

## Spiders on the Ceiling: A Year in Estonia

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2021-22

On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021, I arrived in Lennart Meri Tallinn Airport and headed to the bus station outside, wrestling two large suitcases, a duffel bag and my overstuffed backpack along with me. To get to the bus station, one must descend a single flight of stairs. This 2-meter descent may be traversed either by stairs, escalator or elevator, which are each installed by the exit to the bus station. Burdened as I was, I chose the elevator. I got in, pressed the button, descended a distance of the 2 meters, and then waited for the doors to open so I might shuffle, bags and all, to the bus stop. After a minute or two, the doors failed to open, and so it was that, upon arriving in Tallinn, I immediately found myself stuck in an elevator.

With the help of an extremely apologetic and anxious airport employee who responded when I pressed the emergency call button of the elevator, a technician was dispatched to my location. Over the next forty-five minutes (I was fortunately in no rush), I waited as the airport lady periodically checked in over the elevator intercom, updating me on the technicians' progress and apologizing profusely. Finally, the elevator door slid open a crack, and a scrawny young man with a large crowbar and a goofy grin plastered on his face poked his head into the elevator. He gave the door another pump with the crowbar and it sprung open. I can't remember what exactly he said to me, but I'm sure it was something along the lines of, "The elevators do that sometimes, sorry, but it's nothing a crowbar can't fix!", and then I went off on my way, first to the bus stop, then to a hotel where I spent the night, and then to Tartu by train the next morning where I would stay for the following year.

In some ways, I think the elevator episode represents well what has been so exciting about being in Estonia. Though the country has evolved rapidly in the last 30 years since re-independence, the country still feels like it is making things up as it goes along, keeping a crowbar ready in case things get out of hand, but otherwise keeping its eyes and ears open to giving new things a try. A "live and let live" attitude seems the norm, and it extends beyond the human to the land too. Few homeowners keep mowed lawns, preferring instead to leave space for their backyards to grow lush and dense on their own. Road medians and sidings are covered in underbrush. Around Tartu, meadow-like habitats abound, sporting a biodiversity that Estonians pride themselves on providing room for in their city. Foxes, crows, martens, hedgehogs and beavers can be seen in the city center. And, in the homes, there were many spiders.

For example, the room I sublet over the past year offered a comfortable home not only for myself but for a host of cellar spiders enjoying my high ceilings as well. Growing up in suburban America, I spent relatively little time outdoors and have always been quite afraid of bugs. Nearly all of my family members, friends and peers confess some kind of revulsion and discomfort with bugs as well, though they all experience this fear to varying degrees. So, when I complained to my parents and friends back in the United States about my eight-legged housemates, they advised me to swiftly vacuum the spiders up and spray their hangouts with insecticide, lest they "bring more critters with them". My Estonian friends, by contrast, rarely understood my concern about the house spiders. They advised me to let the spiders be, for they were harmless and unobtrusive. One friend with a country house on the Estonian island of

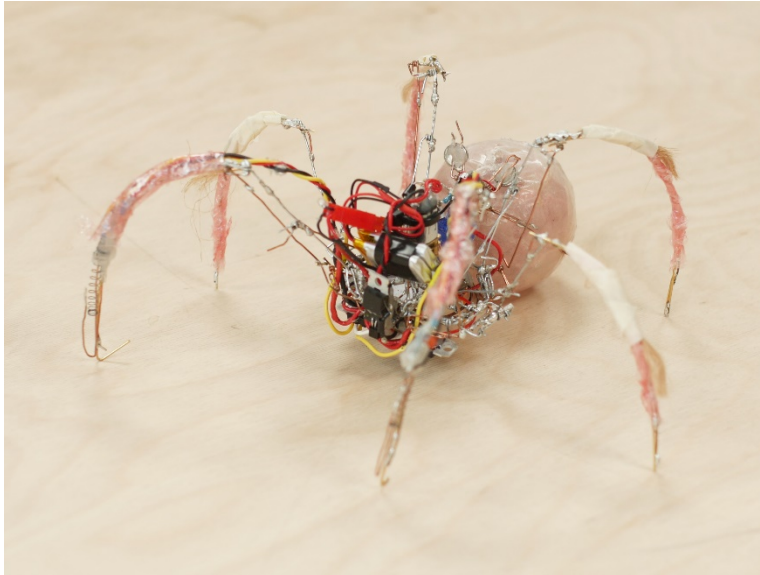
Hiiumaa went so far as to claim that, though his Hiiumaa property was infested with ticks, he never got bitten because he professed to “agree” with the ticks – that is, he and the ticks had arrived at a cordial détente of sorts. This tension – between accommodating or suppressing the lived experience of an “other” in the environments we reside in – has been at the heart of my artistic research in Tartu.

