

Within Breathing Space or Through a Cracked Divider?

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Abstract

Based on two collective art activities at “The Lost-and-Found” academic symposia held at the National Museum in Warsaw and on the Riga to Dubulti train in 2024, this paper reflects on art-based research. I propose that art research can serve as an effective method to revitalize the teaching of art history, as it embraces a multiplicity of methodological approaches and emphasizes the importance of personal involvement and direct experience with art. In this context, openness and criticality are connected to the subjective perspective of the art researcher/art participant. Through this approach, we not only learn about art but allow it to affect and shape us, making it a living part of our cultural heritage and identity. Unassuming and inconspicuous art acts like singing, intuitive gestures, and DIY practices in the Central European art scene may seem like small interventions, but they are essential actions artists undertake in the pursuit of social and political change. These practices contribute to the region’s broader movement to reclaim agency after the political domination of the USSR. Here, the emphasis on corporeality and materiality underscores the potential for real transformation, especially given the spectacular failures of grand ideologies.

Adrienne Rich wrote that linking art to economic power and academic prestige denies the existence of artists from excluded groups. She argued that art, as our human birthright, should not become the property of a powerful few. In her 1998 talk “Some Questions from the Profession”, the poet identifies two primary forces that bridge vast spaces of difference: solidarity and the involuntary, unexpected emotional connections felt with others.^[1] The first is seen as more powerful and equalizing than sympathy, while the latter forges a new and challenging “difficult comradeship.”

This text is based on two collective activities at “The Lost-and-Found” symposia held in Warsaw and Riga.^[2] The first titled *Sounding Gestures: Alongside the Gdańsk Winterfeld Diptych* by Kirsten Stromberg, an artist and educator, and Benedetta Manfredi, a singer and interdisciplinary artist took place at the National Museum in Warsaw on March 22, 2024. The second, titled *Lost and Found Office. Railway*, was situated on the Riga to Dubulti train and was staged by textile students from the Art Academy of Latvia on June 7, 2024.^[3] The first event was a workshop in which participants were invited to respond physically and vocally to a medieval painting. The focus was on using gestures, shouts, grunts, sighs, and chants, emphasizing embodied expression over intellectual analysis (Figure 1). The second event involved an artistic intervention in the daily lives of commuters traveling by train between the suburbs and Riga. The aim was to inspire empathy among passengers by encouraging reactions to unexpected artworks carried onboard by artists. This transformed the otherwise

“empty” time of the journey into moments of creativity and inspiration.



Figure 1. Kirsten Stromberg and Benedetta Manfrian, the *Un-Gesturing Piece* score in front of the right wing of the *Winterfeld Diptych* (Mary Magdalene Lifted by Angels); photo: Basia Sliwinska

In this essay I reflect on how art can empower and support participants by revealing their own potential. Does art have the power to persuade people to think outside the box and explore their possibilities beyond what is already planned for/expected from them? Furthermore, can reflection on the multisensory interrelationships with other people and the matter of the artwork prove useful in reconsidering ways of building knowledge? These questions explore the intersection of research and art, focusing on the relationship between theoretical and artistic experiences, and more broadly the interface between theory and practice interrogated in “The Lost-and-Found” symposia that brought together researchers and artists.

The kind of connectivity I focus on here, grounded in artistic research, is a reflexive activity that can be understood through two metaphors: democratic experience and methodological abundance (“the world is too diverse to be reduced to a single method or even a single philosophy of science viewpoint”^[4]), or even anarchism. Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén argue that these metaphors encapsulate the convergence of practice and teaching, enabling art (or artistic experience) to critique science (or scientific experience). Notably, the outcomes of artistic research can often be open-ended.^[5] Therefore, if the response to questions about the agency of art is affirmative, it is because what matters in art research is not only the subjective perspective of the researcher or participant but also the personal significance that art research holds in their lives. And if so, another question should be posed: How much should art history education change so that the support provided by solidarity and comradeship is not pushed “through cracked macadam” but instead finds breathing space, cultivation, and protection to fulfill itself, as Rich suggests in *Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts* (1997)?^[6]

By analyzing the aforementioned works within the micro-political sphere of DIY feminist media networks and considering how the artists themselves successfully mobilize “low-budget resources to create participatory political cultures and preserve activist memory,” I aim to demonstrate that these artistic activities, by challenging oppressive and dominant cultural frameworks, can serve as a means of remediation in teaching (art) history.^[7] It is therefore art in its broadest sense, encompassing diverse creative activities for learning, that serves as a

mediator in the teaching of art history. Even the most insightful lecture will remain a mere monologue, however, when students actively respond to a work of art, it engages their multi-sensory abilities, transforming passive listening into a deeply personal learning experience.

Reimagining Our Relationship with Art

Significantly, both art events in Warsaw and Riga were organized by university researchers, feminist art historians (including myself), based in the democratic infrastructure of post-communist higher education institutions (University of Wrocław, Art Academy of Latvia). Their aim was to reimagine relationships with art and, consequently, to reform the way art is taught. The second event in the series of three (the first one took place at the NOVA University Lisbon in December 2023) focused on exploring alternative methods of studying art within traditional settings like museums, which have become prominent in the modern era. The third and final event aimed to engage individuals who typically do not interact with art by placing it in unconventional locations. Neither activity was intended to gain academic prestige. In the first case, at the museum in Warsaw, the artists deliberately broke from the behavioral norms expected within a university setting. In the second, everything unfolded outside institutional boundaries, spontaneously engaging random train passengers on the route from Riga to Dubulti. Both events, therefore, analyzed the effectiveness of specific art placements and activities designed to engage broader audiences. This aligns with Rich's concern: fostering solidarity and comradeship.

