

# Echo and the Ecumene

## Grasping the Estonian National Museum

Art Leete and Patrick Lavolette

### ABSTRACT

A duo-biographical recollection of an encounter, this article comprises a dialogue between the authors. On the one hand, it is about a shared moment – a tandem ‘go-along’ tour of the *Echo of the Urals* exhibition in the Estonian National Museum. On the other, it is about certain similarities and differences in the disciplinary approaches to curating as well as to spectating an ‘inter-national’ museum space in Estonia’s second-largest city, Tartu.

### KEYWORDS

cross-curatorial museology, multi-biographical stories, visual/material culture, Estonia, Urals

The official UN Global Challenges 2030 ... don’t explicitly mention the past, its deployment or effects. Yet ignoring history doesn’t make it go away or stop it from tripping up the meeting of worthy and vital targets ... contemporary deployments of the past aren’t all, or necessarily, damaging. They may manifest hopeful potential, not least in the energy of activism and public debates about contentious histories. The challenge is how to grapple with the past in ways that can at the least be less harmful, and that might even help in crafting more equitable and liveable futures. (Macdonald np)

*Echo of the Urals* is one of two permanent exhibitions that form part of the ERM (Eesti Rahva Muuseum), the Estonian National Museum, in the city of Tartu. As certain people sensitive to national politics might expect, one of these permanent displays focusses on the country’s culture.<sup>1</sup> The other, an exhibition launched officially in 2016, portrays the anthropological origins of the Finno-Ugric peoples, and takes into account a vast territory spanning from Scandinavia to the Ural region. After over a decade in the planning – for this national museum was already over a century old, originally opening in 1909 – the *Echo of the Urals* exhibition is hardly something that we consider to be completely ‘new’. Yet it is far from old (Karm and Leete 2015). This brief contribution examines its development within the context of rapidly changing twenty-first-century museological practices. Since



Atko Rimmel focusses his review of the exhibition on the secular and textual, aiming to ‘introduce exhibit items, with less emphasis on the visual and material aspects’ (2019: 71), our attention drifts towards these other matters. The main goal here is thus to add a layer to the ERM’s storyline by dialectically bringing together tangible experience with the audio-visual character of the vision behind the ‘Echo’ displays as a whole.

So if Rimmel was keen to begin his review by examining a quotation from Matthias Aleksanteri Castrén,<sup>2</sup> our contribution takes a different route. For a start, part of our journey is in the vein of a tandem tour, one that projects the exhibition’s significance beyond the Urals. This type of shared ‘legwork’ in a co-inhabited field intends to amplify individual voices through a multi-biographical approach that considers such themes as gender, mourning and shifting dialogues. Indeed, sociologist Jeff Hearn has charted a series of trajectories for the realm of auto-ethnography which are quite distinct from the biographical and *mémoire* genre of anthropologists (Jackson 2006). Many of the themes which he covers in his approach are nevertheless pertinent here – not only to our case study, but also to the academic power dynamics that Judith Okely raises in her introductory text to this issue of *AJEC*. Indeed, in one of his reflections on life-writing, post-colonialism and gender discourses, Hearn affirms:

Some early political and reflective writings on men ... emphasised the importance of autobiography, and in some national contexts, such as Finland, biographical research continues to be a significant tradition for studying men’s lives. Reflexive writing by men on academia itself has also been developed in a few instances ... Interestingly, nationality in academia is rarely addressed reflexively ... For myself, over the last 25 or more years, every so often I have wanted or needed to write autobiographically. (Hearn 2005: 66–67)

Later in his synthesis, after adding some life-history samples from his notes on his own family genealogy, he adds:

By the early 80s, I was writing and publishing on patriarchy. I used the term ‘men’s studies’ for a while until realising how problematic it was. From the very start, the connections between the personal, the political and the theoretical were there and they were (and are) intense. (Hearn 2005: 75)

