius Academy of Art's (VAA) doctoral school there has been this constant back and forth movement, particularly between Tallinn and Vilnius. I'm very interested in coastal landscapes and the ocean; and moving inland to Vilnius has shifted me away from that setting so I find myself at a distance or moving towards the sea. During some of these journeys I have been returning collections of natural material. These returns became a way of thinking about being in an experience from within one.

With each project there are particular objectives and questions I am attempting to reconcile (for example the ethics of extractivism) and putting myself into a process, such as the return with all these questions in mind, creates juxtaposition, a specific dynamic. This creates an opportunity where something might happen – a chance of discovery. It was usually in light of that discovery that the production of a new installation would begin and in the past years, it's not that I haven't wanted that to happen but I also wanted for the experience to contain a tacit aesthetic quality and be something in and of itself.

This past July I returned some sticks to Tallinn. These sticks had been collected with my friend and colleague Simona Rukuižaitė in March 2024, transported to Vilnius and nailed together into forms resembling fish.

I invited friends: Alan Voodla, Katariin Mudist, Ingrid Helena Pajo, Jose A. Muñoz Ñ., Laura de Jaeger and Laura Liiventaal, friends with whom I have practiced in parallel in Tallinn. They were sent a simple invitation, a score for what would happen.



There wasn't any second guessing, I felt a bit unwell at the time and my friends admitted they weren't totally sure what the whole situation was about. We all just went with it and there was no attempt to conceptualise what was going on in the moment, no stepping in and out of what was happening to get a critical overview. It was a moment of *all right, this is what we're doing.*

We tied fish to rope so they could swim in the sky. We carried and pushed the heavy wagon through the long grass. We saw a fox and photographed it through a finger covering the lens of the camera. We were helped by bikes. We were sprayed in sequence with mosquito spray. One after another we moved from the street to the seashore and stayed there until it started to feel like it was getting too late. Within this singular event, there are many individual experiences that all interacted in order to co-author an experience for each other, multiplicity creating an experience that felt whole and complete and of that moment.

So to go back to your questions, the gesture of returning has become a way to put myself into an experience, although this does simplify it, as I do have other questions about accumulation and the ethics of extractivism that bubble in the background with no real conclusion. Situation based work, trying to work situationally and attempting to be in a moment has many moving variables. It's hard to let go of expectations and the want for things to be a certain way.

How do you remain open to things constantly shifting? And how do you navigate with your practice in the structures of the art world?

Practicing within a research candidacy and maintaining an exhibition practice adds extra variables and creates different pressures. Each is an institution with different obligations and deadlines. It is really hard to balance between keeping things alive and being open to the unexpected. My friend and colleague, Miki Ambrozy, (with whom I work as a researcher at VAA developing LANDING, a platform for sharing methods within art-based research) introduced me to the CLEAR Lab and their working protocols. Their value statement has influenced me in thinking about orienting my practice.

In spending time with my own working methods and working with and in parallel to others, space is held for developing an understanding of what is being done within a practice. This is always relational to material, audiences, ideas and values. I haphazardly keep a trace of what I'm doing through journals and conversations but perhaps what's more useful for me in coming to understand the relational web I operate within is through doing things again and again. Making iterative artworks and engaging in parallel processes has helped me to recognise similarities in methodologies that are consistent. Perhaps it's the process of articulating understandings in words that's the most difficult. To say I recognise similarities is different to naming them, but I feel them on the tip of my tongue. I also sit with ideas and questions for a long time and wait for the opportunity, ability or need to address them.

When did you begin to feel the need to return the materials? In your practice you also deal with concepts of memory, archives and knowledge-in-action. What kind of ethical, emotional, or practical impulses do you find around this method and regarding imagining possible futures?

As mentioned earlier, I have questions about accumulation and the ethics of extractivism. I'm an Australian from a settler background. When working with soil or found natural material in Australia, cultural consultation is always sought from Indigenous people of the area. For example, in an exhibition I had at Pig Melon Gallery in Boorloo/Perth in 2023 called 'A Rainbow All Around' I included borrowed beach sand alongside some paintings in my installation. I was instructed to return it to the same area of the coast it was borrowed from at the end of the exhibition. Tyson Yuonkaporta elaborates on the ethics of this in the book *Sand talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*.

I was collecting in Europe before this exhibition, and I was moving material around with me. There's also a world where my doctoral research charts the dematerialisation of the art object moving towards zero production through processes of recycling and return. While these processes are ongoing, my focus has shifted for the moment to questions of: How do I put myself in a scenario that creates the conditions for something to happen? How do I operate in the spaces between A&B in this kind of migratory or mobile studio? I think there is something very oceanic about the constant motion. Having lived inland for three years this compass of the ocean is now an epistemological base from which I'm able to see how that frames a terrestrial location practice. I think making lighthouses is also kind of a provocative image reacting to the state being inland: how do you orient yourself towards the ocean?

Last night I watched the documentary *How Deep Is Your Love* (2025, dir. Eleanor Mortimer) at the "Uncomfortable Cinema" (Nepatogus Kinas) film festival in Vilnius. Filmmaker Eleanor Mortimer joins a team of Marine Biologists who are at sea conducting field work with the objective of naming and classifying species living in the abyssal zone of the deep sea. There's a moment in the film where they search and locate tracks left by another deep-sea submarine which collided with the seafloor some 40 years ago. The tracks have been undisturbed and it is also unclear how old the species of this environment are or what life cycles they experience and within what timeline this happens. In the deep sea an encounter serves only as a fragment of an unclear duration. While watching this film I started to think about how an oceanic epistemology does underpin my own arts practice, recognising that I am implicated in multiple timelines.

Doing art and doing research both entail the conscious addition of matter both ideological and physical into the world. This matter operates independently of the artists / researcher and thus creates responsibility.

I've been moving around for the past 8 years (Roving and Homing, more than a tourist, less than a migrant and not quite a nomadic artist, more of an almost local of multiple places - but this still isn't quite accurate). I'm constantly confronted with the limits of my understanding.

I find myself dwelling on the idea that *"travelling (noun) is the moment when one invents understanding [invokes] perception perceives a reality, classifies as a whole and fails to recognise that this potential is a mere fragment or perhaps even a fiction. Caught between the state of being a tourist and a local one can recognise that they are at the edge of knowing. The task is to ask at what point can one step beyond that or recognise that they can't go further without accepting the experiences of others as truth. Within this relation or rather alongside these relations sit suggestions and speculations. With correspondence at play, reciprocation is actioned in the present tense. An introduction (noun) manifests in the moment before; it is a suggestion and a speculation of what is, what could be and what has been. The plausible and the propositional in dynamic movement. Shadows and echo but what shadows and echoes could be when they exist in the future tense."* from the press release of the exhibition 'Exchange? [Meet = Meet Another + Another Meets Initial Other]' at FORM Gallery, Perth (Durand, 2024).

Returning to the CLEAR Value statement, I think what's key is recognising the mechanism by which entities emerge through practice and research, their relations and all those who enable this coming into being. This is also coupled with making way for other voices, works of other artists and the discoveries of others.

Did this shift change how you approach materials, sites, or collaboration?

Maybe subconsciously. Now in Vilnius I have not been collecting. It has been much more socially orientated dealing with programming and dispersion. In terms of selecting materials (for this work) it was about wanting to have certain material qualities in it. By working with found material and with observations there is a dynamic that is already cooking.

In attempting to move closer to the process from the product – I find myself spending more time in the doing and being with. One of the challenges that has emerged through returning my collections of natural items is how do I document this in a way that's appropriate and not antithetical to my other objectives. This is not something I have answers for.

Working with students over the past two years has been incredibly influential and has shifted my practice. This semester with students in my Bachelor elective course (Aidas, Alvė, Araia, Austėja, Benediktas, Daniel, Gerardas, Giedrius, Greta, Nielas, Sasha, Saulė, Sofija), we have been working within a three-part course structure. We began visiting chosen locations and working with scores by other artists. Following this the students all proposed scores which we work with collectively in various locations. At the middle of the semester the question was posed: 'how can we experience and simultaneously step out of this experience and record it?'

In response to this, students facilitate lessons using their proposed methods for documentation and we discuss what emerges from doing the scores and the documentation in parallel. Experiences are discussed in relation to their materiality, composition within time and how they are interpreted, as one could with an artwork in a gallery. This echoes ways in which I've worked in the past: being in locations and trying to shift the engagement or behaviour within that space in the hope of noticing something that might lead to an artwork. Initially I saw teaching as a way of sharing literature review and proposing methods to other artists that I have found interesting, yet it is starting to suggest a form for possibilities of temporal artworks. In collaborating with my students within this structure I am beginning to observe a reconfiguration of hierarchies, rather than me making some installation accumulating material matter, material is engaged with collectively in time and space, the autoethnographic dissolving into the collective consciousness.

Could you open your process of listening and tuning towards different materialities in gathering and returning?

Decisions happen quickly and sometimes there's a long period of time between decisions. I think listening and turning towards it is a lot about making the mechanisms or the process of the practice transparent. This can be through discussion, in text or evident in a momentarily fixed form like an exhibition. If indeed it is possible to understand the mechanisms behind them. Then the question becomes: 'How do certain ways of doing enable certain outcomes?' Which is followed by: 'How might someone change certain variables in the production process to influence different materialities, actions, outcomes and effects?'

In the proposal to VAA for my doctoral candidacy I asked if the outcomes and processes of a contemporary arts practice can exist in a way that is empathetic to the systems that catalyse and sustain them. Use of the term empathy has not been recurrent since beginning my candidacy. Psychologists and philosophers define Empathy as "the act of feeling what you believe other people feel—experiencing what they experience" (Bloom 2016 p. 11). It is causal, meaning that it influences decisions made thereafter, which can be both positive and negative for all parties involved to varying degrees. I have noted in past journals that I am interested in empathy as an enabler / framer, for the acknowledgment that there are multiple factors that contribute to the manifestation of an artistic outcome (co-worlding/co-becoming) and as a tool to dismantle hierarchies of authorship, participation and experience. Part of the dismantling of such hierarchies requires analysis of how they are constructed as linguistic and pragmatic dichotomies operating in a given moment in time. Furthermore, there is space to identify how the term empathy translates into the realm of arts practice as both an episteme and a process.

There is a collective need to rethink how we're doing things – not necessarily through new technologies but through looking closely and working in a much more non-extractivist way towards the pre-existing and towards perspectives other than one's own. At the VAA Doctoral school we are in the process of collectively organising a similar research exhibition (that closes the day after *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* opens). We are dwelling on discussion of compost and detritus as frameworks to unite undercurrents of multiple individual research projects that turn towards the pre-existing. We are also rethinking how one might engage with this material while looking towards new possibilities. This is also a perspective that unites a lot of the projects in this exhibition in Helsinki.

