

# Narrating Identities Through Art-making on the Margins: The Case of Two Workshops in the Arctic

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*Artists and makers who live and conduct their creative practices in the geographical margins tend to face social, economic, environmental and historical challenges conditioned by the location of such regions. The condition of relative isolation may impact on the quality of artistic processes and such subjective criteria as motivation, inspiration and self-reflection of the maker. When artist communities and individuals come together in collective making processes and share knowledge through narrative practices, it may enable connectivity that spreads beyond geographical limitations and contributes to knowledge transfer and dissemination. In this case study, artistic practices such as collaborative textile art and individual making processes are used to discuss life histories and personal positions towards living and working in the Arctic. Artistic practices serve as a means to discuss and share this positioning in narrative and visual formats.*

*This paper considers the processes and outcomes of two workshops that took place in the cities of Rovaniemi, Finland, and Murmansk, Russia, in December 2016 with local and international artists. The paper analyses the stories and narratives shared by the artists in relation to their making processes and respective contexts. These narratives reveal how the qualities of life and work environments impact on art practices and identity construction and how creating temporal contexts for collective making and sharing may contribute to knowledge dissemination and transfer from one remote community to another. Even though the margins may be objectively defined through quantifiable means, there are also subjective, personal ways of viewing margins or the absence thereof. The research discusses and provides examples of how the creation of collaborative and individual art pieces in the localities in question communicates personal reflections on the margin as a concept, and how the capturing of personal narratives promotes a better understanding of and between different contexts.*

## Introduction

How strange to feel the line that is spun from us lengthening its fine filament across the misty spaces of the intervening world.

– Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, 1978

The paper discusses relative remoteness, proximity and exchange between artist communities in the Arctic exemplified through two case studies: workshops with artist groups (mainly represented by women) in Rovaniemi, Finland, and Murmansk, Russia. The workshops took place in December 2016 and concluded the first year of fieldwork and data collection for the

international art and research project *Margin to Margin: Women Living on the Edges of the World* (MarginToMargin, 2016). The project involved artists and communities in outback South Australia, Finnish Lapland and the Russian Kola Peninsula, with the objective to explore the relationship between art- and craft-making practices, identity processes and empowerment of female makers living and working “on the edges”. The project was carried out through the methods of practice-led artistic research by two Finnish, one Russian, one Namibian-Australian and one Portuguese artists and researchers (further, *the researchers*). Although the research team carried out several other workshops and activities globally, this paper focuses on the two Arctic contexts.

Both workshops were based on a framework where the artists developed their individual art pieces freely interpreting the theme “the margin” and other associated themes, while also participating in collective processes, thereby contributing material, visual and narrative data for the research. The unifying narrative processes in both locations were constituted by group discussions and individual interviews. In both locations the artists were invited to participate in collaborative art-making processes: in Rovaniemi it encompassed making a collective felt, while in Murmansk a *life story mandala* process was facilitated through acrylic painting on textiles (Miettinen, Sarantou & Akimenko 2016: 75).

The exploration of the project themes through art and research opened up complexities and sensitivities. Marginality is, perhaps, the most challenging theme to discuss. While a body of research on the topic exists in feminist and postcolonial studies, healthcare, pedagogy and other disciplines (e.g., hooks, 2000; Ferguson et al., 1992; Hall, Stevens & Meleis, 1994; Mücke, 1992), when put in concrete interpersonal or community contexts, it becomes an increasingly complicated matter. The word *margin* is commonly used in the meaning of a space “outside the main body” of something (margin, 2017). When translated into Russian, *нпедел*, this term acquires the meaning of an unsurpassable limit or point. The established semantic contraposition between the edge and the center (e.g., Jacobs, 1996; Gibson, 2015) places strain on those on the edge, rendering them the vulnerable party. This complex relationship has been problematized throughout the research, raising critical discussions in the two different contexts, while some participants acknowledged the lack of understanding of another Arctic edge:

I am originally from the South of Finland, but I have lived in Rovaniemi now for four years. What I like about Finland is working together and creating great things together. That is what I want to take to Murmansk, but it is a hard question, because I know nothing about Murmansk (Participant, Rovaniemi, 2016).