In both instances, the performances revitalized cultural memory first by addressing a traditionally religious narrative, and second by engaging with a fading, rather secular tradition (knitting and sewing). These performances served "to reinvigorate feminist engagement in the present through providing links to historical-based resources," to borrow Red Chidgey's term.^[8] By incorporating choreography and voice, Warsaw's performance translated the medieval diptych's content into bodily expression, influencing both the memory of the work and its interpretation. This transformation turned static, purely visual representations into dynamic, audiovisual experiences. Similarly, suburban train rides featuring textile-based works redefined both the commute and the role of knitting during leisure time. These rides transformed empty, destination-focused time into creative moments, relocating domestic "women's crafts" into public spaces. In each case, the original meaning whether of the medieval diptych or of sewing and knitting was not explicitly homed in on; rather, meaning emerged through resonances and affiliations, blending the familiar with the surprising. Ultimately, mediating between history and personal memory through art is not solely about art and art history, but about supporting feminist activism and creativity. The remediation of art understood as actions that create interactive experiences is essential. Through this approach, the passive reception of knowledge is replaced by active engagement, as participants join in the artistic process, situating themselves in an interactive space of knowledge creation, in its *statu nascendi*.

To understand a medieval painting, then, it is not always necessary to place it within a historical, philosophical, or even aesthetic context. Contemporary performance art can serve as a bridge to the art of the past. In line with the avant-garde principle that "everyone is an artist," the spectator's body, voice, and natural gestures in response to a painting can be viewed as integral elements of a performance. In this context, the viewer, the figures depicted on the medieval diptych, and the materiality of the object itself all become equal participants. We might refer to them collectively as "actors-actants" a term that encompasses both human participants and non-human entities that actively influence the system of meaning-making and experience. Similarly, approaching the people of Riga and their history didn't require books or interviews but rather a collective artistic experience. Here, too, art becomes a mediator. The artists and participants did not merely reiterate what was already known; instead, they opened themselves up to the unexpected, exchanging energy, and discovering new possibilities.

This allowed for outcomes beyond the predictable routines of commuting or exhibiting art solely in traditional spaces like galleries. In both instances, a sense of agency, authenticity, and freedom was crucial, as remediation is fundamentally about reform.^[9]

Reforms, in turn, become possible precisely because of the use of feminist media. Following Ricarda Drüeke and Elke Zobl, I define feminist media as “any self-identified feminist and/or women’s media project engaged in processes of social change” that “creates a new participatory culture.”^[10] Besides utilizing new technologies, feminist media also encompass performative practices, graffiti, and art. Within this framework, feminist media producers strive to change hegemonic practices. By critiquing the dominant culture’s content, they build diverse networks of personal connections and art distribution. Drüeke and Zobl further develop the concept of cultural citizenship, referring to a positive sense of belonging, where DIY practices play a significant role. In light of feminist media theory, can it therefore be concluded that the artists at the National Museum in Warsaw and on the Riga to Dubulti train route created a productive interactive space that offered a sense of cultural citizenship? I argue that this was indeed the case, as the space they created allowed for the construction of meaning and understanding of the scene and its circumstances. It provided a sense of belonging and mutual support, informal mentoring, recognition of their work, and low-threshold access.

Winterfeld Diptych

Located in the medieval gallery of the National Museum in Warsaw, the Winterfeld family foundation diptych was originally intended for St. Mary’s Basilica in Gdańsk. In Gdańsk’s social hierarchy, the Winterfelds occupied the highest rung, owing to their wealth and access to power.^[11] The commissioned work, created around 1430–35 by an unknown painter likely from Gdańsk, was executed using tempera on oak board (each wing 165.5 cm x 105 cm) and enriched with gold leaf gilding. The left wing of the open diptych depicts two scenes: At the bottom is *Ecce homo*, a scene from the Passion cycle, showing a scourged Christ with bound hands and a crown of thorns, wearing a mock royal cloak, standing between Pilate and a servant on a terrace, and facing a crowd and Jewish priests.^[12] Above this is a unique scene for contemplation on the meaning of salvation, unrelated to the events of the *Paschal Triduum*. This upper scene shows Mary nursing the infant Jesus, facing her grown son, covered in wounds, standing on his tomb, with Eucharistic blood gushing from his cuts into a chalice (Figure 2). The right section of the diptych features a single, large, and undivided panel painting depicting St. Mary Magdalene being lifted up by angels. The left section of the diptych emphasizes the essential bodily and spiritual nourishment for human redemption: the milk of Mary and the shed blood of Christ while the right section focuses on heavenly songs that dull earthly cravings. According to the popular apocrypha, repenting after Christ’s ascension, St. Mary Magdalene was regularly lifted to heaven to listen to angelic choirs. The painting shows her as a young woman, in a vertical posture with hands folded in prayer, hovering over wooded hills, surrounded by seven angels (three on each side and one at the bottom), with God the Father leaning over her head, crowning her. The three scenes are visually united by a uniform dark blue background with gold stars. The religious message is a visual treatise on salvation, achieved through the nourishing of soul and body.