Right now I'm turning towards ideas of facilitation as either a method or mechanism: I mean it's not like I'm making new things, I'm just arranging/rearranging things and moving things around. Returning is also just moving things around.

In your practice, how do you maintain the necessary distance that allows both you and the material to remain distinct — yet still in relation? How do you think about the distance to the places from which the materials originate – is that distance necessary in order to sense your own artistic rhythm and others?

This is a difficult question to answer, it's easier to take a detour and see if I can wind back to it. I think there's inseparability between me and the work – everything is autobiographical even though it's expressed in different means. Physical distinction between myself and my work—be it a situation that exists in time or an installation in space, is part of this distinction and I don't feel that I am my practice or it is me although we're certainly enmeshed. I don't think I'm able to answer that first question because I'm not sure how to do that right now. I have a good external signifier in my cat, Penny, that tells me that these relations are off kilter—this is mostly because it is a busy time and I'm within a period of change and realisation within my own practice. I met Penny by the banks of the river Vilnelė near my studio at the Uzupis Art Incubator. She was a kitten who had been either abandoned extremely young or born outside. Despite this, she's never been short for personality and is insistent on maintaining her schedule. She reacts to late nights caused by installation and de-install running overtime with bad behaviour. The other morning she vocally expressed herself when I took my eyes away from her in favour of checking my emails. Little friends like Penny are excellent compasses to orientate towards the present moment. Our time together also marks the beginning of a significant shift in my practice where I can recognise creative outcomes of my time in Vilnius, dispersed through discussions and emergent collaborations shifting systems towards the social rather than the material. I don't think I think about having artistic rhythms and I'm not sure distance is always a necessity, although I consistently have ideas and find my thoughts running wild as soon as I am in the process of traveling or walking through new environments. I think it comes down to a mix of distance, proximity and chiefly duration that is of most help to me.

Tuija Huovinen is a writer and curator who studies in the Praxis programme in the Academy of Fine Arts.

Heidi Hänninen / KAS! Kontula Art School: *Mapping Kontula Art School: Kontula metro station* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

REPRESENTING PARALLEL ART WORLDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH HEIDI HÄNNINEN

Heidi Backström

Kontula Art School and its leader, artist and researcher Heidi Hänninen are questioning who are able to do public art. What could public art look like and what could it be in general if a more inclusive group of art-makers would be making the decisions and the art itself?

Visual artist, community artist and artist-researcher Heidi Hänninen is the driving force behind Kontula Art School, KAS. It's an art school that has no space to itself but works on the streets of the Kontula area, doing public street art. KAS has one group for children and youngsters and one for adults. The groups have met weekly since 2019 and are as diverse as the Kontula community itself. In the junior group multiple languages are spoken. The adult group has been a platform for Kontula-based artists and art enthusiasts with very different cultural, economical and social backgrounds.

Hänninen's work in Kontula began with the idea of bringing local people together through street art but has since evolved to challenge social stigmas and create high-quality public art from new perspectives.

In the *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries* research exhibition, the main part of KAS activities takes place in the streets of Kontula as guided tours by Hänninen. In the Kuva/Tila gallery, documentation of the last public artwork by Kontula Art School gets exhibited. The artwork is situated at Kontula Metro Station and it's created by both the KAS adults collective and KAS Juniors. It's called *Kaupunki on meidän koti* (City is our home) and it consists of the word HOME in 29 different languages, the majority of them locally spoken.

I participated in Hänninen's street art tour two years ago and I got really touched and inspired by it. I felt that this was the kind of community art project that is dreamed of in the grant application papers, maybe even on the papers of social workers. You could see that the locals had taken both Hänninen and street art as their own. A passerby commented on a new artwork that they had just seen, and another asked how Hänninen is doing. After this interview my image hasn't changed. But now I take the work of KAS more seriously as visual art than I did before. It's not only a good example of how to bring people with very colourful backgrounds together to have a hobby, but also to create two groups of people really committed to making art.

Heidi Backström: What inspired the creation of Kontula Art School in 2019? What needs or motivations sparked its beginning?

Heidi Hänninen: I got an apartment and a studio from the newly-built Kontula artist house and moved to Kontula in 2015. I immediately thought that this looked like a neighbourhood that could have more art in public. To give you context, the mall hasn't been renovated in ages. Another thing that I realized was that there are many immigrants living in the Kontula area. I had been working for the Turvapaikanhakijoiden tuki ry (NGO Support for Asylum Seekers) before and done socially-engaging art in that context as well. I wanted to create a possibility for the immigrant-backgrounded locals to encounter other locals through art. And the method was street art, because I had done it for a long time.

I started street art activities in Kontula in 2016. At first, I didn't have any funding. I just started the project. I got a free space from Symppis (Kontupiste), which was a low-threshold day activity centre offering health and social counselling to people dealing with substance use issues. Then the city of Helsinki heard about me and my practice, and I got to organise some art workshops that were marketed specifically to immigrants and immigrant families. Mothers with their children found those workshops. Kontula Art School, KAS, was founded in 2019 and I got a grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation. But then came Covid-19.

As I had the financial support, I was able to act during pandemics even though the original plans couldn't be executed. I started volunteering for food aid lines. I delivered food to the people spending time at the Kontula mall. We call them ostarilaiset (writers translations: mall-people). Some of them were not in such good condition that they could have gotten to the food aid lines by themselves. So, I brought food to them and started to get to know them better. I had been volunteering at Symppis for years, so I already knew some of the people. But it hadn't hit my mind that they could also be a target group of the Kontula Arts School.

KAS's adult group painted its first wall piece in early 2020 for the Kontula Library. Already by the end of summer 2020 we painted our second artwork together. It was the outside wall of Symppis, in the heart of Kontula mall. Alongside our original KAS group, ostarilaiset and Symppis customers were also included in the art-making process because they were so interested in it. During this process, it got quite clear to me that they chose me as their person, and also the KAS practice as their own.

This is roughly how KAS has been evolving in the Kontula community. In the kids' group the original idea that I had of bringing people with different cultural backgrounds together is still present, as the kids in Kontula are very multilingual. And then the adults' collective has been developing towards different goals.

Can you tell us more about what KAS actually does in practice? How has it taken shape, and what kinds of activities or approaches does it include?

When I started KAS I had street art as a method to make community art practise. I don't call it that anymore. Now I have this KAS practice which is a socially engaged public art practice (yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen praktiikka). It's art on the streets and it's street art.

When we paint, we use brushes, spray paint and stencils. Now we also have one graffiti artist in our group, which is excellent. But I would define our practice more close to fine arts and classical painting than classical street art. Maybe even more now after we were commissioned to make art to Kontula's metro station. This artwork we painted inside in

one factory hall. So we didn't even work outdoors like the classical street artists.

I call my research "yhteisötaiteellinen" action research in Finnish. This terminology is not very simple to translate into English as I'm hesitating if this is community-based art or socially engaged art or what it is in English.

Part of the action research is this idea of cycles. The whole KAS practice is cycling in relation to the seasons. In the spring we are planning and sketching the works that we are going to do during the summer. In the summers we are painting outside. Then in the autumn we celebrate what we have done. And after all that celebration there's also some feedback and reflections that I'm gathering. And then suddenly it's already December and we have Christmas exhibitions and Christmas markets and things like this where we need to prepare and sell our products. And then it's spring again and we start to sketch.

How are the Kontula Art School's groups formed? Who are in those? Do you take new members?

Some of the original people are still part of the group, some have left and some new people have come instead. There's space for around 20 people in both groups. Not all of them are as active as others.

During the years I have been thinking about what the method is to bring new people in? Usually it has been via jungle drum. People are inviting their friends or relatives. Especially in the kids' group, it often happens that the older sibling comes first and when they grow up, the younger ones follow. KAS is running in the family somehow quite strongly.

But then there are people who are checking our paintings or they are following us on social media and are interested in joining us. But it has been difficult because I can't take so many in at the same time. And because it will affect the group dynamics. In our collective trust is a really crucial issue. The main issue, I would say. If there is a new person coming, it's affecting the feeling of trust. Can I trust this person? Can I still talk my things out loud? Our collective is such an interesting heterogeneous combination of different kinds of people, that it's not suitable for everyone.

The best way has been to meet potential newcomers on the street. We paint every year on the streets of Kontula, so it is an easy way to come and say hi and offer help.

The adult group is called an "arts collective," why is that? Does that help it be seen as part of the professional art world instead of "just a hobby group"?

HH: It could be called a community art collective as well. KAS is a group of people doing art together. Artist collectives generally share common aims, and doing art to public space is our shared goal.

I think KAS has different roles for different participants. For some it might be a hobby and for some it might be some kind of a job or a dream job. But I would say that for most it is a lifestyle, and something that connects them to the art world. My other supervisor in Uniarts, Lea Kantonen, has formulated that KAS is representing parallel art worlds. It's not higher or lower art. It's just parallel.

How would you describe KAS's relationship with the Kontula community, and what do you see as its main achievements within that community?

I think the main achievement has been that our art group has been successful in creating art for the public that's loved and highly appreciated by the locals. This can be seen through the ownership that the locals seem to have for our public art. Even though they haven't been painting the pieces, many still think it's their art and that they are part of it. Some people are protecting the artworks, one person even covered my sketches with plastic and cardboard when it started to rain. Kontula has a negative reputation in the media and the work that we have done has lifted the local self-esteem in its way.

I have noticed the ownership through discussions with the locals. For example, when we were painting this tunnel near the mall in summer 2024, I had many encounters with the locals passing by. The discussion continues in social media as well. Social media is really important for us. I've been defining KAS practice as a fourth sector work, urban activism. Social media is considered one of the platforms for urban activism.

How do you see community art's place between the art world and social work, does that distinction matter to you?

KAS is not only for people who need rehab or art therapy, or something like that. Our work brings positive side effects that the social work field enjoys. But the main goal for us always has been to do interesting public art. And I would say that we don't get interesting and fresh public art if we don't include people who are not usually doing it.

If we think about the art world, the question of ego is present all the time. Of course you can hear the echoes of egos in our group as well. We have had power issues, battles and such. But KAS people are self-aware, and we speak about how the collective doesn't work if we let the ego get too big. In the art scene the egos are so big. Artists easily see things only from their point of view. I think it's more interesting to work with people who are more open, and also self-critical. So, I would say that KAS activities for sure make a difference for the well-being, but that hasn't been the main goal ever.

Can you tell more about the power issues that you have faced during the years?

My goal as an activist researcher is to share the power I have. In the early years we had some power struggles. Some people didn't like that there's an authority. I have the authority; I have the power. For some it hasn't been easy to accept that I have been defining our goals—to do public art and work to diminish the stigmas. I'm aware of this, and I need to deal with the trouble.

