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Art from the Margins and Colonial Relations: To Listen To or to Ban Artists' Voices from Russia?

Maria Huhmarniemi & Ekaterina Sharova

The Voice of Artists exhibition was shown in an art gallery in Lapland, Finland, as a statement to consider artists' societal and political roles as opposition to centralised power. At the same time, many Western organisations banned Russian cultural and academic collaboration due to the Russian invasion in Ukraine in the spring of 2022. This article discusses the Voice of Artists exhibition project and considers the possibilities, ethics and obstacles for non-governmental art associations when collaborating with Russian artists in the Arctic region. The study is a continuation of arts-based action research to foster sustainability through international collaborations in arts and education. The theoretical background of the article is based on studies on critical and political contemporary art in Russia, colonial relations in Russia and art history when national romanticism endorsed and appropriated the North and the Arctic region. Power structures in Russian culture are Moscow-centred, and there is a need to decolonise and strengthen regional structures in arts and culture organisations, foundations and policies. Human-to-human contact without interference from the state seems fruitful in providing new dialogue and new knowledge.

Introduction

Western contemporary art emphasises the criticality and processes that are collaborative and participatory. Is there this kind of critical and societal contemporary art in Russia? When in May 2012, Vladimir Putin was reinstated as president in Russia with an authoritarian conservative agenda, free speech was circumscribed, and the possibilities for artists to be critical and political were decreased; however, some resistance and a critical discourse continued in the arts, especially in visual art (Jonson, 2016; Erofeev & Jonson, 2018). Vasilyeva (2021) demonstrates how artists influence political and social norms with their art and challenge autocratic systems, inspire civil society and resist state propaganda in Russia. The essence of artistic initiatives is wider than current opposing political rules; art can be a constructive force, serve as a medium for change in Russia, show that the world is broader than presented by the officials, and create a medium to talk critically (Vasilyeva, 2021). However, critical contemporary art has a stronger position in Moscow and Saint Petersburg than in the Arctic regions of Russia because financial, cultural and social capital from the country is centralised in these two cities. Colonial relations in Russia take place between the

centre and the peripheries (Etkind, 2011), and there are significant internal hierarchies among Russians.

Many previous multinational Arctic collaborations have included Russian artists and organisations, and have fostered sustainability through the arts, research and education through the Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design (ASAD) network of the University of the Arctic (UArctic) (Jokela, 2008; Härkönen & Stöckell, 2019; Jokela & Härkönen, 2021; Jokela et al., 2021; Zemtsova et al., 2020; Zemtsova et al., 2021). The aim of the development of the joint collaboration, exhibition and university studies is to create close and long-term cooperation between individuals, academic fields, universities and cultural organisations in the Nordic Arctic and in Arctic Russia. However, all the collaborations with Russian organisations of the ASAD network were paused in the spring of 2022, and UArctic paused activities as well. This article is based on a cultural collaboration that partly grew from ASAD, but that was designed and carried out by an independent and artist-run organisation. This article is based on long-term arts-based action research (ABAR) (Jokela, 2019; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018; Jokela et al., 2019) to foster Arctic sustainability by promoting Nordic and Russian collaborations in arts, education and research.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in the spring of 2022, many economic, cultural and research collaborations between Russian and Western countries were closed as a sanction on Russia and as a demonstration of support for Ukraine. When Ukraine boycotted Russian culture and called for the rest of the world to do the same, associations of artists withdrew participants from Russia from their communities and thematic exhibitions and festivals (Ponedilok, 2022). Bans included cultural collaborations in the Arctic and impacted Russian artists as well as Indigenous artists in Russia. However, the Artists' Association of Lapland in Finland showed the *Voice of Artists* exhibition in Rovaniemi, Finland, in May 2022. The association decided not to cancel a curated exhibition, but artists from the Russian Arctic were shown together with Russian, Sámi and Finnish artists in Lapland as a statement of cultural policies and as a demonstration of the importance of support for artists' voices as oppositional powers in any society. The decision was based on letters sent by the invited artists and the view of them as artists in colonised positions in Russia. In this article, we reflect on the exhibition project and consider the possibilities, ethics and obstacles for art associations when collaborating with Russian artists from the Arctic region.

