

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT:  
Conversation with AGNĖ JOKŠĖ

JULIJA:

So with this project, this program that we programmed, we were thinking about connections and collectivity, both cross-cultural between Scotland and Eastern Europe, but also more on a personal level. So familial and interpersonal connections, what can it mean to belong and exist in relation to others... We titled a screening program in which your work is included, *the ties that bind*, thinking about the reciprocity, but also about the tensions, heartbreak and constraints that sometimes arise with ties.

Love, care and belonging seem to be important themes in your work. With your moving image piece *Unconditional Love*, you were exploring intergenerational and familial relationships while with *Dear Friend*, you turned your gaze to friendship. With both of these works, we are very interested in your explorations and reimaginings of kinship. Could you tell us more about how you approach these themes, why they matter to you and/or how you navigate the complexities of relationships in your work? And could you potentially also tie in your experiences of living abroad and how they influenced your work ideas about relating and belonging?

AGNĖ:

This question 'What can it mean to belong and exist in relation to others...' In relation to my practice, I don't perhaps imagine other topics that could be as important for me as general relations among people... at least yet. It's perhaps the most thought-provoking and inspiring area to explore creatively. Thinking about interpersonal relations, like, for example, in *Dear Friend*, I was just basically considering this phenomenon of friendship, which I thought gets too little of attention in a more general sphere of life. For some kind of reason, we meet up with friends and can speak for hours about our heartbreaks and unsuccessful romantic relationships or dramas in families. But friendship as such, at least at that point, for me somehow seemed like a topic that is not that much talked about... at least in my circles. And perhaps because I've been quite a lot, at least in my earlier years,

involved in queer feminist activism, I surrounded myself with people with whom we were building friendships beyond romantic relations or imagining a certain type of kinship that can arise from the sense of having people around you. And yeah, I just simply somehow thought it is an interesting topic to explore.

So I started writing the script for *Dear Friend*, I think in 2018, perhaps I was on my second year of Master's at the Royal Danish Academy of Visual Arts. Back then, my teacher was this amazing artist working in the medium of film, Angela Melitopoulos. And back then I started writing in English to have some kind of distance. But eventually, I realised that I had to switch languages and because it was also back then, an opportunity for me to just take a year off school, I decided to take all my notes and come back to Lithuania. I also got an opportunity to participate in this JCDecaux prize, which was a prize for young artists working in the contemporary art field.

And yeah, I was sitting in a cafe and grieving, at the same time, about this lost friendship and just started like writing and thinking about it. And I was actually quite surprised, to be completely honest, because before the show opened, I felt like this is maybe too personal, a little bit on the edge... being slightly too much perhaps. But yeah, then I sent this letter that I sort of was writing while thinking about this very specific person... I sent the letter to them and I got a green light. And then the second surprise came because somehow people started to relate with this text, which was quite personal.

To be more precise, perhaps I would like to lead to the beginning of the question. Relation to others. I was so surprised that some people managed to relate. And I think what is interesting about this whole subject is that it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to completely discover yourself through the stories of others. And I don't know, I think you can imagine yourself in another person's shoes or can maybe sense the emotion of another person. Like that is simply enough. I don't have a straightforward answer, but somehow I imagine that viewers... because when I think about myself as a visitor in an art space encountering other works, I immediately

either sense my relation to those pieces and somehow I can connect or not necessarily.

But there are more questions in your question. When I started working on this piece, I was surrounded by friends living in a collective. So we had like a very family kind of vibe at home. But then somehow you need to move further away from your usual environment to let in other thoughts somehow come in. So I sort of had to come back closer to my family and my immediate surroundings, and a place, which feels very, very familiar to sort of open up and to think about this subject of friendship. And exactly the same happened when I had been working on *Unconditional Love*. I had to move away from Vilnius. I was working in my tiny room in Copenhagen for half a year, editing all alone. And only then I felt like I can deal with the material, which is very sensitive for me because I really care how my family would feel about seeing it. I sort of had to remove myself quite far away to feel like, okay, now I can think about the sequence, but not to think about all these people who I really care about, what they will think about it.

Yeah, but generally speaking, I would say that these themes that are somehow related to relationships and to people are important to me because it's a matter that moves me somehow the most. Deep in my heart, I'm just an idealist. I just really believe that people can be kinder to each other and more understanding and more accepting...

JULIJA:

I think you really touched upon many threads of the question. Also, you talked about yourself moving to other places to think about the relationships that you had ... like to move away from them...