The *Echo of the Urals* curators attempted to incorporate their design ideas about the diversity of Finno-Ugric cultures, with the major theme of gender uniting the exhibition. In sketching out similarities and varieties between the groups, they implicitly hoped to avoid dictating

their message to visitors. Following a strategy of new museology, visitors are expected to create their own meanings and understandings (see Falk and Storksdieck 2005). In reflecting scientifically, however, one might equally attempt to communicate both as and to other curators, not only using explanations by exhibition specialists (see Pawłusz 2018, 2021). Still, sometimes scratching out a hidden topic from the exhibition may be illuminating (Remmel 2019). Regarding this, it made sense to walk together through the ethnographic display. Doing so enabled a dialogic reflection on our first-hand impressions. While moving through the permanent exhibition, we aimed to combine scholarly exploration with immediate tacit perception. In the following discussion, we intend to concentrate on a few selected topics that somehow caught our attention during a ninety-minute ‘go-along’ ethnographic walk (Kusenbach 2003).

### **A Micro-Journey in Mid-November 2020**

During a mild November in Tartu, PL had been reviewing a chapter on the Berlin Forum for an ASA monograph series (Macdonald 2023, forthcoming). The article looks at a publicly prominent case of heritage-making (Fig. 1). Here, the author examines how issues dealing with the ‘colonial’ began as a trace and flared into a major site of contention given the current socio-political climate (see also Matos and Sansone 2021). In paying attention to such concerns, Sharon Macdonald points to how anthropology itself is involved with both interpreting the past as well as shaping the everydayness of heritage-making as a contemporary process. The case study for her conceptual analysis is a project called ‘Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage’. Inaugurated in 2015, this is a ‘multi-researcher’ ethnography meant to understand different perspectives in curating Berlin’s complex historiography (Bartmanski and Fuller 2018). The Humboldt Forum is a high-profile and controversial project that had a virtual opening in 2021. Lodged in the very heart of the Spree’s Museum Island, in the rebuilt façade of a former palace (colloquially referred to as *das Schloß*), this cultural exhibition hub stands as a litmus test of sorts for colonial/imperial heritage debates which extend well beyond Germany.

Now after having just picked up the keys to a shared office space in the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Tartu, PL had been commenting on a draft of this article.<sup>3</sup> As he was preparing to shift gears and read another chapter of Raymond Firth’s (1936) *We*



**Figure 1.** Berlin Humboldt Forum, poster in the main Hauptbahnhof station (September 2021). Courtesy of K. Kary.

*the Tikopia* for his ongoing biographical investigation, AL walked into the room (Laviolette 2020). There was a slightly awkward moment of silence for some seconds. Feeling uncomfortable, PL tried a bit of chit-chat, which he guessed his colleague would probably find tiring. The silence persisted to the point that PL now expected some bad news. Was AL there to tell him to repack his computer because the university would be closing due to new COVID-19 restrictions? Or was it something worse? ‘We hear you have a birthday tomorrow ... have you been to the ERM? Would you like a guided tour, since we cannot really do any fancy social engagements at the university?’ PL responded that he had just been the previous weekend but added quickly that since it is so vast he had not seen all that much of the basement exhibition. ‘In fact, I only whizzed through that lowest level in under ten minutes because this seemed like the material exposition for the Seto and sauna culture, for which I know virtually nothing’. Serendipitously, AL’s response was: ‘Perfect, this is what I intended to show you’.

Agreeing to meet at 2:00 pm the next afternoon, PL walked there from central Tartu. He took a shortcut through the fields, arriving fifteen minutes too early. ‘I expected Art to arrive around ten minutes early because this is the kind of person he strikes me as being. So I should have gone in and used the loo ... Instead, I couldn’t resist the chance to walk around the whole museum, which is enormous’. It is built on a former Soviet military airbase in the area of the older Raadi Manor House Estate and was designed by the Parisian architect firm Dorell Ghotmeh Tane. When arriving at 2:00 pm sharp (AL was indeed already waiting), PL felt a need to explain the desire to see the museum from the opposite side: ‘as an extension to the airstrip’ (something he had remembered reading somewhere). ‘It’s not an extension of the airstrip’ was the casual reply. ‘Damn’, PL thought to himself, ‘this is not a great start to the afternoon ... only fools believe everything they read!’<sup>4</sup> AL added that the museum was closed on that day, which PL had noticed on the door when arriving less than half an hour earlier: ‘I feel doubly privileged for this tour then’. This closure obviously did not apply to them though, nor to the group of twenty-five teenagers who were starting to move across the conference room. Following this cohort of students, we entered through a pair of big wooden doors leading to the basement. This is the threshold to the *Echo of the Urals* exhibition. PL then tried to make a little joke about his visit the weekend before, when one of the things he noticed was that one of their colleagues (Jonathan Roper) was omnipresent in the museum.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he ‘features’ upstairs in two different

