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Crossroads of Eastern Europe and the Arctic North – Artistic Personas and Creative Processes of Border-Crossing Artists

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Abstract

This essay explores the development of an artistic persona and choices within the creative processes of border-crossing artists. Similar to the act of border crossing, the transcorporeal experience contains attempts to enter the unity of the body of the artist and the artwork with the socio-politics of the new site for artistic expression. In the action of border-crossing, artistic practice enters the holistic approach as the human, functioning in the new and unfamiliar society, and as the artist, thus continually shaping the individual's artistic persona and artistic voice. The focus group data from the early-career border-crossing artists originating from Belarus and living in Lithuania are used alongside my autoethnographic data as a Lithuanian artist living in the Arctic North and the visual data from a middle-career artist from Lithuania living and working in the Nordic and Arctic North regions. This data was used for the reflexive analysis. The results outline the possible impact of border-crossing on artistic practice.

Keywords: *artistic persona, border crossing, proximity, distance.*

Introduction

This essay explores the artistic persona and creative processes of border-crossing artists. It focuses on the phenomenon of artists crossing borders and how this action impacts their artistic persona and style of production. Previous research has examined the influence of border-crossing artists on local artistic communities, particularly in terms of the innovative artistic production that emerges when new international artists join existing communities (Borowiecki & Graddy, 2021). However, this study specifically examines the interconnectedness between border crossing, artistic work, and the communication of artistic persona.

One of the novel aspects of this study is its comparative approach, analyzing the expression of artistic personas among two distinct groups of artists: those who have migrated to Lithuania from Belarus, and those who are originally from Lithuania but live and work in the Arctic region and Norway. The selection of these two groups is motivated by several factors. Firstly, both groups share a thematic connection to the local narratives of their respective countries, even as they present their work within the framework of new professional artistic communities. In their artwork, both groups explore the colonial histories of Belarus and Lithuania, as well as issues related to ecosystems, nature pollution, and eco-violence associated with their colonial pasts. Artists from Belarus work

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in Lithuania, a country with its own history of colonialism. Artists from Lithuania, on the other hand, extend their artistic endeavors to encompass the Arctic North and Norway. The study includes autoethnographic and visual data that specifically addresses the researcher's own artistic works within the context of the cross-border Arctic setting. The theme of action of border-crossing by artists and its impacts is important to research, as in the recent years we can see more and more cases of artists working cross-borderly, as well as displaced artists, for example due to war in their home country Ukraine - these artists work within two or more communities simultaneously and are manifesting their national belonging as the part of their artistic practice and artistic persona.

Purpose and Aims

The purpose of this study is to investigate the artistic persona and creative processes of border-crossing artists, specifically focusing on the impact of border crossing on their artistic persona and artistic style of production/artistic voice. The study aims to explore the interconnection between the action of border crossing and artistic work, as well as the communication of artistic persona.

The study takes a comparative approach, examining two groups of artists: those who have arrived in Lithuania from Belarus, and those who originate from Lithuania and live and work in the Arctic region and Norway. The choice of these two groups was based on their thematic connection to the local narratives of their respective countries, while also entering new artistic communities.

This aim of the study is reached through the following steps: Firstly, the key themes within this research are clarified by the thematic literature review: proximity, distance, border-crossing and artistic persona. Secondly, the collected data in the format of autoethnographic notes, visual artistic data and a transcribed focus group interview, all of which were analysed by extracting the keywords and concepts as the material for my reflexive analysis. The main findings are outlined as recommendations to improve the current understanding of the creative practices and artistic personas of border-crossing artists. These recommendations can be useful to curators, collaborating artists, art institutions and art academies.

Proximity, distance, border-crossing and artistic persona

The historical past of the artists' place of origin impacts how the community functions and how artistic production is carried out (Griniuk, 2020). The tensions arising from local social, cultural, political, and economic contexts serve as the starting point for Intense Proximity, which is rooted in historical past (Enwezor, 2012). In this essay, I expand on this discussion based on Garces's (2012) notion of proximity and distance.

Within the scope of this study, proximity and distance refer to the spatial and conceptual relationships between artists and the locations they come from, as well as the new communities they enter as border-crossing artists.