MILDA:

So I'll move to another question. Watching *Dear Friend*, we were thinking about the definition of a witch that Mathew Wayne Parkin, another artist in the programme, references in their work *Vaseline*. So it goes something like *a witch is someone who uses language to make material changes in the world*. And I thought that it was

interesting to think about it in relation to your practice because you use storytelling a lot, and I'm interested in your thoughts about storytelling's potential to create alternative visions maybe of the world that we live in today.

And kind of for context, recently I was also reading an interview with a Lithuanian storyteller, Milda Varnauskaitė, in which she mentions that Lithuania has a very strong silence culture, so people are often wary of telling stories as if sharing them could put them in danger. So I feel like in this context, it's very interesting to think about your practice and what it means for you to tell stories, especially ones that are not often heard in the context of Lithuania. And we can think about where do your stories come from or how do you process them and what kind of potentials you see in the practice?

AGNĖ:

First of all, I feel like I would like to oppose that Lithuania has a very strong silence culture. I would say that Lithuania has a very strong culture of filtered stories, meaning that there is a certain narrative that is comfortable to speak about. And then there is another side which is very tough to explore and hard to speak about. So in my practice, I decided to work with the side that is a little bit less comfortable. And I speak from a queer perspective, which is already seen as inferior, at least in this context. But I've been perhaps extremely lucky in a way that in my environment, which I would say is sort of like a bubble, these questions are not as uncomfortable as they get when you bring them out in the wider context, outside of the visual arts scene. So there is this very strong contrast between different communities.

And I was thinking that this term *witch is someone who uses language to make material changes in the world*, interesting that you were bringing the term *witch*. I was immediately thinking am I the witch in this context? Sometimes I get nightmares about that... that eventually someone will notice that I am proposing changes to language that may lead somewhere, you know, like lead to certain political questions that are not necessarily seen as one-sidedly good. But I still choose to do that because perhaps I just believe in these certain necessities for the language to change and accommodate needs in a way.

So we do have this situation that in English, gender-neutral language, it became very usual. Like people just use it in every day and don't question it much. And I actually, to be completely fair with you, had a chance to see how that happened. Because back then I was living abroad. My surroundings were not native English speakers. So it took some time, even for the queer people to get used to it. You know, you just get familiarised with the sound through time, like it becomes usual. And the beginning was tough. People were confused how to use this strange pronoun *they*. But does it sound strange today? I don't think so.

MILDA:

Hmm. I mean, perhaps it does sound strange to some people. I feel like it's still a little bit of a question of the bubbles, that like in my bubbles, everyone uses this gender-neutral English language like everyday language, but sometimes when you step outside of those bubbles, it's still not as straightforward.

AGNĖ:

Absolutely. And perhaps that's the case with this language question, that there are still a lot of people who oppose and who do not understand why we are moving towards this direction of choosing actually to maybe not give that much of our attention to someone's gender. Because at least that's how I approach this question in Lithuanian language. Thinking, okay, do we really need to spare so much time in our sentence to address this one aspect of a person, like in basically every third word? With English, it's a little bit different. Definitely.

MILDA:

If we're touching on the language, then maybe you can expand and tell us more about your play with Lithuanian language and your experiments?

AGNĖ:

Okay. So what I do in my practice is that sometimes I come up with suggestions for a gender-neutral Lithuanian language. So for example, I came up with some suggestions for pronouns, also for the strategy to gender-neutralise other words...

because in Lithuanian language we have this situation that everything is pretty much gendered. Like even speaking about things, everything is pretty much gendered. And so yeah, I came up with certain proposals. For example, one of them is... because what determines gender in Lithuanian words is the ending of the word. So if the ending is the problem, then you can just swallow it and not say. And in my practice I pretty much... I try to incorporate these very systematic suggestions, it's just forms of everyday used language. So for example, the protagonists in my work, they speak in this language and in a way my strategy is to step by step familiarise, at least the viewer interested in my work, with these language proposals because I do really believe that with language certain things adapt more easily because people just get used to it, they constantly hear it. And it is one way to somehow make a change. For example, now in Lithuanian writing, you can notice that every second, every third post on Facebook uses this proposal made by Vilnius University for gender-sensitive language. So basically in the writing, both endings are included, the feminine and the masculine ending in one, and people are getting used to it and they started writing like this.