exhibitions – reading *Little Red Riding Hood* in a temporary exhibition about fairy tales called *Once Upon a Time* (curated by Katrin Sipelgas). And then he also features in a sound-cave display about voices and languages whilst explaining how easy it was for him to pick up Estonian. The trick, he explains in a looped recording, is to make certain word game associations.

After descending the stairs from the *Echo* entrance hall, one of the few objects found on the basement floor was a group of skis. They were in a walled cabinet on the left, which stood just before a tunnel that leads the visitor over an electric blue river with interactive sounds and projections. These skis had skins on them, covering only one side. The other side revealed some engravings. PL had learnt that these carvings were not typical. Then, stupidly, he guessed aloud that the skins were for helping the skis to go faster when going downhill, a bit like wax. AL's reply was patient: 'Quite the opposite: the fur stops the skis from slipping when walking uphill'. In being wrong again, PL felt his embarrassment must by then have been easy to spot, since obviously the fur would give some grip to the wood on the snow. AL had no idea that his good intentions might wind up humiliating PL. AL found it illuminating that one can learn something from every detail. In truth, these skins worked both ways – fur helps things slide and gives things a better grip as well.

This micro-moment started to remind PL of when Murray Last (a medical anthropologist) visited Tallinn several years ago. They were walking through the old town and Last would point out some interesting features, like some door to an old structure. Then he would ask, knowing full well the answer, from what kind of wood the doors were made. 'What? Do I look like I know anything about material culture?' was what PL felt he should have replied, but did not muster the courage. They had also managed a tour of some art galleries and then Last went to see the Estonian Open Air Museum on his own, even though it was snowing heavily. This lack of participation was something PL later regretted, only getting to visit this museum the following summer, after seeing its Finnish counterpart in Helsinki with the historical geographer S. Robert Aiken.<sup>6</sup>

## Gendering and Mourning

The recognition that the ethnographer is a gendered knower has unmasked the assumption that the anthropologist is an objective and neuter instrument rather than an individual who is herself the

embodiment of social categories. Furthermore, because gender relations are so universally an expression of unequal power relations, their explanation forces researchers to recognize power as a necessary component of all anthropology. (Olson 1993: 112)

The *Echo* exhibition space is designed with a certain ‘structuralism’ in terms of gender opposites. It is composed of four main rooms reflecting the division of seasons. Room 1 (spring) and Room 2 (summer) are separated by a bridge and a wedding path that crosses over a fluorescent river of light and sound. Autumn and winter are increasingly darker spaces that curb back around themselves in a somewhat disorientating labyrinth-like way. The display of wedding artefacts in the summer room depicts many traditions of Finno-Ugric cultures. Indeed, AL explained that one main intention was to have a guiding narrative that was highly gendered. He mentioned how certain ‘reviewers’ were highly critical of this dichotomisation of the displays because of a fear that they potentially reinforced many gender stereotypes. In showing two ‘artificial’ gender symbols, he pointed out that they were designed specifically for the exhibition, but were not based on any previously recognised symbolism.

Although the display is structured to reflect the ethnography of the Finno-Ugric gender roles, the examples are a bit obscure or hidden. The curatorial team’s intentions were not always explicit, but penetrate the display as thin lines, appearing here and there. People do not always notice these manifestations, but this should not hamper the audience from perceiving the ethnographic/aesthetic efforts. Still, the topic of gender is there, and if somebody delves into the exhibition more vigorously, such messages make their appearance. We now try to clarify these design elements by discussing some specific features of the exhibition.