Do you think community art gets the recognition it deserves, both in the arts and in society?

You are asking about community art, but as my community art practice is moving towards public art, I want to include it in my answer. I would say that this kind of community-based or socially-engaged public art practice that KAS is doing is such a new thing that it can't be really well recognised. But as I have gotten three prizes, I mean official recognitions, it's also telling that it's valued in some ways. But what is not recognised is the socially engaged or community-based public art itself.

I get really nauseous when the definition of community art is used incorrectly. Community is created together by people and usually it requires plenty of time. One of my main reasons to apply to doctoral studies was that I identified myself as a community artist. I wanted to join the discussions about the terminology and to improve the visibility of community art.

Let's continue with the topic of public art. Could you tell more about your relation to it?

We in our collective and in our community are questioning who is able to do public art. Who and why? And what could it look like, what could it be in general? We've been used to thinking that public art is commissioned work for high-status artists or some competitions. But who is on the jury? What kind of people are representing the jury, and by that actually representing the public for whom the public art is created? Who does it serve, really?

Public art is meant for the public, but the public is so diverse—how can you define whose taste is the dominant one? As KAS groups form from very diverse people, we are able to represent many different kinds of tastes of public art, or art in the public. This is one of my activist aims, to question the mainstream public art through our practice, and show another way to do it, try another way to do it. Because if you don't try, you don't know.

Are there some other activist aims that guide your practice in KAS?

Another activist aim is my original goal to bring different kinds of people together through art. And it's that even more strongly now, because even more diverse people wanted to join KAS. It was already in the beginning about stigma and about how certain groups of people are marginalised in our society. But now, it has been getting really clear for me that my goal and also the goal of many participants in the adults' group, is to question the stigma that is directed towards people who are or have been part of substance use cultures. I call it substance use cultures as it is a spectrum. On the same spectrum, we have really rich and functioning people who we don't pay attention to at all. And then we have people who are using substances, but they don't have money, maybe they don't even have a home. They are highly visible all the time in the public space for everyone, and their problems are well seen.

As a researcher, I have found out that the core question is about money. Both in the context of substance use and in the context of immigrants. No-one is against rich immigrants who are doing well. But then, people with immigrant backgrounds who are jobless and need to ask for social support are stigmatized.

I would simplify it to say that it's quite often a question of welfare, money-wise. This is KAS' activist goal: to break the stigma, to question the stigma. If one sees stigmatized people creating art it can help to break the stigma. Everybody can have issues in their lives, but they can still be smart and talented. It's good to consider that stigmatized people don't usually want to be re-stigmatized, they want to be equal with others.

KAS has managed to stay active and well-supported in ways many community art projects struggle with. What do you think has made that possible, and how would the collective and community be affected if that support ends?

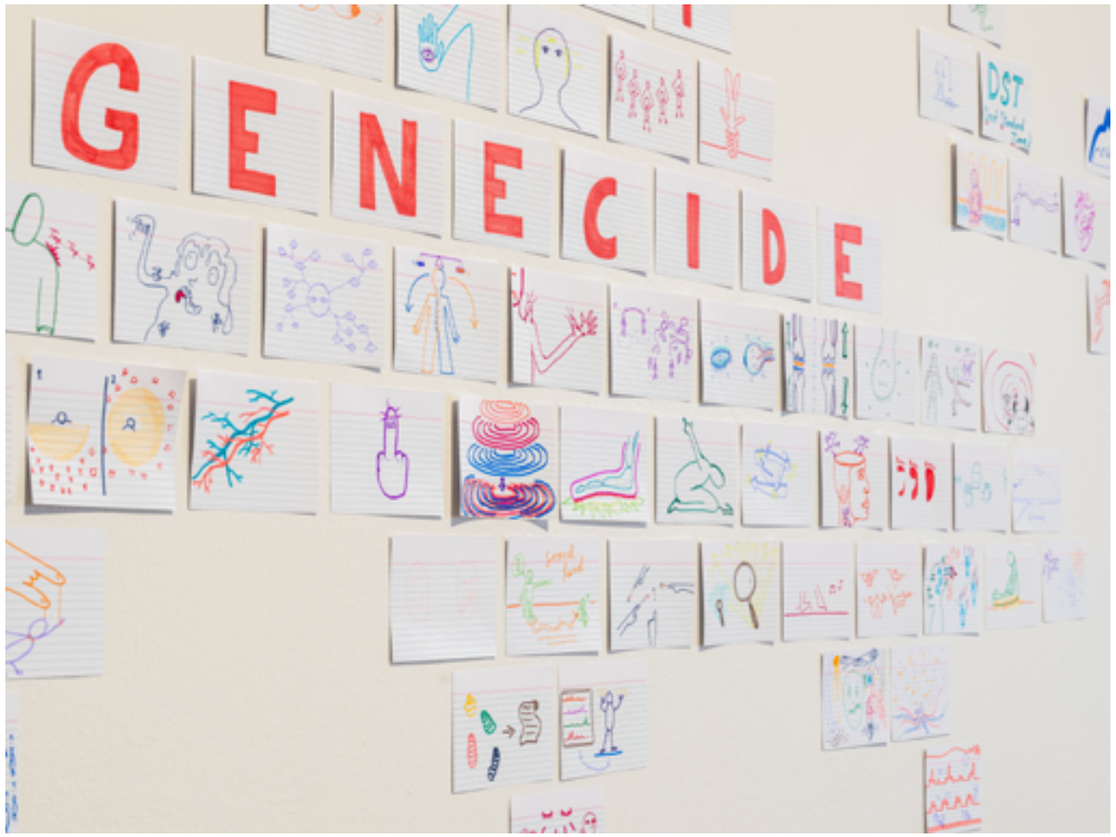
I think one part of why I've been getting grants and support for KAS is because it looks like participatory art. It has been in fashion, you could say. For example, I didn't start to do art because I wanted to be part of something. I just wanted to create art. Same with many others in our collective. They join community art practice because they want to do art with others. It's for the sake of art.

This is part of this toxic picture where art always comes second. Art itself doesn't have the value to get funding. But because it's participatory art, it's given money. I don't sign this. I don't like it. It's an ethical question.

Back to your question, what if I didn't have money for KAS? Well, I couldn't buy food–which is an important part of our practice, we eat together in every meeting–or paint. We use high-quality paints for these murals. I could maybe get some free paints, but they might be lesser in quality and we couldn't choose the colours. These are crucial things when doing high-quality art.

It's thanks to the money that KAS exists; I have been able to do my work. But I think the friendship would last even if I couldn't offer food and keep on going. The community would last and support each other, share ideas, feelings, and life situations. And maybe we would be able to continue working on a smaller scale. But public art in such a way that we are doing now is not possible without funding.

Heidi Backström is Helsinki-based writer, curator, editor, publisher and producer. Heidi works mostly in the field of performing arts, but is now studying in the Praxis programme in the Academy of Fine Arts.



Noora Karjalainen, Ursa Minor Ensemble: *The Disobedient Rhythm* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

THE RHYTHM OF DEAF ARTISTS: IN CONVERSATION WITH NOORA KARJALAINEN

Heidi Backström

Noora Karjalainen wants to open the deaf-centred theatre to different stages and to different audiences in Finland. Coming out from the margins requires structural support and allyship within the art field.

Theatre director and pedagogue Noora Karjalainen is making research about the corporeality of a deaf person and the body of the deaf actor on stage. The rhythm and everyday experiences of deaf artists have become valuable tools in this research. Karjalainen is the artistic director of the sign language theatre group Ursa Minor Ensemble. I met her one week before their latest premiere. *The Disobedient Gene* is a play based on historical research material on eugenics targeting deaf people from the 17th century to the present day. In this play—devised by the all deaf or sign language speaking working group—the deaf people do not surrender but they resist. The play is an important reminder that human rights are constantly in need of active defence.

While preparing for this interview, I realised how little I knew about deaf theatre and deaf culture in general. I have attended some live art performances created by or with deaf artists, but that's all. I hadn't really considered the living circumstances of sign language users in Finland from any perspective other than accessibility. Karjalainen introduced me to many valid points regarding the theatre ecosystem. Allieship is needed to ensure the rights of the deaf community, and different aesthetics and rhythms can only serve to strengthen the quality and value of the arts.

Heidi Backström: We need to start from the fact that I know very little about the world of deaf artists. I'm eager to learn more, but I might ask some very basic or even stupid questions. But I suppose not many other hearing people know much either. Actually, from reading your previous interviews and other media articles about your work, I gathered that you mainly get to talk about deafness in theatre. I hope to ask you other questions related to your practice, and not just use this opportunity to educate myself.

Noora Karjalainen: It's nice that you've been thinking about this. It's true that the previous interviews I've given have focused on deafness in theatre. Not that there's too many of those articles either. I think this is due to a lack of information and knowledge. And also because the deaf theatre has always been in the margins in Finland. Of course we have had some inclusive theatre productions here. For example Espoo City Theatre staged **Mark Medoff's** play *Children of a Lesser God* (Sanaton rakkaus) in their programme in 2019. But not too many to be frank.

We have two professional deaf theatres in Finland (Teatteri Totti and Ursa Minor). The deaf theatergoers are mainly sign language users. The general public hasn't found them. This is where the role of media interviews and articles comes into play, in terms of who they appeal to. They might make the reader feel as though the performances are only for sign language users.

What do you think should or could be done to this?

I think deaf theatre could appeal to a variety of audiences. We could consider the ecosystem of the art world and how the different artistic practices influence each other. Theatre created by deaf artists is powerful and beautiful. It is a way of seeing the world and human beings. I see potential and meaning for the whole ecosystem here.

You have also described yourself as a visual theatre maker. Is this one way to make your performances known to a general audience?

I guess I used to think that deaf theatre is visual theatre as such because it relies on visuality. This is how we are taught. But now that I have been doing my research, I've come to think that deaf theatre is a more multimodal and multisensory way of making theatre. Holistic way, you could say. Deaf theatre requires the visual aspect but also touch, haptics, all the smells, the senses, vibrations, lights... it's all there.

What is your relationship with physical theatre? It's also mentioned as part of your skillset.

My studies and training have focused quite strongly on physical and visual theatre. I have also been drawn to physical theatre myself. There are similarities between physical theatre and sign language theatre. For example, both use facial expressions, gestures, movement, body language and rhythm—and this feels homey. This is a natural part of my practice. The best thing is that my work can move between different genres and forms. So, if my work is visual or physical theatre, it is also dance- and movement-based art that incorporates cinema and sign language art.

Let's go to the beginning. How did you become a theatre-maker?

