ISSN 2424-5070 2025
07

echo gone wrong

support

LITHUANIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

MRF MEDIJŲ RĖMIMO FONDAS

I Like it when Beauty is a Bit Cruel at Times. Ragnar Kjartansson in conversation with Ann Mirjam Vaikla

July 2, 2025
Author Ann Mirjam Vaikla

Ragnar Kjartansson. Photo: Karolin Köster

In mid-May, a major exhibition by the renowned Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson opened in the Kumu Art Museum. The first solo exhibition in Estonia of work by Ragnar Kjartansson (b. 1976) consists of six large pieces from 2004 and 2025. *A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird* provides an insight into the oeuvre of one of the most fascinating and idiosyncratic artists on the international contemporary art scene. His art has been influenced by pop music, recent and classic art history and, in a less straightforward way, by political upheavals. Although his works are highly conceptual, full of cultural connotations and quotes, Kjartansson's oeuvre is truly affective, touching the viewer strongly and very intimately. His exhibition is in Kumu's great hall, and expands into three project spaces in the permanent collection on the third and fourth floors. Today, we are publishing a shortened version of a talk conducted by the Kumu curator Ann Mirjam Vaikla.

Ann Mirjam Vaikla: Ragnar, you have shown your works in major art institutions, like MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in Louisiana's Museum of Modern Art, in the Barbican Centre in London, and so forth. This exhibition in Kumu is your first exhibition here in Tallinn in Estonia, and is curated by Anders Härm. Congratulations to you, Ragnar, on this outstanding exhibition!

The first theme I brought up with you already a couple of days ago is nature and wildness. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, whenever we think about somebody from Iceland, we just can't help seeing these epic images of glaciers, erupting volcanoes, thermal waters running in the landscape, etc, but also, the motif of landscape painting is a recurrent topic in your art. In the Kumu exhibition, we see it in the newly commissioned painting series 'The Weekdays in Arcadia',

but also in one of the project spaces in the long durational video installation 'Figures in Landscape'. This leads me to ask several questions. How do you relate to nature? Is nature an important part of your everyday life? Why do you keep returning to the motif of landscape painting in your work?

Ragnar Kjartansson: City life in Iceland is so recent. My grandmother, who just died three years ago, was raised in a mud hut between glacial rivers that was so isolated that there were not even any mice there. So for me, through my grandmother and my family history, city life is glamorous. I'm only the second generation living in the city. I want to be a city boy, or a city man now, you know (*laughs*). So for me, going into this ridiculously beautiful Icelandic landscape is always just '*paahhh!*', like wow. And then I always feel a kind of connection with my ancestry.

For me, nature has this totally fascinating connection with stories and myths. In Iceland, every hill has a story, either a ghost story or something else. Some Viking killed another Viking there, and so on. The landscape, then, almost carries a cultural field of meaning.

Ragnar Kjartansson, A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird, exhibition view, Kumu Art Museum, 2025. Photo: Karolin Köster

AMV: Yes, I think in one of your interviews, when commenting on the work The End – Rocky Mountains*, somebody asked about nature. Then you said, 'I don't understand nature. I only understand culture.'*

RK: Yeah, I still stick to that. My mind can't really grasp a stone on its own, but when I make connections like 'Ah, your grandmother had a stone like that,' that's when I start to understand. Also, for me, when you're working with nature as an Icelandic artist, it's almost like being from Italy and saying, 'Yes, I'm working with themes of the Renaissance.'

One of my main influences is the American artist Roni Horn, who is basically an Icelandic artist. And she consistently understands nature through a cultural lens. Probably no artist knows Iceland better

than Roni Horn. And hardly any Icelander knows Iceland as well as Roni Horn does. She's been everywhere and documented nature: there is always this kind of cultural approach to it. So when working with nature, I almost feel like I am breaking into Roni Horn's studio.

AMV: I recently met two artists who were doing a residency in Iceland, who were researching glaciers, and they said that historically the farmers in Iceland were sort of angry with the glaciers. That was before the Anthropocene, because the glaciers were still growing and taking over the fields. It seems to me that this narrative, or the position of nature in our culture, is changing, even though Estonians would say, 'Ah, nature has always been a big part of our identity.' But if you go deeper, you understand that at the beginning of the 20th century Estonians, for example, didn't want to identify with nature, because we wanted to become Europeans. And it was only in the 1970s and 1980s, and further on, when nature and forests became such a big part of our identity construct.

RK: It's very similar in Iceland.

That reminds me of a story where my great grandmother ordered a duvet, and the postman was supposed to bring it, but he fell into a crack in the glacier and died. A couple of years later, he melted out of the glacier along with the horse and all the mail, and the bed linen that was ordered was finally used after all! I have never been on a glacier myself. It seems crazy and can actually be deadly, but glacier tours are a big part of the tourism industry in Iceland.

AMV: Wow (laughs)*! I'm now jumping from the theme of nature to the main aspects of your work, and would like to explore how to view and understand your art, which, I would speculate, is also one of the keys to your success. I have interpreted it as a kind of 'translation' between different fields and genres of art. You take performance and dance and situate it or 'translate' it into the field of the visual arts. When did you realise that this was the right path for you? Why do you place your works in galleries or museums as visual art? Why not create sculptures or installations and present them in the context of the performing arts?*

RK: Very good point. I chose visual art because it has a certain playfulness and freedom. Visual art is most free: in the early 20th century it just opened up. No other art form opened as much as visual art. It's like when you make a film, you must make a film; if you want to do theatre, you must do theatre. But when you do visual art, you can just do whatever you want and call it visual art, which is such great freedom.

We used to play this game: try to make a piece of art that's not inspired by Marcel Duchamp. Kind of impossible. I've tried. But it always becomes a comment on this idea that everything can be art. Of course, there's also the excuse: it's okay if it's bad if it's visual art (*laughs*). That's part of the freedom.

I could go on and on, because I used to be very ambitious. I grew up in Reykjavik, after the Sugarcubes, and I really wanted to be an arty pop star like Björk. And how do you become an arty pop star? You go to art school. They say that all American pop music comes from the soil, but European pop music comes from art school. So I went to art school to become a musician, and then instead I just made art because I found it fun and liberating.

Ragnar Kjartansson, A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird, exhibition view, Kumu Art Museum, 2025. Photo: Karolin Köster

AMV: I can really resonate with this journey, because I'm trained as a scenographer and came to the visual arts from the performing arts and the theatre world. I think the visual art scene is much more inert, and therefore more political and responsive to social changes, whereas theatre can remain closed off from the outside world.

RK: Also, if you're doing theatre, there's always this demand for making people understand. If you make a political gesture in the theatre, it must be clear where you stand in politics. But if you make a political gesture in the visual arts, there is just much more tolerance for being slippery as an eel, you know.

AMV: The other day I read about your work A Lot of Sorrow *in collaboration with the American indie band The National. Somebody wrote about it: 'By stretching a single pop song into a day-long tour de force, the artist continues his explorations into the potential of repetitive performance to produce sculptural presence within sound.' I just find this 'sculptural presence within sound' really precise and beautiful. And I think it's something we can also experience, for example with* The Mercy *or* No Tomorrow *exhibited right now in Kumu.*

RK: In *No Tomorrow* the sculptural aspect also comes through in the movement of sound. The sound is present, tangibly positioned in space.

AMV: Yes. And with the work The Visitors*, your most renowned work.*

You also mentioned the word 'politics'. I'd like to take a moment to talk about the feminist dimension, which can also be seen as one of the cornerstones of your work. I believe it's an important reason why your art resonates with so many of us. Let's start with a somewhat straightforward question: what does feminism mean to you?

RK: Just very simply, that half of humanity doesn't have as many rights as the other half of humanity. And I think I have a problem with that.

AMV: That's a great answer. You're currently in Estonia, where the gender pay gap between men and women is the highest in Europe. How does the feminist discourse keep informing your creative work?

RK: Honestly, my oeuvre just owes so much to the attitude of the feminist art movement. Like the approach or way to deal with performance and the body and the play with identity. I remember in art school I was in a class about feminist art, and it just blew my mind. To learn about Marina Abramović and all these fantastic artists that just suddenly represented another voice in art history. I found it very interesting to play with this idea of identity. Nowadays, the theme of identity is very prominent in art, and sometimes it can become … a bit too intense. Just the way we focus so heavily on identity today can sometimes feel a little … fascist, you know?

In short, I was fascinated by feminism and studying feminist art, and by the realisation that the problem lay in my identity. I just found that so fascinating, that everything I did was a part of the problem. So I began to make use of my privileged identity as a white freak, and I still think about it a lot. What's interesting is that, for example, when I perform in the US there's often this attitude 'Why do you call yourself a feminist? You're a man, you shouldn't do that,' which is a complete misunderstanding.

And Iceland also changed very fast. Iceland suddenly had a female president in the 1980s, and then there came the women's party, and they became powerful in the parliament, and then they disintegrated into other parties. That was their goal, to quietly blend into other political parties, so that those parties would start to care more about feminist issues … That's why now, within the conservative, farmers' and social democratic parties, each has its own feminist school of thought. And the prime minister, the president, the bishop, the chief of police, they're all women in Iceland. Being in that kind of society shaped me a lot.

Ragnar Kjartansson, A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird, exhibition view, Kumu Art Museum, 2025. Photo: Karolin Köster

AMV: Yeah, you've also said that 'Feminism is like a constant practice one needs to attend all the time.' I really like this idea of 'a constant practice'.

RK: That's exactly it, because given my background, I would be a typical chauvinist by all accounts. If I were to let myself go and just be myself, I would simply be a chauvinist. It's almost like not going to the gym … (*laughs*). So you kind of have to be very aware of it. For example, I'm not saying that male chauvinist pop songs are bad, they can be *really good*. But when you hear a pop song on the radio, you just have to kind of realise, 'This is a chauvinist pop song. I mean, I like it, but it is what it is.'

AMV: I just remembered now you even went to the Reykjavík School of Housewives. What did you do there?

RK: Yeah, it's still going strong.

I learned how to be a good woman there. It's now called the School of Home Economics in Reykjavík, but it used to be called the Reykjavík School of Housewives. I was the first man to enter that school. So you can imagine what an adventure it was. As the only boy among girls, I learned to sew, cook, and do all sorts of other things like that.