Proximity, as defined by Garces (2012), denotes the physical or geographical closeness between an artist and their home country or community. It emphasizes the artist's connection to their cultural heritage, local narratives, and the themes and issues that shape their artistic expression. On the other hand, distance, as a complex social and psychological construct (Cassim, Hodgetts, and Stolte, 2020), represents the spatial and conceptual separation that occurs (Garces, 2012, Zheng, Yang, and Li, 2022) when artists cross borders and enter new artistic communities. Distance highlights the transformative aspects of border crossing and the potential impact on the artist's well-being (Zheng, Yang, and Li, 2022), artistic persona, creative processes, and artistic style of production.

Artists and curators must navigate the effects and impacts within artistic systems of relations (Enwezor, 2012) and productions. Proximity, as explained by Garces (2012), is based on Sloterdijk's notion that things coming too close burn, thereby making the condition for creativity impossible. Proximity, in my interpretation of artistic work with socially, historically, or politically loaded themes, requires geographical and chronological distance to make such work possible.

Distance, according to Garces (2012), does not oppose proximity but adds value to creating a holistic view. The balance between proximity and distance, in my interpretation, is the journey of discovery undertaken by each border-crossing artist, as Garces (2012) emphasizes the importance of transformation through approaching a situation with the appropriate proximity and distance. This transformation is akin to translation, involving movement between research material, artwork, and contexts/audiences. By distancing oneself, the way of looking changes (Garces, 2017). Border-crossing, a concept frequently addressed in recent studies (Bayramoğlu, 2023), is here interpreted as the action of crossing not only the physical borders of countries but also the boundaries of normative artistic production and spectatorship. Border-crossing artists who venture far from their home countries and artistic communities often deviate from their own norms regarding how art is produced and perceived by audiences.

In an interview with Vannieuwenhuyze (2021), Auslander described persona in the context of musicians' self-representation through their social interactions. In his research (Auslander, 2022), persona is defined as the space between presenting oneself as a person and as a fictional character. In this essay, adapted to the practices of artists, persona can be interpreted as artists' self-representation in public contexts.

Research approach

The research approach of this study is based on the combination of two methods: autoethnography and focus groups. These methods were specifically chosen to gather data from two groups of artists: those from Belarus living and working in Lithuania, and those from Lithuania working in the Arctic region and Norway.

Firstly, I collected autoethnographic data, including notes from my own artistic projects in the Arctic North, visual materials, and observations from attending other artistic projects as an audience member. Secondly, I conducted a focus group to gather data from artists from Belarus who were working in Lithuania during the fall of 2021. The collected data was then analyzed using reflexive analysis techniques.

The research question addressed by this study is: How does the proximity and distance to the artist's community in their home country impact the artistic voice and persona of border-crossing artists? The data collected and analyzed through the combination of autoethnography and focus groups aimed to provide insights and answers to this research question.

Method

The method of autoethnography was applied due to my active involvement in the field of performance art in the Arctic region and my origin as a Lithuanian artist. Autoethnography is sometimes compared to action research conducted by the individual researcher (Wall, 2006). Here, the personal narrative of the researcher is of importance and benefits the outlining of the larger scale of the researched phenomenon (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In my case, the personal narrative is accessed by the use of my diary.

The focus group technique is theoretically defined as a qualitative research methodology, by which the facilitator facilitates focused discussions with a small group of involved

individuals (Marczak & Sewell, 2007). The group within the current research consisted of five participants, age group 20-25 years old. According to the definition provided by Krueger and Casey (2000), the content of work with a focus group is carefully planned in advance through a series of discussions designed, for example, as workshops to obtain data on a defined area of interest. In the case of the current research, a focus group interview was utilized for the one-time meeting/discussion. The common characteristics of the participants of the focus group in this research were that all the participants were young artists originating from Belarus who had moved to Lithuania to live, work, and study artistic practices. In the case of the current research, the precise topic of interest is the ways in which the action of border crossing impacts the artistic persona of a creative producer. The data obtained is verbal, as described in recommendations for the focus group method (Stewart, Shamdasani, 2015). The group was recruited within the larger-scale project Common Ground (2021–2022) based on my interest as a researcher, as well as the participants' interest and their consent to be involved in this research. I served the role of moderator in the group during the focus group session. As required, the focus group experienced interactions with each other through the highlighted themes and feedback sharing in the group; thus, all members became well-informed of each other's thoughts (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). The aim of the focus group was to move beyond the surface of interviewing to have a deep and meaningful discussion with the participants.

