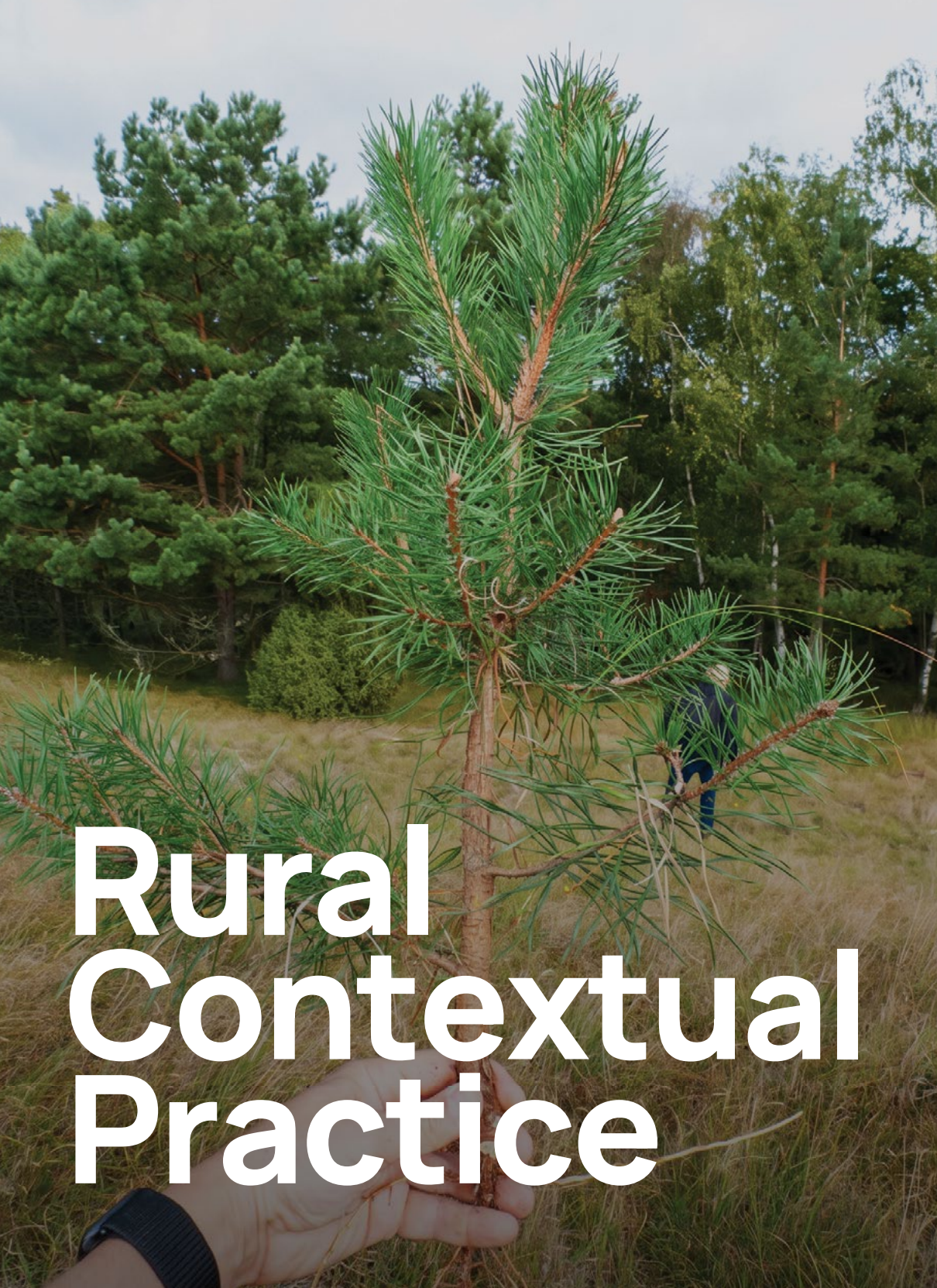


Rural Contextual Practice

TOWARDS A PLACE-BASED ARTS PEDAGOGY

A document from the development of a new MFA course series

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RURAL CONTEXTUAL PRACTICE

Introduction

Rural Contextual Practice is a pedagogic development project exploring site-responsive artistic education in rural and remote contexts. The project was initiated by artists and educators Prof. Daniel Peltz (Uniarts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts) and Senior Lecturer Sissi Westerberg (Konstfack, Stockholm), and developed together with researcher Prof. Dr. Vytautas Michelkevičius (Vilnius Academy of Arts).

A new master's level course offering was at the core of the project. The course was offered in three editions, at three separate sites, from 2022–2024. It brought together students and educators from the fields of craft, fine art, and media art to engage in three specific rural locations: Rejmyre (Sweden), Nida (Lithuania) and Kilpisjärvi (Finland).

The project was supported by funding from the KUNO Nordplus network, allowing participation of master's students from across the Nordic/Baltic region. KUNO describes itself and its mission as: *a lively and ambitious Nordplus network comprising 18 Nordic-Baltic fine art academies, aiming to become an art university without walls. By cooperating on a wide range of project activities, the member institutions commit themselves to the continued development of higher fine art education in the region*.

This publication documents both the structure of the *Rural Contextual Practice* course and the experiences, methodologies and results that emerged throughout the three editions. Most of the texts are based on interviews and conversations with the course facilitators and participants. The informal photographs – taken with mobile phones and a variety of other cameras – were contributed by those who took part in the courses and serve as visual traces of the process.

Edited by Gailė Cijūnaitytė alongside Sissi Westerberg, this publication is both an archive and a reflection on what took place over three years. Offering a glimpse into how artistic education and research can unfold in direct dialogue with specific sites, it aspires to open up ways of thinking about art education beyond urban settings.

INITIATORS' REFLECTIONS

WHY RURAL CONTEXTUAL PRACTICE?

Daniel

We recognized that in many art schools, including the ones we are coming from, there's an implicit bias toward thinking about contextually-engaged practice as inherently urban. There are many examples of art projects that take place outside of urban areas but this urban bias persists and extends to the ways contextually-engaged practice is understood and theorized. Space and institutions are often conceived of, by default, from an urban perspective.

Sissi

Many of us associate *public art* with an artwork placed in an urban centre. I suppose we're posing the question of what *rural public art* is, or what kind of practice an artist needs to develop to be better equipped to make rural public art. And the fact that most major art schools and institutions are in urban centers inevitably affects what education becomes. Most artists, or people in general, work from where they are. So, placing students, who have been educated primarily in an urban context, into a very rural one, is a way of shifting the center of our focus to the so-called periphery.

Daniel

This course isn't based on an abstract interest, it's coming out of seventeen years of working in a rural site and co-founding the long-term, place-based research project *Rejmyre Art Lab's Center*



for Peripheral Studies together with Sissi. Our work in developing the *Rural Contextual Practice* project is informed by those 17 years of bringing people to Rejmyre, reflecting on our own practices and those of the artists who we have worked alongside. It aims to consider what's needed to develop the field; to address a gap in contemporary art education and art historical thinking around contextually-engaged art practices.

As for the title of the course, I chose the word *contextual,* instead of the more common terms in the fields of art, such as public, site-specific, or site-responsive, because I see *contextual* as having a less singular connotation. A site can be geographic, human, social, or abstract, but it still has this sense of being in some way identifiable. We arrive at "the site", we specify within "the site" and then we're "there." But *context* implies something more multiple, amorphous, ultimately unknowable. There's always more context and, when focusing on one context, we recognize there are others that are being occluded. So, the notion of *rural* is being used to bring a marginalized geographic, social and conceptual space to the fore and the term *contextual* points to an investment in reconfiguring the idea of site-responsive public practice in a more plural frame.

Sissi

In terms of the need for the course, this mostly came from spending time in rural contexts and seeing the huge gap between urban and rural areas, for instance, in terms of understanding what art is, the importance of art, or appreciation for art, or culture in general. We found the best way to bridge this gap was through direct, immersive encounters between people and places.

That's something we've noticed with students too, especially in this last course we did, where one of the assignments was to imagine the site before arriving and make a proposal for what they would do without having ever been there. This is often the situation in artist residencies or commissioned projects, where you're supposed to submit a project proposal for a place you've never been. Of course, that's often with the understanding that the project will change once you arrive and meet the reality of the place, but it sets up the idea that you can work in that more distant way.

Just the simple act of making a platform for participants to come, spend time, and develop a project is different from this dominant mode of pre-conception, envisioning a place from afar. When you enter a place by doing some simple collective exercises, you quickly get involved and learn new things about the place. We mostly focus on experimenting and trying things out rather than creating a "finished" project, but usually students make a proposal or a final project of some sort, something that comes directly out of their encounter with the site.

REFRAMING PUBLIC ART PRACTICE: ON EXTRACTIVISM AND LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT

Daniel

The motivation for the course was not only based on the needs we perceived within the field of art education. It is participating in a larger conversation happening around extraction, for example, and the roles public and socially engaged art and rural sites play



in those kinds of destructive logics. The idea of extraction is very much on the surface in Rejmyre (the site of the first edition of the course and a primary site of artistic practice for both Daniel and Sissi), as a rural glass factory town located in the forest in order to consume this forest as fuel. Our work in Rejmyre, and in my own practice, has been grappling with this question of how to be in these sites of extraction. These places have been thought of as sites to extract from and export from. So how do we engage with them in a way that is not for export?

The course is engaged with this set of emerging concerns: How do we practice contextually? How do we practice in and with diverse places and publics in a way that is different from the conventional extractive models that have shaped much of the world and many rural places?

Sissi

It's been interesting to witness students realizing how differently the art they make functions, for instance, in the context of Rejmyre, Sweden, a town of 900 inhabitants, as opposed to presenting their work in an urban context. The logics at play are

different, also, in terms of impact – it's easier to be more considerate of the response you get from the art world, or your colleagues, than to think about the impact you have on people in this context, people you may have created the work around or involved in some way in the making of the work. We've been trying to emphasize considering the long-term impact of our work. While it's easy to get excited about creating something, the effects on the physical surroundings or social fabric may not always be positive. Maybe that's fine if you're there for a residency and will never come back. But for a local art organization, such as the one Daniel and I created in Rejmyre, which has supported contextual practices in a place over time, every art project contributes to a lasting impact. The place remains, and people continue to live and work there long after each artist has come and gone.

Daniel

This is also linked to how, in urban contexts, there's often a sense of anonymity contained in the notion of the public and public space. Rural contexts quickly break that down, teaching us that there's no such thing as anonymous space or anonymous action. Often, you can't even turn on a light in your room or walk out your door without many people noticing. So what do those conditions mean for an art practice engaging publics?

Sissi

Maybe it's about considering different audiences and asking yourself questions like: Who am I making this for? Who is this work communicating with, and how is it communicating? Because it's not only about making the work itself, but also the process of making it. Especially with the kinds of practices many artists have today, that are more process-based or socially engaged, where the making itself becomes part of the work. Sometimes, that kind of practice really sits well in these rural areas, because it often starts from what's actually happening in the interactions you have or create.

But in that process, as artists, we often make assumptions. For instance, we often assume that there is some art-going audience

who will be interested in art and prepared to take part in an art project. But, there are often very different interests and preconceptions about art at play in rural places. Sometimes, it's necessary to learn more about the people and the place you're working with to understand what actually makes sense to do there, or what people might be willing to engage in. It's easy to come in with an idea of what's important or relevant, but an equally important question is how that idea intersects with the place where it is arriving.

PEDAGOGY, PLACE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY

Daniel

The KUNO funding that made this course possible requires a minimum of three partner schools to collaborate on creating a new course. This inevitably creates a cross-cultural, cross-institutional conversation about pedagogy. Sissi, Vytautas, and I have varied experiences; Sissi and I share experiences in Rejmyre and have unshared experiences in other places and Vytautas has a vast experience of international contexts as well as the experience of living in the rural context of Nida Art Colony and running programs with artists there.

In terms of the spirit of the pedagogy, we bring this question: *how to enter a place?* A lot of the work is about studying on the plane of the present, and about not professionalising the role of the one who knows a place. We strive for a radical equality of intelligences with respect to a site.

When it comes to envisioning how to "teach students about rurality" we don't have a specific pedagogy that says, "this is what rurality is, and we're going to convey that to someone cast in the role of the student." We come together to facilitate study groups. Within those spaces, we bring our own practices to explore different concerns that often begin from something quite poetic, that we feel opens to a larger set of questions and understandings of the site.



One part of the organic pedagogy of working in rural contexts is a shift in how we understand institutions. The ways that many of us, as artists, are trained to think about and relate to institutions are shaped by the urban contexts where we are educated and operate. An institution, in an urban context, is a power structure. It's a place that has power and prestige, and it can confer that cultural capital on us and our work. Many institutions in rural contexts do not have those characteristics or functions. The institutions that one must work with in Rejmyre, for example, are volunteer organisations that are often intensely personal and fragile.

Sissi

...and also the for-profit companies, as well, they are fighting for survival, like the glass factory in Rejmyre that has gone through multiple bankruptcies over the course of our time working there.

These places have been thought of as sites to extract from and export from.

So how do we engage with them in a way that is not for export?

Daniel Peltz,
facilitator

Daniel

...or the Historical Society and their museum, which we often work with. It's a group of people that are constantly trying to figure out who will do this work in the future, caring for the objects and story of this place? Who's going to do it now? Who has the time? How can we do this when we have almost no resources?

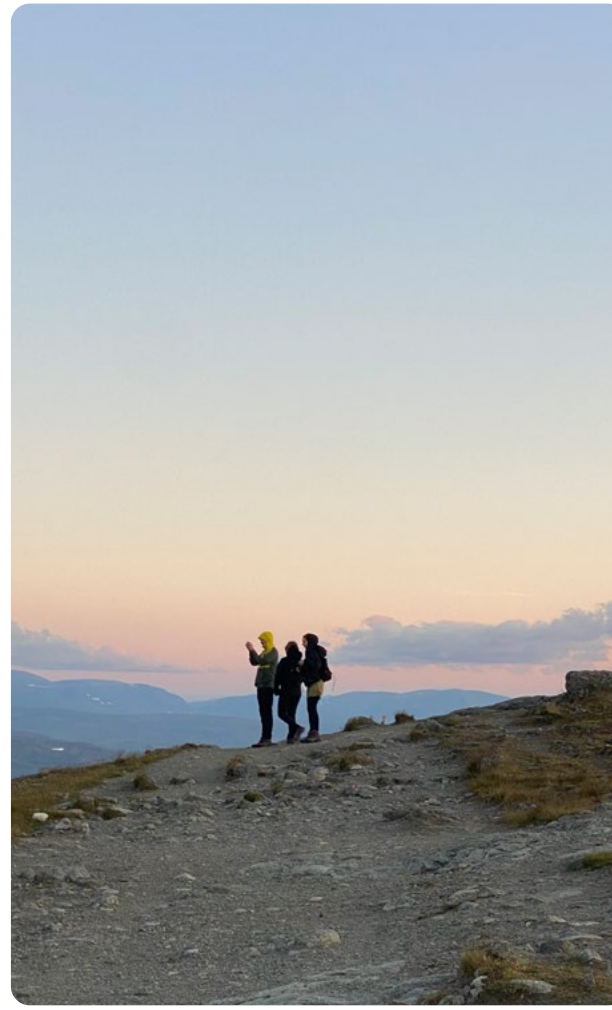
Part of the learning process is reconsidering what it means to work with institutions. Given this variation in what an institution is, we can't transpose our urban institutional logics onto rural institutions, and that's an opportunity to shift as an artist, from: "I'm going to relate to the institution which is a gatekeeper and a power structure" to: "I'm going to relate to the institution which is a fragile social network on the verge of collapse." It's a very different position.

Sissi

It's also important to recognize that these institutions are made up of individuals. There's a prevalent idea of an unknown and impenetrable urban institutional body that doesn't exist in rural places.

Daniel

Exactly. A lot of our work, especially in Sissi's hands, has been about maintaining those relationships, and they're very much with people. It's not like, "We're going to talk to the responsible staff at Kiasma and do an event there," or "We're going to propose this show to the curatorial team at Moderna Museet." It's more like, "How is Per-Inge's knee? Is he the one who has the key to the museum? Oh no, he's gotten tired of this work, so he's handed it off to Anders, and he's hard to reach because the ground is not frozen so he's busy with the excavator." So, if we're going to work with the Historical Society, we have to think about those things – the conditions and the people – rather than assuming it's a fixed place or that their responsibility is to be publicly accessible.



Sissi

Returning to the pedagogy of the course or the framework of the course, I guess what we do is we expose the students to various conditions of the site. Over the years, since 2009, Daniel and I have organized a series of post-MFA workshops in Rejmyre (often together with David Larsson and including Vytautas Michelkevičius' former students) that all explored different ways of doing this. As an example, one year the theme was *Clear Cut*, and we spent most of the time of the course in an actual clearcut, using that as the starting point where the students, from their experience of being



there, developed work and through those experiences raised more questions.

