TOWARD A TOOL KIT FOR CURATING INDIGENOUS ART: A NON-INDIGENOUS FACILITATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *This article explores the experiences of a non-Sámi project manager and educator working with a group of Sámi curators within a unique educational program designed for the Sámi community. Based on artistic research, this study focuses on the challenges and learning opportunities encountered, emphasizing the importance of cultural exchange and understanding in the field of Indigenous art and curating. It discusses strategies applied by the non-Sámi project manager, language barriers, and the role of hands-on activities in facilitating collaboration. The research provides insights into the broader context of Indigenous curatorial practices globally and highlights the need for mutual respect and adaptation for effective collaboration in educational programs. The study's findings contribute to discussions on navigating cultural diversity within the context of Indigenous art and curating.*
Keywords: *curatorial practices, educational program, Indigenous Sámi art, Lithuania, non-Sámi project manager.*

Introduction

Curatorial practice is a process that involves respecting artists and their artworks, promoting dialogue, and extending hospitality. It can take many forms and perspectives. In this study, I address curatorial practice as a societal process that integrates a non-Sámi curator into Sámi cultural contexts and promotes Sámi art in cross-national work. My research question was: How can cultural and knowledge exchanges between non-Sámi and Indigenous Sámi curators enhance curatorial practice tools?

The educational projects "Tool-kit: Curating Indigenous Art" (2023) and "Educational Sámi Curator Program" (2023) involved a group of Sámi curators, myself as a Lithuanian artist, curator, and the principal investigator (PI) of this study, along with Indigenous curators from New Zealand, Zambia, and Canada, and curators and scholars working with Indigenous artists from Australia and Sápmi. The project provided a platform for various perspectives on curating Indigenous art to be discussed through workshops, lectures, and open discussions. These were facilitated at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok, Norway, in 2022 and 2023, where I served as the project manager and organizer, navigating diverse perspectives while being non-Sámi by nationality. This study

builds on my reflective analysis from the perspective of a manager and educator within this project.

In defining the tool kit for curating Indigenous art, I will begin with a story that describes my entry point into Sápmi. As a Lithuanian artist and curator who is not Sámi, my experience and understanding of art, culture, and curatorial practices intersect with the Sámi way of artistic creativity and tradition. Coming from an artist-run culture and having managed my project, BiteVilnius, in Lithuania for 10 years, stepping into the role of manager and curator at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art merged my experiences of artist-run and institutional settings. I interpreted my curatorial task as welcoming people into the artistic space, creating a hospitable environment, and navigating to find the tone and themes for discussions to begin.

As I stepped into the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art, my curiosity was piqued, though I lacked a specific academic background in Sámi art. Therefore, my initial step was to understand what constitutes Sámi art. I saw myself as a learner while simultaneously setting up an educational program for Sámi curators. With an academic background in art, performance art, and curating, I believed I could construct and deliver the educational program. However, meeting the expectations of the Sámi Curator program for Sámi learners presented a unique challenge, as I did not possess knowledge of the Sámi language and needed to outline my understanding of Sámi culture.

Therefore, this study takes the form of tracing the strategies I employed for integration into the Sámi artistic milieu and examines how Sámi art and discussions about Sámi culture are integrated into international artistic events. It also explores the intersection of Sámi Indigenous art and curating with Indigenous cultures from around the globe.

This study presents a reflexive analysis of the developments within the Sámi curator educational program. The questions that follow are not direct research questions but rather reflections that guided my involvement with the project. Can a non-Sámi curator integrate into Sámi art and culture, and is such integration necessary? How is meaning constructed in the co-understanding and co-development of tools to curate Indigenous Sámi art alongside a group of Sámi curators learning together? Can a non-Sámi artist and curator contribute to the group of Sámi curators, and should one assume such a role when coming from a different community?

The article "Toward a Tool Kit for Curating Indigenous Art" is based on my notes and reflections and presents my perspective on the discussed issue. It explores strategies for navigating diverse perspectives in a single teaching environment and how to manage one's own curatorial and artistic experience to avoid significant errors during public performances within the Indigenous Sámi culture that one is learning about. I view this paper as an open sharing of my

experiences and strategies, which may provide useful tools for working with Indigenous communities.