At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, more than 2000 artists, art historians and architects in Russia expressed their condemnation of the war at the Spectate web zine on 26 February, 2022 (Meduza, 2022). Russia criminalised independent war reporting and anti-war protests on 4 March, 2022, and therefore Spectate web zine had to delete the text and the more than 18 000 signatures (Spectate, 2022). Consequently, artists have had increasingly limited possibilities to condemn the invasion and to participate in critical debates.

Internal colonisation in Russia fostered by Moscow-led art institutions

Etkind (2011) describes overseas imperialism and terrestrial imperialism when defining internal colonisation in Russia. According to him, the Russian Empire conquered foreign territories and domesticated its own regions; colonisation was simultaneously internal and external towards others as well as Russians. Indigenous people in Russia as well as many other cultural minorities have been colonised. Similar processes have partly taken place in Nordic countries as well, where a need to decolonise the North—not only for Indigenous people—has been recognised (Haugen, 2021).

Western art and culture have historically colonised the North when artists have visited the North with explorers and presented the Arctic as, for example, a hostile wintry landscape (Atroshchenko, 2013; Chartier, 2018; Huhmarniemi, 2019). In Russia, artists and explorers came from the capitals supported by art patrons and philanthropists. Colonial narratives from the 19th century have not been deconstructed or critically addressed in Russia. Many major art museums in Russia still use colonial vocabulary and show ignorance about peoples in the Arctic. The national art history in Russia does not include northern artistic practices in the primary narrative.

Despite the fact that Russian (and Finnish) epic heritage was preserved by northern peasants, it was appropriated by Moscow artists during the industrialisation of the second half of the 19th century when entrepreneur and philanthropist Savva Mamontov, who built the northern railway, was a key figure (Chulos, 2002). In post-Soviet society, these art historical narratives were lost. As Madina Tlostanova formulates it, “one of the most effective and persistent Soviet colonialist tactics was targeted at erasing all previous knowledge from people’s minds, and distorting their aesthetic and ethical norms and self-perception, thus leaving them with no ancestral links and memories of the past” (Tlostanova, 2022: 6). Tlostanova has focused on the cultural space in the former Soviet republics, but the very same phrase could be used for the inhabitants of northern Russia, where local stories and narratives disappeared from the collective memory. Northerners forgot the heritage of their own ancestors by being indoctrinated by the centralised version of history and art history, where only the capitals’ narrative are described as important.

Contemporary art exhibitions about the North in Russia were initiated by curators from Moscow or Saint Petersburg and have been criticised for their colonial approach. One of those was the *Komi Biennale* launched by the art collector Pierre-Christian Brochet in summer 2021. In a text for the Russian Art Focus, curator and art critic Alexander Burenkov (2021) writes that the Biennale “seeks to reveal the secrets of this remote and exotic region of the country, with the help of a bunch of Muscovite and international artists flown in especially for the occasion”. The classic tabs of coloniality (secret, exotic, artists from the capital visit the remote North) have not been avoided here.

The contemporary art field is fairly young in Russia. Institutions, such as the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art and the VAC Foundation (funded by oil and gas companies), were established in Moscow respectively in 2008 and 2009. Arctic art institutions in Nickel, Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Norilsk are even younger. Also, decolonial thought and decolonial studies are new fields (Semenova, 2021). The new wave of Arctic industrialisation is aimed at its natural resources in the Arctic, but in the context where any state criticism has been oppressed, the survival of critical Indigenous art in Russia seems questionable.