From the history of ethnography, it appears that sometimes researchers ascribe to men a desire to justify their leisure, whereas even women in leisure are working. An example of this in the display is a comparison of pipe smoking versus leather stripping. The curators used a few items collected amongst the Nganasan people in Taimyr Peninsula by Alexander Theodor von Middendorff (1815–1894).<sup>7</sup> In his field diary from 1843, Middendorff reflects several times on gender roles amongst this indigenous group. He sees the situation in terms of a sharp distinction between men’s and women’s labour:

On the whole, the toilsome burden of endless household tasks fell upon the [Samoyed] women. The men felt that their only duties were to tend

the animals, go hunting and fishing, and make wooden dishware and utensils for hunting and fishing. While men split reindeer bones, which they could do with inimitable dexterity by striking them with the back of a knife just once, the women had to fight for their portion of the marrow and brains with unerring tenacity, even though the women's help scraping, and tanning pelts was indispensable! (Middendorff 1878: n.p.)

A similar style of depicting the gender roles among the Nganasan is related to items of material culture, exhibited at the Echo display. The curators connected extracts from Middendorff's travelogue to the objects, collected by him and found in the museum storage archives. A skin scraper is related to description of women's hardships:

No matter how dismal the weather, the woman had to go out to find ice for the pot. When she was done cooking, there was no end to her chores. She had to tend the children, shake, dry, and mend the damaged hut coverings, as well as the clothes and the footwear in particular. Then she had to preserve fish and meat for the coming, endlessly long winter. In addition, every free moment was used to tan skins. (Middendorff 1878: n.p.)

In this context of endless duties, Middendorff approaches skin tanning as an easy job, conducted by the Nganasan women as a leisure time activity that enables relaxing and resting from their real jobs. The other Nganasan items, pipes, put onto the same display, are also connected to spare time, and were available primarily for the male part of the community. This way, the Nganasan skin scraper and pipes, paired with quotes from Middendorff's field diary, serve as examples of gender inequality ruling amongst the group:

They were particularly keen on smoking. They would stuff barely a third of the pipe, which was the size of a thimble. There had to be space for some animal hairs, which were added to the tobacco as a fortifying base. The fair sex would also puff on the pipe quite frequently. But there were only reindeer hairs and wood shavings to enjoy! To be sure, smoking women could only be seen when all the necessary housework was done. (Middendorff 1878: n.p.)

These diary extracts and ethnographic objects reflect the usual division of labour amongst reindeer herding, hunting and fishing societies. As such, scholars in the nineteenth century perceived that men 'only' graze the reindeer, hunt and fish, but women do all the 'real' jobs. Reindeer herding or hunting were not considered as serious duties (because wandering around is not a meaningful venture). At the same time, this division of labour and leisure is not straightforward, as women also smoked pipes. We have no evidence regarding



the Nganasan perspective on these gender roles at that time, but Midendorff's observations still reproduce stereotypes of gender imbalance/injustice.

Similar ironic representations of gender inequality are also present in other parts of the exhibition. A man is asleep above a big oven with the sound of snoring filling the room, yet there is a woman making food in the kitchen of this Komi couple's home. In the Khanty section of the exhibition, we witness a similar scene: the master of the household sleeps on reindeer skins in the middle of a day while his wife is busy near the stove. The culture-specific arrangement reflected here is related to the fact that hunting is a physically demanding job and men need to rest a lot at home. But if we only look at the situation within the domestic confines of the house, then men appear lazy and women hard-working.

By contrast, one particularly evocative scene is of a wailing woman, in mourning for her dead husband. AL explains that she is 'invoking' his spirit and adds that the use of video projection here was 'a way out of the ethical dilemmas of displaying human remains'. The sombre mood is set in a Russian Orthodox cemetery, with a large tree as well as a cross in the background. There's a subtle bump in the floor that mimics the tree's roots but which also impedes visitors from advancing too close to the lamenting woman. The belief system behind this diorama is that her husband will answer her call later in her dreams. As such, we are led into an experiential representation, one meant to help understand this type of human/non-human 'communication'.

