

to Mozart.<sup>7</sup> Midway through the film, the projector suddenly shut down. The theater fell into darkness, and we listened in collective anticipation until projection was restored. Following the program it was announced that the film would be available under daylight outside for inspection. There was no reason, however, to offer such an opportunity, as if what had happened (we may call it the “Gegenwurf”) could be recovered as subject matter, *Gegenstand*.<sup>8</sup> During that moment of silence, so to speak, when the film refused itself, anatomical ears and eyes became superfluous.

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## TO TOUR OR NOT

### On Critical Tourism, Site-Specificity & the Post-Romantic Condition

Nida Art Colony of Vilnius Academy of Arts

Nida, Lithuania

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Located on the Lithuanian Curonian Spit forty-five kilometers south of Klaipėda, minutes away from the Russian border near Kaliningrad, is Nida, an obscure, seaside resort town that once hosted primarily Lithuanians and Germans—including artists and writers such as Thomas Mann and Jean-Paul Sartre. Nida Art Colony exists in this tiny village—a remote gem of colonial cottages sequestered near pine forests, rustic German architecture, amber jewelry, folk art, and archaic fishing boats designed to handle rough waters. It is a space of respite—where many retreat inward and leave urban responsibilities behind, even if temporarily.

Despite the fact that this place seems safe and well-preserved, the fairytale-like Nida is constantly in flux. It exists on an ever-evolving strip of manmade sand serving to impede incoming ocean waves and unexpected maelstroms. The sand dunes continually shift, but the unique site itself remains, despite its inherent fragility. It is intriguing to ponder how the spit remains as protected and seemingly untouched as it has in the Baltics, where similar tourist locales are strategically exploited, quickly altered, or destroyed by an influx of visitors and capitalistic persuasions.

Co-curated by Vytautas Michelkevičius and Federica Martini, there were approximately forty participants present at the On Critical Tourism symposium: international artists and artists groups in residence, visiting artists, curators, academics, researchers, critics, and locals. The event shifted between performances, discussions, guided tours, performative walks, role-playing, dinners, workshops, tea rituals, readings, casual conversation, and knowledge exchange. It harbored coinciding ambitions—one being to gather a diverse range of creatives, researchers, and practitioners to investigate and experiment with ways to share art and related experiences; roles such as “curator”

NOTES 1. Martin Heidegger, *Logik*. Heraklits Lehre vom Logos, part 2 of Heraklit, Gesamtausgabe II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923–1944, Band 55 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), 253. 2. *Ibid.*, 244–47. 3. Georgina Klege, “Voices in My Head,” in *Aural Cultures*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 96–109. 4. Jacques Derrida, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (Geschlecht IV),” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., in *Reading Heidegger: commemorations*, ed. John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 163–220. 5. Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit*, Gesamtausgabe II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923–1944, Band 29/30 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), *Erster Teil, zweites Kapitel*. 6. *The words are from Der Satz vom Grund* (Tübingen: Günther, Neske Pfullingen, 1957), 107 and 108, respectively. 7. *Ibid.*, 118. 8. See Heidegger’s remarks on Lessing’s translation, *Der Satz vom Grund*, 139. This term, “Gegenwurf,” isn’t correct German; “Gegenstand” is the German for “subject matter” or “topic,” but the use of “Gegenstand” to translate a particular word from ancient Greek of interest to Heidegger concedes too much, in his view, to a metaphysical idea he is contesting. Heidegger therefore invites us to adopt a translation that he attributes to Lessing, namely “Gegenwurf.” The ending of “Gegenstand,” namely “stand,” expresses a stabilized condition, and so, to use the ending “wurf” instead (“Gegenwurf”), an ending that is the German for “throw,” results in a contrived construction that could nevertheless express what is under discussion without conceding the contested metaphysical ground, that is, without seeming to concede that things stabilize into such a “Gegenstand.”

and “artist” are changing, and borders between such positions are being reevaluated. How do we step out of our comfort zones and into other realms of artistic research? Can we embrace more than one role simultaneously—and with an experimental, playful perspective as opposed to stringent academic research methods? The symposium aspired to highlight aspects of site specificity, with stints into critical tourism, alternative methods of artistic and cultural production, ecology, and the history of the Curonian Spit (a UNESCO world heritage site) alongside the Baltic’s post-romantic state and current reality. Various keywords and topics were contextualized, from “artist-as-tourist” and “sightseeing as artistic research,” to “nostalgia tourism,” “local,” and “standardized identities.”

Symposium days were filled with sunlight, pristine beaches, fresh faces, and converging ideas. It all began on Nida’s sand dunes with a performative talk-walk led by the Contingent Movements Archive, including London-based artists Hanna Husberg, Laura McLean, and Kalliopi Tsipni-Kolaza, who together represented the Maldives at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Comparisons were made between Nida’s fragile milieu and that of the Maldives, as both regions are at risk of disappearing into the sea. The artist group led participants through marshes and dunes toward the Kaliningrad border, referencing the politics and history of both areas.