In the 21st century, there have been some initiatives in Arctic Russia to promote decolonisation and the recognition of regional and Indigenous cultures in Russia. One of them is the Arctic Art Forum (Sharova, 2018, 2021, 2022a, 2022b) in Arkhangelsk (2016–2020), which is a democratic, grassroots artistic arena for the rediscovery of ancestral history which disappeared during the Soviet period where the only version of history was taught at schools. Due to the digitisation of archives and new, available ways of communication between different continents, northerners in Russia could make artistic connections to Alaska, Norway and Sweden and could rediscover their own art historical narratives forgotten during the Soviet period. Because there is no art academy in the Russian Euro-Arctic region, contemporary art is being created by a few artists educated abroad

(mostly in England, Norway and Finland). The goal of the Arctic Art Forum has been to provide an independent arena for critical discussions of art and culture professionals from Northern Russia and international colleagues. Local knowledge has been essential for new productions, and young artists and students were involved in producing the Forum. Local heritage, forgotten knowledge and oppressed narratives became the essence for the new, experimental, interdisciplinary projects that are documented in the book *North 2.0* (Sharova, 2020).

The marginalisation of Indigenous artists within the Russian art world has been an issue for some contemporary Indigenous artists, such as Syanda Yaptik (who also took part in the exhibition *Voices of Artists*). When Burenkov (2021) stated that there are no Indigenous artists in Russia, the following text by Yaptik developed into a manifest from a ‘non-existent’ Indigenous artist:

If you had enough knowledge (about the North and the colonial situation in it), then you would understand that perhaps there are indigenous people among the gallery artists, and this is not so easy to understand until you start asking such a question. By the way, Madina Tlostanova, to whom you are referring, just told you in a discussion that many people from the northern regions have Russian names, not everyone advertises their nationality, there are reasons for this, and it is important to wonder why this is so.

Perhaps you would understand that it is not for nothing that Indigenous people in Russia often do not represent their national identity in a form that is digestible for you...

Perhaps they would understand that in Russia, as a rule, there is no interest in Indigenous peoples, except for the exotic, and the extraction of resources in the territories where they live.

And to know the context of northern artists, it's not enough to travel and look at their portfolios – you need to have at least some general idea of how the development of Siberia, the North and the Far East took place. (Yaptik, 2022: np., translated from Russia by Ekaterina Sharova)

This strong message has been one of the most discussed in contemporary art in Russia in January 2022, right before the war. After the outbreak of the war, both Syanda Yaptik and Alexander Burenkov left Russia due to the unpredictable situation for contemporary artists in the country, censorship and persecution risks for critical voices.

Research methodology: Arts-based action research

This research has followed the principles of ABAR (Jokela, 2019; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018; Jokela et al., 2019). This approach consists of cycles of aim setting, conducting interventions and analysing and presenting results via research publications and artistic productions. ABAR is always intentional and critical; it is based on the intention to have positive influences on communities and on wider society. Criticality leads to an evaluation of research impacts and reflective discussions. Previous research on Arctic collaborations to enhance the arts' societal impacts has been conducted within the ASAD network. Zemtsova et al. (2020) have evaluated the impact of joint Arctic art exhibitions and research conferences by ASAD and have noted increasing interest in Arctic issues

and re-interpreting and remaking regional identity through arts and design in Russia. Semenova et al. (2021) describe that artistic collaboration has been applied as a way to overcome distances.

The Artists Association of Lapland, which produced the *Voice of Artists* exhibition, is led by a board of artists. The first author of this article is the chairperson of the board of the association. Thus, she participated in the decision making of the *Voice of Artists* exhibition and supported the curator Tanja Koistinen in her work. Both authors have promoted Arctic Nordic and Russian collaboration in the long term. Huhmarniemi, has initiated and curated Nordic-Russian collaborations (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2020). Sharova has been working with relational projects in her native Euro-Arctic Russia since 2012, including the Arctic Art Forum, which was a long-term research and development project for the progressive northern communities in culture and the arts from 2016-2020 (Mikko, 2016; Sharova, 2018, 2021, 2022; Watson, 2020). She takes part in creating alternative perspectives through the field of art history, which has not been regulated by the government yet (unlike the field of history). She took part in creating a contemporary art field in Euro-Arctic Russia. For this article, Sharova has contributed insights from Russian colonisation and contemporary art in the Arctic.

This article is based on research data and notes from the process collected by Huhmarniemi with an aim to self-evaluate the project. It is typical for the ABAR that the researcher is somehow part of setting the aims and making the intervention; this is also the principle in action research. The research data from the *Voice of Artists* exhibition process include notes, documents of artworks presented in the exhibition and artists' and curators' statements. The reflection is brought into a dialogue with blogs and newspaper articles published online about cultural collaborations after the Russian invasion into Ukraine. Pictures of the artworks are published with the consent of the artists.

