



Benefits of Communal Creativity

Experiences of Expressive Art methods and Forming an Art Collective

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this thesis was to explain the principles of expressive art methods and art collectives and discussed how they are conceptionally similar and how they can be utilised for personal and communal development. The study discussed how working in a project environment and simultaneously forming a creative collective are related and can affect each other.

In the first part of the thesis, base theories and methods are explained. Research and discussions were used to examine if and how the author's personal experiences relate to others working in the creative field. Many similarities in how creative communities are established and how they function regardless of location were found. Arguments were made for the benefits of these collective ways of thinking and working.

The second part contains art works the author exhibited during the process of forming the Collective Sandbox. There are seven personal works that related in some capacity to the communal conversations that were had at the time of working on said exhibitions. These works as well as the process of forming a community were relevant for the artist's development in creative thinking. The thesis argues that collective creativity would benefit humans both as individuals and as communities.

Key words: collective, expressive art methods, inclusion, involvement, art exhibition, portfolio

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1 INTRODUCTION

Art is an integral part of human history. It has always been used to tell stories, to describe our dreams, to inflict social change. Art can change the way we think. In the modern times, we have started to separate from making art, and instead spend our time looking at art made by others (32nd & Thorn). Regularly visiting art exhibitions is even seen as some indication of social and monetary status. Art, in the minds of many people, is expensive and inaccessible, even incomprehensible. Is the utmost purpose of art to serve the “insiders”, the sophisticated? (Lindeman 2021). People think they do not understand art, and so they neither consume nor create it.

Art, whether consumed or created, has a positive effect on an individual’s health and wellbeing. So why don’t we do it? I think we have all resources we need to make art accessible again, but as individuals and society both, we are stuck in our ways and afraid of change. We’re afraid of the ideas that could be born if people were to think and create freely. Afraid of people’s minds comprehending more than the rigid boundaries set for them to operate in. We stay in what we know, content enough, because change might require facing our dark and negative thoughts, processing them, learning, bettering oneself, and even sacrifice.

In this thesis, I introduce the discipline of art collectives, how and why they usually form. I introduce project TOSI, as well as the discipline of expressive art methods and argue for its benefits in social inclusion and wellbeing. I explain how the creative collective Sandbox was formed, what are its values and principles and how the collective has impacted me and the other members. Lastly, I will introduce artworks I exhibited during 2021 and 2022 as a member of the collective, discuss the work process behind these collective exhibitions and my own works in them.

This thesis aims to shed light on the complex, personal, and communal process that has been forming and working in a collective. I wanted to gather my observations about project TOSI, its expressive art methods workshops, and the forming of a community into one. These processes overlapped and interacted with each other in many meaningful ways, and realizations, achievements, and frustrations from one reflected to the others, forming continuums that continue to

evolve. It is not always easy to explain what we do, but the process of forming the collective has been so meaningful and impactful to all involved it would be worse not to try.

2 ART COLLECTIVES

2.1. What is an art collective?

An art collective is formed when a group of artists decide to form a community that works together, whether it means only working as a collaborative unit or facilitating circumstances in which each member can work on individual projects. Members of collectives usually share similar values and goals, that they can work towards together, sharing resources and allocating tasks based on individual skillsets. Working collaboratively on specific art projects can be involved in a collective's function, but even more so a collective is about facilitating a shared space and generating opportunities and experiences, like organising exhibitions and sharing and developing ideas.

Although not always, art collectives are often born out of a political circumstance, like dissatisfaction with the government, oppressive power structures or capitalization of art. Collectivity is inherently left-wing, and many collectives act from the incentive of social change and personal improvement instead of monetary benefit. Collectives ignore the notion of a lone "genius" artist that's somehow outside of society, and instead act as operators within the society, developing new methods of thinking and acting that challenge capitalism. (Basciano 2019)

Collective Sandbox is a creative collective established in 2021. Its function is to aid its members in their artistic journeys, as well as create community and spaces for free expression and exchange of ideas. The collective's field isn't restricted to only visual arts but welcomes everyone that shares the collective's core values regardless of their preferred method of creative work. It consists of likeminded people with varying backgrounds in art and culture. As a community, we believe anyone can be an artist, regardless of education or status. We aim for communication that is utterly honest, that allows for incomplete thought and imperfection.

