Defacializing the Encounter: Bodily Disruption and the Materiality of the Non-face in Frontal Animal Images of Northern Finland

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Abstract:
Drawing on Tim Ingold's rhythmical attunement and Donna Haraway's ethics of response, this thesis establishes the function of artistic practice as an onto-epistemological framework within the extreme light environments of the Finnish Arctic. It constructs a Möbius Strip model that dialectically integrates Deleuzian "facialization" and "defacialization" with Levinas's "ethical face" to reframe human-animal relations.

The research originates from the investigation of the frontal animal face as a gaze interface in Northern Finnish visual culture. Specifically, it addresses how the author's psychosomatic disorder following the polar night in Rovaniemi triggered a need for individual ontological realignment. Using practice-based artistic research, this study treats the field, the existential state of the practitioner, and the creative process as unified research objects. Through the being-doing-thinking process, it identifies a significant perceptual disjunction—the "printer-like" effect perceived by viewers in response to meditative visual language. This visual alienation blocks anthropocentric emotional projection and reveals how the individual, in a state of "defacialization", uses embodied practice to achieve an ontological suturing between biological rhythms and environmental cycles.

The study concludes that extreme environmental conditions function as a necessary trigger for defacialization. By refusing the gaze and withdrawing from social identity, the practitioner accepts the "face" given by the animal, thereby establishing an egalitarian and reciprocal interspecies onto-epistemology.

Keywords: Practice-based Artistic Research, Environmental Rhythms, Bodily Disruption, Defacialization, Interspecies Relationality, Northern Finland

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Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Research Motivation

The background of this research is a phenomenological investigation of human-animal relationships and their power mechanisms within the visual context of Northern Finland. In the Finnish Hunting Museum in Riihimäki, animal specimens as hunting trophies, displayed in a dense and non-natural ecological structure, construct a contradictory field interwoven with "dominance and spirituality". Being situated within it, I experienced an intense "oppressive power" that transcends pure aesthetic categories. The human-animal relationship is manifested concretely at the level of power relations.

Taxidermy, as a technical and artistic means of attempting to seal moments of life, not only displays the states of death but also endows the husk with a "mimetic aura" through exquisite realistic techniques. This force reached its zenith in my encounter of gazing with one of the gray wolf specimens: the stable hierarchical order originally established based on the logic of modern humanism—where humans serve as the ultimate hunter—instantly collapsed in the "looking back" of the specimen. As Donna Haraway (2008, p. 56) points out, when the non-human other is "looking back" at humans, a crack in human self-centrism emerges. Likewise, in a reciprocal gaze, the human being acquired a face. This embodied awareness, based on physical vulnerability, compels me to re-examine Spinoza's (2014) Pantheism: God is Nature (2014, p. 12). A perspective where divinity is not an abstract concept but a life rhythm permeating all matter that is living, and even recreated.

However, this sense of life within the museum context remains trapped in the traditional frameworks of representation and death. In contemporary Northern artistic

practice and daily life, there seems to exist a relational image—the frontal animal face image—that does not rely on the display of death but is constructed based on vivid environmental perception. Therefore, this research regards the experience in the Finnish Hunting Museum as the starting point for triggering critical reflection: if specimens as the representation of death can still trigger deep subjective encounters through the gaze, then in the visual culture of contemporary Northern Finland, can the series of frontal animal face images I created be understood as a relational covenant that transcends symbolic meaning and connects humans with non-human others?

The Arctic is often framed through a romanticized lens, yet contemporary research suggests a necessary shift toward "grounded, lived and critical perspectives" (Huhmarniemi and Jokela, 2025, p. 11). This thesis responds to this "pedagogical turn" by moving away from purely representational landscapes to explore the lived reality of psychosomatic disruption in the Northern Finland, engaging with the Arctic not as a scene, but as a dwelling of profound individual and ecological struggle. Relocating from China to Rovaniemi in 2024, I transitioned from a densely populated urban environment to the stark reality of the Arctic North. This research is rooted in the subsequent transformation of bodily perception I experienced during my residency. It documents a profound shift in my relationship with the Northern environment: moving from an "imagination dependent on external information", shaped by my prior cultural distance, to a "survival practice of embodied participation" necessitated by the immediate demands of the polar night. In the process of this relational transformation, as an international student deep in Lapland, I underwent a complex experience of "aphasia"—a life network woven together by ecological and cultural loneliness: witnessing the perceptual disorder of the Arctic ecosystem under the climate crisis in daily life, alongside the cultural suspension typical of a stranger.

In the year-after-year cycle from the polar night (*kaamos*) to the return of light, extreme environmental energy fluctuations triggered violent fluctuations in my physiological rhythms. This sense of disorder not only altered the fine-tuning of perception but also forced the body from a state of daily "living" into an urgent state of "survival". Wildlife biologist Karsten Heuer (2005) argues that the energy intensity of extreme environments is sufficient to break through the threshold of perception,

allowing living organisms to enter a rhythm that transcends rest and resonates with the environment (2005, p. 12).

In this resonance, I encountered a memorable rupture between perception and meaning. During my first winter in Rovaniemi, I was immersed in the sense of the sublime in the natural landscape—specifically, the ethereal colored lights over the Kemijoki river. However, I was struck by a localized narrative when some students suggested that these brilliant displays were not merely natural wonders but, in their view, ominous signs linked to atmospheric degradation. Regardless of the scientific accuracy of their claims, this encounter created a profound cognitive dissonance: the visual "sublime" I perceived was suddenly contaminated by an encroaching sense of environmental anxiety. When this aesthetic instinct to look up at the sky, inherited from human ancestors, encountered critical cognition from the Anthropocene, the sense of eternal sublime in aesthetics was struck by the fragile reality of ecology. I felt myself shrouded in the shadow of aesthetics. It seemed to reveal the hidden nature of the ecological crisis: our aesthetic experience is becoming decoupled from ecological reality. This decoupling is my sense of ecological loneliness. It is not only helplessness regarding natural decline but also an identity anxiety. When people's small talk is imprisoned in discussing familiar seasonal rhythms falling into a whirlpool of uncertainty, our sense of belonging as members of the life meshwork also begins to tear—an ontological alienation felt by the individual.

Simultaneously, when being in a foreign country, cultural loneliness places my perceptual system in a state of suspension. When losing the cultural decoding anchors to capture and judge the expressions and behaviors of the surrounding people; when social sociability continuously shrinks to the point where one's social identity as a linguistic communicator is sidelined, gradually regressing into a living organism in a biological and physical sense; when the mother tongue system fails and language and speech are presented as signals and background noise, and the intermediary language system cannot deeply convey meaning, a perceptual blankness follows like a shadow. As a newcomer, I consciously became a near-pure environmental observer-outsider. However, detaching from habitual modes of speculation triggered an internal cultural turn—a shift toward what Tim Ingold (2002) describes as an embodied skill for perceiving the environment, centred on the practice of thinking through making.

In the low-density social field of Rovaniemi, the perception of the environment falls silent in the social dimension. My perceptual anchors naturally overflowed, turning from human groups toward the co-habiting non-human, non-linguistic living beings, such as ripple-like clouds over the Kemijoki river, the peeling bark of birch trees with a silver-like luster in the thawing ice, birds gliding past the window in the morning, arctic hares alertly foraging on forest paths, and even animal remains slowly being consumed by the environment by the roadside. This gaze toward "non-human neighbors" gradually internalized into an expectation during my daily waking hours. Attending to these "neighbors", and the encounters and mutual gazes with them, not only reconstructed my perceptual order amidst physiological disorder but also allowed me to discover the densely existing motif of animal faces in the material culture of Northern Finland, such as souvenirs, daily objects, visual arts, leading me to wonder: how do they empower the people living here, and why and how do artists create certain animal faces, making them an important member of the visual map of Northern Finland?

In the context of ecological and cultural loneliness, the artistic practice of drawing animal faces not only triggers my embodied empathy with the knowledge production of local artists (animal face artworks) but also becomes an interface for me to investigate the relationship between humans and animals in Northern Finland. It allows me to shift from an observer to a participant—an insider; shifting from watching animal face images guided by language and text to feeling animal face images guided by the body and practice. Through this transformative practice, animal face drawing reconstructs my mind-body order, paving a realistic path toward "ontological affinity" between species in the North. This process of "embodied empathy" validates Henry Beston's (2005) more spiritual perspective on wildlife: viewing them as "other nations" caught with humans in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth (2005, p. 10).

Therefore, the motivation for this research not only arises from complex loneliness but also records it, transforming alienated loneliness into understandable loneliness. This artistic practice naturally responds to Tim Ingold's (2002) environmental perception thought system at an individual level, thereby exploring how we might

establish paths of empathy with non-human others in the present moment where ecological aesthetics and alarms coexist, searching for a sense of existential belonging in a changing land.

1.2 Research Object

The research objects of this thesis consist of three interconnected parts: the physical frontal animal face sketches created after I lived through the polar night in Rovaniemi. The body as a biological receptor, passively stripped of its social identity due to the impact of the circumpolar light environment on individual biological clocks, hormone levels, and cognitive functions. And the ruka ceramic animal masks by visual artist A, who also lives in Northern Finland. The latter is selected as a control group for analysis because the author observed that frontal animal face images seem to exist tangibly as a recurring visual cultural structure in Northern Finland, and this inclusion serves to analyze how environmental perception factors influence the motifs and visual forms chosen by artists.

First, the primary research object of this study is the series of frontal animal face sketches created by the author, as an outsider, during a period of psychosomatic disorder while coping with the extreme light environment of Rovaniemi. The uniqueness of these works lies in their dual-centered focus on the eyes, utilizing a mandala-like expansion that surrounds the eyes with geometric shapes to form an ordered, interlaced network structure, together, these elements create a visual effect where the animal face refuses to be gazed upon. The drawings themselves record the process of the psychosomatic state shifting from collapse toward the reconstruction of order. The meditative nature and sense of order within the drawing process are studied as tuning tools between bodily rhythms and environmental rhythms.

The comparative research object is the animal masks of Finnish local artist A. This comparison attempts to explore the generation mechanisms of artistic practices that share the similar visual cultural structure of the frontal animal face within a similar environmental context, and how the prominent issue of the gaze operates in their respective works. This is done to understand the functional differences assigned to the interface of the frontal animal face under different creative motivations—such as

existential crisis versus cultural narrative—and thereby discuss the operational mechanisms of what Deleuze (1987) calls "facialization" and "defacialization" within the artistic practice of animal face imagery in the visual context of Northern Finland.

Finally, this thesis studies the disordered body, as well as the natural and social environments, together as the physical site where artistic practice occurs. This serves to analyze the inevitable conditions under which the works were produced. This means that the environment is not an external background, but the primal driving force that prompts the withdrawal of social identity. The body, as hardware, manifests its subjectivity when the software of socialization crashes, leading the fluid process of returning from disorder to order. This process also corresponds to the tension of change between defacialization and facialization.

1.3 Research Questions and Research Methods

Based on the aforementioned research background and motivation, this thesis focuses both on the presentation of animal faces as a visual motif and on their function as a "transformative mediacy" in the environmental perception of Northern Finland. In other words, at the empirical level, in the vast and overwhelming environment of the North, the animal face, with its symmetrical facial structure similar to the human face, provides an interface for our sight, emotions, and thoughts to conduct ethical dialogue and inhabit. At the level of power, frontal animal face images in Northern Finland seem to guide me from a research-oriented gaze toward being looked back at by them. In the predicament of cultural loneliness, frontal animal face images pull me to escape the social attributes of humans and enter the category of natural attributes of the Northern ecological community. At the cognitive level, drawing frontal animal face images builds a bridge between the unknowability of animal essence and the perceptibility of artistic essence. To this end, this thesis proposes the following three research questions in a progressive relationship, aiming to explore human-animal relationships in the context of Northern Finland from three dimensions: the generative logic, interactive mechanism, and ontological significance of frontal animal face images.

Q1. Under the extreme environmental rhythms and physiological disorder of Northern Finland, how is the "frontal animal face" in artistic practice generated as a visual anchor for fine-tuning perception?