Exhibition *Voice of Artists* and conflicted views of showing Russian art

The Artists Association of Lapland has been organising Finnish-Russian cultural co-operations to increase mutual knowledge and interactions between the two cultures for many years. Russian artists have been regularly invited to exhibitions, such as the biennial *Young Arctic Artists* exhibition. The association received a grant from the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education for Finnish-Russian collaboration for the spring of 2022 along with a plan to make a joint exhibition with artists from Russia. However, after the Russian invasion into Ukraine, the board of the association published a statement on social media to articulate support for Ukraine, to encourage artists in the peace movement, and to prevent racism toward Russians in Finland:

We want to show our full support for the Ukrainians and for all the artists who oppose dictators and are working to strengthen the peace movement in Russia. (...) Now when Russians are protesting against the war on the streets, they have been arrested. We have Russian artist friends in Finland, Russia and abroad. They have told us of shock, shame, fear and a sense of powerlessness. We hope for all of them the courage to publicly condemn the war and to influence against the war policy of the Russian regime in their communities. We also condemn racism against the Russian-speaking population in Finland. Russians and Russian speakers living here and elsewhere in Europe are not responsible for the actions of the current Russian government. There must be absolutely no room for racism or hate speech (Artists Association of Lapland, 2022).

Soon after the statement was published, the board of the Artists Association of Lapland had a meeting to decide whether the exhibition plan with Russian artists should be cancelled, made without artists living in Russia or produced as planned originally. The board members considered what their statement and the phrase 'stand with Ukraine' should mean in practice. They also discussed news from friends and colleagues in Russia and were aware of the frustration, sorrow and horror of many of the artists. Based on a letter from one of the invited Russian artists, the board decided to stay with the exhibition plan. The following text was also presented in the exhibition, anonymously written:

I hope you realise that we - Indigenous people of the North - are also residents of Russia. Some of our settlements don't have internet connection whatever even in peaceful times, which makes it super complicated not only to participate in the global context, it cuts off alternative information and erases our factual presence. So before you bash and banter, and ask foreign institutions to cut off some existing outlets for us to speak up and be heard, please check your own privileges. Comforts of democracy, that your respected countries provide you with, has not been practised in the spaces we call home. Is it needed to mention that our voices have been historically, systematically silenced in this country again?

Or that complications of global warming already made food security an ongoing problem, which will intensify with the imposed sanctions?

We do wish to live in peace, and hope that in the future there could be a broader understanding when we talk about this country - that there are people who are existing in a residue of a colonisation, and regardless of their desire still considered as part of that country.

The board of the Artists Association of Lapland considered changing the exhibition topic to demanding peace and inviting artists from Russia to criticise the war and territorial colonialism in general; however, this was considered too risky because anti-war protests are criminal offences in Russia. Thus, the theme of the exhibition followed the original plan: the relation to land and environment curated by Finnish artist-curator Tanja Koistinen. The themes of the artworks touched on the relationship with the environment and the experience of inclusion. The exhibition showed artists from the Arctic region: Indigenous artists from Russia and Sámi region, artists from Rovaniemi and Russian artists living and working in Europe.

The title of the exhibition, *Voice of Artists*, was a statement to recognise the societal importance of art and the political potential of art as free expression. 'Giving a voice' is a common term in contemporary art meaning empowerment and support for citizen participation in society. Curator Koistinen stated the following about the exhibition:

Curating the exhibition has been challenging in the current situation in Russia. Before the war, I invited artists to the exhibition with the theme of humans in their environment, with the aim of creating a dialogue between the art from different parts of the Arctic region. In the spring of 2022, I thought of freedom of expression and the worsening situation of the Indigenous artist' community.

Through the exhibition, *Voice of Artists*, the Artists' Association of Lapland aimed to explore the potential of artist communities and artists to promote civic debate, democracy and the voice of

Arctic artists. These themes are relevant to the entire field of Arctic art (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2020a).