The data was analyzed by the tools of reflexive analysis. In reflexive analysis, the researcher acknowledges their role in shaping the research process and recognizes that their perspectives, biases, and experiences can influence the interpretation of data, where in the current research the following steps were addressed: a) activating the mental process of perspective taking, (b) anchoring own perspective and dissecting the perspective of others, and c) equilibrium — negotiating different understandings without imposing commonly shared meanings (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, p.9). Activating the mental process of perspective taking was grounded in the autoethnographic part of the research, where the researcher's position was clarified. Anchoring one's perspective and dissecting the perspective of others comprised the autoethnographic data analysis along with the focus group data analysis as a comparative process. Negotiating different understandings without imposing commonly shared meanings was the phase of data analysis towards defining the key findings within alignment of two sets of data - autoethnographic data and data from the focus group.

Anyway, there are several limitations within this approach towards data analysis: relying on the researcher's self-reflection and introspection; focus on the unique experiences and perspectives of the researcher and the focus group, as the data is grounded in the personal experiences of the involved individuals, which makes data complex and subjective.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research and the requirements of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, stating that all personal data needs to be processed transparently in compliance with the law. The data from the five participants of the focus group is presented as anonymous.

Analysis and findings

My emphasis on adapting these two terms of proximity and distance to cross-border artists' practices means that artists need to find a place – a geographical location – which is most beneficial to their artistic production where they can carry out their work. Moving to new countries to create impacts the methods of creative processes and calls for new ways to communicate artists' artistic personas. Discovering the proper proximity and distance is needed for the artist to foster their creative processes. Proper proximity to the

new artistic community, audiences and artistic institutions is crucial to not only producing but also successfully showing one's artwork in a new country.

According to Garces (2012), there is interconnectedness between the artist's proximity and distance to the theme of work or community and the artistic outcome. Artists need to find the proper proximity to be able to address certain - in particular, politically loaded - themes in their art (Garces, 2012) or to find a community to work with their media, such as performances. Artists who cross borders geographically also cross internal borders regarding the ways in which artistic practice is created and how they are seen within new artistic communities and by new audiences. During the action of border crossing and merging into the new environment, the artists elaborate on the ways their artistic language is expressed and the spectrum of themes they work with. These artists immerse themselves in the wider look into their area of work from the other side of the geographical border. However, even though the general idea of moving to a new place enlarges one's view, connectedness to the physical location of artists' home countries and their artistic lives there vary greatly, depending on the country of origin of the artists involved in this study. The analysis of the data is grouped by the following keywords: distance, proximity, and artistic persona.

Due to the ethical reasons, and agreement with the focus group participants, I will indicate the responding participants of the focus group as Participant 2, Participant 3 and Participant 4. All of these participants are young female artists from Belarus, aged 20-25 years old.

Distance

The Lithuanian artists based in the Nordic and Arctic North regions involved in this study collaborate in most cases on projects located in Scandinavian countries. The frequency of their individual projects based in Lithuania varies from two to ten projects per year from 2015–2022, where all of the artists have annual projects based in their home country. The focus group members were asked to rate how far their hometown is from their current location. All artists thematically address the issues of memory, history, and nature in their work, and these themes are introduced in their projects, both in Lithuania and in the North and Arctic North. In contrast, the artists from Belarus based in Lithuania have their work and study community in Lithuania, and they rate the feeling of distance from Minsk to Vilnius as very high:

Before, Minsk seemed to be very close to me. It's like three or four hours by bus, and you are sitting in the kitchen with your mom... It's very difficult to enter Belarus now. Before, in our situation, we had access to the country every half a year, and now you should need lots of documents to go there and then to come back to Lithuania. The distance itself is very short; it's like 190 km. Now it seems as if I need to go to the African continent, for example (Participant 2).