With the gracious funding of a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Travelling Fellowship, I came to Tartu because I wanted to apply ecosemiotic and biosemiotic perspectives in my art to respond to the local ecology here. Particularly, I was interested in reframing people’s relationship to nature and the built environment in more poetic, ethical and sustainable ways. These semiotic disciplines offered toolkits to explore alternative ways of meaning-making in ecological and biological systems. As a framework, ecosemiotics interrogates how cultures perceive, interpret and construct their relationship with “nature” – how they build knowledge about their environment. This discipline was supplemented with the research into Estonian folklore and how, in the local Estonian context, it scaffolds a unique relationship between humans and nature. Likewise, biosemiotics offers a framework for examining the perceptual abilities of non-human organisms and understanding how those organisms generate meaning in the spaces they share with humans. Thus, through a semiotic perspective, I could gain a greater understanding of the feeling, experience and knowledge that can be derived from the same local ecosystems in Estonia by vastly different communities, individuals and species.

And so, a dense, winding and rich yearlong journey began first with the Semiotics department at Tartu University. Prior to arriving, I had been reading texts on Object Oriented Ontology and New Materialism, focusing on how we might lend greater agency to non-human entities on their own terms, moving away from human-centric models of the non-human world. The month I arrived, professors from the Semiotics department were co-organizing a conference/art festival on precisely this topic called Biotoopia in the fishing village of Viinistu, near Tallinn. The festival was a remarkable who’s who of Estonian artists and academics thinking about the relationship between technology, ecology and art. Still reeling from the recent realization that I would be sharing my room with several arachnid neighbors, I was introduced at Biotoopia to the notion that most Estonians view the “home” quite differently than how I did. In New Jersey, home consisted of four walls, within which was the homeowner’s absolute, unabridged domain. But in Estonia, where everyone had grown up with a country home, home extended past the four walls of one’s house into the surrounding land. And that difference meant that suddenly “home” was necessarily an ecosystem, containing many forms of life beyond one’s own, including bugs, "pests" and other "invasive" species that must be coexisted with

This idea became the seed for my first (and as yet unfinished) project of the year – “Digital Oasis”. Reflecting on my fear of the spiders on my ceiling, I wanted to create a work that would challenge viewers to rethink the kinds of life they’d be willing to share their domestic space with. “Digital Oasis” applied this framing to our laptops/devices - our entirely anthropocentric "digital" homes. The performance would consist of a series of spider robots that occupy a mock-up of a home office and join in an ecosystem with the home office’s computer. Visitors are invited onto the office set to use the computer. The bugs would intercept and reject attempts to load large images, videos and other files by the computer’s browser, thus offering the visitor a stripped down, glitched Web 1.0 facsimile that peels back the infrastructure of the internet itself.

The robots visually embodied the irrational fear projected onto pests by western society, conveying an “abject” otherness and unknowable agency that persistently defies domestication. In this manner, the bugs represent a decolonization of digital space, revealing the sinews of internet networks while providing a lens to reconsider all our behaviors (online and in person) as a negotiation with other lifeforms. Nonetheless, visitors would be permitted to kick, step on, interfere with or engage with the robot bugs however they please. As the robots’ internal mechanisms degrade and batteries die, I would be on hand to repair them and bring them back to



Prototype of “Digital Oasis” Spider

life for 2 hours, after which I would let all of the bugs die and the performance will end. The bug carcasses would remain for all to see, as either a liberation or a deadening of the space depending on one’s perspective.