Figure 2. Artist unknown, left wing of the *Winterfeld Diptych*, circa 1430-35, with in the upper part *Maria Lactans* and *Christ of Sorrows* and the lower part *Ecce Homo*, oak board, 165.5 x 105 cm, National Museum in Warsaw; image: public domain

The diptych remained in Gdańsk until the end of World War II. Following the border changes, Gdańsk became part of Poland. St. Mary's Basilica, previously Protestant, was taken over by the Catholic Church, and some of its most valuable monuments were claimed by the Polish state. In 1946, the diptych was by government decision transported to Warsaw, where it remains to this day. Since the political transformation of 1989, successive priests have demanded the return of works seized by the state to Warsaw, seeking not just to change their location or loan them, but to restore their ownership. This would supposedly be in line with the "Recommendation concerning the Protection at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage." However, clause 24 can be interpreted to support both the State and the Church, as it states:

The harmony established by time and man between a monument and its surroundings is of the greatest importance and should not, as a general rule, be disturbed or destroyed. The isolation of a monument by demolishing its surroundings should not, as a general rule, be authorized; nor should the moving of a monument be contemplated save as an exceptional means of dealing with a problem, justified by pressing considerations.^[13]

The differing interpretations by the State and Church of this recommendation stem from the complete disruption of harmony between the image and its surroundings due to changes in borders and population exchanges. In Warsaw, new relationships have been established over the seven post-war decades, while in Gdańsk, the pre-war situation cannot be restored as traditions have been broken. The population not only left, but the church, previously Protestant, has become a place of Catholic worship. However, the Catholic Church authorities also refer to clause 22 of the recommendation, saying that Member States of The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, should investigate effective methods of affording added protection to the components of the cultural and natural heritage, which should be "restored, wherever appropriate, to their former use or given a new and more suitable function, provided that their cultural value is not thereby diminished."^[14] The World Heritage Convention also acknowledged that cultural heritage is threatened by social and economic transformations, emphasizing the responsibility of individual states to implement policies that integrate cultural and natural heritage into collective life. The State Council of

the People's Republic of Poland ratified the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage on May 6, 1976.

However, feminist thinkers criticise the role of the state as a guarantor of cultural heritage. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow observe that both the state and mainstream media often distort and erase many aspects of heritage, thereby failing to preserve the collective memory of numerous social justice movements. They highlight that the landmark Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was not passed by the UN General Assembly until 1979 and did not come into force until 1981.^[16]

The main narrative of the *Winterfeld Diptych* centers on Mary Magdalene. Not only is it the largest painting that depicts her, but her figure also appears on the back of the art piece. There is no doubt that Mary Magdalene served as a role model and inspiration for many women at the time the work was commissioned. It is possible to speculate that the diptych, as a visual religious treatise, was either specifically composed for the beloved daughter of the Winterfeld family patriarch or created with her intellectual input. This speculation opens the door to exploring feminist themes within the work's message. When selecting the work, Stromberg and Manfrian highlighted Mary Magdalene as "a woman that is complex throughout the history of the church and a story that is often suppressed, repressed, oppressed" and "a symbol of the despised and marginalized humanity."^[16]

It is crucial to note that Stromberg and Manfrian's artistic intervention can be considered feminist, as it deviated from mainstream scientific and religious interpretations that attempt to dictate how the diptych's representations should be understood. This intervention emphasized a free, intuitive, and bodily response to the historical object, allowing for uncoordinated and varied interpretations. Three event scores drew from the lineages of Yoko Ono, Alison Knowles, and Pauline Oliveros. Paying homage to these artists, Stromberg and Manfrian argued, "[t]hey were like some of the angels holding and uplifting Mary the women and artists before us, who support us."^[17] During the performance no one was reprov'd or guided toward a "correct" understanding of the work. Each participant was encouraged to view the painting and its figures with empathy, responding with improvised sounds and gestures. Observing others' reactions was also part of the experience. This interaction created a unique collective of painted medieval figures and contemporary figures. The polyphonic *Sounding Gestures* should be seen as a discursive tool in the fight for the right to individual and beyond visual interpretation of heritage, unlike the approaches of experts (Figures 3 4). The diptych here is not just to be viewed and accepted based on the interpretations of priests and art historians.



Figure 3. Participants of “The Lost-and-Found” symposium performing *Sounding Gestures* at the National Museum in Warsaw, March 22, 2024, with third from the left Kirsten Stromberg and fourth from left Benedetta Manfriani; photo: Basia Sliwinska



Figure 4. Participants of “The Lost-and-Found” symposium performing *Sounding Gestures* at the National Museum in Warsaw, March 22, 2024; courtesy of Kirsten Stromberg and Benedetta Manfriani

DuPlessis and Snitow assert that there is a battle “over the meaning of scientific discovery,” and that “feminist agility in crafting an ever-evolving response” plays a crucial role in this. They argue that “the trick for feminists is to stay loyal to the value of the open-minded inquiry, without being overwhelmed by the barrage of self-digested information or by distorted popularizations.”^[18] Therefore, in building a historical framework for the artistic intervention by Stromberg and Manfriani at the National Museum in Warsaw, it is important to observe that the *Winterfeld Diptych*, originally housed in their private chapel in Gdańsk’s basilica was intended not for public liturgical ceremonies but for private contemplation and devotions. This distinction is significant, as the diptych’s pictorial juxtaposition of scenes differing in chronology and territory akin to a montage in modern film terminology could be interpreted according to a more individual understanding. Thus, when we discuss heritage, we refer to a legacy that, as far as historical conditions allow, is free from the pressures of the dominant narrative and open to counter-stories.