Literature Review and Method

Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the issues with terminology when addressing Indigenous communities, noting that terminology often originates from a Western perspective (2021). The term "Indigenous" is problematic due to its tendency to generalize diverse populations with varied experiences under imperialism (Smith, 2021). According to Cameron (2015), Indigenous art differs from Western art in that it is not created solely for aesthetic pleasure or ownership. Instead, it reflects vital information about living, embodies semantically deep meanings and perspectives, and is often communicated through symbols that connect individuals to themselves and their environment. In Sámi art, artistic forms are categorized into *duodji* and *daidda*, where *duodji* refers to traditional crafts and making, and *daidda* represents contemporary art (Griniuk & Guttorm, 2023; Guttorm, 2012; Guttorm, 2015). Indigenous Sámi artists engage with both forms of artistic expression, and educational programs in *duodji* at the bachelor's and master's level are offered at Sámi Allaskuvla / Sámi University of Applied Sciences.

Artistic research is a research method that emphasizes the use of artistic practices to generate new knowledge and insights, recognizing the value of art as a mode of inquiry and the research process itself as a creative act (Borgdorff, 2010; Vanlee & Ysebaert, 2019). It can take many forms and be applied to various topics and contexts (Vanlee & Ysebaert, 2019), although it is sometimes seen as politically driven and institutionalized (Hovland, 2022). In this study, artistic research is employed through the educational projects "Tool-kit: Curating Indigenous Art" (2022, 2023) and "Educational Sámi Curator Program" (2023). Both programs involved the same eight participants—curators with backgrounds in various areas of Sápmi—with two additional participants joining later. This brought together curatorial practices from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives within the educational project aimed at training Sámi curators, organized by a non-Sámi manager, curator, and educator affiliated with the project's hosting institution. The project included a group of curators and speakers: Indigenous curators from New Zealand, Zambia, Canada, and Australia, and curators and scholars working with Indigenous artists from Australia and Sápmi. Through workshops, lectures, and open discussions, the project provided a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange among these diverse perspectives.

Reflexive analysis in this research involves critically reflecting on the author's own lived experiences and acquired knowledge (Probst, 2015) before engaging in Indigenous art curatorial contexts. This approach enables the author

to act as both educator and learner, positioning their perspective to navigate the diverse viewpoints of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals collaborating within Indigenous communities. Curating Indigenous art and working with educational projects within curatorial work is complex and dynamic, requiring a profound understanding of cultural protocols, histories, and traditions, which must be learned quickly upon entering a new milieu. By engaging in reflexive analysis, the researcher can navigate these complexities and develop more meaningful and collaborative relationships with the Indigenous communities with which they work. A limitation of reflexive analysis is its focus on the researcher's experiences (Probst, 2015); however, in this study, the main goal was to outline and explain the researcher's perspective and the challenges encountered within the current project, as well as to identify possible solutions to overcome them.

Cases

From August 2022, I began working with a group of Indigenous Sámi curators who had previously met during a study trip co-organized by OCA (Office for Contemporary Art Norway), the Sámi Parliament, and the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art to the Venice Biennale in April 2022. After the trip, project management transitioned to the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art, and I assumed my role as the director of this institution. The program was limited to participants who had signed up for two-year non-graduate education and was underdeveloped, without any secured funding; therefore, it became my responsibility to develop the program's content and secure financial support. In August 2022, this task felt like creating spontaneous content, leading me to create the program for the 2022 Autumn Semester and fundraise for it during August 2022. Fortunately, by September 2022, funding was secured for the remainder of the year through Globus Opstart Nordic Culture Point, allowing us to conduct several sessions with both live and online participants, including Indigenous curators and artists, as well as non-Indigenous curators working with Indigenous art, such as myself. Incorporating these two perspectives was crucial for me.

As the project manager and a non-Indigenous Lithuanian artist, curator, and researcher, I found a connection to the theme of decolonization, drawing parallels with Lithuania's history of colonization by the Soviet Union until 1991. Indigenous knowledge was an entirely new domain for me. By integrating these Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, I could relate to and understand the non-Indigenous curator's viewpoint while learning about the Indigenous perspective through the lectures.

For instance, in describing the lecture sessions by Mwape Mumbi and Gui Siui Durand, their presentations provided insights that I wished I had encountered as an art academy student or in other educational contexts. Mumbi's lecture offered informative, deep artistic and curatorial insights within an academic

framework. Conversely, Durand's lecture incorporated elements of a performance lecture, despite being digital. Durand discussed his involvement with performance art, both as a curator and practitioner, notably his participation in the 2017 Performance Art Bergen open festival—in which I also participated in 2015. This professional link to performance art was an important and unexpected connection for me. I deeply appreciated not only the content but also the format of the lecture. As the manager of and an educator within the educational program for Sámi curators, these points of connection were vital for me in facilitating discussions post-lectures.