It is common that an artist's nationality is mentioned along with the artist's name. However, Sámi artists often prefer to present their Saminess and Sápmi as a region rather than a nationality. In the exhibition, *Voice of Artists*, Koistinen and Humarniemi considered how artists should be presented and defined based on their ethnicity, nationality or the region where they are currently living, where they are from or where they feel belong. The artists and their home regions were Tomas Colbengtson (Sápmi), Tatiana Filippova (Sakha), Johannes Heikkilä (province of Lapland), Panu Johansson (province of Lapland), Piia Lieste (province of Lapland), Tanya Kravtsov (Omsk, Siberia /Israel/ province of Lapland), Svetlana Romanova, (Sakha), Lada Suomenrinne (Sápmi) and Syanda Yaptik (Yamalo-Nenets, current nomad). For example, Colbengtson currently lives in Stockholm, outside Sápmi, but is identified as a Sámi artist. Kravtsov moved from Siberia, Russia, to Israel as a teenager and later to the province of Lapland. Suomenrinne was born in northern Russia and moved to Sápmi in Finland with her mother, who married a Sámi person. In her art, she explores the diversity of her own cultural heritage as being an Indigenous, Northern Sámi, Russian and Finnish woman. It was challenging to decide how artists' ethnicity or nationality should be expressed, and the conclusion was to present artists just by their name in the exhibition poster and the communication (figure 1). The communication of only artists' names—not their nationality or home regions—pulled the focus to artists as individuals.



Figure 1. Poster of the *Voice of Artists* exhibition.

Tatiana Filippova is an artist, photographer and writer of fragmentary prose who uses art to decolonise her own experience as an Indigenous person. Her grandparents were forced to leave their land during World War II; now, climate change is slowly turning her home into a foreign land. Through art and writing, she studies whether the modern Indigenous people of the Republic of

Sakha can find a new homeland elsewhere or whether they should continue to live on their ancestral land. Some of her photos in the *Voice of Artists* exhibition refer to the colonisation of land and the mind and the people. Her landscape photo is titled 'I have been colonised' (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tatiana Filippova, 'I have been colonised', 60 cm x 40cm.

The *Voice of Artists* exhibition programme included a series of art workshops that were open to the public (figures 3–5). The workshops were facilitated by Tanya Kravtsov and Lola Cervantes. They have both found a home in Lapland though coming from abroad: Kravtsov is from Siberia and Israel, and Cervantes is from Mexico. Kravtsov explains the workshop methods:

We apply the traditions of birch bark and straw to contemporary crafts. The workshop promotes cross-cultural interaction through craft making. We hope to engage both locals and newcomers of Rovaniemi, thus supporting the integration of newcomers into the environment through creative practice with natural materials in an art space (personal communication).

The workshop invitation was also communicated to refugees from Ukraine. Traditional birch bark crafting is a technique that has similarities with crafting traditions in Finland, Russia and Ukraine. The way of using it in community art pulled the focus from the war to the importance of encounters between people. Kravtsov is an artist-researcher who has previously studied ways of using birch bark in community arts and a method that brings together locals and newcomers in Rovaniemi (Kravtsov et al., 2022).



Figures 3–5. A workshop designed and facilitated by Tanya Kravtsov and Lola Cervantes. Photos by Tanya Kravtsov and Lola Cervantes 2022.

Tomas Colbengtson was born in Tärna, Sweden, and is of south Sámi descent. In his works, he often refers to Sámi culture, asking questions about cultural identity and existence. The artworks presented in the *Voice of Artists* exhibition illustrate vandalised road signs. The name of the city, Rovaniemi, is written on two signs as Northern Sámi Roavvenjárga and Inari Sámi Ruávinjargâ (figure 6). The rova part of the name Rovaniemi is considered to be of Sámi origin, as roavve in Northern Saami denotes a forested, stony hill. Colbengtson points out that there is no official sign with this Sámi name of the city Rovaniemi. He also draws attention to the issue of signs that have often been defaced and vandalised when written in the Sámi language. When the work by Colbengtson was presented next to art by Indigenous Russian artists, the themes of the exhibition widened to consider whether Sámi culture is still silenced in Nordic countries, even if not to the same extent as in Russia. Making joint exhibitions of Indigenous and regional artists in the Arctic is one way to understand the realities of regional and cultural similarities and differences.