In quantifiable terms, scholars have cited certain constraints on different aspects of life in the peripheral Arctic. Petrov (2014: 152) referred to “limited evidence of the creative class’s transformative role in the periphery”. This may be a result of limitations in resources and opportunities on the one hand, but also a lack of research and documentation that occurs in the peripheries. These limitations, fueled by environmental limits, contribute to Hardt’s notion that Arctic art and design are not favored with “total artistic freedom” (2012: 57). Coutts advises that a focus on the social and cultural will widen perspectives of the obvious climatic and geographic aspects of the Arctic (2012: 49). Both authors refer to the complex socio-cultural landscapes reinforced by identity formations and mobilities of people in the region.

Through a discussion of the case of two workshops, this paper addresses the social and cultural aspects of the two Arctic locations, alongside environmental factors. Art, craft and design practices discussed in this paper, despite being underpinned by challenging circumstances in the Arctic, contribute to the body of practice-led artistic knowledge supported by narrative functions and identity work. The research paper analyses concrete artefacts, narratives and identity processes that came about in the two workshops. The discussion on how knowledge is generated through artistic and narrative practices is followed by comparisons of the two contexts and related identity formations. The paper concludes by discussion of the findings and analysis of how the social and cultural aspects of the case study contribute to the understanding of Arctic identities.

### **Generating Knowledge through Artistic and Narrative Practices**

As noted by Exner-Pirot, there is a regional component to the issues of knowledge transfer: “the biggest challenge to Arctic innovation is that the accumulated knowledge often remains tacit knowledge, not explicit knowledge” (2015: 4). The processes outlined below allow for a more efficient transition between these two forms of knowledge.

Nimkulrat et al. note how professional design practitioners tend to depart from “their experiences and ‘specialist tacit knowing’ during design processes” (Nimkulrat, Niedderer & Evans 2015: 5). Art-making processes also bear strong potential for generating knowledge that may be used and applied by the makers and researchers of artistic practice, thus, transitioning from tacit to explicit. This premise is the basis of practice-based (or practice-led) and artistic research (e.g., Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006; Koskinen, 2009). Practice serves as knowledge generating in all its stages – from ideation, through prototyping and making, to the final artefact, leaving the artist-researcher not only in the position to create artefacts, “but also [to] document, contextualize and interpret the artefacts, as well as the process of making” (Mäkelä & Nimkulrat, 2011: 1). Thus, skill itself can be regarded as a method, as noted by Mäkelä and Latva-Somppi in relation to craft-making where “craft skill is used to narrate” as the “application of traditional techniques and materials places the work in a historical context” (2011: 57).

Personal stories lie in the core of this study’s data and knowledge generation. While they start off as elements of tacit and subjective knowledge, stories further become explicit knowledge when put into words and artefacts, documented, critically and empathetically reflected upon and disseminated. Personal experiences, especially those that are narrated and documented, may contribute, much like traditional making, to the understanding of historical and geopolitical contexts, mapping socio-geographic formations and the realities communities face. Derived from the discussion raised by Mills about understanding of the larger context in terms of its meaning for the inner and external lives of a variety of individuals (1959), this idea further developed into a political argument referring to the connection between personal experience and larger social and political structures: “the personal is political” (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). An alternative approach to modernist objectivity is viewing the knowing individual “as a subject who is conscious of her situatedness, history and discursive nature”, as opposed to being an external observer (Haraway, 1991, as cited in Mäkelä & Latva-Somppi, 2011: 38).

The narrative function, when attributed a space and time for sharing, empowers art- and craft-making. Narratives allow for knowledge transfer that enables the understanding of multiple

contexts and backgrounds of art and craft makers and their communities. This function is aptly referred to by Somers: “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (1994: 606). Somers (1994) refers to the notion of *narrative identities*, a concept also addressed by Paul Ricoeur (1992: 114-116), that come about when individuals negotiate their stable and changing identities through narratives which are internalized or expressed by using personal stories and communication. Narrative identities are intrinsically connected to temporality, as “narratives are constellations of relationships embedded in time and space,” – Somers explains, which means that identities are shaped during connecting events within a “social network of relationships” (1994: 616). Taking note of these gives focus and depth to narrative-based research, as it may not be taken for granted “that people with similar attributes will share common experiences of social life, let alone be moved to common forms and meanings of social action” (Somers, 1994: 635).