Many anthropological associations for explaining supernatural belief systems in the afterlife could be drawn here. Perhaps one relevant scenario is the notion of landscaping death, at least in the ceremonial sense that it brought to PL's memory a canoeing/kayaking journey with Franz Krause in April 2013. This occurred through the flooded forests of Soomaa National Park, which protects a 390 square kilometre territory. Soomaa means 'land of bogs', and somehow this scene brought out his own haunted/nostalgic thoughts (see Krause and Ley 2019; and McLean 2003).

At the end of our tour together (before going back up the stairs), we faced a flat screen mounted on the wall. It is on the other side of the river, next to a lift. We had gone straight past it when beginning the tour by going to the skis. The caption next to this screen read: '*Collecting Wood for Grandmother* (2009)'. In this short film of two minutes, a boy in the back garden of a country house is running along the side of a house. He repeatedly lets himself slide on the ice, as the slippery

path beneath the roof had turned into an iced surface. His playful act seems to be for the camera, which he constantly looks to for approbation. It was an infectious little game that perhaps had some element of *tristesse* to it because of the cold, barren setting. This facet was exacerbated when AL told PL a touching story of how the boy in this film, who was the son of his friends, had drowned a few years after the recording. He adds even further that it was their second son to have died and that around ten years before the second was born the couple had lost their first child. Just as the exhibition itself involves a seasonal reflection of a whole life cycle, so too is this circularity of life captured and presented in this short video.

‘Touching’ is of course an understatement. Faced with a loss for words, and perhaps again to fill the silence with a personal story of his own, PL mentioned how he was once told by a close friend that belonging is inseparable from death. Being ‘proper’ Cornish was explained as something beyond birth or breeding: ‘You also have to have known someone who has died Cornish’ (Lavolette 2003: 217). In trying to give his own second-hand ethnographic snippet of wisdom some gravitas, he realised that it did not have the same impact in terms of lived experience. At least not in terms of the tragedy he had just been told. His intent was certainly not to attempt to enter into any kind of ethnographic table tennis rally.

### **Inter/Activity – Nationality**

Instead of taking the stairs to leave the basement floor exhibition space, AL gestured to the lift as he pressed the button. Providing some comical relief, he spoke of how this mechanical taken-for-granted assemblage of objects was offered as a reply to the critique that the gallery did not provide enough content about Finland: ‘So we said: “But look, we have a contribution from Finnish technology right here, the Finnish lift”’.

We ended our ninety-minute tour in the top room with the language tree and the map of the regions across Russia and Eastern Europe. AL explained some of the linguistic similarities between various Finno-Ugric words. For instance, *kala* (‘fish’) – following various words leads to a deeper understanding of why it is next to impossible to carve out national boundaries for ethno-identities that pre-date the birth of the nation state. In thinking of the language tree, AL mentioned that the Urals project is not directly about Finno-Ugric people, but is more

about the wider peripheral culture area that forms the sense of continuity. So the Nenets, the Komi, the Sami and so on are connecting ancient ancestral links. The tour had started here, so we had travelled full circle.

Before drawing any conclusions, however, it is worth thinking about the use of audio-visual material in the exhibition space (as well as online) as a strategy for attracting/educating visitors. In this capacity, several animations, interactive touchscreens and documentaries are scattered through each room. Most of the ethnographic films presented are from the 1980s and were made by Alexei Peterson, a former long-term director of the ERM (from 1958 to 1992). These follow the style of Russian realism videos. According to Peterson, everything must be presented according to ethnographic monographs. This visual material was censored during Soviet times, so it was made to look like old footage. It was prohibited to show life in the Udmurt villages in real time because preserved folk traditions were interpreted as signs of backwardness. Presenting real village life was thus officially perceived as an attempt to discredit communist progress. The notion of ‘primitive’ behaviours was something the state did not want to portray about its own indigenous inhabitants. Local administrators demanded that film-makers announce that they were presenting the pre-communist era, the tsarist period. Hence, the Udmurt people in the film were supposed to be acting, by wearing folk costumes for example. But they were not really acting; as such, costumes were still regularly in use (Niglas and Toulouze 2010):