I was diagnosed as deaf when I was around four years old. After that, my family moved to a small city. I was a misfit child. Although I could speak, I couldn't hear well enough to hold a conversation with other children. I had to find ways to communicate with and connect with the other children. Playing and doing theatre helped me to connect with others, and to listen, touch and interact. This shaped my path significantly.

In upper secondary school, my gym teacher showed us a film about the deaf dancer **Juho Saarinen**. He was the first deaf person to be accepted into the Theatre Academy. This inspired me to pursue a career in theatre, and I applied to Turku Art Academy to study in the Performing Arts programme. I also completed part of my studies at the Dramatiska Högskolan in Stockholm.

While in Turku, I was part of an amateur deaf theatre group. It was there that, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was part of the deaf community. The time in Turku was meaningful as I had the same aged sign language users around me, and I saw theatre that was created specifically for deaf people by deaf people. Both were new experiences

Photo: Heidi Koivisto Robertson

for me. You could say that I discovered my identity as a Deaf person there.

After graduating from the Turku Art Academy I moved to Helsinki, where we formed a working group that later became the Ursa Minor Ensemble. That led me to apply to the Theatre Academy to study for a Master's degree in Theatre Pedagogy. I am now continuing those studies with my doctoral research.

Tell me more about your desire to conduct research.

Already when I was studying in Turku, I felt like there was something "off-mode" in theatre to me. I couldn't put my finger on what made me feel this way. I felt as though I were behind a glass wall or window during, for example, improvisation exercises or rehearsals.

The Theatre Pedagogy department at TEAK has provided me with great facilities, as we have studied alongside the dance department. It was at this intersection of the two fields that I started to find words and theory to support my experiences. I learned that corporeality plays a significant role. We have learned to adapt the theatrical techniques of hearing people, but have we ever actually stopped to think about how we (sign language users) exist in the world and how our bodies function in theatre? Is theatre built for us at all?

You could say that I fell down a rabbit hole. The deeper I go, the more things I find that need to be researched more thoroughly. At the same time, the research has been empowering. I've learned to value and celebrate my deaf body!

You are the artistic director of the professional Deaf theatre group Ursa Minor Ensemble. I've understood that the group plays a key role in your research. Could you tell me more about the ensemble, how it was formed, and how you work together?

As part of my Master's thesis in 2020, I invited sign language users to take part in a theatre laboratory with me. Participants didn't need to be professionals, but they did need to have some background in theatre. Due to the heavy restrictions imposed by the pandemic at the time, I could only take five people to the laboratory. Six of us worked together for four days. That was the starting point for the Ursa Minor Ensemble.

During the workshop, we explored ways to provide instructions using methods other than sign language. We talked and did physical and sensory exercises. An immense amount of material was gathered, and I realised that one master's thesis would not cover all our findings. The group stayed together, and in 2021 we performed our first play, *Growth*, followed by *Kuvanveistäjä* (The Sculptor) in 2023. After *Growth*, I started thinking about applying for doctoral studies because the more we researched these themes, the more questions arose. I wanted to understand deaf theatre better.

What have you discovered through your research so far? What are your current research questions?

In short, I am studying the body and corporeality of a deaf actor on stage. In other words, I am exploring how deaf people experience the world. How do we sense things, how do our perceptions form and how do we experience the world? What kind of practice can be developed from deaf reality for the stage? What kind of aesthetics emerge from deaf-centred practice? The topic is still broad.

My research group includes four deaf actors from the Ursa Minor Ensemble who act as co-researchers: **Olga Green**, **Quentin Green**, **Jarl Hanhikoski** and **Silja Ruonala**. Together, we carry out the practical part of my research, the theatre laboratories and artistic parts. The material is extensive, but I can highlight one example at this point. We have studied vibration and resonance extensively, both as bodily experiences and as ways of listening. We have conducted all of our experiments in dance studios with elastic floors. This allows us to sense each other's movements, directions and qualities of action, even when we cannot see each other. This frees us from having to receive all the cues and actions visually on stage. This is why our set and costume designer **Tanja Honkanen** has built us our own wooden stage, which resonates with the sound world of our sound designer **Joonas Leppä** and our own movements.

A performance called *The Disobedient Gene* is part of your research. It will premiere after this interview, and you are still in the rehearsal phase while we are talking. Could you share something about the play?

The Disobedient Gene is the first artistic part of my research. It is based on historical research material on eugenics targeting deaf people from the 17th century to the present day. Our entire working group consists of deaf people or sign language users, so the performance is based directly on the reality experienced by deaf people. We have also made a conscious choice to leave out interpretation, as we want to give the audience the opportunity to experience the world of deaf people. However, the performance can be enjoyed even if you do not know sign language. The performance was created using the devising method. First, we carried out a laboratory period, after which we began producing performance material within the artistic framework that I had prepared.

The audience will come to watch the research taking place on stage. While performing, we also constantly make observations about how our bodies work in the performance situation and space, and what we notice. We are already looking forward to the audience's presence and future discussions with them!

Can't wait to see it! Could you share some findings that you have made during this laboratory and rehearsal period? Is anything different from previous works?

Through this performance project, we have realised that research requires multidisciplinary collaboration. Set design, lighting, sound and the movement of the actors all shape our understanding of theatre. One aspect of this is the resonating stage and its potential, which I mentioned earlier.

Another thing here is the question of rhythm. When my researcher colleague, theatre-maker **Elina Izarra**, came to see *Kuvanveistäjä*, she pointed out that the rhythm in the performance was different from usual in performances. We became interested with this in the Ursa Minor Ensemble, so we started to investigate the matter more closely. How does our rhythm and tempo differ from the concept of time held by hearing people? We considered the rhythm of the stage, the rhythm of action, the rhythm of gaze and the rhythm of sign language. We drew inspiration from the work of Tertti Martola, a pioneer of rhythmic exercises for deaf people.

I recently saw a dance performance by Michael Turinsky, who is a physically disabled artist and theoretician. Their piece, *Work Body*, also addressed the concept of rhythm and drew parallels between the capitalist world order and the pace of able-bodied individuals. I find the rhythm of our time a highly interesting and relevant question.

I think that there are many different rhythms and times in the world. Deaf people have a universal concept called Deaf Standard Time (DST). This is the deaf community's own time, where things happen more slowly, are stretched out or, for example, we just keep signing even if we should go somewhere else. Now that we are conducting artistic research at Uniarts, it is important to acknowledge that this institution is also not easily accessible for deaf people. Deaf people still find it difficult to access art education or jobs. We have incorporated DST into our practice. We start workdays slowly and set aside plenty of time for discussions and reflection. We do things the deaf way and use deaf explaining. We operate at a slower pace and there is room for learning and slow development in the process. The fast-paced capitalist and ableist world is built on the ideal of the able-bodied person. DST as a practice provides the opportunity for a safer space.

Photo: Heidi Koivisto Robertson

Are there some good examples from other countries that we could adopt here in Finland to make the theatre field more deaf-centred?

Deaf theatre is approached and funded very differently in different countries. For example in Sweden Riksteatern Crea is part of Riksteatern, which gives them opportunities to tour nationally to reach deaf people all over Sweden and give them access to deaf theatre. This doesn't happen in Finland as easily as we don't have resources for touring.

In Norway Teater Manu is funded by the government like other professional theatres. They have a building of their own, and they also tour nationally and internationally. They perform for both deaf and hearing audiences.

The International Visual Theatre, located in Pigalle, Paris, is an independent theatre for deaf people. It is a theatre, publishing house and training centre. Half of its programme is produced in French Sign Language, while the other half is visual and physical performances. The IVT creates bold and distinctive performing arts where deaf people's own practices are at the heart of the work.

There are many examples around the world of how deaf theatre and hearing theatre can be combined. For example, in the United States, numerous bilingual musical theatre performances have been performed, also on Broadway. In Britain, theatres actively collaborate with deaf artists by hiring them to work either as actors, consultants or dramaturgs. Theatres are also adding sign language or inclusive performances to their repertoire. Deaf theatre is an active and significant part of the country's theatre scene. Here in Finland, we can learn a lot from the operating cultures of other countries.

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What could Finnish theatres do to become more supportive of the deaf community?

I wish the theatre houses could do more than the bare minimum of inclusivity work that they are asked to do. They should hire deaf actors for roles that are usually played by hearing actors. They should combine spoken language and sign language in new ways. They should offer their stages to deaf artists instead of only putting on a few shows with sign language interpretation. They should also increase the number of shows interpreted by deaf interpreters or performers.

This would make sign language more visible to the general public. It could make a huge difference to our small community at a time when our rights are at stake. In a functioning society, the rights of deaf people and the value of sign language theatre would be recognised without debate.

It turned out to be an educational moment after all. Thank you for that.

I hope that deaf-centred practice will find its place in the arts' biodiversity, and through my work, I hope to broaden people's understanding of what it means to be deaf. Deafness is not a tragedy, but something to be celebrated and cherished on stage.

Heidi Backström is Helsinki-based writer, curator, editor, publisher and producer. Heidi works mostly in the field of performing arts, but is now studying in the Praxis programme in the Academy of Fine Arts.

Dominik Schlienger & GaiaStage Ry: *Gaia Stage* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

DEFINING AGENCY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIK SCHLIENGER

Gabriel Thiam

In this interview, Dominik Schlienger explores human, technological, and ecological agency, arguing that ethical action, grassroots creativity, and artistic engagement can play a role in restoring balance between humanity, machines, and Gaia's interdependent systems.

There might be a general discrepancy between technologies that constitute our world and people's awareness of these technologies. Even as artists, creators and imaginers of tomorrow, we have problems defining our agency in the world of interfaces.

Dominik Sclienger is a musician and a researcher who has broad experience in developing sound technologies. He has studied agency in human-machine interactions and, in many ways, brings intelligible answers to the urgent question of how to be a part of the world.

Gabriel Thiam: You scrutinise the notion of agency in human-machine interactions and relations with respect to the Gaia principle. How can these machinic relations become more equal, and what can we learn from Gaia in this regard?

Dominik Schlienger: The Gaia principle expresses an interlinked balance in a network. If we push something in the networks in a particular direction, by causing global warming, for example, Gaia reacts to restore its balance. All nodes move if one node acts. And Our agency currently works against our interest, pushing nodes out of balance.

James Lovelock called it a system, but I think that's misleading. That's also the point Bruno Latour makes, Gaia is not a system but an interconnected network that forms a unit. The many agents in that network have their own ethical imperative. They negotiate their conditions to survive—or progress, in this interdependent "system" where we all depend on each other. We're out of balance, and we're not the only actants. All we can try to do is to act appropriately to not destroy those actants we need for our own existence. We're not alone, not helpless, but not free either. If we act less, it's better for the balance than if we act more, because our technical actions are problematic.