It is often emphasized how building of a discursive space enables narrative and sharing processes, such as “interaction, polyphony, letting-go and the progressive unfolding of thoughts are supported, benefiting ways of knowing, narrative (re)construction, sensory perception and capacities to act” (Eaves, 2014: 147). The project described in the paper created a variety of discursive spaces for artists to share identity and art-making processes, including face-to-face processes, web-based platforms, seminars and exhibitions. The use of video recordings was another platform for realizing performativity and narrativity, as well as data collection. Creation of digital spaces increased the transition between tacit and explicit knowledge. Additionally, digitalization facilitated connections between the communities through web-based sharing platforms, such as video channels, social media, blogs and publications. Connections were also established in physical spaces through exhibitions. These methods encouraged cycles of knowledge transfer, creating spaces for making and sharing, documentation, enabling conversation and collating feedback. Face-to-face meetings and direct knowledge and practice exchange often depends on the availability of resources, but virtual exchange offers ways to overcome these challenges.

### Case Murmansk

One must not focus only on the margins. The center and the edge are inseparable from one another. Their connection is very strong and noticeable, but it is complex and not always obvious... [In our work] the edge is treated not as something negative, but as something welcome and celebrated, as a determinant of quality. In my opinion, the limit is always where it is. One cannot move it, only cross it.

– Participant, *Murmansk*, 2016

The four-day workshop *Повести о Пределах* (a Russian analogy to the title *Narrating the Marginal*), was hosted by the Art and Service Department of Murmansk Arctic State University (MASU) with a group of students and graduates of the department, two young men and fourteen women.

The participants explored personal interpretations of the concept of margin. During the first day of the workshop the participants and some researchers painted *life story mandalas* as an introductory activity to the workshop (see Figure 1). This process provided space for the participants to share personal life stories. The narrative ability of making processes and the painted mandalas themselves created new connections and empathy for the research process. The

Murmansk students then presented their ideas for the personal projects they planned to complete during that week.



Figure 1. Visualising personal life histories through *life story mandala* artistic tool, Murmansk, December 2016. Credit: Daria Akimenko

In terms of narrative sharing, the workshop process presented some limitations to the researchers themselves, who had to rely on their Russian-born colleague for translation and facilitation during the activities. Three MASU students communicated in English, although most students had a fair to good understanding of the language.

The artists' interpretations of the themes were often subjectively approached with a focus on personal limits, while exemplary objective limits were linked to their frustrations with obtaining visas for travelling internationally as well as climatic and environmental challenges. One participant noted, for example: "In my art piece I would like to reflect on inner limits, on how they influence one's perception of the world around," while another added: "I wouldn't want to sound banal, but it is obvious that living in Murmansk, one is faced with climatic and geographic limitations, such as cold temperatures and darkness... Through my abstract painting I would like to express the feelings of a person living in such conditions and still thriving to find inspiration, despite everything" (Participants, Murmansk, 2016).

Narratives' rationality is about explaining, expressing, understanding and constituting human life as a whole, and this is the value and role of story in human life (Ricoeur, 2004: 243). The value of storytelling towards building social connections is widely appreciated as it brings different people and their values together. Narrative allows people to cross cultural boundaries, because stories emerge from and journey through all cultures, encouraging encounter and mutual understanding among different people, hospitality, sharing, as well as the interest we share in each other (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2000: 47).

The artist Oxana Loginova commented on the importance of the narrative ability of artefacts that continues, acceding to different journeys, once the artefacts are removed from their makers (Sarantou, 2014):

[The bookmark I made] is not just something written, like "Hello" and "How are you", because you can do that on Facebook. If people receive something material that you made with your hands it is different, because you send your warmth to another person, and maybe your love or the mood you were in while you made it.

From this bookmark I made, the person who receives it will remember me while reading (Loginova, interview, December 13, 2016).

The approach to narrative in this project was followed with the purpose to discover the value of stories in identity creating contexts and as means of speaking of the lives they are interwoven with. Judith Butler (1990) contributed significantly to an understanding of the performative aspects of identities. Narratives, as identity performances (Butler, 1990), have a significant role in this project as they are able to communicate ontological aspects associated with identity formation, including the tensions that are associated with notions of “self” and “other”. Identity performances, some bearing strong relations to the Arctic environments, were also concretized in this project through artistic outcomes and artefacts. In the narration above the participant explains how her personal stories are woven into and embedded in her artefact. However, her artefact making is a performative expression of identities and the concretization of the process is the making, turning materiality into an artefact that “speaks”.