Now it has been modernised, but when I went to it in 1997 it was basically like stepping into the 1950s. And the headmistress was a wonderful person, but from a different era. When I was starting this course, she said: 'Ragnar, I have to tell you, on Thursdays we usually teach cleaning. And if you find it too degrading, it's okay, you don't have to show up.' That experience also probably made me very aware of what my mother and my foremothers had to go through. Like you kind of see this world of obedience, but also all the gorgeous things that are created within it. And I think that's also why I got into art school. I had a shit portfolio. But they were like, 'Wow, you went to housewives' school, that's impressive' (*laughs*).

AMV: This is in a way what you're doing in your art. You use your own identity with the privileges you have to give space for others. I can see it clearly in the main artwork here No Tomorrow*. It's also very important for me that it's a collaborative piece. Someone from the audience asked why there are only women there, but to me it seems meaningful simply to create a visual world where women exist at all.*

RK: Yeah. And because I've been working so much with the male identity. Of course, it's a bit embarrassing, but I like clichés. One of my favourite works is *The Cliché is the Ultimate Expression Collaboration* by Magnus Sigurdarson.

In *No Tomorrow* we're, of course, simply talking about white women wearing jeans. There's something unsettling about that, but I actually like finding disturbing elements in clichés. I like it when beauty is sometimes a bit cruel.

AMV: Let's move from feminism to colonialism. This topic appears in one of your early works made in 2003 called Colonization*. It's one of my favourite works of yours. I think you have a very interesting take on how you're dealing with this super-cliché image of Danish colonialism. Because I guess it could also be speculated whether Iceland was ever a colony of Denmark. The situations of Greenland and Iceland, as I understand, were very different. And are still very different nowadays. Iceland does not depend on Denmark, while Greenland does. Could you tell us more about this piece?*

RK: Colonialism in general is, of course, a brutal problem of humanity, and always has been. It's part of the patriarchal problem. But I mean, you Estonians have had to deal with Russian and German colonialism. We had to deal with Danish colonialism. And I just find it interesting. *Colonization* is a work where I play an Icelandic peasant, and this actor, Benedikt Erlingsson, plays a Danish merchant

who's just beating me up and is just being horrible to me, but it's all set in a very theatrical setting. And he's just saying: 'You piece of horse shit, you piece of pig shit,' and just kicking me. It becomes comical, it's very silly. It's almost like Benny Hill.

I made this piece when I was a young man. I was drinking heavily in Copenhagen, and I went to the Vega Club, and I couldn't get in, so I kicked the door, and the glass of the door broke. The security guards took me down and called the police. I found it interesting that instead of being ashamed, I was a drunk bastard and said things like 'Okay, is this how you're gonna treat me? Are you gonna treat me like you treated my forebears?!' I fully took on the postcolonial victim role. And this work was sort of a play on this colonial victimhood of Icelanders, because for Icelanders it's a very important part of our national identity: that we were victims of Denmark … This narrative was very important for our national identity and bringing us independence. But when you look at the reality of history, it was mostly Icelandic landowners who basically treated people as serfs, and people had no rights. And the Danish king was trying to fix that, to make people have more rights, but Icelandic farmers were vehemently against it.

It's also interesting that we learn so much about it in school: Danish colonisation. But the Danes kind of have no idea. We have a lot of shared history, but it's not taught in Denmark. I don't think it's the deliberate erasure of history, but I just find it interesting. And it was also interesting to show this piece in Denmark.

Ragnar Kjartansson, A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird, exhibition view, Kumu Art Museum, 2025. Photo: Karolin Köster

AMV: Why I also wanted to bring this work up is because of this notion of building your identity on victimhood. I believe this also creates a sense of recognition here in Estonia and Eastern Europe. In a way, it seems that overemphasising the victim role status hinders empathy, and consequently the broader development of society.

RK: Yes, everybody likes to identify as a victim. I mean, Donald Trump wants to identify as a victim. I find it most interesting when oppressors, you know, like the Americans, feel themselves as victims. And of course, the whole Nazi ideology was all about being victims.

AMV: Showing the work No Tomorrow *here at this moment where we are right now, after three years of war in Ukraine, seems like a gesture of resilience, because it reminds the viewer that it is very important to attend to the beauty of daily life, to the dance and the joy, and so on.*

RK: Yes, exactly. Sometimes it feels like there's so much to say that, at the same time, you don't know what to say any more.

AMV: What are your plans for the future? Would you like to share a bit about the direction you're heading in, and the themes you're working with?

RK: I'm currently working on several themes and projects. For example, one involves the work of the sitcom writer Anne Carson: it will be a sort of endless sitcom, a continuously repeating comedy scene that we'll be filming next year. It will be six hours long. I'm experimenting there with the repetition of the situation.

And then I'm working on a piece which has a nice title in Italian, 'Domenica Senza Amore', which translates into 'Sunday without Love'. That's going to be in Italy in September. It's a musical thing based on a song by a German guy called Rocko Schamoni, who wrote this song in the 1990s. I love this song so much, but nobody knows it. And I sent him a question if I could use this song for this work. And he was just like, 'What the hell, why do you know this song?' Nobody likes this song. But it's a good song. So it's in German, but in English it goes like this: 'You have to live without love, love is not good for you. Stop all this longing, looking at stars. Stay on the ground and listen to me.'

AMV: Wow! This song, and you coming to talk with us, felt like yet another act of generosity, Ragnar. Thank you! I'd like to finish with that thought.

RK: I also want to thank all of you for your openness. It has been truly wonderful here. I'm incredibly honoured to show my work at Kumu. Shout out, thank you, mic drop!

Ragnar Kjartansson, A Boy and a Girl and a Bush and a Bird, exhibition view, Kumu Art Museum, 2025. Photo: Karolin Köster

Institutions are people. Conversation with JL Murtaugh, curator of Rupert's Residency and Public Programmes

July 3, 2025
Author Ieva Gražytė

Residency conference. Supercondominio 6, Rittana, Italy, August 2024. Photo Alberto Nidola

Ieva Gražyt?: I remember our first meeting vividly – it took place on Zoom a little over a year ago. Lost in the ever-shifting time zones, I had simply missed it. You, fully understanding the complexity of life in this ever-moving world, promptly rescheduled it without the slightest inconvenience. You greeted me warmly through the screen, assuring me that you truly understood what it means to be constantly on the go.

JL Murtaugh: I remember the call well. I sensed your natural enthusiasm and appreciated you making time on the other side of the world. You couldn't have known at the time, but it was a difficult moment for us internally, our team was stretched very thin.

Conversations like that kept us going. It's a real honour that people like you have the interest and bravery to be part of what we do. If you dare to trust people, it can go far.

We must have frank conversations and compassion about our present working conditions, and strive to improve them. Our team's primary focus, after all, is helping talented individuals reach their artistic goals, whatever they might be.

Within reason, I at least consider the other side's perspective in every interaction. It's an imperfect strategy, but I find it usually leads to a better outcome. We all want a compelling result. I admit that some do not share that sense of common purpose – it doesn't always work for the best. Still, I

endeavour to remain optimistic and empathetic.

Applying to any of our programmes takes courage and dedication. Rupert has a strong reputation, but applications are extremely personal and intimate. At Rupert or in my other projects, I choose to work with those who are genuinely enthusiastic and have a shared understanding of what resources and outcomes all parties contribute to the collaboration – labour, time, conversation, ideas, et cetera – and act accordingly.

I will speak with everyone at least once – I spend a lot of time on preliminary conversations. Beyond that, I have little energy for those who try to extract without any return, even just their attention. A relationship means they have to bring something to the table for it to work. My focus is always on those artists and partners who offer a mutually fruitful exchange.

Articulations 6, Gosia Lehmann, Ceci Moss, Ren Loren Britton & Goda Klumbyte. Rupert, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 2024. Photo Andrej Vasilenko

Ieva Gražytė: Your involvement and genuine curiosity are always apparent to me. As both Liam and Syndicate, you represent a nomadic subject in contemporary art – producing exhibitions, events, and publications across the globe. I see your international presence as one of Rupert's strengths. Could you tell us more about how Rupert fosters partnerships and long-term friendships with collaborators worldwide? It's no secret that nurturing sustainable relationships in a scene dominated by short-term projects is incredibly challenging.

JL Murtaugh: I appreciate the compliment, though I see these as two distinct points.

Rupert made its name, from very early on, as a borderless organisation. I followed it closely from afar, and its distinguishing characteristic was a focus on groundbreaking ideas and artistic quality, rather than the artist's origin. Admittedly, it still tended to favour those who resided or were educated in the major European or North American hub cities – London, Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles,

et cetera – but the type of artists attracted to us set an important tone. I have always viewed Rupert as a transnational institution, albeit firmly rooted in Vilnius.

With initiatives like Mutual Empathies, Alterlife, and Ulysses, I hope to expand our frame of reference, to challenge the preference for those hubs. Since joining Rupert, I've individually reconsidered each of our partnerships, evaluating their curatorial conditions and outcomes. I'm attempting to provide similar resources for our artists, regardless of birthplace. Truthfully, there are often bureaucratic barriers, closed-mindedness, and fear, but it's important to stretch the perimeters of what's accepted as possible.

Installation view, Alina Schmuch: Underpasses. Mass Moving, Rupert, Vilnius, Lithuania, June 2025. Part of the collaborative residency Alterlife (with Sonic Acts, Amsterdam) and New Perspectives for Action, a project by Re-Imagine Europe, co-funded by the European Union and the Lithuanian Culture Institute. Photo Andrej Vasilenko

Ieva Gražyt?: Could you tell more about the initiatives you just mentioned? And how do global openness and interculturality reflect on them?

JL Murtaugh: The first edition of Mutual Empathies, a multinational artist residency project, confirms the validity of this concept. It was co-created with the Goethe-Institut Lithuania director Anna-Maria Strauss, to demonstrate how everyone benefits from intercultural dialogue, and how Rupert is uniquely positioned to lead such a programme. The pilot edition took place in Vilnius and Cologne, matching a German-based artist (Vanja Smiljanic) with a non-European one (Saroot Supsuthevich of Bangkok, Thailand). It was incredible to see how quickly the bonds formed between them, and how it influenced what they created during that time.

Our newest European project, Ulysses, places us in a pan-European network of largely music and sound institutions, led by Ircam in Paris. We are its first predominantly visual and interdisciplinary arts member. What attracted me to this was its commitment to extended relationships with artists working with sonic media. Our first two residencies in this framework allow us to both revisit an artist

duo we've collaborated with before in support of an ambitious new project—Yen Chun Lin and Gediminas Žygus; and initiate a new collaboration with an artist I've followed for some time now, Nazanin Noori, introducing her layered theatrical direction, hardcore compositions, and politically charged practice to Lithuania.