If we say that the problem is the technological system, and that technical actions are out of our hands, we give technology a systemic power it does not have. That's why, in the context of AI, for example, technology can serve as a Trojan horse: The human agency behind it is hidden, and makes some people believe in technology as a system.

How do you think technology can be developed from within an artistic practice, in light of Bruno Latour's interpretation of the technical mode of existence derived from Gilbert Simondon's theory of the technical object?

For me, art is always technical. In Greek philosophy, the terms of art and techne were sometimes interchangeably related. In Heideggerian thinking, the breaking off of techne from art can be read as the beginning of modern technology. I question this break, this schism, and I claim there never was a discontinuation. Modern technology and techne as in craftsmanship—they are the same technology, it's just the angle of conceptualisation that has changed. It's our material interaction that creates artifacts. The body is something very technical in that sense. So however we interact with the material world, this happens in a technical mode, in the technical mode of existence, as Latour defines it. We make things and we destroy things, often at the same time.

In Simondon, I really like that he says that we should look at technical objects as our friends, l'amitié is really important in Simondon towards the technical object. And I think this is particularly strong for artists and their tools. I come from music, and as musicians we have our instruments.

Many of my friends have names for their instruments. We get a really strong personal attachment, and funnily enough, possibly more so than to your own body. There's a phenomenological level where we communicate with the instrument, get answers back from the tool, as we work together. So it becomes a collaboration.

What are ways in which knowledge of technologies can be brought to the people?

Well, I think an important thing is to realise that there's a real discrepancy between technological or technical practices and technology as a theoretical concept. A very typical example is the discussion on AI. I participated in a workshop a few years ago about the future of AI, and how it could be more ethically developed. I was there as a consequence of my thesis, because I'm talking about agency in technology. Many of the participants were professional AI developers. In the workshops, the idea was to think about the future of AI: what can varying technologies bring us in the future? What futures do we see? Across the board, the answers were predominantly dystopian. Not many believed that there's any good in technology for the future. There were some post-human ideas floating around, like accellerationism, but all in all, in my perspective, they all had a strong dystopian element in them. And these were the people making the technologies!

It shows that there is such a massive misunderstanding of what we do and what we say we do. We really have to start to "think what we're doing". That is an Arendt quote. Our action, the doing, is totally removed from our thinking. It sounds so simplified, so banal. But she says we have to "think what we are doing." And this she said in 1958, it was in connection to her objection to nuclear power and nuclear technologies. Applied to AI, where we delegate thinking to the machines, Arendt's thought is so present and so important. It's like she could have written it yesterday, not in 1958. She said "If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is."

Gaia Stage, Espoo Day. Photo: Dominik Schlienger

Maybe what I was trying to get towards is how to bring people closer to these knowledges. For example, in ways that are completely benevolent, such as Creative Commons Zero, sharing of information with other people for the sake of general awareness, maybe even of what technology is?

Arendt again—the idea of the agora, which, interestingly, was originally the economic space where people exchanged things. That creates our society. It's not from above, and not from industry, it's our political action that forms our society. We negotiate. What do we need? When do we need it? How much do we need? And then it's not an external, determinist force. It's not a positivist view on technology. It's a "non-view" of technology, a way of reconceptualizing it as a social and material arrangement. "You're cold. I've got wood. I'll give you wood. We'll make a fire." "This guy doesn't have wood, but we can share so he's warm." These are all social and material arrangements, and technologies develop from that purposeful interaction. In the process of negotiations you find clever ways of doing things, you find things that use less energy.

Negotiation can be a force for social adhesion, and it's not a danger. According to Pierre Musso, whatever you imagine, you always imagine the contrary, too. And with technological thinking, this is very strong. The standard answer of many well-meaning critical thinkers is that all technologies have been developed for war. But they also have not, because whenever you imagine something, there's always the contrary as well. Every time you develop something nice and cozy and helpful, it can also become something really dangerous. This probably goes back to a Saussurean sense-making: if you say one thing, you exclude all else, and hence refer to it nonetheless etc.

The idea of an invention can also be made more tangible by proposing something else than just a binary. According to Matteo Pasquinelli, an invention ('Machine Intelligence') can have at least four different knowledges. For example, the human knowledge of the machine, the knowledge embodied by the machine's design, the tasks automated by the machine and the knowledge of the world made possible by its use. I'm thinking about how to form an awareness of inventions or of developing technologies.

This is why a grassroots interaction with technologies and the artistic interaction with the possibilities of materials are so important. Coming back to Simondon—to treat technical objects as friends. You won't throw something away when you have a deep emotional attachment to it: you fix it and you look after it. This is extremely important, and this comes from grassroots interaction, not from consumerism.

In the totality of technological existence, what counts as a gesture? What amount of knowledge do we have to have of technologies in order to actually act?

Well, I feel more important than knowledge is reflection, and many of the things we do happen without reflection. Reflection is really important at this stage in time because our basis is being destroyed. The environmentalists who say that we need to look after our surroundings mean that we need to reflect more.

Do you see Uniarts as an affirming facilitator for not only your project—Gaia Stage—in particular but also, say, carbon neutrality?

I think that they're trying to improve things, but a lot of the day-to-day actions of Uniarts are not exactly carbon-free. They have some good initiatives, though. For example, they support travelling by sustainable means and if your travel gets longer due to slower transportation, as a Uniarts employee, you get compensated through per diems. So it's a really fair offering. Going green is a question of income in many ways.

You say in an interview that, in your opinion, it would be important that artists and musicians understood that although the purpose of artistic work is to express immeasurable monetary values, the market still gives the work its monetary value. How well aware should artists then be of the monetary value of their work? And what is the role of pedagogy in forming an understanding of the non-monetary values of artistic activity?

That's an interesting question, because there's the misalignment of the value of art versus the value of work. And of course, this is a massive question, really. I think that Arendt is a good one to turn to, probably. The difference between labour and work and their different value systems—can they be, in any way, made congruent? I simply don't know. For every person in the West there are probably several people working for nearly free somewhere else, not in the West.

I think, right now, what's happening is that people are trying to get this message through, that artistic activity is something else.

We have this little free space where our sole duty is to explore and not to make financial sense. If it happens to pay someone's living, great. A lot of really super interesting things are possible. You can have a concert for only three people, but they can be the right people to be there, and it can give them something.

The value of art is that you can make an idea shareable—when I hear something that excites me and I can make other people hear it as well. It's just not measurable as a monetary value.

How should we grapple with the interfaces of technology and politics or even education within this art field, or beyond, as part of not only now but also the future? For example, the gadgets we use to navigate life?

Well, I think, I think it's important that we reflect on them (gadgets) as being part of our social life, that we recognize every technology relies on so many different actors all over. I don't know how many, but say there are 10,000 parts that make up a computer, and they come from about 1,000 different factories all over the world. I find it fascinating that these are social achievements. They come at the right hour to the place where they're assembled. Out comes a handy little laptop with which you can connect with the whole world immediately and everywhere.

Your question is, how can we understand this? It's possible that globalization is not all bad. How can we use this knowledge and experience—the possibilities of interconnected thinking—without any harmful impact? These are social skills too, to be able to organize ourselves in these ways. These are achievements, as humanity, to be able to be this interconnected. How can we use this in a non-harmful way?

A Swiss start up has just recently managed to develop something like a biodegradable computer with 25 cells. They call it a "brain" because everything has to be about AI and so on. They call it a brain cell, but actually it's something much more basic. It's a bio-organic semiconductor. It's totally biodegradable. This is amazing. With ideas and developments like these, how can we maintain our engagement with the world without, at the same time, burning it up?

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Norpas 2024. Photo: Dominik Schlienger

Marleena Huuhka: *Harmahtava, iltavaloa hehkuva taivas* / ءامس ءاسملا عوضيبحوتت قيدامر / *A Greyish Sky Glowing with Evening Light* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

PLAY, PERFORMANCE AND ACTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARLEENA HUUHKA

Gabriel Thiam

In this interview, performance and game scholar Marleena Huuhka shares ideas about gameplay, society and performance. The interview touches upon the theoretical framework of posthumanism and new materialism, particularly in the context of gaming and agency in society. Possible paths and forms of action are discussed.

Marleena Huuhka is a performance and game scholar who explores how play, agency, and resistance take shape across virtual and physical worlds. Huuhka's research, grounded in posthumanism and new materialism, positions video games not merely as entertainment but as complex sites where non-humans, code, bodies, and environments co-produce meaning. Her work traces how players navigate the algorithmic and predictable, subverting them into possible sites of counter action.

Huuhka reflects on academic practice, the politics of the everyday, and the proximities between scientific research and speculation. Moving between Minecraft, sites of annihilation, theatre theory, and the subtle resistances found in ordinary gestures, she considers how performance emerges where pre-coded rules dissolve and new possibilities arise. For the Research Pavilion, Huuhka integrates social media footage from Gaza into a narrative of resistance.

Gabriel Thiam: You have done academic work that has its theoretical framework in post-humanism and new materialism. Could you tell us about why this has been the path that you haven't counterplayed?

Marleena Huuhka: My background is in theatre studies, and when I graduated with my master's, I felt I no longer wanted to work with theatre in a traditional way. I then shifted toward studying video games as theatre, or as theatrical events or performances. At that time, post-humanism and new materialism were very much on trend—still relevant now, but especially fashionable ten years ago—so that may have been one reason I gravitated in that direction. But also, when working with video games, which are clearly code and algorithms doing things, the post-humanist and new materialist attention to the materiality and potential agency of virtual, technical, and algorithmic entities offered an interesting path to follow.

How "lateral" would you call the society in comparison to the world of games and vice versa? Are you optimistic about our possibilities as agents or perpetrators?

I'm not very optimistic. Obviously, I think we have more room to maneuver as humans than in games, if this is what you're asking. But our societies already have their path scripted out, and our ways of, for example, doing activism are pretty much already mapped out, meaning what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Of course, there are always meanings that go beyond those borders, but maybe changing them happens quite slowly.

In one of your research articles—connected to your dissertation—you propose a taxonomy for analysing the use of video games in theatre, including performance in video games, video games as performance, and gameplay as performance. How do you connect performance to everyday life and the choices we make as citizens?

A performance scholar might say that everything we do is a performance. Even right now, we are both performing: you're performing the role of interviewer, and I'm performing the role of a scholar who tries to remember what they wrote in their dissertation. In that sense, performance is always present in our actions.

When we talk about artistic performance, the difference is in the framing, because not every action is immediately understood as performance—yet once we name it as such, it becomes performative. In everyday life, if you look at a situation on the street and decide to frame it as a performance—a fight, children playing, people passing by—it begins to appear differently. There is always movement, always activity, and our lives are performative in the sense that we each have positions to occupy and roles to navigate within society.