The artist Antonina Gorbacheva adopted a social approach by creating a video that discusses the role of a woman in facing limits and overcoming daily obstacles. She says:

Women [in the North] often face obstacles. For example, they may not get a job where “male force” is more valued. There is an obvious discrimination. At the same time we know that our women have been to space, can educate six children as a single parent and so on... I want to show the limits they face and the way they break through those limits due to their inner strength (Gorbacheva, interview, December 13, 2016).

Antonina proposed her video to be a part of an installation, alongside posters and a textile t-shirt citing “I’m Strong”, the title of the work (see Figure 2). This piece became more than an artwork, a political action of rendering audible gender issues in her region. In the reality where feminist actions are often frowned upon and gender roles are still very strictly defined, Antonina’s work is an artistic step towards “recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual” (Crenshaw, 1991: 1241). In the film she visualizes the real stories of her female friends and placed herself as a collective character symbolically “breaking through,” reaching the top of a snow-covered fell in the end of the video.



Figure 2. Making process and the installation “I’m Strong”, Murmansk/Rovaniemi, December 2016. Credit: Daria Akimenko; a still frame from the video “I’m Strong” by Antonina Gorbacheva.

Participants in Murmansk employed narrative to express their emotions, experiences, hopes and frustrations with their circumstances on the one hand, while making sense of their situations on the other. One stated: “[I experience] never-ending fluctuation from the negative to the

expressive, from the empty to the replete”, while another mentioned: “I view my life as a map with checkpoints I grew through. And there are points and bonuses I gained by helping people. And there are paths of other ‘heroes’, people” (Participants, Murmansk, 2016).

I wanted to study in a completely different place. But as I finished high school quite early, and places like St. Petersburg and Kazan are very far from here, I was not ready psychologically. That’s why I entered here, in Murmansk, started studying and have no regrets. I think that if you want to study, you will always achieve it regardless of the conditions. As for the teachers, you can always find a person who would lead and support you. We find opportunities for self-realisation, also thanks to collaboration with other Universities (Participant, Murmansk, 2016).

This reference bears in itself indirect insights into the reality of life and education in this place, for instance, young people’s mobility away from Murmansk, social pressure for starting university immediately after high school (common throughout Russia), struggle to find your artistic self and a suitable studying/working context “regardless of the conditions.” A variety of reflections and personal relationships with margins were documented during the study. Artists’ stories present a wider, complex and informal understanding of living in the margins, revealing the tensions presented by their life circumstances. This narration illustrates that some are even drawn to and find inspiration in the tensions presented by margins:

When we first started working on this project, I thought that probably I have no margins or limits and that the whole thing is not about me, but I tried to find a topic about the others. But it is hard to make art when it is not about you. Everything we do is about ourselves. By the third day of the workshop I realised fully that everything I work on is a stimulus to my creativity and movement ahead. That all the time I come across obstacles, margins and limits that I have to overcome. And when I don’t feel those margins and the need to struggle, I get too relaxed. Therefore, any discomfort, all the minuses and pluses of studying here, of living, working and creating in this city formed me the way I am. My whole creativity is based on overcoming (Participant, Murmansk, 2016).

The artists’ stories deliver evidence that the term *margin* is too wide to define, as it is often disconnected from the determinism of only geographical, climatic or economic factors due to margins also being shaped by cultural, social and political variables. The tensions that margins present not only shape identities, but also the underpinning narratives of lives reflected in artistic practices and outcomes.

## Case Rovaniemi

I don’t believe that the world has edges. There is no center either, namely.

– Participant, *Rovaniemi*, 2016

*Narrating the Marginal* was the title of the other Arctic workshop that was hosted by the Faculty of Art and Design of the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi. The group of fourteen participants, three men and eleven women, included local artists and international students of the University as well as practitioners from Moldova, Estonia, Turkey, Australia, Namibia and the UK. The themes connecting the artists on professional and personal levels included migration, belonging and exploration of marginality in various contexts.