Alterlife is a cooperation with Sonic Acts in Amsterdam, part of our Reimagine Europe network. It provides a special opportunity to invite an artist to Rupert for a residency and mentorship, with an invitation for a new work commission to be exhibited in Vilnius, and at the biennial in Amsterdam. It had a huge response, with over 500 applications for a single spot. I have worked closely with the first artist in this programme, Alina Schmuch, who spent several months in Vilnius last year conducting interviews, research, filming, and refining her concept, then a second residency at W139 in Amsterdam where I visited her to extend the project further. We will show the first chapter of her new film installation in June at Rupert, in a very special environment, and the second with Sonic Acts in late 2025.

Artist talk with PRICE. Medūza, Vilnius, Lithuania, August 2024. Photo Dominyka Gurskaitė

Last year, we hosted a residency and production initiative as part of The Sustainable Institution, where we cooperated with E-Werk in Lückenwalde, Germany, and LUMA in Arles. The artist we worked with in this programme was bones tan jones, who spent six weeks at Rupert working with me, Viktorija, bones' project manager Eglė Kliučinskaitė, and numerous technicians and performers to first compose, then rehearse a new opera performance that we showed as part of Earth Bonds II last year, then the filmed version for a screening I organised as part of Meno Avilys' Deep Rivers Run Silent. I've worked in many distinct contexts with artists to guide and facilitate new work, and without question, Rupert offers something special that other institutions cannot. We are always prepared for the unexpected.

In each case, these projects are a means to an end: residencies have to be about more than the time one is physically present. It should only be the start of a relationship. While the story differs from person to person, ideally, anyone who joins Rupert continues that conversation and benefits from our support for years to come. I have devoted considerable time to evaluating how our artist relationships can improve, facilitate return visits to Vilnius, or offer production resources, continued advice, and curatorial support.

I would like Rupert to grow to the point where we offer more than just space and curatorial support to every single artist in the residency programme. We're moving that way already by inviting residents to be AEP tutors, holding paid public events like screenings or performances, plus those production opportunities I mentioned. It will take time, but our institutional partners, private donors, and of course, the Lithuanian Cultural Council will all be essential to making it happen.

I've been very fortunate to count so many supremely talented, brilliant, and motivated people as colleagues. I've had the freedom to move between contexts (public and private, commercial or institutional) and locations in a way many others cannot.

So, while I certainly bring my own experiences to the team, the real reason I am at Rupert – why I'm in Lithuania—is because it's always had faith in people like me. A lot is possible when you work hard, be kind, and listen closely.

Mutual Empathies 2024-25. From left: Monika Kerkmann, ADKDW; Anna Maria Strauß, Goethe-Institut Lithuania; Saroot Supasuthivech, artist; JL Murtaugh, Rupert; Vanja Smiljanić, artist; Trace Polly Müller, ADKDW. Akademie der Künste der Welt, Cologne, Germany, February 2025. Photo Sophie Dettmar

Ieva Gražyt?: In the age of the neoliberal gig economy, when artists often move from one residency to another, some institutions begin to feel like home. Rupert is likely the most well-known contemporary art residency in Lithuania, bringing together artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. One of the greatest strengths of the residency, in my view, is the opportunity it

provides for residents to collaborate with participants and mentors from the Alternative Education and Public Programmes. I personally made friends and professional connections at Rupert, and I'm now happy to visit these people elsewhere. How does Rupert cultivate this sense of community and lasting connection among its residents?

JL Murtaugh: I said this before moving to Vilnius or being directly affiliated with Rupert, so it comes without personal bravado: it is the most distinguished residency programme in the Baltics, and I'd even include all the Nordic countries too. I don't believe that's a controversial claim. I'm not sure even the Lithuanian art community fully appreciates that fact. That's a testament to the artists who came to Rupert, its past curatorial and management teams, the welcoming environment in this country, and the high calibre of Lithuanian contemporary artists and curators establishing that ground.

This is a double-edged sword, of course. Our current team benefits immensely from the strong reputation built by our predecessors. We must also continue to take educated risks to stay relevant and at the leading edge of creativity.

Rupert was built on the value of alternative education. The residencies were a way to bring more established and innovative voices to the contemporary art conversation in Lithuania. It only makes sense, as we grow and our network enters its third generation, that we merge these two main pillars of activity.

You are right, for artists and curators – myself included! – other residencies are often a mark of approval, a line on the CV that denotes legitimacy, affiliation, and aspiration. There are so many residency programmes now, and it's easy to rest on its most basic definition; someone who merely hands studio keys to the artist, wishes them well, and picks up the keys at the end. Some even charge artists considerable rent, which in my mind makes those institutions indistinguishable from a hotel.

Rupert must continue to stand for more. Its established success in identifying artists makes it neither an education nor a residency institution now. Those are only our main tools for engagement. We are an ecosystem, a mutual benefit society. No matter where I travel, people know Rupert by reputation and word of mouth. It's an incredible responsibility to be a steward of Lithuania's major conduit between the local and international contemporary art domains.

So, maintaining that visibility and presence, keeping these conversations active and the pots boiling, requires a deep commitment from everyone on the team – Viktorija, Goda, Monika, Aistė, Aistė Marija. We all play a big role in making Rupert what it is today, and what we aim for it to become. It's critical to give meaningful time and attention to every individual we work with.

Ieva Gražyt?: Indeed, institutions are made up of people, and I am so very happy to meet you all, Rupert.

Articulations 8, Imani Mason Jordan and Candice Nembhard. Medūza, Vilnius, Lithuania, March 2025. Photo Dominyka Gurskaitė

This article is the second edition of Inside Stories, a series of features highlighting the people, labour, and ideas behind the scenes at Rupert.

Inside Stories is a pilot study for New Perspectives for Action, a project by Re-Imagine Europe, co-funded by the European Union and the Lithuanian Culture Institute.

What Happens to the Exhibition as a Possibility for Dialogue when We Can’t Agree on the Reality We’re Living In? A conversation with Adomas Narkevičius

July 15, 2025
Author Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė

Adomas Narkevičius. Photo: Anne Tetzlaff

The contemporary art world does not exist in a vacuum: it is permeated by the same power dynamics, economic realities, and political tensions as the rest of the world. This is the premise for our conversation with this year’s Kaunas Biennial curator Adomas Narkevi?ius, who invites us to view the field of biennials not as a utopia detached from reality but as a systemic structure often replicating the same mechanisms of inequality. According to Adomas, art institutions today find themselves at an existential crossroads, between the need to remain sensitive to a complicated world and the logic of survival in an algorithmic attention economy. In this context, Kaunas appears as a paradoxical city: influenced by global capital structures, yet also bearing a strong history of alternative culture and political activism. Although Adomas is not connected to the city biographically, but rather through friendships and trust-based collaboration, it is precisely this kind of relationship that allows him to shape the biennial as an open, living conversation, between different experiences and ideas, and between the city’s past and its present.

We invite you to read our conversation with Adomas on doubt as a value, the exhibition as a space for dialogue, and how contemporary art can help us live with uncertainty, not by avoiding it, but by seeking forms that help us be in it together.

Saulė Gerikaitė. Meeting with voters, 2023

Agn? Bagdži?nait?: Hello, Adomas. As you know, this interview is about the upcoming Kaunas Biennial, which you are curating this year. I will definitely ask you about the biennial as a format, and the curatorial strategies that will soon unfold this September in the city where I grew up. Still, I'd like to begin with a personal reflection on a biennial experience that has stayed with me, specifically the 2011 Istanbul Biennial entitled 'Untitled'. It was curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa. The latter, notably, was also the curator of the 2024 Venice Biennale, which sparked a great deal of discussion.

Back in 2011, I remember stumbling on the Istanbul Biennial almost by chance. It was part of a field trip with students from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Fourteen years have passed, and I still recall vividly the unpleasant sensation of being a tourist. Wherever the biennial events were held, there wasn't a single local person present, except at the opening reception, which was packed with Istanbul's elite. I didn't turn down the champagne either. What stayed with me was a profound sense of alienation; it felt like none of the city's residents even knew the biennial was happening. Because I live in Kaunas, my impression of the Kaunas Biennial is, of course, somewhat different. But tell me, do you think it's possible to organise a biennial in a way that avoids this kind of exclusion?

Adomas Narkevičius: Hi Agnė, thank you for this conversation. Your personal, uncomfortably vivid memory from Istanbul is symptomatic of the art world at large. Perhaps it's symptomatic precisely because the art world, its symbolic, financial and social economies, is not detached from the rest of the world, its everyday processes, transactions and dominant power structures. Like many readers of this niche interview for art professionals and enthusiasts, I sense that the declarative statements often made by biennial curators, at various levels and on various scales, have become something of a textbook ABC of biennial culture. Yet they often fail to align with the very principles that shape biennials, or with the rules of egalitarian democracy and the reality we actually live in. The oligarchs of digital capitalism have, over the past ten to fifteen years, altered both how we perceive the world and how we inhabit it together.

I would argue that the social contract that existed in the so-called West until recently, based on the belief that the state guarantees education, healthcare and culture, and a promise of social equality in exchange for citizens' loyalty and participation in a democratic system, has been gradually eroding over the past decade. Major European economies have struggled to cope with large-scale crises, while cutting investment in public infrastructure and services, education, healthcare, and of course, culture. For instance, it's long been known that the UK's National Health Service is dysfunctional. But a decade ago, it would have been hard to imagine Germany's famously precise rail system falling apart. Trump 2.0 and his personal alliance with the world's richest man seem to me like a symptom and extension of these crises in the form of a newly imposed world order.

Meanwhile, the institutional art world in Western Europe has, during this same period, continued to behave as if the neoliberal globalisation package, complete with the ideals of equality and democracy, remains exportable to 'developing economies'. Biennials, of course, are a major catalyst in this cultural globalisation machine.

At the same time, the foundations of Europe's postwar art institution model have been eroded from below. Institutions based on the welfare-state model (open structures that for decades supported socially accessible and free artistic expression) have been hollowed out from within: squeezed by a lack of operational funding, 'democratised' through an influx of private money, and increasingly influenced by private interests (collectors, patrons, blue-chip galleries) in their programming and governance.