The performance was never staged but the bugs were prototyped. Further work needs to be done to make their internal mechanisms more robust before staging the performance. Tartu Kunstmuuseum (the Art Museum) and Loodusmuuseum (the Natural History Museum) are both willing to host the performance once finished. The crux of this project

centered on how we are able, or willing, to recognize and respond to the agency of an other in our human spaces. How do we react when our world view is no longer solipsistic and we are reduced to an object within the subjectivity of another being? In the midst of the increased optimization of our environments to our human needs, how willing would we be to accommodate the needs of another according to their umwelt, if we were made aware of those needs? How are our human spaces enlivened when we allow those spaces to interface with the meaning-making processes of an other? And how easily do we assign agency to these non-living robots compared to the actual “pests” that we share our homes with?

I worked on this project from September till January before other projects became my primary focus. At the same time, I began research at the Semiotics department into both local folklore (of which the Estonian government has sponsored a still-growing database) and foundational texts in Eco-semiotics. I read Jakob Von Uexküll’s seminal text *Forays into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, where he examines how every autonomous entity (plant, animal, cell, or agent of any kind) has a unique perception of reality (“Umwelt”) informed by the sorts of stimuli it can sense and the kinds of actions it can take in response. This led to texts by Almo Farina on Eco-fields - the net of the physical attributes in a species’ environment or habitat that are meaningful within the species’ umwelt. Further anthropological texts by Eduardo Kohn explored how indigenous cultures in the Amazon attempt to access the subjectivities of their forest neighbors through their dreams, and how storytelling can function to bridge species’ umwelts.

To apply these new paradigms more concretely, I also began researching sites of spiritual or folkloric meaning near Tartu and began exploring Estonia's many bogs and forest trails, each of which gained new flavors with each passing season. In September was the mushroom picking season, with many of my friends coming home from trips into the woods with baskets full of mushrooms to cook. The bogs were also rife with cranberries to be turned into jam. In October, with the fall colors bursting into brilliant reds and oranges, I visited Taevaskoda ("Heaven's Hall"), a historically sacred freshwater spring that people still make offerings to for good luck. In November, I went on a hike in Määnikjarve bog and was stunned to find that, in old growth forests like these, trees often grow entangled together and begin to creak when the wind passes through them. These creaking noises sound remarkably like opening and closing doors, which was especially spooky when one is hiking alone in the forest.

This sensation became the seed for my second project, which was completed in July 2022, called "Wooden Conversations". Inspired by Estonian folklore, which lends animacy to trees and also often views doors as metaphysical gateways, I devised an installation that I got to



work on at Maajaam – an art space focusing on the interaction between technology and nature that I visited regularly throughout my year in Tartu.

*"Wooden Conversations" as installed during the Wild Bits 2022 Residency (Photo by Fotomorgaana)*

The installation (which is still in place) consists of a wooden door, from an old house in Tartu, installed in a grove of trees on Maajaam's property. A cord connects the door, through a gearing mechanism, to a pair of entangled pine trees. When the door is opened, the cord pulls on the trees ever so slightly so that the trees making an audible creaking noise. This noise sounds like the creak of a door opening, resulting in an act of ventriloquy where the tree makes the

sound the door is expected to make when opening. Likewise, when the wind passes through the trees and makes them creak, the cord slackens and the door bobs open, animated by the trees' voice. The sounds of trees creaking and doors squeaking echo each other – the dead wooden product speaking with the voice of the tree and the tree's voice made recognizable by its similarity to the product's creak. They animate each other in a conversation transmitted through their shared material essence. In this regard, the work may generate a modern folklore, as if the reason doors creak is because the “spirit” they share with trees communicates through them. Likewise, as the sound of a door opening implies someone present at the door, the work posits that the tree, the door and other wood objects gaze back upon the viewer, particularly when the door is opened by wind without the viewer's intervention. The aim is to dramatize the shared fibers between nature and our built environment, which we tend to separate, so we may better acknowledge our ties to the wild entities seeded into our lives.