Daniel

Instead of studying the idea of the industrial forestry practice of clearcutting, we study clearcutting by putting ourselves in a clearcut. But we also recognize that clearcutting is not just about the forestry practice of cutting down all of the trees in an area, it is also a metaphor. And then, from inside this physical and metaphorical clearcut, we figure out what we need to do. How do we sleep? How do we eat? What does it even mean to study? But we do that all from within. So, there's definitely a big emphasis on embodied pedagogy.

Sissi

After all these years of doing workshops in Rejmyre, we felt prompted to bring this work into the art academies themselves through an actual course. We found out about the KUNO funding and asked Vytautas to come on board to develop a new course offering together with us. That's how the *Rural Contextual Practice* course series was born, we made an application, it was accepted and we received funding for the first three editions.

ON THE FIRST EDITION – *EVERYTHING YOU WANT WAS ALREADY HERE*

Daniel

We worked with a different theme for each of the three editions of the course. The first year, in Rejmyre, was *Everything You Want Was Already Here*. We were trying to open an exploration of *abundance* and *lack* as both primal experiences of coming to a rural site.

Those notions of abundance and lack are profound questions in artists' and students' lives: "What do I have? What don't I have? How do I understand what I have and what I don't have, both as resources? What is my life going to be like when I don't have access to the resources these educational institutions are temporarily providing me?"

Sissi

These schools are training us to be artists, but they're doing so in a very specific context. We have all these well-equipped studios, helpful technicians, and study services personnel. How are those abundant conditions training me to be an artist when I'm going to graduate into a space without such abundance? So we encourage the students to work from whatever they encounter.

Daniel

These kinds of questions, about abundance and lack, are right on the tip of the student experience tongue and they are also relevant in relation to the conversations around extractivism. How do we think about what is abundant in rural sites without thinking of that thing as something for us to take? How do we think about what is lacking? And how do we question those kinds of constructions? We wanted to begin from there.

ON THE SECOND EDITION – *MAKING, TALKING, WALKING, (NOT) WORKING AND BEING SHY*

Sissi

In the second edition, in Nida, Lithuania, we turned our attention to the "work" of being an artist in various ways. The title for the course kept expanding as we added in the approaches of each of the five facilitators, finally becoming: *Making, Talking, Walking, (not) Working and Being Shy*.

Daniel

We added the word "making" late in the development process because Sissi protested against the title as it stood.

Sissi

Yeah, I was concerned that without the word *making,* none of the craft students would apply.

Daniel

For this edition we were thinking about "ways of being" that are tied up in "being an artist" and how those manifest in different ways in urban and rural settings. I chose to focus, for my contribution to this edition, on the notion of "being shy," which relates, in some ways, to Vytautas' focus on "(not) working".

Rural places are often associated with, and make space for, certain kinds of resistances. Focusing on these resistances, which *shyness* or (*not*) *working* address, allows us to reconnect with questions around what motivates each of us to make art and the tension between the public validation of the exhibition and the private intimacy of the studio, that rural spaces can become a surrogate for.

ON THE THIRD EDITION – IMAGINED SITE

Sissi

We focused the third edition of the course, *Imagined Site*, in Kilpisjärvi, Finland, on the role of imagination in relation to site-responsive art making and asked the students to produce three "imaginings" in the form of proposals for art works for the site: one before coming, one while there and one after leaving.







Daniel

We were trying to think about the ways that the "rural" often exists as an imagined place from an urban perspective, of remove or retreat, that is used to imagine an antidote to, or respite from, the challenges of contemporary urban existence. We also wanted to open up the role of imagination in site-responsive making. When we are asked to engage in a site as artists, that is far from where we are located, we tend to start first from our imagination of this place. This is both a way of seeing the place from afar and a way of seeing that we bring with us into the physical encounter

with a site. We wanted to bring that to the surface, to kind of de-pathologize the act of imagining in relation to contextual art practice, to bring it to the surface and consider different ways of understanding the practice of imagining a site.

STRUCTURE, EXERCISES AND OUTCOMES

Sissi

We usually start with a series of short exercises led by the facilitators, those of us who are leading the course. This is both a way to quickly get to know some aspects of the site and for the participants to get to know each other through group exercises. If we have longer courses, we later ask the participants to lead exercises during the course that involve the whole group in the ways they are considering the site. We divide the time up so that each participant has a chance to involve either the whole group or a few other students in an exercise, exploring their work from the inside. Depending on the duration of the course, sometimes we've asked students just to develop a proposal for a piece they would like to make, and sometimes to actually carry out a work, even though it's a very short time – let's say, 10 days. The goal is to have students make work on-site, focusing on "gestures", as Daniel refers to them, rather than the pressure of producing a "finished piece".

Daniel

Starting with facilitator-led exercises is a kind of return to early art school experiences, where group activities dominate the first year, gradually giving way to individualized projects. So we're using the transformative action of moving to these rural sites to revisit these communal/collective ways of thinking and being together.

The exercises are really oriented around wondering together. They're not about knowing; it's not that we come and say, "we know something about this place, and we're going to have you do this to

learn it". Instead, it begins from what we are each wondering about within the site, and asking ourselves how can we wonder through our practices with the group. That's basically the pedagogy. Then we ask the students to do the same. How can you wonder through your practice with the group?

Course design can be a subtle somewhat esoteric practice, like writing a poem, it can be quite beautiful. I've learned a few things over the years, then Vytautas has different ideas, Sissi has different ideas, and then, in coming together, we come up with some kind of a mash-up of our ways of working, and it's usually an interesting mess, not entirely incoherent (laughs).

We had a plan like this in Kilpisjärvi, the third edition of the course, and immediately the students undid it. They said to us, "There's a mountain. We want to go to the mountain". And we were like, "Oh, but tomorrow we're supposed to wake up for breakfast at 8am and be ready for the presentations at 9:30am; you're going to be too tired". That didn't stop them, and we didn't want to stop them. They had another pedagogy, which was not on the schedule – Saana, the mountain.

There's a lot in recognizing how to make a frame that is open enough, that is breakable, that knows it's going to be broken, and not to hold on when the breaking starts to happen, but to adapt as much as possible while still holding some frame. We made those structures for a reason. We wanted people, at some point, to share the concerns they were bringing into the course, their pre-imaginings and the ways they work outside of this place. If we don't hold any of that frame, then that space disappears, so holding the frame with soft paws.

VULNERABILITY, FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL CROSSOVER

Daniel

I think that vulnerability is really important. When we go to a rural site as a group, we're coming from different institutions, and



our roles in the institution kind of disappear. There is no institution. Our roles don't have that solidity. People don't know me. They don't know Sissi or Vytautas. Some know us, but the majority of people don't know us in our institutionally assigned roles. So even who we are, as students, as artists, as teachers, becomes softer. We're trying to use that organic vulnerability as a resource in the act of study.

Sissi

Yeah, I think the ambition is that it should be a space that is different from the everyday school situation. We often use the phrase *other institutional space*. I don't think we can completely escape the hierarchies in terms of our positions in relation to the students and so on, but we're trying to soften them. They do change, though, especially while being outside, in the forest for example.

Daniel

Also, crossing over institutions helps in this, because when they meet you, if you are a professor at Konstfack, and they're studying in Vilnius, you're not the one making the choices that

affect them, about who gets the grants or who gets the awards or whatever. They're meeting you as another teacher but also just as another artist with whom they're having this interaction. So, there is a difference. I sometimes refer to this part of the work as one part of creating a *barely there institution*[1].

Sissi

I would say that it's not just about making a space for the students to feel more free; it's also a space for us, as facilitators, to feel more free. It gives us a chance to experiment with different approaches and develop them over a long time. Coming back to this course in different contexts is a way for us to refine the pedagogies, the course structure, and our thinking around it, which can then be passed on to the next course in this continued work. I think this publication is also part of that – sharing the accumulated knowledge.

CONNECTING TO THE SITE: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Daniel

Rural Contextual Practice is an opportunity to break down the divide between the site and ourselves. That was clear to me from the beginning. I remember when we first started working in Rejmyre, our first workshop in 2009 felt like the realization of a dream – a different kind of teaching space. We had 15 participants and the village population might've been 900 back then, but within the central craft village where we were operating, there were maybe

1 On Place-Based Artist Pedagogies: Asiko Art School and the Nordic/Baltic Studio for Continued Engagement, University of the Arts Helsinki, 2024 p.147



only 30 other people. So, our group, including staff, nearly doubled the population of the area.

What then is the site, what is the context we're studying? How much is it shaping us, and how much are we shaping it and how is this formulation a false dichotomy? I felt the weight of those questions and the joy and concern of having just made an art school of sorts in this small, rural community.

A few students working on a group project asked, "Can I cut down a tree and hang it upside down?" We had to figure that out – asking our new neighbors, "Is it okay if some people in our group cut down one of your trees and hang it upside down?" The whole logic of an artistic intervention being encountered by an unknown public just totally broke down.

Also, it's really interesting how the different ways that artists work emerge in this space, especially in a social context. For example, when we're in Sweden, artists who speak Swedish have completely different access to the site, and they end up working in very different ways. Artists without a history of industrial craft practice approach things differently than artists who have a history with glass production, when we are studying in a glass factory town, for example.

Rural Contextual Practice
is an opportunity to break down
the divide between the site and ourselves.

Daniel Peltz,
facilitator

Sissi

Yes, last time in Rejmyre, one of the students, by herself, managed somehow to get into the hot shop and started to make work.

Daniel

We tried for years to figure out a way for artists to work in the glass factory but weren't able to find a sustainable financial structure that worked for everyone. Then this one student brought a work to the final presentations that was made in the factory, she said "Yeah, I made some work. I just walked in and talked to some of the workers." There was no conversation about payment and she navigated it really well. I think the idea that we are all united by this category of artist, and somehow share a way of being, breaks down in these moments. You see people start to operate in different ways based on language privilege, cultural privilege, and personality.

REMOVE, FOCUS AND THE COMMUNITY OF THE GROUP

Daniel

Recently, we've been talking a lot about the role of the group in rural contexts, especially in a multicultural, interdisciplinary environment, and how working together in a rural setting differs from working in more traditional urban spaces. David Larsson, who taught with us at Nida and also in Rejmyre, has talked about how he has come to see the value in these rural sites; the function of remove and focus they allow. Of course, artists love gathering in urban spaces; there are so many sources of inspiration, but there's an immediate diffusion. Even if you have a structured program, there are so many things pulling for your attention: seven different exhibitions, three institutions you haven't seen, curators to meet, dancing, bars, things to buy. There's less of that in a rural site. In this moment in society, this space of remove and limited stimulation

has become an incredible resource. We become aware of what we have: this place and ourselves.

Sissi

And you kind of know where everybody in the group is, they're somewhere in this area.

Daniel

There's a lot of learning that happens just within that kind of community. There are fewer people, so you see them all; you start forming relationships, and that becomes a big part of the pedagogy.

Also, there's the flip side of this focused space that emerges in these courses, it is harder to escape the psychosocial space of the study group. If you don't get along with the group, or if you're struggling to find your place, then it can be difficult. You have to find some other place, or find your place on the outside. That sometimes happens. There are many people who thrive. I think we do a good job creating a welcoming, open space but inevitably there are some people who struggle with the intensity of a rural, residential study space, and the need to be in a group so much, it doesn't suit everybody.

We've had to learn how to leave space for people to be alone and for unscheduled time. At a school, the student always knows "my class is from this time to this time. I have to put up with it regardless of what else is going on with me physically or emotionally, but then I'm going to go home and I'm going to be alone, or I can go do something else". But during these courses people are sharing housing...

Sissi

And having every dinner together or cooking for each other.

Daniel

Yeah, and they're responsible for each other. Meals have to be cooked, together and for each other. And they have to deal

with conflict differently. In a more conventional course, if someone's taking up too much space, or not holding up their part of the bargain, you can complain about them later – but when there's no dinner on the table, or you have to make dinner with the person who is not showing up, it's a different situation.

There's also a lot of mental health struggles that come up in creating study spaces with artists and working in these more isolated community contexts has presented new ways to think about those. I mean in the urban university setting, I came to the idea "if a student isn't ready to study, they should get well and then return to study", but being in these rural study communities has reminded me of the importance of those who are not well within a community, the importance of holding space for and recognizing the necessity of everyone.

Sissi

In terms of the community of the group in relation to the local community, it can be challenging to create organized encounters between the two during, say, a ten-day workshop. It is, in a way, too little time. We usually organize visits with local groups or presentations by local experts and sometimes a community dinner where exchange can happen. But, what usually works best are the person-to-person encounters that happen organically, as the students move around and spend time at the site.

LOCAL IMPACT, DEPENDENCY AND HAVING THE TIME

Sissi

For some students, being in a rural setting may feel a little bit like coming back to something that they had growing up. Just because you're studying at the art school, in an urban environment, doesn't mean that that's where you came out of from the beginning.



Daniel

And then those who have complex prior experiences in particular rural contexts can also have critically important perspectives. They sometimes get angry at the group for romanticizing or the initial fascination that often emerges when arriving in a new place. I remember when we first started working in Rejmyre, there was a glassblower in the group who was gay, who spoke out about his experience. He said, "What are you doing thinking this is a fascinating, benevolent place? This is a violent, normative place. This is not a playground". So, having those kinds of interruptions to the imagination and the more idealized ways people are coming into a site, from multicultural perspectives as well, that's also the way that you study within a site. It's probably happening in urban settings too. It's just harder to see. In a small society, you can really see that.

Teaching and learning in rural areas differs from urban contexts. We talked about *focus* as an advantage, but there are many challenges too. Just like there are challenges of studying in urban spaces.

Sissi

There are a lot of things to consider. You have to think a lot about the impact of your actions and the nature of so-called public spaces.

The idea that there is a *public space,* that is neutral, is often a flawed perspective. Even if the fields and forests feel overwhelmingly *open* when we first arrive in a place, a lot of the land, of course, is owned by someone. Even if we have "allemansrätten" (The Right of Public Access) very little is publicly owned... Also, those areas that are seen as public within a village, often there is someone who feels they have more of a claim to those than others. I don't know if that's a disadvantage, but it's something that differs from some places within urban settings.

Also, the fact that processes are sometimes very slow. Maybe you want to do something, but you don't have access to the tool or material that you would like to have, or you may not get an answer right away to whether something is possible.



Daniel

Yes, the fallacy of "public space" and the slowness of social processes are issues in both urban and rural study but they manifest in particular ways in rural settings. Not having the same kind of autonomy is a challenge. Being dependent both on the human and physical resources of the site.

I've seen in these courses how more limited resources make the ones that are there more precious. I was thinking about the importance of this blacksmith couple in Rejmyre, one of whom is also a tanner, of both animal and fish hides. There are probably many blacksmiths in Stockholm, but they don't have this value to art students that this one couple has. All of a sudden, every course participant wants to engage with them, and we can arrange that, and everybody has the time to do it. So they do a tanning workshop with the group, for example, not because we planned that or suggested that but because there is a will and desire to engage.

During the course in Nida, Vytautas arranged for the group to collectively assist the national park rangers in their daily work and this became a whole day engagement that gave the students a chance to have an embodied experience of this work and the local



environmental issues that the rangers are trying to address. There was also time for a 30 kilometer walk led by one of the facilitators, Vitalij Červiakov, both in Rejmyre and in Nida, that took up more than a whole day.

And in Kilpisjärvi there were other people there doing intensive field research at the time of the course. There were these two, quite young, researchers who were working around the military history of the site during WWII, and they offered to share their work. They came in and shared the artifacts they found from the field, like pock-marked helmets and different things. If the course was happening at our academy in Helsinki, I think we'd struggle to get one person to come to that presentation. But when the course took place in Kilpisjärvi, every participant was there and super curious to hold the objects like the helmet and grenades. There's this way in which whatever is there becomes valuable.

Sissi

And some of the other researchers invited the students to come with them and do the fieldwork. To come and empty their traps, for example, or check on the instruments and the measuring equipment.

Daniel

And they had the time, because they've committed this time to being in this place. They could go out and spend time with people in the field. In Kilpisjärvi, we invited a few artists to share their practice at the site. In Helsinki, these kinds of presentations would have been one to two hours with slides, in Kilpisjärvi, one artist took the whole day. She spent the first half of the day just telling the students about her life and her relationship to the place, sitting together outside. She didn't say anything about her art practice. Then, in the second half, she told them about her work and afterwards invited Sissi to go cloudberry picking. So they went off and had this whole other experience of the landscape.

It's this particular kind of organic, slower, unfolding teaching and learning that rural contexts sometimes make space for.





EVERYTHING YOU WANT WAS ALREADY HERE

Rejmyre,
Sweden

COURSE ANNOUNCEMENT

EVERYTHING YOU WANT WAS ALREADY HERE
REJMYRE, SWEDEN

AUGUST 9TH – AUGUST 22ND, 2022

Everything you want was already here is a two-week intensive, site-responsive course that takes place in the rural, glass factory town of Rejmyre, Sweden and is hosted by the artist-run organization *Rejmyre Art Lab's Center for Peripheral Studies*. Participants will explore issues central to making site-responsive art in rural contexts and create an artwork in response to the site of the course.

The course brings together MA students from the *Academy of Fine Arts* in Helsinki, *Konstfack University College of Arts Crafts and Design* in Stockholm and the *Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts* along with select MA students from other KUNO schools.

