

LiU Humanities Seminar Series

“The Politics of Renaming Artworks: the Decoloniality Debate in Eastern Europe”

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Museums play an important role in translating, situating, and shaping the convergences between local, national, and global memory discourses and debates. In the postsocialist region art museums have often been the leading public discussions around issues concerning deeply rooted values, identity and belonging. Grappling with the impact of the recent debates around racial justice, decoloniality, and Europe as postcolonial/postsocialist, this paper focuses on ‘Rendering Race’, an exhibition held in Estonia in Kumu Art Museum in 2021. The exhibition, curated by US American art historian Bart Pushaw, engaged with representations of race in the artworks from the museum’s collection from the 1920s and 1930s, provoking an unusually heated debate among the public.

In this talk, I attempt to unpack the main point of contention: the curatorial decision to change racially charged titles of artworks. Importantly, the curatorial act of renaming brought together two minority groups: people of colour and Roma people who were thus for the first time actively considered as part of the museum’s publics. This gesture implicitly acknowledged that the museum has agency in creating publics via textual and visual narratives (Koobak and Tali 2023). I am interested in further exploring what this shift towards mnemonic pluralism in local museums means within the broader transnational context of substituting offensive titles of artworks which continues to be controversial.