Another participant also emphasized the challenges posed by the political situation in Belarus, which significantly affects the sense of distance and complexity when engaging in artistic work there, as well as the time required to readjust to the working routine upon returning to Lithuania from a visit to Belarus:

...about our homeland when the situation just started (My note: the interview was taken in 2021, so the reference is to the events during 2021), a few months after some of us returned to Belarus to visit our relatives and friends because the day when it all started, every minute was like holding your breath because several nights and weeks involved ongoing phone calls, and when you come back here with such an informational background for the people outside, you become like a complex state of anxiety (Participant 3).

Thus, although the physical distance from Belarus to Lithuania is relatively short, the challenging political situation in Belarus amplifies the perception of distance and makes

artistic activities and interactions with colleagues and family members extremely difficult. Since the artists are still enrolled in art education, their main community is in Vilnius, and collaborations and cooperations primarily occur within this context. On the other hand, the distance from the Arctic North to Lithuania is long in terms of physical distance, but as revealed in this study, artists have collaborated on various projects in the Nordic region and often present their individual projects in Lithuania, as well as in their hometowns.

Proximity

While the theme of distance was explored in terms of geographical location, the theme of proximity focuses on the thematic approach within artistic works, allowing local themes to resonate with new cross-border audiences. The artwork of Lithuanian artists often delves into archives, memory, history, landscapes, and their situatedness within them. In their proximity, these artworks engage with local Lithuanian narratives but are often produced for and exhibited to Nordic audiences, thereby emphasizing the significance of cross-border contexts. For instance, performance artist Joana Gelažytė, when performing in the Norwegian landscape, conveys the importance of caring for nature and portrays nature as an active participant, drawing references from Baltic tribes that transcend borders and time, highlighting key values. In my own performances, I employ layering techniques, combining post-colonial memory themes with aesthetic storytelling. The narrative aspect serves as a second layer, complementing the aesthetic approach. This approach allows me to tailor each performance to a diverse audience, offering an aesthetic experience to a broad spectrum of viewers and a narrative-based experience to those specifically interested in Lithuanian colonial history. This is exemplified by a quote from my diary reflecting my performance at the Supermarket Art Fair 2021: ‘I try to start slightly and then go in depth depending on how long people are staying, and even go into the stories, personal stories of uniforms or images, saying that there is my grandfather in the photos.’ The participants of the focus group of artists from Belarus living and working in Lithuania answered the question of how far one needs to be from the home country or the art community in the home country to be able to work with the local projects and narratives in a different way. Two participants stated the following:

‘I am not sure if I could ever work with something from Belarus. I think it’s like a survival mechanism in my brain... I have lots of warm memories from my childhood, so I cannot not feel love for my city and country, but now I am afraid to think of any project in connection to this country... I do not know when and how it can change’ (Participant 2).

‘We don’t really communicate our art to Belarus, though some of the teachers in our university do come from Belarus. But do I think of going there and working there as a professional artist? No’ (Participant 3).

One of the participants would definitely accept collaborative proposals from Belarus, stating the reason ‘...because my country needs me’ (Participant 4).

Similar to the analysis of distance, the concept of proximity is closely intertwined with the political situation in the artists' home countries. The intense sense of proximity poses challenges for artists when addressing themes related to their home country. Artists maintain a deep emotional connection to their country, and it is speculated that political changes in their homeland could potentially create opportunities for their cross-border work in the future. In the case of Lithuanian artists, including myself, the themes explored in our work encompass a rich historical context, post-colonial memory, and eco-violence, which are situated more than thirty years in the past. This temporal distance may facilitate the integration of these themes into artistic expressions and foster meaningful discussions.

The combination of an empathetic connection to one's home country and a certain level of distance, whether in time or geography, appears to make it more feasible to explore politically charged topics (refer to Fig. 1). Gelažytė, in her artwork, skillfully narrates the history and mythology of Lithuania, intertwining them with nature. While her approach is rooted in Lithuanian themes, it resonates with cross-border audiences through the universal themes of respect and care for the environment.