This transdisciplinary course explores contextually responsive art practice with a specific focus on the rural. The dominance of the urban in artistic discourses and the marginalization of the rural, as an often invisible space of industrial production and resource extraction, combine to form a strong argument for focusing our attention, within the space of master-level art and craft education, on developing our conceptions of the rural and our capacity to make complex works from and with rural contexts.

ON THIS YEAR'S THEME

Our chosen theme, *Everything you want was already here*, is an opportunity to explore conceptions of abundance and lack in our respective approaches to art, craft and making. Rural spaces have historically attracted artists seeking a respite, or a near total escape, from the implicitly urban art worlds. All of the participants in this space are currently enrolled in art academies in different large cities of Europe.

These urban areas, and the academies themselves, are places of abundance in many ways, in terms of the resources and opportunities they present. Those of us who inhabit these urban institutional art spaces also come to recognize that, in all this seeming abundance, there is also a great deal of lack (over regulated time and space, disconnection from the natural world/the source of the materials we consume and the people who produce them). Rural areas in turn present different forms of abundance and lack, real and imagined ("open" space, decreased regulation, different conceptions of time, social disconnection etc.).

COURSE COMPONENTS

The activities and methods of the course include:

- guided tours and independent exploration of the site, introduction to industrial forestry, glass and iron industries, local crafts and various constituencies in the community
- a series of collective exercises initiated by each of the facilitating artist teachers
- collective meals
- previous work presentations by each participant
- time for project development
- a final temporary public project accompanied by a work-in-progress presentation.

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Housing and some meals during the workshop are covered for all participants and there is no course fee. Housing will be in double and triple rooms with shared kitchens and bathrooms in Rejmyre's renovated, historic school building. Studio and meeting spaces will be in historic buildings formerly used by the glass factory.

FACILITATORS

Prof. Daniel Peltz
Professor of Time and Space Arts with a specialization in Site and Situation Specific Practices, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vytautas Michelkevičius
Head of Photography, Animation and Media Art Department and Head of Doctoral Programme in Fine Art, Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania

Dr. Vitalij Červiakov
Artist, Doctor of Arts, Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania

Sissi Westerberg
Senior Lecturer, Smycke & Corpus: Ädellab, Department of Craft, Konstfack University College of Arts Crafts and Design, Stockholm, Sweden

David Larsson
Visual artist, Stockholm, Sweden

GUESTS

Oyindamola Faithful
Director of The Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Lagos

Ama Ofeibea Tetteh
Programme Lead for Asiko Art School, Nigeria/Ghana

Serubiri Moses
Independent author/curator, Uganda/USA

PARTICIPANTS

Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design

Johan Ibrahim Adam
Anna Märta Danielsson
D. Martins Lerias
Rosita Ståhl

Trondheim Academy of Fine Art

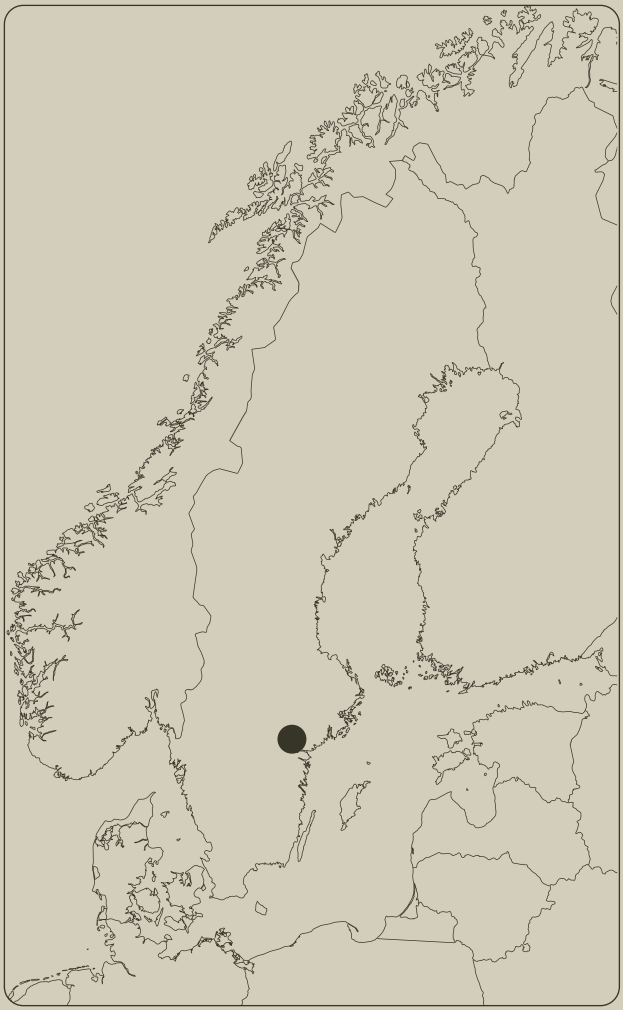
Natalie Field
Sophia SoYoon Lee

University of the Arts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts

Doğa Çal
Alyssa Coffin
Alexandra Rotts
Pavel Rotts

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Nidas Kaniušas
Vytautas Kuklys
Kotryna Kvedarytė
Tamara Pathak



Rejmyre is a small factory town in the Östergötland region of Sweden, located about 190 kilometers southwest of Stockholm. With a population of approximately 900, the town is centered around the Reijmyre Glasbruk, a glass factory founded in 1810 that is still in operation today. The town's identity is closely tied to the glassmaking industry, reflecting a history of craftsmanship, material extraction, and industrial labor.

Rejmyre Art Lab's Center for Peripheral Studies is a long-term, place-based, artistic research project, founded by Daniel Peltz and Sissi Westerberg. Its mission is to create a platform for encounters between artists, contemporary art and the public, to test and develop new models for site-dependent artistic practice and to explore and develop the role of the artist within society, especially within rural contexts.

Its activities include a post-MFA fellowship program, international artist residencies, public seminars, exhibitions, and an evolving program of installations in and around Rejmyre that aim to re-radicalize the notion of site-specificity through a philosophy of embedded installation and co-inhabitation between artwork and site.

FACILITATORS' REFLECTIONS

SHAPING THE COURSE: STRUCTURE AND EMPHASES

Daniel

The Rural Contextual Practice (RCP) course is built on the ground of many years of offering post-MFA workshops in Rejmyre (at the site Sissi and I established in 2009 that later came to be known as *Rejmyre Art Lab's Center for Peripheral Studies*). For the first RCP course, in a planned three-year series, we chose to begin in Rejmyre and revisit an earlier workshop theme called *Everything You Want Was Already Here*. This theme offered what felt like an accessible and evocative entry into some of the core questions in the Rural Contextual Practice course: How do we constitute abundance and lack in our lives as artists and people in the world? How do we think of the space/place of the rural with specificity and relationally? What are the local resources and what is lacking? How does adopting the posture that we have exactly what we need, wherever we work, open us to a more curious encounter with any site?

We began with a set of poetic prompts that root the group, and the thematic study, in the place and are simultaneously drifting off, not possible to locate only in the here and now. We take turns offering ways for the group to engage the subject of study as a collective, through exploratory practice. It is a pedagogy of wondering together.

Sissi

In the course we use the place itself as a starting point for discussion and exploration. Rejmyre municipality is built up around



the Reijmyre Glass Factory which was founded in 1810 and is still in production. Earlier, there were many local production companies (a brass works, a chandelier factory, a furniture manufacturer, etc.) and a flourishing tourist industry up until the 1990s. After several bankruptcies of the glass factory, most of its buildings were taken over by the local authorities and it is today more of a post-industrial site, even though the glass factory is still running. There are many places like this in the world that have been abandoned and that

are struggling with their right to exist. We feel it is important to study a place like this through the lens of art-making and to train young artists in relating to local conditions and histories that are very different to those you meet in an urban context.

David

On a logistical level, the structuring of the course was to divide responsibility for each of the days between us facilitators. That each of us takes responsibility for a day, or part of a day, to plan whatever activity we want to do with the group. Of course, we had discussed and planned everything carefully, ensuring a smooth flow of activities while allowing free time for lake swimming, meal prep, and evening student presentations. The reasoning behind the specific activities was based upon whatever we, as individual artists, were interested in at the time.

On another level, we used the idea of a script as a written structure for the course. This was something that Daniel, Sissi, and I had used before in earlier workshops and I think of it as a way to create a level of anticipation for the participants. It gives some idea of what is going to happen, but, just as with any script, it also allows interpretation. We used the same title, theme and a similar script to structure a workshop we offered back in 2014. The KUNO course in 2022, in that sense, becomes a remake of the workshop held 8 years earlier. Yet, it can never be identical, as such workshops are shaped by the unique circumstances of the moment – from the facilitators and students to the weather and lake temperature.

Vytautas

I was really intrigued by the poetics of the title, which was so simple and, at the same time, sharp. I found it was a great opportunity to show urban students that even minimal resources can inspire creativity. I was excited for them to later experience the realities of rural life, like delayed logistics for anything they might need, such as materials and groceries. Also, I clearly remember some details of the trip to Rejmyre, like waiting in the connecting bus stop in the middle of nowhere and having time to reflect on the

non-place. It was very warm when I reached my final destination, where David greeted me, marking the end of my long journey. That familiar welcome helped to set up a connection between me and the remote place.

The programme was very well structured by my colleagues, but I want to emphasize that the time between the scheduled activities (the off-time) was also really important and appreciated by the participants. Moments spent sitting around the table outside or going to a lake for a swim together really helped to build the community and root oneself in the place and time.

TEACHING METHODOLOGIES AND SITE-RESPONSIVE APPROACH

SOMETHING TO SIT ON

David

For this course I wanted to offer a very practical activity, basically inviting the students to build something. Since my session was on the first day, I really liked the idea that the first thing you do as you come to a new place, is find a place to sit and then build something to sit on. It felt like a good starting point for a workshop focused on talking, discussing, and thinking together.

Since this workshop brought together a group of students who, in most cases, had never met each other before and came from different disciplines such as Craft, Fine Art, and Media Art, I find that practical building can be an easy way to start working together and break the ice, so to speak. When you don't know each other, it can be easier to talk about how to screw two pieces of wood together rather than to, for example, formulate thoughts on an artwork or a theoretical concept.

Moreover, it was also an experiment for me in which I wanted to explore a way of building using a special metal bracket that I had designed for another project.



WATER MAKES THE WHEELS GO ROUND

Sissi

Water Makes the Wheels Go Round was the title of the day that I was in charge of. The area around Rejmyre has a lot of local industries that have historic roots. At one point, they were all powered by water in one way or another. The glass factory, for example, used a cable car cart powered by a local stream, from the nearby village of Bremyra, which was dammed into a waterfall, that carried carts full of glass across the lake to the nearest railway station.

We went to visit the historic hammer mill (Häfla Hammarsmedja) that has been in operation since the 1680s. It's located next to a body of water that was channeled into a canal that powered a big wooden wheel that would make the giant hammers go up and down, pounding the hot, glowing iron into thinner, flat strips that were used to hold wooden barrels together. At present, Häfla Bruk continues to operate, in a different location, as a metal staircase factory, still partially powered by a local water dam, and exports its products all over the world.

A little down the stream, a local policeman has made it his hobby to keep the historic flour mill running, as his father, grand-

father, and great-grandfather did before him. When he opened the gates for the water to run under the mill, the whole wooden building started to quiver and vibrate, as the grains were passed through channels down to the grinding wheel. Being inside this flour mill was like being inside a giant wooden creature of a machine. The mill operator is very strict, so I always warn participants before the visit: if you don't listen or start using your cell phone while he is talking, you will get shouted at, or might even be asked to leave. This time, it all worked out fine, and he got the attention he expected from everyone in the group. I think one of the students even considered coming back as an apprentice. As a way of paying for our visit, we bought some milled wheat and spelt flour, which some of the students mixed with water later that evening to make bread for the group. So some of what the big wooden creature milled for us became an embodied experience.

I wanted the students to get a sense of the relationship between natural resources and production. The reason why these industries were placed where they were was either because of the water or the woods. When the glass factory was founded in 1810, it was located in Rejmyre; the rich forest was swiftly cut down to power the glass furnaces. As the fuel shifted from wood to coal, the practice of building "kolmilor" to turn the wood into coal became a practice that is now reenacted annually by the Historic Society in a nearby village. After coal came gas from some not-so-local place, and the furnaces of today's glass factory run on electricity. So today, what makes the wheels go round is much less visible than when all the trees around Rejmyre were cut down to feed the glassmaking, but it still comes from some natural resources.

They say that even though there are more than 12 kilometers between Rejmyre and Häfla, you could hear every pound from the hammer mill all the way into the heart of the hot shop.



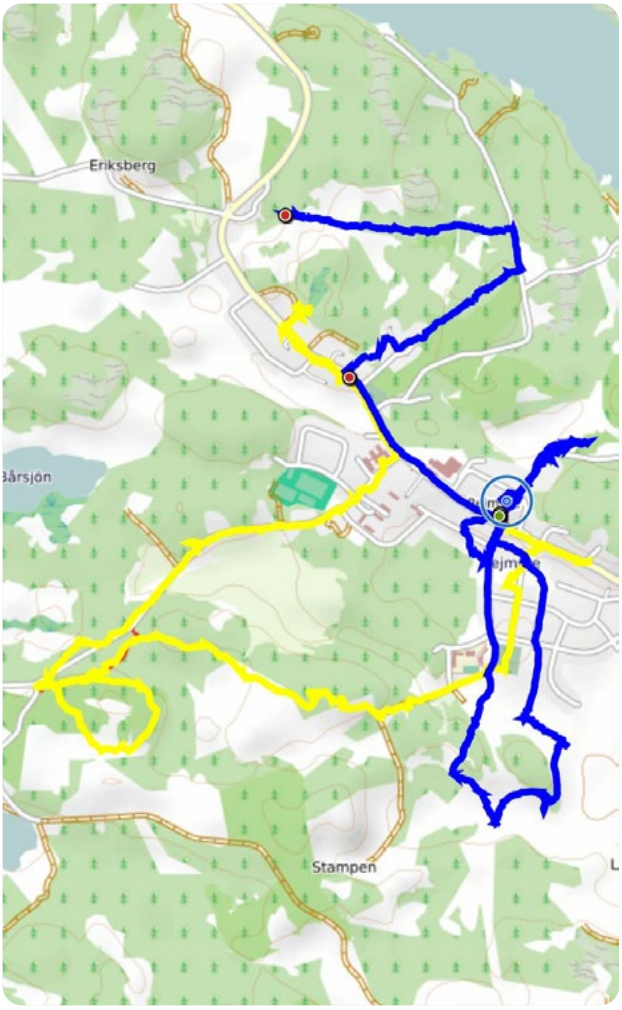
PARTICIPATORY WALK

Vitalis

As my own artistic practice and research is focused around walking as a pretext for space and togetherness, it was only natural for me to invite the participants of the course to go on a participatory walk during my part of the programme. I had never been to Rejmyre before, and neither had the majority of the participants. We found ourselves in an uncomfortable situation of being a group of strangers from various parts of the world, who each took their own means of travel to reach this remote place and were now

Trees, lakes, silence, and secluded spots in the forest are abundant. What if those things can be the tools for making art?

Vytautas Michelkevičius,
facilitator



being observed not only by a group of like-minded people, but also by the inhabitants of Rejmyre. I wanted to propose a practice that would connect all these variables, and walking in an unexpected direction – back and forth, through or around, avoiding the main streets – seemed like the best way to contextualise oneself both to and within the place.

The name of the course *Everything You Want Was Already Here* sort of dictated that one should "go with the flow" in experiencing, exploring, observing, and trusting the circumstances they got. So, I invited the participants to go on a walk and introduced

a specific structure: we split into two groups, each group had an eight-sided die that they rolled to see the direction of their walk on the compass, a 60-minute MiniDV cassette in the camera to film their adventure, and they were not allowed to use verbal communication or their phones. In a way, these rules eliminated hierarchy and leadership in the group, since the only guides were a die and a compass. These things took all the blame for the challenging or boring paths we took.

Having so many restrictions, not knowing where we're going, being led by the randomness of the die, not being able to explain to anyone why we are in someone's garden seemed scary at first. It required a change in group dynamics – trust and care for each other, as well as patience in finding ways to communicate non-verbally. What interests me most in walking practices is that a lot of common sense and selflessness awaken in these moments.

Some of these moments happened when, at one point, the group I was in came across a field of nettles – the people wearing long pants trod a path so that those wearing shorts could pass through without stinging. Or when we collectively built a bridge from the logs we found lying around to cross a small river. Towards the end of our walk, we stopped to rest on big rocks among berry plants and had a picnic in silence, thinking we were in the middle of nowhere, far away from town, only to realise later that neither of the groups had gone further than two kilometers away from the Rejmyre glass factory. The two groups, following the random directions of the die, even walked the same paths without meeting. After hours of walking, the groups met by the lake to discuss their experiences and watch what each group filmed on the tapes. My intention in giving them the cameras was to introduce a way of documenting and reflecting on the embodied and collective experience of a contextual, site-specific practice that extended time and space.