Figure 6. Tomas Colbengtson, Ruávinjargâ, 2021.

The Association of Lapland is a non-governmental, artist-run and non-profit organisation. The costs of organising exhibitions are commonly covered by artists themselves or by cultural grants. The presented artworks are on sale, and the association keeps a provision of the sale to fund the continuation of activities. If possible, if the association has a decent grant for producing the exhibition, a fee is paid for artists. This was the situation in the *Voice of Artist* exhibition. Due to the potential financial benefit for the artists in Russia, the exhibition was not communicated in international forums, such as the Arctic Arts Summit 2022, which has launched a larger website to present arts in the Arctic (Arctic Arts Summit, 2022). The Arctic Arts Summit has faced similar controversial issues when pondering how to express solidarity with Ukraine while not isolating all Indigenous artists in Russia. In this situation, the presentation of the *Voice of Artists* exhibition was

not published. Anyhow, when there was no international media coverage about the *Voice of Artists* exhibition, the impact of the exhibition was only local, in the town of Rovaniemi.

Discussion: Potential impact of cultural collaboration and bans

In Nordic countries, as elsewhere in the West, people with local, Russian and Ukrainian roots live in the same cities. Many have relatives and friends in Russia, and maintaining the connection with ones who oppose Russian invasion has been considered important. While cultural collaboration has been cancelled, there have been discussions of whether this is beneficial (Sansom, 2022). Similarly, there have been discussions on academic boycotts (Burakovsky, 2022; Weinberg, 2022). Scientific collaboration and openness have been argued to aid democracy and human rights and to help counter misinformation in Russia (Burakovsky, 2022). Closing communication with Russia has been viewed as a risk to unintentionally support Russian efforts by isolating Russian students and academics who could be pro-Western and anti-authoritarian (Burakovsky, 2022). Similar arguments can be made regarding collaborations in the arts and culture.

While it is being debated whether grassroots level human-to-human interactions and collaborations should be continued between Russians and the rest of the world, there has been a bigger consensus on the importance of excluding Russia from events, such as the Eurovision Song Contest and Venice Biennale. These events are based on the idea of artists presenting a nation as well as a concept of nations competing with each other. The large-scale, commercial art events can be considered equal to sports events that have, with reason, suspended the Russian national teams and Russian clubs from competitions. Cases of banning and cancelling Russian culture in the West have been discussed in the media in Russia. They have been used by propaganda media such as Izvestia, RIA Novosti, Lenta, Gazeta, RG (Rossiyskaya Gazeta). Journalists have focused on classical music and literature more than contemporary art. In Finland, the discussion on sanctions has focused on Russian tourist: there has been demands to close the borders from tourism. Borders got closed on 29th September 2022.

Institutional art collaborations are impossible, in the current situation, also because pro-Western leaders of art museums and similar organisations have been replaced by ones who agree with war propaganda. Determining whether artist-run organisations that work on critical contemporary art and grass-root level cultural collaborations should listen to and present artists' voices from Russia or join the international ban is complex. Would it be more beneficial to support artists who may have some potential agency in the anti-war movement and civil society, or to suspend all collaborations as part of a wide cultural and economic sanction? We can also question whether either act ultimately makes any difference in such a large-scale conflict as the invasion in Ukraine. Whether we should care about the difficult situation of colleagues and artist friends is a question of our ethics.

Risks for artists and Russian cultural institutions need to be considered along with the potential impact of the collaborations. Currently, contemporary art institutions risk being put on the list of foreign agents as a result of their criticism of the war in Ukraine, as has happened with one of the central regional grassroots initiatives in Russia, Typography (Zyryanov, 2022). Artists could also be viewed as criminals, such as Sasha Skochilenko (REE/RL, 2022) and Yulia Tsvetkova (Kishkovsky, 2022). If art institutions and artists are invalidated as a consequence of international collaborations, the goal of empowering artists in criticality turns against itself.