The part of the art world that has long been unbothered by unrestrained financial speculation and value bubbles has swiftly and diligently adapted to this new techno-feudal phase of capitalism, a phase that no longer requires a social-democratic face or the horizon of economic and social equality. Western Europe's institutional art field has certainly responded, attempting to form a centre-left counterbalance, often incorporating activist art, educational programmes, grassroots community engagement, or directly politically engaged initiatives, into their programming. The political boundaries of this kind of inclusion became particularly visible in Ruangrupa's curated 'Documenta' [Documenta 15].

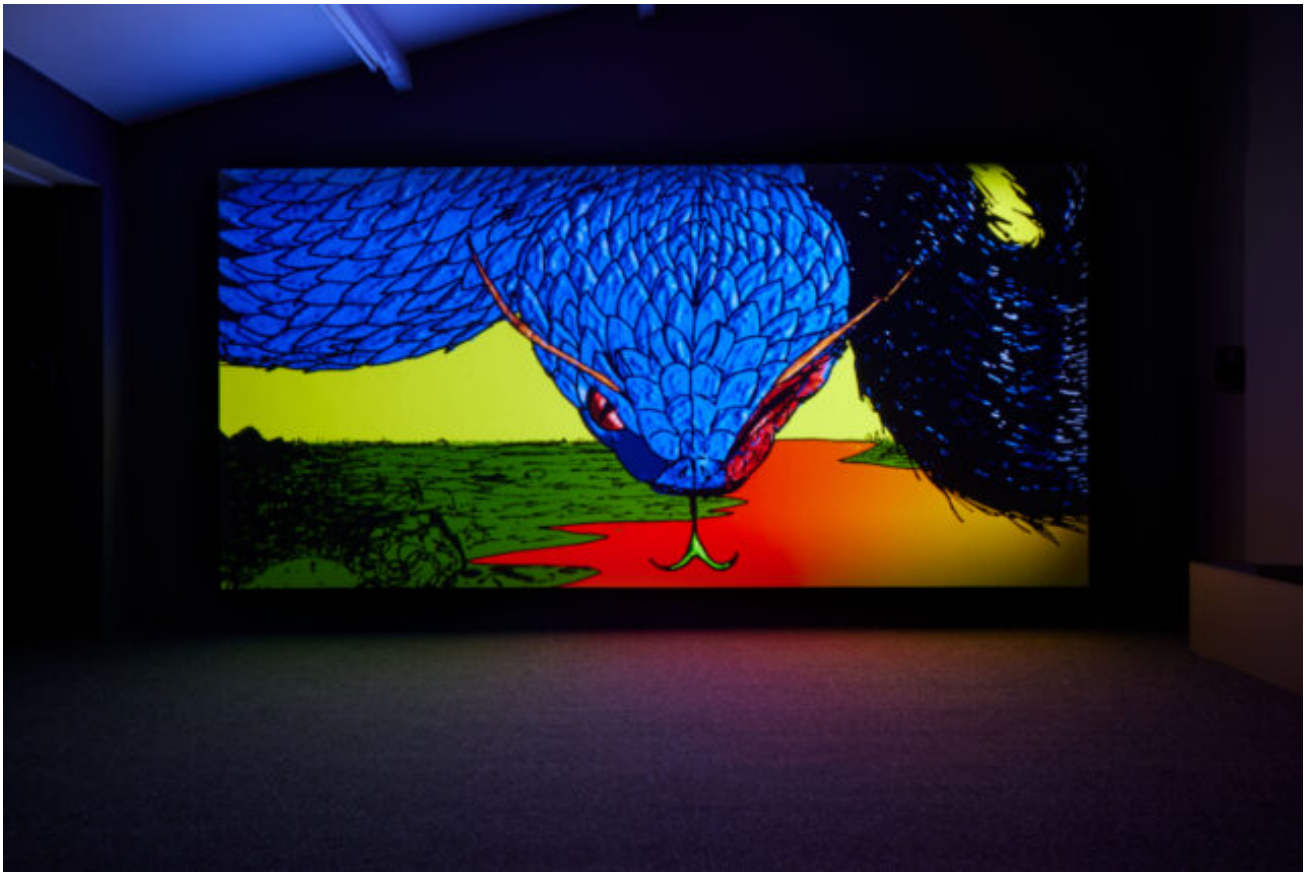
I believe that many reflective institutional directors, and institutions themselves, feel stuck. Expression based on experiment and individual artistic freedom, once the cornerstone of the postwar Western art, now risks appearing irresponsible, or out of touch with reality. Yet politicising institutions is equally risky. For example, when political winds shift toward nativist right-wing agendas, essential cultural institutions and programmes are often restructured accordingly, as happened in Hungary and, more recently, in Poland.

Still, to me, the greatest, and perhaps existential, threat to contemporary art (by which I don't mean art made today but the historically conditioned institutional ecosystem we've known in Lithuania since the 1990s) is this: in an economy of algorithmically amplified and curated information and attention, art institutions are no longer public spaces in the same sense they were before the platformisation of the internet. These are no longer spaces where all segments of society actively engage, and where attention is captured deeply enough to foster genuine social dialogue. In other words, the social polylogue is now happening elsewhere. But where exactly? There's no definitive answer; but it seems to be happening more and more in privatised, sanitised digital spaces. Theorists and artists who emerged with post-internet art began analysing this over a decade ago, but their voices have since blended into the spectacle-oriented, techno-positivist art that now fuels financial speculation.

To put it differently, art institutions, and biennials based on the welfare-state model (such as the Kaunas Biennial), are now confronted with the question: Are they still capable of being social spaces for dialogue and respectful conflict? Are they still capable of engaging people with ambiguous, complex emotions, forms and ideas, ones that attempt to remain sensitive to a complicated world, even as the digital spaces we're embedded in constantly try to sell us the illusion that the world is simple and one-sided?

The current situation in the Baltic States, and in Kaunas in particular, within the broader European landscape, is quite unique. While Lithuania has one of the highest levels of social inequality in the EU by key indicators, its economy has grown rapidly and is catching up with West European living standards. In the UK, the majority of people under forty, and anyone without inherited wealth, are facing social stagnation and a declining standard of living. Meanwhile (with important caveats), in Lithuania's major cities, I still observe a belief in social mobility and the promise of equality: in other words, a belief in the future. Paradoxically, Lithuania seems to move towards values it believes in more strongly than the 'West', where those values are now under threat from populist right-wing forces. These conflicting moods coexist with very real anxieties related to Russia's soft and hard power threats, which in turn bring an increasingly conservative public sphere and a declining threshold for mutual respect and attentive listening. It's a highly complex emotional and social terrain. Capturing it in the form of an exhibition may be impossible; but I find that striving for this, even if it leads to failure, is more meaningful right now than curating a show based on the kind of confident premises about the world that dominated biennials back in the 'end of history' 1990s.

Anti-elitist attitudes towards the art world are often conflated with anti-intellectualism. But visiting exhibitions and geeking out about how an etching is printed, its historical significance, or how the art historian Rosalind Krauss connected emerging post-structuralist theory with Marcel Broodthaers' conceptual games, that in itself is not elitism. Leftist pedagogy, as I imagine it, and as I sorely missed in my own high school art education, should encourage curiosity, inquisitiveness, and a comfort with not knowing. Artworks, more often than not, don't know: they play, ask questions, and provoke doubt. Anti-elitist rhetoric, to me, seems rather reckless, and it's already being co-opted by authoritarian populists. In the best version of the contemporary art field, it can be radically plural: ranging from formal experiments to ephemeral works that exist only in instructions or the imagination, to case studies that haven't yet been tackled by other disciplines (e.g. history, archaeology, ecology), or politically activist art. These modes can coexist. The fear of not understanding an 'intellectual' exhibition or a work of contemporary art, which I myself often experienced while studying philosophy at Vilnius University, is often really a fear of being judged, for example, as uneducated. That fear can block the joy of noticing how light falls on paper, a surreal image, or an unexpected insight into a phenomenon I hadn't seen before. This is closely tied to inherited psycho-social patterns typical of wounded post-colonial states: perfectionism, self-deprecation, distrust in oneself and others, imposter syndrome, learned helplessness, and so on.



Amaru's Tongue: Daughter, 2021, Chuquimamani-Condori and Joshua Chuquimia Crampton. Installation view of Amaru's Tongue: Daughter, 2021, Auto Italia, London, UK. Courtesy of the artists and Auto Italia. Photo: Henry Mills

AB: That was a very compelling and precise analysis of the roots of exclusion in the contemporary art field. Let's continue with politics and history, this time focused on a specific city.

It won't surprise anyone if I call Kaunas a conservative city. Although the Conservative Party hasn't been in power in the municipality for some time, I would still say that the current city policies are even more right-leaning than they were under the Conservatives. Biennials are always confronted with the challenge of local contextualisation. It's hard to truly get to know a city and absorb it in two years. On the other hand, perhaps not everything needs to be overly localised. I'd personally like to see Kaunas not just in the context of Lithuania. It seems to me that a biennial could be one way to expand or deconstruct Kaunas' identity. How familiar are you with this city? How interesting is it to you within the context of the biennial?

AN: I can relate closely to your idea of expanding Kaunas' identity. In a recent conversation, the artist Jasper Marsalis, who's participating in the biennial, told me about his fascination with the moment when the ideas of Fluxus, civil rights, rock music, and free jazz all moved through the same streets of New York. I replied: 'Did you know Jurgis Mačiūnas was from Kaunas?' So the first thing you'll see here will be the Fluxus Airport, and during the biennial's opening weekend (13 September), the Fluxus Festival will also take place. As my proximity to Kaunas is based on friendship and mutual trust rather than biography, I see my role as contributing to a living, artistic conversation, and helping build connection between international artists, those who, in my view, reflect on, shape or challenge the spirit of our times, and those working here in Lithuania, particularly Kaunas. These are people who build culture and an alternative to the city government's vision through their work and everyday lives. I hope that's a sensitive and realistic way for a single exhibition (which, it's worth noting, operates on a project-based model rather than an institutional model) to contribute to a city's self-reflection, both in terms of its present and its past.

I see the exhibition's relationship with the city through conversations and friendships with people who consider themselves residents of Kaunas. That's why, in the context of KB15, I want to work with the Kaunas Artists' House and the Lithuanian Art Workers' Union. Even while working at Rupert, I was struck by how Kaunas was (and I believe still is) the leftwing cultural and intellectual epicentre of Lithuania. It's also a place of activist movement, a site of political protest demanding equal rights for all citizens, social and legal equality, and respect for human rights.