After completing the first year of the program in 2022, I recognized the need for a more structured plan for the program's second year in 2023. With a refined understanding of the student group and their expectations, my goal was to ensure that the program would be both enriching and informative.

To achieve this, I dedicated time to planning the content for the entire year, integrating both online and on-site lectures, study trips, and practical curatorial work complemented by reflective writing assignments. In January 2023, I submitted my funding application to the Sámi Parliament. Fortunately, the application was successful, allowing us to secure support for the entire year's program.

We initiated the educational content in February, confident in the quality of our planned curriculum and the expertise of our contributors. Our focus for 2023 was on enhancing the students' understanding of Sámi art and culture, Indigenous art, and curating from Indigenous communities globally, as well as offering them practical experience in curating exhibitions. A program highlight was the practical curatorial work, allowing students to create and curate an exhibition based on research from the RDM museum collection in Karasjok in collaboration with cultural institutions.

Research Results

The Sámi curator educational program stands out as unique, with no similar offerings currently available at any Nordic art academy or university. This program specifically addresses the Sámi Indigenous perspective on curatorial methods as a way to decolonize curatorial work.

In my discussions with various stakeholders, I have learned that several development programs and courses are being planned for the Arctic region, such as those at Tromsø Art Academy, initiated by PhD candidate Karoline Tampere, and the University of Lapland, initiated by Professor Maria Huhmarniemi. However, the uniqueness of the non-graduate program for Sámi curators at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art lies in its design for students within the Sámi community, who have a Sámi background. This approach may seem exclusive to those without a Sámi background but who are interested in Sámi curatorial

practices. Nevertheless, in this first edition of the course, this was a deliberate and significant choice prompted by the current scarcity of curators in Sápmi who possess both curatorial education and practice, as well as a Sámi background.

In my role, I had to thoughtfully consider how to work and design the program, since despite being a scholar, curator, and artist with the qualifications to design and implement such an educational program, I am not Sámi. Thus, I actively acknowledged my non-Sámi, Baltic background, exploring commonalities and how I could interpret the culture and history of Sápmi through the lens of my own people, their history, Lithuania's colonial past, and postcolonial discourse.

To define the requirements for my approach, I realized that the course should include both Indigenous curators and scholars, as well as non-Indigenous ones who, like me, work with Indigenous art and culture. Early in the process, I needed to determine how I would work and what strategies I would apply in situations I might not fully understand as a non-Indigenous person, and how I could contribute to deepening discussions, drawing on my own country's colonial history. I frequently discussed Lithuania, highlighting the similarities in artistic expression tools used by Sámi and Lithuanian artists at events such as conferences. For instance, at the conference Giving Voice to the Unspeakable, I presented two cases of Sámi art projects and two cases of Lithuanian art to explore the tools used by artists and curators (Griniuk, 2023a). At another conference, Cumulus Antwerp 2023, I shared my background and entry point into Sámi Art from a Baltic perspective (Griniuk, 2023b).

By actively applying my Lithuanian background, I felt closely aligned with the topics discussed during the sessions, despite having a dual role as a manager and educator, as well as being a learner in areas unfamiliar to me, given my non-Sámi identity. As a Lithuanian artist, I developed an interest in the themes of the colonial past and the deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia, including the traditional Sámi area and the Kola Peninsula, by the Soviet regime. I began painting these themes in 2003, and they guided my journey as an artist as my practice evolved over the years. Thus, my work deeply engages with the themes of postcolonial memory and postmemory, as memories are narrated across generations (Hirsch, 2012). From my perspective, I was actively involved in the cultural and knowledge exchange between non-Sámi and Indigenous Sámi curators, and both perspectives positively influenced the development of curatorial practice tools. As a manager and facilitator, I learned significantly about Sámi perspectives and their content, and the parallels drawn between Sápmi and Lithuania introduced new insights to the participants and listeners. My engagement with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers deepened my understanding of how curatorial work is conducted in Indigenous communities in Zambia, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. I view these discussions and collaborations as ongoing, and as a manager of the projects, I am actively

exploring the possibility of the student group undertaking a study trip to one of these destinations. Additionally, I am working to facilitate an in-person meeting in Karasjok, where the course is held, with the speakers we initially met digitally. Student feedback indicates a preference for live interaction with the speakers beyond digital lectures, as this would allow them to discuss the content of the presentations in both formal and informal settings, such as over lunch or dinner.