This question explains that visual art, including drawing, is no longer merely a product of inspiration but a survival strategy. It views environmental pressure (polar night, sudden return of light) as a bodily impulse and argues that frontal animal face images naturally arise during such disorder as anchors to stabilize perception and reconstruct the connection between the subject and the environment. This differs from the common concept in traditional art history of artists actively choosing motifs, emphasizing instead the generation of images within the environment.

Q2. How does the gaze of the frontal animal face break through the traditional framework of representation to construct a reciprocal, embodied-empathic encounter between human audiences and non-human others?

This question explores how, when animal images appear in a frontal, gazing posture, they interfere with human visual sovereignty. It aims to discuss how this "facial gaze" generates an immediate, cross-species ethical interface, transforming the audience from onlookers into participants, thereby responding to the power reversal I experienced in the museum. This question aims to challenge the unidirectional dominance of humans over animals in traditional human-animal relationship narratives. By introducing the concept of the gaze, this research explores how the frontal animal face serves as a reciprocal interface, breaking the subject-object binary and constructing a cross-species encounter based on "looking back".

Q3. How does this artistic intervention based on the frontal face reshape the power structure between humans and animals in the Northern context and provide a new path for understanding an equal, multi-species ontological affinity?

In the specific context of Northern Finland, art is not merely decoration; it is an ontological tool. This question explores how artistic practice dissolves the hierarchical concepts of anthropocentrism, redefining the non-human other as an equal co-habitant

with a sense of companionship. Combined with a new understanding of Sámi animism in the Lapland region, it provides an ethical interpretation for Northernness based on reciprocity and symbiosis.

This research is conducted through the dual lens of I as both an artist-practitioner and a researcher, employing a multi-dimensional framework that integrates artistic research, Autoethnography, and Qualitative Intertextual Analysis.

The core of this study is rooted in artistic research, where the creative process itself is treated as a primary mode of knowledge production. This approach focuses on a series of frontal animal face portraits, sketches, and exhibition materials created following my experience of the polar night in Rovaniemi. As Muhr (2020) posits, arts-based methods possess the unique potential to transcend the limitations of language, unveiling nuances of human-nature connectedness that lie beyond words. "By tapping into emotions and embodied experiences often neglected in traditional science, the non-verbal component of artistic practice elicits unspoken knowledge ."(2020, p. 254).

This process is further supported by Hartmut Rosa's Theory of Resonance. Rosa (2019) argues that art and nature constitute two central spheres of resonance in modernity through which humans establish and derive meaning from their relationship with the world. Niels Henrik Gregersen (2026) further summarizes that "as a philosopher of resonance, he is more interested in scientific observations that the sensitivity of the human body, with its circadian and seasonal rhythm, is related to the shifting influence of sunlight and weather conditions have a considerable influence on human bodies and minds." (2026, p. 41). Within this study, the act of drawing is not merely an aesthetic choice but a transformative lever for reconnecting the self to the environment, transforming the alienation of physiological disorder into a resonant encounter with the non-human other.

To document the visceral and sensory dimensions of the post-polar night environment, this research adopts a phenomenological autoethnographic approach. This method treats the body's natural responses to the extreme environmental shifts of the North as primary data. By recording the fine-tuning of perception through creative practice, the

research captures the transition from a state of sensory chaos to one of re-ordered equilibrium. This subjective, embodied narrative provides an essential ontological bridge between the human creator and the hibernating animal subjects.

To expand the scope beyond personal experience, the study incorporates qualitative interviews with contemporary artists in Northern Finland who also utilize the frontal animal face in their work. This data allows for a rigorous intertextual analysis, comparing different creative responses to the Fennoscandian context. By interpreting these diverse visual voices, the research seeks to identify shared patterns in how contemporary art reclaims and reshapes the human-animal relationship in the North.

Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of the Face: An Ontological Study of Social Representation and Power Mechanisms

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2002), in discussing the liquidity of modernity, analyzes the human pursuit of tangible, stable, and meaningful things: “The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give shape to the shapeless, a persistence... Thus, there is a need for attempt after attempt, effort after effort, and only by desperately clinging to the tangible, the solid, and thus the hopefully lasting... can they be tried.” (2002, pp. 126-127). This seemingly fixed entity is our face. From the moment of birth, the face is situated unidirectionally within the flux of natural time. The face does not represent a single identity of an individual; rather, a face is a synchronic presentation of a living being’s diachronic social identity, mutable and diverse.

The face is not only a core concept and material medium for discussing issues of human identity, but also a symbolic medium used by thinkers to establish the relationship between humans and nature. “The most interesting surface on earth is that of the human face.” (Belting, 2017, p. 1). This statement reveals the modern character of the face—its pictoriality and fluidity. From the perspective of human-animal relations, it is not only the human face, but also the animal face, and all material interfaces that satisfy the human brain’s gestalt cognitive mode, that can become faces interesting to play with. The uniqueness of the animal face lies in the fact that, like the human face, it possesses materiality, mediality, corporeality, pictoriality, and ethicality. It also possesses micro-expressions of certain facial muscles that can escape conscious control and reveal the subconscious. Furthermore, the symmetrical structure of the vast majority of animal faces naturally possesses recognizable similarities and differences compared to the human face. Although Kant (1998) argued that the “thing-in-itself” is unknowable, this ontological and epistemological

species difference—which cannot be truly understood—precisely prompts the human desire to grasp the animal face as an image for recognition, because image is the subject of our quest, Belting (2011) argues that "image not only as a product of a given medium, but also as a product of ourselves, for we generate images of our own (dreams, imaginings, personal perceptions) that we play out against other images in the visible world." (2011, p. 2).

Through the Gaze, humans project psychological images onto material images and back again. Image draws its meaning from gaze, much as the text lives from reading. Although this pictorial mode of viewing and cognition violates the organicity of the face, the innate function of the face to be visualized and interpreted cannot be entirely denied. In both Western and Eastern civilizations, physiognomic sciences have existed to judge character, calculate past experiences, and even predict destiny based on facial features. The word physiognomy comes from Greek roots, pointing to its two layers of meaning: phusis (appearance) and gnōmōn (interpreter). However, Levinas (2012) questioned the visuality of the face: Is not the face given to vision? (2012, p. 180) and answered in the negative. He believes our vision usually grasps things by capturing properties. From this perspective, when a person faces a face, what they see are tangible, textured objects like specific facial features. But the specialty of the face lies in its transcendence of the structure and materiality to which it is attached. From Levinas's view, "when we do not treat the face as a seen object, it may actively manifest as a pure aesthetic power—an Epiphany." (2012, p. 189). In other words, the face reveals a subject's desire to escape and resistance when projected upon by another's gaze. It is an existence that refuses to be visually domesticated. When we form a relationship of mutual gaze with a real animal, the animal cannot be understood through our gaze, even if we gaze at an image of an animal face, as long as it is a face. In Levinas's view, it is impossible to truly complete the gaze. This is because the image of the animal face likewise refuses our gaze and emotional projection through its transcendental existence, meaning our emotional projection likely bounces back into our eyes upon reaching the image. This process becomes a completion of self-projection through the gaze, where we ultimately receive our own emotions.

At the same time, Levinas (2012) proposes the ethicality of the face. Based on the

escapability of the face and its refusal to be objectified by the human gaze, when we encounter a true face, we should not capture various physical attributes through the senses as if processing information, nor process this information logically through the brain. Instead, we should receive a primal sense of pressure from the face, awakening our ethical response. From this perspective, the animal face does not fall into the cognitive dilemma of the unknowability of the “thing-in-itself” simply due to its animal status. In Levinas’s framework, the animal face can encounter the human face, unfolding the possibility of cross-species communication in a gesture of summoning a human response. Although Levinas did not explicitly acknowledge that animals possess an ethical face in the human sense, at the ontological level where faces encounter, both Levinas and Haraway (2008) emphasize the disintegration of human self-centeredness at the moment of encounter. The difference is that the former’s discussion of the face is metaphysical, abstract, and ethical, while the latter focuses on embodied, real, and symbiotic discussions.

However, Deleuze and Guattari (2014), in discussing “faciality”, use the concepts of “the white wall and the black hole” to deduce that humans have faces while animals do not. The reason is intriguing: the animal face and body together constitute an integral existence within an environmental territory, that is, animals in the wild refuse to be incorporated into a meaningful system of signs, and precisely because of this, they possess vitality. Unlike the animal face, the human face is a symbolic subject used for mutual recognition after being attached to a social identity. In their framework, the face is a biological expression, while faciality is a social power mechanism. The White Wall refers to systems of order such as language and signs. The black hole points to the individual’s self-awareness as a subject. When humans use language and acquire social identity during socialization, self-awareness internalizes these external symbols as a source of self-cognition. This internalization deepens society’s shackles on the person, thereby losing animal vitality. This is what Deleuze calls the "facialization" of the human face in an anthropocentric society. If the facelessness of animals in the wild relieves animal protectionists, those taxidermy specimens displayed in museums become, in Deleuze’s discussion, objects with animal forms that have been facialized. If so, how have they inevitably become deterritorialized, even after being stripped from their living environments and placed in exhibition halls that attempt to restore those environments visually? If animal face

specimens have been facialized by human society, then how do they, in the process of being gazed at by me, pull me out of the abyss of human social attributes and make me perceive the vulnerability of life triggered by the gaze of the specimen?

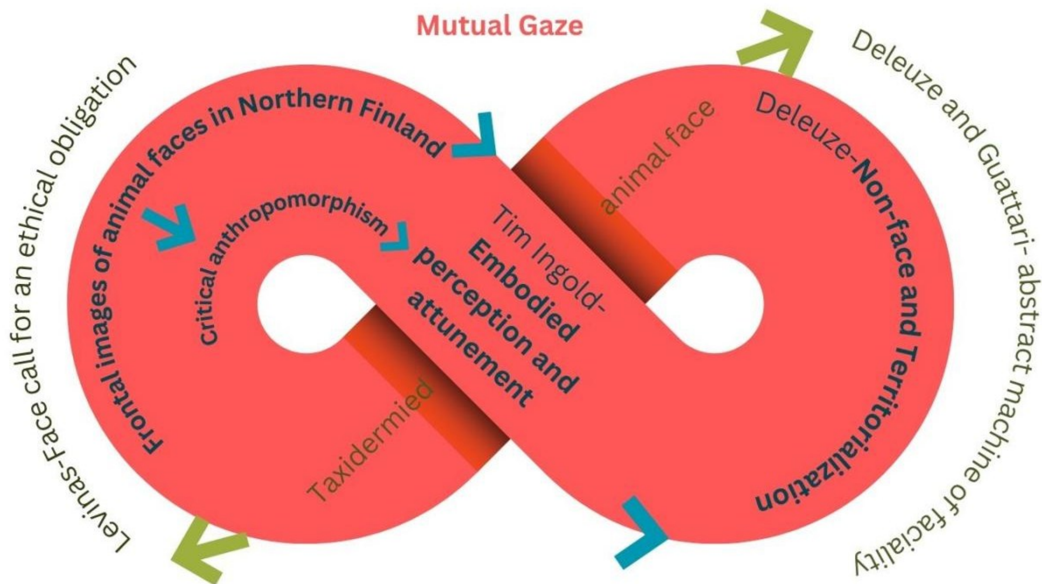

Figure 1: The Möbius Strip of Facial Ontology: From Facialization to Defacialization in the Interspecies Gaze

From the perspective of Levinas's ethical face, the taxidermy animal face staring back at me triggers an ethical response toward its life. It remains unsymbolized, meaning it has not been "facialized". However, from Deleuze's perspective on faciality, the taxidermy animal has already been facialized through the processes of production and display. Does the contradiction within the taxidermy face embody a dual attribute? The purpose of taxidermy is clear: to imitate the appearance and demeanor of the animal in life as accurately as possible to facilitate its cognition as an objectified, textbook-like body of knowledge. The process of taxidermy deterritorializes the animal that it is displayed in a frozen momentary posture, at which point the animal's form has been stripped from the entirety of its lived experience (horizons) and environmental pressures. It is, in fact, a product of humanity's declared control over nature. Consequently, the face of a taxidermy animal is an objectified face—the "facialized" face of which Deleuze speaks—rather than the wild, vital head of an animal (Figure 1). The conceptual entanglement of Deleuzian facialization, Levinasian

ethics, and Ingold's attunement is further articulated through the interpretation in Figure 1. This model illustrates the Möbius-Strip-like relationship between these theories as a tool for analyzing the animal face.