We can attempt to reconstruct this spiritual legacy today, recognizing that it is inevitably influenced by contemporary contexts. For example, the *Winterfeld Diptych*' Mary Magdalene can be interpreted in light of modern discourses on feminism and emancipation, which are also prevalent in popular culture. Rich's call for the separation of art from economic power and academic prestige forms part of a counter-hegemonic narrative, which we might suggest had its parallel in the Winterfeld family, albeit in a different form. Furthermore, while successive trends in the humanities do not negate the achievements of emancipation, they often turn to other aspects in a reflective manner.

Cultural Memory as a Sounding Movement Form

According to apocryphal and hagiographic accounts, after Christ's Ascension, Mary Magdalene left the Holy Land and traveled by ship to Provence, where she repented in a rocky cave for 30 years without food or clothing. The largest painting of the diptych depicts this very story. However, Stromberg and Manfriani proposed an interpretation of Mary Magdalene's character focusing not on the narrative itself but on personal feelings evoked by the painting. They encouraged participants to express these emotions through bodily expression rather than relying on prior knowledge of the story. In their *Un-Gesturing Piece (Breathing Gesture)*, the instructions to participants read:

Choose a figure within the work.

Embody the gesture.

Breathe the gesture and find the sound.

Sound and release.

Sound and release.

Repeat.

When told to "shift," find another figure

and repeat.

The next part of *The Winterfeld Scores* was titled *Feeling Heard Piece (Voicing from the Silence)* and read:

Choose a figure within the work.

Embody the gesture.

Speak the voice of the figure in the work. What do they say?

What is their tone? How loud or soft? Words for today?

You can remain silent if you feel the figure is outside of language.

The *Co-mposing Piece* section proposed:

Reflect upon all figures and forms within the work.

Choose a figure or a form

and formulate discreet short sounds.

Listen while sounding.

Find someone else's sound and make their sound.

Repeat for as long as you wish.

Listen while sounding.

When someone has started to make your sound, shift to a new one.

The participants produced surprising sounds and assumed unusual poses. Over time, however, the strangeness faded, and a subtle connection with the figures in the painting began to emerge. What initially seemed like child's play, defying all traditional methods of learning about old art, gradually transformed into a deeply personal engagement with the artwork and the characters depicted within it. The final part explored the question of what it means to "listen while sounding," emphasizing a more complex experience than mere give and take a simultaneous being that can be practiced.

One could say that Stromberg and Manfriani were attempting something akin to what W.J. Mitchell described in his teaching practice an effort to awaken students "to the wonders of 'visuality,' practices of seeing the world and especially the seeing of other people."^[19] Mitchell explained that this involved turning the act of seeing, a cultural construction that is learned and cultivated, into a subject of analysis, challenging the veil of familiarity and obviousness. He referred to this as staging the paradox that seeing, in its essence, is invisible and must be brought to light. Mitchell also likened this process to the "show-and-tell" ritual commonly practiced in American elementary schools, a playful exercise that also resonates with the performances in Riga.

Railroad Lost-and-Found Office

Women artists from the Riga Academy of Arts have transformed the metaphor of the lost-and-found office to reflect changes in rail infrastructure and passenger habits. Historically, railway stations were built as landmarks in specific localities. Today, however, small stations and their associated lost-and-found offices are being closed down as unprofitable. Only large stations with stores, restaurants, and bars, which attract crowds of customers, remain. The artists highlight the lost-but-worth-recalling habits of rail passengers, especially how they spent their time while traveling. The ubiquity of smartphones has disconnected people from their surroundings. Passengers no longer gaze at the changing landscapes outside the window, establish relationships with fellow travelers, or engage in small manual crafts like knitting. The artists aimed to prevent passengers from isolating themselves in virtual reality. They observed that passengers inadvertently doom themselves to being deaf and blind to their

environment, often plugging their ears to avoid reality and interpersonal contact. In response, the student group devised new methods of social interaction and communication during train travel, using small provocations with textiles as catalysts. These interactions were envisioned as a joyful celebration of togetherness and the celebration of small moments of mindfully living life.

Similarly, the textile intervention in and around one of the small train stations was intended to remind people that these places are not merely associated with gastronomy and consumerism. The project emphasized the importance of looking around and establishing relationships, especially as the action was carried out just before the station's demolition. All this evoked the desire to establish unexpected emotional connections and challenging comradeship described by Rich. The artists encouraged men to knit as well, recognizing that the division between male and female roles is entirely unfounded. They placed life-size rag dolls, handmade by the artists, in passenger seats, diligently observing people's reactions and engaging in discussions. Additionally, they brought along unusual and surprising textile objects, whose ambiguous purposes and convenient sizes encouraged people to handle them. This led to spontaneous conversations and the formation of new bonds.