Friends who participated in the first Kaunas Pride march described it as a historically significant event that changed how they saw and felt about themselves. I truly admire the people behind such events, those who are not always visible or audible in the public sphere but are incredibly persistent. So thank you, Viktorija, Edvinas, and so many others, volunteers, staff, and activists from the Emma social centre, Kaunas Artists' House, and Luna6.

On one hand, I'd even say that it's not hard to activate Kaunas as a city. It has a high-level international contemporary art biennial, and the variety of methodologies and themes developed by its guest curators over the years reflects the broader aesthetic and political codes of global biennial culture. Its residents participate in the global content economy of reels, memes, influencers and micro-celebrities, like those of other cities. They live both within global trends and within atomised digital bubbles.

As you hinted, the city's government is by no means an outlier: it successfully localised the techno-feudal oligarchic model we discussed earlier. In Kaunas, it manifests through construction and infrastructure renovation, where the formula of 'efficient manager + technocratic solutionism' combined with the image of a successful businessman seems to work. The rule of the relatively pro-russian mayor in the interwar capital is a paradox worth a study of its own. But again, from talking with residents of Kaunas, I understand this administration didn't appear out of nowhere. It grew out of years of 'traditional parties' mismanagement, unresolved critical issues, and complacency.

At the same time, I want to be honest, first and foremost with myself. It's no secret that Kaunas is not my hometown. It's not the city where I came of age as a person or as a cultural worker. I currently work full-time in London, and I've been honest with the Kaunas Biennial team from the start that I wouldn't be able to deliver a locally grounded, research-based biennial. What I do bring with me is six years of experience accumulated in London, and a perspective on contemporary art shaped there,after a formative period at Rupert. Curators from 'Eastern' Europe are quite visible on London's art scene today. You might even hear the occasional joke about an 'East London East European art mafia'. I find great inspiration in what people like Milda Batakytė are doing at Auto Italia, what the Estonians Niina Ulfsak and Mischa Lustin are building through their project space Galerina, the curatorial practice of Tosia Leniarska, or my conversations with the Goldsmiths PhD candidate Vaida Stepanovaitė and UCL's Daša Anosova. The direct or indirect contributions of these and other people will resonate in 'Life After Life'.

Although our methods and interests differ, what unites them in my view is a refusal to conform to a narrow 'Eastern European' identity. They challenge the entrenched postcolonial discourses in the cultural sphere, which still fail to grasp our region's post-imperial experience and the deep roots of Russia's current military ambitions. I believe that, for international art professionals who have a sense of my work and values, and who plan to attend the biennial, this context will facilitate a more equal dialogue with the city and with the biennial itself.

Kaunas Pride, 2102. Photo: J. Stacevičius

AB: I feel compelled to add that when the first, and so far only, Pride march outside Vilnius was held in Kaunas in 2021, thousands of people showed up. The crowds far outnumbered the protestors who were against Pride. That event seemed to prove that Kaunas is not just a city of so-called marozai *[a Lithuanian slang term implying conservative, macho-minded men]. And yet the institutional and cultural reluctance to keep talking about that moment, to remember it in any meaningful way, only reflects the face of Kaunas city politics. On the other hand, there are many other essential elements that make up the city and its culture.*

In the press release for the Kaunas Biennial, I read: '"Life After Life" will open its doors to various art phenomena and genres, regardless of whether they are typically considered contemporary art. The anniversary festival will pose a central question: if the global biennial format no longer reflects the needs of today's reality, what artistic form can respond to the contradictions of the present without trying to "fix" or escape it?'

That paragraph alone contains quite a few key statements, one of them being about forms of contemporary art. Based on my own work experience in the cultural field here in Kaunas, and probably echoing the thoughts of many of my colleagues, I'd say that Kaunas doesn't particularly like what we'd call 'pure' contemporary art. It still occupies the position of a foreign body here, even in a class sense. Maybe it's due to my limited knowledge, but I don't personally know a wealthy Kaunas resident who collects contemporary art. We don't have a dedicated contemporary art institution in Kaunas either, but we do have festivals that might be seen as functioning like institutions, periodically bringing in and showcasing international contemporary artworks. One of these institutions is the Kaunas Biennial. Beyond its obvious function and role, what other elements are important to you in the context of this event?

AN: I agree with your observation, it feels like it reflects the current reality. At the same time, I think that sometimes quickly moving politically significant subjects into the cultural sphere, especially when elected public representatives fail to implement concrete political and legal changes, can also have counterproductive effects. That said, I was glad to hear about the recent Constitutional Court ruling that enables same-sex partnerships. This is, of course, the result of many years of political and

social work carried out by the LGBTQ+ community itself. But in a democratic society, such efforts shouldn't fall solely on the shoulders of marginalised groups. The very idea of democracy relies on institutional responsibility to guarantee rights, not just on letting people fight for them, and on social solidarity.

In this regard, I keep coming back to the words 'sensitivity' and 'understanding', which stem from the same Latin root ***aesthesis*** as aesthetics. When successful, the experience of art can heighten sensitivity: that is, it can produce conditions for attunement to one another, to ourselves, and to the world. This kind of sensitivity, sometimes pre-verbal, can lay the groundwork for political action and responsibility: for how we speak, how we choose to treat each other.

Many of the large-scale biennial projects over the past decade have declared some kind of responsibility. But once you run their internal processes through the gears of ambition and institutional policy frameworks, you often end up in a zone of anesthesia (and I think we've all experienced at least one massive contemporary art show that left us feeling emptier afterwards than before). It's hard for a biennial to break free from its 19th-century origins: its mission to exhibit the world, to present it in full, thereby producing the illusion that it can be understood, and thus mastered. This desire to control, sanitise and even solve the world still lingers in the biennial model of contemporary art.

AB: Another question, stemming from the same paragraph in the press release: what does it really mean to not run away from the needs of contemporary reality? If we go back to the themes of the 2022 and 2024 Venice Biennales, or other major exhibitions, like those at the Whitney Museum or the last 'Documenta', it's clear that all of them were politically engaged in some way. They focused on the perspectives of marginalised communities, of local people; they addressed issues of identity, especially queer and BIPOC identities and histories. You could even say they claimed the potential to change reality. In fact, many on the political right are afraid that reality has already changed too much. As Trump would say, we're living in dangerous, woke times. Personally, I feel that contemporary art is finally looking in the direction it needs to. Finally, it's not just elite art connoisseurs who get to speak. Finally, the Western world is at least symbolically offering reparations: giving something back to those who need it most. What I'm most afraid of now is the backlash in the West's contemporary art world, which is already under way. The art critic Dean Kissick's essay 'The Painted Protest' is one example. So we all probably understand that art alone isn't going to fix the world, and that this ambition is mostly symbolic. How do you view this tendency within today's art field?

AN: I see the dynamics you mentioned playing out in the art world in slightly different light than just the left-right political backlash ping-pong, although in our neighbouring Poland that was probably the most tangible way the political shift translated into the cultural field. What concerns me is this: what is the ***endgame*** of such political wars for art institutions? I'm glad that political forces closer to my values and convictions have recently won in Poland, and I'm glad Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art opened with a vision rooted in those values. But what happens if this narrowly won coalition government fails to convince a broader segment of the public? It's not hard, though I'd rather not imagine it, to envision a Trump-style authoritarian 'revenge tour': firing all allegedly disloyal staff, dismantling all socially engaged or progressive programmes.

What I'm trying to say is that we are living in a time of intensifying distrust towards democracy, its values and institutions. What happens to an art institution that is meant to facilitate open public dialogue when the public itself is no longer talking, when large parts of society no longer believe in the institution's purpose or necessity? What troubles me most, and what most contemporary art institutions still avoid addressing, is one of the most uncomfortable and under-articulated questions of our time: can institutions and formats that were shaped during the era of globalisation and the so-called 'end of history' still convince anyone that contemporary art serves the public good? Can they still fulfil that mission?

If the answer is no, then art becomes just another information tool in the vast arsenal of political and oligarchic forces, merging with precisely what it often seeks to critique or distance itself from. As a curator, I very much care about confronting this tectonic shift. What happens to the exhibition as a possibility for dialogue when we can't even agree on the reality we're living in?

Today, with society fragmented by algorithms and both intellectual and emotional life 'optimised' by market logic, it's hard to be guided by unoptimised curiosity. It's hard to stay present with ideas I don't agree with. And even the ones I do agree with are easier to support 'quickly', as Claire Bishop notes in her recent book *Disordered Attention*, often while doing something else at the same time.

In such conditions, 'Life After Life', as a format of contemporary art institutions, could be not a continuation driven by inertia, but a living attempt to imagine the afterlife of contemporary art. This does not mean an abstract or escapist 'other world', but a very specific question about the future after the present, after forms that no longer justify themselves, inevitably from within those very forms; after regimes of knowledge that have lost public trust; after a contemporary art system that struggles to embody the notion of the common good. It could still become a space where new rules of the game can be renegotiated.

