

## SEEN

### it's bitter so bitter, that it becomes sweet

In June 2022, I was invited to participate in a group exhibition at Tallinn Art Hall, curated by Corina L. Apostol and Kristaps Ancāns. The show paired selected students from the Estonian Academy of Arts' MA in Contemporary Art program and the Latvian Academy of Arts' MA in POST program to create collaborative works by September of the same year. My partner was Madara Gruntmane, a Latvian poet. We were similar in age, shared the same gender, and had grown up under the USSR in neighboring countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—often referred to together as the "Baltic trio."

As we began discussing our project, I leaned towards an immersive exploration of our shared experiences, while Madara, who spoke Russian—a rarity among Estonians of my age but common in Latvia—steered the conversation towards unfamiliar territory. Despite my comfort in the autobiographical depths of my art, Madara wanted to explore themes I typically avoided, such as love, emotions, and the self in the context of marginalized individuals. Inspired by her recently published book, *Aizmīlestība* [Afterlove], she proposed having marginalized voices perform her poems, treating them as actors.

This idea made me extremely uncomfortable; the thought of approaching strangers and inviting them into our project was daunting. However, I couldn't refuse simply because I was uncomfortable. There were no ethical concerns, just my own vulnerabilities and emotional reservations. The curators were enthusiastic about the idea, giving us the green light. Only one fellow Estonian student expressed concern, viewing it as an exploitation of others' suffering for artistic gain and a fetishization of the marginalized.

As the project commenced, roles were delineated: Madara would handle the outreach and negotiations, while I was tasked with filming. In July, I arrived in Riga, equipment in hand and nerves on edge. We planned our approach in Vērmāne Garden, a central park in Riga, on a sweltering day with temperatures reaching 30 degrees Celsius. The park felt like a movie set—exciting yet terrifying, and I wished I could teleport away. Our first challenge was defining who was "marginalized." We spotted a couple; the man was asleep on a bench, and the woman, despite her unwashed hair, wore stark black eyeliner. It soon became clear she was not mentally present, likely under the influence of drugs, and her companion was similarly incapacitated.

Disheartened, we continued our search. After a tense encounter, Madara sat next to a man with a bag full of cans. His face was asymmetrical, marked by old scars and a deformed skull, but when he turned to Madara, his face lit up with a sober, dignified beauty. We found a quiet spot to record, managing two takes before paying him and moving on. Despite the day's rough start, Madara reassured me, "It's always hard with the first."

The next day, energized and optimistic, we sought additional "actors" in a smaller park. We encountered two older men who, despite their initial laughter and skepticism about our intentions—fearing mockery or exploitation—agreed to participate. They could only read Russian, requiring Madara to provide translations. One man, lacking glasses, improvised his performance, adding his own interpretation to Madara's poems. The other, a stylish figure reminiscent of a Balenciaga model, delivered his lines with theatrical flair reminiscent of the old Stanislavski school. His performance was surprising and profound.

As we wrapped up, Madara's colleague suggested visiting a free kitchen, a common gathering place for those in need, for further insights. Upon our arrival, we attempted to speak with individuals coming in and out of the kitchen, but no one was responsive. We quickly realized that not all those needing a free meal were homeless, and being in such a vulnerable space made them unwilling to engage. This moment highlighted our own lack of knowledge, the societal stigmas, and the clichés we unknowingly upheld.

Frustrated, saddened, and somewhat ashamed by our approach, I sought advice from my best friend, a lawyer at the Estonian Centre for Human Rights. She was direct: "No, you cannot approach this in such a manner! You need proper documentation and legal backing, even for cash payments. The amount must align with the average salary for this type of work in the region. Moreover, approaching people on the streets is highly unethical." This was a necessary wake-up call for us.

Subsequently, Madara and I visited her office, scheduled a consultation with a lawyer, completed our paperwork, and reached out to organizations that could assist us. With the help of the Social Rehabilitation Centre "Ratnieki," we met former prisoners now living within the community and engaging in their rehabilitation. They cultivated tomatoes and roses, forged iron, and crafted wood. The cleanliness of their farmhouse was notable, with posters proclaiming, *"Your home's face reflects your inner world and soul."* Icons adorned the walls, as Erik, the oldest resident, noted, "They need something to believe in." Erik Ligers, who had been incarcerated and battled substance abuse since childhood, was living his first years free from drugs. He spoke about his plans to study social work to better assist "his people," fellow ex-prisoners. He is now a rehabilitation social worker at the same center.

Located near Riga, "Ratnieki" supports men recovering from various addictions, providing assistance for nine months post-incarceration.

My emotions ranged widely during this visit—from fear due to preconceptions to tears when I saw a heavily tattooed man tenderly caring for a large rose bush. Yet, I recognize that these reactions are quite common.

After that experience, we also connected with social workers in other regions of Latvia who helped us complete our filming, and we ended up with 10 wonderful actors. The emotions were still intense, the people varied: we met young individuals living on the streets marked by needle scars, single mothers surviving only with the aid of social workers, but I no longer felt fear. Instead, I was filled with compassion, humanity, respect, and understanding. The project was completed, the opening went smoothly, and there were no questions from the audience. But why? Was the work so comprehensively executed that there was nothing left to question?

There was just one instance, during a tour I conducted for first-year students in the same field, when I referred to our actors as "them." This prompted a reaction from a student from Berlin, for which I am very grateful. This reaction sparked an important discussion about the language and perceptions we use when discussing marginalized groups, challenging us to reflect on our choices and the impact they have. It was a reminder of the ongoing dialogue we must engage in to ensure our work not only represents but also respects those it portrays.