Why, then, do I still experience a profound withdrawal of social identity and an ontological sense of pressure, as a being equal to these animals, when facing these taxidermy faces? The reason is that when I gaze upon them, I am not employing my vision to capture the features of their eyes, noses, facial shapes, or the state of their fur. Instead, the taxidermy face manifests by transcending its materiality as a wild force that repels my human social attributes. Yet, due to their lifelike simulation, gazing at their faces feels like being rejected by the face of a real animal, and my fearful gaze does not penetrate their simulated eyes to reach an understanding of the animal. Instead, it is rebounded back to me—I receive my own fear. Through the taxidermy face, I am forced to sense the fragility of life in the face of death. Thus, these taxidermy faces defeat Deleuzian faciality with a Levinasian ethical summons (Figure 2).

Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan (1984), the pioneering humanistic geographer, suggests, our engagement with animals is often characterized by a paradox of dominance and affection. This perspective is particularly resonant when considering how the displaying and depiction of northern fauna serve as both a "foundation of intimacy" and a subtle "form of rule", reflecting the inherent power dynamics embedded in our embodied encounters with the Arctic environment. The sense of dominance is physically manifested within the Finnish Hunting Museum and Arktikum through the spatial arrangement of animal specimens—be they fixed on pedestals, mounted on walls, or encased in glass—coupled with their linguistic containment on nameplates. Such rigid immobilization stands in sharp contrast to the affection and emotional narratives projected upon them by the observers. In the context of Arctic displays, the 'dominance' over nature is perhaps most viscerally manifested through taxidermy. As Poliquin (2012) argues in The Breathless Zoo, taxidermy represents a culture of longing that paradoxically preserves the animal by silencing its biological life, turning a once-agentic creature into a "breathless" object for human gaze. However, on the other hand, the pedagogical approach suggested by Jokela et al. (2024) offers a vital restorative alternative. By revitalizing elements of the Northern animistic conception,

art museum pedagogy facilitates a transformation of the museum—moving from a site of “breathless” objects toward a space dedicated to “nature-based well-being” (p. 115). Consequently, the Arctic environment ceases to be an exotic backdrop, emerging instead as an agentic subject that actively participates in the artist’s personal and spiritual refiguring.

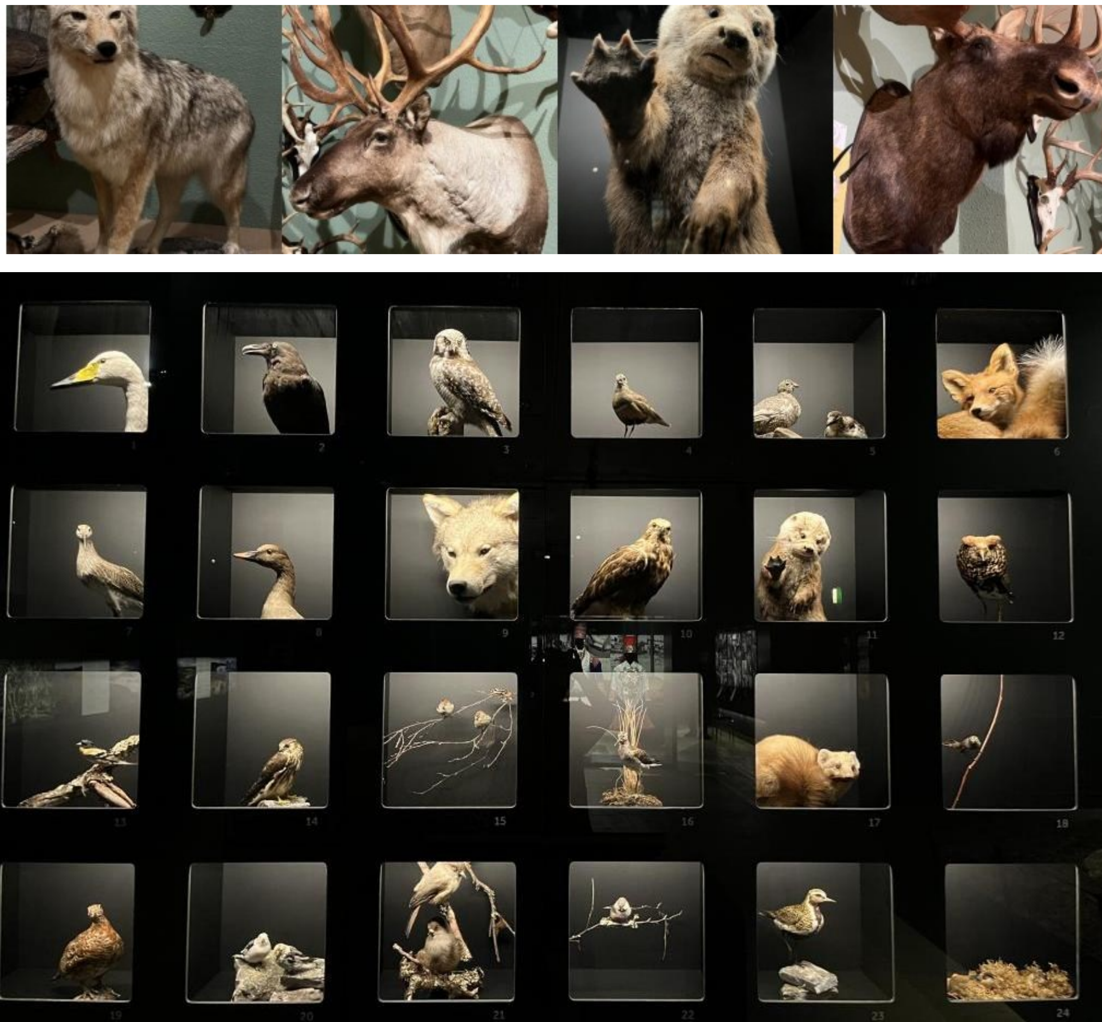

Figure 2: Finnish Hunting Museum and Arktikum Science Centre Museum, Photograph: Zijun Zhao, 2024

Beyond ethics, on the level of socio-cultural practice, the face serves as a material medium carrying the symbolic systems of social interaction. Referencing Erving Goffman’s (1992) discussion of “face-work” regarding “self-image management” and Tzvetan Todorov’s (2017) concept of “human inner plurality”, one finds that humans perform a series of social operations—such as imagining, interpreting, and assigning meaning—to their own faces and those of others from a specific identity perspective.

This guides the face toward a purposeful “rationality” at the functional level. Only when the social identity carried by the face is absent, leaving the face itself, can a “Sublime” akin to ancient Greek sculpture be revealed. This mechanism of assigning purposeful rationality to the face mirrors a broader ideological framework of control. Just as the human face is managed through “face-work”, the natural world has been subjected to a similar logic of categorization. Critiquing the legacy of the Enlightenment, Demos (2016) illustrates how Western thought has historically relegated nature to an object of management and exploitation. Within the frameworks of colonial and capitalist expansion, the natural world was conquered and categorized to align with the demands of empire and global markets (pp. 71–93). Recognizing that “nature” is a construct deeply embedded in colonial history, In this light, decolonizing nature requires more than ecological preservation; it calls for a radical reimagining of our relationship with the environment—a move from detached observation to transformative engagement.This colonial legacy of nature-as-object is not only embodied in the static taxidermy specimens I encountered in the museum, but is also inherently present in the very desire to project an 'affectionate' face onto the non-human other.

If the animal face possesses an ethicality similar to the human face and can facilitate a mutual “return of the gaze”, then where does the abyss of difference between human and animal originate? This difference is often traced back to the Cogito ergo sum perspective on the subject. This philosophy and European Rationalism regard rational thinking as the source of human knowledge and the fundamental distinction between humans and animals. Man, as the subject, views everything outside himself as an object, revealing a fundamental change in the relationship between man and the world. In a 1938 lecture, Martin Heidegger (1938) proposed the concept of the “World Picture” (Weltbildes), linking it to “man becoming the subject” as a prerequisite for modernity. Thus, the “World Picture” is a modern worldview. Here, “picture” does not refer to a visual representation, but rather signifies that in human eyes, the world exists as something to be dominated and controlled, where functional value is maximized. This bystander perspective brings a sense of distance that is not merely spatial perception but creates a spiritual hierarchy between the observer and the observed.

Anthropologist Christoph Wulf (2018), starting from how humans build connections with the world through the production of images and recognize the self through the "Other", states: "Images are the product of the concentration and flow of energy. The concentration and flow of energy transform the world of objects, practical activities, and the world of the Other into various images." (2018, p. 3). Because the production and processing of images involving the imagination fully embody historical and cultural characteristics, the resulting images differ in nature and form. To explore the specificity of any image, one must clarify the principles of adaptive order that produced it, as our perception of our surroundings is not chaotic. The ordered cognition of the world formed by images depends on geography, history, and socio-culture. Wulf categorizes image generation into "sensory experience images" obtained through functional organs like sight and smell, and "mental images" internalized by the imagination, such as memory, visions, and dreams. "Based on different levels of understanding the world, images can also be classified into sacred, representative, and simulative ."(2018, pp. 5-6). Animal face images in human visual culture are both products of sensory experience and internalized mental images. They are the transformation of sensory perceptions into image memories or visions, which, combined with the subject's imagination, act upon practice.

The face possesses the characteristic of representing specific experiences. Expression itself contains both showing and hiding, though our language systems often use binary oppositions to describe these dialectical relationships. For example, in comparing traditional literati landscape painting with classical Western painting, the technique of liubai (leaving blank space) is a frequently analyzed pictorial language. Wulf notes that liubai embodies the "yin and yang" or "presence and absence" styles of ancient Chinese culture. He believes that Chinese painters are not only skilled at "showing" something through a picture but are equally adept at "hiding" something through an image. Analyzing this from the perspective of conceptual definition, liubai appears to be an act of "not painting"; however, from the painter's conceptual stage, it is a part of the painting. Returning to the relationship between "showing" and "hiding", the two can be understood as opposing methods of expression for things with "mediality". Mediality allows things to manifest through difference, and difference prompts humans to categorize the world, leading to a plurality of knowledge.

If we understand the dialectical relationship of the same thing this way, then when we intentionally or habitually project our gaze onto the medial animal face, it manifests not only as a captured image showing its material attributes but also as a microcosm of the world the animal inhabits (their facial structures condensing adaptive features to environmental pressures), automatically internalizing them as part of the self. Todorov (2017) interprets the "non-insulated" individual from a poet's perspective: In this sense, the poet is right: "I am an Other. The inner plurality of each person is the pluralistic connection of the Other, the diversity of roles assumed by surrounding Others; this is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity." (2017, p. 143). Therefore, although language seems to be the primary tool of communication, linguistic research shows that silent facial expressions are a major pathway for mutual exchange and understanding. More importantly, faced with the reality that the "thing-in-itself" (Ding an sich) is unknowable, humans obtain response and recognition from the "Other" by displaying the self, giving the face perceptible and understandable qualities distinct from other organs.

Polymath Robert Burton (1621) believed that for vision, three things are necessary: the object, the organ, and the medium. When Adorno discussed the social relations of artworks, he viewed "mediation" as something that exists in the object itself, not something between the object and other external objects. From this brief survey, it is clear that the face is medial. Coincidentally, Burton's three elements of vision align with interpretations of the face from different perspectives: first, after Descartes awakened the subject's consciousness, everything in human eyes tended toward the reality of being "grasped as a world picture", and the face is inevitably objectified as a thing to be manipulated. Furthermore, biologically, the face is part of the human and non-human animal body. Its specialty lies in the fact that each face, based on a certain order, gathers vital sensory organs. In terms of intersubjective exchange, face-to-face communication satisfies the psychological need for "presence". Individually, the face almost constantly presents its own sensory experiences and will to express. Thus, the natural and social attributes of the face give it rich form and content, making it not an intermediary independent of the environment, but something viewed and recognized as a whole. In this sense, the natural attributes of the animal face serve as an imaginative interface to nature during mutual gazing, while its social attributes lay the communicative foundation for mutual looking back. A major reason the face can carry

the complex meanings of “medium” is that its vital tension keeps it in flux, much like the liquid quality of modernity. It is this instability that grants the face continuous expressive energy.