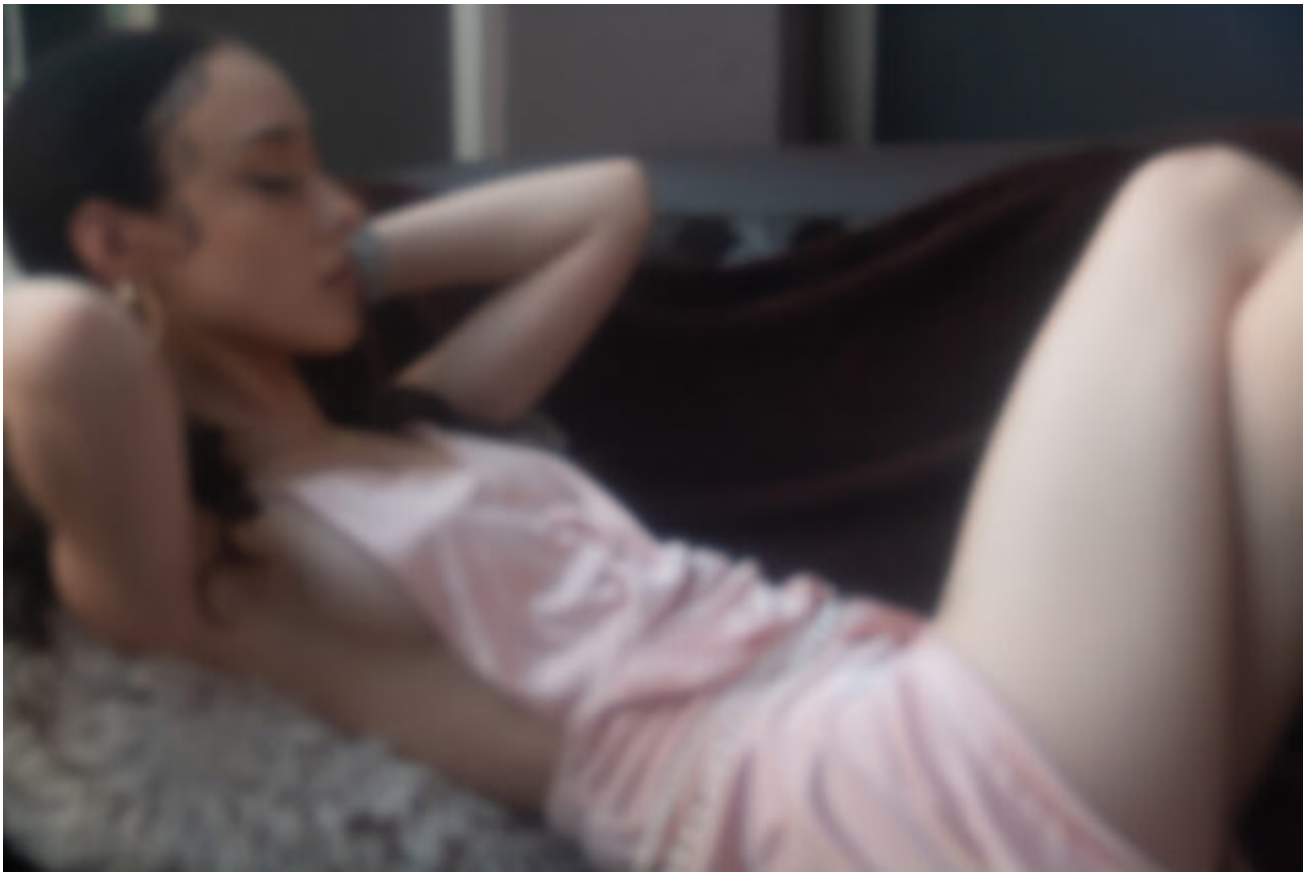
As Lithuania leapt into market capitalism, for decades leftist political thought and activist practices were taboo, from family dinner conversations to national politics. This normalised legal, social and economic discrimination against minorities, and even as Lithuania's economy and overall standard of living grew astronomically, so did economic inequality. This was reflected across public life: in the media, in academic publications, in research, in the artistic and cultural production supported by major institutions, and in national politics. Now, finally, there are tangible shifts happening: in public attitudes, in the subjects being explored in the cultural field, even in legislation (!). At the same time, there are forces that would like to undo even the smallest progress, weaponising the fear of a world that has changed 'too much'.

Still, I don't believe the field of contemporary art is just a neutral arena where political subjects, audible or inaudible, speak. Since the postwar period, this field has grappled with the fundamental question of how visibility is constructed: what gets seen, through which forms, in what language, and with whose permission.

That's why I'm somewhat critical of reducing contemporary art to a vehicle for political messaging, as if its value were only measured by the position it takes. An artwork can act through form, materiality, structure, rhythm, silence; through elements that don't necessarily yield to quick decoding or immediate clarity. In fact, it's often through these formal aspects that a work can create a kind of sensitivity, cutting through language or, as psychoanalysts might put it, operating at the level of symbolic reality, resisting knee-jerk scepticism or pre-formed opinions. That sense of flight may be the first step towards an ethical or political response.

Maybe that's why so many artists I've spoken with over the past five or six years are turning to practices of opacity, refusing to explain everything, to be easily translated into information. Today, when nearly everything visible must be hyper-legible, easily shareable, and instantly grasped, opacity becomes a form of refusal. It defends complexity, contradiction and ambivalence, the right to remain unreadable, unclassified.

To me, this isn't apolitical. It's a way of resisting the pressure to be instantly consumable, to be useful, to have a ready answer. It's about protecting a space where something might emerge that the 'smarter than you or I ChatGPT couldn't yet regurgitate. Dense, hesitant, slow, or contradictory thinking: all of that, to me, is political.



Saulė Gerikaitė. Chantelle, 2024

AB: I'd like to ask about the title 'Life After Life', and the biennial's theme, which is described as transformation and indeterminacy. I vividly remember my father on Saturday mornings opening up the thick weekend edition of Lietuvos Rytas*, which covered all the week's news, every aspect of life. That image represented a kind of stability: Dad at the breakfast table, occasionally sharing something he read about the world. There was no confusion or panic at that moment. It felt like a ritual, one that no longer exists. A transformation has occurred. I'm curious: how many layers of this idea of transformation will be present in the Kaunas Biennial? How expansive will this 'indeterminacy' be?*

AN: That's a beautiful image: your dad with ***Lietuvos rytas*** at the breakfast table as a ritual of stability. I think that contrast between the stable, nearly self-evident rhythms of the past and the discontinuities of the present is very close to what I've been thinking about while working on 'Life After Life'. Would I be wrong to say that I've noticed, especially on Lithuanian social media, that Trump's sudden isolationist turn struck like a collective shock, forcing people to re-evaluate certain assumptions about the US and its political direction?

I'm not interested in celebrating 'transformation' or 'ambiguity' as themes in themselves, concepts under which you could squeeze in just about anything. I'm more curious about what happens when inherited forms no longer function as they once did, when they still stand, but feel hollowed out, disconnected from the present. That's not necessarily liberating. It's more of a tension: between what we feel and what could be coming, but hasn't yet taken shape.

In that sense, I don't think 'Life After Life' will offer 'vagueness' as salvation, or 'transformation' as a solution. What I wanted was to bring together artists and artworks that work dialectically, where one idea (or expression, or image) doesn't overpower another, but instead coexists with it, in friction. I'm interested in what happens when an artwork contains contradiction as its internal structure: formally, temporally and emotionally.

I hope the exhibition will allow these dimensions of indeterminacy to come together, to take shape as a coherent set of forms. I'm curious to see what an exhibition might look like if it could exhibit doubt: not in a way that dissolves into fog or noise, but in a way that could help us live more attentively together, even when answers are uncertain and the questions remain unresolved.

AB: Thank you, Adomas, for such a rich and thought-provoking conversation.

On Breaking the Joints

July 21, 2025
Author Yana Foqué

Mateusz Sadowski. Time Settings, 2022. 4K video, stop-motion animation, sound, duration – 6’22” (foreground); and Time Settings, 2022. Object from the animation, xerox prints, cardboard, plasticine, 285 × 35 × 30 cm. Photographer: Andrej Vasilenko

Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse are in couples therapy. The therapist says, ‘So you say your wife is insane?’ Mickey replies, ‘I didn’t say she’s insane. I said she’s fucking Goofy.’

It’s a ridiculous line to open a review with, but one that nonetheless popped into my head when I encountered Nadia Naveau’s *Funny Five Minutes (Goofin’ Around)*, positioned at the top of the stairs as one of the opener to the exhibition ‘Breaking the Joints’, curated by Edgaras Gerasimovičius and Post Brothers, currently on view at the Sapieha Palace. Both the placing of the sculpture and the joke’s punchline are not out of place here, as a gesture in delving into a show that asks what animation can reveal about bodies, violence, and the liminal space where sorrow brushes up against slapstick.

Nadia Naveau. Funny Five Minutes (Goofin' Around), 2018. Blue stone powder, polyester, 180 × 230 × 160 cm. (foreground); and Jani Ruscica. Companion Piece (Purple Movement), 2025. Site-specific mural, glass paint on glass windows (fragment). Photographer: Andrej Vasilenko

The exhibition's conceptual foundation draws its inspiration from the counter-intuitive animation principle, first articulated by Art Babbitt, where animators intentionally 'disfigure' or 'break the joints' of a character's anatomy to give it solidity, weight, force and believability, suggesting the fundamental violence and trauma at the heart of cartoon joy realism. The exhibition stretches this idea into a comprehensive exploration of bodily deformation, cartoon logic, and how contemporary artists employ these tropes to comment on deeper social, material and political conditions. What is especially striking is that it is an entire exhibition dedicated to the expanded medium of animation, a curatorial decision that casts animation not as a niche or supporting discipline, but as a compelling lens through which to explore contemporary artistic concerns, especially since the exhibition broadens its focus beyond 'pure' animation in the traditional sense, extending to sculpture and drawing, and treating animation not just as a technique, but as a way of seeing, shaping and thinking. It unfolds aptly across the grand, ghosted interiors of the former military hospital, and ophthalmology, a clinical and surgical speciality within medicine that deals with the diagnosis and treatment of eye disorders. Here, the phrase 'broken bodies' and the exploration of how animation combines visual perception and the representation of the body has a visceral resonance. On one hand because of the building's military past, but also because of Vilnius' unsettling geographical proximity to russia, an aggressor whose war on Ukraine is relentlessly severing limbs and lives. Simultaneously, the very screens that in the years since the emergence of smartphones have become the natural habitat of animation, the frames in which they flex and rebound their muscles for our kids' entertainment during restaurant hours now also serve as unblinking windows into real-time atrocities: footage of children trapped in flames in Gaza. This confluence of past and present, geopolitical location, and the chilling duality of the screen, its uncanny ability to transport us into both worlds of complete fiction and overwhelming reality, renders the exhibition's exploration of 'broken bodies' extremely layered, somewhat unsettling, and at the same time, extraordinarily timely.