2022 is the Year of Cultural Heritage of the Peoples of Russia. The Ministry of Culture announced a program with 180 events including support of infrastructure, publishing anthologies of national literature, and music festivals in various regions of the country. However, the Russian nation and the Russian language prevail in this state project, and the organising committee consists of mostly Russians. Due to the internal colonisation (Etkind 2011), Indigenous people of the Arctic region have only little power on the program, and the financing strategies of such events.

Knowledge production about Russia is influenced by media narratives, which are focused on the strong rather than the weak: coverage of the political life in Kremlin and oligarchs is more common than coverage of culture or conceptual art from the Russian peripheries. Pierre Bourdieu (1996), in his article 'On Television', claims that the very field of journalism is pressed by the time limits that do not allow for in-depth research or putting facts into context:

Given the lack of time, and especially the lack of interest and information (research and documentation are usually confined to reading articles that have appeared in the press), they cannot do what would be necessary to make events (say, an outbreak of violence in a high school) really understandable, that is, they cannot reinsert them in a network of relevant relationships (such as the family structure, which is tied to the job market, itself tied to governmental hiring policies, and so on) (Bourdieu, 1996: 7).

This critical remark by Bourdieu (1996) could be applied to certain coverage of the news from Russia, which produces knowledge for the majority in the West, and it explains the way the context and the internal relations remain invisible. Indigenous and critical artists in the Arctic regions in Russia struggle for survival, and banning representatives of the vulnerable minorities from expressing their voice is problematic. Providing space for their expression means a contribution to sustainable cultural production, which is not possible in Russia in an equal way. According to Shestakova (2021),

...the act of becoming the accomplice in both local and global ecological disasters caused by anthropogenic and white colonial destruction is an ongoing inquiry into one's positionality, thinking habits, and imaginations. One has to become a time-traveller: dismantling past and present oppressive structures for the decolonial futures to come (Shestakova, 2021: np).

The harmfulness of forced assimilation of cultural minorities has been recognised in the Arctic region (elsewhere than Russia), and various decolonising efforts are demanded and also taking place. Some artists and cultural organisations aim to contribute to decolonisation in the Arctic (Arntzen, 2021; Decker, 2020; Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2020a; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2021; Sharova, 2020; Sharova & Veits, 2021).. For example, Sámi people and Indigenous people in Greenland and Canada have independent cultural organisations, and cultural independence has contributed to a decolonisation process (Arntzen, 2021). Artists in the Arctic region and peripheries play an essential role in proving that the North is inhabited and has multi-layered narratives, which have not been yet told. Extractive practices (both oil and gas but also intellectual resources, ideas and imagery of the Northerners) could turn into acts of co-creation.

Conclusion

Due to the Russian invasion in Ukraine in the spring of 2022, many Western cultural organisations paused or closed their collaborations with Russian artists and Russian organisations. The relevance and potential fruitful and harmful impacts of bans have been discussed in the media. This article examined the possibilities, ethics and challenges related to contemporary art collaborations between the West and Russia in the Arctic context. Many contemporary artists and curators left Russia after the war began, some live in neighbouring countries, and some left for Europe. Brain-drain from Russia is significant, but there are still some young and critical artists left; there are potentially emerging independent artists, researchers and cultural producers who are still in Russia. These active and vital forces require support and solidarity. Online activities, radio, discussion platforms for young artists and cultural workers are necessary and important. Hopefully, these relations can grow into projects after the regime change in Russia one day.

The need to support independent artists organisations, critical artists in Russia and in exile, and Indigenous people to promote decolonisation and democratic development is evident. Human-to-human interactions without interference from the state seem the most equitable way of acting, providing some dialogue and knowledge of Indigenous and regional cultures in Arctic Russia. However, the continuity of Indigenous regional arts and culture depends most on political and democratic development in Russia. The collaborations can cause harm for artists and result with only little local impact. Resources for supporting critical regional and Indigenous arts in Russia, through international collaborations, are needed from governments and international organisations, when the invasion in Ukraine is stopped.

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