Some paleoanthropological studies based on evolution suggest that the emergence of human language is closely linked to bipedalism. Human facial features became flatter compared to quadrupedal movement; the cranial cavity enlarged; and bipedalism changed the connection angle between the head and spine. These subtle shifts made the vocal system and the brain’s language processing possible. While language improved cooperation efficiency, primate and linguistic studies point to the fact that most human communication is silent and relies on facial expressions. German psychologist Wolfgang Köhler (1999) found that “expressive faces” occurred before language, predicated on "increasingly complex social organization" (1999, p. 265). Regarding natural attributes, Charles Darwin (1979) believed facial expressions were vestiges of evolution—actions that externalize emotions. Modern science points out that emotions externalizing as expressions result from ordered regulatory activities of the cerebral cortex regarding autonomic nervous system functions. Facial muscle coordination controls subtle expressions. Research shows some expressions are habitual while others are unconscious, controlled by different neural circuits. Certain expressions are consciously controllable, while others are not.

2.2 Animism and Sámi Cosmology

2.2.1 Animism & Animatism and the Animal Agency in the Context of the Sámi Cosmology

According to the Saami Cultural Encyclopaedia: “animism is a belief that human beings, animals, plants and inanimate entities possess personal souls independent of physical existence.” (Roto et al., 2005, p. 14). This definition of animism highlights two key points: first, all beings in the world possess subjectivity; second, there is no ontological hierarchy between humans and animals. Understanding the animal face image from this perspective means that, in the Sámi worldview, the animal face is no longer a visual symbol but another real, existing, agentic subject.

Animatism emphasizes the power of the natural world, rather than personified life, focusing on the force of natural phenomena. In Sámi culture, animism and animatism are not oppositional but jointly constitute a framework for understanding the world. In the animal face image, both often superimpose, acting upon the creator and viewer: the animal face is both the face of a subject and a source of power. In the Sámi visual world, animal face images can be found on material carriers like shaman drums and rock art. These images are interfaces to the worldview, leading to spirituality, natural forces, and knowledge.

Analyzing cave art, Lewis-Williams (1998) proposed: "Palaeolithic humans established and defined social relationships through imagery, and that the ability to reach higher-order consciousness made it possible not only to create images, but also religion and social distinctions." (1998, pp. 19). In the painting practice of creating animal faces, I indeed experience the image not as representation but as a consciousness-generating mechanism. When I gaze at an animal face image, a relational consciousness forms between the animal and me, establishing a human-animal relational circuit through my being gazed upon by the animal image.

Bahn (1997) offers a highly inspiring view in Ice Age: "the possibility that the shaman's power was derived from the subsequent viewing of the images rather than from the act of drawing or painting. The artist /shaman might have been a 'master-of-animals' who represented the life force of an animal or imparted life force to it, with lines drawn at the nostrils and mouths of animals depicting the entrance or exit of the animals' life forces." (1997, pp. 181). In other words, the process of drawing an animal is an intersection of life forces, and the act of viewing the animal image also has an empowering effect; the image becomes a container for the state of life force. Crucially, this perspective highlights that the aesthetic empowerment of the animal face image is a mechanism of viewing, rather than a symbolic mechanism.

2.3 Nordicity and Environmental Rhythms: The Field as a Perceptual Liminality

2.3.1 Nordicity as an Emotional and Perceptual Structure

Nordicity further deepens the cultural and aesthetic structure of animal face image empowerment. Nordicity is not merely a geographic label but a cultural structure encompassing climate, light, seasonal changes, solitude, a sense of calmness, restrained emotional expression, and dependence on nature. Melnichunk and Pavlov (2022) understand "Nordicity as a cultural, emotional, and symbolic structure that includes the northern climate and light; a visual culture composed of white, black, and gray-blue; social emotions of silence, restraint, and coldness; close interaction with nature; and the Arctic as an imagined North."(2022, p. 106).

In Finnish and Nordic visual culture, this Northern aesthetic is expressed through negative space, low-saturation colors, simplified faces, gentle yet powerful emotional expression, and deep-seated intimacy. From the perspective of human-nature relations, this interconnection constitutes what Jokela (2008) terms "the landscape of identity"—a dynamic wholeness that is anchored in and fully immersed within a specific place. Continuously reshaped by the environment, this structure comprises multiple distinct identities situated within symbolic spatial-temporal imaginaries and deeply tied to a sense of home. Concurrently, this deep interspecies intimacy is manifested in Jokela's environmental art practices, wherein "it becomes difficult to distinguish the environment and the community from one another—the concept 'North', for example, defines both location and community simultaneously" (2008, p. 11). Consequently, "the North" operates as a conception possessing both geographical and cultural dualities. Rather than appearing as a passive background, "the North" reveals itself as an intense relational field where darkness, cold, starlight, aurora, and an omnipresent, remote solitude intertwine, configuring the landscape as a topography endowed with a mystical character.

Contextualized within the anthology *North as a Meaning in Design and Art*, published following a pivotal 2015 conference at the University of Lapland, Sophie Dietrich (2019) argues that twilight and darkness serve as critical aesthetic entry points for a deeper comprehension of Northern conceptualizations. This resonates with Ingold's (2016) phenomenological interpretation of light as an affective experience that "gets inside and saturates our consciousness". From a design

perspective, Harri Kalha (2019) delineates how Finnish craft and design facilitate the reception of the Nordic "other" through an authentic, rustic, and unmediated naturalism. Equating the Finnish concept of "Nature" with "the North", Kalha underscores the historical reality that "harsh climate conditions initially led to a focus on bare necessities (survival)" (2019, p. 37). In the Northern context, nature thus emerges as a dual trope in modernist art texts: symbolizing both untamed freedom and a conservative impulse toward domestication. Juha Ridanpää (2019), navigating this through a historical-geographical lens, emphasizes that Northern Finland has long shouldered regional stereotypes, most notably illustrated by a 1950s drawing that deployed "a straight line (transition zone)" (2019, p. 124) to divides the nation into "Culture-Finland" and "Nature-Finland". This cartographic dualism effectively relegated Northern Finland to a savage, untamed wilderness. However, as Maria Huhmarniemi (2019) demonstrates in her discussion of art-science collaborations in the Arctic, developing a genuine intimacy with the North attaches heavily on familiarity and the accumulation of embodied environmental knowledge—a critical threshold that directly dictates the extent to which artistic practices can generate transformative knowledge for Northern inhabitants.

This demand for embodied environmental knowledge and localized intimacy directly shapes the visual culture of the region, translating the broad, harsh relational field of the North into the intimate and micro-landscape of the non-human countenance—animal faces. Within this background, animal face images often exhibit a "calm intimacy": their expressions are not intense, yet they stably carry the viewer's emotions and experiences. Animal faces in children's animal toys, contemporary art, and traditional worldviews all share this crucial aesthetic characteristic. Nordicity endows the animal face image with specific cultural energy and modes of perception in the Nordic context, serving as a critical background for aesthetic empowerment and the broadest field site for this thesis's multispecies ethnography. It is precisely within this dual structure of calmness and gentleness that the animal face image becomes a medium capable of offering psychological security, emotional regulation, and confirmation of cultural meaning.

Before delving into the discussion of animal motifs in the North, it is important to provide a brief overview of three key regional terms associated with northern Europe:

Nordic region, Scandinavia, and Fennoscandia. These terms refer to distinct yet overlapping geographical, political, historical, and cultural areas. Among them, Fennoscandia has the closest historical and cultural ties to the Sámi people.

Fennoscandia is defined geographically by the unique terrain shaped by Precambrian rocks, encompassing the Scandinavian Peninsula, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in northwestern Russia. Historically, it was home to the Indigenous Sámi people, whose culture blended influences from the Scandinavian Peninsula, Finland, and Russia. This region has been a significant site for practices like reindeer herding and animistic religious traditions. However, Fennoscandia's history has also been shaped by complex colonial dynamics and the pressures exerted by the formation of modern nation-states. These processes displaced the Sámi from their traditional territories and suppressed their languages, religions, and cultural practices. Today, the Sámi are primarily distributed across the northernmost areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, collectively known as Lapland. They are experiencing a revival of their language, religion, culture, and identity, reclaiming and strengthening their heritage.

The Nordic region is broader in scope, encompassing the five Nordic countries (Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland) along with their territories (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands, among others). Politically and economically, this region shares certain values and systems, such as strong commitments to equality and high-welfare state models, which contribute to its distinct identity. However, looking beyond these socio-political frameworks, this regional identity is equally anchored within the intricate nexus of ecological realities and cultural formation. In their article, *Arctic art education in changing nature and culture*, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2022) unfold the conceptual lens of "ecoculture" to deeply investigate human-environment relations within the Arctic context. They specifically elucidate how ecological entanglements between human and more-than-human entities attain sustainability through the situated production of "northern knowledge".

According to Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2022), this "northern knowledge" operates as an active, situated learning process within the Arctic context, integrating cultural heritage with the tacit knowledge embedded within arts, crafts, and visual symbols.

Crucially, under the strain of contemporary ecological shifts and climate change, traditional ecocultures must dynamically evolve, necessitating the establishment of "new kinds of bonds between human and other-than-human nature". This relational demand marks an ontological turn from possessing knowledge about the environment toward a posthumanist paradigm of "knowing with nature". This epistemic solidarity processes knowledge within materiality and the human-nature narratives infused within it. Within Arctic art education, Jokela and Huhmarniemi illustrate this paradigm through local children's artistic engagement with the figure of the reindeer. They observe that, from a posthumanist perspective, children view reindeer as "family members", utilizing snow—a temporal winter material—to visualize their "togetherness with reindeer and knowing with reindeer" (2022, p. 12), thereby offering local communities a generative forum to renew their relationship with the changing Arctic environment.

In contrast, Scandinavia refers more narrowly to Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. These countries are connected by linguistic similarities and a shared historical background. By distinguishing these terms, I can better situate the animal motifs that are central to this discussion, within the complex interplay of geography, history, and identity in the North. And based on the distinctions outlined above among the three northern regional concepts, the term "North" in this discussion refers specifically to Fennoscandia. This is because the carriers of the animal motifs explored in this study—rock art and the sieidi cult—are predominantly found within the geographical and cultural boundaries of Fennoscandia. Broadly speaking, as Hodgins (1998) argues, Nordicity is far more than a mere latitudinal measurement, it represents a complex "personal odyssey" involving the continuous refiguring of one's spiritual and physical relationship with the wildness.

2.3.2 Animal motifs in rock art in Fennoscandia

In the investigation of the prehistoric visual remains of Fennoscandia, human and more-than-human entities present an ontological entanglement within the rock paintings distributed across present-day Finland. Sámi cultural scholar Francis Joy (2017) describes the red figures and symbols depicted in these rock paintings, ranging

from elks, reindeers, and birds to snakes, anthropomorphic shape-shifters, and animal spirits. These figures manifest a series of complex and multi-layered cosmologies involving shamanism and animal ceremonialism. For instance, drawing upon the research of Lahelma (2008), Joy (2017) exemplifies scenes in Finnish rock art where individuals in falling or diving postures are accompanied by animals such as elks, fish, or snakes, serving as visual evidence for a comparative study with the Sámi knowledge system.

This liminal relationship between humans and animals at a cosmological level is further embedded within a sacred topography through the holy sites known as Sieidi (or Seita in Finnish). These sites typically manifest as boulder landscapes adjacent to waterways, forests, and tundra. Some are characterised by human, animal and anthropomorphic facial profiles and bodily features (Joy, 2017, p. 201). These landscapes harbor supernatural powers and host guardian spirits. Consequently, operating as liminal realms, the Sieidi provide portals for communication between the different layers of worlds within the Sámi cosmos.