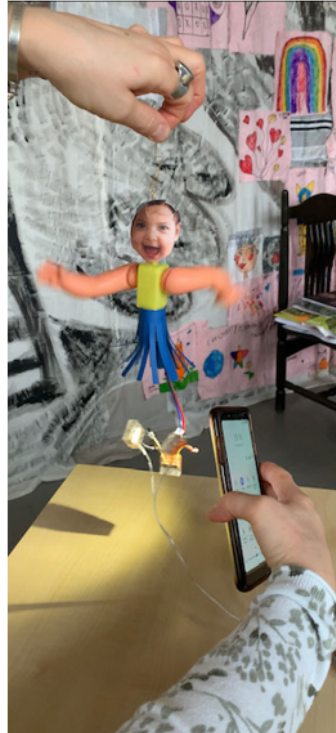
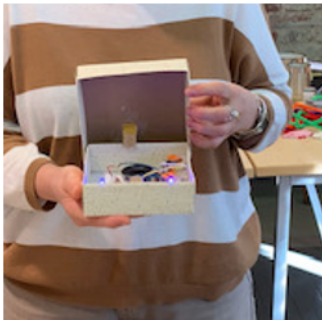
As Tartu will be the 2024 European Capital of Culture, Maajaam received funding for its Wild Bits Residency programme to invite 10-15 artists over the next two years for a month each to the property. Each artist develops an installation that will then be part of a public art park that Maajaam will exhibit for 6 months in 2024. I was selected as one of the first 5 artists of the exhibition and developed “Wooden Conversations” on their property in July 2022. The work has been installed and will be open to the public in 2024 as part of the Tartu 2024 festivities.

Simultaneously, I was also trying to pick up an older conceptual thread from my art practice – how we might relate to the technology around us in more sustainable and ethical ways. To this end, in September 2021 I began volunteering at Paranduskelder (“Repair Cellar”) – an NGO of environmentalists in Tartu who run a makerspace oriented around repairing old things and promoting circular economies. I began volunteering to help people repair electronics and soon became involved in some of the comedic activism videos the organization produced. These YouTube videos focused on upcycling and guerilla interventions around Tartu to make the urban environment more pedestrian-friendly, fun and sustainable. One other exciting part of living in Tartu was that the municipal government has always been extremely open to such community interventions, like community-built parks, urban gardens, art installations, graffiti and more. Technological experiments were also common with robot package deliverers, self-driving buses, robot lawn mowers and more being tested around the city. As a resident of Tartu, this made the urban structures around me feel extremely flexible, like I could make them my own or fit them to my needs if I wanted. And many of my friends had done that, either as street artists, or as environmentalists or by proposing new urban interventions to the municipality (Tartu fields ideas from citizens to fund one major public works project each year, and puts the ideas to a vote in the annual elections).

I was interested in thinking about how we might feel that same freedom towards the technological structures around us. I was particularly inspired by the Estonian folkloric character of the Kratt. Kratts appear in Estonian folklore as golems that are built from everyday objects and animated by selling one's soul to the devil. From there, the Kratt will do any work one sets before it, but if the Kratt has no work to do, it will turn on its master. Interestingly, Kratt tales were often used to explain inexplicable or unjust societal circumstances among Estonian villagers. If someone seemed to have more wealth than they deserved, the assumption was that they had a Kratt to steal that wealth for them. Conversely, Kratts would be summoned to steal from the rich to equalize social structures of the time. With this in mind, Kratts were a ripe metaphor for our current relationship with technology – tools we rely on immensely and put our

souls into, but which still reflect many of the problematic social structures that pervade our society.

After getting in touch with the Narva Art Residency in November, I visited the residency in December to prepare a workshop that would examine these themes. Narva is the third-largest city in Estonia and the largest Russian-majority city. It is located on the border of Estonia and Russia and is commonly considered the Eastern border of the EU. Here, ethnically Russian residents exist in a sort of limbo between the East and West, but community efforts have been growing to integrate the city more meaningfully into the rest of Estonia. Trying to build on these



community efforts, I designed a workshop that would ask Narvians to reflect on how they want their (and Narva's) relationship with technology to be.