The discussion revealed many interesting differences and similarities in the dynamics of the two groups. Participants' emotions and experiences throughout the walk were unique to that specific place and time, and could only have occurred there. This somehow referred to the idea that "everything was already here" and maybe waiting for us to walk. Not all randomness is random.







METHOD FOR MAPPING

Vytautas

I was trying to transfer my passion for maps and mapping while giving a lecture and a practical task to the participants of the course. Most of them came back with very interesting responses on paper. They managed to catch the momentum and share it in a visual and textual form. My intention was to invite them to think that going out for a walk is an essential method for mapping, which is why I invited Vitalij Červiakov to share his artistic practice based on walking, and I am happy that it worked out in many ways we could not have imagined before. Mapping is also about relationship building, and some of these connections have probably continued over the past three years. These opportunities to meet peers and exchange ideas are essential for one's master's studies as an artist.

WE AWAKE TO FIND THE FLOOR IS GONE

Daniel

For my offering, I revisited a prompt from the 2014 gathering, *We Awake to Find the Floor Is Gone*. In 2014, this phrase referred directly to a building at our site in Kalbo (a barn where the farmer, who owned the property before Sissi, had purportedly sacrificed the floorboards to heat the main house). It also references conceptual spaces, including the space of graduating from art school (a structure that has supported and held everyone present, sometimes better than others).

During the course in Rejmyre in 2022, I connected this prompt (*We Awake to Find the Floor Is Gone*) to the newly built *Refuging Pavilion*, a participatory art/architecture project that I worked on with the surrounding community the summer before the workshop. In that art project, participants were invited to take part in a ritualized performance, during which they built a 120-square-meter transparent dome. The building process involved fastening bolts to connect the polycarbonate sheets, while exchanging memories with their building partner – memories of feeling safety, freedom, and love.

I brought the KUNO course group to the pavilion, that resulted from the practice described above, and we lay on our backs. As they lay looking up at the dome, the trees, and the sky, I read them a text I wrote to the group, called *You awake to find the floor is gone,* which became a prompt for a collective exercise.

The text draws together sounds and images that are there in the site (in the present and in the past), that are there inside invisible/inaudible experiences of being in this place and also on sounds and images consciously conjured by the group.

HOW DOES A WORK WHERE?

The second part of the day, I introduced a new prompt that connected to some work I had been doing as part of my teaching in various parts of the world that I referred to as *How does a work where?* I was interested in opening the practice of *where-ing* initially



from the perspective of the work and the place, to delay the introduction of us, the artists, as subjects. We worked on sharpening our articulation and deepening understanding of how a work adapts and understands itself in relation to its surroundings.

APPROACHES TO ABUNDANCE AND LACK: RESPONDING TO THE THEME

David

I think of the *Everything You Want Was Already Here* sentence as a question about what we need to be able to make art. At an art school, almost everything one can think of in terms of tools or materials is readily available, but that can also be overwhelming and perhaps at times more confusing than helpful. In Rejmyre, however, almost nothing is readily available except for some basic tools. On the other hand, things like trees, lakes, silence, and secluded spots in the forest are abundant. What if those things can be the tools for making art?

Daniel

Critical to the pedagogy is that everyone introduces an approach to exploring the theme. As facilitators we initiate this process by offering ways of wondering through our practices. After these initial experiences – combined with various interactions and field visits – each participant makes an offering of their own.

The emphasis is not on defining exactly what each offering does in relation to the theme. This is part of the quality of a pedagogy of wondering through; wondering has a softness that is curious and engaged, yet in some fundamental way uncertain.

Vytautas

Also, we had an abundance of sunlight and warmth, which was unexpectedly pleasant. So, we used it every day, and it made

Trees, lakes, silence, and secluded spots in the forest are abundant. What if those things can be the tools for making art?

David Larsson,
facilitator

our time together more communal than we could have imagined. By foraging berries and swimming, some of us were transported back to childhood summer holidays – times of endless days and no schedules. That childhood abundance was extraordinary. As a professor, comparing it to your own student years, you may recall those times as moments when time felt more abundant and stretched whenever needed. With this in mind, we tried to show the students that *now* is the time to start enjoying their freedom – something that might be much more limited in a few decades. Of course, enjoying the present moment within the framework of the future is difficult, but this ability is essential.

Equally essential was learning how shared moments shape our experience. Evening presentations and collective meals encouraged this, turning simple gatherings into meaningful exchanges.

EVENING PRESENTATIONS AND SHARED MEALS AS TOOLS FOR COMMUNAL LEARNING

Daniel

Evening was a special time of day. In art schools, we rarely hold classes during this time after dinner. Casting our presentations of past works into this space often lent them a quality of intimacy and repose.

Cooking for each other is a crucial aspect of the pedagogy of these gatherings. I often express one of the values of these gatherings as: *we are all hosting each other*. Cooking for each other strengthens our sense of dependence on and capacity to care for the group in a simple grounded way. If you don't show up in class – psychologically, I mean – you can almost get by; you might bring your body but leave the rest of you behind. But if you fail to cook dinner, the impact is undeniable, the physical and psychological space breaks.



David

Meal preparation also works in a similar way to the building exercise on the first day – it offers a possibility to create something together with some of your fellow workshop participants, but (hopefully) in a playful and relaxed way. And when you serve the meal, you get appreciation from the rest of the group. Preparing and offering a meal to someone is a fundamental way of connecting with others – just as being offered and accepting food that someone else has prepared for you is.

Vytautas

Meal sharing may start with a bit of hesitation, but soon it becomes clear that it's the best way to bring people together. Sometimes it's not easy, but it teaches how to manage limited resources and share responsibilities. These two qualities are crucial not only for future artistic careers but also for rural living, should they decide to try it at some point.

FINAL SITE-RESPONSIVE PROJECTS AND LASTING REFLECTIONS

Daniel

Reflecting on the course, there were certain elements that we, as facilitators, found particularly significant and "already here". For one thing, the course was a reunion with Vytautas, David, and Sissi, in a teaching setting in Rejmyre. It had been a while, and there is something very special about working with a group of artist colleagues over time. We all have very different approaches to both art-making and teaching.

Then, there was the addition of Vitalis, along with the specific character that each of the participants brought to the gathering. We had a set of guests, who came as part of a project I am working on at Uniarts Helsinki aimed at exploring the relationship between the pedagogic spaces we have been creating in Rejmyre and those of a roving, Pan-African art school called Àsìkò. Àsìkò, a Yoruba term, means "time" – or more specifically, a special moment in time. These visitors also participated during the final presentations of the students' works.

Sissi

Each student had a quite different approach to the theme, and their final presentations took on a variety of formats. One was a performance in the woods, another was a climbing workshop. One took place at the site of the Historical Society's old cottage, while another was a mockumentary about the "haunted" house where all the students were staying. There was also a dance party, a piece situated over an old well, an embroidery, paintings on found objects, one piece involving blueberries and a log, and one that was a fortune-telling tool.

Most of the works were site-specific installations of one kind or another, developed over the latter half of the course. I especially remember a performance that one of the glass students from



Konstfack made in an abandoned part of the old factory storage space. She used books, instead of newspaper, which is usually used as a heat protecting wet paper when forming hot glass, and had somehow managed to get the glass workers to let her make some glass objects in the hot shop that were part of the installation – an impressive feat, as it's usually difficult to gain access to that space, but she somehow managed. Other parts she made with the help of the local blacksmith, quickly integrating herself into the community.

Vitalis

From the beginning of the course, as students began developing their ideas, my colleagues and I remained available for consultations during their free time. Whenever students approached me with questions or simply wanted to share their thoughts, I invited them for a walk. Walking became a space to think through ideas, allowing discussions to unfold naturally within the environment they were responding to – like the huge rocks in the terrain or the corridors of the house we all lived in.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay until the final presentations, but some students stayed in touch, sending me sketches of their



work even after I had left. When the Lithuanian students returned to Vilnius and we met again, they shared with me and their peers what other participants had created. It was nice to hear how the projects evolved, considering the short time they had for development. In doing so, they extended the course's experiences and goals beyond its duration, resonating in the thoughts of those who hadn't been there. I even noticed echoes of this influence in their final MA projects.

I always look forward to working with students in rural settings. Everything I want is already here – time and vast space, a concentrated group willing to trust me and walk, the care we develop for one another, and the thoughts that we share.

David

In a way, what "was already here" for me was a way of holding a group of students together, with the other facilitators, in this particular rural village. Since the workshop builds upon a format that we have already carried out multiple times before in the same place, there was a sense of familiarity which, hopefully, was sensed by the students.

By hosting the workshop in a place so familiar to some of us facilitators, we had access to a very powerful set of pedagogical tools: the different buildings and rooms, the forest and lakes, the people we know in the village, and so on. When we did the workshop in Nida the following year, I think there was a similar situation, except this time, it was the other half of the teaching group that had familiarity with the place.





STUDENT PROJECTS

Natalie Field

Offering to the Forest God

PERFORMATIVE RITUAL

Tending to the body of a jackdaw found on the road leading into town, participants gathered in the attic of the Rejmyre glass factory to perform funerary rites usually reserved for humans. We stood in a semi-circle and held a minute of silence, followed by a collective reading of a poem, repeated three times, an incantation. Each participant then entered the crawl space to share a private moment, and a gift of flowers and seeds in an act of reciprocity. We concluded with a procession to lay the bird at rest at the edge of the forest.

These are the words we spoke...
every body represents a life lived
the material form
a physical manifestation of a memory
the memory of you
a manifestation of your physical form
we will hold this memory
your being has not gone unnoticed
now we offer you to the forest
so you may become one
once again

Rosita Ståhl

Traces In Time

INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE

A folded newspaper, wet soaked and pressed out water, is the tool that glassblowers use for shaping glass with their hands.

I folded newspapers the same way as the tools for the glassblowers at Rejmyre glass factory and instructed the glassblowers to shape the glass using these newspapers, focusing on their hands rather than the glass itself.

The burnt and scorched newspapers were then turned into front pages of cast plaster books, with the glassblowers' names hammered into the spines by me at the blacksmith in town.

I installed the work in an old storage attic for glass next to the factory, where the books were part of a performance reflecting on how information fades over time. The books were unreadable, evoking a sense of frustration and hopelessness about the fragility and value of cultural heritage.


ROSITA STÅHL
2022

Anna Märta E. Danielsson

Feel Free to Take Part in the Compromise

INSTALLATION

For a long time, our common resources – the collective time, energy, and care – have been focused on building the modern city with access to what is considered a necessity for modern life. Being part of a community includes compromise. Resources might feel scarce everywhere, but in some places, time ticks differently, and access to modern city distractions is very limited.

Public transportation doesn't run on a regular basis.

There is only one store to shop for groceries.

There are only 90 kids to split between the after-school activities.

In all these places, we need to learn how to share everything, including each other. We must learn how to work together even when interests, opinions, or goals drive us in opposite directions. Our differences will be obvious. This spatial installation around an out-of-use sewer well consists of small leftover pieces of float glass, etched with messages born of frustration.

A place to dump your waste.

Feel free to take part in the compromise.

If you don't have anything nice to say, you can say it here.

I guess we'll always have to work it out together.


OM DU INTE HAR NÅGOT SNÄLLT
ATT SÄGA,
KAN DU GÖRA DET HÄR

MAKING, TALKING, WALKING, (NOT) WORKING AND BEING SHY

Nida,
Lithuania

COURSE ANNOUNCEMENT

MAKING, TALKING, WALKING, (NOT) WORKING AND BEING SHY
NIDA, LITHUANIA

SEPTEMBER 20TH – SEPTEMBER 30TH, 2023

This 10-day intensive course aims to open a safe space for sharing your artistic positions and discussing the ways you relate to society as an artist. Teachers, staff, administrators, peers and the academy's resources have been "taking care" of you for many years. How do you carry forward this legacy of care into the communities you enter and create?

The course will convene in the remote location of an historical artist colony site for 10 days of making, talking, walking, working, not working and being shy. The workshop will be hosted by Nida Art Colony (NAC) – part of Vilnius Academy of Arts. NAC has been running since 2011 as a residency centre and experimental faculty where various pedagogic modes are tested and (re)discovered.

ON THIS YEAR'S THEME

Among other questions, sincerity, shyness, responsibility, care, craft and other qualities of artistic work will be discussed and performed. Artistic work will be put here as the central focus and the time of the course will be both deliberately experienced, counted, wasted and reflected.

The course opens with a series of rituals/exercises aimed at helping the group to become immersed in the site and surroundings of the Nida Art Colony. Moreover, during the first part of the course you will be served, both with content and catering, in order to allow you to be devoted only to "artist work". The meeting in the rural location of the Nida Art Colony not only discusses and examines (artist) work but also performs it. Each activity is measured by the working time involved, which varies from 8 to 24 hours per day. This gives an opportunity to experience

various durational modes of performed labour.

The tutors will be responsible for 1–2 days in the programme and will propose a way of working and being together that the group will inhabit and consider. At the end of the course we will have an in-depth period of reflection on the time spent together, as well as the methods used in the course.

COURSE COMPONENTS

The activities and methods of the course include:

- collective and independent exploration of the site
- introduction to various constituencies in the community
- a series of collective exercises initiated by each of the facilitating artist teachers
- collective meals
- previous work presentations by each participant
- time for project development
- a final temporary public project accompanied by a work-in-progress presentation

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

RT transportation to NAC in Nida will be provided for all participants from the sponsoring academies (and for all others there is travel funding through mobility grants).

Housing will be provided for the duration of the course at NAC.

5–6 days catering is provided by the chef-in-the-residency, the catering for the remaining 4–5 days is co-organised (cooking and cleaning) by course participants working in small groups (ingredients/supplies will be provided by the host).

FACILITATORS

Prof. Daniel Peltz
Professor of Site and Situation Specific Practice, Department of Time and Space Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland

Prof. Dr. Vytautas Michelkevičius
Head of Photography, Animation and Media Art Department and Head of Doctoral Programme in Fine Art, Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania

Dr. Vitalij Červiakov
Artist, Doctor of Arts, Postdoctoral Fellow in Art Research Institute at Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania

David Larsson
Visual artist, Stockholm, Sweden

COORDINATOR

Gailė Cijūnaitytė
Interdisciplinary artist, Vilnius, Lithuania

GUESTS

Tatjana Frenkel
Interdisciplinary artist, Vilnius, Lithuania

Stasys Kupliauskas
Preventive Activities Specialist, Curonian Spit National Park Directorate, Nida, Lithuania

PARTICIPANTS

Iceland University of the Arts

Ráðhildur Ólafsdóttir
Martina Priehodová

Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design

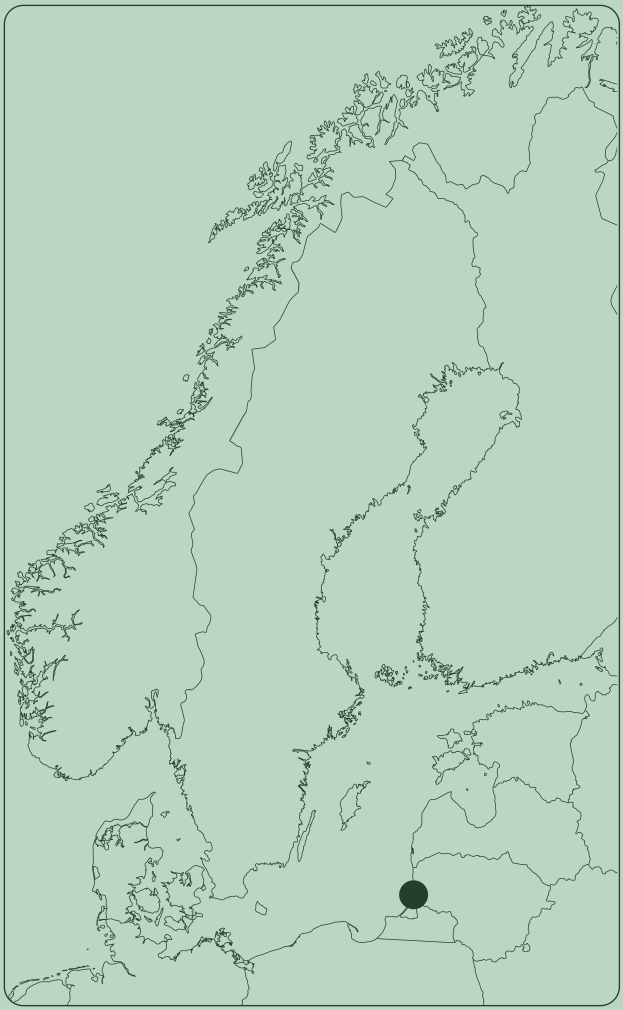
Maja Lena Andersdotter Björk
Alice Fyles
Anja Vera Karolina Halla
Matilda Söderberg

University of the Arts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts

Doğa Çal
Alyssa Coffin
Julia Syrzistie
Salla Valle

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Olga Abramova
Pijus Chraptavičius
Nidas Kaniušas
Aistis Kavaliauskas
Rūta Vizbaraitė
Vilius Vingras



Nida is a town on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania, nestled between the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon. Known for its sweeping sand dunes – some of the largest in Europe – Nida is part of the UNESCO-listed Curonian Spit. Over the past two centuries, reforestation efforts have shaped its landscape, now protected within the Curonian Spit National Park. While winters are quiet, with just a few shops open and mostly locals around, summers transform Nida into a lively tourist destination.