Museums all over the United States today are grappling with complex issues involving whom they serve, whom they should be serving, and how to go about doing so. Shifting patterns of museum patronage, changes in urban and other population groups, minority and other communities’ growing interest in having a say as to how they are represented in exhibitions, and evolving professional standards within the museum world itself are all fueling this exciting debate. (Kahn 1993: 113)

From the first line of this quotation, one could easily substitute ‘United States’ with ‘world’. Indeed, the book that Kahn was reviewing (see Karp et al. 1992), as well as the sentiments captured in his summation of it, was as relevant in 1993 as it was twenty years later, when the ERM was only a few years from opening. With such ideas in mind, PL enquired into how conscious the curators were with other models of new museum practices. AL explained that there was a division between the roles of his own team and those of the ERM museum curators, who had been seeking European examples of good practice.

He then highlighted another highly biographical/personal dimension to *Echo* – one object on display belongs to his family as well as to former exhibitions about the heritage(s) of the Finno-Ugric people that he has co-curated.

A feature worth highlighting is that there are interactive smells connected to certain settings in the exhibition such as in the sauna and near the kiln. AL has mentioned facetiously that the smell of bread can be bought in bags, and added that many of the sounds were generated in an interactive way to respond to the movements of visitors. The neon-coloured fish in the lit-up floor also react to guests' footsteps. PL felt like asking 'So where are the mosquitos?' but resisted. He had already appeared silly enough for one day. But at one point he did ask about mosquitos, since he was curious about customary types of repellent. Fire/smoke was the solution put forward (several examples of burning/smoke are present) – as well as simply adapting. Would there be any herbal mixtures/remedies, etc.? Is this a gendered question that begs asking/answering?

In all rooms of the exhibition, there are also bigger screens for showing animations. These are for recounting some of the folklore, customs and legends of the Finno-Ugric people. AL has described the idea of these films as an attempt to model gender relationships through folk humour:

We felt that it was necessary to link and conceptualise the exhibition scenes in a more sophisticated way and to add more emotional texture to this display. The stories underlying the films are derived from folk tales. The films use humour and irony to highlight the eternal tasks and challenges that men and women must face in their lives. (Leete 2017: np)

The best Estonian animation movie directors were invited to create the clips in collaboration with ethnographers. These short films as well as the book describing the ideas behind them (Karm et al. 2017) won several prizes at international film festivals and competitions. This demonstrates a high level of recognition for how these animations stay cognitively close to original folklore sources.

Another example is Video 2 of the Multimedia Showreel by Velvet Creative Alliance. It is a promotional video for the *Echo of the Urals* exhibition, and it sees a young boy walking through the exhibition space on his own. He is interacting with the intermediary of technology to understand culture. This is a 'future-child', perhaps an orphan in an empty world, finding out about the past from what has survived. Or this is a youngster from the past, who is transported

into some alien world where he intuitively learns how to escape the ‘entrapment’ of dead culture (i.e. a world of frozen post-human remains).

Another promotional video, Video 3, is *The Making of Echo of the Urals*, which initially appears as a quite straightforward portrayal of what was happening behind the scenes when the gallery spaces were being designed. Here, the viewers are able to witness electric floorboards being assembled and dioramas being fitted together. Now there is quite a lot happening in this short video. One thing we could focus on is the ‘artistic automation’ when human forms are mechanically cut out of polyethylene foam, as conceptually reminiscent of the work of Walter Benjamin (1969 [1936]). It also has certain collaborative as well as audio-visual parallels with the autobiographical process described by the British artist Anthony Gormley in the documentary *Inside Australia*, a work commissioned for the 50th anniversary of the Perth International Art Festival (Nicholls 2003).