Hosted at the Narva Art Residency, I led a two-day workshop in April 2022 called "Designing Kratts: Storytelling through Simple Machines", where eight participants of varying ages discussed how the Kratt mythology provides a new perspective on their relationship to modern technologies. How might the technologies they use tell a story about their lives? How might they imagine technologies to better understand themselves? With these questions in mind, participants designed and took home two Kratt-like robots to

explore how robots can metaphorically represent human stories. Participants learned the basics of artistic robotics by building a small robot that moves when light shines on it, and constructing a backstory for the robot. Then, participants designed a Kratt that functions as a robotic self-portrait, metaphorically acting out the personal and emotional work that participants felt was an important part of their lives. Twisting the Kratt folklore, the prompt focused on building a

*Participant creations from "Designing Kratts"*

technology that does your work *with* you rather than *for* you. For this robot, each participant was asked to bring a seed object of meaning to them that would form the foundation of their creation. Some of the outputs included a tool that only allows the creator to access wifi while the sun is out, so they won't overwork themselves. Another project was a mask that contained bright and ominous lights to remind the creator of her good and bad sides. One more project was a robot built from a Percocet package that self-contorts over and over again, reflecting the creator's struggles with pain medication. These outputs, I hope, encouraged participants to reflect on how technology could better fit into their lives without overwriting or suppressing their agency over their personal stories.

As I was preparing this workshop, the months of December through February were snow filled. The lakes and rivers were frozen, with ice fishing, ice skating and cross-country skiing occupying people in Tartu. The sun went down by 3:30 most days, but the snow would reflect enough glittering light to make the dark nights hopeful rather than crushing. In the snow, the paths that tie the city together disappear and it is up to our plodding footprints to stitch some order back into the urban fabric. To stave of the cold, friends and I would rent a sauna every Tuesday night, heat up and then dip (very briefly) into the cold river waters under the night lights. In January, I attended a residency for two weeks in Riga, Latvia that was run by kuš! Komikss, an acclaimed alternative comics publisher. Soaking in the melancholic city, I gave a performance/comics reading of one of my works that I had completed in 2020 and began work on a comics project about the rhythms of nature and wildlife I had experienced in New York City during covid. In February, the snow began to melt and refreeze and Tartu's citizens spent 3 weeks gingerly walking up and down icy sidewalks in an unfortunately slapstick daily routine.

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, Estonia's Independence Day, Russia invaded Ukraine and Tartu mobilized in support of the city's large Ukrainian minority. While Estonia was never in any danger, we all knew people who had family in Ukraine, and it was so easy to imagine how, with one similar act of insanity, Tartu's pastel buildings that I walked among everyday could also be turned to rubble. In March, I attended a 5-day artists retreat in Vilnius, Lithuania where we built wearables that used bodily sensors and EEG probes to reflect on our relationship to the body. On the 8-hour bus ride back to Tartu, crowds of families and refugees filled the bus stations. Ukrainian mothers wrestled small children and bags filled with basic possessions into the coaches. One man scrambled onto the bus at the last minute and sat next to me – the last available seat. Only after an hour did he ask me in broken English where the bus was even going. At the Estonian border with Latvia in Valga, we waited for an hour on a dark lonely road as the Estonian police registered each refugee, gave them appropriate documents and distributed stuffed toys to the children aboard.

By March the snow had all melted and the rivers were engorged. This is known as the 5<sup>th</sup> season of Estonia – the flooding season, and life was returning to the fields and forests. Beavers were building dams on the river banks and queen bumblebees roved the ground looking for places to build a nest for their offspring to live in summer. With the help of a friend's Sawz-All, I cut a wooden door and door frame out of a house in Tartu that was set for demolition. With Timo Toots, the owner of Maajaam, we trucked the door to Maajaam in preparation for my project "Wooden Conversations" in July. I spent a few days over the following weeks wandering around Maajaam's property, listening and building a map of creaking trees that might be suitable for my project.

In April, while in Narva performing my workshop, I saw a small Tortoiseshell butterfly, my first butterfly of the Spring, which is said to be a sign of good luck. With friends, I drove to the island of Hiiumaa, off Estonia's west coast, and visited a bizarre ramshackle theme park built by a single man over 10 years that still perfectly epitomizes to me Estonia's crazy creative energies. I also began volunteering at the local community garden in Tartu, helping build a new greenhouse and planting tomatoes to harvest. Every meeting at the garden ended with a hot cup of tea made with herbs grown in the garden. By the end of the month, some parts of northern Estonia were also teeming with wild garlic sprouts which one could just pick and much on, or turn into wild garlic pesto.