During an earlier journey, the participants' disembarkation at the small Atgāzene station was linked to a personal memory of one of the students, Baiba Čadore. As a child, Baiba visited this area to see her grandparents when it was still a rural village, while today it is a suburb of Riga. During her childhood summer visits, she enjoyed observing the carefully tended flowers in the flowerbeds, windows, and meadows, running along the railroad to see Roma horses and Aunt Emma's goats grazing. She also loved the rhythmic sound of the train wheels clattering on the rails and of Aunt Emma's loom. This was a magical place for her, where she could immerse herself in her own imagination. At 28 Atgāzenes Street, the house where her father grew up (and taught her to knit!), she enjoyed listening to his stories about his childhood and past events. It was also where she knitted her first socks under her family's guidance. To evoke these old conversations and relationships, Baiba created various drawings and representations using the appliqué technique, reminiscent of those past events (Figure 5). She juxtaposed scenes to form a tableau, inspired by Gustav Klutsis (1895–1938, a former student of the Academy in Riga), who developed the photomontage technique. This composite view, using narrative shortcuts, was necessary for her to intensify the sense of what was lost. The material textiles activated the senses of touch and smell in addition to sight, allowing for a multisensory retelling of the past.

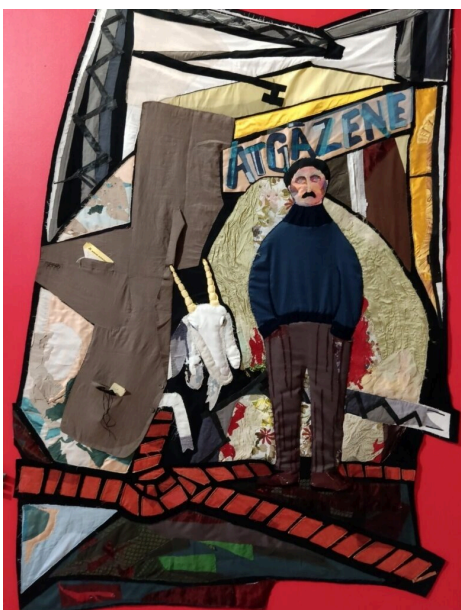


Figure 5. Baiba Čadore, *Meeting at Atgāzene Station*, 2024, textile mosaic, 287 x 210 cm; courtesy of the artist

At the Atgāzene station itself, Ilze Brenn highlighted its current state as a sad, abandoned place on the brink of demolition. The station's walls are covered with graffiti and tags marking territory, and part of the building has turned into a ruin. Ilze sought to transform the closing chapter of the Atgāzene community into a celebration of change. Soon after her intervention, the station was erased from the face of the earth. Her idea was to relate two modes of artistic expression graffiti and sewing. Sewing, associated with clothing, evokes a sense of closeness and coziness, while graffiti is often linked to struggle and discord. Confronted with the station's inevitable end, Ilze decided to celebrate the convergence of these two distinct forms of artistic expression. Her textile intervention consisted of fabric letters attached to the graffiti-covered walls. These letters referenced both the name "Atgāzene" and the "end", which is why she titled her project *Atgāzenend* (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Ilze Brenn, *Atgāzenend. Meeting at Atgāzene Station*, 2024; courtesy of the artist

Evija Stukle-Zuitiņa began her project by observing the activities of passengers during train travel. On one of her journeys, she decided to measure lost time through knitting, using different colors of yarn between each station. This resulted in a short, striped scarf. The 45-kilometer-long suburban train ride lasted 40 minutes, translating into 1,000 stitches in 50 rows. She then created *The Slow Train*, a textile mosaic measuring 260 by 170 cm, which combines appliqué techniques with embroidery and knitting (Figures 7 8). It depicted the interior of the carriage with five passengers sitting side by side on a bench. Instead of wasting time, each passenger was engaged in knitting. However, the motifs on their textile items were related to the Internet and computers. An elderly gentleman fell asleep with an unfinished blanket scattered with the word "Google". The lady next to him used "Facebook" as the motif for her piece of fabric, while others knitted computer icons. In the textile mosaic only one passenger knitted a sweater or shawl in plain stripes. He noticed that his colorful, abstract pattern did not match the technological motifs of his fellow passengers, so he anxiously stopped his work, expressing regret for his mismatch with his surroundings. He seemed decidedly sad about what he could and should be enjoying composing a pattern from harmoniously matched colors and the soft, cozy texture of the yarn. Although presented humorously, the work criticizes the tendency to focus solely on abstract ideas, neglecting the materiality of the world, its various substances, and their properties.



Figure 7. Evija Stukle-Zuitiņa, *The Slow Train*, 2024, textile mosaic (embroidery, knitting), 260 x 160 cm; courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Evija Stukle-Zuitiņa, *The Slow Train*, 2024, art intervention in the Riga to Dubulti train, June 6, 2024; courtesy of the artist

Like her colleagues, Mairita Jonikane recognized a common issue stemming from technological developments: we have lost the ability to observe our surroundings, enjoy small moments, and fuel our imagination with the ordinary and mundane because we are constantly looking at our phones. Her proposal aimed to encourage viewers to occasionally shift their focus from their mobile screens to the passing landscape outside the window. The concept was rooted in therapeutic benefits watching the changing scenery can help viewers relax, calm down, and relieve eye strain. Eye fatigue, known as asthenopia, can be mitigated by following the 20 20 20 rule: Every 20 minutes of screen time should be followed by 20 seconds of looking at something in the distance. This practice prevents eye strain and allows the eyes to regenerate. Jonikane's *#mylanmdscape* project aimed to cultivate this habit of alternating focus, though not strictly adhering to the 20 20 20 rule (Figure 9). Using colored transparent films applied to train windows, she transformed the passing landscapes into visually engaging scenes. Passengers were encouraged to look outside, take pictures, and share them on social media. This activity helped them establish interpersonal relationships both on the train and online.