The objectives and questions the artists chose to explore varied in scale, direction and focus. Some would inquire and aim to stimulate a discussion about global topics, such as “stereotyping, uninformed value judgments and the role of ego” (Participant from Namibia, 2016), while others asked questions that participants could relate to on a personal level. A Finnish participant, for example, sought to understand and cope with the transformation between different roles that have challenged her perception of self by asking “who or what exists in between these roles”. Some artists had more introverted, practice- and material-oriented objectives that contributed unique data through “creating a series of forms that present the characteristics of the material such as rawness, and characteristics of myself, such as being woman and designer, while showing different levels of simplicity and complexity” (Participant from Turkey, 2016).

The artists reflected upon the discussed themes from very different viewpoints: referring to cityscapes, daily practices, inner processes and tangible textures. The produced artworks included two performances, a group game, two video art pieces, two textile works (felt and weaving) and two mix-media artefacts.

In collective sharing the narratives varied from general inquiries to reflections on personal position within identity systems. One way or another identities remained an important theme that was widely explored by several participants in Rovaniemi. The understanding of how people combine multiple identities as they remain relatively transcendent, fluid, overlapping and context sensitive (Appiah, 2007: 100), was central to many discussions. One of the participants noted that “identity is how other people see you”, while another added: “we talk so much about identity, as if there is one and it relates to the other one, but I think it’s so much more fluid and so much more noisy and chaotic” (Participants, Rovaniemi, 2016). Another artist mentioned:

I just don’t think that I have one [identity]. I definitely have characteristics and things that I like and so on, but I never feel that any of them is essential... In what concerns “identity markers”, I am always on the easy side. So maybe I am just oblivious to the problems that other people are facing (Participant, Rovaniemi, 2016).

These expressions illustrate that individuals have to negotiate and perform their plural identities often trying to make sense of them through identity processing, such as combining identities (Lawler, 2008: 3-5). Another participant shared an insight into her own identity work: “I have a process now where I am trying to accept myself as I am, because I noticed that I look at myself through the eyes of the others” (Participant, Rovaniemi, 2016).

Identities are formed between, rather than within, persons due to individuals being immersed in environments and societies, living their lives as they unfold into the myriad pathways of their textured worlds (Lawler, 2008: 3). Identity processes are not necessarily clear-cut and smooth, thus individuals have to manage their contradicting identities that are often driven by affect, such as feelings of belonging and unbelonging, to be different from or the same as the “other” or by being part of a selected group that is “different” or the “same” (ibid). One of the participants shared a fitting personal observation that supports this point: “I am two different people – when I talk Estonian I am one person, when I speak English I am somebody else. And I can choose which one to be depending on a situation” (Participant, Rovaniemi, 2016).

A Finnish artist Priska Falin chose to reflect upon identity formation and its margins from a spatial point of view through the means of video:

Sometimes the perception of identity is built on clearly definable roles. Can identities be defined by the hidden, unnoticed or unrecognisable? Eight different localities in the city of Rovaniemi are presented in the video *In Between*. These localities are in between the central, familiar or promoted locations that tourists or local people of Rovaniemi visit. These localities are the unnoticed in between spaces that people may pass through regularly as they seem mundane. This artistic representation explores the relationships between identities and roles through these marginal locations (Falin, interview, December 5, 2016).

Artists also reflected on how they relate to identities that come about through materialities and art-making processes and how these shape notions of belonging and unbelonging. The artist-researcher Bilge Aktas conducts a study of felting as a craftform in rural Turkey and Finland. Through her felted installation (see Figure 3) she reflected on materiality:

I chose working with felt since it is a significantly vibrant material. I perceive the practice of felting more as manipulating the material rather than making an artefact. Due to the strong characteristics of the material, each piece becomes unique within a shared sameness... These pieces can stand on their own individually, but they can make a statement when they create a community, too (Aktas, interview, December 5, 2016).



Figure 3. Making process and the artwork by Bilge Merve Aktas, Rovaniemi, December 2016. Credit: Daria Akimenko.

The same material evoked polar associations and reflections in different makers giving an insight into their artistic practices, personalities and identities. The Estonian-Australian artist shared in a group discussion referring to working with wool while making a collective felt: “As I was making this thing, I realised that I really hate fibre... it’s so unpleasant... there’s something so vague about it. I work a lot with metal and wood and I much prefer it, it’s so concrete”.