Oliver Laric. Hundemensch, 2018. Polyurethane, 53 × 52 × 58 cm. (foreground); and Hundemensch, 2018. Polyurethane, pigment, 53 × 52 × 58 cm. Photographer: Andrej Vasilenko

Barry Doupé. Bubble Boing, 2017. 3D computer animation, duration – 7’38”. Photographer: Andrej Vasilenko

As we move through the rooms, several works gently punctuate the curatorial theme with precision. Mateusz Sadowski’s ***Time Settings***, a personal favourite, offers a meditative take on motion, not as speed but as sculpted time, suspended and tender. One room, Oliver Laric’s ‘Shapeshifters’ series, already canonical in the post-human discourse, suggests a body that is never fixed: liberated and spectral, able to inhabit many selves, but never truly at rest. It is ironic then, perhaps, how here the work, while still compelling, feels so neatly slotted into the show’s thematic thesis. At times, the curatorial frame feels so carefully constructed that certain individual works feel dulled under its strength. Take Barry Doupé’s continuously looping ***Bubble Boing***: this 3D computer animation from 2017 invites, perhaps unfairly, comparison with his earlier presentation in Vilnius (also curated by Post Brothers and hosted at the time in Gerasimovičius’ gallery Swallow), which felt riskier, looser, and less constrained. These moments raise the question of whether the exhibition might have benefited from a bit more slapstick chaos, a bit more of Goofy’s actual goofiness. But pulling that off is a delicate task, one that resists easy resolution; and perhaps, in the end, would a humorous take really serve this subject? ***Funny ha-ha*** would not be able to offer the kind of tribute this exhibition now so carefully extends to the bodies and histories it seeks to unpack. A glimpse into how the curators have themselves grappled with this tension, between the historically comic register of animation and the gravity of the themes the show sets out to unpack, emerges in their note on the exhibition’s title. They explain that while the English ‘Breaking the Joints’ implies an active gesture, its Lithuanian parallel ‘Atbuli griaučiai’ (literally ‘backward skeleton’) evokes a kind of awkward, playful, macabre condition. This divergence on one hand simply arises from a gap in translation from one language into another, but it also opens up a more intimate reading of Art Babbitt’s approach. To create characters like Goofy, the animator did not just contort limbs; he imbued his figures with perpetual optimism, guileless confusion, and bumbling decency. This marked an important shift: from characters whose woes, like a loose board or a banana peel, and the comic effects that followed in their footsteps, were the result of their surroundings, to characters whose inner states gave rise to the absurd worlds around them. This nuanced interplay between external forces and internal states feels to the point with the works gathered in the show, and finds a particularly strong echo in Özgür Kar’s impressively large, looming two-channel videos ***Death playing the clarinet*** and ***Death, SHHHH*** (both 2023), which book-end the exhibition. In the latter, a skeletal figure cringes and shushes, animated and exhausted, caught in compulsive loops of melancholic performance and neurotic retreat. Entombed in the crates that brought them here, Kar’s skeletons inhabit a state of limbo: fully present, with one foot permanently out the door, refusing to perform or to absorb any meaning not already their own.

Keeping that kind of space in a group show is not easy, but ‘Breaking the Joints’ succeeds in balancing the funny and the painful, the weird and the real, par excellence. It holds up a timely mirror to all the cracks around us, and shows plenty of ways to grin or sit through it all. Because, honestly, what else ***can*** you do when a fool runs off with your wife?

Özgür Kar. Death playing the clarinet, 2023. 2-channel video, sound, duration – 12'. Courtesy of the Artist, and Emalin, London, and Edouard Montassut, Paris. Photographer: Andrej Vasilenko

Photo reportage from the exhibition 'Breaking the Joints' at the Sapieha Palace

Yana Foqué is a curator, an occasional director, a mom, an OK cook, and a writer. Currently, you can bump into her in the streets of Vilnius, Lithuania.

Through the Lens of Vincent van Gogh and Vytautas Narbutas: Ieva Kotryna Ski's 'stonewashing'

July 22, 2025
Author Paulius Andriuškevičius

Ieva Kotryna Ski, stonewashing, 2025. Exhibition view at Editorial, Vilnius

Looking at a still from Ieva Kotryna Ski's film ***faults and folds***, a field shrouded in fog with clumps of vibrant grass, I cannot help but imagine Van Gogh. Perhaps it is because the image feels painterly, as if it was painted with broad, thick brushstrokes. It is undeniably melancholic, probably due to the fog that envelops it like a good autumn coat. And the beautiful contrast between the lush green at the bottom of the screen and the washed-out white above lends the film a slightly enigmatic tone.

There's another artefact in the space that evokes Van Gogh: a small pastel drawing on paper of a pair of jeans. It is tiny, but symbolic. The crumpled jeans resemble Vincent's scrunched-up boots painted nearly a century and a half ago. The folds collapse into an irregular mash of heavy fabric. For a moment, it looks like a Cubist piece, showing the object from several perspectives at once. I am a

bit stunned by the use of white pastel on white paper. It gives the impression that, with its blue seams and edges, the garment emerges from nothingness, just like those tufts of grass from the dense fog. This hand-drawn work adds warmth to the otherwise cool Editorial space, where works in various media meet. It is slightly cosier than the fog-drenched grass, and perhaps a bit comical in its clumsiness. Still, both generate a resonance filled with unfeigned sensitivity that echoes in low tones as you wander through the small gallery space.

But how do these associations even arise? It is 2025, and the images on the screen have been processed using artificial intelligence, not a paintbrush. Am I trying to suggest that Ieva Kotryna Ski's exhibition has something classical, or even old-fashioned, about it? Of course not: this is simply how my art historian brain works. Images speak in many languages that we do not always consciously understand, but still somehow do. And how fascinating it is to listen to them while exploring the artefacts that Ieva Kotryna has assembled.

Ieva Kotryna Ski, stonewashing, 2025. Exhibition view at Editorial, Vilnius

Ieva Kotryna Ski, stonewashing, 2025. Exhibition view at Editorial, Vilnius

Among them is another piece, a concrete ‘bench’. It is a segment of curb commonly found in city streets. It seems to be trying to pass itself off as pure stone, perhaps the result of the geological synthesis happening on-screen. When you place a denim-covered seat on it, it is firm and cool. I imagine this block being used to abrasively wear down the jeans hanging on the wall, giving them the artificial weathered effect.

Alongside Van Gogh, another figure appears in the exhibition: the geologist Vytautas Narbutas. Three of his microscopic photographs of mica are displayed on the wall next to the drawing of the jeans. Vytautas Narbutas is Ieva Kotryna Ski’s grandfather. His inclusion lends the exhibition a more personal touch. This is not the first time the artist has drawn inspiration from her family. For example, this summer at the Pamarys Gallery, the film ***Preila Project***, created by her and her cousin Ignė Narbutaitė, is being exhibited. The film focuses on Preila, where the Narbutas family has been spending their summers for many years.

The photographs are small and abstract, showing the internal structure of mica. An innocent-sounding stone, mica is the culprit in the ‘mica scandal’ mentioned in the exhibition’s notes: due to excessive mica in construction mixtures, new houses in Ireland have begun to crumble. Fragments of the stone can be found scattered across southern Lithuania, glittering in the sun like gemstones. As a child, I too used to play with those sparkling stones.

3 microscopic photographs of mica from the archive of geologist Vytautas Narbutas, 12×9 cm, 12×9 cm, 11,5×9 cm

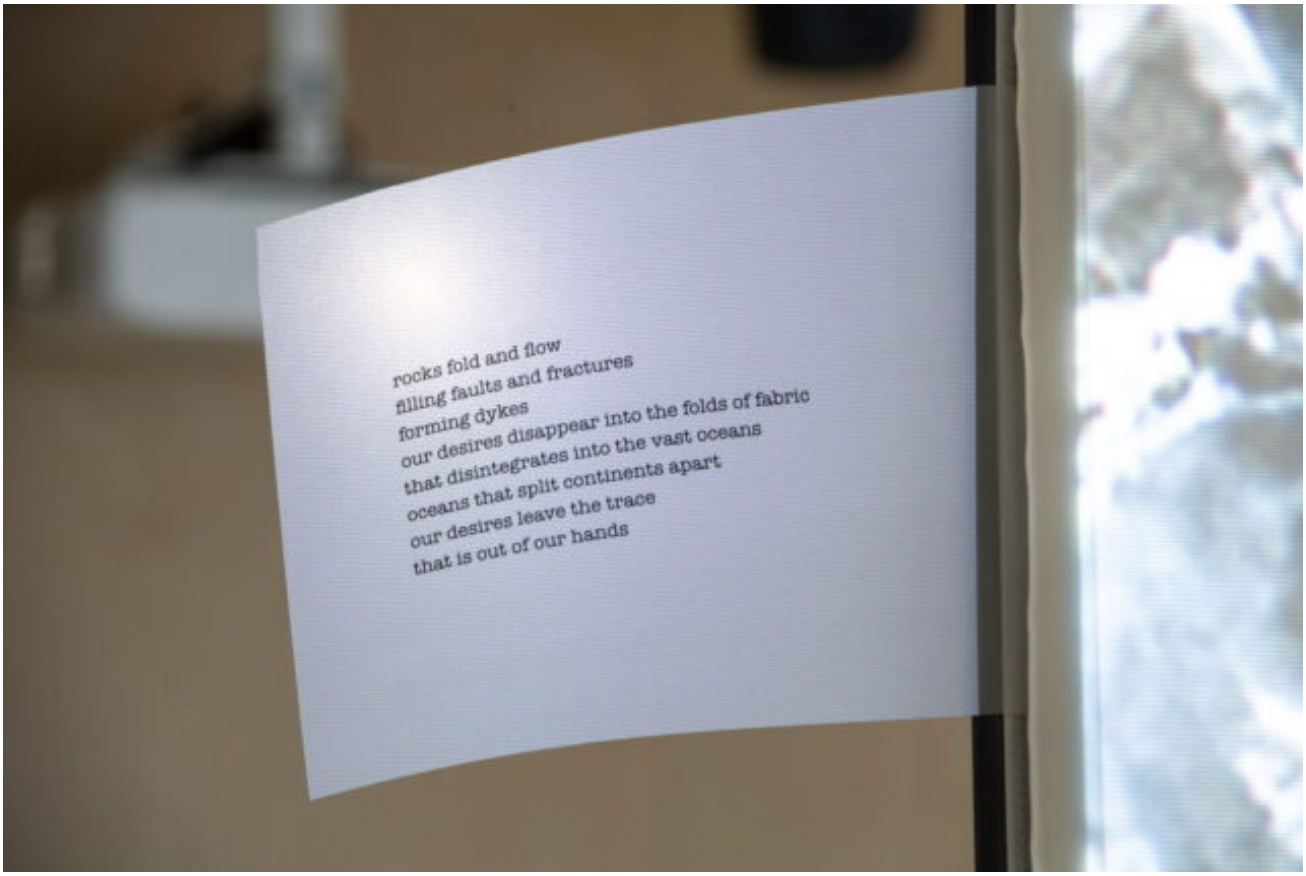
There is another photograph on a different wall entitled ***echafaudage (scaffolding), Paris 05.02.2023***. It appears to depict the interior of a shop. In the centre of the image glows a refrigerator filled with chilled drinks. Its lights shine brightly, casting artificial light and tinting objects in cold hues. The photograph shows a clutter of goods, like in one of those tiny shops where you can buy both everything and nothing at the same time. The photograph was taken in February, during the winter, in Paris, where Ieva Kotryna lives and works. It is curious why she chose this image, which caught her attention two years ago, and how it found its place in the exhibition's narrative. It seems to contrast with the imagery on the video screen: the forces and creations of nature versus a human world crammed with objects.