Furthermore, Joy critically underscores that the commonalities of identity and belief cultures in the Fennoscandian region possess a fluid nature, which cannot be conceptually dissected by modern dualism that sever the symbiotic wholeness of nature-culture coexistence. Joy's research on Finnish rock paintings reveals their ambiguous and contested nature, while exploring the potential connection and continuity between the prehistoric material culture represented by Finnish rock art and the Sámi cosmological knowledge system carried by Sámi drums.

In the article *North-Norwegian Rock Art*, Poul Simonsen (2000) recounts the discovery of rock art in the Nordic region. The story begins in 1799, when a Norwegian botanist stumbled upon rock carvings while collecting plants in the forests of northern Norway. Over the following two centuries, numerous rock art sites from the Stone Age were uncovered across the Nordic region and the northwest of Russia. Simonsen classifies these carvings into two categories: "Hunter's art and Farmer's art, reflecting the distinct cultural characteristics and cognitive frameworks of these two groups—food-gatherers and food-producers." (2000, p. 18). Most Nordic rock art sites are closely associated with water systems. Many are located along the

Norwegian coastline, while others are found inland near lakes. Based on the imagery, archaeologists and anthropologists have hypothesized that these sites might have been regional centers, seasonal migration settlements (such as winter or summer dwellings), or places for hunting fish and large mammals. Simonsen speculates on one possible scenario:

> After having arrived at the place, people often had to sit down and be patient for days or weeks. The wild animals or the fishes had not yet arrived. One could only wait. If you were hungry or if time was passing and you were beginning to doubt whether the prey would arrive this year, then the time was ripe for a magic Ceremony. (Kare, 2000, p. 38)

In northern Norway, some of the earliest identifiable rock art features large mammals, with deer species being the most commonly depicted. Among aquatic animals, seals are the most frequently illustrated due to their critical role in sustaining life along the cold northern coasts. Surprisingly, fish motifs are rarely found. Losey (2018) argues that dogs often appear in scenes assisting humans during hunts, depicted biting prey or accompanying hunters. Birds important to hunters also make occasional appearances. While animals such as bears and otters are depicted, others like wolves, foxes, and wolverines are absent. Simonsen emphasizes that: "The distinction between animals suitable for depiction and those never depicted must depend on more than purely materialistic reasons." (2000, p. 39).

One particularly rare and creative motif is the snake, which Simonsen found only in northern regions where snakes were not part of the local fauna. In these depictions, snakes are portrayed with ear-like shapes to distinguish them from simple zigzag lines. Simonsen hypothesizes: "The snake must have been a magic or religious symbol to people living in areas where they never encountered one." (Kare, 2000, p. 40).

Later rock art often features increasingly stylized animal motifs, making it difficult for researchers to distinguish species or determine the gender of animals based on natural traits, such as the shape or size of antlers. This stylization likely reflects the

creators' subjective intentions, with exaggeration and abstraction used to achieve symbolic meaning or convey imaginative visions. Forty years ago, it was suggested that Scandinavian rock art originated in Norway and evolved linearly from naturalism to stylization and abstraction, culminating in the Late Stone Age and ending around 500 BCE. Simonsen critiques this overly idealistic perspective, referencing Gjessing's view that "Nordic rock art exhibits stylistic diversity that defies a single linear developmental model. For example, the Trøndelag style features motifs filled with internal lines that are anatomical or symbolic in nature." (2000, p. 43). This diversity underscores the complexity and richness of animal motifs within Nordic rock art traditions.

Methodology

3.1 Methodology Approach: An Organic Assemblage of Practice and Perception

The methodology of this thesis is an organic assemblage that evolved in tandem with my artistic practice and life in Rovaniemi. Adopting a framework of autoethnography, the research methods emerged through the “fermentation""of creative work, reflecting the entangled growth of the researcher, the environment, and the inquiry. To preserve the phenomenological integrity of this process, the methodology follows the chronological emergence of the research: starting from environmental perception and the experience of psychosomatic disarray, leading to drawing as a transformative practice, and finally culminating in embodied empathy as a pathway to understanding the animal face. Although this trajectory follows a chronological sequence, these phases are realistically intertwined. Meanwhile, the methodology of this study reflects a dual knowledge interest as framed by Anttila’s four-field framework (as cited in Jokela and Huhmarniemi, 2025). While the core of the practice is subjective—practice, rooted in the frontal-animal-face drawing, the eventual production of a Möbius strip conceptual model shifts the research towards a subjective- theoretical outcome. As Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2025) suggest, this transition allows the artist-researcher to not only reflect on their work but also to produce theories and meanings that can be applied to broader artistic phenomena. In this case, which is the visual construction of human-animal relations.

The text distinguishes between art as a process (the work of art) and art as an object (the result of that process). Art as a process embodies the principle of thinking through making. Building on the concept of epistemological inclusivity, Barone and Eisner (2011) argue that artistic research is not a mimicry of scientific inquiry but a

distinct mode of knowledge production. It captures sensory depths and aesthetic nuances that traditional quantitative methods often overlook. Thus, art forms—be they films, plays, or paintings—invite reflection on the human condition, not by providing definitive answers, but by provoking critical questions and reconfiguring lived experiences.

Looking back at the research process of this thesis, it echoes Robin Nelson's (2022) advocacy of being-doing-thinking practice as the primary carrier for presenting original findings. However, it differs from his view that primary findings are presented by means other than writing. From the final outcome, although the artistic practice is the core of the research, the process of documenting and restructuring the research through writing played a vital role; it produced the Möbius strip analysis model regarding the human-animal relationship in frontal animal face imagery, which was further used to analyze the creative mechanisms of such imagery in Northern Finland.

Nelson places Practice-as-Research (PaR) within the integrated framework of onto-epistemology. The way humans know the world can only occur under the premise that we acknowledge ourselves as material beings deeply participating in the world. In this light, even though the embodied knowing generated in artistic practice addresses certain real-world challenges or intellectual problems through the act of "doing" itself, the path for knowledge to be universally accessed and understood remains, in a general sense, through linguistic forms such as written text.

This raises the question of the epistemological capacity of artistic practice within art research. Henk Borgdorff (2012) draws on theories and practices from the life sciences to clarify whether artworks or art practices are capable of creating, articulating, and embodying knowledge. He points out that things "could sometimes be things we want to know (epistemic things) and at other times be objects through which we can know (technical objects)." (2012, p. 190). Inspired by historian of science regarding the unformed state of knowledge objects, Borgdorff notes that experiments "must be sufficiently open to allow these indistinct things to come into view. This openness and room for not-knowing, or not-yet-knowing, cannot be imposed by stern methodological procedures."(2012, p. 190). Artistic practice

possesses precisely this experimentality, which is reflected in the tacit knowledge contained within the resulting artworks. Borgdorff uses Adorno's non-identity to support the idea that this tacit knowledge is ineffable and inexhaustible.

From the above discussion on the practical and experimental nature of art research, we learn that the ontology of art research does not lie in finding fixed answers or solutions. Instead, it creates an incomplete field that is open to continuous discussion and self-generation through the openness of artistic practice and artworks. In this study, although the author's practice of drawing frontal animal portraits helped return the author to an ordered life, this was not the end of the creation. In particular, the intuitive feedback from viewers during the exhibition—the perception of the animal faces as "printer-like"—provides an enriched epistemological reality for analyzing the phenomenon of humans habitually projecting onto frontal faces. This also puts into practice what Borgdorff (2016) emphasized as practice-infused research, where practice within art research simultaneously plays the roles of research object, research method, research context, and research outcome.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study is derived from both internal and external sources. Internal data centers on my individual artistic practice, while external data includes visual works and written interview from the Northern Finnish artist A.

Individual Artistic Practice as Primary Data

My creative practice serves as the primary site of knowledge production. This includes preliminary sketches, final drawings, exhibition photographs, and reflexive journals. These materials document the thinking through making process, capturing the transition from sensory chaos during the kaamos (polar night) to a re-ordered visual equilibrium.

Written Interview: Design Logic and Thematic Structure

To validate the hypothesis of the frontal animal face as an evocative interface of gaze, I designed a semi-structured written interview structured into five progressive

thematic sections. Each section aligns with the thesis's theoretical framework to elicit specific layers of experiential knowledge:

Theme 1: Artistic Motivation and Subject Selection: Explores the influence of Nordicity on the subconscious. It investigates how environmental rhythms translate into creative impulses, supporting Q1 regarding the tuning (Ingold, 2000, p. 22) between environmental pressure and the creative subject.

Theme 2: Frontal Face as Visual Structure: Focuses on the visual function of frontality in generating interactive mechanisms of the gaze (Q2). By comparing frontal versus profile representations, it seeks to reveal if eye contact is an intentional construction of a trans-species communication interface.

Theme 3: Presence and Individuality of the Image: Utilizes New Materialism and phenomenology to examine the image's agency. It investigates whether the image transcends representation to become a subjective carrier, echoing the discussion on Presence—the image as an activatable, interactive object.

Theme 4: Human-Animal Relations and the Face: Delves into ontological boundaries. It analyzes how anthropomorphism and "otherness" are balanced to collect data on the visual boundaries of cross-species empathy, establishing an ethical connection based on equality.

Theme 5: Context and Comparative Perspectives: Critically situates the works within the macro-historical and cultural context of Northern Finland. Q11 and Q12 test whether these frontal faces deconstruct the "dominance logic" of traditional hunting and transform the modern meaning of Sámi animism.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative Thematic and Interpretive Analysis

This study employs Interpretive Description, which seeks ways of organizing emergent insights through iterative engagement with data (Leavy, 2014, pp. 108-109).

By cross-referencing my own practice with the interview and works of A, new possibilities for understanding the animal face are illuminated. Although critical reflection on personal practice has inherent limitations, this "What if" perspective is beneficial for understanding both the present and absent elements within the research sample (Leavy, 2014, p. 108).

Materiality, Creative Process, and Spatial Logic

Media Selection and Resource Circulation: My choice of basic media—pencil and white paper—stems from an awareness of sustainability encountered in Rovaniemi. Finding discarded pencils and sketchbooks on campus sharing shelves represents a warm manifestation of resource circulation. This minimalism strips the artwork of ornamental layers, returning it to a primal state where I construct my understanding of the animal through the monochromatic trace of the lead.

The Geometry of the Gaze: My process involves a transition from naturalistic representation to a rational, almost digitally printed aesthetic. I construct the animal face through basic geometric shapes—triangles, circles, rhombuses—composed of ordered short lines that radiate outward from the eyes like mandalas or ripples in water. This systematic geometry represents an artificial imposition of order upon the organic face.

Spatial Resonance and Northern Aesthetics: The materiality of my work co-acts with the environmental energy of my north-facing room. The window, as the sole light source during the dim kaamos, creates a charcoal-like tonal relationship between the room and the snow-covered city. Influenced by Alvar Aalto's modernist urban planning, Rovaniemi's skyline—characterized by sawtooth-like, almost linear forest horizons—has subtly infected my senses with a Nordic temperament. This results in a visual style that is simultaneously a dialogue with nature and a highly ordered framework generated within the detached sensibilities of Northern modernism.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All external data collection—including interview designs, invitation letters, and

consent forms—was conducted with strict adherence to local intellectual property norms, social values, and the personal boundaries of the artists. The research maintains an open, inclusive stance, ensuring that the analysis of Finnish and Sámi-related themes remains respectful and free from cultural bias.

To address the ethical and technical challenges inherent in cross-cultural research—specifically linguistic ambiguity and the limitations of automated translation—this study prioritizes the participants' cultural agency and the integrity of their knowledge production. The following methods are employed for the translation of the written interviews:

1. Linguistic Autonomy: Participants are invited to respond either in their native language or in English, at their discretion.This ensure they can express complex artistic concepts without the constraints of a secondary language.

2. Expert Semantic Oversight: To preserve artistic nuances and cultural metaphors, the translation process is supervised by Professor Maria Huhmarniemi. This ensures that the English rendering avoids the conceptual thinning often associated with generic AI tools. For the initial drafting, secure institutional software is utilized as a baseline, rather than open-access AI platforms, to maintain data privacy.

3. Member Checking and Validation: The finalized English drafts are returned to the artists for "member checking". This final approval stage ensures that the representation of their intellectual and artistic contributions is accurate and mutually agreed upon.