Figure 9. Mairita Jonikane, *My Landscape*, 2024, art intervention in the Riga to Dubulti train, June 6, 2024; courtesy of the artist

The only foreign (Polish) member of the female student team, Wiktoria Mateja, noticed the somber mood prevalent on commuter trains. She was struck by the lack of positive energy and the general sense of gloom and depression among the passengers. She observed that people in Latvia often appeared particularly gloomy and sullen. Determined to lift their spirits, she set out to rekindle their lost joy and curiosity. To achieve this, Mateja began traveling by train with four peculiar and unexpected objects she had crafted from stitched materials, which she referred to as “weird.” The idea was that their oddity and vibrant colors would spark curiosity. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday, she placed these mysterious objects on seats and tables, observing people’s reactions (Figure 10). To avoid issues with the train staff, she first explained her project to the conductor. Then, she simply waited for passengers’ responses, noting and analysing the most interesting reactions. This performance also proved significant for Mateja herself, helping her overcome her fear of interacting with people and reacting to her own art.



Figure 10. Wiktoria Mateja, *Unexpected Passengers*, art intervention in the Riga to Dubulti train, June 6, 2024; courtesy of the artist

Barbara Ābele, a tutor and educator at the Academy, explained to me the significance of railroads for the performances in an email dated August 10, 2024. This context, which wasn't immediately apparent to foreign participants, added important depth to the experience. Railways and trains hold a deep significance in Latvia, being both a source of pride and a sensitive topic. Used to deport Latvians to Siberia, they became tragic instruments during the Soviet regime. On a warm June night in 1941, people who had just left the theater in their finest clothes, as well as those resting after a long day's work in the countryside, were suddenly taken away... The deportations, which spanned a full decade, from 1941 to 1951, aimed to completely eradicate local culture, enforced through a reign of terror. Many people lost their lives during these deportations, whether in transit or in the prisons at the deportation sites. Since these atrocities could not be openly discussed until the political transition of 1989, the process of mourning remains ongoing. During the Soviet era, the rail transport system connected Latvia with other Soviet republics. It also brought waves of tourists to Jūrmala, a popular resort town. Today, the Rail Baltica project presents new challenges, with political issues, costs, and scandals adding complexity. Despite these challenges, trains remain a valued mode of public transport, offering good connections across the country.

The rise of digital habits has, however, drastically reduced face-to-face communication. People no longer talk, interact, or even look at each other the way they used to. Furthermore, traditional handicrafts, once so popular, have largely disappeared. In this context, as Ābele explained to me, the interventions provided during the performances offered a touch of nostalgia, with people sharing heartwarming stories of childhood memories and the traditions of mothers and grandmothers knitting socks, scarves, and sweaters for their loved ones. Barbara Ābele, along with fellow teacher Elīna Veilande-Āpine, emphasized that their project was not centered on the difficult Soviet past, though it inevitably surfaced during the performances. As they commented on the topic, "[p]lease, fewer Soviets. We are doing our best to escape them, even in our memories. Of course, with the war in Ukraine right next door, our minds and hearts are both sympathetic and deeply affected."^[20] This reflects how the intergenerational trauma of Soviet domination, which Milan Kundera once called "the abduction of Europe," subtly reemerges in Central Europe, even when an art project is focused on entirely different themes.^[21]

What Actually Happened in the Museum and on the Railroad?

My initial thesis was that the artists in Warsaw and Riga, together with conference participants, produced new meanings and developed the concept of cultural citizenship as a new practice related to DIY grassroots activities. The process of meaning production intertwines cultural production, cultural products, and audiences, contributing to the formation of identity and a sense of belonging. Traditional citizenship has often been shaped by white heterosexual maleness within the nation-state context. In contrast, the cultural citizenship proposed by feminist media extends this framework, as "participatory practices emerged from the claim to be granted full citizenship."^[22] These practices mediated between the private and the public, the rational and the emotional, the factual and the fictional, the serious and the entertaining, all to promote greater inclusivity. According to Toby Miller, citizenship is realized in three zones corresponding to the tripartite motto of the French Revolution: *liberté* (the political right to reside and vote), *égalité* (the economic right to work and prosper), and *fraternité* (the cultural right to know and speak).^[23] Rich's call for solidarity meant the necessity of changes in representation. To avoid gendered heteronormativization, she replaced the Enlightenment term *fraternité* with that of *comradeship*. This comradeship became the cornerstone of cultural citizenship.