A Finnish artist Mirjam Yeboah brought to the workshop her project of vulva-shaped jewelry, each piece unique in shape and color, both a work of craft and a political statement (see Figure 4). The series was created before, outside of the workshop context, as an artistic exploration of the subject. But as the artist went on showing her work, she found the subject increasingly

sensitive and difficult to talk about. Mirjam shared: “I don’t think we talk enough about vaginas and gender and different kinds of intersecting personalities and identities. [We don’t] show it in the way that is true, maybe shocking for some, but also beautiful” (Yeboah, interview, December 6, 2016). In the workshop she wanted to collect reflections and stories, anonymous or open, regarding the subject and see if her work could gain weight and value through the discussion of gender issues and both social and personal boundaries. The artist wondered: “...what kind of people can talk freely about this topic and what reactions it causes in others. It’s very interesting to see and use it in some way” (Yeboah, interview, December 6, 2016).

Discussions on the politics of the margins and on how marginalities are produced were enabled in the group context and provided additional research data. In the Rovaniemi case, more than in Murmansk, the notion of margin was extrapolated and used in its multiple meanings, including such specific ones, as a margin of a book or textile. One of the big questions raised during the workshop was about how margins, or states of marginality, are defined and by whom.



Figure 4. Group discussion and “GENI”, vulva-shaped jewellery by Mirjam Yeboah, Rovaniemi, December 2016. Credit: Mirjam Yeboah; still frame from the footage of a group discussion.

## Plural Arctic Identities

Through physical artefacts, recordings and the exhibition (see Figure 5), the stories of the Arctic participants became powerful as they were concrete representations of their individual and collective identities. Although the meanings surrounding the artefacts transformed, as the works from two Arctic locations entered a conversation with one another in the exhibition space of Arktikum, Rovaniemi, the pieces retained their unique identities and site-specificities.

The interaction between the two Arctic edges discussed here has obviously not been the first of its kind. Rovaniemi often initiates, receives and hosts international art and research forums and students from Murmansk and the rest of the world. Murmansk gave the researchers a feeling of a “cosmopolitan” city, rather well-connected to Central Russia and the rest of the Arctic (through a major seaport). Nonetheless, at least in the field of artistic and educational collaborations, there is a tendency of Murmansk community looking up to Rovaniemi as “the center” that is hard to reach due to limited transport infrastructure, scarce funding opportunities and strict immigration policies. This implies that the “center-margin” equation exists even within geographical margins themselves, which fuels further questions, for example, whether the notion of an “iron curtain”

continues to place strain on mobility and transfer between these two Arctic locations that are, in fact, not so geographically distant.



*Figure 5.* Exhibition “Every Margin Tells a Story”, Rovaniemi, December 2016. Artistic outcomes of the Rovaniemi and Murmansk workshops formed the exhibition that was hosted at Arktikum in Rovaniemi from December 2016 to February 2017. Credit: Daria Akimenko; Satu Miettinen.

The comparison between the two presented contexts can be problematized: the Rovaniemi group was diversified, with participants not necessarily representing Arctic locations, while the group in Murmansk was more homogenous in terms of their places of birth and residence. In this respect, a clarification of the Russian context is required. While most of the Murmansk participants were “ethnically” Russian, at least five of them cited being born and having spent their childhood elsewhere. They referred to themselves as being “from the South”. The southern regions of Russia can be as far as 3000 km away from Murmansk, which is as far as South European countries are from Rovaniemi. This supports the idea that migration and mobility remain, as they did historically, narratives of the Arctic, enriching in various ways socio-cultural landscapes of its many locations. The relativity of the notions of center and margin comes into the picture: Rovaniemi may be perceived as an artistic, educational, touristic center to the people of the Kola Peninsula, while Murmansk is central to many economic and trade processes in the Russian Arctic. Center and margin remain in continuous interplay and are contextual depending on many socio-cultural variables.

Several of the participants in Rovaniemi were doctoral candidates (between the ages of 25 and 50) who were able to process themes related to marginality on epistemological levels, thus discussing the themes in depth. This group represented random identities with limited relation to the Arctic region. The participants from MASU were undergraduate students and graduates between the ages of 20 and 28 and therefore they approached the topics of marginality and identity in more personal and direct ways. However, one of the authors of this paper, who has lived and worked in Finnish Lapland, but was born and raised in a peripheral Russian region, notes that a rather insightful image of the two groups from the different locations can be grasped.

Some Arctic communities with very versatile demographics focus on overcoming at least some aspects of marginality, like the University of Lapland community that stands strong against being

externally marginalized. Other communities, like the Murmansk group that is composed of different people sharing histories, strong and unifying pasts, educational approaches and other factors such as the divide between the West and the East, have different obstacles in overcoming marginalization. The researchers experienced very physical and tangible peripheries while traveling between Rovaniemi and Murmansk on dilapidated roads and crossing stringent visa check points. Arctic realities are not homogenous. The striking differences between the two communities reinforced the importance of sharing and exchange between Arctic artists and other global communities.

While the two Arctic groups differed from one another in terms of skillsets and backgrounds, the researchers noted strong contrasts in their approaches to theory and practice. The artists in Rovaniemi initiated an informed and inquisitive discussion challenging some of the key themes and concepts of the project, such as empowerment, identity construction and marginality. The group of Murmansk artists and designers, in contrast, focused on personal narratives and delivered modest and intuitive sharing processes.

During both the workshops artists' narratives illustrated the importance of location, place and space in their identity processes. One participant commented: "I am from Istanbul, currently I am living in Helsinki. I like how Istanbul has lots of stories and Helsinki allows me to focus on my personal story." Another said: "If we talk about Russia, I like straightforwardness and the tragedy here most of all. Especially, I appreciate those in the creative fields" (Participants, Rovaniemi and Murmansk, 2016).

Stronger divisions in gender roles were noted amongst the Murmansk group although participants from both locations commented that they do not perceive any differences in their approach to art-making and artistic practices due to their gender. Two Murmansk artists noted: "Chasing after equality with men many women burn out, lose their inner fire. When trying to cope with heavy tasks she is not meant to cope with, a woman, the keeper of the family hearth, loses her special qualities," and "I pictured myself in pink, because I'm a girl" (Participants, Murmansk, 2016).

The differences in the two groups' artistic and academic approaches shaped the workshop experiences of the researchers. The Rovaniemi group proved to have a more conceptual and explorative approach to making and understanding art and craft. The Murmansk group demonstrated thorough and advanced technique as well as a more "classical" academic approach despite working with contemporary artistic means. The identities expressed through art-making were diverse, illustrating the complexities of Arctic identity processes.

## **Conclusion**

The assumption that similarities between the two Arctic contexts exist may prove to be incorrect. Despite superficial similarities, the participants' individual and collective identities (based on geography, personal backgrounds, working methods, education) vary greatly, thus revealing context-specific realities, strengths and vulnerabilities. Not only the narrative identities of individuals, but also collective Arctic identities should be considered and approached minding preconceptions and generalizations.

The careful documentation of the activities through film, photo and sound was not only a successful method for the representation of the research, but also became a powerful tool for all

the researchers to process and disseminate data after fieldwork. The use of video documentation offered a platform for expressing implicit knowledge, thus rendering it explicit through narratives and identity performances. Working with people and their communities, transferring knowledge through art-making and narrative processes, stimulates an appreciation for the role of both mind and heart in fieldwork. While tangible and quantifiable data are conclusive and comprehensive, it is the intangible data deriving from the intersection of the individual and collective, concurrent and conflicting, intuitive and rational that challenges and fuels research in meaningful ways.

The project achieved the intended documentation of artefact creation underpinned by marginal circumstances. The two artist communities discussed in this paper meet the definition of marginality – the condition of being peripheralized, mainly due to the geographical component (Hall, Stevens & Meleis, 1994: 25). It becomes apparent, however, that even though the margin may be often objectively defined through quantifiable means, there are also subjective, very personal ways of viewing margins or the absence thereof. The research discusses and provides concrete examples of how the creation of different collaborative and individual art pieces in the localities in question sums up personal reflections on the margin as a concept, and how the capturing of personal narratives promotes a better understanding of and between the different contexts.

The documented narratives were related to living, shifting roles and identities related to “making it as an artist” in remote areas. The narratives revealed that artists and makers who live and conduct their creative practices in the geographical margins, specifically in the Far North, face socio-economic, climatic, historical and other challenges conditioned by the remoteness of these regions. The condition of relative isolation may impact, both positively and negatively, on the quality and productivity of artistic processes, but it may also impact on subjective realities of art-makers. The use of multimedia narrative offers ways to work through and cope with the identity tensions related to displacement, marginality and isolation allowing to put forward, as poetically noted by bell hooks, “a message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity” (hooks, 1990: 209).

## References

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