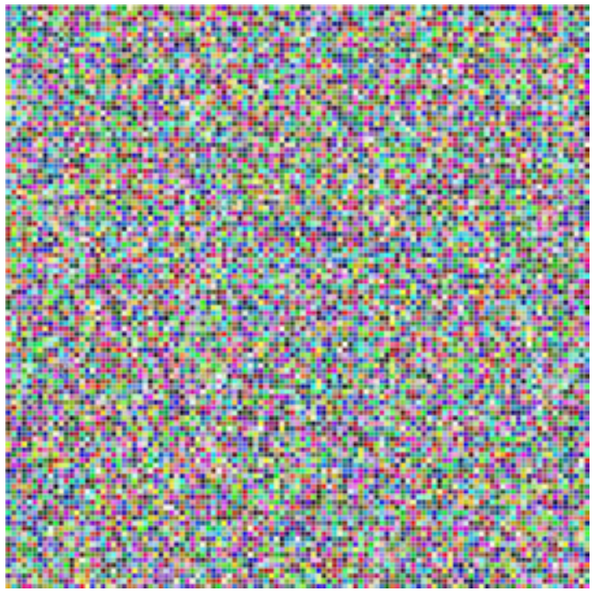
This also connects to your earlier question about our capacity for movement or change. That capacity is tied to the roles and performative practices we engage in as human beings.

While completing your thesis, Weird Encounters in Virtual Worlds, how did you manage having your feet on the ground in what we could call "real life," and what could that even mean in academic work?

I'm not sure I really did. The kind of research I do is largely speculative and theoretical. I did some groundwork with students, but most of it operates at a theoretical level. That's something I'm interested in exploring further—how to actually integrate my work into everyday practices.

Are there ever clashes or shocks while moving between the real, the virtual and the research material?

I wouldn't say there are shocks, but there's definitely a lot of interpretation involved when working with different materialities and datasets. In researching video games or performances, the material isn't always as concrete as in other types of research. In my thesis, for example, much of what I discuss relates to feelings—what kinds of emotions arise from playing, or how students describe their experiences. I haven't faced clashes per se, but there have been challenges in understanding and conveying these personal experiences. The research



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material is very subjective, so the question becomes: how can it convey meaning in a way that's understandable in a broader academic context? My PhD thesis isn't artistic research, it's strictly scientific, which also imposed limitations on how much I could speculate.

Can the form of autoethnography be exclusive? Do you ever consider your position in academia overall as catering to almost solipsistic stances?

Working in academia, all the people work from the angle of curiosity. Game studies tend to still be pretty company-orientated, and they (the companies) seek to find some kind of benefit from things. So I think, in a way, I have pretty much carved out for myself a weird space in academia. I really don't know how to answer this any better; it's a difficult question.

According to Dave Graeber, who you refer to in your thesis, the radical intellectual should look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they're already doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, as possibilities, as gifts. There is a lack of study of, for example, the implications of actions made by our government in relation to the art and culture budget. How, if at all, do you apply Graeber's statement on the radical intellectual to your practice, and what role does research play in it?

Well, it's something I haven't really thought about, our government. I don't know if I'm even that interested in working on that kind of political level in the Finnish context, because I don't really see anything good coming out of it. I'm pretty skeptical that that can actually make an impact. And I think that in the context of doing otherwise, like the things that I'm interested in, they are not, for example, alternative artists or anything like that. I'm more interested in what people do in their everyday lives. And, of course, those moments don't necessarily translate into political action, or action on that scale... Of course all everyday actions are political, but they don't necessarily have anything to do with what is going on on the upper level.

Now with my current project, which is also part of the Research Pavilion, where I'm looking at social media footage from Gaza, I guess that doing otherwise might apply. In a way I'm looking at what people are doing there, what they decide to show of their lives, and how I can, as a researcher, talk about that material, and how I can write it into a narrative of resistance. I am doing exactly what Graeber implies, but I don't know if what I write will return to the people who have been the inspiration for it. Offering back sounds easy, but it's not.

Do you think of yourself as a radical intellectual?

Well, yes, in a way I do. For example, I decided to do work on Gaza and apply to get funding at a moment when it was forbidden to talk about Gaza in the Finnish academic system, a year and a half ago. At that point I did feel very radical.

You have said that performance is what stays after the predetermined actions melt away. What do you mean by this?

I think it is related to Antonin Artaud. For him, a performance is what emerges when everything is already gone. The most famous quote by Artaud describing performance talks about a city destroyed by a plague. Most people have died, but some remain, and they do things that have lost their meaning—they rob, hoard, and act in ways that no longer carry value, because everything has already been destroyed and death is looming. For Artaud, theatre happens when things are completely gratuitous and arbitrary.

I've used this interpretation in the context of gaming. I think of gameplay as performance: when I decide not to play according to the rules, or not to do what the game or its designers want me to do, that space where I choose to act differently is where performance is present.

Marvin Carlson defines performance as threefold: display of skills, patterned behaviour and keeping up a standard. Erica Fisher-Lichte defines performance as a sort of transformativity. Other theoreticians include Richard Schechner, Linda Hutcheon and Judith Butler. Who or what is able to perform?

Well, that's a big discussion. Coming back to what I said earlier, when thinking about performance, the key is the framing of it—basically, anything can perform when it's framed correctly. How do things perform? Do they need help?

When we think about object theatre or puppet theatre, we ask whether puppets perform. The performance might not happen independently. It's the same with a kindergarten play—it doesn't happen without some kind of direction from outside. Or another big production, for that matter: there's a director who directs the actors, and they do what they're told. Or, if we think of someone playing the violin from the sheet music, it's a script the performer follows. Anything is able to perform, but it might need a little help.

The profit of a performance is tied to spectatorship, not the performance itself. How can we, then, as spectators, embrace and support freedom of performance?

I'm not sure we need to. Or I think that would be another question. Because a lot of the things that I talk about are not part of the consumerist or capitalist art environment where people do it for money. So if I talk about things that happen in video games, it might be that nobody even sees those things. I don't know if there's a necessity or need to support those things, except maybe by just doing them yourself and supporting your own creativity. Mostly this is talked about to separate the performance from the audience so that we're not always talking about something that is made to be watched or made to be seen multiple times.

You refer to people such as Antonin Artaud and Rosi Bradotti after forming research material from Minecraft and Lego Harry Potter. Do you think that these corners of the world are separated from the structures that do not have individualistic or human-centred references?

I experimented with many different things while playing Minecraft, and what that showed me was a sense of open-ended possibility.. In that way, Minecraft offers a way to understand something about the world and society—not through its characters or environments alone, but through the endlessness of its generation. It shows how algorithms take on material form, how a world continually brings itself into being. I'm not sure we can learn the same from Lego Harry Potter.

Throughout the process of the four articles on the basis of your thesis, you said to have understood gameplay as "material activity created through and in the bodies of my human and non-human peers and myself" and that "deconstruction of human dominance should be aimed for." How, if at all, can this inspire our thinking in general?

Gameplay is such a bodily experience, such a material experience, at least for me. We could talk about immersion. I guess what we could learn from it would be to understand technology better on a more corporate level. If we think about ChatGPT, people just use it, not thinking about what actually happens when they use it or what kinds of processes go on behind some single line of answer. We could understand these processes better. Gaming could be a way of grasping other electronic, digital, nanotechnological spaces that are usually hidden from us.

Do you think that anarchic counterplay can be edifying from an environmental point of view? And if so, then why? Can this form of decision-making be applicable to an actor in society in the face of, say, climate change?

I think it can. I, however, might be applying anarchic counterplay to a different kind of activist work than work against climate change. I do believe there is a lot of potential in it, and that it can be applied in other things and gaming as well. In the Research Pavilion there will be a tiny piece about my bigger postdoc project, where one part of it is looking at play during war as a form of counterplay against these current situations. So yes, anarchic counterplay can be applicable, and it's something I would like to work with in the future.

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Veli Lehtovaara in collaboration with Jani Hietanen: *Laituri | The Pier* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

ECOLOGICAL POETICS IN DANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH VELI LEHTOVAARA

Lyenne Palü

In his work, choreographer and researcher Veli Lehtovaara explores how the porous, sensing body can open pathways to ecological awareness – and how choreographic writing can generate its own kind of poetics.

Bodies carry a knowledge within them that is too often overlooked—the sediments of our sensuous memories, the bodily feeling of being in this world. In times of multiplying ecological crises, connecting with our physical habitat and entering into more conscious relations with our environment becomes especially crucial.

In this field, choreographer and researcher Veli Lehtovaara situates his practice. He investigates the relationship between language and dance through an open, experimental approach to choreographic writing and finds, on the many thresholds within the realm of dancing, the space where ecological poetics can emerge.

This interview traces the flow of language in Veli's choreographic processes, his encounters in the forest, and a transformable pier that will begin its journey to different bodies of water throughout 2026 as part of the research exhibition *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries*.

Lyenne Palü: You move between the roles of performer, choreographer, doctoral researcher, and artistic director, among others. To begin, could you share how dance has shaped the way you experience and relate to the world?

Veli Lehtovaara: Growing up in an environment where conceptual and scientific knowledge was dominating, bodily knowledge was often pushed aside or not trusted. Dance, especially somatic and perception-orientated practices, changed that for me. It gave me access to a new kind of knowledge: different ways of relating to my body, but also to other bodies, human and more-than-human, through my senses.

In the past few years, I've worked a lot with practices that connect visual perception with the sense of weight—with movement as a shift of weight. Seeing is not passive but an active process full of often unconscious choices. I can choreograph my seeing: for example, through directing attention to the periphery or a focal point, to what is mobile or still in relation to me. These practices have changed how I move through the world and how the world appears to me.

Working in experimental dance and theatre also gave me tools to focus on the relation between the inner experience of my body and the sensory experience of the environment. A choreographic question that has emerged is how energy and information move between the two. I situate dance on this porous edge between the sensing-feeling body and the habitat, which is shared and created together with other kinds of living beings. I'm interested in methods involving deconstructing and rebuilding how we use the senses in dance and performance, and I've learnt ways of cultivating bodily awareness together with environmental awareness.

Your research explores ecological poetics in dance and choreographic writing. Beyond theory, how do you encounter ecological poetics in practice—in movement or in writing?

I can try to explain, but as long as we speak about it instead of experiencing it, we are in the realm of language and theory.

In my writing, I've noticed that an embodied, collective choreographic process can produce its own kind of language and literal poetics that is able to communicate and be ecologically relevant.

In terms of dance, I'm thinking of *Nature Untitled – Movement III*. This performance takes place in a shopping centre in Kalasatama, Helsinki, where the audience sits on boxes filled with fresh wood while the performers dance among and around them. At the same time, another environment is present through headphones: field recordings from an old-growth forest and a voice describing ecological processes, phenomena and creatures living there.