Art Historian John Zarobell (2022) says "Art collectives come into existence for many reasons, whether to collaborate on art making or to generate a space for contemporary art outside of the established channels of exhibition and the art market." In the case of Collective Sandbox, the latter describes the purpose of

the collective very well. We wish to generate opportunities and spaces for ourselves, as well as change the system around us to be more accessible, inclusive, and transparent.

In his paper, Zarobell explores art exhibition making practises by art collectives in the global south. While our collective is far from being in charge of a global biennial like the art collectives in Zarobell's paper, I find the underlying values of their organisations similar to that of our collective. The Indonesian art collective ruangrupa describes their concept as a set of shared values, collective rituals, and organizational principles. As a collective, they share resources, time, energy, funds, ideas, and knowledge among themselves and others (ruangrupa, 2020). This could be said about Collective Sandbox as well. We operate both as individuals and a unit. While one of our goals is employment, the collective is far more than a work community. Because of our shared values and the members' capabilities for artistic, creative thinking that isn't bound by the rules and limitations of society, we are able to have fascinating, complex, sometimes even challenging conversations. I've found that in many communities, including families and workplaces, communication isn't transparent, but bound by a multitude of unspoken rules that uphold a made-up harmony that only succeeds in limiting the ways we think and act.

Collectives are somewhat in rise in popularity and are gaining public recognition, which is well reflected in the 2019 Turner prize being accepted by all four nominees collectively, "in the name of commonality, multiplicity and solidarity", and the next shortlist in 2021 consisting entirely of artist collectives. (Basciano 2019. Brown 2021.) According to Eeva Kemppe, underlying factors in collective ways of creating being more relevant in recent years include a wider societal movement of deconstruction and re-examining hierarchy, as well as frustration with the myth of an individual artist. (Kemppe 2021)

2.2. Expressive Art Methods

In summer of 2021, I did my practical training for project Art, Inclusion and Social Innovations (TOSI), that ran from 2020 to 2023. It was a collaborative project coordinated by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and executed by The Cultural Centre PiiPoo and City of Tampere. The project was funded from the

European Social Fund's priority axis of social inclusion. At the time of my practical training in 2021 the people working on the project were Veera Laurila from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Pilvi Kuitu and Katriina Nylund from PiiPoo and Virpi Koskela, who was brought onto the project as artist-developer, a professional in theatre and expressive art methods. (THL 2023.)

Project TOSI's main objective was to increase involvement in people under 30. My work took place mostly in Ohjaamo One-stop guidance centre in Tampere, but also online and in different events and occasions on the field. At Ohjaamo, TOSI's objectives were mainly achieved by utilising expressive art methods in various workshops and retreats aimed at young adults, many of whom came from challenging situations or struggled with personal identity or insecurities. My main task during the practical training was participating and assisting my instructor Virpi Koskela in these workshops we called TOSI labs (TOSI-labra). The workshops were free of charge and organized in 10-week periods once a week. In them different mediums such as movement, painting or writing were used to examine one's feelings or experiences.

The methodology used in TOSI labs comes from expressive arts, a discipline that uses arts, such as visual arts and movement, as basis for discovery and change (32nd & Thorn). Expressive art methods workshops usually begin with a warm-up or a shorter task. During the first session, introductions are made. The warm-up task can be a relaxation exercise, or picture cards or other visual aids can be used to go around the room and participants can share whatever they want – what they've done that week, how they feel in the moment or so on. After the warm-up, a longer time is allotted to expressive work. The instructor may share a text or a song that prompts the work, or the theme can stem from discussions had within the group. Movement, writing, and visual methods are utilised in working, one or more per session. After the expressive work, participants share observations, thoughts or the visual or written product of the workshop. The practise of expressive workshops is extremely flexible and adapts to each instructor and group situationally. (Malte-Colliard et al. 2013.)

A space of shared experience is crucial to these workshops. It means facilitated circumstances that allow participants to share experiences freely and equally. Its core principals are inclusion, involvement, and participation (Koskela 2016). The

workshops have a loose frame they follow, but often they also adapt with the participants' wants and needs. The facilitator offers a space and prompts thoughts on a particular topic or inspired by music or visuals but doesn't give strict instructions or dictate what the ends result should be like.