4. To respect the participant's privacy and comply with research ethics guidelines, the identity of the collaborating Finnish artist has been anonymized upon request. Throughout this thesis, the participating Finnish artist is referred to as "Artist A", and the referenced artworks are discussed strictly within a conceptual and analytical framework.

Declaration on the Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this thesis, the author used Gemini primarily for linguistic translation, and Microsoft tools for written interview linguistic translation. Gemini also severs as an academic research assistant. Specifically, the tool was employed to facilitate the mapping of complex academic concepts and to refine the multilingual expression of the research. The author remains fully responsible for the interpretation of the data and the final content of the work.

Discussion

4.1 Anthropomorphism as a Decentering Method

Regarding the motivation for creation, the animals in the artist A's work come from two main backgrounds. First, they originate from textual descriptions of anthropomorphized animals in folklore, rather than objective experiences summarized by people based on scientific observations such as biology and zoology. Second, by distinguishing between the two states of existence—the independent wildness of animals and the property-based domestication—the artist chose wild animals, which are more similar to the sense of the unknown deep within the human soul, as her creative prototypes. For her, "they spark imagination and emotions, and one can project human life onto them". In the folklore she reads, the fox is often described as "representing cunning, cleverness, and survival through wit, while the bear is simpler, relying on physical strength". The natural traits of wild animals like the fox and the bear in stories are symbolized by humans into specific values and moral characters. This process transforms the incomprehensible natural attributes of wild animals—survival strategies and habits—into understandable social attributes within human society. That is, it transforms biological reality into human-understandable moral knowledge, thereby ordering the wild world and flipping the subconscious fear of the wild and unknown represented by animals into the social value system at the conscious level.

However, artist A does not stop at the gaze toward animals based on the anthropomorphic descriptions found in folklore. On the contrary, taking the bear as an example, she believes that "the bear also embodies, for me, a human who is kind-hearted but commits bad deeds because they cannot use their strength and power in the right measure. They grieve deeply when they see the traces they leave behind—all that has been ravaged and broken. The pain of the world breaks them as well". The evil produced by so-called destruction is also a form of sadness. She projects onto

such animals a sense of remorse similar to that of humans, internally perceiving the symbolized bear as a living subject sharing the same tragic fate as humans—much like the hero Heracles in Greek mythology, with his infinite power and the heavy price he pays for bearing it. In Greek mythology, Heracles falls into a madness beyond the control of reason due to the schemes of the goddess Hera, accidentally killing his wife and children. Power plays the dual role of savior and oppressor in this tragedy.

Figure 3：The Bear mask, the fox mask (Digital photograph), by artist A, from artist's website https://silmukeramiikka.com/projects/kettunaamio/

In cultural narratives, both Heracles and the brute force bear are consistently reinforced regarding the importance of reason over power. Lacking reason, a unique subjective trait of humans, one falls into the dark side of binary opposition. However, Heracles' violence occurs both in a state of losing social identity and in a state of "defacialization" that combines divinity and animality. In contrast, the bear is defacialized within its natural survival environment. When the bear is programmed into human folklore and facialized into a single personality attribute, its dynamism as a living being is stripped away and fixed into a certain cultural mask, thus, "facialization" occurs. This process of turning the animal into a ficed cultural trope encapsulates the mechanics of "facialization", wherein the dynamic, multi-dimensional life intensity of the non-human other is over-coded (Deleuze et al.,

2014). Artist A seems to have chosen a Heracles-style tragic perspective to deeply anthropomorphize the bear. On one hand, she acknowledges the destructiveness of life force; on the other hand, she indicates that life must bear the heavy price of any form of power. In human culture, these powers with great destructive potential are often misunderstood and demonized, which actually verifies the fact that wild life force is refused true understanding by humans. This anthropocentric demonization mirrors what Huhmarniemi (2019) critiques regarding the external exoticization of the North. By reducing complex ecological subjects to flat, romanticized, or threatening archetypes—the proverbial "land of polar bears and lemmings"—human culture refuses a true, embodied encounter with the wilderness.
Artist A's projection of the bear sharing the same worldly suffering also reflects the sadness of the human destiny within its own civilizational process, situated amidst the reverse violence of uncontrollable technological power. Both are inevitably alienated—losing self-control. In the process of developing technology and controlling nature, humans are kidnapped by the logic of technological development, being both the producers of technology and its slaves. The bear is alienated by human narrative during the process of human civilization. Originally, in the natural environment, its power and survival were coordinated and self-sufficient. But in folklore, this power is alienated as uncontrollable and evil-producing. Even if the artist views the bear with empathy as a living being that does evil because it cannot properly use its power, it inevitably alienates the bear because the bear is always understood within the human moral system. It is more like taking animals that share a destiny with humans into a collective lament, unconsciously performing a mirrored self-pity.

If the artist were to "reduce" the bear in folklore—that is, reduce the bear to a purely incomprehensible wild existence—it would easily slide into the abyss where emotional projection and communication are impossible. Therefore, tragic anthropomorphism plays the role of an inducing strategy in artist A's creation of animal masks to ensure that projection can unfold. However, according to the artist's answers in interviews, anthropomorphism occurs at the personal emotional level of the artist during creation, rather than at the formal level of the work. That is to say, the artist did not create through the visual similarity between the animal mask and the human face, but established a consciousness of coexistence at the ontological level. If

the artist maintains the “otherness” of the animal in the form of the animal mask—presenting the wildness of the animal that humans cannot truly understand in the original state of a mask—even though the frontal animal face is the most favorable form for the communication of the gaze, it will form a vacuum state that refuses to accept the viewer’s projection on a cold form (Figure 3).This forces the viewer to return to themselves to find meaning, wandering between repeatedly projecting onto the animal mask and self-projection. In this process, not every viewer can arrive at the tragic empathy of the creative source. However, the expressionless animal mask is likely to force the viewer into a subjective illusion that the animal refuses to be projected upon, thereby bringing the viewer’s subconscious act of projection to the conscious level when looking at the frontal animal face.

In addition to using the wild animal narratives in cultural texts as a starting point, artist A’s choice of wild animals for her mask creation is also based on reflection on the relationship between humans and animals, specifically the categories of “domesticated” and “wild”. In her view, the core of domestication or taming is the process of humans turning animals into property. Looking back at how livestock and the products of modern society—pets—are given names by humans, play specific roles and functions in human social life, and are endowed with the legal attributes of material property, one can understand that “propertization” is actually the systematic facialization of animals. The systemic propertization operates as a form of institutional facialization. As Tuan (1984) delineates, the cultural shearing of animal wildness into domesticated companionship or human property is inherently driven by an exercise of dominance coated in affection, forcing the animal into a humanized power asymmetry.

However, the existence of wild animals is self-sufficient and independent of human needs; it is a non-facialized wilderness. The artist believes that this non-propertized thing can represent the sense of the unknown deep within the human soul. From this perspective, there is a non-socialized realm deep within the human soul just as there is in wild animals. If this is the case, it precisely shows that in the encounter with the frontal face of a wild animal, humans possess the psychological foundation to achieve “defacialization” and desocialization of identity. Although artist A did not explicitly state the influence of environmental pressure on the creation of the masks, the sharing

of the unknown and worldly suffering seems to point to the essence of life solitude imposed on humans and wild animals as living beings who must maintain independent biological operating systems. Every individual must bear survival pressure alone and make responsive behaviors in an individual sense. The French philosopher Gilbert Simondon（2021）argues, the process of self-generation of life is a process of "individuation". This refers to how a living being must constantly deal with survival crises such as foraging, reproduction, and natural enemies while surviving in the natural environment. In this process, the nervous system, sensory system, and behavioral patterns of the living being are strategic reactions refined through repeated survival practices, possessing self-consistency at the level of individual existence conditions. When this living being exists for its own survival, its interaction with the environment does not need to be an emotional demand. This is precisely the state of existence of wild animals as they are—a free and lonely existence.

Unlike wild animals, the survival pressure for domesticated animals is no longer the wilderness; even for stray animals, their environment is a man-made one. The human social landscape inevitably becomes one of the survival pressures for these domesticated animals. This means that in the process of co-evolution and domestication, domesticated animals observe human behavior in the man-made environment as a survival factor and respond to it. At the level of behavioral plasticity, domesticated animals seem easy for humans to project upon, but at the respective biological cognitive levels, solitude seems absolute. In artist A's animal masks, we do not see domesticated animals, which are relatively easy to project upon, but rather wild animals that refuse our projection. Therefore, the non-propertized quality of wild animals cherished by the artist represents a sort of "animalistic stubbornness" of the artist as a human being who also refuses to be co-opted by the human meaning system.

The main factor for artist A choosing the frontal face for her animal masks is still to create an interface for projection and gaze. Eyes are a necessary condition for the gaze to occur. Interestingly, the eyes of the animal masks are two empty holes. They attract the viewer's gaze, yet because of their empty nature, they cannot reflect the gaze, but

instead act like black holes, constantly absorbing the viewer's continued and uncertain gaze. This shows that the artist not only identifies with the face as an emotional communication interface but also consciously uses the absence of animal eyes to reinforce the face of ethical consciousness that summons the viewer.

Compared to the eyes of animal taxidermy, which use man-made glass beads to deliberately simulate living animal eyes and create more direct ocular content, the empty eyes clearly remove various emotions that the eyes might convey in a minimalist way. Rosa (2012) argues that the longing for permanence, possession, and nostalgia, this threefold "culture of longing", is actualized through the illusion of a gaze engineered by the glass-bead eyes of animal taxidermy. However, regarding artist A's animal masks, what remains is the pure structure that originally carried the eyes. The black-hole-like empty structure seems to be the entrance leading to the connection with the "the unknown felt by the mind" mentioned by the artist. The empty eyes also correspond to where the animal's body begins to rot after death. In several observations of the remains of Arctic hares dead by the roadside, while the exterior of the body appeared intact, the eyes, as original holes in the body, were always the first to collapse, forming a passage that seemingly allows microorganisms in the air to travel freely inside and outside the remains. When one gazes into those black holes where decay begins, the black holes that cannot reflect our gaze directly state the absence of life. This naked presence of life's vulnerability further triggers the viewer's mourning for the impermanence of life.

Regarding the artist's tendency in viewing her created animal face images—whether she sees them as living existences or emphasizes the material nature of the objects—artist A expresses a desire to "establish contact with the figure in my work". This answer jumps out of the binary framework of thinking often caused by the question itself. The desire to establish a connection reveals that the artist uses a relational ontology to deal with the relationship between the animal masks, the "archetypal" animals they represent, and humans. Furthermore, the artist tends to use the human schematic method to view animal masks as representative symbols, rather than creating any specific animal living in a specific time and space—not a particular fox or bear she has encountered, but a visual life intensity of the "that lives in her mind" presented to people. Through visual languages such as lines, proportions, and

textures, she conveys a recognizable symbol. The difference from the "archetypal fox" fixed with personality and moral attributes in folklore is that the former creates a pluralistic interface that triggers the viewer's perception and emotional projection. Everyone may see different states of existence for the animal and themselves in front of the animal mask. The latter shapes a relatively closed, non-dynamic cognitive conclusion. We are told what the fox is like and what qualities the bear possesses. Of course, literary texts can also serve as material for reflection, as artist A does by correcting or deepening the understanding of the bear's situation. Especially, she notices and emphasizes that the changes in her impressions of animals are reflected in the subtle changes in the specific creative forms of the animal masks—that is, some features are emphasized while the importance of others is reduced. This shows that the creation of artist A's animal masks is built on a dynamic process of perceiving, recognizing, and understanding animals, rather than constantly replicating an archetypal animal image.

