

# CREATION OF FICTIONAL COMMUNITY

**ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER / VIENAS BE KITU**

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of the requirements for the award of the degree  
of Masters of Fine Art (New Media).

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University of Cape Town

# CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS   | 2  |
| INTRODUCTION  | 7  |
| THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND                             | 11 |
| The notion of community   | 11 |
| Benedict Anderson and <i>Imagined Communities</i>                 | 13 |
| Some perspectives on the idea of community in African thought     | 15 |
| The idea of “Emergency Lithuania” in the work of Kazys Pakštas    | 18 |
| Experiences of collectivity: historical and present-time examples | 21 |
| CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC REFERENCES                                  | 28 |
| Audrius Novickas  | 28 |
| Ugnius Gelguda  | 31 |
| Do-Ho Suh   | 35 |
| Mimi Cheron Ng’ok   | 40 |
| CREATIVE METHODOLOGY  | 43 |
| BODY OF WORK:   |    |
| <b>ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS/VIENAS BE KITŲ</b>                      | 47 |
| <i>Swings</i>   | 47 |
| <i>15 Reasons to Breathe</i>                                      | 51 |
| <i>Do Potatoes Matter?</i>  | 56 |
| CONCLUSION  | 58 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY  | 62 |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS   | 69 |

**WORDS HAVE MEANINGS: SOME WORDS, HOWEVER,  
ALSO HAVE A 'FEEL'. THE WORD 'COMMUNITY' IS ONE OF THEM.**

**ZYGMUNT BAUMAN.<sup>1</sup>**

# INTRODUCTION

This essay explores how the creation of a fictional community is expressed through my body of work. These works do not reference an actual community as such, but are an “imagining” of a non-existing one, so that they can be understood as a “fictional” or “imagined” community. The dynamic of this imagining is located in the exchange between the memories of my real-life Lithuanian community, and my investigation of the ways in which symbolic objects and group interactions create a sense of community. In this way, my work can be said to reference actual communities, but emphasise the symbolic, or “imaginary” ways in which they hang together.

[1] Bauman, Z. 2001. *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world*, p. 1.

In this essay, I analyse how, in relation to my work, my sense of a Lithuanian identity has been shaped by memories of Lithuania’s history and by the changing international political context, up to and after restitution of Lithuanian independence in 1990. With recent political changes, ways of “narrating the nation”<sup>2</sup> are also changing, raising complex questions about the nature of collective memory and the politics of representation.

[2] “Narrating the nation” – term first used in Homi Bhabha’s book *Nation and Narration* (1990).

In early 2006, I came to South Africa to study towards my Masters in Fine Art. Even though I have been away from my native Lithuanian community for quite a long period of time, I have not found a new one to belong to, and have remained to a large extent marked as a *stranger*. Thus, I have found myself in a very difficult but interesting, and quite unusual situation. I have reflected on my behaviour during this time, that, as a Lithuanian citizen, while being outside my native community, I am in certain circumstances trying to represent and incorporate some collective Lithuanian features in my daily living.

Later in the essay, I will discuss the dynamic process of balance between, on the one hand, freedom and (as I will argue) loneliness, versus, on the other hand, the security of being inside one’s native community. I will also explore and analyse circumstances,

purposes and methods of how this dynamic is manifested, and then expressed in my work.

It is important to introduce certain delineations and limitations in my work. First of all, in the context of my research paper, the notion of “fictional” is conceived as a “constructed”, “imaginary”, or “artificially created for a specific purpose”. Secondly, in this paper I am only dealing with nationality-based communities and the discussion may not be applicable for communities based on other aspects of identity, such as religion, school, workplace, common interests, and so on. This is mostly due to the fact that nation-based communities are especially reliant on strong symbolic devices. In the contemporary global political environment, there is furthermore an increased emphasis on borders, which are largely signified in abstract terms, and these symbolic devices often serve to make the boundaries of a country into something concrete, or identifiable. Thirdly, the geographical areas featured in my work and discussion will be limited to South Africa and Lithuania. Lastly, I do not intend to follow all the histories of community development in those places, but I will only look at certain instances that are relevant to my interests.

In the first section of my essay, I explore the theoretical and historical context of my work. I introduce the notion of “community” and look at the way in which it has been dealt with by Benedict Anderson, Kazys Pakštas, and Kwame Gyekye. Kazys Pakštas is of particular interest to me, as his geopolitical project “Emergency Lithuania” deals with the creation of a Lithuanian colony in another country. Later in this section, I pay close attention to the notion of “collectivity” in past and present Lithuania.

In the second section of the essay, I provide an overview of contemporary artists who have worked with similar ideas and have influenced my production. Here, I explain briefly my particular interest in the art of Audrius Novickas, Ugnius Gelguda, Do-Ho Suh, and Mimi Cheron Ng'ok. I highlight aspects of their art practise

that fascinate me, particularly the nature of the role of national and traditional symbols in their works, as well as the relationship between an individual and the collective.

I describe some of the most prevalent methods and processes employed in my research within the third section. Here, I discuss the tools and strategies I have employed to create my fictional community. The most important amongst them will be the role of the Internet, the use of language as a marker of identity, and the simulation of the sensation of flashbacks and remembering within my work.

In the fourth section I will discuss my own body of work. I will examine the way in which I have conceptualised and produced these works, and how I understand the way in which they relate to my concerns. I will also talk about the methods and processes employed in my production. I will analyse some of my intentions behind these works and show how the concept of a fictional community is closely connected to them.

In my conclusion, I will provide a sense of the project as a whole, and the way in which the parts are interrelated. Here, I emphasise the ironic sense that I am left with, which I can shortly state as follows: To have an identity, one needs to belong to a group. Yet, one's identity is defined not only by the group, but also in relation to it, thus bringing individuality into play. If looked at in this way, it seems to me that individual freedom on the one hand is opposed to communal integrity – but of course it is not that simple. In essence, my work explores the boundaries between these two states, the need to belong, and the need to be an individual. This tension is not based so much on abstract arguments, but rather on my own experiences. In this context, I have found that the cases of South Africa and Lithuania are politically highly charged environments in which to pose these problems, and to a great extent their particularities have shaped my production.

It is important to note that my whole project is strongly based on personal experience and that I write this text as a visual artist and creative researcher, and not as a theorist or art critic. Therefore this essay is not intended as a validation for, or justification of my visual work. Instead, it resonates with my artworks to describe some of my inspirations and motivations, so to open the work up to an audience.<sup>3</sup>

[1] Due to the fact that I have made use of a number of internet resources for my images, the references for these are too long to be printed alongside them. I have, however, included a full list of images with the references at the end of the document.

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# THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In this section I will first introduce the general meaning of the term "community", where later I will explicate it further, making reference to the theories of Benedict Anderson, Kwame Gyekye, and Kazys Pakštas.

## THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY

A common definition of the notion of "community" may be found on the popular Internet reference site, Wikipedia: A human community is a social group sharing an environment with shared interests. Intentions, beliefs, resources, preferences, needs, risks and a number of other conditions may be present and common, affecting the identity of the participants and their degree of cohesiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Or more specifically, as Kwame Gyekye<sup>5</sup> puts it,

The existence of social structure is an outstanding, in fact, a necessary feature of every human society. A social structure is evolved not only to give effect to certain conceptions of human nature, but also to provide a framework for both the realization of the potentials, goals, and hopes of the individual members of the society and the continuous existence and survival of the society.

Participation in cultural activities and socialising in nationality-based group settings are important for linking people with their country of origin and creating a sense of community.<sup>6</sup> It also plays a part in the development of national identity when there is pressure from a dominant cultural group for minorities to assimilate. Shared symbols, values and experiences across different groups are important to the creation of both the sense of community and national identification.<sup>7</sup>

[4] Wikipedia: Community. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community>

[5] Gyekye, K. 2002. Person and community in African thought. In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J. ed. *Philosophy from Africa*, p. 297.

[6] When I type the word bendruomenė ("community" in Lithuanian) in the Google search engine, almost all of the results are related to different Lithuanian emigrant communities worldwide, as well as ethnic communities inside the country.

[7] Lizak, M.V. 2003. *Sense of community among Ukrainian Catholic young adults: a qualitative view*. D.Phil. Thesis. University of Saskatchewan, Canada. [O] Available at: <http://library2.usask.ca/theses/available/etd-09172003-013846/>

What is highly important for my research is that a sense of community and national identity may also be linked by their mutual association with symbol systems. A common symbolic system helps to reinforce boundaries between members and non-members. Many features of nationality-based groups, including language, food preferences, folklore, music, dress, religious ceremonies, may serve as a common symbolic system.

In relation to the concern with sense of community and national identity, one has to consider the concept of "nation". An interrogation of this term can be found in the influential text of Homi Bhabha *Nation and Narration* (1990).

In the chapter *The National Longing for Form* by Timothy Brennan, the author speaks of "the world obsessed with national pride".<sup>8</sup> He unpacks the term "nation" as "[referring] both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the *natio* – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging".<sup>9</sup> In this way, he focuses on the relation between nation and community. Brennan<sup>10</sup> further explicates more on that, stating,

"Nation" as a term is radically connected with "native". We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and "placeable" bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance.

I find Timothy Brennan's concept of "nation" highly engaging, and it has influenced my own research in the way I have created my own fictional community.

However, Raymond Plant<sup>11</sup> argues that it is important to indicate that there were and still are many thinkers who have taken an opposing view, namely that the loss of community is no loss at all, and that in fact it can be seen as a liberating and emancipating development. This tradition of thought looks for the basis of human

[8] Brennan, T. 1990. *The national longing for form*. In Bhabha, H.B. ed. *Nation and Narration*, p. 44.

[9] Brennan, T. 1990. *The national longing for form*. In Bhabha, H.B. ed. *Nation and Narration*, p. 45.

[10] Brennan, T. 1990. *The national longing for form*. In Bhabha, H.B. ed. *Nation and Narration*, p. 45.

[11] Plant, R. 1974. *Community and Ideology*, p. 30-31.

association not as tradition, habit and custom but as the free agreement of free persons. When understood in this way, leaving a community is therefore a necessary condition for the emancipation of the self-conscious, self-directing individual. It is the essential way to master independent thinking, and to grow as person with an individual point of view, and dependant on communal opinion.

In my personal experience, I did notice that some decisions are easier to make, or some opinions are easier to express when outside one's native community. But, on other hand, I feel that I am here also without a common starting-point, or point of reference with other people, which almost always exists inside one's native community. In this way, the central dynamic between freedom and belonging can be seen to emerge. While a native community provides one with common ground, this can be limiting in the extent to which one can pursue aspects of one's identity that are not easily assimilated within the dominant discourse. However, leaving a community also removes much of the common ground that one shares with one's countrymen and women. The result may be a sense of emancipation, but with a sense of loneliness and alienation attending it.

## **BENEDICT ANDERSON AND *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES***

Imagination plays a big role in my research project, and Benedict Anderson addresses this issue at length in his *Imagined Communities* (1983).

One of the main points developed in his book is the idea that nations are "imagined communities". According to him,<sup>12</sup> an imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not based on personal interaction between its members, but instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity. It is "imagined" because never – not even in the smallest nations like Lithuania – can one person know all (or

[12] Anderson, B. 1991 (1983). *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, p. 6.

even most of) the members of the nation. That is, the possession of national citizenship motivates the individual to imagine the boundaries of a nation, even though they may not physically exist.

Later in his text, Anderson discusses how diasporic peoples begin to imagine notions of community in contexts to which they have migrated and re-settled themselves in various ways.

According to Benedict Anderson,<sup>13</sup> an imagined community is nothing more than the influence made by the folk traditions found in literature, music, dance, poetry and so on, on people's imagination so that they conceive of themselves as something bigger than their immediate surrounding community. This means that without a surrounding collective, family, or household, an individual is mentally linked to other people, whom he or she might never meet in his or her life, but who, like he or she, speaks the same language, sings the same songs, and has the same national identity.

In the centre of Anderson's study is the notion of "collective imagination",<sup>14</sup> which is constructed through access to the same set of books, magazines, newspapers, and which he argues serves to reinforce the sense of commonality. He advocates that the increasing standardisation in the production of commodities as well as developments in communication technologies has contributed to the evolution of national identity as an imagined community. Anderson attaches importance to modern communication, in the shape of books, telephones, radio and TV, and more recently the Internet, as a condition for the existence of a national community.

In Anderson's work I have found an important point of reference, and a basis for understanding the relationship between national symbols and "imagining" a community. Later in this essay, I will explore this notion and its particular relation in my own construction of a fictional community in my body of work.<sup>15</sup>

[13] Jokubaitis, A. 2006. Kodeli tauta nera jivaizuojama bendruomene? *Problemos*, 70, p. 15

[14] Jokubaitis, A. 2006. Kodeli tauta nera jivaizuojama bendruomene? *Problemos*, 70, p. 14

[15] However, I do understand the linkage between an emphasis on national symbols, their significance and promotion of nationalism, but this topic will be left for future research.

## SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

In order to understand better the place and present situation where I find myself now, and not only where I am coming from, I would like to discuss some perspectives on the idea of community in the texts of a selection of African authors. I believe it will help to establish the nature of the relationship between my context and myself.<sup>16</sup> As one of the concepts closely related to my research topic is that of “communitarism”, I will discuss this notion in relation to the way in which it has been articulated from within selected African communities. In order to do so, I will introduce some texts by Ghanaian author, Kwame Gyekye.

What is the relation between individuality and community in thought systems present in Africa? Why are African societies so often seen by outside observers to be characterized and to emphasise an individual’s duties to the group – communal ownership and collective responsibility – rather than individual rights or personal principles? Is this observation even accurate? In this section, my intention is to explore these questions of personhood and community.

Seeing that the conception of personhood is rooted in an individual’s culture, it is expected to vary culturally, similarly it may be expected that societies with communal values will differ from individualist cultures in their conception of personhood. Thus, the question which Kwame Gyekye<sup>17</sup> poses in his article *Person and Community in African Thought* (2002) is whether a person, living in a society, is truly a self-sufficient, atomistic individual who is wholly independent from other human beings, who does not depend on his or her relationships with others for the realisation of his or her needs – so that he or she has priority over the community. Or, is he or she by nature a communal being whose survival depends on other human beings, and so must have, and does have, natural, fundamental and mutual relationships with them.

[16] Addressing someone with affectionate terms such as *sisi/bhuti* (“sister”/“brother” in Xhosa), or *mama/tata* (“mother”/“father” in Xhosa) is not used in Lithuania outside one’s immediate family. This is just one of the examples in my day-to-day experience living in South Africa showing that the notion of community is different to the one I am used to at home.

[17] Gyekye, K. 2002. *Person and community in African thought*. In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P., ed. *Philosophy from Africa*, p. 297.

These questions became a background for two opposite approaches in communitarian thinking, namely radical and moderate communitarianism.

[18] Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and modernity. Philosophical reflections on the African experience.*

Radical communitarians such as Joseph Mbiti and Ifeanyi Menkiti<sup>18</sup> claim that:

- The community defines a person as person, and not some isolated property like rationality and free will;
- Personhood is acquired; an individual's moral achievements earns him or her the status as a person, as a full member of the community; and
- Personhood is something at which an individual can fail.

From the perspective of radical communitarianism, priority is given to the duties that individuals owe to the community because those duties are aimed toward a common good. Moderate communitarianism,<sup>19</sup> on the contrary, argues that this position rejects the values of the individual such as autonomy and the ability of free choice. In this vein, Kwame Gyekye, a moderate communitarian, argues that radical communitarianism exaggerates the status and the power of the community at the expense of the complex nature of the individuals who constitute the community. Furthermore, it leads to the inability to detach oneself to evaluate, criticise, and revise one's community's values and traditions. The greatest danger, Gyekye claims, is that it may lead to political intolerance and authoritarianism.

[19] Beauchamp, T.L. & Childress, J.F. 1994. *Principles of biomedical ethics*, p. 77-85

As Gyekye<sup>20</sup> states,

The question is appropriate and would need to be explored, for it is possible for people to assume offhandedly that with its emphasis on communal values, collective good, and shared ends, communitarianism invariably conceives the person as *wholly* constituted by social relationships;

[20] Gyekye, K. 2002. Person and community in African thought. In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P., ed. *Philosophy from Africa*, p. 298.

[...] and consequently, that it diminishes his/her freedom and capability to choose or question or re-evaluate the shared values of the community.

Moderate communitarianism, as promoted by Léopold Sédar Senghor and supported by contemporary philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye, Kwesi Wiredu, and Segun Gbadegesin,<sup>21</sup> claims that the individual is both autonomous and a communal being. The interdependence between an individual and his or her community requires that the individual should be committed to support his or her community as much as the community should be committed to preserve life of all its members. Moderate communitarians recognise that besides being a social being by nature, the individual also possesses rationality, moral sense, capacity for virtue and free choice. This has the advantage of maintaining the individual's ability to take a distanced view of the practices and the values promoted by his or her community.

An individual becomes conscious of his or her own being and responsibilities towards self and others through connections to other people. In this sense, what happens to the individual happens to the entire group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. A Zulu/Xhosa maxim says: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – "A person is a person through other persons".<sup>22</sup> Or as Mbiti<sup>23</sup> paraphrased it "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am; I exist because the community exists".

The ideas presented above have helped me to gain insight into the concept of the collective, or in this context, communitarian, way of life in relation to selected African communities. Also they have revealed the differences in approaches to this notion. The central idea that I have found important for my own research, is that of an individual's ability to take a distanced or critical view of the practices and the values promoted by his or her community.

[21] Wiredu, K. 1998. How not to compare African thought with Western thought. In Eze, E.C. ed. *African philosophy: An anthology*, p. 193-199.

[22] Author's translation; but same or similar translations are widely available on Internet or from personal communication with Zulu or Xhosa native speakers.

[23] Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and modernity. Philosophical reflections on the African experience*.

## THE IDEA OF "EMERGENCY LITHUANIA" IN THE WORK OF KAZYS PAKŠTAS

Lithuanian professor Kazys Pakštas for me is amongst the most interesting Lithuanian authors, and his work is closely related to the subject of my research. His project "Emergency Lithuania" is, on the one hand, brave and surprising, but on the other, naive and simple-minded.

Kazys Pakštas (1893-1960) was one of Lithuania's most talented personalities. His ideas concerning the establishment of a new Lithuania emerged just after World War II, and he continued working on them after that. Pakštas was one of the first widely known Lithuanian scientists. A geographer, who travelled around the world visiting almost all the continents (except Australia and Antarctica), he was also an active politician, and was nominated for the presidency in 1938. Pakštas was a committed social worker and the generator of a wide variety of original ideas, which he never tired of advocating.<sup>24</sup> It is essential here to emphasize Pakštas's idealism – the country's needs were always more important to him than his personal situation.

Pakštas believed that Lithuania, at the time before World War II, could not remain stable for long, as it was rife with internal conflicts and surrounded by many powerful countries. He was the first person who tried to understand what the main stages of transatlantic Lithuanian mass emigration would entail, and did so based on his prediction that many Lithuanians would rapidly leave the country. In order to protect at least a little piece of Lithuanian culture, which he felt was in danger, he suggested creating a Lithuanian community overseas. In his view, if the country itself was taken over by Germany or Russia, or had its government overthrown, Lithuanian culture, and even the country as an "imagined community", could be maintained by creating an outpost populated by Lithuanians. This outpost would be named

1741 Rudokai, J. 2003. Ar paseno profesoriaus K. Pakšto idejos? *Vienas*, 26, p. 25-28.

an "Emergency Lithuania", and it would remain a stronghold of Lithuanian identity.

The most important task, which the professor and his co-workers had to accomplish, was to find territories to settle in that would not create excessive legal, religious and logistical complications. Pakštas wanted to move Lithuanians "on the basis of linguistic and cultural autonomy";<sup>25</sup> so he had to find a state, where the laws would allow doing so. Because of this reason he rejected many larger countries, which had very old traditions of civic society and state system of self-dependence, and focussed instead on smaller less established societies.

[25] Pakštas, K. 2007. *Aplink Afriką*, p. 155

In 1924 Kazys Pakštas considered Quebec to be the best location for such a settlement. Later, in 1927, his preference switched to the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in 1930 to Angola, and later to Madagascar and Venezuela. Pakštas quite liked the location of Angola, and he was researching its climate, specific features of the landscape, the composition of ethnic groups and the farming conditions.

He finally decided that it would be best to establish the Lithuanian community in the British Honduras (now the independent nation of Belize). Together with a few other enthusiasts, he travelled there to explore the possibilities to establish a settlement, but due to the rise of the independence movement there, the project was not realised. The last location he considered for the *Dausuva*<sup>26</sup> were the Bahamas, but support for this project was growing weaker and never came close to realisation.

[26] Dausuva, named after *Dausos* – "spirit world" in Lithuanian mythology, also known as *Zalioji Atžala* – Engl. "Green Sprout". Wikipedia: *Dausuva*. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dausuva>

Most of his countrymen did not understand his ideas and found them laughable. Some of them accused him of "stimulating the pessimistic feelings in the society" and portrayed him as a "British agent recruiting Lithuanians to relocate them to Honduras"<sup>27</sup> But despite that, Kazys Pakštas was sure that it could be very useful for the country to accomplish this proposal. However, in the article published in the Lithuanian emigrants' journal *Į laisvę* (1958) he

[27] Pakštas, K. 1958. *Dausuva*. / *Į laisvę*, 15, p. 67. Author's translation.

[28] Pakštas, K. 1958. *Dausuva. Įairių*, 15, p. 64. Author's translation.

[29] Šiurkus, V. 2005. Gyventi kosmoso ritmu: Kazys Pakštas įsivaizduotoji Lietuva. *Politologija*, 7 (38), p. 123-131. Author's translation.

acknowledged, "this idea will not be developed. Not because it is not suitable for Lithuanians or not possible to implement, but mostly because we are not suitable for it; we do not have the soul of the people who created Americas"<sup>28</sup>

In his collected works *Kultūra. Civilizacija. Geopolitika*. (2003) Kazys Pakštas states: "Nobody would ever receive the Motherland as a gift: we have to make it ourselves, create it"<sup>29</sup>

The imagined Lithuania of Kazys Pakštas was intended to be a comfortable land of tolerance and prosperity and was intended to provide Lithuania with recognition in the international community. It was Kazys Pakštas's Lithuanian dream but it was turned down by the unfavourable circumstances of his lived reality.

I think that Pakštas's project was rather "exotic" and unusual for its time, and today it seems quite naive. One can argue that it was most likely influenced by colonial breezes felt at that time even in Lithuania. Reading his works one gets the sense that Kazys Pakštas did not care or even think too much about how those newly established Lithuanian communities would be able to survive and adapt in the severe realities of those chosen countries. Having emigrated to the USA at an early age, he did not question that life in Angola or Madagascar might be completely different and most probably much more demanding than that in the USA where most of the Lithuanian immigrants were moving at that time.

In Pakštas's writings, I did not come across any consideration of how those countries would feel about being made to host a "new Lithuania", but I may presume that they did not pay too much attention to Pakštas's attempts, being too absorbed with real colonisation issues at the time, and regarding his as a doubtful project.

In my discussion of Pakštas's work, I identify his concerns with a question about the importance of preserving Lithuanian culture

and creation of Lithuanian community in another geographical place. All this constitutes an important part of my own creation of a fictional community, as it addresses the possibility of materialising the product of human imagination, but also how particular political, historical and geographical circumstances influence such a project. Moreover, his project emphasises the extent to which a nation-based identity can be seen as being tied into its specific location and time. It further reveals the romantic notion of thinking one can transplant it, as well as the final impossibility to do so. As such, my project is bound by its impossibility, as I cannot actually recreate my community, but have to enter into the project necessarily through the imagination.

## **EXPERIENCES OF COLLECTIVITY: HISTORICAL AND PRESENT-TIME EXAMPLES**

The concept of "collectivism"<sup>30</sup> can be defined as,

[describing] any moral, political, or social outlook, that stresses human interdependence and the importance of a collective, rather than the importance of separate individuals. Collectivists focus on community and society, and seek to give priority to group goals over individual goals. Specifically, a society as a whole can be seen as having more meaning or value than the separate individuals that make up that society.

In the Soviet Union, the ruling Communist Party singled out collectivism<sup>31</sup> as a special form of conscience for society members. The value of the collective had been declared as a state ideology, while the values of individualism were regarded as an anti-social manifestation of backwardness and selfishness. For many people at that time, the term was loaded with specific ideological meaning as determined by the Soviet Union, and therefore was seen as meaningless cliché.

[30] Wikipedia: Collectivism. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collectivism>.

I would like to point out that I know this particular part of the history because of my background, and am basing my ideas and work on this experience. For this reason I have included Wikipedia references to provide an easily accessible source that functions as an entry point into the material. It is not, however, the focus of my work to research that history in too much depth, and I have therefore not entered deeply into that area here.

[31] I am aware that the greater part of the readers have a general understanding of this term, but in my personal experience I relate it solely to the expression used in the former Soviet Union.

But collectives existed all the time, even from very early ages. They are the necessary condition for humans to survive in the harshest conditions. Life makes it vital to gather together into collectives, communities, groups and so on. Without this it is impossible to work, survive and defend. However, while collectivism exists in any way, during Soviet times it was almost worshipped, as it was regarded as the highest form of living, and the most important foundation of the existence of a society, at least in official terms. In reality, the transition from private ownership to collectivism was not as smooth as the Soviet Union would have liked.<sup>32</sup> And a certain part of the population was constantly resisting being put into any kind of “voluntary” (though enforced) organizations.

Memories about “equally-fair-to-everybody” Soviet times still arouse sentiments for quite a number of my fellow countrymen and women. For others, everything that reminds them of that dreary period and the experiences related to its rituals, are hideous. But most would agree that especially during Soviet times, there existed a strong sense of collective. For me personally, this historical period has left a deep trace in my memory, and to a large extent influenced my understanding about the relationship between collectivism and Lithuanian national identity on which I have based my creative work.

## COLLECTIVE HERITAGE

In the Soviet Union, collectivisation was introduced by Stalin in the late 1920s as a way to boost agricultural production through the organization of land and labour into collective farms (*kolkhozes*) and state farms (*sovkhozes*).<sup>33</sup>

*Kolkhoz* was a form of collective farming that existed along with state farms. The word is a contraction of *коллективное хозяйство*, or “collective farm”. It was organised in such a way that the tools of production (land, instruments, machines, cattle, seeds and so

[32] When the Soviet Union collapsed, *kolkhozes* were re-organised into agricultural companies and most of them were, and still are, struggling to find their place on the market.



[Fig. 1] Alexander Rodchenko, *Male Pyramid*, 1936.

[33] Wikipedia: *Collective Farming*. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collectivization>

on) were managed by all of its members and the results of their work were distributed also according to these members' mutual agreement.

The plan was an obligatory (but termed "voluntary") union of peasants, and the collective farms were controlled by government officials (*kolkhoz* chairmen), who were elected by the peasants of the commune. However, such elections were often followed by corruption and coercion, and hardly ever fulfilled the idealism in which they were set up. In a *kolkhoz*, a member was paid a share of the farm's produce and profit according to the number of workdays he or she had worked. A *sovkhoz*, on the other hand, employed salaried workers. Instead of a monetary salary, it was popular to get paid in agricultural goods, such as those that the *kolkhoz* was cultivating. For a long time, in order to keep *kolkhoz* workers from leaving to town, they were not allowed to obtain passports.

Two of the other interesting inventions were the *subbotnik* and *voskresnik* (from the Russian words *суббота* for Saturday and *воскресенье* for Sunday). These were days of organised volunteer work on the weekends in the Soviet Union. *Subbotniks* and *voskresniks* were mostly organized for cleaning the streets and parks, and removing garbage. They were seen as one of the tools of communistic formation of the masses. During the first years of Soviet rule, *subbotniks* employed volunteers. Later though, with the decrease of enthusiasm amongst the population, *subbotniks* became enforced, and were an emblematic feature of the socialistic way of life.

An example of collective activity aimed at the youth was the "Young Pioneer camp", vacation or summer camps for young pioneers. In the twentieth century these camps existed in many socialist countries, but particularly in the Soviet Union. The first All-Union Young Pioneer camp, Artek was formed on June 16, 1925. The Young Pioneer camp phenomenon grew in popularity, and in the USSR there existed approximately forty thousand Young Pioneer



[Fig. 2] Collective farming.



[Fig. 3] Lenin at subbotnik. Post stamp, 1957.

[34] Общероссийская ассоциация общественных объединений "Дети Плюс". [O]  
Available at: [www.kidsplus.ru](http://www.kidsplus.ru)



[Fig. 4] Lunch time in the communal flat.

[35] *October Revolution*, also called *Bolshevik Revolution* (Nov. 6-7, New Style, 1917), the second and last major phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917, in which the Bolshevik Party seized power in Russia, inaugurating the Soviet regime. Encyclopedia Britannica [Online]. [O]

Available at: [www.britannica.com/eb/article-9056737/October-Revolution](http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9056737/October-Revolution)

[36] *Homo Sovieticus* is a sarcastic and critical reference to a category of people with a specific mindset that were allegedly created by the governments of the Soviet block. The term was coined by well known Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksandr Zinoviev as the title of his book of the same name.

The idea that the Soviet system would create a new, better kind of person was first postulated by the advocates of the Soviet system; they called it the "New Soviet man". *Homo Sovieticus*, however, was a term with negative connotations, invented by opponents to describe what they said was the real result of Soviet policies. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many social and economic problems in Russia were blamed on *Homo Sovieticus's* alleged failure to adapt to a capitalist society. Wikipedia: *Homo Sovieticus*. [O] Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo\\_Sovieticus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_Sovieticus)

camps.<sup>34</sup> There were different types of camps: sports camps, tourist camps, thematic camps for young technicians, young naturalists, young geologists and others. Typically, the state organization where a youth's parents worked, "sponsored" the child by allotting the worker's child a place in the camp free of charge to the parents.

Summer camp was an important part of my personal experience of growing up in the Soviet Union; it was an integral part of Soviet childhood, which from my earliest days brought a sense of collectivity into my mind.

Concerning housing matters, there existed the distinctive housing system called *komunalka* (communal apartments), in which multiple families would live together in an apartment – usually one family to a room – and share basic living facilities such as the bathroom and kitchen. In a way, *komunalka* was created with the intention of controlling the residents, as well as suppressing the ever-present friction and conflicts among them.

Communal apartments were introduced after the October Revolution<sup>35</sup> under a policy of "overcrowding" (literally translated from Russian as *уплотнение*). This saw the Bolsheviks taking over the apartments of the wealthy and moving in new tenants according to a small regulatory number of square metres that was apportioned per person.

All those above mentioned experiences and memories of *Homo Sovieticus*<sup>36</sup> play a big role in my creative work. Likewise, the habit of doing things together, being a part of the whole, matching one's actions accordingly to another's, acting "in tune" and "in rhythm" with others has also greatly shaped my experience. This has been most noticeable for me with the lack of community in my present situation. The general feeling of belonging to a country that is one sixth the size of the Earth's land surface, with a huge population made me feel very proud at that time.

Ironically, on the other hand, being a Russian in Lithuania during Soviet rule, I never felt as though I were a member of a minority group, even though Russians were quite a small part of the country's population. Also at that time, the Russian language was the one and only official language. Following political changes in the country, however, Lithuanians were quickly re-established as the majority group and even today the Russian language is rarely used and heard outside the Russian community. In this way, my very relationship to the notion of nation-based identity is already a complex one.

## COLLECTIVE PRESENT

I would like to comment on a number of contemporary Lithuanian events and traditions that celebrate collectivity, as it seems to me that Lithuania inherited some passion for mass events from the Soviet Union. The most important ones for my discussion here are the Baltic Way demonstration, the basketball as "religion" phenomenon, and the National Song and Dance Festival.

(Fig. 5) Baltic Way in Lithuania.



[37] Namely Soviet occupation, 1940-1990.

[38] Čingienė, V. & Laskienė, S. 2004. Trenerių rengimo išukiai besikeičiančioje aplinkoje. *Sporto mokslas* Nr. 2 (36), p. 22-25.



[Fig. 6] Euro2007 Basketball Championship, Semi-finals: Lithuania-Russia.

The Baltic Way was an event that took place on August 23, 1989, when approximately two million people joined their hands to form a human chain of over 600 kilometres long, across the three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. This unique demonstration was organized to draw the world's attention to the common historical fate that these three countries suffered.<sup>37</sup> It marked the fiftieth anniversary of August 23, 1939, when the Soviet Union and Germany in the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact divided Eastern Europe into spheres of interest, and which led to the occupation of these three states. This event forms an important reference for a sense of "Baltic brotherhood" and collective vision.

Another Lithuanian tradition worth discussing is basketball tournaments and the mass fanaticism that attends it. Sport is a system of knowledge,<sup>38</sup> and its activities and institutions can be examined as a structure that forms part of a national identity. Furthermore, basketball has had a large impact on the formation of a national Lithuanian identity during and after the Soviet era in Lithuania. The association between supporting a national team and the radical political changes taking place in Lithuania at the time, transformed ordinary fans into admirers of the players who made them proud as the representatives of an independent Lithuania. In addition, the national team and its successes helped the name of Lithuania to be known all over the world – as a country in its own right, rather than simply a part of the Soviet Union. As a societal activity, basketball ascribed special meaning to national symbols, especially the green colour used in their uniforms. The game boosted the development of a community spirit and people's pride in their nation.

One of the major culturally uniting events in Lithuania is the National Song and Dance Festival. Its tradition has lasted for a hundred years and it has developed into the most significant and largest cultural event in Lithuania. It exalts people's creative self-expression and the vitality of the national culture. It further promotes artistic activity by periodically gathering amateur artistic

groups of different genres and culture professionals to enormous festivals that receive an enthusiastic response. This tradition is an expression of cultural and national identity, and is based on the enthusiasts of the popular art genres, such as choir singers, dancers, and musicians.



[Fig. 7] Lithuanian National Song and Dance Festival.

From a contemporary viewpoint, it appears as though past instances of collectivism are judged mostly negatively, at least according to the opinions presented in the Lithuanian media, while contemporary events are regarded very positively. This may relate to the never-ending antagonism between Soviet Union and Lithuania, however the details of such a dynamic may be the topic for another research paper, and I will not pursue it further here. For my work, the consistent presence of the notion of collectivity has shaped my background<sup>39</sup> and my present response to my situation. It is neither a wholly positive or wholly negative attribute but one that has guided my thinking about my own identity and the way in which I relate to the people around me. Moreover, while the Lithuanian context is a specific one, there are parallels in South Africa and other African countries, which I have not examined in too much depth in this essay, but it has had an influence on my life and creative work while residing in this country.

[39] I acknowledge that due to the fact that I have to perform my research in a context where people, for the most part, do not have any prior familiarity with the subject of my research, that certain sensitive historical or political details might be lost or misinterpreted. That is related especially to the topics on Lithuanian collective present, but mostly, to a Soviet collective past. Also it is important to point out, that in such a short space it is impossible to discuss the whole complexity of those subjects, and I proffer this essay as necessarily subjective.

# CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC REFERENCES

In this section of the essay, I provide an overview of contemporary artists who have worked with similar ideas and have influenced my production. I feel a special resonance with the work of Andrius Novickas, as he interrogates Lithuanian national symbols. Ugnius Gelguda in his installation has constructed a very striking image of the power of a mass group of people. Artworks of the South Korean-USA artist Do-Ho Suh were of importance, as he interprets the dynamic relationship between an individual and a collective. The photographic series of Mimi Cheron Ng'ok is another example of the representation of a community and the complexities around this issue in contemporary times.

## AUDRIUS NOVICKAS. *TRICOLOUR SETS*, 2005

Audrius Novickas is one of the most noteworthy contemporary Lithuanian artists. He received a much attention from international art critics during the 1990s and is practising today. Novickas has participated in important local contemporary art exhibitions, representing Lithuania abroad on numerous occasions.<sup>40</sup> My discussion of his work revolves around the piece *Tricolour Sets*.

(40) During the Lithuania presidency of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in June 2007, Novickas was participating in the exhibition of Lithuanian artists called "Invisible Bridges of Cultures: Africa and Lithuania" which was arranged in Geneva, where the main session of ECOSOC was held, and where he also presented his artwork *Tricolour sets*. Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (C) Available at: [www.urm.lt/index.php?1550437375](http://www.urm.lt/index.php?1550437375)

[Fig. 8] Andrius Novickas.

*Tricolour sets*, 2005

10 flags (of Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Lithuania, Mali, Senegal)

Dimensions: 4.5 x 1.7 x 2.85 m



The installation comprises flags of ten countries. They are created as replications of original national flags, all of which are composed of three particular colours – yellow, green and red. The artist was not concerned with using the authentic tones of the original flags, but rather standardised the colours in all the flags in the installation to be in the same tones. He used the flags of the following countries: Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Lithuania, Mali, and Senegal.

The *Tricolour sets* is composed by positioning the flags one after another in the specific chronological order in which the flags were legitimated – from oldest and smallest, to the newest and biggest. Each flag is proportionally larger than the one preceding it. With this expanding sequence the artist draws attention not only to the resonance of the formal elements in space but also the increasing concentration on this set of colours and spread of representations of this symbolic code in the world.

Bolivia was the first country to declare a red-yellow-green tricolour as a national symbol in 1888. The second country to raise a red-yellow-green flag in 1898 was Ethiopia. It was the only country in Africa that avoided colonization, therefore the combination of the red, yellow and green became a model of liberation and started to be considered as Pan-African colours. Lithuania was the third to officially announce the tricolour for its national flag in 1918 and remains the only country in Europe with this colour scheme.<sup>41</sup>

By using flags, and through placing emphasis on their similarities, Novickas raises questions regarding the uniqueness of national identity. He is in a sense conducting a kind of geopolitical research. For my own study, it brings to the fore a number of questions. One may ask whether there is any rational explanation for the Lithuanian choice of colours, which by the time they were selected, had already been used by Bolivia and Ethiopia, and since then have spread to a number of African countries. Does a flag, as a distinctive symbolic feature of the nation, a touchstone wrapped with patriotic pathos,

[41] Interesting to note that the colours of the Lithuanian flag in almost the same sequence are also present on the Rastafarian movement flag. When Lithuania was creating its flag, however, Rastafarianism as a movement did not exist yet.

an aura of honour and recognition, have to be unique? How, in this context, should we approach the considerations of a Kazys Pakštas about the need of moving Lithuanians to Africa? How may the uniqueness of our flag be viewed in a European context: as a challenge or as a misunderstanding?

I am not implying that I believe there is any inherent link between Lithuania and the Pan-Africanist ideology based on the choice of national colours alone. Instead, I am here emphasising the fact that the seemingly arbitrary choice of colours to represent a nation through its flag, foregrounds the “imagined” and constructed nature of this identity. In this way, one can start to sense the somewhat fluid quality of national symbolism. Novickas’s work draws unexpected parallels between the flag of Lithuania and other countries, thereby suggesting an alternative reading of the flag as national symbol – not as signifying only an autonomous nation state, but as having resonance with other places.

This re-contextualisation of Lithuanian and African national flags reveals the contingent and relational character of national identity. Audrius Novickas is playing with one of the essential symbols of the state and nation – its flag, which has an almost magical power that in a sense unites an “imagined community”. In my work, I am also keen to use something that is in some circles “unquestionable”, part of nation’s “treasures” and rarely exposed in contemporary Lithuanian art. I feel that Novickas has found an alternative way to represent relations between Lithuania and Africa, using well-researched political-historical material, and not stereotypical and easy manipulated images.

## UGNIUS GELGUDA. ŽALGIRIS, 2006

Young Lithuanian artist Ugnius Gelguda's audiovisual installation *Žalgiris*, highlights constructions of collective commonness and national identity, through the use of one of the very strong national icons – namely a brand of football and basketball teams.

In this huge projection, which is reminiscent of monumental wall paintings – uncontrollable and riotous youths without any specific signs of identification are shown. They can be either basketball or football fans, as they are depicted without the attributes of their beloved team. Men and women, sweating, shouting and swearing, usually more or less under the influence of alcohol, are jumping in a very tight crowd. Accompanying the projection is a soundtrack of the battle sounds of clanking swords. The artist does not document, but creates a generalized portrait of youth, without identifying exact time or place.

Even though Gelguda does not provide clues within the image of the particular context, the title of the work is vital in this respect. *Žalgiris* is the name of both an important battle in the history of Lithuania, where the independence of the country was defended, as well as a popular and successful basketball team. Therefore, the title of this work brings both of these meanings into play.



[Fig. 9] Ugnius Gelguda. *Žalgiris*, 2007  
3 slide projector, audio system  
Dimensions: 14 x 3 m

[Fig. 10] Ugnius Gelguda, *Žalgiris*, 2007  
(detail)



I posit that Gelguda's *Žalgiris* depicts an imagined community, because it focuses our attention on two instances that function as triggers of national pride, or a sense of belonging to a nation-based group. What is more, in this work the relationship between the group in the image and a viewer becomes important. A viewer is not invited to be part of the group. Rather, one gets the sense when seeing this work that one is watching from the outside. Hereby an important aspect of an imagined community is revealed: it often establishes its own identity through the relationship with an *other* – the one existing outside the border, not belonging to the group, the stranger. Ugnius separates physical and represented space. The viewer sees the crowd from the other side of the partition – like an other world that he or she cannot reach, which he or she can only observe from afar.

However, this distance is not absolute. After getting used to the darkness and starting to walk along the projection, a viewer can find a way into the image. It is possible to get into even the most closed community, if one really wants. The installation is set up in such a way that the moving shadows of viewers getting in front of the projection create shadows of them in the crowd. But when this

happens, it is only an outline, not a recognisable representation as such. One can then argue that the work assimilates, unifies, and erases individual human features and only the yell of collective ecstasy remains – and one either has to observe this from the outside, or become part of it by giving up his or her individual identity.

It is important to note that a common enemy (or, in this case, opponent) seems to unite a crowd better than common work. It is not accidental that these aggressive youths are portrayed with battle sounds of clanking swords. The Žalgiris battle is one of the most important symbols of Lithuanian national identity. But Gelguda's work is not about a contemporary battle, or even a historical one, but rather speaks about the mechanisms that fuel the patriotic rhetoric of the struggle. He consciously does not indicate which event is more important: the Žalgiris battle in 1410, when a united army of Lithuanians, Polish, Russians, Czechs and Tartarians defeated the Teutonic Order, or Kaunas basketball team, which smashed the Central Army Sports Club (CSKA) of Moscow.



(Fig. 11) Jan Matejko, *Battle of Žalgiris*, 1878

Within Soviet propaganda, the Žalgiris battle was interpreted as Lithuanians' fight against German knights (portraying these knights as invaders and drawing parallels with the Nazis). However, since the victory of the Kaunas Žalgiris basketball players over Moscow CSKA (a game that took place in the times of the early *Sąjūdis*<sup>42</sup> movement), their victories gained more symbolic meaning,

[42] Sąjūdis (Reform Movement of Lithuania) is the political organization which led the struggle for Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Wikipedia: Sąjūdis. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sąjūdis>

and resonated with the sense of smashing an occupying army. Nowadays, the Žalgiris team consists not only of Lithuanians, but rather, its players are collected from all around the world. But their victories still raise patriotic feelings, which fans express shouting "*Lie-tu-va!*"<sup>43</sup>

Every generation rewrites its tales about heroes. From a contemporary perspective, *Žalgiris* is not only the battle of knights and titans. It is the phenomenon of sport club culture, and its soundtrack reminds one of action films. The artist consciously refuses empty rhetoric but rather exposes the mechanism of collective identity itself. This audiovisual installation clearly shows how collective commonness, hostility, involvement and alienation are created and how historical battles become the foundation for repeating myths and rituals. As a result, a changeable conception of identity is uncovered – from core subjects, such as native language and land, to free choice and spontaneous group activities, such as a multinational basketball team.

Being a big basketball fan myself, I feel confronted and implicated by this representation of wild youths celebrating the victory of their beloved sport club. I strongly identify with the sense of a mass group feeling, and its resonance with nation-based identity. Nevertheless, I cannot dispute that the captured moment is a true representation of the collective madness that occurs in Lithuania during such events. Gelguda's installation clearly demonstrates the complexities of group identity, using sport as a case of collectivity in present Lithuania. It is one of a few popular activities, and definitely a most uncontrolled one.

## Do-Ho Suh. *FLOOR*, 1998 AND *SCREEN*, 2004

Do-Ho Suh is a South Korean artist, whose ability to express complex ideas with subtle clarity, using simple and beautiful forms, distinguishes him as a significant contemporary artist. Suh left South Korea in 1993 to study in the United States, and many of his works embody a tension between the American emphasis on the individual and the Korean celebration of collective society. In this way, his art often addresses the complicated issue of cultural difference.

### *FLOOR*, 1998



[Fig. 12] Do-Ho Suh. *Floor*, 1998  
PVC figures, glass plates, phenolic sheets,  
polyurethane resin  
Dimensions: 7 x 8 x 0.08, 55 modules

For this work, the artist constructed a glass floor, under which were packed about 180 thousands miniature plastic figures of different sexes and races, each one five centimetres high. Their hands are turned upward, pressing against the glass, their faces distorted in grimaces of exertion. While there are many individualised figures, set apart from one another through their colour, dress and features, seen from a distance, they blend into one anonymous entity.

[Fig. 13] Do-Ho Suh. *Floor*, 1998 (detail)



[Fig. 14] Do-Ho Suh. *Floor*, 1998 (detail)

When walking across this floor one may not see each of the thousands of tiny figures reaching to support the glass, as if trying to prevent it from crushing them. This might be interpreted in the relation between the individual and society, between the power of a few and the anonymity of the masses, between the fragility and insecurity of the individual and the strength of the community. To form part of the group or to resist is the question that arises in this kind of context. That is the tension that *Floor* transmits with its thousands of compact and repeated little figures, fragile on their own but strong together in a block, capable of holding the large

feet that steps across them, sometimes unaware and sometimes ignorant. It seems to me that for Do-Ho Suh, there is no middle way between capitalist individualism and collective strength.

As Do-Ho Suh<sup>44</sup> explains himself,

A tiny plastic figure is very fragile, but a huge number together have a significant weight. It's collective power. In my work I explore precisely that ambiguity of the 'herd': the sense of protection and strength on the one hand, the loss of individuality on the other.

Looking at his work, I involuntarily imagine a proletariat carrying a capitalist-bourgeois, as this was the kind of rhetoric that we were taught in the schools about Western (in other words, Western European and USA) economic systems, where, we were told, many thousands of people have to work hard to make the life of one rich individual full of pleasure.

It is precisely the ability of the artist to evoke such a strong resonance with the socialist ideology, as well as the ambiguity of the individual as unique and part of a mass group, that appeals to me. Similar to my work *Swings*, through the repetition of forms, the artist makes reference to the complex relationship between the individual and the collective, a theme that is both informed by and transcends particular cultural contexts.

(44) Malhotra, P. 2001. Space is metaphor for history. *Tema Celeste*, 83 (January-February), p. 52-55.



(Fig. 15) League of Nations - Capitalists from all countries, unite!

## SCREEN, 2004

[Fig. 16] Do-Ho Suh. *Screen*, 2004  
ABS thermoplastic, stainless steel  
Dimensions: 3 x 6 x 0.013 m



As in many of Do-Ho Suh's works, scale plays an important role here. It allows the viewer to feel the tension between the individual and the group. *Screen* consists of scaled down individualised figures that form an architectural structure. For Suh, this site of interaction and interchange between people and space, ideas and expectations, places the viewer in a dramatic environment that emphasises the relationship between his or her own presence and the mass of figures in front of him or her.

Suh is known for sculptures and installations that break conventional notions of scale and site-specificity. Exploring the fine line between strength in numbers and homogeneity, Suh's work questions the identity of the individual in today's increasingly multinational, globalised society. This artwork directly explores the relationship between the individual and space – understood both as an intimate, personal environment and as an arena for social relationships.

One of the ways in which the relationship between an individual and a community is shown, is through the notion of “membership” – an idea of shared communal experience. It is the case of the person who finds himself wholly integrated into his or her social environment and finds in the life of his or her collective something deeply expressive of his or her own personality, his or her aspirations and aims.

The dependence of each one of the figures on the others is also evident in this piece – if one were to take one figure out from the structure, the whole pile would collapse. Their firm sturdy bodies remind me of factory workers, especially Russian workers, who were always portrayed on television and in newspapers as fit and well-built. This is further emphasised by their arrangement in a sequence-based system, where, as with a factory, every step of production depends on the one preceding it.



[Fig. 17] Morning exercises at South Korean Kia car plant in Slovakia.

[Fig. 18] Do-Ho Suh, Screen, 2004 (detail)

I am particularly interested in the work of Do-Ho Suh as I can engage with common memories of collective past and the communal archetypes from Korean and Soviet Union history, which influenced his creative work as well as mine. In addition, I feel a personal engagement with his idea of collective as in my own creative work I am likewise exploring the notion and role of space in relation to the individual, as well as within community relationships.

### **MIMI CHERONO NG'OK.** ***THIS PLACE I CALL HOME, 2006***

Mimi Cheron Ng'ok is a Kenyan artist currently residing in South Africa. She has experienced directly the negative aspects of being perceived as *other* in this particularly fraught context.

Her black and white photography series entitled *The Place I Call Home* is specifically focused on issues pertaining to the migration of people between African countries and South Africa. Using portraits and text, she "has created an archive of the presence of the second *other* or the *other other*. It is a narrative pertaining to being black in South Africa but not black South African".<sup>45</sup>

Cherono's series documents black Africans from across the continent who currently live in Cape Town. The immigrants photographed are from Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and a few other countries. Even though South Africa is home to people from different parts of the world, Cherono finds that locals seem to group all immigrants under the same banner.

An important focus of Mimi Cheron's work has been around one theme – the *other's* image *here*, and the representative image of the *here*, produced for the *other*. In other words, the presentation of immigrants to the native population, and vice versa, the image of the local population, as seen by the immigrants. Thus one could say that she is interested in one of the most fundamental motives

[45] Michaelis School of Fine Art (University of Cape Town), 2006. Catalogue: 2006 / Michaelis School of Fine Art.

of the social discourse in post-modernism, namely that of (self) representation. This is further one of the most popular and thought provoking issues in the contemporary South African art context.

In her series, Cheronno explores questions concerning power relations and authority inside South Africa's migrant communities. Discussions around notions of hospitality are of special interest to her. These issues illustrates very clearly the current South African situation in the context of host-guest relations between foreign and host communities.

One of the major questions in philosophy during the last years has been the question concerning the *other*.<sup>46</sup> In terms of migration, a highly contentious issue in the current political climate, it has special significance. How and to what degree are we able to receive and welcome the *other* as the *other*, that is, as the one he or she is, rather than as the self constructs it? The debate is, in other words, concerned with hospitality, with the willingness and capability to offer the *other* a welcome. French philosopher Jacques Derrida's text *Of Hospitality*,<sup>47</sup> deals extensively with this concept, and although I will not pursue this in depth, it may be useful to summarise the main thrust of his argument as follows: for Derrida, hospitality is viewed as a question of what arrives at the borders, in the initial surprise of contact with an *other*, a stranger, a foreigner.

I can see various similarities between my work and that of Cheronno's, as she speaks of a new community of displaced people that has formed in Cape Town. Initially, this notion was more central to my production than it is now, as I felt some kind of kinship with people who have arrived here and have no community they can easily fit into. Of course the specific circumstances of immigrants from the African continent are for the most part rather different to my own, and this has led me to consider in more detail the underlying dynamics of moving away from a community, the way in which one responds to a new place, and a lack of community.

In this regard, one can speak of a very different kind of "imagined" community. Rather than being united by a common place of origin,

[46] In this context of my research I am using the term *other* to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude others who they want to subordinate or who do not fit into their society.

[47] Derrida, J. & Dufourmantelle, A. 2000. *Of hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond.*

or identifying a common set of national symbols, many immigrants are united by *not belonging*, by being outsiders. Moreover, seen through the eyes of local population (in this case, South Africans), this unification through being *outside* takes on a more sinister tone. It is my feeling, that many local South Africans are not able to tell clearly who this community of outsiders are, how they may be identified, and so on, because they are seen simply as *others*.

[Fig. 19] Mimi Cherono Ng'ok.  
*This Place I Call Home*, 2006  
Photography series



[Fig. 20] Mimi Cherono Ng'ok.  
*This Place I Call Home*, 2006  
Photography series



# CREATIVE METHODOLOGY

In this section I will describe the methods I have applied in my creative process to construct a fictional Lithuanian community, and to give shape to my thoughts around my own history and my dislocation, as I have outlined below. I have used three main methods for the construction of this body of work. The first method pertains to the way in which I have sourced material for my work, the second refers to the systematic way in which I have reflected on my current situation and the third concerns the specific questions about my identity as a Lithuanian.

One of the most important tools I have used is the Internet, which I approached as a global field where the exchange of ideas take place. The Internet was used in my work in the following ways:

– *Swings*: Examples for the pattern for the weaving the sashes were found on the Internet, as well as e-mailed to me from Lithuania. This is significant because it reveals the way in which, in contemporary society, the proliferation of digital media affords easier communication between geographically removed parts of the world. Moreover, the Internet plays an important role in the way in which things are represented to us in contemporary society, and thus makes an important contribution to the way in which communities are constructed and their identities are “imagined”.

– *Do Potatoes Matter?*: Images for my short video were sourced exclusively from Internet forums, blogs and chats. By using them, I have self-consciously harvested material from the “imaginings” and representations of a number of Internet users. The work, in some ways, represents the kinds of images that have surfaced as being important in the way in which Lithuanian culture is understood and represented. Of course, since I am currently outside of Lithuania, these platforms also inform my own constructions of Lithuanian identity.

– *15 Reasons to Breathe*: The texts for this work were taken from online forums that discuss what it means to be Lithuanian and

what life is like in the country. I wanted to use them because they revealed some of the major streams in discussions about Lithuania, and the way in which the national identity is being articulated. The fact that this could be accessed through the Internet is important, because I find myself currently at a distance from the place that they are talking about, yet, I can find people with similar interests, or people from my “nation-based” community even from here. The particularities of their texts guided me to reflect on my own memories and perceptions about the place where I come from, and am now representing, and re-constructing within a new space.

In all these examples, it is evident that the Internet has had a large influence on my production here. This is intended to reflect an engagement with the way in which the Internet shapes our expressions and our representations, but also, to signify the changing relationship between people from different countries through the communication possibilities brought about by technological developments.

Throughout the process of creating a fictional Lithuanian community in Cape Town, I endeavoured to self-consciously consider the ways in which I was trying to bring aspects of my Lithuanian context into my daily living. Some of the most salient of these include:

- Collecting different fragments of experiences from other communities. Memorising, stealing all bits and pieces of images, sounds, tastes and smells that are familiar to me from my own history and traditions. This magpie approach was vital, as it suggests in the first place that the experiences one regards as unique to one’s own culture, are seldom thus. It further underscores the “imagined” nature of the sense of community.
- Projecting personal values and expectations on the other communities. Assuming that other people will behave the same way as people from my community would behave in the same situation.

- Intensifying my personal interests in Lithuanian history, traditions and culture. I was struck by the realisation that for the first time, I had to use the phrase "in my culture...".

- Filling "empty" spaces in everyday life with imagined stories. That is, imagining how something would turn out if it were to happen in Lithuania.

All of these processes indicate that in my time away from Lithuania I became more intently focused on what it means for me to come from a *specific place* (Lithuania), and the way in which that place was represented in my own mind. This process is the clearest example of the way in which distance establishes a new perspective, one that I have tried to examine and represent both in this essay and in my work. I have kept records of all these different experiences, and used them as a departure point in my work. A good example of this can be seen with the sashes in *Swings*. While such sashes are common and familiar to people in Lithuania, they have obtained a special meaning for me lately. They represent something to which I do not have access here, and which people in South Africa do not know in the same way that I do. To a large degree they then start to signify my distance from the place where they (and I) come from, but at the same time, they function as a link, a connection to that place.

By looking at critical discourse around my own culture, traditions and history I started exploring my Lithuanian-ness. What does it mean to be Lithuanian? Does Lithuanian-ness exist only as long as somebody is talking about it? What if we are already in the process of losing our national specificity and our nation-based identity finally will be simply dissolved?

"Lithuanian-ness" exists to all those who name themselves as "Lithuanians". However, this in itself is not that simple, as many Lithuanians will look suspiciously on Jewish, Russian (like myself) or Polish people who would call themselves Lithuanian. Even so, "Lithuanian-ness" is something that seemingly bonds people



(Fig. 21) One and only Lithuanian Afro Baris

together regardless of personal idiosyncrasies, and it makes a group of people distinct from the members of other nations. It is not important that we have never met and probably will never meet most other people from the same nation. Moreover, it does not matter that probably not all of those I have met might feel sympathy or at least understand my way of thinking. This is something truly linking "Lithuanians" one to each other – and that is a myth of our communality, the fantasy about ourselves as a community, and the collective imagination in Benedict Anderson's sense.

[48] Coetzee, P.H. 2002. Particularity in morality and its relation to community. In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J. ed. *Philosophy from Africa*, p. 275.

In this regard, Pieter H. Coetzee<sup>48</sup> observes very astutely that,

Choice and identity are informed by a community's accumulated cultural capital through the agency of a tradition. A tradition is a historically extended socially embedded narrative about the systems of thought [...] and social practices of a specific community. The idea of a historically extended narrative stresses the role of traditions in contemporary community which lies in the possibility they create for interpretative continuity: the possibility of reinterpretation of exemplars from history connects contemporary events with the past, which means that the social meaning of any particular tradition is always open-ended.

These three elements of my methodology address the sources for, production of and reflections on my work. They are all deeply informed by my concerns regarding communities in general, the relationship of an individual to a community, and my particular personal context as seen in these terms. I have endeavoured to find ways in which to give expression to these ideas in visual terms, and as such have made use of installation and video formats in particular. I have chosen these platforms, as they are by the nature of their media able to convey ideas in spatial and narrative terms, rather than through figurative depiction, or static representation as such.

# BODY OF WORK: ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS / VIENAS BE KITŲ

My body of work, entitled *One Without the Others / Vienas be kitų*,<sup>49</sup> consists of three separate artworks, namely *Swings*, *15 Reasons to Breathe*, and the short video *Do Potatoes Matter?* In the section below I will discuss each of them separately in relation to the ideas that I have already set out in this essay.

## *SWINGS*, 2007

Zygmunt Bauman powerfully suggests, that “What that word (community) evokes is everything we miss and what we lack to be secure, confident and trusting”.<sup>50</sup> This idea has been central to the irony I observe within the dynamic of belonging to a community. On the one hand, a community provides a place, a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the fact that a community has, in many ways, a homogenising influence, results in some cases in a lack of freedom and individuality, or even tolerance for difference. It is this irony that lies at the heart of *Swings*.

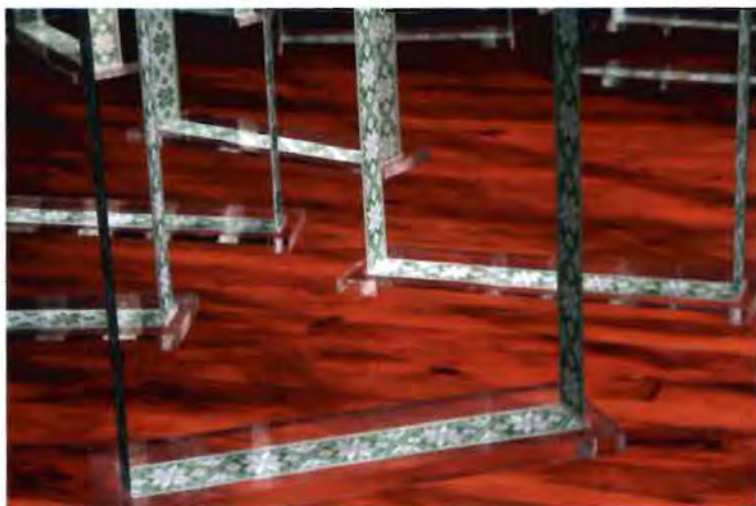
[49] “*Vienas be kitų*” – “One Without the Others” in Lithuanian

[50] Bauman, Z. 2001. *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world*, p. 3.



[Fig. 22] *Swings*, 2007  
Perspex panels, nylon sashes, timber  
Dimensions: 4 x 4.5 x 6 m, 30 swings

[Fig. 23] *Swings*, 2007 (detail)



[Fig. 24] *Swings*, 2007 (detail)



The installation *Swings* consists of thirty portable suspended swings that are made using woven sashes with a pattern derived from traditional Lithuanian sashes, and panels of clear Perspex acrylic glass.

I can see various similarities between my artwork and work of Audrius Novickas *Tricolour Sets*. In my work I am also using an old Lithuanian national symbol, only in my case it is sashes. On another hand, the works of South Korean-USA artist Do-Ho Suh share my interest in exploring notion of space that is both separating and connecting individuals.

The main concept of the work is the expression of the feeling of being in a community through the interaction with specially created and arranged swings. The installation is interactive, the viewer can touch and push the swings.<sup>51</sup> The idea behind this is that a person can swing only when he or she is alone, or otherwise will bump into other people. So it is when you are outside your community and usual network of relationships – it is freedom and loneliness at the same time.<sup>52</sup>

The sashes used in the work were custom-made in one of Cape Town's weaving factories, especially for my project. This production turned out to be more complicated than I had initially expected, as this type of textile is not a part of the local tradition in Cape Town. In this sense, the production of these sashes made me very aware of the process of creating a Lithuanian community here, in that the traditions do not already exist, but have to be simulated, therefore foregrounding the imaginative aspect of the work. The main reason why I have chosen to use traditional sashes, is that by producing sashes here, in a completely different historical and cultural context, I wanted to replicate my Lithuanian context, by making what is essentially an imagined, or fictional object.

National sashes constitute an old and very traditional part of Lithuanian culture. It is a symbol of happiness, gratitude and attachment. The basic function of the sash, or *juosta*, was to secure the skirt, as well as to girdle the waist (in order to allow freedom of movement), as well as to make women's headpieces. It was also used as part of the swaddling for babies, particularly when they were taken to church to be baptised, to support baskets while



(Fig. 25) *Swings*, 2007 (detail)

[51] The swings were created and constructed in such a way as to carry the weight of sitting people and so to be fully functional. Unfortunately, however, when weight was applied, the edges of the Perspex seats turned out to be too sharp and cut in the sashes, and so were not performing to their full concept. This would have to be corrected before the sashes are exhibited again, so that they can fulfil their role as functional objects in an installation.

[52] I often get to hear complaints about Lithuanians' unsolidarity, envy, desire to harm his or her fellow-countrymen. "If you will meet Lithuanian in foreign country, never expect his or her help, better don't say at all that you are Lithuanian as well, because they will rob you, steal from you." Personal interviews with Lithuanian emigrants to Spain and UK, 2004-2007.



(Fig. 26) Lithuanian traditional sashes

[53] Bakškonis, J. 1961. *Audinių raištai*, p. 26-34.



[Fig. 27] Traditional weaving.



[Fig. 28] Weaving tools.

[54] Tamošaitienė, A. & Tamošaitis, A. 1983. *Lithuanian sashes*, p. 105-107.

sowing, and pots of food taken to the field workers. They were used to spread under the feet of the bride and bridegroom in church, as well as to support the coffin while lowering it into the ground.

Every girl was supposed to know how to make sashes.<sup>53</sup> After the wedding, on the way to her new home, a bride used to tie sashes on the walkway crosses and trees and then on the gate of her husband's homestead to ensure their happy conjugal life. She used to leave sashes at every place they were likely to be frequenting in the future – at the fireplace, the porch, the bathhouse. Sashes were also used as presents for the musicians at the wedding and for the neighbours. I think of this tradition as, in a way, the bride “buying” her way into the foreign land – namely that of her husband's family.

In contemporary times, sashes, very often with words woven into them, are used to honour people on the occasion of their birthdays, or to welcome a honourable guest. Sashes are also used on funeral wreaths instead of ribbons. They are frequently mentioned in folk songs and legends.

Sashes are produced by twisting, twining and weaving techniques. Those, found in ancient burial places, date back to the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Earlier, several scores of motifs were used in sashes. Symbols of the celestial bodies predominated, such as crosses, stars, and very often a six-pointed star in a rhombus. Also popular were the motifs of fir-tree, blossom, bud, rake, and tree of life.<sup>54</sup> Usually flax, wool or hemp yarns were used.

I used clear Perspex acrylic glass panels for the seats of the swings. I chose this particular material, as I was attracted to its clearness and lucidity, since these characteristics corresponded with my general feeling about space for the imaginary and dreams.

## 15 REASONS TO BREATHE, 2007

The project *15 Reasons to Breathe* consists of fifteen white square frames with white backgrounds that are made in a specific way so that when you breathe on the glass, the hidden text appears.



[Fig. 29] *15 Reasons to Breathe*, 2007  
Wood, glass, paper, hardboard, face tonic  
Dimensions: 15 frames, each 22 x 22 x 2.5 cm

A number of things influenced the creation of this artwork. One of them was a childhood memory from schoolbooks which told a tale about Lenin. In this tale it is related how, when Lenin was in jail, he communicated with the outside world through messages written in milk, which were at first invisible (being white liquid on a white page) but turned yellow when held over the candle flame. Another

powerful memory, which originates from my winter experiences in Lithuania, is an image of frost on the houses and cars windows' glasses. These two memories combine in a powerful personal experience, as they are both quite specific to my Lithuanian context.

I can, however, also relate this work to Mimi Cheron's photographs. In her work there are a half-visible words on the glass in front of every person's photo, and which creates a multilayered effect.

[Fig. 30] *15 Reasons to Breathe*, 2007 (detail)



For my project I have used texts based on Lithuanian Internet forums, where those people who left Lithuania and those who are living in the country, are continuously arguing where it is better to live. For example, texts from these forums include:

"Our country has an old and glorious history, of which we can be proud."