Just outside the town center lies Nida Art Colony (NAC), a subdivision of the Vilnius Academy of Arts. Since 2011, initially led by Rasa Antanavičiūtė and Vytautas Michelkevičius, NAC has been a hub for international artists, offering residencies and exhibitions. It serves as a hybrid space for art production, education, and collaboration, with a strong connection to academic and cultural networks. Under the current direction, the colony continues to cultivate dialogue between artists, researchers, and the wider cultural field. Among its notable contributions is the commissioning of Lithuanian pavilions at the Venice Biennale, including the *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, awarded the Golden Lion in 2019.

PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS

FROM REJMYRE TO NIDA: EXPECTATIONS AND CHANGES

Gailė

In the second edition of Rural Contextual Practice course the focus shifted from thinking about the abundance and lack that artists experience in rural places toward questioning what it means to be an artist and to create in a highly specific environment, a deeply existential question. So, while planning the course, the facilitators wanted to keep it playful and mysterious in a way, knowing that it would inevitably raise a lot of internal and personal questions for the participants.

As I had the pleasure of coordinating this course, I got to engage with it very closely – from the first applications months before the course began to the final financial and activity reports for the hosting institution. I was handling the paperwork, making calls to arrange chefs, planning logistics for the trips, setting up meetings with the park ranger, guest artists or NAC staff and communicating with institutions to justify and officially document our presence and activities. I still got to take part in some of the workshops and discussions on the program.

Being an artist myself, during this course I tried to view the administrative work as a kind of artistic practice – something that has become an inevitable part of my career and education. Perhaps this shift in perspective reflected what the tutors hoped to encourage by opening up more space in the programme to think about what an artistic career actually entails. The course title, *Making,*

Talking, Walking, (Not) Working and Being Shy, was an attempt to capture the essence of each day's activities and the ongoing questions about what it means to be an artist – both in terms of labor and personal engagement.

I did not participate in the course that was held in Rejmyre, so coordinating the second edition was a challenge in that sense. However, three MA students – Alyssa, Doğa, and Nidas – had an opportunity to return to the *RCP* course for the second time after participating in the *Everything You Want Was Already Here* course a year before. The facilitators were happy to have some returning students to experience the shift in focus as the course continued and to build on ideas that developed in Rejmyre.

Alyssa

I had really high expectations after Rejmyre was such a transformative and powerful experience for me. The community that formed among the group in Rejmyre was really strong and so I expected, even with different students, that there would be the same effect, by the nature of it being such an intensive course and was disheartened when I felt this didn't happen. A main difference seemed to be that we didn't share common space or cook meals together like we did in Rejmyre.

Rejmyre also made me assume that Nida would be a similar small village where we would bump into and interact with locals – people that had made their living there for generations in a trade particular to that region. I came with the wish to be more involved in the daily life of locals and to shed some of the "artist as a tourist" gaze, to attempt to glimpse into the life of the place as those who live there relate to it.

Many of my expectations were crushed, and I needed to recalibrate as it turned out that Nida is a very touristy town with an unusual history and an artificial landscape. Because of this unexpected and unusual context, an important de-romanticisation process needed to happen within me. My artistic practice is rooted in cultivating relationships with the land, so there was a strong



desire in me for the "rural", to be removed from the public and primarily isolated in the natural environment. The notions of this kind of imaginary "rural" raised important questions in Nida: What is natural, and what is constructed or human-made land?

There are so many different places overlapping in Nida, it was impossible to approach it as a single place to study, especially when staying in the bubble that is the Nida Art Colony. When we come into a place as an artist and then leave in less than two weeks, what can we really know? There was an intense awareness of the deficiency or bias in the mode of study when not living and staying in a place. Paradoxically, we were introduced to the idea that, sometimes, to study something, we need to be positioned "just shy" of our subject. This made me wonder: Could I really study this place if I became fully immersed in it, or is there a certain state of consciousness that is only possible from within? These thoughts connect to a conversation we had about what is "rural" and this idea that perhaps we can perform the rural. So imagination and ways of knowing emerged in our discussions in ways I don't remember them featuring in Rejmyre.

Nidas

I had no previous knowledge (apart from what I could gather from the course description, or other details on the internet) of Rejmyre and of what I could expect there. I think that is the main difference of my personal experiences between Rejmyre and Nida. I had been to Nida multiple times before and was very familiar with the region.

So, for me, Rejmyre demanded a more in-depth look at this location. Exploration of the identity of the place, as well as frequent workshops with Daniel, David and other artists made for an interesting, busy schedule, which I appreciated.

Unfortunately, I couldn't quite get away from other work that I brought with me and also imposed on myself the idea that I must craft something by the end of the course. In the end I felt that I'd missed something, a more organic connection not just to the surroundings but to the people as well.



Compared to the rather intense and enlightening course in Rejmyre, Nida seemed more like a vacation, but that didn't bother me. It allowed me to think about the need of creating or crafting something tangible and if I really had an obligation to do it.

Doğa

I was waiting to encounter something small, minor – in the sense of capillary vessels. Something audible but not loud, simple, and something that I will be lost in again.

I expected to be part of a supportive community and part of an accumulated knowledge about the spaces we would be hosted in. As a way of building a sense of community, I had anticipated cooking together with the other artists. Finding out that this time we wouldn't be cooking ourselves totally changed my perception of organizing my day and the activity of cooking.

The compactness of the rural area and the structure of the courses let me experience the others' approaches in depth. So, I was very excited to witness and discuss other artists' short-term project outputs and processes, and to have the opportunity to be part of how they approach and create.

I was waiting to encounter something small, minor – in the sense of capillary vessels. Something audible but not loud, simple, and something that I will be lost in again.

Doğa Çal,
student

REFLECTING THE PROGRAMME: ARTIST WALK, ARTIST SHARE, ARTIST REST, ARTIST WORK

CRITICAL TOURISM: TEA & SAUNA RITUAL

Gailė

The first day of the course was hosted by Vytautas Michelkevičius – after introducing the Nida Art Colony and giving a lecture on *Critical Tourism*, he invited us to a *Tea and Sauna Ritual*. Each of us had to take a wooden log from Nida Art Colony and carry it all the way to the sauna, which was located on the beach, 2–3 km away. I remember him saying that in this way, we would each contribute to preparing and heating the sauna instead of just waiting for the host to do everything for our comfort.

While the sauna was heating up, Vytautas took on the role of an herbalist and invited us to spread out across the field behind the dune and gather some herbs – just not the poisonous ones. Confused but intrigued, the participants examined plants, scanning and googling them, showing each other their findings, or bringing them straight to the master – Vytautas at that moment – to identify what they had picked. It reminded me of childhood and awakened that carefree curiosity – though drinking tea brewed from the groups' collected herbs felt a bit uneasy. Surprisingly, one of them turned out to be quite tasty, brewed from pine cones. We sat in a circle, passing around cups of tea, each of us tasting it cautiously.

Later, we unwound on the beach – some lay in the sand, others swam, played ball, or enjoyed the heat of the sauna. We experienced Nida as a Lithuanian seaside retreat. But beyond that, we had time to observe each other more closely. I feel like Vytautas created space for the group to form naturally, leaving it up to the newly arrived students to initiate connections. For a shy group, that was not easy. We're used to similar courses being packed with icebreakers and introduction exercises, but here, we had to take things at our own pace, in a rather intimate setting – an unofficial space, stretched out in time, even teetering on boredom.



ARTIST WALK: THE AUTUMN EQUINOX WALK

The physical relaxation was much needed because the second day was the day of the *Autumn Equinox Walk* led by Vitalij Červiakov. Students from Vilnius already knew of the long durational walk that stretched across the Curonian Spit since it had become an annual tradition. I think for this course Vitalis kept the idea that he offered in Rejmyre – that the best way to contextualise oneself both to and in the place for the newly arrived group was to walk through and experience it both with the body and the mind.

Nidas

As I'd experienced the 30 km walk from the town of Juodkrantė to Nida once before, I knew what to expect. It was easier to accept the sometimes tedious and tiring process of walking on the beach for several hours. Even though we had a task to accomplish – to record audio and video footage of anything we deemed worthy along the way, to me it still seemed rather isolating, because



we were given instructions by the host of our walk, Vitalis, not to communicate verbally while on the beach. However, when we were "allowed" to speak to each other again, it felt almost joyous – I think maybe that was the point.

During the second part of the journey, we were joined by artist Tata Frenkel, who gave us a short presentation on physics, electromagnetism, and radio frequencies. We were also given radios we could play around with. We were carefully listening for odd frequencies, and were sometimes successful in finding them. This was interesting, because Nida is located on the border with Kalin-

ingrad Oblast, a Russian province separated from the rest of the country, which provided the topic of rural context a worrying and tense edge. At the same time, this part of our walk, perhaps because we were giving in to fatigue and therefore becoming more relaxed, seemed more "fun" somehow.

To be honest, the part that I appreciated the most during the Equinox walk was the walking itself – not the creative tasks, not the non-verbal communication or community building, but the basic act of walking. Thanks to Vitalis, the simplicity of it is something I have started to enjoy more often in my personal life and is one of the reasons why I await the warmer seasons.

Doğa

My route in this walking session was way more different than the others. I couldn't partake in such a long walk without gradually adapting my insulin pump and my body, day by day, to walk 16-ish km all at once. When I said I couldn't make it, Vitalis came up with the idea of having a shorter walk closer to Nida Art Colony. Guided by Tata Frenkel, I had a circular walk around the town. After they introduced me to that route, they also suggested that I take that path a couple of times during the day.

Walking in a circle is a familiar practice to me, since I walk around the house when I need to help my insulin pump reduce my blood sugar. When it's the same circle, it takes the same amount of time and the same amount of energy, so I can guess how much my blood sugar will be reduced based on the number of circles. I measure the space with my blood sugar. The first circle with Tata was to get to know myself, since I had been constantly taking care of my levels; the second was to have a glimpse of the place, and the third was to enjoy it.

Because of that long walk, I have thought of the relationship between my body and space, since I felt bitter about not joining others. The bitterness brought up the questions of how I am doing in the space when I am walking? Why couldn't I dare to walk? What have I been learning from my diabetes? After the workshop, in time, I would come to realize what I had just expressed.





Nidas

Before the *Autumn Equinox Walk* we were given audio and video recording devices to collect sounds and images during the walk, which we would later use for a group audiovisual performance, the *Equinox Jam* the day after the walk. It's a collective sharing of the material and thoughts gathered throughout the day of walking, also something that has become a tradition for the students of Vilnius Academy of Arts.

I had participated in this walk and the jam once before, and during the jam I used a projector to play some visuals. I didn't really have a plan to do video projections or join the jam session at all, it was rather improvised. It was interesting to hear tidbits of conversations between the travelers taken out of their specific context, replayed and dropped into this surreal, modulated, and scattered audiovisual party. This time, I thought that I would be actually expected to bring in some visuals. So, I guess I imposed upon myself, similarly like in Rejmyre, to set my mind on producing videos, this time preparing video footage for the jam.

I edited, converted, and rendered the footage collected by myself and other participants into videos suitable for the video mixing software. This was a long process that left me exhausted and annoyed, with little enthusiasm left for the jam itself. It didn't feel fun for me; it felt more like work. I collected videos, incorrectly assumed that I was expected to create visuals, and then presented them. While I appreciated the playful atmosphere generated by the creativity of artists working with the sound part of the jam, I think I was too self-absorbed and self-conscious to fully get into it.

I think that was when I started to question the purpose of these self-imposed assignments.

ARTIST REST

Gailė

The ritualistic marking of the Autumn Equinox Walk was followed by a day that, in the programme, was called Artist Rest. How did you use it?



Doğa

I honestly don't remember if I used it at all. But it is also possible to conclude that many of these reflections happened at resting time – growing within me. However, I am not aware if I am resting. I guess I have a loose connection with the idea of resting, lately I have been learning to welcome it to my life.

Nidas

In my mind, rest is something that has to be earned, something you award yourself with after completing a difficult task. And because I think that I rest more than I should, I associate it with shame, much like I do with shyness, another topic of the course.

So, although I mentioned that this workshop felt like a vacation, I didn't actually rest a lot. The relaxing nature of it came down to the familiarity of Nida and the participants of the workshop.

I was aware of my own need to prove that I am not wasting time, yet, in the context of artistic practice, notions of productivity seem absurd. Before the last day of the course, after a discussion

with some of the participants, I incorporated rest into what could be considered my "final product" for this workshop. I guess I rested on the last day.

Alyssa

I remember Daniel suggesting a "pedagogy of exhaustion" – to avoid a state of exhaustion we have the right length of gathering, an appropriate bedtime and days off to "rest". He asked us: what kind of knowledge might be found in a state of exhaustion?

During one group gathering we were asked "where are you/we?". Here's what I wrote in my notebook:

We are in a place of wondering, of shared exhaustion, of differing needs trying to find where to be met and held. We are in a place of beginning to trust that we are heard and cared for. We are in a place of longing to rest. We desire meaning and purpose in this course. We are in a place of being resistant to and a bit critical of the program, while also being open and in a contented posture of not-knowing.

This was my intuitive reading of the group's energy. I think it reveals that so much of what allows for rest in a space of pedagogy is feeling heard and cared for as a student. There is also a need for our collective and perpetual exhaustion as artists to be acknowledged and examined, not as something to try to avoid with all the right boundaries in place, but to actually lean into and examine our notions of productivity and rest.

As artists, it's hard to define rest. In Nida, rest often looked like doing. Making restful space requires restorative action. For me, that means clearing nagging tasks, cleaning my room, letting my mind be noisy in meditation – even dreaming up artwork if that's where it wants to go. True rest feels like spiritual equilibrium – something you can't just drop into between packed program schedules.

ARTIST WORK

Gailė

Having worked as the director of Nida Art Colony for a decade, Vytautas developed a deep understanding of the local people and the surrounding nature. Since Nida's landscape is highly regulated and maintained by the Curonian Spit National Park, running an institution that constantly welcomes foreign artists – many of whom are captivated by the area's nature – must have meant regularly reminding them of certain rules and working closely with park rangers.

For this course, in order to highlight Nida's specific environmental context, Vytautas proposed that on the 5th day of the program, called *Artist Work,* we collectively assist the national park rangers in their daily work. When ranger Stasys Kulpiauskas learned he would have some extra hands for a day, he didn't hesitate and decided that the group should help clear young pine trees from a restricted area of the *Dead Dunes*. This work was essential to maintaining the dunes and preserving the unique flora and fauna of the region.

While speaking with Stasys on the phone, I warned him that he would need to explain the necessity of this work to a group of international art students. He laughed it off, convinced that its importance was self-evident. To him, it was an opportunity to share the ongoing efforts of the Curonian Spit National Park and raise awareness about ecological preservation – something we cared about deeply.

Doğa

I remember that day with bitterness and confusion. I didn't feel comfortable when I was asked to pluck the small trees to prevent them from occupying the land further. We uprooted them and left them where they had been growing. I felt bad. The feelings among the group were similar, with thoughts like, *"Why am I doing this?"* and *"I'm about to give up."* However, the fact that they would be



plucked didn't change, whether I did it or not. And gazing into the distance did not help me escape this reality. I think these frictions led me to look deeper into the concept of responsibility of an artist. What do I take responsibility for in my artistic practice?

My ideas were reinforced: I could use the autonomous space opened up by art not by isolating myself from the political or avoiding engagement with it, but by directing various perspectives toward it and asking whether another way is possible – and how. This was not the statement of this process in itself; rather, it was something that came out of my being set free throughout the whole process. And, of course, the reason why we were there tearing down those trees was not a decision made that day. Life in that area needed the dunes to stay in place, and these trees had been planted a long time ago to do that. The pine tree was chosen because it grows easily and takes root quickly. But now, that fast-growing pine had to be uprooted because it had spread beyond where people had wanted it to.

Nidas

At the same time as I was walking along the dunes and ripping out the young pine trees from the sand I was listening to a lecture online (I'd missed a few lectures, so this felt like a chance to catch up). The lecture was on violence and beauty, which felt rather fitting in this context, as the removal of the pine trees was, in part, an aesthetic decision – to maintain the beauty of this man-made landscape. In the eyes of the ranger and those who employ him, it is necessary to preserve the image of the sandy dunes, not to let it get overgrown. And even though plucking out the trees seemed wrong, it felt, unfortunately, satisfying, in a destructive sort of way. I agree with Doğa that it seemed confusing; we were told that this is for the good of the landscape, but in reality, we were mostly doing it to hold back the natural development of this environment. In the end, it provided some interesting topics for discussion, yet it stemmed from a very real – I would say violent – activity.