So yeah, but I would say that for me I see these practices as sort of parallel, meaning that I work with text, I work with stories, and then certain models of language, certain systems of language is a tool to perhaps direct the attention to these very specific elements that I would like the viewer to experience. So for example, questioning the same question of gender in a video work... For example, *Dear Friend* was also created thinking about this fact that we use masculine as a universal in Lithuanian. So there is no masculine endings in that work. Sort of reimagining if the universal could differ, you know... if we could not have this one way to be universal but think about maybe a feminine ending as potentially universal in that kind of universe.

So I even sometimes call it more of an activist practice than artistic practice. Because in arts, I do understand why viewers greet certain artworks with suspicion if they're precisely directed towards change. I feel like it is a ground that is a little bit shaky and that's why I feel like creating the separation here. Like, okay, actually I'm

speaking about this gender-neutral language in public and not necessarily as an artist, but as well as as an activist.

JULIJA:

So those roles kind of intertwine?

AGNĖ:

Absolutely.

JULIJA:

And do you think about one role in particular, or do you kind of float between all of them? And I don't know. You don't want to be put in one?

AGNĖ:

I think that when speaking from a position of an activist you really need to be considerate. It's a very serious matter. With art, I do think that there has to be a little bit more space to be not necessarily extremely consistent. Otherwise, it might become very... I don't want to say boring. You might lock yourself in a way.

JULIJA:

Maybe we could come back to the storytelling part of your practice and if any thoughts arose on this?

AGNĖ:

So storytelling is in a way an important practice right now, especially in the contemporary art world, because this is sort of a method to speak about experiences that were not given the stage for like hundreds and thousands of years. And right now it seems like a moment to bring up these stories and lived experiences on the table and give them the necessary bright and light.

So I do think about it, in a way, in connection to many other artists that are as well working with... with stories. I do feel like speaking from this very particular perspective, for example, like in the work *Dear Friend* – from this queer, feminist,

lesbian perspective, seemed important, especially in this context, the Lithuanian context... because when I was growing up, I haven't heard people speak in this way. I heard people speaking in a different way. As important it was back then for me, as I imagine it can be, right now to maybe a ten-year-old Agnė, you know? But I also believe that for certain stories to be heard, there is a better or a worse time. So in a way, I feel like I made this work a little bit too late. It could have been made much earlier. I'm just questioning it... if it could have been heard... if it would have been told early. Because right now what was surprising to me was that people who have not necessarily strongly expressed or understood queer experiences were relating to a story which is not necessarily about them.

But, you see, perhaps friendship is that kind of a topic that connects people beyond sexual orientation or gender. Friendship is perhaps this question that is important to a lot of people. But yeah, storytelling as a method for me is in a way I would say... I'm not very good at drawing or painting, so words are sort of... Let me tell stories to you, I want to create these universes where certain unimagined things can be lived through. So this person walking in the main hall of CAC and reading a letter to a platonic lover and this amazing lesbian woman - this is the world I want to imagine. And through telling the story, living it through, it sort of happens.

JULIJA:

A certain type of magic as well.

MILDA:

Yeah. Maybe you could tie in a little bit also why and how do you use moving images to tell these stories? What does that bring to the storytelling process? I guess I read somewhere where you were speaking about using moving images and how that helps to capture body language as well as not just words and kind of creates a more spatial experience.



AGNĖ:

At least in that work, in *Dear Friend*, what was important was the lens of the viewer. So the person who was filming was my recipient. And that's not really what you can do while performing to a crowd.

MILDA:

Yeah, I guess it creates a certain kind of intimacy. It almost feels like you're speaking to a person one on one, through the camera.

AGNĖ:

Yeah. And then there were other questions, that we sort of considered. Ok, what kind of camera do we use... I really wanted to have a chance to show this huge space of the main hall. So we needed some kind of cinematic equipment. And then we just yeah... Odeta Ryškutė was filming *Dear Friend* and she was just like 'Let's just get a cinema camera.' I was like 'How much does it cost?' Half of the budget. Okay, let's do it [laughs].

But now I feel like it was a nice decision that we were sort of thinking about it in this extremely maximalist way because really those lenses opened up this very particular space, like the space which never had any like absolutely open queer representation in that room, like the main hall. Because one of the most important shows in CAC was *Nuo sutemų iki aušros [From Dusk till Dawn]*, this exhibition of queer art, curated by Laima Kreivytė. I still remember that show. It was such an influential show... for me.

JULIJA:

When was it?

AGNĖ:

It was I think maybe 2013. Yeah. So it happened a while ago, but it happened in the cellars of the Contemporary Art Center.

JULIJA:

Okay...

AGNĖ:

And it was not because the CAC did not want to give the space. It was just because... we had this conversation with Laima when she told me that actually, they just had too little time to organise the show and the whole building was already booked and only the cellars and the reading room were left. And that's where the show happened.