In May I was travelling. I visited the department of Media Design at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm for one week, where I met with researchers in the field of somaesthetic design – design which focuses on reconnecting users to their own bodies, affective sensations and surroundings. After that, I received funding from the EU’s Erasmus + program to attend a 1-week camp in the north of Spain focusing on European sustainability initiatives with members of Paranduskelder. At the end of the month, I finished a prototype of “Wooden Conversations” at Maajaam.

By June, the days were growing long, with sun out as late as 10 pm, and the night sky never getting much darker than a rich blue. The rivers and lakes were warm enough to go swimming in, though algae in some of the lakes had consumed so much of the oxygen that asphyxiated fish washed up on the shores in macabre columns. I had befriended some artists at the Typa Print Centre, a printing museum in Tartu whose printing machines are all fully functional and available for use by artists in their residency program. More and more evenings were spent chatting with them in open air bars that had reopened with the warm weather. Music filled Tartu’s air on Friday and Saturday nights after a long two years of relative silence due to Covid. When I first arrived in Tartu, I had acquired a stack of maps of the area from the tourism office and had been recording every route I took around Tartu on the maps. I was interested in the implicit choreographies of my navigation – which trunk lines did I tend to rely on to get from one place to another and what parts of the city would I miss as a result? Judging by my movements, and the parts of Tartu I actually moved through, how well did I actually know the city? At Typa, I began experimenting with Mimeograph machines to see if I could print a booklet depicting this data. Unfortunately, I was unable to produce the booklet before leaving, but the project is something I definitely still intend to finish.

On the summer solstice, I celebrated Jaanipäev (Midsummer, or St. John’s day) by renting a car with a friend and travelling to different villages along Lake Peipsi (the great lake separating Estonia from Russia) throughout the night. With the goal of staying up until the sun rose again at 4 AM, we drove past brilliant bonfires that lit up the dark countryside on our way to each village’s festivities. The celebrations generally resembled an American hoedown, but set against a vast mirror-like lake. Alongside music and bonfires, villages also sported large wooden swing-sets, which sets of 6 people could together ride on in a practice called “Kiik-ing”. By the early morning, the bonfires were all out, but a liminal mist hung over the fields and bogs as our reward for staying up till the sunrise.

In the final days of June, as the forests grew thick with wild strawberries and blueberries for passersby to eat, I reached out to the Tartu Natural History Museum about support for a project that is currently still in development. The proposal was a public art installation, called “Neighborhood Watch”, based around the framing of animals in Estonian folklore as a watchful, moralizing arbiter of human fate. In these tales, the fortune of villagers often depended on their conduct in encounters with the non-human, animal gaze. The installation would involve 10 CCTV cameras installed in close proximity to 10 habitats of urban wildlife (crows’ nests, bat caves, beaver lodges, duck ponds, riverbanks, meadows, insect infestations, tree stands, fox holes etc) around Tartu such that the cameras face pedestrian paths to gaze upon passersby and recreate the moralizing non-human gaze. The cameras’ presence implicitly begs the questions: who is watching the feed and how do they judge our actions? The answer would be found in the Tartu Natural History Museum, which holds an extensive collection of taxidermized animals.



There, screens playing the feeds of each habitat camera will be placed in front of the taxidermized animal or preserved plant that would occupy that habitat.

The gaze of the animal as "other" in the wild is a strongly empathetic, humbling experience that we rarely confront anymore in urban environments, and the gaze of a taxidermized animal is a superficial imitation of this gaze. The taxidermized animal perfectly symbolizes the ambiguous position of the "wild" in urban environments. It is dead and petrified yet it still retains an unmistakable glimmer of its faded aliveness. Simultaneously, as the animal gaze has faded out of urban life, we have grown used to the corporate, authoritarian eye of surveillance in digital and built spaces. The CCTV camera gaze is as strongly provocative as the animal gaze, though it primarily induces anxiety and a power imbalance that many of us have grown to swallow. Using these two conflicting gazes, the work would leverage our submission to modern surveillance so that we may also consider submitting to some kind of moral "surveillance" by nature itself. In so doing, the CCTV camera as a symbol may shift from an agent enforcing fear-induced "order" to an agent inspiring an empathetic accountability towards urban wildness. While there was not time to develop the installation while I was still in Tartu, I am still discussing with the Natural History Museum about potentially installing the project at a later date.