ARTIST MAKE

Doğa

The next day in the programme was called *Working with the Artist* and David led his workshop *Making Collective–Collective Making*. I was fascinated by the way he in-determined the artist's work in order to redefine it. The task was to invent a tool. The question of where I should begin rose. I have been interested in the relationships between people for a long time now. And during the workshop we were at a wood workshop of NAC. So, everything I may have wanted was already there. I used two pieces of wood with a string in between – for two people to grab the pieces of wood and lean back, trusting the rope to support them. I first tried it with David and I was the one who couldn't trust the knots and the rope. After practicing a couple of times, I could let go.

The next step of the workshop was to bring together our tools to work together in groups. I remember our group had a



threshold, a balance board, and a rope for trust. Suddenly, everything came together in harmony. One of us stood on the balance board, right next to the threshold, holding one end of the rope, another person held the other end, while the third waited for their turn.

What we did was reflect on our methods, tools, and work. The workshop helped me realize that it is up to the artist to define the work and how it will eventually function. The depth of this workshop echoed in an artistic research course I took later. I had to convince myself why I had chosen a particular method. Ulus Baker (and surely philosophers before him) said something like

this: knowing something is really just an act of verifying hypotheses in your own mind. You can't see the answer to a question you haven't asked in the thing you are investigating. So, if I start asking about the color of a crab, I'll know the color of the crab. If I don't have a question about its anatomy in my mind, I don't come across anything about its anatomy and I don't know. When I think that this applies to theories in all our states of knowing... paradigms emerge. What we know and what is considered true exists within a certain paradigm. Why did I choose this method? What else is there in this thing that I am approaching before this method?

Alyssa

I remember this day most clearly. I had the idea to make an "anti-amber-catching net" for assisting in letting go of the addictiveness of collecting amber. So, basically, it was a net for hunting and not catching these precious stones as it had holes too big to retain any of the tiny amber when scooping sand from the beach to sift for it. This was really meaningful to me as there had immediately been such a craze amongst our group towards finding these golden-orange shimmering rocks. Of course, I too was seduced by their beauty and this desire to possess them. But, after a few days, I realized I could very easily get sucked into only looking at my feet in hopes of spotting a speck of some, and missing the walk and being present to all else. What might I be missing in the incessant hunt for amber, eyes glued to the ground, fixated on this one thing?

It also felt wrong to take what I had no use for (only perhaps in the name of potential art), while many people in this region rely on amber for their livelihood. This idea of coming to a place for just 8 days and sweeping it for its most valuable resource was clearly the artist acting as an extractivist.

I became more interested in what I could leave behind in this place. There also came this idea of studying something by not picking it up or taking it. So, making the net was assisting these intentions by providing me with a conceptual tool to deliberately let the amber slip through my means to capture and possess it. Daniel noted: What are we NOT looking for when we look for amber? We

I became more interested in what I could leave behind in this place. There also came this idea of studying something by not picking it up or taking it.

Alyssa Coffin,
student

are told this amber is valuable, but why do we value this ancient tree resin over any other rock? Is it because it glitters more in the sun, because it's more rare, or because it's been tethered to a market value so its value is in what it can be exchanged for?

This anti-amber-catching net then got combined with my colleagues' tools – an apple-stealer and one other backpack-like contraption that I can't quite remember. Together, they made a "toolkit for moral decisions". This was a nice connection back to *Everything You Want Was Already Here*, where we discussed abundance and lack in artistic practice. In one sense, amber was the material of Nida – what was available embedded in the place, to use it seemed like recognizing an abundance rather than feeling a lack of any other imported material one could desire to make an artwork during the course. This course pushed me to consider what artwork could be created from a deliberate choice or place of lack. What does absence and lack become when it is the material subject of our artwork?

SHYING

Nidas

On the last day, before the round-up and our final presentations, Daniel introduced shyness as a way of being. During the presentation, I started to wonder if perhaps shyness is a privileged position, since lack of shyness is almost always required for survival or a comfortable existence. To me, shyness is also synonymous with isolation – either you isolate yourself intentionally or you are isolated through lack of contact with others. But then we were introduced to crown shyness among some species of trees, and even though this is a human concept adapted to non-human entities, it is a method of survival. A valuable, useful shyness.

Then I thought about the practicality of it and decided to take a position of amplified shyness, for it to become active, almost aggressive. In my mind, shyness is almost always a sign of passivity, but in this case, shyness does not have to be sensitive, it can be a conscious and intentional refusal to communicate, whether verbally



or nonverbally. What I did was that I basically tried to hide away from everyone, or, if that was not possible, avoided eye contact at all costs. I feel that for shyness to become useful, it has to be very intentional and used only in very specific conditions, requiring sensitivity to subtle social cues. I don't think this would be easy for me to accomplish, to be shy and to be confident in being shy, without it becoming a burden or an obstacle.

Doğa

I know Daniel from UniArts; he is my professor. He always looked into my eyes when talking, which is why it was so confusing and surprising when he started presenting this part by hiding under a chair and just typing his words. It was an obvious gesture of shyness that I can easily empathize with. We looked at the crowns of the trees and how they give space to each other: crown shyness. I remember that the class followed up our research by using shyness as our method.

It was hard to confront my own shyness. How do I feel "in shyness"? How do I behave? It was really tough to notice my shyness – I couldn't. All I could come up with was not maintaining


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eye contact or not settling in a particular place in a relaxed way. But that was something I already knew from observing other people.

During the research part, I wandered around Nida, ready to test some "hypotheses". Ideally, my research would have involved breaking eye contact and checking my feelings, and seeing what happened next. However, my ideal scenario didn't happen because there were really few people looking at me. Most broke eye contact before me or didn't look at me at all. I think I was incapable of being shy in these circumstances, even though I had been told several times that I was shy in other situations. I couldn't explore this further, but I think what I got from this session went hand-in-hand with David's session. What do I do with actions and feelings that are already present in my everyday life – like being shy, inviting, witnessing, listening? How do they work, and where do/can they stand in my artistic practice?

Alyssa

Shyness is such a deeply personal topic for me. At the start of this session, I appreciated how shyness was presented as a valuable way of being that offers a unique perspective on the world. Daniel talked about "reclaiming the value and epistemology of shyness."

Growing up as a timid and quiet child, "shy" was a label that was put on me and made me feel defective. It made me want to hide in shame for not being able to perform normal social and vocal functions. It was really valuable for me to have the chance to reframe this label of "shy" and examine it from an artistic and conceptual perspective.

Although Daniel's presentation was evocative and opened a new way of thinking about shyness, when we were then left to explore the concept alone for five hours – encouraged to embody and enact it – I was thrown into a very different headspace. For me, shyness isn't just a label or personal trait; it's also a source of trauma. Growing up, it excluded me from many social experiences. I was often either left out or treated like a fragile being in need of special care. During the session, these memories came rushing

back, and by the end, I found myself frozen – unable to speak, only sobbing from a raw and wounded place.

All of this feels quite personal and vulnerable to share, and during the course I only shared with two close friends and briefly with Daniel to explain my tears. Now reflecting, I feel it's important to share because these two KUNO courses were unique in that I felt they could hold space for the personal to collide with the professional/academic and for these two spheres of being an individual and an artist to be met in the fullness of their entanglement. I never once felt shamed for breaking down crying, instead this moment led me to bond with another student that stayed and embraced me through those tears which led to us collaborating on my final piece.

I think in this particular context of "shyness as a way of being" it was paramount – if some trauma in me hadn't been triggered, it would be indicative of not having surrendered fully into the prompt, into a way of being. I probably would have stayed in the rational realm of mental reasoning from an emotionally safe distance, thinking about "shyness" as an abstract concept to be studied. I really appreciated Daniel's evocative nudge towards shyness as *a way*, a way of moving through the world, one that we collectively inhabit.

PROJECTS IN RESPONSE TO PLACE AND THEME

Gailė

At the end of the course, we had presentations by the students of the artistic works or proposals they came up with during that time. Since we had students coming from different schools and different disciplines – their works varied in media: from a video work about critical tourism and a poetic audiovisual installation, to embroidery, painting, and first-time woodworking. Some students also collaborated, teaching each other various crafts or trying to make glass together at the firepit. We even had a few emotional,

performative presentations. But for you three it was the second time presenting a project in the *Rural Contextual Practice* course. How did the setting and the theme of the course influence the development of your project? What did you focus on?

Alyssa

I made a participatory performance piece about shyness where I invited people to journey through the forest to the dunes.

Participants were asked in advance to write down their thoughts about their understanding of "shyness" on a piece of paper. Then the group was led on a silent walk through the forest and into the dunes, all the while passing the slips of paper quietly between them. When they arrived at the site where I was naked and lying in a hole in the sand, they were led along the upper perimeter of the dune in a circle around me. They were asked to look at me indirectly or "just shy of" my performance. By seeing me in their periphery, my intention was that they would not just witness a human figure, but rather a context – a shy gaze expanding their viewpoint into an interrelated perception of the vast landscape, their own walking bodies, the people walking in front of them, and my isolated, vulnerable body below.

Shyness attends to the spaces in between – sensing unspoken words and the charged air of emotional bodies. Often shy myself, I know how each move or word can feel like a clumsy, silent elephant. My presence and actions feel paradoxically both crudely mammoth and invisible to those around me. All the while, there is my critical, internal eye. I wanted to place myself in this uncomfortable state of shyness, through my performance, in a way that would illustrate it in confronting terms.

Once the participants had completed the circle around me, they were invited to approach me in the ditch. For the duration of their walk I was frantically trying to hide myself – my face buried in the ground – as I used my flailing limbs to move the sand to cover my body. The invitation was for them to walk up to me and crouch down to whisper to me a line from one of the papers or something they wanted to share with me about shyness. Only a



few people approached me and let me into the thoughts that had been exchanged among the group on their walk. This reticence both perhaps demonstrated their own shyness while also making visible how a shy person is so easily ostracized, especially in an extroverted social culture where a herd mentality often dictates actions.

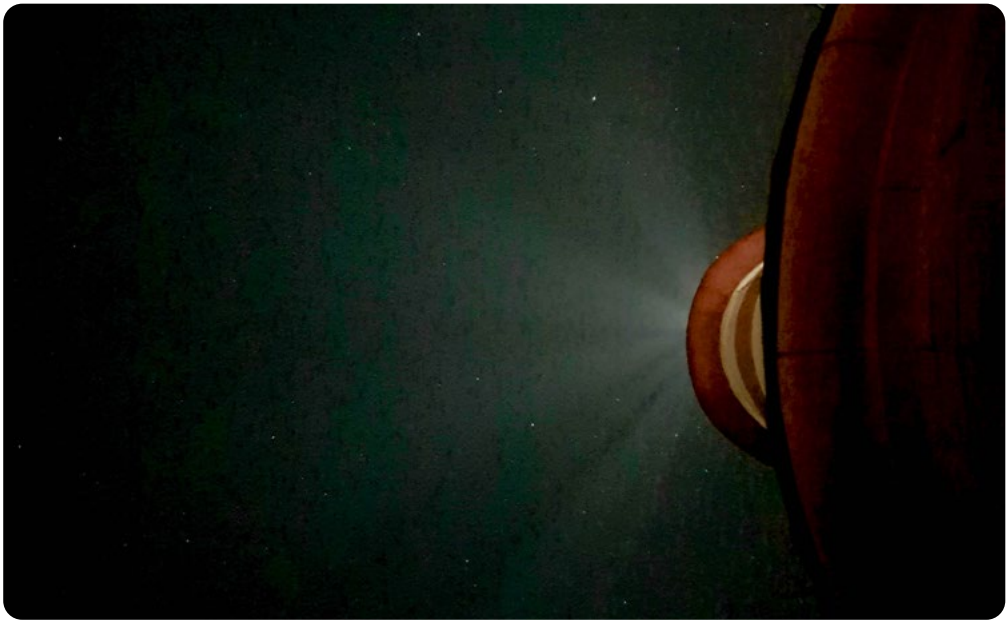
Nidas

In my process, the *kratt* – an entity from Estonian folklore created solely for labour – became the central figure quite early in the workshop. It craves work above all else and can be brought into being by anyone using basic household items for its construction, along with a drop of their own blood to spring it to life.

I would like to believe that this entity encapsulates the notions of working and not working, as well as tool-making and tool-sharing. I did some quick research on the subject of *kratt*: its various definitions and descriptions; media where it can be found (folktales, written stories, film, theatre); its appearances and applications in contemporary folklore (Estonia's National AI "Kratt" Strategy); ChatGPT's stance on what can be considered a *kratt* and if ChatGPT itself is a *kratt* (it disagrees with this suggestion).

As far as I was concerned, by doing this research I had already completed the "Working" part of the workshop. Tutor David Larsson helped me reach this conclusion by mentioning that "sometimes you have to let go of the research and move on to practice." Except, in this case, I decided against a tangible practical output and concentrated on the "Not Working" part of the workshop.

During the final presentation I introduced the concept of *kratt* as a tool: something you can construct in your own mind out of leftover obligations and which will then do your bidding without you feeling the full weight of responsibility. After all, it is still you – just separate from yourself. This presentation took the form of a short talk or a confession. It was probably one of the most satisfying presentations that I've ever done, it served as a way to circumvent various issues I have with art creation, or art work and avoid the tension of "having to produce something".

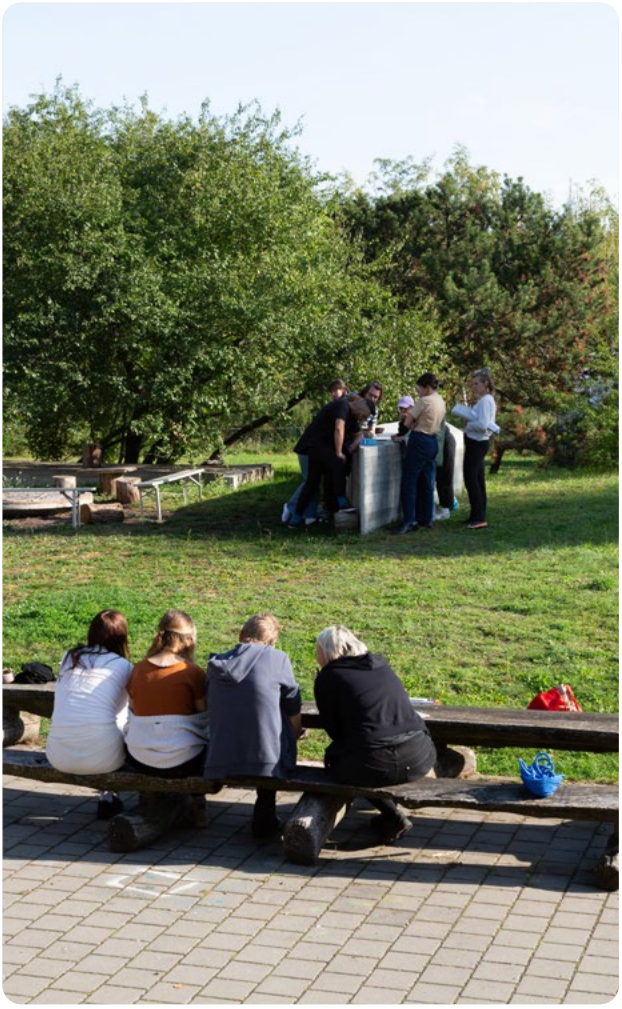


Doğa

My final presentation was a recording in Lithuanian and Turkish, translated into English and Lithuanian by Google Translate. It was a short phone screen and voice recording from the library, capturing a conversation in which the librarian explained how the lighthouse light was changed, why, and when.

From the beginning, I was curious about how people live in Nida. I was looking for a local touch, expecting something to show up. Meanwhile, I was highly influenced by the critical tourism lecture and questioned my own position as a new visitor in Nida. I was looking for ways to avoid acting like a tourist. Where could a non-tourist go? Cemeteries, regular shops, bike paths, libraries... That's why I decided to spend most of my time in a public library. The first time I entered the library, even though the library was open, many things were closed. This made me realize that avoiding the tourist role wasn't as simple as choosing a place, it might have more to do with time.

I went to the library several times to make myself more comfortable with human interaction. I was shy but eager. Then, I noticed that the people were not very comfortable speaking English. I



realized that I was fixated on communicating solely through language, rather than exploring other means of interaction. Because of this stubbornness, I came up with the idea of using Google Voice Translate. All I wanted was to keep the record of this multilingual voice translation act that would happen between us.

I was reading some of the books from Nida Art Colony that the public library had. At some point, maybe when I was about to give up, the moment came. Everyone in the library started chatting in Lithuanian and laughing at something. I looked at them with a smile, confused, and said that I was curious about what they were

talking about but I didn't understand. Then some of them tried to speak to me in English. It didn't work well, so I immediately suggested using the translator and recording it. That was what I brought back to the Nida Art Colony.

To me it is so obvious that I can speak English to everyone in Helsinki but not in Nida. This double-sided constraint (me not being able to speak Lithuanian and others not being able to speak English), brought up the research itself.

The rural context was one of the conditions that determined the direction and focus of my work. The basis of my project was not directly "ruralness" but the disconnection I felt in that environment, the forms of interaction, and the effort to connect. In this way, the rural context really worked as a context that shapes the way of relating, allowing me to explore the processes of connection and communication instead of representing a specific image of the rural.

REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING IN RURAL CONTEXT

Nidas

This course gave us insight into what we perceive to be rural, and how we perceive ourselves acting as artists within such a context. For me, it was interesting to observe ourselves as these strange outsiders latching onto and researching rural environments, in the hopes of infiltrating the small communities. We sought to understand them and ourselves in the process and, perhaps, to impact them in a subtle, positive way – or at least to attempt to do so. I think this was achieved in some cases in Rejmyre, though less so in Nida.

I am not intimately familiar with Daniel, Sissi and David's practices or the Rejmyre Art Lab project; I can only reflect on what I experienced during my stay there. What I could observe is that the artistic community in Rejmyre is perhaps a bit more symbiotic in their relationship with the community of the town. In Nida, the artists are further away from the town, both in a physical sense

This course gave us insight into what we perceive to be rural, and how we perceive ourselves acting as artists within such a context.

Nidas Kaniušas,
student

and in their connection to the local community. Then again, I may be completely wrong!

I think that for me, Rejmyre was a lesson in looking outward, sharing, communicating and taking in the unknown. There was a lot of listening involved. In Nida, I returned to looking inward, but I was glad to do so, and even though my creative output remains only in my own mind and maybe one or two other minds as well, I prefer it this way.

Alyssa

The course in Rejmyre was the most significant experience during my two-year Master's program. The offerings of *Everything You Want Was Already Here* were rich, conceptually countercultural, and profound. Yet, I didn't experience them as an academic superiority being handed down to us students – there was also space for us to take our own initiative and propose practices or group gatherings as we felt inspired.

This freedom to be both the facilitator and a student, and to be intrinsically motivated to experiment, reminded me of my days being homeschooled as a child, when excitement for learning was the guiding force. Over the course of the two weeks, I facilitated two different rituals surrounding wild food, and over the weekend break, I coordinated a gathering by the lake for a cookout dinner. We were on a rotating schedule to make meals together, and this essential activity became an important space for conversations and forming connections with other students. I believe a certain level of autonomy is needed, a responsibility of the students to help create the experience of the space of study, for a group to form into a community.

For me, creative thought emerges from encounters with the natural world and people, so in some ways all art for me is a type of collaboration. These KUNO courses had a way of surfacing that truth by bringing us into an intensive space where nearly all our waking and sleeping hours were shared – spontaneous conversations emerged, sparking new thoughts, and there was time to sense people's emotions and stories in a way that isn't possible in



a traditional academic environment.

In an intimate rural contextual practice, the people around you become part of the place, and your artistic response becomes entangled with these relationships. Each location was charged with a specific atmosphere – both energetic and built – that subtly shaped the creative mind/body.

The rural context is perhaps more visibly present, tied to a certain demographic and livelihood. Unlike urban settings, where diversity is perceptually homogenized, rural environments lay bare their unique characteristics.

What happens when you're asked to be fully present in your surroundings? In an urban university environment, you hide in your studio, mine your own thoughts, and choose who gets a glimpse of your process. Everything was impacting me on every level, so I decided in both places to embrace it fully and see where it led me.

Both in Nida and Rejmyre, it led me to inviting others to be part of my creation process – to, in a sense, play themselves in the narrative of my work as a way of being authentic to the impact of their presence. It also led me to make the most dynamic, emotionally honest, and brave art pieces of my studies.

Doğa

For some reason, I don't have a clear conceptualization of "rural" now. Everything we did during the course felt so distinct from one another. The way I perceived or experienced the rural, I think, reflects and is hinted at in my earlier answers – I associated it with compactness, with being minor and small. And now, in my mind, what I call rural remains somewhat elusive. The workshops helped me experience things in a rural setting, but I am still not sure how to think about rurality itself.

For instance, in the Nida project, I was looking for some connection with the people living there, and the rural site gave me that possibility. It allowed me to engage with people in ways I usually can't, especially in places where I don't share a common language. It was different from my experiences in cities or places where I could speak in my native tongue. But even in that encounter, I still don't know what to say about rurality itself.

Maybe that's because, for me, rurality in this case was a condition that shaped how I related to others and the place. It wasn't about defining the rural place, but about responding to it, figuring out how to navigate artistically. In both projects, the rural context didn't dictate what the work should be about, but it shaped how I engaged, how I listened, and how I made sense of the disconnection or looked for connection.

And I also can't fully summarize what I took away from those two significant courses, as I can't quite put my experience into words. I wanted to join the third edition of the course as well, but I had already graduated by then, so it wasn't an option. However, being in those places – being in a rural environment – was something special.







STUDENT PROJECTS

Pijus Chraptavičius

Sailor Moon

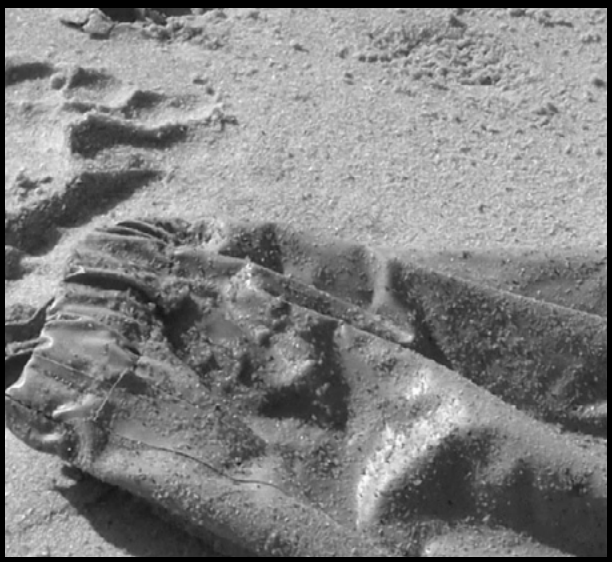
AUDIOVISUAL INSTALLATION

Gusts of wind scatter grains of sand, like memories rising from the layers of the past.

A soundscape pulsing with the rhythms of industrial techno becomes an inner compass for travelers wandering between the dunes of Nida and Preila. Their steps are ritualistic, as if seeking echoes of the past. Here, sand is not only nature but also a mirror of time, beneath which rests a forgotten seafarer's identity. From his shirt – found like a relic – emanates the spirit of salt, wind, and solitude. It is not just a garment but a symbol: an incarnation of memory, a trace of a vanished life washed by the waves of time.

The journey becomes not only physical but also spiritual – through layers of time, structures of sound, and bodily states. It is a ritual of searching for what was forgotten but never lost. Image and sound merge into one – a hypnotic odyssey into the unknown.





Alice Fyles, Martina Priehodová, Vilius Juozapas Vingras

Ceramic and glass experiments

Alice Fyles

I remember wanting to work intensely with my body, having spent most of the project resting and thinking – apart from the Equinox walk we did. I was eager to return to my main medium, ceramics. So I went to the beach to collect stones and sand, curious to see if they would melt in a fire. As I sat outside crushing them, Vilius approached and offered to help. He brought glass and shells and showed me how to separate finer particles with a shaking technique. He also told me about his work with an invisible material – radiation.

Later, Martina arrived with some leftover clay and joined our improvised firing session. I borrowed some of it to make pinch pots for the crushed stones. We discussed how to avoid explosions, where to place our objects, and how to generate enough heat to transform the materials in the firepit. We used a metal container to retain the fire's heat, which eventually melted – so we knew the temperature was high. By nightfall, more people had gathered around, drinking and cooking marshmallows.

The day began with solitary work and turned into a spontaneous collaboration. A lively communal setting became a moment of connection and experimentation. That open, flexible approach is something I try to carry into my current practice, as it often leads to a lot of fun and unexpected outcomes.

Martina Priehodová

My ceramic practice was still quite new at the time. I was captivated by Alice's determination to make the firing happen – it was exciting that ceramics could also be such a bootleg practice. I snooped around the studio in Nida Art Colony and found some

leftover clay. Later, we went walking with Vitalis, looking for wild clay along the lagoon shore. The landscape was mostly swallowed by sand, but I was very glad that the practice shifted towards something else, rather than slowly dying down.

I didn't expect any exciting results, but I was drawn to the fire and the unpredictability of it all. We melted a pan, which was, for sure, fun. Then, another resident of NAC from another course came by and criticized our unstructured experiment, which made the whole thing even funnier. The glass in the pinch pots melted, we had a lot of fun burning the fire, and I like to think I'll always be just a little more of a cowboy than you when it comes to experimental ceramic practices.

Vilius Juozapas Vingras

For me that day started with a feeling of loss. I had just figured out what I wanted to do – fuse pieces of amber together – when I realized I'd need a sufficient heat source. That's when I noticed Alice working by the firepit. I offered to help in exchange for sharing the space and the fire.

This exchange continued throughout the whole day. It is the main thing that stuck with me even after all this time. I remember Alice sharing about clay and ceramics whilst I shared about glass. It was an exchange of knowledge and effort – a collective process to keep the fire going and to complete our work no matter the result.

Though we encountered the person from another group trying to explain how our setup wouldn't work, I am happy that they didn't stop us. I got to prove to myself that there are ways of working with glass that don't require workshops or much equipment.









IMAGINED SITE

Kilpisjärvi,
Finland

COURSE ANNOUNCEMENT

IMAGINED SITE
KILPISJÄRVI, FINLAND

JULY 18TH – JULY 30TH, 2024

Imagined Site is a 12-day intensive, site-responsive course that takes place at the Kilpisjärvi Biological Research Station (in far northern Finland) and in the participants' imaginings of the site. Imagined Site is the third edition of the KUNO intensive course Rural Contextual Practice. This edition is produced in collaboration with the BioArt Society Residency, that has been engaging the Kilpisjärvi station since 2008 through their Bioarctica platform. The course explores issues central to making site-responsive art in rural contexts.

Imagined Site brings together students in an advanced stage of their studies from the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, Konstfack University College of Arts Crafts and Design in Stockholm and the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts along with select MFA students from other KUNO schools.

ON THIS YEAR'S THEME

Our chosen theme for this edition of the Rural Contextual Practice course series, Imagined Site, makes craft of the often maligned role of all the things we project onto a place before arriving, the things we imagine the site to be that draw us to engage with it. This speaks both to the conditions of site-responsive public art production and to the space of the "rural" itself, which exists in many ways as a false dichotomy and a fertile imaginary.

The structure of the course involves developing three proposals for works to be realized "in" Kilpisjärvi, one based on how we imagine the site prior to arrival, another based on how we imagine the site while there and a third as we imagine it in the aftermath of our visit.

Upon arrival, participants will make a second proposal for a work that responds to their time in residence at the site. This work too will engage imagination, as an aesthetic mode and strategy of being with the places we inhabit in "the present."

The space of imagination known as "remembering" will also be engaged, with participants asked to make a third and final proposal after leaving Kilpisjärvi, either in the process of slow travel away from the site or upon returning to their homes. We will take time to be with these three, not at all distinct, modes of being with a site, before, during and after, and their roles within our respective art practices.

The course is an opportunity for students pursuing fine and craft arts as well as media art, to meet and engage in a site-responsive exploration around these issues, through their own existing practices.

COURSE COMPONENTS

The activities and methods of the course include:

- developing three proposals for an on-site project, before coming to the site, on site and after leaving the site.
- presentations and introductions by biologists, Kilpisjärvi staff and members of the BioArts Society
- a series of collective exercises initiated by each of the facilitating artist teachers
- collective meals
- previous work presentations by each participant
- independent exploration of the site and time for project development
- a temporary public project accompanied by a work-in-progress presentation during the final days on site.

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

For students from the host and partner academies, international travel and local travel to and from the site are covered through the KUNO intensive course support. Accepted students from other academies can apply for travel support from KUNO. Housing and all meals during the workshop are covered for all participants and there is no course fee. Housing will be in double and triple rooms with shared bathrooms.

FACILITATORS

Prof. Daniel Peltz
Professor of Site and Situation Specific Practice, Department of Time and Space Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland

Prof. Dr. Vytautas Michelkevičius
Head of Photography, Animation and Media Art Department and Head of Doctoral Programme in Fine Art, Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania

Sissi Westerberg
Senior Lecturer, Smycke & Corpus: Ädellab, Department of Craft, Konstfack University College of Arts Crafts and Design, Stockholm, Sweden

GUESTS

Erich Berger
Artist, researcher, former director of Bioarts Society, Helsinki

Dr. Rūta Spelskytė
Post-doctoral researcher, Vilnius Academy of Arts

Dr. Leena Valkeapää
Independent artist, Kilpisjärvi

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää
Independent artist, Kilpisjärvi

Dr. Hannu Autto
Service Coordinator and Station Manager, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Kilpisjärvi Biological Station

PARTICIPANTS

Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design

Jamie Gilroy Barrett
Salome Kappelin
Minna Rombo Zetterlund
Monika Zawadzka

Malmö Art Academy

Juju Bento
Anna Pezzoli

University of Bergen

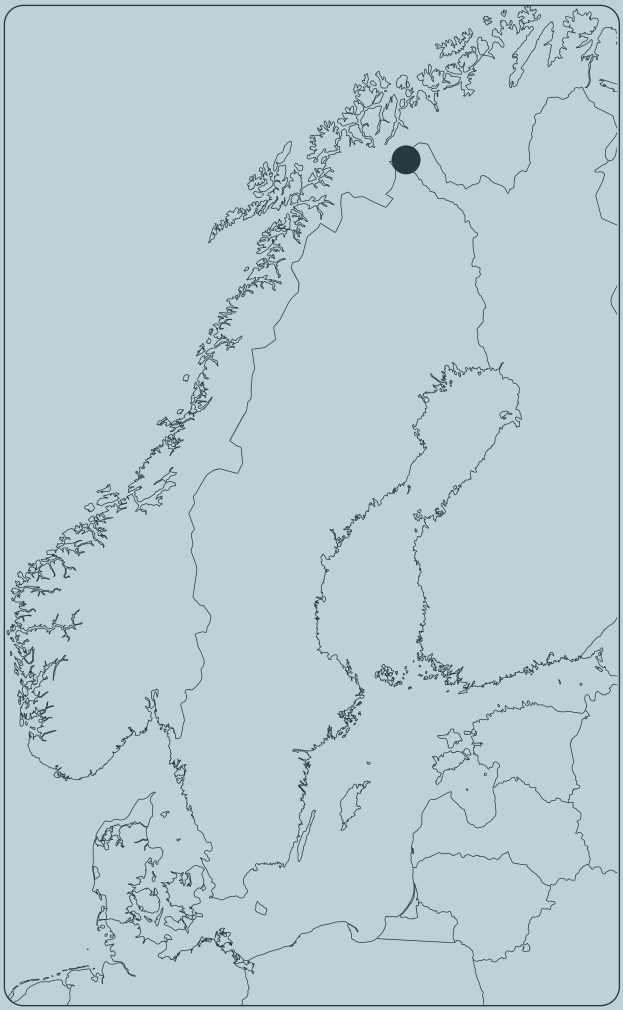
Henriette Mauritz Nordbeck

University of the Arts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts

Ramina Habibollah
Luumu Jokelainen
Sara Rantanen
Peng Xiao

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Rūta Grumadaitė
Aleksandra Ivinskaitė
Vilius Vingras
Emilija Zakarauskaitė



Kilpisjärvi (Gilbbesjávri in Sámi languages) is located in the northwesternmost part of Finland, within the Sápmi region traditionally inhabited by the Indigenous Sámi people. Situated in the Käsivarsi Wilderness Area and over 400 meters above sea level, it lies close to the Arctic Ocean. The landscape is marked by high fells such as Saana and Halti, with snow covering the ground from autumn until early June, and Lake Kilpisjärvi remaining frozen until midsummer. Despite its harsh conditions, the area has long been shaped by Sámi traditions of fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding, which continue to be practiced today.

Just outside the village stands the Kilpisjärvi Biological Station, a field station of the University of Helsinki, founded in 1963 following ecological studies initiated in the 1940s. Since 2008, the Helsinki-based Bioart Society has collaborated with the station on Ars Bioarctica, an art and science residency program focused on the sub-Arctic environment. The Bioart Society works at the intersection of art, science, and society, facilitating projects that engage with biology, ecology, and life sciences. The program brings together artists, scientists, and researchers from Finland and abroad to explore environmental questions through interdisciplinary collaboration.

FACILITATORS' REFLECTIONS

WHY KILPISJÄRVI AS RURAL CONTEXT?

Daniel

We agreed that the third edition of the course would take place in Finland and selected the Biological Research Station in Kilpisjärvi as the host site. We chose it because it had good physical and conceptual infrastructure for hosting the course.

They were able to meet our basic needs: more than enough beds to host our group of 18–20 people, adequate meeting areas and a dining hall where meals could be arranged. Most importantly, however, they had over a decade of experience (through the Bio Art Society residency at their site) with hosting artist engagements with their site and its researchers from other fields (primarily biology). They are also part of the University of Helsinki (a peer university to Uniarts Helsinki) and thus were experienced in hosting field study courses.

Sissi

Using Kilpisjärvi (a small municipality in Sapmi in the most northern part of Finland) as the third site in the course series, gave us a chance to explore a different aspect of rurality that is connected to the idea of "the wilderness" and "the mountains".

The previous editions had been in the Swedish glass factory town Rejmyre (an inland, post-industrial setting) and in the Lithuanian peninsula Nida (a coastal summer tourist destination) which are representing very different aspects of the rural.