In the video work, the rocks are constantly transforming. They merge, unfold and dissolve into the environment. These effects are generated by the use of AI and digital photograph processing. You could say the piece is a collaboration between Ieva Kotryna and artificial intelligence, a joint artwork. I put it that way, because, despite AI's often formulaic logic, it is hard to predict what visual forms it will produce. Maybe this unpredictability injects energy into the video work: after all, nature, which shapes the Earth's geological structure, is just as unpredictable.

In the background, 'A Love Song' by Pauline Oliveros softens the ever-mutating stone shards on screen. The music carries the images like a river: they intertwine, then overwhelm one another. This dance is endless, all-encompassing, until suddenly we return to something stable, a green field sunk in fog.

It is wonderful to witness how the exhibition ‘stonewashing’ unites the microscopic and the monumental: planet-forming volcanic lava and the electric lights of a Parisian shop, a massive dolerite rock and the tiny striations of mica. What would Van Gogh and Vytautas Narbutas think of all this? I believe they would enjoy seeing how Ieva Kotryna Ski’s mind works, and how it has conjured up this small but multilayered exhibition. Truly, ‘words can lead to unexpected places.’

P.S. ‘stonewashing’ has already closed, but for those on the Curonian Spit, I recommend visiting the exhibition ‘Preila Project’ by Ieva Kotryna Ski and Ignė Narbutaitė, on view at the Pamarys Gallery in Juodkrantė until the end of summer.



Ieva Kotryna Ski, Untitled, 2025. Text on paper

Ieva Kotryna Ski, echafaudage, Paris 05.02.2023, 2024. Digital print on plastic, 28×21 cm

Restoring the Aesthetic Potential of Nostalgia

July 25, 2025
Author Joonas Pulkkinen

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Before I got the opportunity to experience Marija Rinkevičiūtė’s artistic work and her excellent exhibition at the Irène Laub Gallery, I kept thinking ***What Remains*** would be an ideal title for an essay collection, an exhibition or any kind of artistic project. The phrase, ‘what remains’, stuck with me and I couldn’t shake it from my mind. Scepticism began seeping in—surely someone had used it already, and indeed, it turned out to be the title of Rinkevičiūtė’s great exhibition.

There are a few reasons why I kept thinking about Rinkevičiūtė’s exhibition. Her works resonate perfectly with the atmosphere of Brussels, where she also earned her master’s in painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Brussels, to me, is in Finnish—as a friend of mine, a former assistant for a Member of the European Parliament, described the city—***ihana pikku haisuli***.

That’s difficult to translate. ***Haisuli*** isn’t really a standard Finnish word; it’s a noun formed from ***haista***, meaning ‘to smell’. It is also the Finnish name for the Moomin character created by Tove Jansson, known in English as Stinky. A literal translation of the phrase might be ‘lovely little stinky’, but that fails to capture the spirit of the city in the way I feel it. It’s not pejorative but a term of endearment for something slightly offbeat, funky and charming.

For a long time, I was somewhat hesitant about visiting Brussels, partly due to reading Charles Baudelaire as a wannabe goth in high school. Baudelaire is perhaps the most famous Belgophobe in literary history. He moved to Belgium late in life, hoping the country would revive his career, providing him the freedom to publish his text and the opportunity to edit his compilation of texts.

Instead, the cultural atmosphere disappointed him. He found no life in the streets and complained of a pervasive smell both outdoors and indoors, the smell of haystack. His bitterness was later compiled posthumously in ***Pauvre Belgique!*** (Eng. Poor Belgium!).

I'm not suggesting Rinkevičiūtė's works are rotten or smelly. Far from it. But there's a kind of verdigris in her practice—a weathered, material presence that shares a familial resemblance with the everyday city life of Brussels.

I might be interpreting Rinkevičiūtė's work too emphasised from the perspective of Brussels. She has a longer history with material arrangements in her artistic practice than her works in ***What Remains***, and, at the moment, she is not based in Brussels, though she had a residency at the time of the exhibition at Fondation CAB Brussels.

As a city, Brussels doesn't only stink, and there is indeed life on the streets. The lovely little stink is there because of waste and rubbish everywhere, due to a strange waste management system. Still, Belgians produce less waste than the average EU citizen.

Anyway! Another and more thematically compelling reason why Rinkevičiūtė's work lingers in my mind is her concept of 'rejoicing nostalgia'. Her artistic play with materials—bleached colours, monochromes, found objects, fragile structures—evokes a distinct sense of nostalgia but not the clichéd, reactionary kind.

Rinkevičiūtė's nostalgia is rejoicing materially. It's not always clear whether her works are paintings, sculptures, installations or mixed media, and that doesn't matter. They operate together. The faded colours and textured surfaces make you wonder: what kind of life did these materials lead before they became art? They create their own sense of nostalgia with different logic.

Rinkevičiūtė originally studied monumental art at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. And some of her works do feel monumental despite being fragile. They seem barely able to stand under their weight, yet they hold space with quiet power. I would love to see how she constructs her monochrome pieces and which found materials she uses. Her works raise questions about their fate, history and lifespan.

I've grown increasingly sceptical about applying theory in art reviews, especially when it feels like contemporary art jargon is being projected onto works that never asked for it. Still, Rinkevičiūtė's work does offer an experience that reminds me of how Theodor W. Adorno once described atonal music: something extreme and unanchored in tradition. The pieces could also be interpreted as just pure artworks, not based on the exact tradition of certain techniques or the properties of their materials.

And yet, if we do speak of the so-called new materialism in contemporary art, Rinkevičiūtė births concrete ideas (in this case nostalgia in a non-derogatory context), inspiring the viewer to think through artistic processes, the definition and continuity of artworks, the task of processing materials and their combinations. Her process becomes a kind of thinking—a meditation on material, continuity and transformation. Some are titled poetically: ***box painting***, ***tree skin***. According to the exhibition text, one material used for most of the works is distemper paint.

From the street, where some of Rinkevičiūtė's works were installed in the gallery's vitrine, the Irène Laub Gallery looked like an abandoned stationery or print shop. Once again, perfectly in tune with Brussels as a city which feels like the promised land for hoarders. In Rinkevičiūtė's hands, nostalgia isn't merely eerie; it becomes something else entirely, a friendly ghost.

Marija Rinkevičiūtė's exhibition ***What Remains*** was on view at the Irène Laub Gallery in Brussels from 22 May to 5 July 2025.

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, 'What Remains', exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

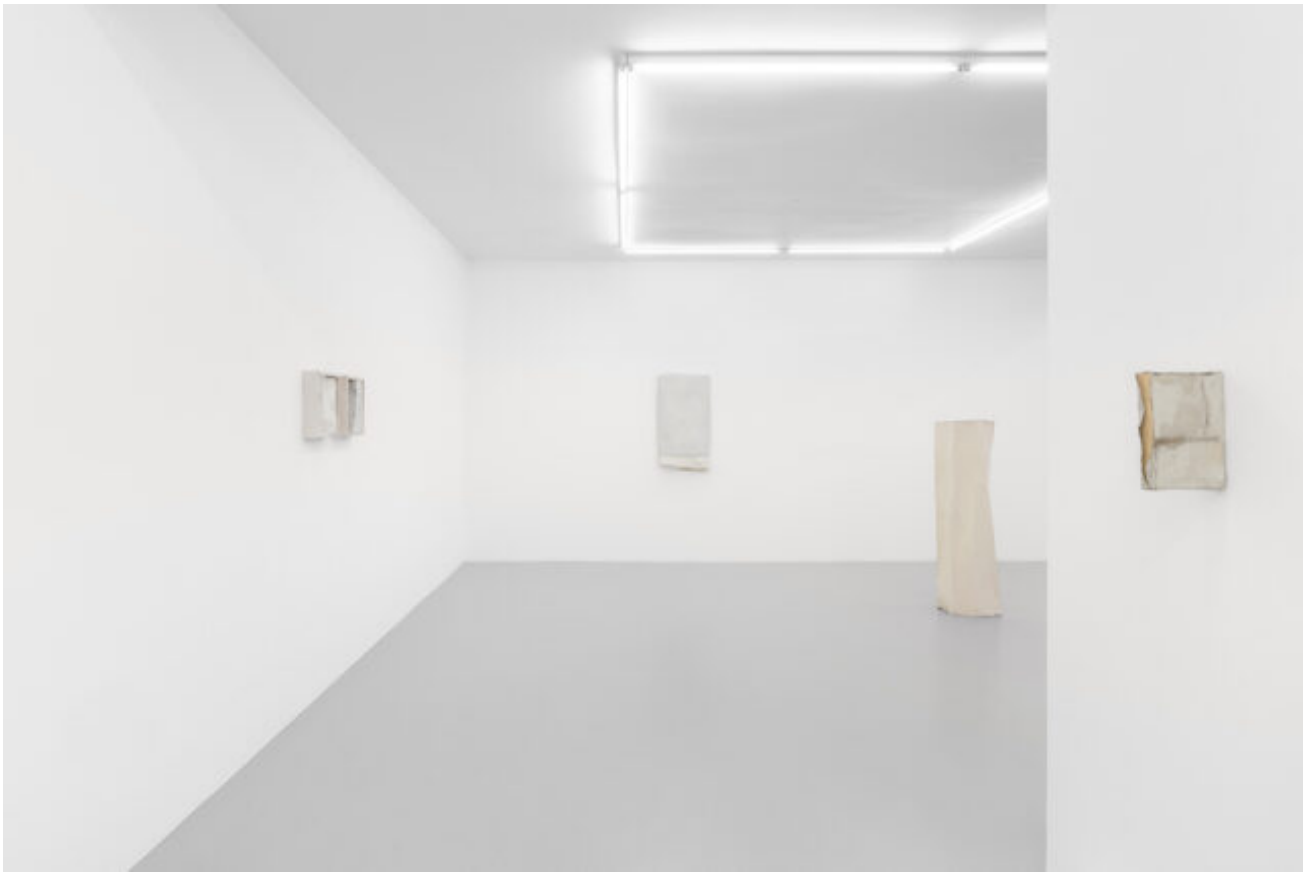
Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde



Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

Marija Rinkevičiūtė, ‘What Remains’, exhibition view, Irène Laub gallery, Brussels, 2025, Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde