

Rendering Race Through a Paranoid Postsocialist Lens Activist Curating and Public Engagement in the Postcolonial Debate in Eastern Europe

Redi Koobak

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

Margaret Tali

Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn, Estonia

Abstract This chapter engages with the heated public debate on racial representation and colonial history that arose around Kumu Art Museum's exhibition *Rendering Race* (2021) in Estonia. As an academic activist intervention, it proposed an important shift by changing racist titles of artworks from the twentieth century and thereby for the first time in the museum's practice considered minority groups as its publics. The chapter analyses the curatorial strategies used and the key points of contention in the public debate to consider what it revealed and obscured about Eastern Europe's relationship to the aftermath of European colonialism.

Keywords Activist curating. Renaming. Postcolonial Europe. Postsocialism. Eastern Europe. Estonian art.

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1 Introduction

In the current climate of increasing polarisation of societies and the rise of right-wing movements in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, academics and public intellectuals play an active role in translating, situating, and shaping global debates for local publics. A powerful example of these divisive issues that have galvanised academics into action is the variety of campaigns to decolonize institutions of knowledge production, such as museums and universities, and struggles to counter racism in Europe which have gained new momentum across the globe with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US and its transnational reiterations. In many contexts, museums have paved the way in communicating postcolonial and decolonial debates¹ to local audiences, using cultural heritage to create public discussions that are often very emotional because they touch upon deeply rooted understandings of values, identity and belonging.

In this chapter, we focus on Estonia as an example of a postsocialist Eastern European context where the urgent task of examining Europe as postcolonial and the country's relation to it unexpectedly emerged around a public debate about an art exhibition. Curated by US American art historian Bart Pushaw, this exhibition *Rendering Race* (17 February-5 December 2021) was held at the temporary Project Space of the National Art Museum Kumu and formed a part of its new permanent exhibition *Landscapes of Identity: Estonian Art 1700-1945*. With its focus on historical visual representations of race and racial difference, underexplored in the Estonian context, the exhibition reached an engaged public far beyond regular museum visitors. In particular, the curatorial decision to change racially charged titles of artworks provoked heated discussions that unfolded during the almost one year that the exhibition was open. To our knowledge, it is the first time that such renaming of artworks, which has been a contentious practice in countries like the Netherlands or Germany, has taken place in Eastern Europe.

Drawing on our knowledge of Estonia as “intimate insiders outside” and our politics of location (Tali, Astahovska 2022) as visual culture scholars writing from and with a postcolonial and postsocialist perspective, we examine both the exhibition and the emotionally charged public reactions that it provoked. We suggest that *Rendering Race* can be viewed as an example of academic activist curating that attempted to bring the subject of race into Estonia's public consciousness via an independent curator's collaboration with the mu-

¹ We mostly use the term “postcolonial” although the discussions pertain to the decolonial debate as well. For postcolonial responses to decolonial interventions, see Colpani et al. 2022.

seum. We will analyse the curatorial strategies used in this exhibition and the key points of contention in public reactions. Insights into this debate and its cultural and geopolitical implications allow us to demonstrate why this exhibition caused such a stir and what the public response revealed and obscured about Eastern Europe's relationship to the aftermath of European colonialism.

2 **Rendering Race as an Academic Activist Project**

Weaving together insights from cultural and art historians, Kumu Art Museum has recently made a significant contribution to the much-needed process of rethinking Estonian history beyond the narrow nationalist frame. As a result, the museum's renewed permanent exhibition, curated by Kadi Polli and Linda Kaljundi, offers a new perspective on local history that highlights the historical cultural plurality of the country by focusing on Russian and Baltic-German communities that had previously not been made sufficiently visible in a nation-centred narrative predominant in the history-writing of the region. From the beginning of the eighteenth century until the First World War, the Estonian territory was colonised by the Russian Empire, although its governance and education remained mostly German even until 1918 when Estonia became independent. The process of revisiting local history at Kumu involved an intensified focus on gender, class, and race, hence also complicating predominant understandings of Estonianness and the country's shifting place within Europe.

The exhibition *Rendering Race* that complemented the permanent exhibition grew out of curiosity for why Estonian artists of the twentieth century suddenly became interested in depicting people from other cultures (Kaljundi 2021). The external curator Bart Pushaw, a long-term collaborator of Kumu, was invited to engage with artworks of the 1920s and 1930s from the museum's collection through a focus on race and racial differences [fig. 1]. The exhibition told the story of how "[t]he global reach of European imperialism facilitated frequent contacts between Estonians and people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas" (Pushaw 2021) and the curator proposed to read this story through a postcolonial lens.

Since the theme of race has largely been absent from Estonian history writing, appearing for a long time only with reference to the eugenics movement in the 1930s (e.g., see Weiss-Wendt 2013; Kalling 2013), Pushaw's decision had an activist orientation. Whereas activist work is often seen as in opposition and as external to museum organisations, we understand academic activist curating in this case as a type of pedagogical practice that helps to draw attention to marginalised subjectivities and to initiate public conversations on previously unexplored topics. Our case study brings to the fore the possi-



Figure 1 Screenshot of the guided video tour by the curator Bart Pushaw at the *Rendering Race* exhibition. The video was produced by Kumu Museum and made available via its website

bility of engaging with such work through collaboration and at least partially from within museums.

What a postcolonial perspective in the Estonian context might mean is a complex matter. Postcolonial critique of Europe often denotes “critique of the overseas colonial past of several Western European countries and of the superiority of the West according to the universalist thinking of the Enlightenment”, in which countries of East-Central Europe have played “an insignificant or no role” (Kováts 2021). While this question has been raised and explored by many scholars,² these debates still tend to overlook the positioning of East-Central Europe because of its complex relationship to the colonial history of Europe, particularly when viewed from the perspective of “postcolonial/post-socialist juncture” (Tlostanova 2017). So far, a postcolonial approach to cultures in the Baltic region has been particularly insightful for analysing the Soviet period, for instance, through the concept of “Soviet colonialism” (Annus 2012; 2018). More recently, however, the introduction of the concept of “entangled histories” (Undusk 2000; Werner, Zimmermann 2006; Laanes 2020), influenced by postcolonial studies and the idea of interconnectedness of different cultures in the region, marks a shift away from the more typical methodological nationalism that has been prevalent in the history writing of the region.

² Bakić-Hayden 1995; Kelertas 2006; Boatcă 2020; Koobak et al. 2021.

Race is a topic that is difficult to raise because most people in Estonia do not think about themselves as racialised subjects. Unacknowledged anxieties about race and racialisation are closely tied to the relation Estonia has with Europeanness. Like many other Eastern European states which are consistently placed in the hierarchy of “degrees of Europeanness” as “epigonal Europe in the East” which is “‘not yet’ modern” (Boatcă 2020, 10), this sense of an imagined and perceived “lagging behind” European modernity (Koobak 2013; Koobak, Marling 2014) has been ingrained in the Estonian nationalist narrative since the national awakening in the nineteenth century. The disintegration of the Soviet and Eastern European socialisms created a vast population invested in “becoming European” again (Dzenovska 2018, 16) and asserting their Europeanness due to the concurrent perceived misrecognition of Eastern Europe as “lesser European” compared to its Western counterpart that has designated this position to them since the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994). Furthermore, the investment in becoming a European subject has been linked to the struggle to gain equal recognition for the narratives of the twentieth century history of the Baltic States within the “core” narrative of what “Europe” is (Mälksoo 2009, 655).

Pushaw introduced a transnational perspective to representations of racial differences in Estonian art in the exhibition by emphasising “the importance of race as a phenomenon of visual difference” (Pushaw 2021) and encouraging Estonians to “start thinking about wider connections with the world” (Kaljundi, Pushaw, Velvet 2021). The exhibition encompassed a variety of material, including sketches of theatre set designs, etiquettes of cigarette and tobacco packages next to paintings, graphics, sculptures, and caricatures by some of the most acknowledged local artists of the early twentieth century. Hence, the topic of race was contextualised in the broader visual culture of the era, turning the exhibition into an important addition to scholarship on Estonian culture and history which has rarely evoked the concept of race.

In exhibitions motivated by activism, museum wall texts function as amplifiers of the affective force of images (Simon 2014, 70), guiding the viewers’ gaze. Upon entering the project space area of *Rendering Race*, the visitor first encountered a wall text that framed the presented material. Thematically, the exhibition was divided into four themes, “Desire”, “Beauty and Ugliness”, “Entertainers” and “The Timeless East”, although these were not specifically demarcated or explained. The text began by marking its temporal focus on the first decades of Estonian independence that saw profound and irreversible changes in the social status of Estonians, “transforming how they perceived themselves” (Pushaw 2021). Furthermore, Pushaw suggested that through their encounters with people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas, which became possible because of European colonialism, Estonians

realised that the general categories of race assumed more importance than specific categories of ethnicity or nationality: if any dark-skinned person with tropical origins was Black, then light-skinned Estonians were white. (Pushaw 2021)

Using the category “white” to refer to Estonians was a bold intervention by the curator since in the Estonian language racialised terms are mostly used to describe people and cultures who are visibly different from the unmarked majority white population.

One of the challenges that the curator faced was the question what to do with titles of artworks from the early twentieth century that used language deemed offensive in contemporary context. As the recent debates around whether the use of the Estonian word “neeger” is racist have demonstrated, many people who insist on it still being a neutral non-offensive descriptive term, as it was a hundred years ago (Lips 2021), end up using it exactly for that effect – to offend. Therefore, the curator’s main activist gesture was to change racialised titles of artworks. Following a similar practice in several other countries, this curatorial strategy aimed to remove

from the museum’s vocabulary – and from the broader societal vocabulary – words that emerged as part of racist and discriminatory discourses, which [...] have shaped in harmful ways how certain groups are perceived and represented. (Modest 2018, 13-14)

In this case, the curator decided to present the new neutral names alongside the older exoticising and discriminatory labels which were included in a smaller font and in brackets in order to create a broader discussion about “how historical images of race inform the injustices of today” (Pushaw 2021). For example, Kristine Mei’s glazed ceramic sculpture previously titled “Negro with bananas” (1925) was renamed “Man with bananas” and Eduard Wiiralt’s print “Negro heads” (1933) was replaced with “Heads”.³ Furthermore, the derogatory word “gypsy” was also changed, for instance, by replacing the title of Aino Bach’s etching “Young Gypsy” (1934) with “Young Roma”. This gesture thus acknowledged the role of language in showing respect towards and recognition of marginalised groups. However, some changes in titles were also motivated by other reasons. For instance, Eduard Wiiralt’s woodcut that was named “Oriental Motif” (1925) in the reputable 1958 catalogue of the artist was renamed “Family” because the previous title was inaccurate. Changes like these reflect the challenges of contemporary museum work,

3 In the interest of readability, we only include the English translations of the artworks’ titles and not the Estonian originals throughout this chapter.



Figure 2 Exhibition view with the collection of Dimitri and Ivan Solomentsev on the foreground. Photo by S.Stepaško. Courtesy of the Kumu Museum

balancing between staying true to the artists' intentions and considering current debates on racial justice and legacies of colonialism.

Interestingly, Pushaw also integrated artworks of African origin from collections of other local museums (fig. 2) in juxtaposition with the artworks by Estonian artists in order to further explore how Estonians of that time encountered cultural differences and how their perception of racialised people was shaped by European colonialism. The brief wall text explained that these artworks were part of the collection of African art brought to Estonia by Dimitri Solomentsev who was dispatched together with his brother Ivan by the Ministry of the French Colonies in 1928, "to work as medics in the French Congo and the Belgian Congo" (Pushaw 2021). While Ivan died of malaria in 1934, Dimitri returned to Estonia, donating their collection to the Estonian National Museum. By including these objects in the exhibition, Pushaw raised the theme of collaboration of Estonians with Western administrations in overseas colonies and opened the question how Estonian history could be conceptualised through a postcolonial lens differently than has been done thus far. As the accompanying wall text alluded to the colonial fantasies of collectors of such artworks, we might conclude that Pushaw aimed to challenge the widespread and largely unquestioned insistence in Estonian public discourse on Estonia having nothing to do with colonialism.

The exhibition also purposely included some openly racist images by caricature artist Gori (Vello Agori) which were displayed behind a wall and accompanied by a warning sign indicating that the artworks were “examples of anti-Black racism in Estonian art” (Pushaw 2021). The curator explained in an interview that even though he initially hesitated to include these disturbing images in the exhibition, “it was the museum’s task to show uncomfortable things as well” (Potisepp 2021) and instead of hiding them away, invite the visitors to reflect on how Estonian visual culture was also inter-connected with the racist worldviews of that time. Since the satirical caricatures are offensive, the curator decided to separate them from the rest of the exhibition so that the visitors could choose not to see them.

Significantly, the act of changing titles of artworks in Kumu Museum initiated by Pushaw and fiercely debated by the public carried a symbolic weight for local museums at large since the new versions of the titles continue to appear in the digital search engine ‘MUIS’ of musealized heritage in Estonia (Maasik 2021). In our view, such activist curating with a teaching moment introduces a more entangled understanding of history which plays a particularly important role in rethinking local identities and deeply ingrained national narratives. In the next section, we trace the public reactions to this gesture in order to take a closer look at the specific dynamics of public engagement with questions of race and postcolonial Europe. This enables us to further nuance the implications of European colonialism in Eastern Europe which sees itself as separate and has for long congealed the entangled nature of the historical and cultural developments in its history writing.

3 The Public Lives of *Rendering Race*

When *Rendering Race* opened in early 2021, it immediately provoked a whirlwind of heated reactions which unfolded into a debate that lasted throughout the 11 months that it stayed open. This was hardly unpredictable considering the rise of right-wing politics that has emerged in Estonia in recent years, yet more extensive in scale than the museum had anticipated. Like many other countries, Estonia has seen an increase in openly racist and xenophobic statements in the local media, contributing to the polarisation of the contemporary society into traditionally and progressively thinking groups, particularly since the right-wing party EKRE reached a large presence in the Estonian Parliament in 2019. The manifestation of illiberal discourse has, in turn, strengthened the progressively oriented groups as well. Alongside the public debate about other polarising issues such as ethnicity, nationalism, human rights, migration, the rise of feminism or the threat of the climate crisis, the exhibition firmly placed the topic

of race and colonialism amongst the divisive issues that imprint the rhetoric of politicians and citizens alike, revealing the most burning anxieties around socio-political problems in Estonia.

The debate around *Rendering Race* involved different key agents, including the curator, conservative critics, several members of EKRE, academics, art professionals and organisations gathering experts in the fields of arts and museums. The main outlets where the discussion took place were the daily and weekly newspapers, comment sections of these newspapers, public online media platform ERR and right-wing platform *Uued Uudised*, art magazine, public radio, a podcast, and social media channels. Around the time of the exhibition opening in February 2021 when the curator was in Estonia, the media approached him for interviews but after he left, the museum curators answered media requests for comments. Although the international coverage of the exhibition was scarce, the curator was invited to talk about it in a series of online talks organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art as part of their project “Reflecting Post-Socialism through Post-Colonialism in the Baltics”, and *Eurozine* published an interview with him (Kaljundi, Pushaw, Velvet 2021).

As it quickly became clear, public engagement with questions around how Estonia relates to discourses of race and European colonialism played out differently than the curator and the museum had expected. The museum hoped to create an arena for rethinking Estonian history globally (Hellerma 2021): to raise questions about the position of Estonian artists in relation to European imaginaries of racial differences and the nature of unequal power relations in local and international contexts (Maasik 2021). Instead, it was the act of changing racially charged titles of artworks that became the central point of contention in the media and triggered highly emotional reactions. As an immediate response, several opinion pieces were published in public online media and daily newspapers which interpreted the renaming of artworks as “absurd” (Uued Uudised 2021a); a form of “cancel culture” (Valge 2021); being “in contradiction with the museum’s task to preserve cultural heritage” (Kiviberg in Eesmaa 2021); and many drew parallels with practices of censorship during the Soviet era (Luik 2021; Hennoste in Hellerma 2021). Furthermore, it was seen as “falsification” of history (Vahtre 2021) and framed as an undemocratic attempt to present the so-called politically correct opinion as “the only correct opinion” (Uued Uudised 2021b).

Since the public debate was so heated, the museum invested more time in explaining the themes of the exhibition and defending the curator’s choices than is normally common. For instance, this explanatory work involved an interview with the curators of the new permanent exhibition at Kumu (Raud 2021), a blog post on the museum’s website clarifying the process of changing titles of artworks (Tiideberg 2021) and Linda Kaljundi’s interview with Bart Pushaw and his-

torian Aro Velmet (Kaljundi 2021). They underlined the commonality of the practice to change the titles of artworks within museum work when new information about them resurfaces or because older artworks are often left untitled, it is not uncommon for the museum staff to give descriptive titles to them much later.

After several critics claimed on social media that *Rendering Race* censored “authentic” culture expressed in the artworks’ original titles, the response to the exhibition quickly escalated and shifted from the cultural sphere to the political. The debates took a surprising turn when the MPs of EKRE requested that the Minister of Culture appear at a Parliament hearing and justify the exhibition and its politics of renaming artworks. The parliamentary interpellation that took place three months after the exhibition opened was a clear attempt to politicise this curatorial decision. Jaak Valge, a historian and the representative of EKRE who brought the request for an explanation forward, suggested that renaming artworks in the museum collection was an undemocratic practice and he associated such “copying foreign and over-ideologized campaigns” (Parliamentary debate 2021) with the repressive interventions of the Soviet regime into artistic practice in Estonia. He framed it as an example of “cancel culture”, “a step further from the concept of leftist liberal political correctness that disapproves certain use of language” (Parliamentary debate 2021). He also pointed out that cancel culture disregards the fact that people cannot be held responsible for the offences of the past generations, and that we should not make judgements about history according to current values.

In her response, the Minister of Culture Anneli Ott stressed the experimental nature of the exhibition. She confirmed that Estonian cultural heritage was not endangered because *Rendering Race* involved a very small selection of Estonian art and the new neutral titles of the artworks suggested by the curator would remain side by side with the old ones in the museum databases. During the debate, members of EKRE extended the conversation in different directions, instrumentalising the exhibition for their own political purposes, at times turning the Minister’s answers around or disregarding them altogether.

The parliamentary debate, in turn, provoked an emotional reaction among art and cultural professionals. It led the professional organisations in the fields of art and museums to defend the autonomy of cultural expression in a public statement to the Parliament (Public statement 2021). They described the debate as not only offensive towards the external curator and his work, but also as unfair to the Minister of Culture who was put in a complicated situation when she was asked to explain and justify the specific content of the exhibition. They saw this attempt by the right-wing party to demand the minister to interfere in the conceptual work of the institutions under her responsibility as a concrete request for censorship which would

have an intimidating effect on the cultural and art sphere, particularly with respect to initiatives that raise topical and potentially contentious issues. Moreover, they strongly defended the principle that in a democratic society we cannot and should not prescribe who is allowed to comment on the country's history and cultural heritage or which topics can be addressed and from which perspectives.

Furthermore, since the museum was closed due to another round of COVID-19 restrictions shortly after the exhibition opened in early 2021, very few people could see it at the time that the debate was unfolding. The curator's guided video tour⁴ on the Kumu website enabled the exhibition to reach a broader public than regular museum visitors, but for many this remained their only impression. Such a limited engagement with the postcolonial perspective it proposed ended up amplifying the controversial reactions. It shifted attention away from the artworks to the various emotions raised by the unprecedented debate in the Parliament around curatorial work with the effect of further dividing the public.

However, the exhibition also led to critical public engagement with questions of postcolonial Europe, particularly how present-day Eastern Europe grapples with the discourse around the former colonial practices of Western Europe. Several commentators in the debate pointed out that in the Estonian public discourse it is common to insist that "we have nothing to do with colonialism" and "our colonial legacy only has to do with once having been colonised by Germans and Russians, and later by the Soviet Union" (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021; Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021). Yet, as the exhibition suggested, Estonians were linked to the world of colonies and empires through transnational connections that opened to artists and other intellectuals during the first Estonian independence as well as through the circulation of commodities. Due to the Soviet era, which separated the Soviet sphere of influence from the rest of the world, this knowledge has been lost in public memory. As cultural historian Linda Kaljundi pointed out, the news and visual culture of the Western colonial world were, in fact, very present in the public discourse during the national awakening of Estonia at the end of the nineteenth century when many of the artists included in the exhibition grew up (Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021). In many ways then, the exhibition allowed the public to reflect on the variety of ways that Estonian artists perceived and represented colonial relations, for instance, through identifying with colonised people due to local historical experience of oppression but also at times exoticising them (Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021).

⁴ Bart Pushaw on *Rendering Race*: <https://kunstimuseum.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/project-space-ii-rendering-race/>.

Moreover, commenting on the African artefacts brought to Estonia by the Solomentsev brothers, historian Aro Velmet highlighted that the exhibition pointed to how Estonian history is “deeply embedded in the history of colonialism not just on a discursive level, but also in very material ways” (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021). Such connections continue to this day, for example, through circulation of capital or Estonia’s participation in military missions in Mali, a former French colony, and in the US invasion of Iraq (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021). Likewise, in one of the concluding articles of the extended local debates, designer and writer Maria Muuk raised the question of Eastern Europe’s dependence on Western colonial world and opportunities that this relationship created, bringing public attention to the question of complicity it raises (Muuk 2021). In public perception though, these attempts to foster new topics, narratives, and sensibilities in approaching history tend to clash with the inward-looking national visions of the past and narratives of victimhood that have been definitive to the self-image of Estonia since the end of the nineteenth century and heightened during the postsocialist era. These deeply ingrained national narratives become symbolic resources that are constantly revived and reinvented in the face of changing global discourses.

4 Rethinking Anxieties about the Postcolonial Debate

Scholarship that examines Europe through a postcolonial lens includes a wide variety of critical approaches (Ponzanesi, Colpani 2016; Jensen 2020) which insist in different ways on the “inseparability of present-day Europe from its hegemonic position in the world and its colonial history of violence and exploitation in the name of European modernity and civilization” (Butt et al. 2022, 20). *Rendering Race* sought for ways to touch upon this perspective that sees Eastern Europeans as “just beginning to realise that the memory of their trauma, the terrors of the Second World War and the memory of slavery exist in a shared space of remembrance and the two have been influencing each other in multidirectional ways” (Kaljundi 2022). Yet the specific strategies that the curator used – presenting a wide variety of racial representations from Estonian art and history museums’ collections, putting diverse artistic positions towards the theme side by side, and juxtaposing Estonian artists’ work with that of African artists to raise critical awareness about these topics – did not quite lead to the desired debate. Instead, the debate that did emerge revealed a series of anxieties around Estonia’s identity and belonging to Europe.

In our analysis, some of the misunderstandings and omissions that fuelled the reactions to *Rendering Race* arose from the confusions around the curatorial text introducing the exhibition which came

across as a matter-of-fact style ‘new’ narrative of Estonian history. This text did not explicitly raise any questions that would have invited the public to reflect on or explain the different artists’ positions in representing racial differences. Its lack of contextualisation of the subjects of race and colonialism in Estonian art and culture and occasional ambivalence in phrasing led to many misconceptions among the public which limited the possibility of engaging with the exhibited works. In fact, the wall text of *Rendering Race* seemed to close the possibility of identification with the raised themes and therefore a large portion of the public discussion continued to revolve around the question of what the curator had misunderstood.

Several critics noted that it was the wall text rather than the exhibition itself that became the focal point of the discussions (Hellerma 2021). The text framed the 1920s and 1930s in a way that neglected the consequent decades in Estonian history after the Second World War which still figure prominently in cultural memory. Most significantly, since Pushaw neither specifically related to nor brought in the familiar story of the terror of Soviet occupation following the first decades of Estonian independence (Saar 2021; Kivimaa 2021; Luik 2021), his framing of the exhibition was seen as lacking sensitivity towards aspects of Estonian history and cultural identity that are often considered crucial if not definitive. By introducing a post-colonial perspective on race through his curatorial choices, the curator dismissed the memory of socialism.

The heated debate over renaming the artworks, which became the main object of contention, and which was sometimes perceived as a form of cultural colonialism by the curator (Kivimaa 2021; Hennoste 2021; Kaus in Hellerma 2021), exemplifies how the histories and legacies of European colonialism still need to be worked through in post-Soviet societies. The relatively recent nature of the Soviet colonial regime has shaped a different contemporary understanding of colonialism in the Baltic context compared to Western Europe where colonialism is predominantly associated with the overseas conquering of land and people for profit. The specific Baltic narratives of victimhood and colonialism have often been misunderstood or misrepresented by scholars in the West due to the divergent interpretations of the Second World War and the Cold War in Eastern and Western Europe (Tali, Astahovska 2022). When the wall text talked about “injustices of today”, it referred to racial injustices and not injustices considered most urgent in popular conception of the word in the Estonian context, that is, associated with Estonia’s own victim narrative. This led some critics to read the new narrative proposed by the curator as offensive towards Estonian culture (Luik 2021), or even suggest that the museum should issue a public apology (Vahtre 2021). Hence, the introductory text of the exhibition created an obstacle for the public engagement with the exhibited work and brought about



Figure 3
Aleksander Uurits, *Roma Woman*.
Formerly titled *Gypsy Woman*. 1912.
Oil painting. Photo R. Koobak

the overtly emotional responses. The debate around *Rendering Race* revealed the continued urgency and need to negotiate the Soviet-era narratives of trauma when discussing colonial injustices which are seen to be far removed and secondary in comparison to the more recent Soviet colonial regime.

It is important to note that the curatorial strategy of giving more neutral titles to artworks, some of which were created by most appreciated artists in Estonian cultural history, managed to produce an important shift in the sphere of art museums which is often conservative. Due to their hierarchical organisation and focus on displaying artworks to one-sidedly educate their publics (i.e., Duncan 1995; Tali 2018), art museums have for long been difficult sites for holding open discussions. The debate revealed a conflict in the museum between the traditional ways of working and the need to be attentive to local audience groups to remain a welcoming environment for all publics. On the one hand, the voices of minority publics such as local people of colour or Roma people were missing from public reac-

tions to the exhibition as well as from the panel discussion held at the Kumu Museum upon the closing of *Rendering Race*. On the other hand, the curator's activist intervention was not only symbolic but also produced a real and lasting effect on other museums and their use of language that is now more considerate towards these minority groups [fig. 3]. Hence, minority publics who are mostly invisible or whose voices are largely absent in local media and cultural arena more broadly were for the first time actively considered as part of the museum's publics. The gesture of renaming the artworks implicitly acknowledged that the museum has agency in creating publics via textual and visual narratives.

Even though the exhibition aimed to spark conversations about the relationship Estonia has to European colonialism, it neither fully considered the multiplicity and complexity of historically layered ethnic relations and local colonialisms nor their impact on the identity and sense of belonging in Estonia. For instance, the example of the Solomentsev brothers and their involvement in the violent colonial regime as doctors raises many questions in the context of the exhibition. Their collection of art objects from Congo displayed at the exhibition, which was the only constellation of objects that brought up the topic of potential complicity in colonial violence, reveals the challenges of discussing complicity without well-founded knowledge about the brothers' ethnic background or reasons for joining the French and Belgian colonial project. The fact that their names are Russian-sounding (they are called "Estonia-based" in the Estonian wall text and "Estonian" in the English version), which might seem as a minor detail to outside viewers, complicates the way the Estonian public might identify with their story as it evokes local colonial relations and tensions. As the explanatory context given about the brothers was very brief, some of the commentators reacted and called the brothers "Russian doctors" instead, claiming that calling them Estonian resulted in the unfair transfer of colonial guilt to Estonians.

Admittedly, the small-scale space that the museum dedicated to *Rendering Race* made it difficult to accommodate the curator's ambitions. This created a tension that did not always work in favour of the conceptual accessibility of the overall narrative of the exhibition. However, despite the challenges, as Aro Velvet pointed out, it did prompt the viewers to think more deeply about how those "whose flag was not waved somewhere in Africa or Asia" might be connected to colonialism (Velvet 2021). While the exhibition cannot provide direct answers, it can certainly raise questions about complicity and complicate matters beyond what politician and historian Jaak Valge suggested in his comment that "helping Africans as doctors, even if that is done in collaboration with colonial powers, should not make us responsible for colonialism" (Parliamentary debate 2021). The insufficient contextualisation of the story of the two brothers thus ends

up strengthening the commonplace attitudes that because Estonians have been colonised themselves, they should bear no responsibility for European colonialism.

The renewed intellectual engagement with the concept of “race” in the wake of the recent political struggles around anti-racism and decolonisation across the globe demands that we also rethink the so-called “Eastern European exceptionalism” within global coloniality and the global order of “race” that has secured power and privilege for white people. The preparatory research for *Rendering Race* and the more critical reflections on its aftermath have already laid the groundwork for an emerging discussion on race in the Estonian context where it has thus far been fairly absent (Pushaw 2020a; Pushaw 2020b; Kaljundi 2022). Yet rather than inviting a nuanced public engagement with racial representation and historical complicities, the exhibition produced a space where existing anxieties around race and colonialism were re-circulated and reified by the public and among politicians.

In our reading, *Rendering Race* adapted transnational postcolonial and decolonial debates selectively, leaving limited space to investigate how Estonia – and more broadly Eastern Europe – is implicated in keeping up the colonial mode of power that still endures in Europe today. We suggest that this happened partly because the exhibition failed to relate in a clear way to contemporary postsocialist cultural memory that is so deeply ingrained in the public consciousness and self-understanding of Estonians. It is then hardly surprising that an act of renaming gets read through an almost paranoid postsocialist lens that sees it as censorship and a threat to “authentic” culture.

5 Concluding Remarks

Since debates around Europe as postcolonial evoke contested notions of Europe and its racialised borders and peripheries, they tend to stir up contradictory emotions, desires, and animosities among the public. Such debates in Eastern Europe are often limited to the local context and remain accessible only in the local language without engaging audiences beyond national borders, so translating and situating them becomes a form of academic activism in itself. Unpacking the activist curatorial strategies and the public response to *Rendering Race* in this chapter demonstrated, first and foremost, the many obstacles to engaging with different ideas of Europe, its colonial history, and its connection to different regions of the world.

Activist curating presents a productive way of bringing together postcolonial scholarship and its mediation to a broader public because it engages diverse publics in contested conversations about colonial power relations and their continued impact on different so-

cieties and cultural communities. However, introducing global discussions around racial difference and colonial legacies to audiences used to their own nationalist underpinnings of European discourses requires considerate and conscious curatorial framing that cannot afford to neglect the predominant contemporary cultural memory. While the project succeeded in opening new connections for Estonian art history, bringing new topics into public consciousness, and, importantly, approaching minority publics with a new sensitivity, we argue that its inadequate contextualisation ultimately closed off deeper public engagement with narratives of postcolonial Europe.

When tasked with rethinking complex colonial relationships and establishing connections with local histories, art museums find themselves in a new position in relation to external curators who can introduce novel research-based perspectives and contribute to organising public programs around museum collections. Through launching such collaborations art museums can serve as important sites for rethinking the convergences between local, national, and global discourses of postcolonial Europe. Nevertheless, as the curator expressed in an interview, such work may create uncertainties about fully understanding cultural differences in all their specificities. Inevitably, there are layers of cultural history that may be lost. The many misunderstandings the exhibition produced revealed the challenges of rethinking transnational histories from a postcolonial perspective in a context where centring on the national narrative – as a form of resistance to an oppressive regime and precondition for survival – has for long been so dominant in history writing that it fails to fathom the possibility of having benefited from the suffering of others.

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