Located close to the northern Finnish border to Sweden, Norway and Russia and as far from the capital city as you can get inside of Finland, Kilpisjärvi represents a certain idea of "remoteness".

Vytautas

For many years I had a dream, or rather an image in my mind, of remote lands, white nights, and a question: how could these affect the working conditions of young artists?

I have also known a few artists who visited (and worked at) Kilpisjärvi Biological Research Station and have heard good things about it. I believe that bringing artists into other contexts, such as research, and in this case, the natural sciences, is a powerful way to open future horizons and ask new questions. Who will be your collaborators as an artist? And how will you relate to society and other disciplines?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH STATION

Daniel

The Biological Research Station in Kilpisjärvi as a site reflects an interest in this course in the relationship between rural contextual practice and art/science/bio-art practices. This is a growing field of contemporary art practice and one that offers a critical opportunity for artists to engage in some of the pressing questions we are facing with respect to climate transformation.

Vytautas

We hosted a programme of invited artists and researchers to feed both the programme itself and our minds, while the difficult geological conditions fed our bodies through movement and other somatic practices.



What was particularly interesting was that most of the programme had been planned in advance. We even had an online lecture beforehand by artist-researcher Dr. Rūta Spelskytė, who had previously been a resident at the Kilpisjärvi Biological Research Station during the harshest period of winter.

We involved other people along the way, too. For instance, war historians, working at the Research Station at the same time as us, were invited to present their findings. A guided tour by the facility manager opened our imaginations and dropped our jaws. An online lecture by artist-researcher Erich Berger, former director of the Finnish Bioart Society, was an extremely valuable addition since he and his peers have spent many months at the Station, doing research and artistic practice.

Sissi

There is a similarity between how artists and researchers work. We are exploring something without knowing what the outcome will be. I think the curiosity and dedication are also something we

There is a similarity between how artists and researchers work. We are exploring something without knowing what the outcome will be.

Sissi Westerberg,
facilitator



have in common. The Research Station itself also offered some totally new experiences to the students. They were introduced to the lab and allowed to use the microscopes, and they were invited by some of the researchers to join them in their fieldwork.

THREE IMAGININGS: A STRUCTURE FOR RESPONDING TO SITE

Sissi

The concept of the three imaginings was suggested and developed by Daniel. The rest of us thought it was a good choice. As professional artists, when going to an artist-in-residence or applying for a grant to do a project somewhere, we are often asked to make a proposal for what we will do, often before even setting foot in that place. So, when participating in the global art world, we are engaged in a kind of professional imagining. Once on site, the project always changes. And after it's done, when you leave, is often the time when you realize how it should have been done.

Daniel

Imagination is a mode of practice/a skill that artists are often perceived as having expertise in. And yet, when artists are asked to engage with specific sites and communities, we often see our "imaginings" as weeds to be avoided or pulled out. I suggested imagination, in relation to site, as a focus for this edition in order to explore the tension between the wildness of imagination and the seeming groundedness of site.

Structurally, the course asked students to produce three artworks or proposals for artworks: one based on their imagination of the site prior to arrival, one while there, and one after departing. I had never had the opportunity to go to the region or the Research Station prior to the course so I was, in many ways, in a similar position to the students in having begun my engagement with the site by imagining it from afar. We made a decision not to spend too



much structured time on introducing philosophies of imagination, although we did send some pre-readings. Being there in Kilpisjärvi, I could feel how compelling the landscape itself was as a space of study. I realized that the structure we had planned for the course didn't allow enough space to be in the landscape independent of the group. This is always a challenge with intensive fieldwork courses but an important one to sit with.

HOW THE COURSE EVOLVED: ADAPTING TO THE SITE

Sissi

Something that was a little different in this course, than the previous ones, was that we had several artists and researchers come in to present, share and discuss their research with the group both before and during the course. At the beginning of the course, we also had some introductory collective exercises led by us facilitators, and the students presented the "first imagining" they had developed before coming. During the rest of the course, the students were developing this proposal into a new project, based on their experience of the site, experiments, discussions, and impressions from the local and remote guest presenters who were brought in. At the end, they all got a chance to try out a sketch of their proposal on the group. In between, there was berry picking, swimming in the lake (with or without sauna), and evening gatherings fighting off the mosquitoes by making fires and sometimes cooking in the "goahti" or "kåta" (a traditional Sámi tent-like wooden shelter).

Daniel

So, there were the formal activities: presentations of imaginings, meetings with researchers at the Research Station, sessions with past artist residents from BioArt Society, co-working sessions and there was also the informal curriculum, which is particularly important in a fieldwork course. I remember, as one strong example, the students deciding to take an evening hike to the summit of Saana fell (the mountain behind the Research Station). They wanted to experience the sun setting and then rising again, a unique experience of the far north. They discovered that if they hiked down the mountain, at just the right pace, they could pause and experience not one but three sunrises.

Also particularly important to this course was the visit by the artist Leena Valkeapää. Leena had been recommended by a colleague and also by BioArt Society as an important contact in



meeting this site. She spent one whole day with our group. I have never seen an artist give an “artist talk” in the way she did. She spent the entire morning taking us out into the landscape and telling us the story of her life, including her engagements with this site and her eventual decision to move to the area. In the afternoon, she showed us her PhD work and her collaborative art practice with her husband, who is a Sámi reindeer herder.

Vytautas

I think collective walks and rumours about them (where to go and how it was) were really effective as a methodology of group building and for experiencing both the site and time. We had daylight 24/7, so we had a vast number of opportunities to take not only day but also night walks, and, to cut a long story short, to experience the world out of the box.

A big opening for all of us was the meeting with local artist Leena Valkeapää, her partner, and artist Oula A. Valkeapää. I think their life story gave us access to local knowledge and a sense of criticality towards the exploitative nature of tourism in Lapland. I still remember Oula A. Valkeapää's quote: "There is so little space here now." It was said in the context of reindeer herding, and referred to the borders and rules, made in urban offices, that prevent the movement of semi-wild animals and the continuation of traditional lifestyles. Leena also introduced us to prominent and important works by Sámi writer, artist, musician, and activist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää.

Their life story also revealed the tensions between urban and rural life, as well as overlooked opportunities for artists here.





INVITED ARTISTS AND RESEARCHERS

The course Imagined Site had many artists and researchers come in and contribute to the programme, bringing in both local, theoretical and scientific perspectives on the site. This was a great way to get multiple perspectives on the site and open up discussions. Some of the presentations happened online, before the course started and some happened on site. Some were planned ahead and some emerged spontaneously from encounters at the research station. Artists, scientists, historians and reindeer herders fed into and enriched the programme. What they all had in common was a relationship to Kilpisjärvi.

Dr. Rūta Spelskytė-Liberienė

The first presentation of the course happened already in June, long before the course started as a way to plant some seeds and get the discussion going. It was by the Lithuanian artist Dr. Rūta Spelskytė-Liberienė, a post-doctoral researcher at Vilnius Academy of Arts who recently had a residency at Kilpisjärvi Biological Station through the Bioarts Society. Rūta gave us a guided visual tour of the station and Kilpisjärvi in the depths of wintertime and shared her project which was dealing with magnetite. She was walking on the ice and trying to find traces of the rock which has magnetic qualities.

She stayed at the research station in deep winter. During this time of year, the day only lasts for a couple of hours and the valley and mountains are in deep snow. Up to one meter of ice covers the lake. This significant thickness allows the lake to remain frozen for 7–8 months a year.

Erich Berger

Erich Berger is a doctoral researcher, artist and curator based in Helsinki. He is the former director of the Finnish Bioarts Society, which established a long-term artist residency programme at the research station. Our course offering was an official part of this residency so hearing about the history of the residency was

an important component. Erich currently works at the University of Oulu in Finland, where he conducts interdisciplinary research into how artists approach temporalities beyond human-centred time, combining cultural anthropology, geology and art.

In his presentation Erich focused on two very different, specific geologic aspects of the area and how they entered into his artistic work and research. The first case is looking into 540-million-year-old animal traces that have been preserved along the Scandinavian mountains in Sweden, Norway and Finland. These trace fossils, mostly produced by worms, have been rediscovered during *Field_Notes – Deep Time* field laboratory, organised by the Bioart Society in 2011. Subsequent expeditions in 2021 and 2023 with palaeontologists and artists explored this unique window into the deep past of life and the planet. The second case presented is the *Spectral Landscapes* series about radioactivity and the landscape that Berger started at the Palkiskuru uranium prospect about 100 km south of Kilpisjärvi.

Dr. Hannu Autto

The Kilpisjärvi Biological station manager and environmental scientist Dr. Hannu Autto gave an introduction to the history of the station, going back to the late 1800s. Professor Olavi Kalela of the University of Helsinki became interested in the migration of the Norwegian lemming and began studying voles in Kilpisjärvi in 1946. The archive of lemming data is now the longest-running one in the world. The biological station itself was founded in 1963 and has since served the students and researchers of the University of Helsinki and other Finnish and international universities without interruption. Hannu also gave an introduction to the laboratory and shared his research interests as a social scientist.

Dr. Leena Valkeapää & Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

Dr. Leena Valkeapää, artist and researcher, moved from Helsinki to Kilpisjärvi 20 years ago and maintains a long-term practice at the site. She spent a full day with the course group, sharing her work and allowing her practice at the site to unfold. Leena described



her first encounter with a reindeer herder, who later became her husband and artistic collaborator – Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. As they were observing the landscape across a lake, she remarked, "It's so vast!", to which he replied, "Oh no, it's too little space! It's not enough now that I can't bring the reindeer across the border for grazing." Leena emphasized that there are so many historical and contemporary land issues that have shaped and left their marks on the landscape – from Nazi invasion during World War II to mining and overgrazing. Through their collaborative work, based on images and text messages Nils sends to Leena while out with his herd and a dog, the group got a glimpse of his deep relationship with the landscape and the embodied experience of everyday life.

Informal visitors

During the course, the students had an unplanned encounter with two young war historians conducting research in the former bunkers surrounding the research station. Each morning they could be seen hiking up the mountain, carrying equipment and prepared to stay overnight if needed. Based on a request from the students who had informal conversations with them, we made room in the

schedule to have a presentation of their fieldwork including documentation of the sites and display of found remains from World War II, rusted out war helmets and ammunition. The objects and the stories, of thousands of horses, soldiers, firewood being transported to and lodged on the mountains, created a dissonance to the otherwise romanticised image of natural beauty, silence and peace that remained with us.

LASTING REFLECTIONS

Some travelled on gravel and asphalt from Lithuania, some rocked to sleep by rail, all were met by reindeer, blocking the road, as they approached the small gathering of houses that make up Kilpisjärvi and the Biological Research Station.

The choice to conduct the third edition of the KUNO course at this location was a way to explore another kind of rural area than the one we met in Sweden – the post-industrial factory village, and in Lithuania – the off-season seaside destination. Here we were in the heart of Finnish Sapmi, close to the Swedish and Norwegian borders, in the middle of a mountainous, arctic landscape that, at least at first glance, appeared more wild and desolate than most places. We often hear the expression "in the middle of nowhere" and perhaps some would use it to describe this place. But an important lesson of rural contextual practice is that there is no "nowhere", except as an imaginary.

The placement of a group of artists at the Biological Research Station felt surprisingly "natural". Perhaps because our course was built on a decade-long collaboration with the Bioarts Society, that places multiple artists-in-residence at the station each year, but also because there are many overlaps between artistic work and biological research. Something about the body language of the scientists, as they prepared to do their fieldwork, was similar to what you see in artist when we get excited when feel we have discovered something we want to explore.

The way we engaged with the course title Imagined Site was by asking students to produce three "imaginings" in the form of proposals for art works

for the site: one before coming, one while there and one after leaving.

As the week advanced, with three prepared daily meals at the research station's canteen, cold swims and saunas, midnight walks to the nearby mountain (Saana), microscope studies, presentations by artists and researchers, daily trips to the convenience store and hard work, each student found a way to move from their first imagining of the site into a second imagining.

As we all dispersed in different directions at the end of the course, it was a sort of closing of the space for us (the course facilitators) to receive the gifts of the students' third proposals as we arrived home. Some of them are enclosed in this chapter.



STUDENT PROJECTS

Xiao Peng

What Plants Are Saying (About Us)

PARTICIPATORY SITE-RESPONSIVE EXCHANGE COMPRISING PENCIL AND INK DRAWINGS, WRITTEN NOTES, AND POSTAL MAIL-OUTS.

During the Rural Contextual Practice series at the Kilpisjärvi Biological Research Station, I began a drawing-based project focused on non-anthropocentric perspectives and plant life in the Malla Strict Nature Reserve. Avoiding photography, I drew one plant per day, using this slow process to reconsider what it means to pay attention to nature. A chance encounter with a tourist questioning reindeer behaviour, and a later meeting with artist *Leena Valkeapää*, shifted my thinking – revealing contradictions in legislation and diverse views on reindeer grazing's ecological role. Inspired by this, I invited fellow artists to draw plants and write imagined reflections from the plant's perspective, which were then mailed out to them anonymously from Kilpisjärvi irrespective of who drew what. The project evolved into *What Plants Are Saying* (*about us*) – a participatory, site-responsive experiment that resists fixed outcomes and invites new forms of connection, unfolding in tandem with the place and its inhabitants.




RAMINA
27/07/24.

Jamie Gilroy Barrett

Temporal Leak 99490

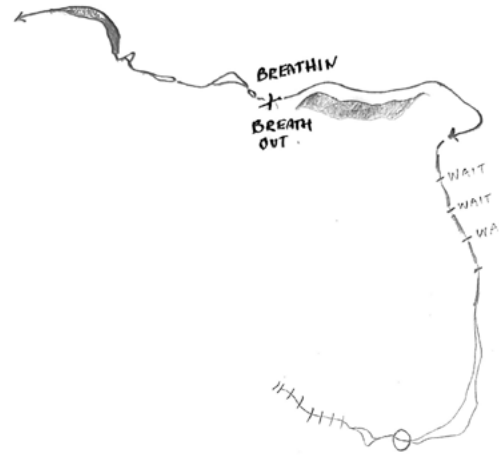
A SERIES OF SCORES FOR WALKING



In Kilpisjärvi, I explored the concept of leakage – how meaning, memory and sound move across boundaries of place and time. Central to this was the introduction of a personal yet alien object to the Arctic landscape: a postman's whistle once used by members of my family in the Irish postal service.

Placing this object in the environment prompted reflection on the dissonance and resonance created when distant places, histories and signals intersect. I was also influenced by the convergence of three national borders in the region and the sensory confusion of endless daylight during the Arctic summer – where night seems to leak into day.

From these ideas, I developed a series of open-ended scores/maps, inviting fellow artists to interpret them through sound and their surroundings. These collaborative performances, along with the whistle and field recordings, were blended into a final sound piece – where personal history, shared experience and landscape are deeply entwined. Participants were later asked to use the scores/maps to navigate an area of Kilpisjärvi while listening to the sound piece in earphones.





Minna Rombo Zetterlund

Field work with retroreflector

I imagined Kilpisjärvi as a faraway place, where the horizon is vast and awe is close. My constant dream of gazing at a wide horizon of ocean meeting sky expanded. I imagined Kilpisjärvi and the dream of the ocean transformed into the vastness of the fells. I had brought mirrors and superglue to build a retroreflector, expecting to make and explore. But on arrival, I lost all desire to create, the landscape complete in itself, to the point that nothing else was needed. I was lost for words in all my languages, even making.

Eventually, I built the reflector just to have done so. As it began to fall apart during a hike, I felt strangely relieved; the more it fell apart, the more relieved I felt.

This feeling lingered, returning home to my big-city-cave, realising that in peripheral places, where the horizon is vast, no language is needed but awe.





These moments, when you convene outside the usual academy workshop or studio, which is usually located in an urban context, and you go to a rural setting and have very intense exchanges and you stay together; you have breakfast together, you have lunch together, you go for a swim or sauna; this brings a very lively experience and you form this temporary community. I think this informal way of study is very important.

Vytautas Michelkevičius

Why are most art universities in urban contexts? There's an enormous gap between the urban and the rural. Public art universities also need to take some responsibility for bridging this gap.

Sissi Westerberg





Rural contextual practice is an epistemic intervention, aimed at expanding ways of knowing by expanding wheres of knowing. Our long-term vision is to build these pedagogic experiments into a full degree program that situates university-level art education in rural and remote encounters/contexts.

Daniel Peltz

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RURAL CONTEXTUAL PRACTICE
Towards a place-based arts pedagogy
A document from the development of a new MFA course series

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Production and Prepress
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Thanks to
Vitalij Červiakov, Dovydas Černiauskas, Daniel and Ula Zarem

Printed by
UAB "Baltijos kopija", Vilnius, Lithuania

Published by
VšĮ MENE, Vilnius, Lithuania, www.mene.lt

Vilnius, 2026

ISBN 978-9955-834-07-6

Supported by

KUNO
An Art Academy Without Walls

UNIARTS HELSINKI

KONSTFACK
University of Arts, Crafts and Design

Vilnius Academy of Arts


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