Following this, Barnaby Drabble—Zurich-based freelance curator, writer, and managing editor of jar-online.net—introduced the symposium with a comprehensive, practice-based presentation and workshop focused, not on being organized or self-organized, but disorganized. Highlights from his presentation included work by Dutch artist Jeroen Offerman, among others emphasizing the artist’s obsessive, oftentimes repetitive nature. Offerman’s *Stairway at St. Paul’s* video (2003) relays the artist meticulously singing Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” backwards in front of the cathedral.

Lithuanian culture critic and writer Jurij Dobriakov’s “Touring the Zero Town: The (Im)Possible Homecoming” expressed his interest in cinema and incorporated films such as Karen Shakhnazarov’s *Gorod Zero* (Zero City, 1988) and Dmitri Astrakhan’s *Chetyortaya Planeta* (The Fourth Planet, 1995). Dobriakov explained:

Being irrevocably displaced from the place of one's birth/childhood is a distinctly post-Soviet experience. Curiously, this experience was reflected upon, in a markedly absurdist and Kafkaesque manner, by a number of obscure Russian movies made in the 1980s, just before the end of the Soviet epoch, and right after it, in the shaky 1990s. It seems that in this encounter both the memory tourist and the locals acquire strange, unstable identities, and find themselves in an ahistorical "time out of joint," realizing that they don't quite know both who they are and what exactly is the place they're in.

The Lithuanian critic shared the unique perspective of one who immigrated from Kaliningrad to Klaipėda in his formative years, leading him to investigate displacement—particularly related to the post-Soviet era. His family in Kaliningrad either moved on or no longer exists, and he requires a visa to return. Dobriakov made connections between his tourist-like relationship with Kaliningrad and protagonists from the aforementioned Soviet films—all bound and sentimentally influenced by the apparitional towns and odd sites in question. He inquired, "How does one return to the "Zero Town" of one's half-forgotten and displaced past, and what awaits there?"

London-based artists Markus Soukup and Sam Skinner presented "In Visible Cities [Act 1 >> Leave to Remain]," which included the screening of the video *Postcard to Nida* (2013) followed by a Skype discussion that questioned tourism's necessity and benefits for the tourist and environment. Taking a critical, ironic approach to the site-specific nature of the symposium, Soukup and Skinner highlighted their physical absence and chose the city of London as a starting point for a larger discussion on the function of tourism. What meaning or value can be obtained by either restraining or participating in the phenomenon? How feasible is it for an artist to send their artworks on a voyage in the artist's place? Much can be avoided by doing nothing—by going nowhere—but this approach isn't useful or possible for everyone wearing the "tourist" mask. Not everyone has the capacity or desire to remain in one place and be content, despite obvious damage stemming from travel.

The Estonia-based Error Collective—contributors being Ernest Truely and Justin Tyler Tate—presented a lecture titled "On Hospitality: Error Master Suite Franchise Project," which included a seemingly improvised dance party addressing what is expected of institutions, artists, critics, and researchers when hosting others and presenting ideas, and an overview of their capitalist-critical, subversive projects such as *Master Suite*, which hosted Swiss tourists for the somewhat absurd amount of 300 euro nightly in Tallinn's Culture Factory Polymer (formerly a toy factory) to show them an alternative version of the Tallinn tourist experience. A video was also shown to assist the collective's entrepreneurial goal of expanding and making future experiences more comfortable for guests. Additionally, their on-site sauna experience *Not At All Touristic Sauna* provoked symposium participants to engage in impromptu conversations. The collective focuses on improving ways



to engage cultural and social exchange via design and architecture with site-specificity and DIY methodologies in mind. They are an approachable group, and their energy was infectious.

Other contributors included Polish art critic and sociologist Sebastian Cichocki, Lithuanian researcher Aldis Gedutis, British artist Bill Aitchison, and Basel-based artist Florian Kutzli. Peripheral happenings were led by Swedish artists David Larsson and Marika Troili, who organized a conceptual dinner of "local" cuisine; Mann's short stories were read in multiple languages; parallel workshops were led by Frauke Materlik and Veda Popović; a guided tour was led by Yulia Startsev; and a walk was led by Adrien Siberchicot. Artists in residence also opened their studios to share new work and evolving plans.

On Critical Tourism did not overtly attempt to educate its audience from an art-historical perspective. Some participants expressed that they would have enjoyed becoming better acquainted with additional site-specific projects from the Baltics from a more lucid, historical vantage point. This symposium embraced an experimental, liberated approach, yet much may have been gained from integrating a more conventional and even, at times, traditional, mode to overlapping the symposium's thematic threads.

A number of questions remain: How does one define one's creative role in relation to tourism, and what is the definition based upon? When does one cease being a tourist, thereby becoming a resident? How can we begin the process of becoming more responsible artists and tourists? How can we gauge the value of a symposium experience when it is only accessible to a few? Many of these questions have answers, yet some deserve heightened criticality—a second glance. Complacency recognized in the average tourist can clearly be found in the art and academic worlds. What steps can be taken to un-lazy or un-tourist ourselves?

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**Above**

Contingent Movements Archive performative walk toward the Baltic Sea (2013), led by Hanna Husberg, Laura McLean, and Kalliopi Tsiplini-Kolaza; courtesy Nida Art Colony

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