At the international symposium in Warsaw, participants from Europe, the United States, and South America (residing in the European Union or the United Kingdom) gathered around a monument with a complex nationality. Today it is owned by the Polish state, but before the war it belonged to the Free City of Gdańsk, an autonomous

city-state under the “League of Nations” protection. Although the diptych was an immigrant in Warsaw, its Christian message resonated with a transnational community marked by cultural differences. Manfriani and Stromberg proposed qualifying citizenship as a transnational and emotional mode of participation. They told me, “we were hoping to reframe and question value systems during the time period that the painting was made and see if, and how, these value systems are embodied today.” And they added a general statement about their art practices:

We are interested in changing people’s relation to art and to themselves/others, broadening human experiences and perceptions, deepening an understanding and wonder with the world we reside in, and often educational practices are the perfect form to facilitate these kinds of relations and transformations.^[24]

One could view their actions as an exercise in secular criticism, drawing on Stathis Gourgouris’s notion of “taking away from the religious the agency of determining what is secular.”^[25] However, these unbounded sounding gestures can also be seen as an exorcism of various tragic experiences, including the post-war migrations of Poles and Germans due to shifting borders. The rescue may have involved a deliberate kind of forgetting one that compelled the performance participants to confront an object from the past and react to it in defiance of established rules. This forgetting wasn’t about erasing our identity, but rather about letting go of who we once were. In times of rapid change, relying on our previous understanding of reality can be insufficient. We must instead navigate our experiences anew, free from the constraints of past knowledge.

For Latvian artists, the national dimension was profoundly significant, as the memory of Soviet terror remains vivid. The inspiration behind the art of Klutis, who perished in a Soviet gulag in 1938, was not only rooted in admiration for his work but also in the memory of his tragic fate his true story only came to light in 1989.^[26] The choice of a train as a means of transportation subtly evoked the historical backdrop of deportations, even though the symposium participants were ultimately bound for the Baltic coast and its picturesque beach. The sadness of the travelers emerged in a peculiar way during the train journey. It seemed as though the helplessness and vulnerability to Soviet terror endured by their parents and grandparents decades earlier inexplicably led to the passengers’ passivity. And the desire to remember how to knit socks and sweaters for loved ones stemmed directly from the fact that their ancestors were kept freezing in Siberia. Perhaps this is why ordinary gestures, mutual solidarity, and openness were so crucial. The potential of the body, handicraft skills, and reciprocal interactions in the present were what truly mattered.

The dissociation from the past and the impossible desire to restore it are two sides of the same coin: the expectation of a new, better world yet to come, and the reworking of loss. This is a time of cultural transition, of exchanging the old self for the new, while living in the shadow of what has been rejected and lost.^[27] We reveal what is lost by using the work of art as a mediator between times.

In this context, DIY cultural citizenship, which “eschews assimilation but demands rights, including the maintenance of immigrant cultures” and “concerns the maintenance, development, and exchange of cultural lineage a celebration of difference, which is also a critique of the status quo,” involved not only gestures, movement, and voice but also tangible textile objects.^[28] This approach embraced the right to belong to an unknown or forgotten cultural heritage, represented by the landscape outside the window and the desacralised medieval object. Overcoming difficulties or “difficult comradeship” e.g. textile intervention in a graffiti community, empathy with Mary Magdalene floating in the skies and the tenderness of the angels aimed to

produce a shared memory. This shared memory allowed for a medieval art object to be “misinterpreted” and a scarf to be “done wrong,” affirming the right to respect one’s own ignorance and fallibility. Integration was not tied to assimilation.

The cultural citizenship proposed by the artists emphasized participation, agency, and the right to be different. People who did not identify with the Church and Christianity could still interpret the Christian art object, and those who could not knit were invited to try. Artistic remediation convinced participants that there is no situation of unreadiness to participate in culture. It became clear that there was no single “correct” interpretation of the diptych; each participant developed their own approach to engaging with the artwork. At the same time, these individual performances contributed to a larger experience in an interactive setting in which shared knowledge was created. The authoritative and *ex cathedra* knowledge transmission with its pontifical and imperial “not yet,” used to exclude from political sovereignty, exists today in tension with the emphasis on the “now” that characterizes all movements toward democracy.^[29] Participatory action has been all about producing a positive memory of the present. Today’s openness, boundless potential, and the possibility of mutual exchange enable us to remember without passively repeating traditions, allowing us to break free from the vicious cycle of mourning and impossibility.

Beyond Expertise: Toward Embodied and Shared Creativity

So, let’s finally ask: How should we teach art history? How can we also teach about medieval paintings to people who do not identify with Christianity, and how can we help them understand unfamiliar textile objects? Cultural comradeship and citizenship mean that the right to know and speak cannot stigmatize people as “not yet” ready to speak. Therefore, the production of knowledge should be a joint effort. Jacques Rancière provides some guidance in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991).^[30] While Joseph Jacotot’s emancipatory pedagogy focused on linguistic translations, the cases analyzed here deal with the visual arts. In Rancière’s book the teacher was French, which prevented him from being seen as an expert by his Flemish students, as he did not speak their language, and they did not speak French. At the workshops in Warsaw and Riga, there were no masters or authorities; everyone felt equal and empowered to speak and respond freely. The feminist media used by the artists in Warsaw and Riga emphasized participatory practices, much like Jacotot, who taught what he himself did not know, demonstrated the equality between teacher and student, foregrounding the need for mutual respect and active involvement in study.