And I was sort of thinking, okay, if I can take whatever space in the CAC then I have to take the main hall. And yeah, and we had an agreement that okay, we will be filming the work there and we come with Odeta, we rented this crazy expensive equipment and there are workers in that space who are sanding the floor and the sound was insane! Like Odeta was filming me, I was speaking with her but I was not able to hear myself. So the original soundtrack of the work is just pure noise. And that's how there was no other option just to think what to do with the sound after. We use this cinematic equipment, but we don't have sound. So then we went and ADRed it, did dubbing, so actually the whole work is dubbed, but we filmed it in the main hall, so with certain interruptions. So you can see the workers in the background. These are CAC people who have been preparing for another show, short on time. We were short on time too. But we all met there. It was actually quite an interesting experience in a way.

JULIJA:

Did they say anything about your work? The workers that were there changing the exhibition?

AGNĖ:

No. They were busy with their own stuff. I think most probably they did not notice much but that's why actually the whole imagery is a little bit like in the fog in the video. Because we were actually walking in this huge cloud of dust.

JULIJA:

[laughs] Okay. Mm-hmm.

AGNĖ:

Yeah. But we found a way to somehow fit into that gigantic hall.

MILDA:

Yeah. You fit yourself into the circumstances.

AGNĖ:

In a way... In a way, yeah. But at the same time, it felt like too big of a compromise to go somewhere else. Rather, I will have this whole situation than lower down my expectation. It just felt like somehow very important as a statement. To claim that gigantic hall for this one quite tiny person. Yeah. I'm gonna read my letter to a friend there. Yes. To give certain kind of importance to a text that actually is important just for one person.

JULIJA:

Was it also exhibited in the same hall during JCDecaux?

AGNĖ:

No, actually, not. It was... it was exhibited in the northern hall.

JULIJA:

Kind of referenced the place but not fully. Then maybe the last question you mentioned also Laima Kreivytė and your activist activities and friendship is also a big topic as we talked about... I'm just interested in the activist networks in Lithuania and how you're placing yourself. I mean, activism might be a big word... It might not be, but how do you work with other people? How do the ideas flow?

AGNĖ:

You know, and that's the thing. It's very hard to do something alone. So definitely, for many different things, I've been working with other people, but I would say that right

now it feels like the core of queer activism somehow, okay forgive me, listeners, if I am completely wrong, but moved from Vilnius to Kaunas, I would say.

JULIJA:

The second largest city.

AGNĖ:

Kaunas seems like a place now where you go to *Emma* and actually go and organise together. And where to go in Vilnius to search for this kind of place? Like, I don't know... To be completely fair with you, I do feel a little bit lonely in terms of activist community here right now. But maybe because it's important to give yourself some time and connect with people, start working together. I've been here for a year now and the communities that I work with, they're more connected to arts right now than to the queer community. And I don't know how to explain that, but I have to say that I don't do anything alone. I always work with people. For example, last week we started a small collaboration with this amazing calligraphy artist Linas Spurga. We will be making new Lithuanian letters for gender-neutral endings. So instead of writing both endings in one word, we will try to create new signs to merge with those letters.

As well, with this whole gender-neutral language. I haven't started it. Other people started thinking about it and started creating proposals much earlier than I even thought about this question as a question. And it was Gina Dau who was very, very generous... gave me all of her tables made together with some people from the Lithuanian Gay League. So they created this proposal that I used in my very first written word in 2017. I didn't manage to learn that language, so I just had to come up with another. Gina as well reflected that maybe that proposal is a little bit hard to adapt in everyday use because it's a properly learnt new language.

In general, I would say that at least my art practice is somehow very linked to other people. And without them, without working together or without them being generous, reflecting and helping to fix certain bugs and, for example, with language or thinking

together about artworks and reconsidering certain decisions, without all of these people, it would be very, very difficult to do anything.

JULIJA:

And in a way, this is a network, maybe not a monolithic...

AGNĖ:

Yeah, yeah. That's the thing. If you want to imagine this very monolithic kind of community that is just together working, well, then maybe I haven't experienced anything like that. It's like everything is fluctuating. People have different resources at different times.

JULIJA:

For sure.

AGNĖ:

People move around, someone comes, someone goes and dynamics change.

JULIJA:

Okay. I think we can finish off here. Thank you. There were a lot of topics touched and thank you for your reflection on the work and it was very interesting to hear about your practice and your thinking processes.