Figures 2 and 3 are still images taken from this promotional video. We have selected them to reveal subsequent passages of text. They are separated by thirty seconds of music and behind-the-scenes sequences of the gallery installation process.<sup>8</sup> They read: ‘And we saw things that were inexplicable (0:41) ... and the machines woke up our ancestors’ (1:11).



**Figure 2.** Mirrored arms/hands fitting the luminescent glass optics (‘river-scape’) floor. A still from *The Making of Echo of the Urals* (0:41) (ERM).



**Figure 3.** Mechanical robot arm cutting black ‘polystyrene’ into the shape of an armless human head and torso (1:11) (ERM).

## Conclusion

One of the last artefacts that PL noticed on the path out of the winter room was a nineteenth-century flounder fish net embedded in a glass wall cabinet. AL then told him a fascinating story of how they had trouble determining what kind of fishing this net was actually used for, since professional fishermen claimed that the netting was not the right size for flounder. The environmental message here is that because of overfishing the species is now a miniature hybrid of its former self. After taking a photo, PL was immediately reminded of Alfred Gell’s (1996) inaugural article ‘Vogel’s Net’. In this piece traps, hunting and museum curation are crafted into a visual and textual metaphor for the ‘artefactual’ intelligence of humans as they are themselves entangled, ensnared or just stuck in relationships with the art world.

Now there are shoals of bodies of literature dedicated to the idea of interactive museums that attempt to capture the sense of being elsewhere, or of experiencing the past. Such themes have and continue to be addressed at Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand, for instance (Wedde 2007). Another comparison that might spring to mind is the *Paradise Exhibition* in London in which the curators invited indigenous highlanders from Papua New Guinea to act as design consultants (O’Hanlon 1993). For our part, we take a multi-biographical approach to be a less spatial and more ethnological

version of the many multi/parasite metaphors to arise from George Marcus' (1995) work.

*Echo of the Urals* thus shows us that human questions exist across time and space. The creation of ancestry, historical coherence and cross-generational stories form a more ambiguous, mysterious and occasionally contradictory set of features to occasionally surface. This is so, since exploring the vibrations of the Urals' ecumene – its inhabited earthly core – is a feat where the imaginary stretches to include post-Soviet socio-cultural change as well as vast expanses of seemingly 'empty space' (Hannerz 1992). Such reflections on ethnographic curation and visitor experience are therefore interesting for exploring the biographies of things, persons and cultural assemblages.

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**Art Leete**, Dept, of Ethnology, Univ, of Tartu. Art is the Head of the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Tartu and the Chief Editor for the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*. E-mail: art.leete@ut.ee  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5505-0043

**Patrick Laviolette**, Anthropology Division, FSS, Masaryk Univ. Brno. Co-Editor of *AJEC* since 2019, Patrick is currently working with Geoffrey Gray on a biography of the economic anthropologist Raymond Firth. E-mail: patrick.laviolette@fss.muni.cz  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1042-7043

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### Notes

1. This exhibition is simply called *Encounters* (<https://www.erm.ee/en/content/encounters>).

2. The words of a Swedish/Finnish ethnologist from the first half of the nineteenth century welcome people to the stairwell that divides the upper hall from the exhibition spaces ‘below ground’.
3. Macdonald’s spatial linkages with the Humboldt Forum’s palatial location have parallels with those of the ERM’s Raadi Manor.
4. ‘The museum boasts a huge slanted roof that is designed as an extension of the old runway, located a few kilometres outside the city’ (Mairs 2016). In fact, the museum is built at the former taxiway for military aircraft.
5. Jonathan Roper, it turns out, shares a birthday with Alastair MacIntosh, one of PL’s mentors from the Centre for Human Ecology in Scotland.
6. For more on the Estonian Open Air Museum, see Lang (2010).
7. With Baltic German and Estonian origins, Middendorff was Professor of Zoology at Kiev University.
8. The time spacing is serendipitously significant here, in that it represents an equivalence in seconds to the time span in years since *Anthropology and Autobiography* (Okely and Callaway 1992) was published.

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