The dancers have visited that forest—the Siikavaara protected area in the Kainuu region—together with nature guide, environmental educator and forest activist Riitta (Nyyskä) Nykänen, whose voice the audience hears. So, the audio track can invite the dancers' bodily memories of that place while they simultaneously respond to the very concrete, tactile and visual environment of the shopping centre.

There is a juxtaposition of two very different, almost contradictory environments. The dancers move in a kind of liminal third space between them, continuously linking the two.

Do you see this linking as the poetic act of the choreography?

I do. This in-between space—that's where the poetics come into being, through the dancers' bodies, through their movements. That is the case in all my choreographies, but that in-between space always manifests itself in different ways.

The most fundamental in-between, for me, is the relation between the inner space of our bodies—our internal experience—and the surrounding environment.

Finding the right language for a dance is important for you, and you describe your choreographic writing as a "score, instruction, script, spell, recipe or code." Could you share what such a spell, for example, might look like? And how does the choice of this range inform your dances?

Here's a small fragment of text from *Nature Untitled – Movement II*, spoken aloud during the performance, that can function like a spell:

spider

finger, tiger

error

Photo: Jussi Virkkumaa / Saari Residence

An instruction for it could be this: repeat these words speaking aloud, always in different speed, order and rhythm, including hesitations or getting stuck. Continue as long as you stay curious to find new ways of embodying the words with your voice and movement. For example: spider, finger, tiger error, finger spider. Error, tiger, finger, error. Spider tiger spider finger, error.

I wanted to open the windows and doors so that choreographic writing could be all those things. It's also a task for me to think about what choreographic writing can be. For example, it can mean a specific notation: symbols that were invented for dance. It can also mean literal written task scripts. Another way to think about choreographic writing is to consider how dance inscribes itself into a specific place or environment—how it becomes part of that place, or more specifically, part of our experience of that place.

So in that sense, dance is a form of writing?

Yes, you can look at it like that. Dance inscribes itself into a place, and through that, we experience the place differently—our memory of it changes. This applies to the performers as well as to the spectators.

When I think about this relation between dance and place, it also connects to certain practices I've carried into my work. One of them is the act of greeting—something that happens before the dance. Sometimes I use it as part of a choreographic score. Greeting a place, another living being, or an element like water, wind, or a season.

Finno-Baltic myths and folklore, once written down from older oral traditions, allow us to read traces of these greeting practices today. In these texts, you can read about habits of greeting places, buildings, and various beings—gestures that were once part of everyday life.

What does that look like when you greet a place? Do you say hi?

That's one possibility. The greeting can be spoken, or it might take another vocal form, like singing or humming. It can also be a gesture you make within your mind and body – or a movement, a way of directing your attention toward whatever you're encountering. Sometimes it's also a question: "can I be here? Is it okay if I enter this temporary relationship?"

Do you ever feel that a place doesn't welcome you?

Yes, sometimes. It's just like with humans—if you pay attention, you feel whether you're welcome or not. I think that's also possible with places, other living beings, and even natural phenomena.

Here's one nature-connection practice I learnt from Osma Naukkarinen and often do in a forest: I begin by wandering and listening with my whole body, noticing where I feel drawn. When I arrive somewhere, I ask if I can be there. If it feels like "maybe not", I keep walking; if it feels welcoming, I stop and simply stay—doing nothing at first, just arriving. Then I begin to explore the place through my senses: through touch, smell, sight, listening/hearing... From that, movement may emerge. It might look like dancing, or it might be barely visible, but the focus is on connecting to the place through the senses in that moment. For me, this is one way of working with ecological poetics in movement.

When you return to the studio to write choreography, what does the process look like—for you and the dancers?

I usually propose simple words, directions or orientations—quite many of them—and together they form a kind of landscape that the dancers navigate by choosing what to include and what to leave out. Ultimately, their choices shape what the dance becomes. It's a collective, embodied and iterative process: we dance, we watch, and we try to find words for the dance.

Some fragments of language come directly from working with scores and specific performers. Later I edit, re-edit, translate, and maybe add something – in performance the text returns to the body when a performer speaks it. So it becomes re-embodied. The words move from the dancing body to the page and back to the body again. It becomes a cycle, a flow of language.

Creating dance is, for me, a very oral process. Sometimes we write something down and return to it later; sometimes the text becomes a score for speaking. Some of these texts aren't danced at all—they emerge from dance but then exist simply as choreographic speech or text.

How do you think about authorship in that process?

Authorship, for me, is fluid, and agency is distributed. But the agency of the performer is fundamental. I'm interested in creating circumstances where the dancer can follow their own curiosity and imagination.

You aim to develop choreography to think about ecological problems. I wondered if you could share your thoughts on what choreography can *actually do* in the face of ecological crises—and where you see its limits as a tool for real-world ecological change?

The environmental changes and ecological catastrophes that we are creating and facing are so complex and interconnected that we need to respond to them on many scales and in many fields of human activity. Art and dance have their share in this. Yet in ecological and environmental discourses—especially in Western approaches—the body is often forgotten, or we don't know how to include it, and I think that's part of the core problem.

Bodies carry enormous amounts of information and knowledge. Experimental dance practices, in my experience, recognise this and have developed methods to cultivate an embodied environmental awareness: an awareness of our own body, of other bodies, and of the materials and forces shaping our environments. For me, this corporeal awareness is necessary in our struggle to respond to ecological crises.

There are some somatic techniques I work with that create access, in dancing and choreographing, to the body's memory. What you carry in your body is your whole history—from infancy until today: things you've done, things you've practised, dances you've danced, encounters you've had. Your body holds traces and memories of all of these. I think of them as sedimentations that can be revisited and that can surface in the dancing body when you relate to it with care and with certain techniques that can be used in dance.

Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries introduces a pier, which continues your earlier _Nature Untitled_ works. What will visitors encounter in this installation, and how does it initiate the research you'll be developing over the next year?

The exhibition marks the "launch" of a year-long practical research process. In this, I will bring a pier to different locations and place it on natural waters—lakes, ponds and the sea. It's shaped like an eight-directional compass, but it's modular and can also take on other forms. In the exhibition space, the pier functions as a sculpture and invites visitors to imagine, bodily, what it might be like to float and drift at Gilbbesjávri, Ypykkälampi, Päijänne or in the bay of an island in the archipelago. I hope they can slow down for a moment, rest on the pier, and tune in to their own bodies—feel where they are and how they're feeling.

The sculpture will also include sound elements and choreographic speech that address the visitor's body through different registers of sensuous information.

What questions do you take with you for this research, and what kind of encounters do you hope to make with it?

I'm curious about what will happen when I bring this architectural object on water—something that floats and can even detach from the shore. How does my body experience the surrounding environment from that position? How do I connect with the water, its temperature and conditions, with the air and the sky that opens above, and with the land that borders the water? I think of the pier as a kind of vessel or interface between these elements, and I want to explore how a body can situate itself differently through this platform.

Another question I take with me is how the pier can invite people: how it can make the research accessible to communities with very different backgrounds and different relationships to body, dance and art. I also hope to create opportunities for people from the places I visit and for researchers from other disciplines to engage with the practices I've developed so far. This time the work is an ongoing process rather than a finished performance, and I'm interested in opening it up while the questions are still unfolding.

Lyenne Palü is a Swiss artist and writer, currently on exchange in the Master's programme Praxis – Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art while collecting ghost stories, weather reports, and medieval memes.

Whyte & Zettergren (Olando Whyte and Rut Karin Zettergren): *Galaxy Revolution* (2025)
Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries research exhibition in Kuva/Tila gallery, 5–21 December 2025, Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki.
Photo: Petri Summanen

HEALING THROUGH SPACE TRAVEL: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUT KARIN ZETTERGREN FROM WHYTE & ZETTERGREN

Lyenne Palü

Jamaican-Swedish artist duo Whyte&Zettergren's work explores transatlantic histories, tracing places and materials, and using healing practices to confront historical trauma and imagine alternative futures.

Transatlantic cultural heritages, healing practices, and speculative space travel form the constellation at the heart of Whyte&Zettergren's latest work Galaxy Revolution—Space travel as a tool for change.

The duo, consisting of Swedish visual artist Rut Karin Zettergren and Jamaican dancer and performance artist Olando Whyte, have collaborated since 2018, when they began tracing connections between the Nordics and the Caribbean through sites historically linked to the triangular trade. Bringing their different cultural contexts and artistic methods into dialogue, they work with objects crafted from materials extracted, manufactured, or exported from these places, developing practices that open pathways for world-building and healing.

On the day of our conversation, Olando cannot join us due to Hurricane Melissa, which struck Jamaica days earlier. Despite these difficult circumstances, Rut Karin shares insights into their collaborative practice.

Lyenne Palü: How is Olando doing at the moment?

Rut Karin Zettergren: He lives in Kingston, which, compared to other parishes, was not affected by the hurricane as badly, but there's still a lot of heavy damage. Trees have fallen on his roof, which needs rebuilding now, but it's still raining. So we are trying to organise some support to help with this right now.

And you were there yourself only a few days ago.

Yes, by the time I left for Finland, we already knew a tropical storm was on its way, but not yet whether it would hit Jamaica directly or how strong it would be. So I have been watching news updates all week, and when it hit land on Tuesday, it turned out to be their strongest hurricane recorded in history. With climate change, of course, these are getting stronger and more frequent. It's the third time in three years now that Olando has had to fix his roof because of storms or enormous rainfall.

That's a lot to go through. And what you're describing also already connects to the themes you address in your work together with Olando—how upheld power structures and violent histories continue to shape the present, for instance.

In Jamaica—and really everywhere—you can't separate climate change from colonialism and the old plantation economy. The indigenous population didn't plant the land in the same way before that. Jamaica has volcanic bedrock, the soil isn't very deep, and there were rainforests. But with the sugarcane monoculture, big parts of the island were deforested, and later the bauxite mining also cleared and damaged huge areas. The soil doesn't hold in the same way anymore. So the landslides and all the damage now, they're definitely connected to that history.

Your collaboration as the artist duo Whyte&Zettergren began in 2018. Can you share with us how you met and what places of interest you were both coming from at that time?

Olando and I are both working together, but we are also partners privately. In 2014, I was filming a project about Dancehall in Jamaica. I was interested in this music genre and how it had come to the Nordic countries. That's how I met him, because he's a dancer.

When we started collaborating, the question of how coloniality has shaped both Jamaica and Sweden was very present. Our first project together, *Herring, Iron, Gunpowder, Humans and Sugar,* traced materials and places across the two countries.