This theme of the animal in urban space was one that still was occupying me in the summer of 2022. In his text, "Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World", Andrew Whitehouse discusses the idea in soundscape ecology that every animal in an ecosystem occupies a sonic niche as well as a physical one. Different bird species tend to avoid using the same frequencies for their mating calls to ensure that they are not competing with any other species to be heard. As such, a healthy diverse ecosystem is often telegraphed by how complete its sound frequency spectrum is. If there are any gaps in the frequency spectrum, it is likely because a species used to occupy that sonic niche and now no longer exists in the ecosystem. It is often anthropogenic noise and human influences that result in the thinning of an ecosystem's soundscape. These ideas were on my mind when I visited Kulgu, the neighborhood of Narva known as "Narva Venice" by outsiders. Kulgu consists of hundreds of makeshift garages-turned-summer-homes that line a series of artificial canals. The canals were built to provide water to the Balti Elektriijaam electrical power station nearby, and crackling power lines criss-cross the neighborhood where residents have built their community. In some spots, the crackling sound gets under one's skin, headache-inducing even, and yet under the power lines grow lush gardens that the residents tend to on warm days.

In the summer, the Narva Art Residency rented two garages in Kulgu and hosted a residency program there from July till September. In September, I was invited as a resident to live for three weeks in one of the garages and produce my final project in Estonia – "Kulgu Community Radio". I placed around Kulgu three electrical boxes, each connected to a wooden totem of an animal that used to be common in the Kulgu/Narva River area. They respectively represent a Black-throated loon, a White-backed woodpecker, and a European green frog. Next to the droning sounds of the power lines crackling over Kulgu, these totems play their animal calls in an endless, lonesome repetition to fill in the sonic environment. On each electrical box, there is a microphone for community members to record a 15 second message of their own, which will then possess the wood animal and play through its mouth on repeat for 24 hours (or until someone else records a new message). After 24 hours, the totem speaks with its own call again. Playing in a loop, the totems are lonely devices, calling out even when they may not have

a listener, binding the voices of community members and wildlife to the physical fabric of Narva Venice. Entangled in each totem is a negotiation between Kulgu's human and non-human inhabitants – the community voices of Kulgu. In this environment, which was never intended to



support the vibrant life thriving here today, this work imagines an avenue for residents to conceive a similarly vibrant soundscape for Kulgu, meditating on the kinds of life, feelings and connections that might exist here in sound. The work was installed for three weeks between September and October 2022.

As September ended, I got to experience the natural cycles of the last year begin again. Apples were ready to be picked from trees once more, and the mushroom picking season renewed, though there were fewer mushrooms to be found due to the dry summer prior.

I finally left Estonia on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 after a wonderful year of growth and exploration, and I am truly grateful to the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis fellowship for allowing me to experience this year. I arrived in Tartu with little sense of my own environmental context in the United States let alone the environmental context of Estonia. While I still would not call myself particularly well versed in 'reading' environments around me, my time in Tartu has greatly widened my perspective on how our human rhythms can actually resonate with the rhythms and needs of a broader natural tapestry, even in "modern" urban environments. Along the way, I have read texts, spoken with Estonians, artists and academics to learn how we can build new stories and vernacular models of the world that accommodate and "agree with" the agency of other-than-human entities. To that end, I have tried to shape my art practice to combat our innate anthropocentrism in ways that feel grounded, local and accessible to communities outside the realm of academia. The artworks I have described above are the first of many more, as I continue to investigate new ways of coexisting responsibly with technology and nature in an age when we struggle to do either. With the foundation I have been able to build this year, I have received a study scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to pursue a 2-year master's degree in Media Design at the Hochschule für Kunst in Bremen where I will continue my work.



*The three totems installed in Kulgu*

For my own part, one year after arriving in Tartu and being spooked to find spiders nestled in all corners of my flat, I lived in a dacha in Kulgu infested with spiders without issue for three weeks. While I can't speak to their interpretation of events, I feel like the spiders and I agreed with each other this time around.