Having a background in performance and technology, I aimed to share these skills with the curator group. Beyond traditional lectures, we delved into more hands-on activities to create interactive spaces for audiences. The participating curators designed an electronic instrument that produced sounds when the participants touched. If two people touched the instrument simultaneously, they could play tunes on each other's bodies, such as by touching hands. The most important aspect was that they were building these instruments themselves. This workshop was based on my previous research on performing in spaces where I was unfamiliar with the local language, creating interaction and audience involvement through DIY technology (Griniuk et al., 2023).

Another challenge was my lack of fluency in the Northern Sámi language, which was native to all the studying curators, although they were all fluent in English. While English was our common language of interaction, there were times I needed to step back during discussions held in Northern Sámi, whether with a speaker fluent in Sámi or within the group. When written assignments were involved, students often submitted them in Northern Sámi. Part of my learning process involved recognizing the importance of using Northern Sámi while not speaking the language myself. I learned to recede in live conversations and allocate sufficient time for written texts to be translated into English, enabling me and the involved advisor to provide feedback on the content. The challenge of not speaking the Sámi language was a significant area of learning for me, particularly in exploring how to ethically navigate an unfamiliar cultural context ethically. My approach to ethical navigation was influenced by my Lithuanian background.

The table below outlines the main findings of this research, addressing the three aspects of the study.

Table 1 **Main findings of the research** *(Designed by the author)*

Indigenous art and curating globally meeting Sámi art and curating	Strategies applied by the non-Indigenous project manager and educator working with the Sámi curator group in education	The Baltic background of the project manager and educator interconnected with the Sámi background of the group of studying curators
The Sámi curator educational program is	Due to the distance, part of the lectures were digital. The	I applied my Baltic background to understand

unique and designed for students with a Sámi background, but non-Sámi individuals can also participate, currently in the roles of speakers and facilitators.	students preferred live contact with the speakers to discuss the presentation content in formal and informal settings over digital lectures. This suggests that such a project would require even higher funding to provide transport and accommodation for long-distance speakers.	what we had in common with the Sámi culture and history.
In my role as project manager and facilitator, but not being Sámi, I needed to carefully consider how to work and design the program.	I am currently exploring the possibility of a study trip to one of the countries involved in the project, for example, New Zealand, that would facilitate deeper cultural exchange for the group of involved curators.	I incorporated my background and active skill-sharing within the interaction building. I explored hands-on activities to create interactive spaces for audiences based on my previous research on DIY technology.
The involvement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers from Zambia, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia helped to broaden the understanding of Indigenous curatorial practices globally from the perspective of those from Indigenous communities, as well as those working with Indigenous communities.	The criterion for non-Indigenous speakers and contributors was holding a PhD degree and having extensive practice and publication about their work as curators with Indigenous art and art projects. This ensured the quality of the content and provided a non-Indigenous perspective on scholarship and peer-reviewed materials for students to discuss and offer their opinions on.	When speaking publicly or at conferences, I would always mention my background. In some conference presentations, I actively and extensively discussed how the theme of the colonial past is addressed by Sámi and Lithuanian artists. To this end, I used my own artistic practice as one of the cases, as I have worked with themes of postmemory and postcolonial memory in Lithuania throughout my entire artistic career.

Conclusion

The Indigenous art and curating field is expanding rapidly, requiring a profound grasp of Indigenous cultures and histories. In this study, I, a non-Sámi project manager and educator with a Lithuanian background, explore my experience working with Sámi curators in an educational program through artistic research and reflexive analysis. A significant challenge was the language barrier, which necessitated strategic participation and translation efforts. The program, initially designed for Sámi curators, also welcomed non-Sámi individuals as

speakers and facilitators, fostering unique cultural exchanges. Collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers from around the world enriched our understanding of global Indigenous curatorial practices. Hands-on activities, such as creating interactive sound instruments, added dynamism to the course content. This study provides valuable insights for anyone involved in Indigenous art and curating education.

Acknowledgments

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