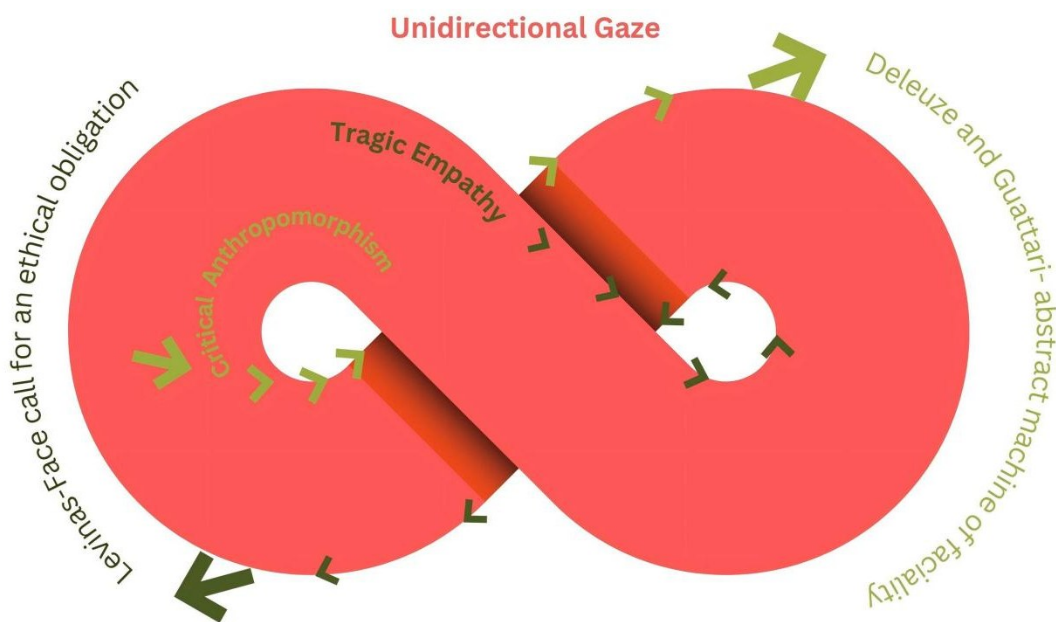

Figure 4: The Möbius Strip of Stabilizing Facialization via Dual Paths: The Loop of Anthropomorphic Critique and Ethics of the Other in artist A's Practice(Digital)

Overall, at the conceptual level, artist A's animal mask creation points to the source of

highly symbolized animal narratives in folklore, but based on this, she adopts a critical reading method to perform a deep anthropomorphic empathy toward the wild animal narratives in the stories. That is, she endows the animal subject with a tragic fate and the essence of individual solitude like that of humans. At this creative level, her animal masks point to Levinas's (1969) ethical face. At the formal level of the work, each animal mask adopts a minimalist and expressionless frontal face outline with pre-reserved empty eyes, which serve the clear purpose of allowing the creator herself to gaze and attempt to establish a relationship, while also inducing the viewer to project emotions into these abysses that cannot bounce back the projection, thereby preserving the "otherness" of wild animals that are not propertized by humans. On the other hand, the representation of the animals is also based on the extraction of a archetypal cultural symbol, always focusing on the "ness" of each animal created, seemingly leading to the visual prototype of each animal—presenting human-recognizable animal traits through a visual structure from which no animal characteristics can be further stripped. This is also the part of "facialization" touched upon by the creation process of the animal masks (Figure 4).

4.2 From Faciality to the Territorialized Head: Artistic Practice in Survival Rhythms

Unlike the artist A, who explores the cultural archetypes of wild animals through animal narratives in folklore, the motivation for my animal face drawings is rooted in a more fundamental, embodied existential crisis. From a perspective of dwelling, during the transition from an outsider to an insider within a specific environment—specifically under the extreme light conditions of Northern Finland in the circumpolar region—my own life rhythms spiraled out of control due to environmental stress. The somatic disruption closely instantiates what Ingold and Kurttila (2000) observe regarding human immersion within the volatile weather-world of Finnish Lapland. They argue that environment rhythms in this region are not mere passive backgrounds but active, elemental forces that fundamentally recondition and challenge the sensory boundaries of the dwelling body. This led to the withdrawal of my social identity and the collapse of the socialized face. Animal face sketching intervened in the

psychosomatic wasteland of this state. Its purpose was not to depict or represent animals, but rather, within the loneliness of individual cultural aphasia, to slowly pull me back into the daily social order (facialization) through a minimalist media framework composed of the hand, the pen, and the paper, utilizing a visual method akin to Zen meditation. The non-linguistic recovery through repetitive tracing echoes Muhr's (2020) conceptualization of art-based research as a potent vehicle to access human-nature connectedness "beyond words". In a state of cultural dislocation, the material manipulation of the drawing medium operates as a non-linguistic sensory anchor, facilitating emotional grounding when discursive language fails.

The animal faces in this process do not attempt to achieve cross-species communication through artistic practice, nor do they try to restore the wild horizon of animals from commodified human relationships. Furthermore, they are not about projecting emotions onto symbolized animal faces to validate one's own existence. Instead, they represent the creation of a series of animal faces that carry the desire for order and possess eyes that refuse the gaze of the viewer. In this context, creation is no longer an intellectual game about how to understand animals, but has evolved into a journey of self-healing—reconstructing the order of life by attuning the rhythms of the body and the environment during seasonal psychosomatic disorder. Within the Möbius strip analysis model of this thesis, the artist A's animal masks largely stabilize the function of the animal face as an ethical interface, endowing it with profound cultural connotations. In contrast, my animal face works reveal a more turbulent process of flow within the Möbius strip: from facialization to defacialization, and back to facialization (Figure). The cyclical oscillation within my practice serves as a creative re-imagining of the "faciality" system conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (2014), illustrating a radical, lived tension between the face of social identity and the defacialization.

How did my body retreat from being an organized organism that normally processes social information to becoming a relatively simple physiological receptor? In fact, this is the moment when the body emerges from its hidden state in human social life, and it is the physical site where defacialization occurs. In conventional daily life, we rarely have the opportunity to feel the subjectivity of the body. When we speak of subjectivity, we usually refer to our consciousness and thinking processes. At such

times, consciousness moves through different frameworks of social identity and practices social functions, such as processing social information, making decisions, and learning. The invisibility of bodily subjectivity is, in this sense, a manifestation of healthy and orderly biological indicators, including cognitive functions, hormone levels, and physical strength. When the sense of the body surfaces, it indicates that a warning signal has been issued—perhaps a sense of pain or a non-painful discomfort, which are manifestations of a system not running smoothly.

In the Arctic Circle, the polar day and polar night exert a violent impact on the biological clocks of newcomers, especially for those are being sensitive of environment. The lack of cultural socialization further results in missing the seasonal positive social strategies developed by locals to cope with the extreme environment, though socialization does not apply to all populations as a means to smoothly navigate such conditions. When the body, as biological hardware, cannot support the normal operation of social identity as cultural software, the withdrawal of identity becomes a forced and passive stripping away—a self-protection mechanism activated by the living organism to reduce the use of non-essential cultural functions. Therefore, defacialization is a physical process established upon biological rhythms, sensory overload, and the stripping of cultural symbols, leading back to a state of biological existence. It seems that the pace of life slows down during this period, the interface function of the face—originally used to produce social expressions and engage in reciprocal gazing—is temporarily closed. This is the defacialization at the perceptual level following the withdrawal of social identity, reducing responses to external information. The strategic shutdown of the socializing reflects what Ingold (2010) describes as the fundamental condition of "knowing" through the weather-world, wherein the organism must temporarily dissolve its rigid cognitive frameworks and retreat to a baseline biologically and physiologically receptivity to symbiotically survive environmental pressure.

Figure 5：Poster Design of the Animal face (Digital), 2025, by ZIjun Zhao

In the drawing of animal faces (Figure), the process of rendering them leaves no room for thinking about cultural narratives concerning animals. This is because, when viewing photographs of frontal animal faces, the biological characteristics—such as the intensity of the facial structure, the density of the fur, and the proportions of the facial features—present a physiognomic sense that is more attractive to me. This is an objective observation of defacialization that filters out the social attributes of the animal face. Thus, in the author's creation of animal faces, defacialization primarily refers to the stripping of the social meaning of people and things by the extreme environment. Cultural symbols fail, and instead, physiological impacts are temporarily highlighted.

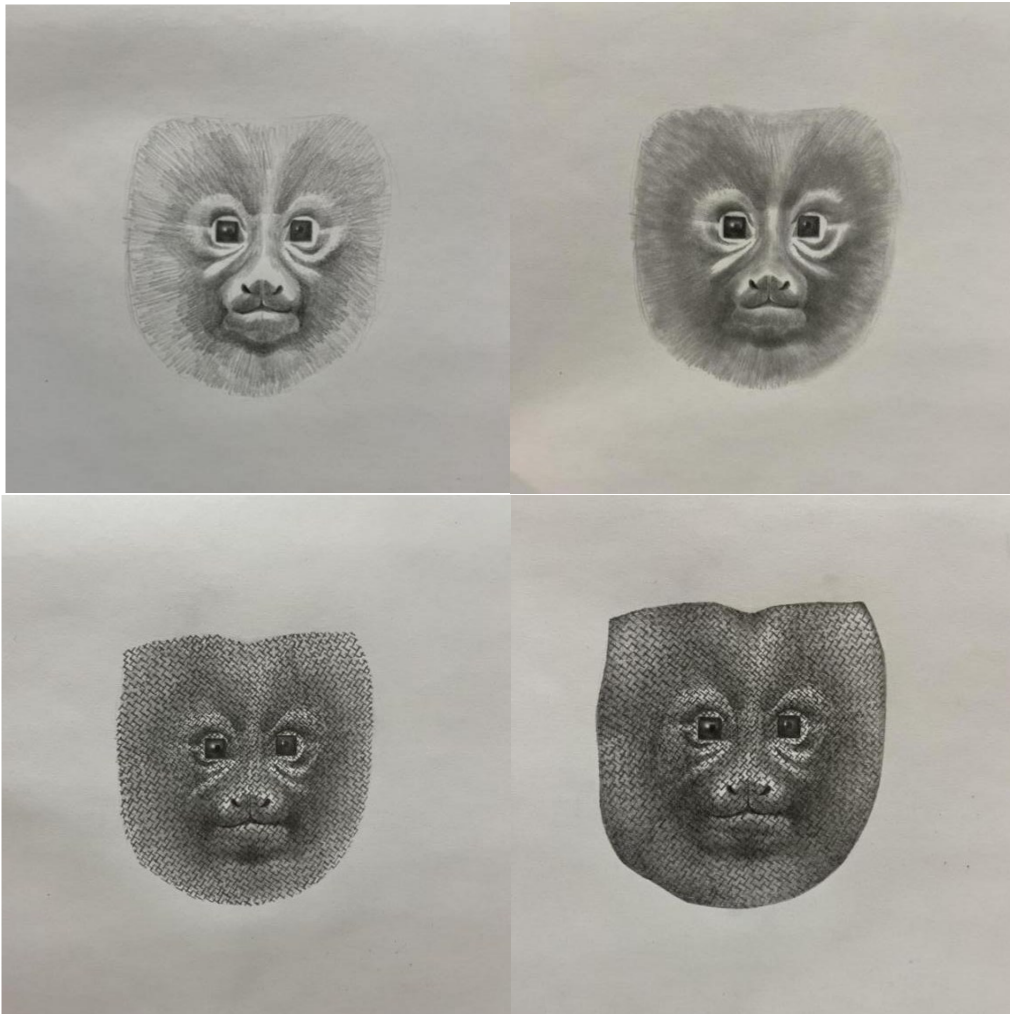

Figure 6：Monkey Portrait, 2025, by artist ZIjun Zhao. Photograph: Zijun Zhao, 2025

The commonality of this series of animal face portraits is that the forms of both eyes are framed in unusual natural shapes, such as angular squares, rectangles, or diamonds. The purpose is to retain the structural functions of the eyes while effectively resisting natural emotional projection from the viewer, as the reshaped eye forms and light-shadow deconstruction dismantle the interface where the human gaze habitually seeks focus and projection. In each frontal animal face portrait, the eyes are the only parts of the face not covered by the network formed by the uniform and rhythmic mandala-like expansion and interlacing of short lines. They form open voids. However, restricted by the method of drawing the eyes, the entire animal face provides no entrance for the viewer's gaze. Yet, this is not a visual expression method practiced to preserve the wildness of animals. In reality, it centers on an interaction logic of basic geometric shapes composed of short lines expanding uniformly from the eyes toward the periphery (Figure).