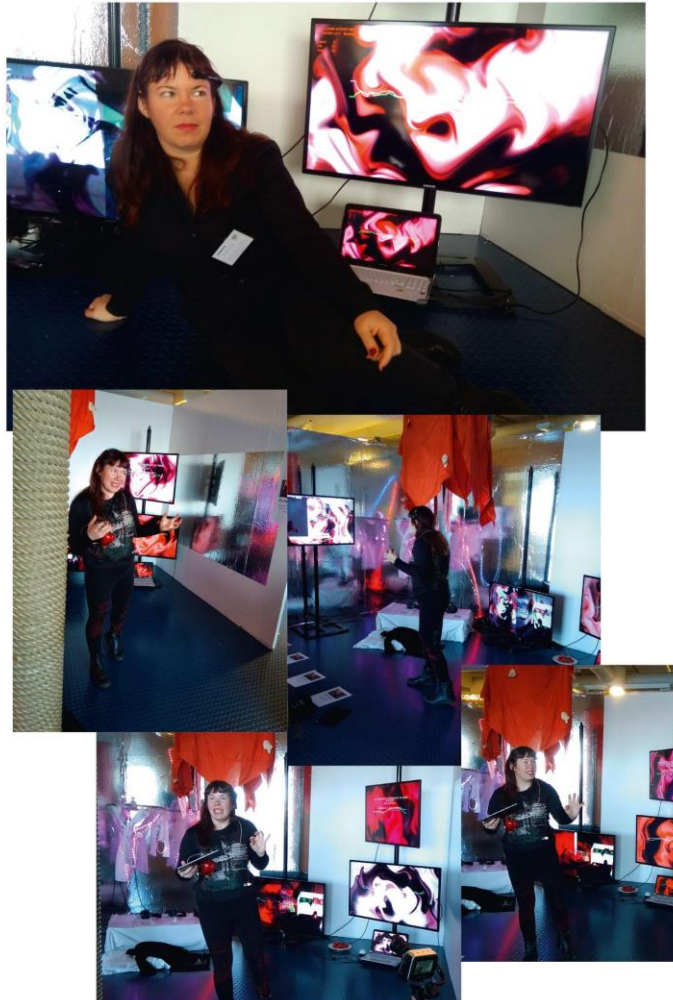


Figure. 1. In my performance at Supermarket Art Fair 2021, the objects in the installation were produced from the Soviet uniforms worn in Ukraine and Lithuania before 1991. Performance is a part of my DA dissertation at the University of Lapland, Finland. Photo: Tue Brisson Mosich

Artistic persona

The artistic persona is examined through various aspects, including the language of communication, the targeted community, and the communication strategies employed. Lithuanian artists residing in the Nordic region have distinct communication objectives. One of their aims is to engage with the local audience in Lithuania, which involves reaching out to local media, media outlets in their hometowns, and Baltic media channels. However, their primary target audience is international, as demonstrated by their social media posts, which are all in English. When participating in live events, artists adapt their artistic persona by speaking in Lithuanian for Lithuanian audiences and in English for Nordic and Arctic audiences. The focus group members speak in regards to language in artistic communication and during the live events as follows: 'It depends if I create it for the audience or I create it for myself' (Participant 2). Participant 3 noted that she uses the Lithuanian language to communicate her events and art in Lithuania.

Conclusion

This essay examines the artistic personas and processes of border-crossing artists by analyzing the strategies employed by young artists from Belarus in Lithuania and Lithuanian artists in the Arctic North and Norway. The sense of belonging for these artists is influenced by the distance from their local community in their respective countries of origin, which can feel either close or distant due to political regulations governing entry into the country. The physical distance between the two countries is not significant, as it is shaped by these regulations.

The artistic personas actively engage with their new community of belonging through social media channels, often adapting the language of their posts to match the language of the new community. This helps foster a sense of proximity to the new community.

Working with politically loaded themes is more feasible when the events or issues being addressed are from a distant past, such as over 30 years ago. These themes are specifically tailored to resonate with international audiences. However, if the politically loaded themes are recent, the physical distance from the artist's community in their home country does not encourage engagement with such themes, as the mental proximity to these topics remains strong. The presence of childhood memories, family, and friends in the home country creates a sense of insecurity that can disrupt the creative process.

Lithuanian artists based in the North and Arctic regions are active both in their home countries and abroad. On the other hand, Belarusian artists in Lithuania often do not have cross-border collaborations with Belarus but express openness to future collaborations or artwork production in their home country. Nevertheless, the primary focus of their artistic production remains oriented towards their new community and international audiences. The potential outcomes of this study include a deeper understanding of the contemporary strategies employed by border-crossing artists and the recognition that the artistic landscape is shaped not only by physical distances but also by political environments.

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