However, they go further by also being integral to the affective and material turn. In both Warsaw and Riga, bodily mediation proved crucial. In the collaborative and interactive spaces created, rational conclusions about how and what to think did not precede material and physical experiences. In front of the *Winterfeld Diptych*, no unified interpretation regarding the meaning of its imagery emerged. Each participant in the performance was left with their own experiences and sensations. While they could share these, their impressions continued to “work” within them long after the conference ended. Similarly, travelers knitting on the train or encountering strange objects each reacted in their own way, responding to the color and tactile feel of the yarn and the different textures of the materials. Physical and material sensations preceded rational thoughts. People participated in art without a priori and instrumental evaluation. For a long time, art history students and art lovers were denied this type of experience. Properly understanding a work of art traditionally involved placing it within a unilinear, formal sequence that highlighted its development, culmination, and decline. As David Carrier aptly observed, artworks were often presented within a single tradition, where “deep innovation leads to grand success in the marketplace, which in turn relies on connoisseurs and art critics.”^[31] Scholars focused on interpreting works as they were understood at the time of their creation. The idea of the “pure” work of art,

autonomous and removed from its context, meant that it was treated as a container for important information, which, once embedded, remained there permanently.

The modern art system, with its essentialist definition of art that separated it from craftsmanship, was inherently exclusive and aspirational. It established normative distinctions, classification schemes, and intermediaries such as museums, university art history departments, and art critics. This infrastructure, developed in the late eighteenth century, was designed to perpetuate its own dominance, producing canons that oscillated between philosophical concepts, cultural trends, and social structures. By controlling this art infrastructure, the societal elite maintained their privileges, presenting this arrangement as inevitable and a natural outcome of historical logic. Larry Shiner noted that, until art history rediscovered the importance of social and political context and adopted new methods of analysis, it remained confined to a canon of masterpieces by great (male) geniuses, dominated by formalism. This approach marginalized women and minority artists, dismissing entire areas of art as insignificant.^[32]

It is evident, then, that the performances in Warsaw and Riga are part of the transformative changes that Rich and many other feminist thinkers and artists have long advocated. The diversity of these performances reflects the shift from a monocultural, modernist art system to one of pluralism. In discussing the need for methodological richness in art research, Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén draw on Paul Feyerabend, who convincingly argues that the world is so diverse and surprising that believing in a single, all-powerful method is self-deception and a reductive view of human beings and their relationship to the world.^[33] Consequently, the artistic activities in question were both open and critical, with their authenticity ensured by practical participation. This approach did not assume a distinction between the (experiencing) subject and the (observed) object as a prerequisite for inquiry.

During *Sounding Gestures*, for example, we imagined ourselves as Mary Magdalene, and we knitted together during a train ride, sharing memories of past experiences. In doing so, experiential democracy ensured that no area of experience was off-limits.

Artistic research defined as a democracy of experiences demands numerous varied, challenging and experimental encounters, where the different parties can encounter each other reciprocally. The content and nuances of the encounter are created along the way: in the searches, while searching, when recounting, when listening, when clashing, when facing each other eye-to-eye, flesh-in-flesh.^[34]

Thus, teaching art history cannot be separated from the involvement of personal experience and intimate “interest.” It requires meeting and conversing together, listening to one another, and remaining open to all methods of research. The predicament with teaching art history lies in its traditionally epistemological approach, where works of art are treated as objects one should simply know about. Because framing these works “correctly” requires specialized expertise, only highly qualified academics are typically seen as suitable for the task. This approach, however, tends to cede the understanding of art to specialists, thereby distancing it from non-specialists. This focus on accumulating and preserving knowledge often comes at the expense of engaging with art’s dynamic, evolving meanings meanings that can be revealed through unconventional perspectives and interactions.

In the two activities discussed, an artistic situation was created to foster a new understanding of art, one that awakened the creative potential of participants who are usually regarded as passive recipients of facts, dates,

and technical terms. While expert guidance in knowledge production can be valuable, the field of art is precisely where diverse approaches should be encouraged. Today, art serves as a testing ground for individual potential and for exploring varied forms of collective and interactive engagement. This approach is rooted in the belief that contemporary art is essential to democracy, as it fosters openness and creativity without excluding anyone from participation.

This openness, evident in the cases discussed, encompassed elements of unlearning and deskillling, as well as play, including the previously mentioned parallels to the “show-and-tell” practice from elementary school. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed artistic works and practices to be viewed in ways that diverged from historically established conventions within art history. Naturally, this could provoke disciplinary anxieties concerning traditional understandings of heritage and appropriate methods of study. Performativity emerged here, with multisensoriality and an expressive audiosphere becoming embodied and interactive practices. Initially, these might have been perceived as a threat or a carnivalesque addition to the conventional modes of knowledge production in art history.

Shannon Jackson describes the “show-and-tell” exercise as an intersubjective exchange where objects (artworks) play a crucial role in constructing and expanding individual identities.^[36] This encounter also teaches us to listen to stories and interpret them in various ways. As a form of “interdisciplinary arbitrage,” it also prepares us to navigate the inevitable asymmetries in exchange and differing interpretations of what we see. This process illuminates W.J.T. Mitchell’s idea that all media are, in essence, mixed media the visual arts inherently involve embodied, temporal, tactile, and environmental elements. Thus, what occurred in Warsaw and Riga was neither a threat to art history nor a mere carnival, but rather part of the broader aspirations that Rich described; the desire to dismantle gender, racial, intercultural, and class exclusions that were so painfully experienced in the past.

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Footnotes

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