One starting point was when we were in a supermarket in Jamaica, and I was like, "Why do you have salted herring here?" because the herring fishery and industry is really big on Tjörn, the island where I grew up. Only then did we find out why it's also part of the local culture in Jamaica: it was exported from the Nordic region as a cheap source of protein for enslaved people during the transatlantic triangular slave trade—to maintain their labor capacity in this very brutal system. For Sweden, even if it wasn't the largest player in the triangular trade, it was an economic surplus to export salt fish—and still, in the Nordic regions, these histories haven't really been told.

So in our work, we explore these material histories that connect our countries, as well as their differences and how they've played out. In Jamaica, of course, the impact is more extreme; the culture is still shaped by this violent history. In Sweden, these legacies are more subtly embedded, for example, in cultural practices like Fika, which has its roots in colonial goods.

Our artistic practices also met in this context. Olando began to draw more on Afro-Jamaican rituals from his heritage, developing them into performance and ritual forms that are not exactly traditional but adapted—using materials from the places we work in, combining them with contemporary art approaches.

Is he choosing not to do these rituals in their historic form in order to keep them separate from his artistic practice?

That, but also because these more original forms of healing practices can in certain circumstances be read as rituals that are illegal in Jamaica. Jamaica has a law called *The Obeah Act* that was introduced under a different name, *An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves*, after the big slave uprising *Tacky's Rebellion* in 1760. These communal rituals were believed to make the practitioners

immortal—that the bullets of the enslavers couldn't hurt them. Whether the British colonial authorities actually believed this is questionable, since witchcraft was legal in Great Britain at the time. But the community-building aspect of Obeah traditions made the enslaved people strong enough to organise uprisings, which was very dangerous for the colonialists. And because the Black population outnumbered the White population in Jamaica, the colonial violence had to be very high to prevent further uprisings.

So after that, they had a death penalty for what was defined to be Obeah, and later on they rewrote it to be called *The Obeah Act* in 1898. Today, the police can still search your house and arrest you on suspicion of practising Obeah. The law is debated and rarely used, but people are sometimes held without charge or asked for bribes. This year, a case went to court and the person was fined. And the definition is so broad in the sense that you're not allowed to use what they call "tools of Obeah," which can be a candle, silver rings, herbs, rum, water or soil. So in theory every church service could fall under this, but Christianity is very strong in Jamaica and it's only people practicing more traditional Afro-Jamaican traditions who are targeted.

For Olando, his performance and dance practices are a lot about healing. In our collaboration, he has brought in this knowledge, while I contribute mine from fine art, filming, sculpture, and thinking through performance scores.

Now I've shared a lot of historical background, but I think if you're coming from a Western perspective, these things might be harder to understand without it, since they're rooted in a very specific Jamaican context. I'm sharing these practices from my perspective as someone who is not Jamaican and doesn't have the same depth of cultural knowledge as Olando, while he would likely describe our work and his practice differently, informed by his heritage and culture.

Still image of Whyte & Zettergren conducting geological training in a former sulphur mine near Lake Mývatn, Iceland. Image credit: Bryndís Björnsdóttir

In *Idiorrhythmic Imaginaries*, you're showing Galaxy Revolution—Space travel as a tool for reimagination. It's an interactive work combining game instructions, stories, research notes, drawings, and videos of space training practices, amongst other things. Could you tell us about how this work developed and how the healing practices enter into it?

We were invited by Bryndís Björnsdóttir to do a project in Iceland that explored the country's colonial histories. We were a small group of artists, and Bryndís organised lectures for us. In one of them, we learnt that Iceland had been used to train the Apollo 11 astronauts. Because its volcanic landscapes were believed most similar to the moon, they used it to practice collecting moon dust—which we found really fascinating.

In my own work, I engage a lot with speculative fiction from a feminist point of view, thinking about different worlds and futures, reading authors like Ursula K. Le Guin or Alice Bradley Sheldon (who published as James Tiptree Jr). Olando was drawn to space in his own way, through dreams, music and drawings, and through what he named "Yaad Futurism"—a local Jamaican perspective on futurity that draws on the yard, the word for homestead. So, our interests met in thinking about space, in connecting it to colonial histories and seeing the space race as a form of continuing colonisation.

We learnt that Iceland doesn't have an official governmental space agency. There is a private organisation called the Iceland Space Agency, initially formed by just one guy. So we thought, "Okay, we can have our own space agency too." What the astronauts did in Iceland we've found out by visiting the locations and talking to Örlygur Hnefill Örlygsson at the Exploration Museum in Húsavík. There, we saw materials left by the astronauts and learnt how they trained in geology. When we revisited these places, we did our own practices for our space travelling programme, quite spontaneously coming up with exercises like drawing in the sand and imagining journeys to different planets.

Being in a place that carries its own mythologies of technological progress and conquest, I was curious how you chose to engage with it—how to complicate or resist these dominant narratives that tend to erase marginalised histories?

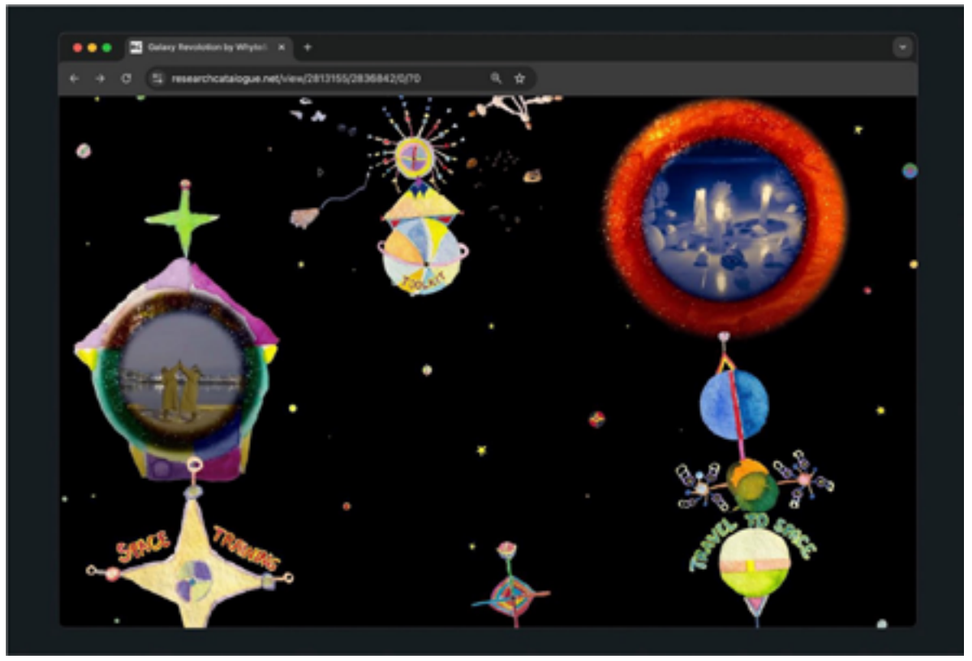
I think for us it was more about reimagination. Of course, the Apollo program and NASA produced a lot of research and technological development, but there are these grand narratives carrying this idea of progression that is closely tied to colonisation; we see it in how Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos imagine life in space. Imagining different futures is important, because otherwise it's only people like them shaping these visions—neural links in your brain, mining on Mars, or living in free-floating space pod colonies. Because they have so much money, they get to make these predictions.

Instead of continuing that predominant tradition, we are interested in more imaginative practices: feminist speculative fiction, Afrofuturism, local futurism—ways of imagining space as somewhere you could be free or where the world could be different. So parts of our space-travelling programme became almost like a game, a bit like how children play, rather than a hard industrial programme. Others are more like ritual acts. These games or practices help you envision another future, and imagining a different future can also prompt you to change the present.

For Olando, the ritual side is also a connection to the past, to ancestors or people who aren't here anymore. He has a different perspective on time than I do; the boundaries between a spiritual and a physical plane feel less separate to him. I'm more shaped by Western thinking, but I'm trying to invite his perspective and not reproduce the same hierarchy.

I was struck by the poetic gesture in Act 1 of your launch ceremony, where you turn a model of an old trading ship into a spaceship. You describe this as a "healing practice for the space race," bringing objects that witness historical trauma into the future. What does it mean, for you, to carry historical trauma forward, and how can this act function as a form of healing or transformation?

I think it's partly an act of remembering. Even if you imagine a different life in space, you're still formed by history. In Olando's case, very personal experiences shaped by the violent history of Jamaica—and specifically his own community—



Screen capture of the exposition *Galaxy Revolution*, published in *VIS: Nordic Journal of Artistic Research*, no. 13, *Breftopia*.

influence how he works and why he can do these actions. So, carrying that history doesn't mean reproducing it; it's about bringing the knowledge of the past into the future.

It's similar with feminism. The oppression of women has shaped what feminism is and its practices of care. If that oppression had never existed, technology might have been developed very differently from the beginning. The same with colonies—the world would look very different. But since this is our history, remembering the trauma becomes a way of knowing how to act, or how not to act—a way of acting in the world differently.

In the exhibition, I wondered what you expected the audience to engage with in your work. In the instructions I read that they are invited to "(mis)use" your methods to reshape the past, present, and future in their own ways. I'm curious how you mean that and how you navigate the challenges of remixing histories and rituals without unintentionally appropriating or simplifying complex cultural traumas.

We hadn't thought about it that way—we imagined that wherever you are, you could explore a practice of your own. Not by doing Afro-Jamaican rituals, but by developing a ritual from your own culture as a practice to reimagine. So, "misusing" our methods can mean anything; it's an invitation: one person might imagine a future without genders, another a future without money. For us, it made sense to work in a greenhouse or in places where the Apollo astronauts trained. For others, it might be somewhere in their own community. The idea is to open up possibilities rather than prescribe a specific outcome.

When you imagine visiting other beings or planets, what do you want to learn from that experience? How do these imaginative journeys shape your perspectives?

I feel that these fictive journeys are really about seeing the world in a different way—returning to the present with a shifted perspective. Sometimes it's almost like meditating together: creating a calm, imaginative space where we can simply notice things and say, "Oh, look at this beautiful plant." In my head it looks one way, it will look different in Olando's, and by sharing those images we build a kind of shared imaginary space.

It's a way to acknowledge these complicated histories and cultural differences while also imagining how things might play out otherwise in the future. Another tool that helps me with that is filming with infrared—it lets us see the world as if it were another planet, which puts me in a playful, almost childlike mindset. In those moments, I try not to be analytical but to focus on the act of filming, of looking, and of seeing the world in a different way.

Lyenne Palü is a Swiss artist and writer, currently on exchange in the Master's programme Praxis – Curating and Writing in Contemporary Art & collecting ghost stories, weather reports, and medieval memes.

For direct access to the online work itself, see here:
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