"I can't live in a society where envy is the only feeling unifying people."

"Individual means nothing here."

"Don't even think to get sick here - you will rot alive!"

"Here I work to live, and not to save for life in the future."

"This country has the most beautiful women."

The fact that these texts are translated from Lithuanian to English language therefore brings another aspect into discussion, that of the relation between one's native tongue and a foreign language, as well as what is lost in translation. As I have experienced, the role of one's native language in everyday live outside own native community is one the important ones. Rainer Ganahl<sup>55</sup> notes,

The reasons for keeping and defending one's own language are obvious. Language is the primary medium of understanding, memory, and exchange of the individual and of the society one belongs to. [...] To belong to a linguistic community or to be excluded from it can have a major impact on a person. [...] Exclusions are of a linguistic nature.

To allow text to appear on the glass, the viewer has to get intimately close to it and breathe. Breath brings a very personal relation with the text, it recalls notions of voice and remembered experiences, and makes them alive. But it also creates an idealisation of one's own memories and history. It is as momentary as a flashback,<sup>56</sup> the sudden and disturbingly vivid recollection of events from the past. There is a basic feeling of loneliness, which is for just one short moment veiled by the flashback and the hearing of many voices.

[55] Ganahl, R. 1998. *Language in the age of global networks*. [O] Available at: [www.ganahl.info/languageandglobalisation.html](http://www.ganahl.info/languageandglobalisation.html)

[56] In history, film, television and other media a *flashback* is an interjected scene that takes the narrative back in time from the current point the story has reached. *Flashbacks* are often used to recount events that happened prior to the story's primary sequence of events or to fill in crucial backstory. Wikipedia: *Flashback*. [O] Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashback>

[Fig. 31] *15 Reasons to Breathe*, 2007 (detail)



Everything I have discussed above is intended to reflect on what happens when the one's community appears to be very distant, unreachable and unattainable. Only for a short period of time, like the length of a breath, can one can feel the sensation of being inside a community. In my work, the short-lived nature of this experience, as well as the continuous reminder that it is imaginary, reveals some of the complexities of a sense of community that I have explored in this essay.



[Fig. 32] *15 Reasons to Breathe*, 2007 (detail)

## DO POTATOES MATTER?, 2007



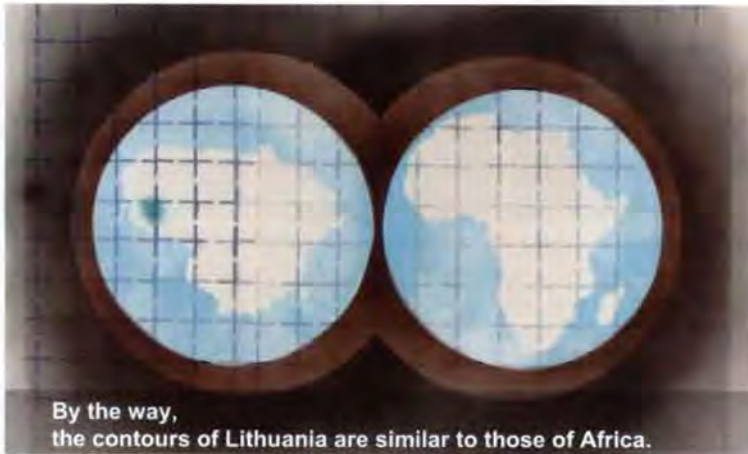
Behind the construction of this video piece is the personal experience of ongoing storytelling about the place I come from. After two years of doing this, my stories have been transforming into an increasingly self-contained tale about Lithuania. Since most of the people I have met know very little about Lithuania, I have learned to be faced with all kind of bizarre questions and remarks. From regular requests to spell out the name of the country, to “Hey, it’s so cold over there!” and “Do you have black people there?” Over the time, the already prepared answers were formed in my head. Soon I had all the tools to create a myth about Lithuania myself (or even for myself). This reconstructed, imagined epic about Lithuania filled the emptiness of not being there, and gave rise to the creative representations.

The title of the piece *Do Potatoes Matter?* is derived from an unsuccessful attempt to change my usual potato diet to the more popular rice-based in Cape Town. Even though I have tried to adapt, my body seems to still desire the potato-based meals. It is interesting to me that a one needs to adapt not only mentally, but that one’s body also responds to the changes in location. So for me the chosen title signifies the importance of native practises and habits.

The texts in my video piece range from recalling the emotions evoked by my experience of being outside my Lithuanian community, to certain peculiar historical and political characteristics of Lithuania, all of which are mixed with (self) irony as a presentation of Lithuania, as I imagine it, to a South African context. All the images<sup>57</sup> used in this presentation were sourced from public web sites, as it constitutes a part of my interest in the representation of Lithuanian identity, as I have indicated in my methodology.

[57] Except one image, which is a photo taken by me

In constructing this piece I also make reference to the notion of the flashback, something that happens very quickly, where you do not have time to reflect on what you just have seen in your mind's eye, or remembered. I imagine this visual story as a kind of "reverse postcard", because I am not sending images from South Africa to Lithuania, but rather, showing my community as it exists in my personal visualisation, to South Africa. This visualisation is in turn informed by my daily records, in which I reflect on my Lithuanian community. These records were largely collated through notes concerning my own flashbacks. In this way I want to share those flashbacks, in their disjunctive and associative nature, with *others*.



[Fig. 33] *Do Potatoes Matter?*, 2007  
 Digital video  
 Duration: 10'40"

# CONCLUSION

[SB] Sollins. S. 2003. *Art 21: art in the twenty-first century. Seasons one and two. Do-Ho Suh.* (videorecording)

As Do-Ho Suh observes, "displacement gives me a space to have some critical distance to everything, it allows me to see things differently".<sup>58</sup>

The creation of a fictional community in my work, in essence provides a space for critical discourse on my personal identity. Being away from one's native community, leaving both one's individual and collective past behind, is not a unique situation. Increasingly, on a global scale, people are moving between countries for a number of different reasons. My move has led me to feel lonely and isolated, but most importantly it alerted me to the need of creating a community, or belonging to one, and the role it plays in my identity. My reflections on what a community means to me have directly influenced my creative process, and as a result I have managed to establish a community of sorts through my work – at least a fictional one.

As I have explored and illustrated both in my essay and in my body of work, this creation of a fictional community is a complex and manifold process. It requires a good comprehension of historical, as well as theoretical background of the notion of community, as well as the particularities of one's specific background.

In order to address this, I have, in my discussion, used texts by Benedict Anderson, Kwame Gyekye, and Kazys Pakštas to establish this necessary foundation. I have chosen these three remarkable, but divergent authors, to reflect on the notion of community from a variety of angles. Each was useful to my thinking for their particular approach. Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of the "imagined" community. Kwame Gyekye provided valuable insight into notion of communal life in selected African communities. While Kazys Pakštas's project "Emergency Lithuania" brought the irony of the creation of a fictional community to my attention. I would like to reiterate, however, that I have not attempted to establish a fully comprehensive overview of the theories around communities, as

this essay serves to introduce my personal concerns as they relate to my work.

In addition, my analysis of the work of selected contemporary artists who in their concepts and approaches resonate with my own practice, constituted a very important part of my study. As particular examples, I have selected to discuss the works of Lithuanian artists Andrius Novickas and Ugnius Gelguda, South Korean-USA artist Do-Ho Suh, and Kenyan-South African artist Mimi Cheron Ng'ok. I have consciously chosen artists from different parts of the world, so to illustrate their diverse strategies, but they nevertheless share an interest in the function of national symbols, or the relationship between an individual and his or her community.

The construction of a fictional community necessitates the mastery of certain strategic and technological methods and processes. I have endeavoured to make use of important tools in global communication, especially the Internet, while at the same time reflecting on one of the most basic elements of human interaction, namely language and one's native tongue. I have drawn on my personal experiences throughout, and in this sense, the project can be seen as highly individualized reflection on myself, and my country of origin. In my work, I did not aim to develop a "real" community, but instead, to create a sense of belonging and a deeper understanding of the existing balance between freedom and loneliness, versus, on the other hand, the security of being inside a native community.

Finding myself now at the end of this process, I have to ask what my motivation was to create this fictional community. Would it have made me happy to bring over to Cape Town a few thousands of Lithuanians? I doubt it. Maybe then, to open a Lithuanian language course, so that finally I would have somebody, except the cats, to talk to? I am not, however, really sure that anybody would find a practical reason to learn a language with seven grammatical cases of decliner and thirteen participles, and with only four millions

native speakers. Would I really want to hear “Oh yes, I know these Lithuanians!”, just to see articles in the newspapers about crimes committed by some Lithuanian immigrant? Of course not. The notion of creating a Lithuanian community here, was never intended to represent an actual movement of people, but rather to draw attention to the impossibility of recreating one place in another.

At this time, I also have to review the process I have undergone, my subjective experiences of being here. Could it be that I quite like to be seen as “exotic”? After reflecting on these issues for a long time, both privately as well as in my work, I came to the answer that there is *no* final answer, no *one* solution by which to position myself in relation to my context. And, it is all right to feel differently every day. One day, I am missing my Lithuanian community, and the next one, I am thinking that I could never feel as free and independent inside it, as I am here, through being a total stranger. I believe that the dynamic between an individual and a community is different at any given point of time, and depends on many different components. And I feel that I cannot draw a line, because it is in a very human nature to seek both for freedom *and* security. And this is exactly what I have done expressing these dynamics through my artworks.

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[Fig. 32] Simonson, K. 2007. *15 Reasons to Breathe* (detail).

[Fig. 33] Simonson, K. 2007. *Do Potatoes Matter?*