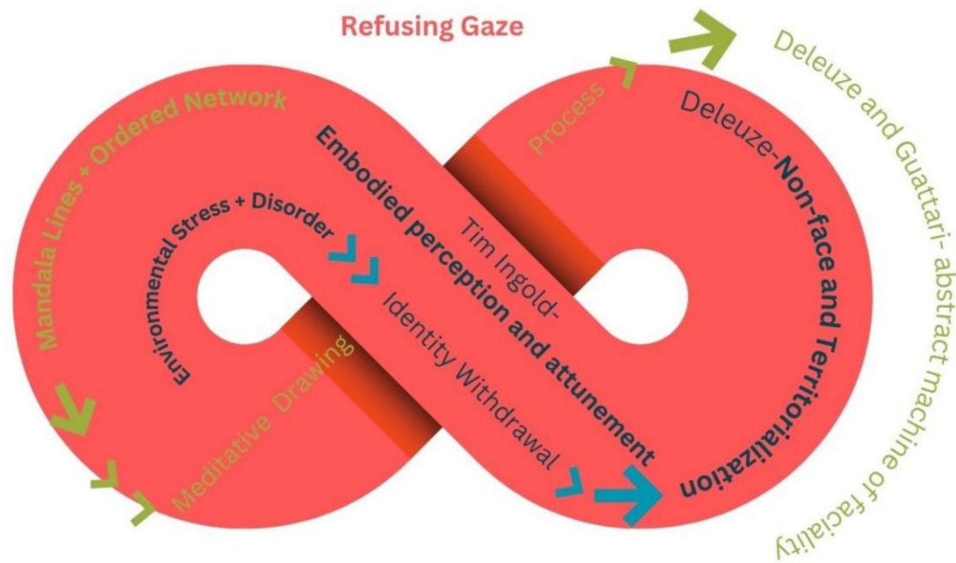

Figure 7: The Möbius Strip of Reconstruction of the Psychosomatic Wasteland: On the Defacializing Retreat of Social Identity and the Facializing Mediation of Drawing in Zijun Zhao's Practice(Digital)

This process involves a high level of focus on the geometric direction followed by each short line to ensure that no single line goes off track within the complex interlacing. This spontaneous, compulsive, and rehabilitative style of drawing is very likely an adaptation to the geometric order naturally produced by the cerebral cortex under conditions of hormonal imbalance and the malfunctioning of the vertical pressure axis system. It helps force the loose integration capacity of the brain to achieve synchronization through the regular movements of the hand, stimulating the construction of relationality. Perhaps one can further imagine that the movement of the hand, which naturally extends the basic geometric shapes drawn from the animal's eyes infinitely, is a visible external manifestation of the topological structure of the spatial connections within the brain's nervous system. For example, the radial diffusion centered on both eyes resembles the form of solar rays radiating outward as perceived by the naked eye. Eventually, the animal face is covered by a net formed by the interaction of these dual-centered geometric shapes. This high-density net becomes a scaffold that stabilizes the naturalistic draft of the animal face, playing a supportive role in the reconstruction of psychosomatic order.

4.3 Refusing the Gaze and Looking Back at Animals

In the exhibition of frontal animal faces in this study, the common feedback from viewers was that the drawings looked printed. This comment reveals a sensory gap between the creative process and the viewing experience (Figure).

First, regarding temporality, during the creative process, each short line was a step toward a “platform of order”—a time-print of hours of intense focus. This was a linear, bodily flow experience. However, from the viewer's perspective, they see a flat image. The mesh structure created by uniform, high-density, repetitive lines reinforces a sense of non-linear time—a flattened, de-bodified effect shielded by the grid. Thus, the temporal extension and physicality of the creation contrast sharply with the viewer’s perception of an inanimate instant. Paradoxically, the extremely ordered manual marks erase the traces of the hand, preventing viewers from sensing human labor and leading them toward a mechanical or digital perception.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the painting process, the network of lines starts with a single stroke and gradually grows into a mesh, this is a logic of growth. From the viewer’s perspective, they directly face a dense web covering the animal’s face, making it difficult to perceive the underlying sketch in layers. Consequently, this creates a defensive effect that refuses projection, resulting in a visual language of refusing the gaze that does not reflect the viewer’s own emotions. This ordered network alienates the original sketch. However, this is not meant to sever the connection between humans and animal images, but to trigger a deep and equal response—a posture of “looking back at animals” based on de-anthropocentrism.

Donna Haraway (2008) once mentioned a primatologist who “acquired a face” by responding to the baboons she studied. Typically, humans use their subjectivity to gaze at animals as “others”, arrogantly projecting a face onto them based on human emotions. Yet, few expect to be gazed at by an animal or to have a “face” projected onto them that carries an animal group identity. Essentially, the primatologist actively experienced the withdrawal of her social identity (as a human observer)—a process of defacialization—through the act of responding. Only then could she enter a fluid,

interspecies onto-epistemological field. In this sense, when viewers are unable to achieve their habitual gaze through my drawings, they have the opportunity to be pushed toward an ontological posture of responding to the animal. We no longer "give" the animal a human-emotional face, instead, we wait to be given a face by the animal.

Figure 8: The Animal face exhibition, 2025, Gallery Lyhty, Rovaniemi, Photograph: Zijun Zhao, 2025

Conclusion

5.1 Research Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is reflected in three levels: theoretical, practical, and intellectual. First, theoretically, this study utilizes the Möbius strip—a cyclic model where the end is the beginning but the direction is reversed—to integrate two ontologies: Deleuze's facialization and Levinas's face that summons an ethical response. Using the author's embodied experience as a case study, it verifies how artistic practice demonstrates the binary concepts of defacialization and facialization as a fluid whole. Furthermore, this model analyzes the different operational mechanisms of two artistic cases regarding the gaze of frontal animal faces. The act of withdrawing social identity—defacialization—in this research aligns with the core principles of Arctic Art Education (AAE), which foregrounds "justice, agency and the rights of more-than-human nature". By rejecting the anthropocentric gaze and accepting the "face" given by the animal, this practice-based research functions as a force for cultural resilience, contributing directly to the decolonization of artistic and educational practices in Northern localities.

Second, in terms of practical contribution, the visual language of the artworks proves that the environment acts as a driver, with its orderly visual rhythm intensely penetrating the aesthetic practice of the author as an outsider. Nordicity shifts from an abstract cultural concept to a visible form through the art. This visualized Nordicity reflects both the calm, continuous order of the Finnish Lapland landscape and a deep self-defense at the perceptual level—a printer-like visual expression that manifests the subjectivity of the environment. Thus, the artistic practice in this study serves as a visual sample of cross-cultural exchange, providing a concrete onto-epistemological path for understanding the dynamic relationship between environment, body, and animal face imagery.

5.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

The most prominent limitation is the singularity of the samples and the environmental specificity of the research site. The two primary samples are the author's drawings and the animal masks of Northern Finnish artist A. Rovaniemi, the field for the author's practice, is an ecotone in terms of climate and geography. Situated between temperate and frigid zones and influenced by both maritime and continental climates, its vegetation includes both boreal forest and Arctic tundra. Its location near the Arctic Circle results in extreme light environments like polar night and polar day. These factors introduce contingency and uniqueness to the study. Therefore, future research needs to expand sample collection and apply the Möbius strip model more broadly. Based on this, there are plans to use this practice and model as a methodological framework to design a humanistic course for international students in the Arctic Circle affected by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), focusing on human-animal relationships and collaborating with local animal shelters, zoos, and natural history museums.

5.3 Methodological Reflection

This study employs artistic research, especially practice-based research (PbR) as an onto-epistemological method, rooted in embodied environmental perception and maintaining rational self-cognition during psychosomatic disorder, while transferring control to the brain-body-mind system. In other words, the healing process does not involve emotional value. This proves that artistic practice is not merely an emotional expression of sensory forms, but a process of "doing" driven by dual consciousness: the subject is immersed in the physiological, defacialized disorder where social identity withdraws, while simultaneously maintaining a cognitive order to monitor and record this disorder and its return. Thus, drawing in PbR does not just generate forms, it acts as a perceptual container. It is unique because it carries the author's embodied experience, yet it faces the "other" through exhibitions to receive feedback and provide open responses. The natural growth of artistic practice is, in fact, ontological data produced by the body under environmental stress. The exhibition serves as a dynamic field for collecting data on the gaze. The perceptual gap between

the viewers' "printer-like" impression and the author's process reveals the habitual nature of human projection onto frontal animal faces as a key finding.

Theoretical synthesis and writing provide a structuring function in PbR. The tacit knowledge produced by practice is not entirely presented through artworks. While viewers gain general impressions through exhibitions, for research rooted in embodied experience, writing must act as an experience transmuter. Without the ontological analysis of the "face", the Möbius strip model would not exist as a tool to integrate Levinas and Deleuze, and the practice would not achieve the possibility of becoming a knowledge paradigm.

However, relying on practice-based artistic research as the sole methodology has limitations. First is the contingency and isolation of data. Current data depends heavily on the author's personal experience, raising the question: Is the defacialization discussed universal? Additionally, PbR follows the being-doing-thinking practice process, meaning interpretation follows action, which risks the trap of subjective over-interpretation. Meanwhile, autoethnographic analysis overlaps the roles of researcher and subject, risking psychological suggestion and reinforcing the researcher's subjectivity.

In future developments, it is necessary to expand the scope of artist interviews and sample analysis. Beyond the current focus on frontal animal faces, interviews should target artists living in the circumpolar North to explore if they share the experience of social identity withdrawal. Furthermore, the description of psychosomatic disorder remains perceptual. It lacks biological data, detailed records of brushstrokes, and weather data (light changes) to correlate environmental shifts with the return of order. Finally, integrating environmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience regarding the gaze and perception into the Möbius strip model will enrich its analytical dimensions.

In conclusion, this study establishes a preliminary onto-epistemological framework centered on embodied-artistic practice and supported by the Möbius strip. It applies this to the visual culture of frontal animal imagery in the contemporary Finnish Arctic, exploring the ecological tension affecting human-animal relationships. Future

research plans to introduce interdisciplinary knowledge to test the model’s community universality in the Arctic context, completing the transition from personal healing to a broader environmental perception mechanism.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questionnaire for Artists

Introduction

This interview is part of a research project investigating the role of frontal animal face imagery in the visual culture of Northern Finland, particularly in the Lapland region. The study explores how much images shape perceptual engagement and human-animal relations, with a focus on how artists construct and understand these visual forms.

The interview aims to better understand your artistic practice, your approach to depicting animals, and your reflections on the role of animal faces in your work. It seeks to explore how individual artistic choices may relate to broader environmental, perceptual, and cultural conditions in the North.

Section 1: Artistic Motivation and Subject Selection

Q1. What draws you to animals as subjects in your work, and how do you choose which animals to depict?

Q2. Many of your works focus on wild animals. Is this choice connected to your environment, personal experience, or a particular way of relating to animals?

Section 2: Frontal Face as Visual Structure

Q3. Why do you choose to depict animals through frontal faces, rather than side views or full-body representations?

Q4. Do you think a frontal face creates a different kind of encounter with the viewer compared to a profile view?

Section 3: Presence and Individuality of the Image

Q5. When you look at the animal faces you create, do you feel they have a kind of presence or "aliveness," or do you see them more as material images?

Q6. When creating each animal face, do you think of it as a specific individual, or as an image representing a type or species?

Section 4: Human-Animal Relations and the Face

Q7. When working on animal faces, do you think about the relationship between animal faces and human faces, in terms of similarities or differences?

Q8. In your work, do you tend to emphasize the distinct qualities of the animal, or do your images also reflect something human?

Q9. Do you see your work as involving any form of anthropomorphism, or do you try to avoid it?

Section 5: Context and Comparative Perspectives

Q10. In some of your works, such as those combining animal heads with human bodies, the relationship between human and animal appears differently from your frontal animal faces. How do you understand the difference between these two approaches?

Q11. In my research, I have noticed recurring visual tendencies in animal face depictions by artists working in Northern Finland, such as frontal orientation and reduced facial features. Do you recognize these as part of a shared visual language shaped by the northern environment, or do you see your work as developing independently?

Q12. In Finland, animal heads are sometimes displayed in hunting traditions. Do you see any connection between this and your own work?