The project unfolded in a cultural and social landscape deeply shaped by the histories and stigmas of the Baltic region. Both Estonia and Latvia, despite their geographic proximity and shared Soviet past, navigate the narratives of marginalization differently. In Latvia, where Russian-speaking communities are more integrated, there is a complex interplay of identities that shaped our approach. This was evident from the beginning, as Madara's willingness to speak Russian—a rarity among Estonians of my generation—signaled the subtle differences in cultural attitudes even within neighboring countries.

Socially, the project confronted deeply ingrained stigmas surrounding marginalized groups, particularly those experiencing homelessness, addiction, or post-incarceration reintegration. These individuals often occupy an invisible space within society, where their struggles are either sensationalized or ignored altogether. Our initial attempts to approach individuals at a free kitchen starkly revealed the power dynamics and discomfort inherent in these interactions. The reluctance of individuals to engage underscored how spaces designed to offer support can also reinforce vulnerability and shame.

Institutionally, our collaboration with social workers and organizations like the Social Rehabilitation Centre "Ratnieki" highlighted the systemic efforts to address marginalization through structured rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Yet, these efforts often exist in tension with societal attitudes that perpetuate stereotypes and limit opportunities for these individuals to rebuild their lives.

The role of art in this context becomes both a challenge and a responsibility. By positioning marginalized individuals as performers and actors, we sought to grant them visibility and agency within a cultural institution. However, this approach also raised ethical concerns about representation and the potential for exploitation. The tension between creating meaningful art and ensuring ethical practices was a constant undercurrent in the project, pushing us to critically evaluate our methods and intentions.

Ultimately, the settings and societal attitudes we navigated served as both barriers and catalysts for the project. They forced us to confront our assumptions, refine our approach, and engage in meaningful dialogue about the role of art in amplifying voices that are often silenced.

In exploring the collaborative art project through an autoethnographic lens, I have leaned heavily into the principles of subjectivity, reflexivity, and vulnerability, which are central to understanding the interplay between my personal narrative and the broader cultural and social dimensions of the experience.

**Subjectivity** in my narrative is not just an unavoidable aspect but a valuable lens through which to view the project. This approach recognizes, as Kristeva (1991) articulates, that the experience of 'otherness' is deeply rooted in how we perceive and interact with those deemed outside societal norms. In engaging with marginalized communities, my own perceptions and emotions colored the interactions and outcomes, providing a richer, more nuanced view of the societal dynamics at play.

**Reflexivity** has been a crucial tool throughout this project. By constantly questioning how my background, beliefs, and emotional responses influenced the project, I engaged in a form of self-analysis that mirrors Lefebvre's (1991) discourse on the production of space. Just as physical spaces are shaped by social dynamics, so too are the conceptual spaces we navigate in art and research. Each decision and interaction was influenced by my personal cultural framing, reflecting broader societal structures.

**Vulnerability** was a pivotal aspect of this experience. By stepping into the world of those who are often silenced or ignored, and acknowledging my own emotional responses—ranging from initial discomfort to a deep-seated compassion—I embraced the vulnerability that Pink (2007) suggests is essential in ethical visual anthropology. This openness allowed for a genuine engagement with the participants, providing a foundation for portraying their stories with integrity and respect.

Through this project, I have drawn direct connections between my personal experiences and broader anthropological themes, such as the ethics of representation and the role of art as a medium for social commentary and change. These reflections are underpinned by the works of scholars like Kristeva (1991) on the construction of 'otherness,' Lefebvre (1991) on the social production of space, and Pink (2007) on the responsibilities involved in depicting marginalized communities.

In sum, this autoethnographic approach has not only deepened my understanding of my role within the project but also highlighted the complex interplay between individual narratives and larger societal issues. The project thus serves as a microcosm for exploring how art can both reflect and affect cultural and social dynamics, urging a continual reevaluation of the ethical implications of our creative practices.

#### **Works Cited**

- Kristeva, J. (1991). *Strangers to Ourselves*.  
Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*.  
Pink, S. (2007). *Doing Visual Ethnography*.

**(iedomājies)**

kujuta ette  
imagine  
Представь

**(mākoņpūkas nolaižas)**

pilvetupsud laskuvad  
whisps of clouds descend  
пух облаков спускается

**(glāsta izdegušas pļavas)**

paitavad kōrbenud nurmi  
fondle the scorched fields  
гладит выжженные луга

**(tu arī vari tur būt)**

sinagi vōid seal olla  
you too can be there  
ты тоже можешь быть там

**(viens)**

ūksi  
alone  
Один

**(ar kādu)**

mōnega  
with someone  
с кем-то

**(ar mani)**

minuga  
with me  
со мной

**(arī tevi glāsta)**

sindki paitavad  
you too are caressed  
и тебя гладит

**(vari raudāt)**

vōid nutta  
you can weep  
можешь плакать

**(kļūt par mākoni)**

pilveks saada  
become a cloud  
стать облаком

**(uz brīdi)**

hetkeks  
for a moment  
на минуту

names and center:

social worker Olga Sapelkina

Actors:

Ēriks Ligers

**without family names:**

Romāns

Kārlis

Oksana

Ramona

Inga

Vigo

and

Social Rehabilitation Centre "Ratnieki"

3 of them stayed anonymous