Expressive art methods encourage participants to openness and child-like play. To create intuitively, to assign meanings and narratives as they come, to get your hands dirty, make mistakes, say "I don't know". To identify the harmful loops to allow oneself to do the work necessary to break them. Every session would conclude in conversation in which each participant could share as much or as little of their process as they wanted. These conversations were often of extremely personal and sensitive matters, but the environment in which the workshops were held encouraged openness and cultivated a safe environment. Many found the workshops and the community found in them having a positive effect on their lives and ways of thinking, including reduction in anxiety. This was not only my experience, but the verbal and written feedback from many of the other participants as well. (Vasara 2023. Rasila 2022.)

Almost two years later, as an afterthought, I find myself wishing I had kept notes more methodically. Due to the nature of the workshops, my notes from the summer are scattered on pieces of paper and on multiple notebooks. Some were scribbled directly onto what would become the artwork. Keeping structured notes was not important, so it was not done. Here's a snippet from the notes I did find: "I chose to use the colours turquoise and yellow because they looked good together. I added white and red to make pink. I started working with my left hand, spreading the turquoise and yellow around. I thought I was creating randomly, but maybe not after all, and instead I wanted once again it to look pretty."¹

During my participation in three 10-week workshop groups, I found myself identifying and challenging harmful and useless loops of thought I'd become content with. In studying art, I had started to think of creativity too rigidly for it to be truly enjoyable. In the workshops and as a result of them I felt free to create more spontaneously. The quote above is from fairly early on, when I was beginning to

¹ Valitsin väreiksi turkoosin ja keltaisen, koska ne näyttivät yhdessä hienolta. Lisäsin valkoista ja punaista tehdäkseeni vaaleanpunaista. Aloitin vasemmalla kädellä turkoosin ja keltaisen sotkemisen. Luulin tekeväni sattumanvaraisesti, mutta en ehkä sittenkään, vaan halusin taas työn näyttävän kauniilta.

understand my need to always create something beautiful or pleasing. As time went on, I cared less about the final product and more about the joy of creating and the mental process that came with it. I started noticing changes in my ways of thinking and acting. My thought processes became less negative and more intuitive. I found it easier to paint, write and talk about painful subjects.

“Play is dangerous,” says Virpi Koskela in a panel organised as part of project TOSI. “Behaving irrationally or unpredictably is dangerous. It creates thinkers, activists, doers. When people move authentically, their consciousness expands.” (PiiPoo 2023) ²

Especially communal, inclusive artforms that encourage putting one’s soul into the action are according to studies significantly beneficial for the participants well-being. Expressive art methods have been increasingly applied in healthcare context in Finland; so far, the work has been largely done in projects and with groups of certain healthcare facilities’ customers or residents (Malte-Colliard et al., 2013). The positive impact of expressive art methods on mental and social wellbeing of the participants has been observed widely, regardless of age, background, or disability status of the participants. While project TOSI’s participants were largely gathered from One-Stop Guidance Centre Ohjaamo’s clientele, participation did not require affiliation with any facility or service, which I understand to be quite rare in this kind of activity. The project managed to reach people who were in many cases outside the system – without long-term care, study- or workplaces, and provide them with meaningful activity and connections.

2.3. Forming the Collective Sandbox

“Becoming a force of nature doesn’t mean that all of our aspirations must be “grand”, Senge et al. write in *Presence*, a conversation on profound change. “First steps are often small, and initial visions that focus energy effectively of-

²”Tohon leikkiin vielä, sehän on vaarallista. Siis se, että ihmiset oikeesti irrationaalisesti käyttäytyy tai leikkii jotain yllättävää. Ni se on vaarallista. Se on ollu ihmiskunnan historiassa aina kaikissa valtakunnissa, se että joku vaikka menee hiljaisuuteen tai perustaa oman luostarin tai jonku hemmetin kulttuurikeskuksen, se on vaarallista. Koska sieltä voi syntyä ajattelijoita. Sieltä voi syntyä aktivisteja. Sieltä voi syntyä toimijoita.”

ten address immediate problems. What matters is engagement in the service of a larger purpose rather than lofty aspirations that paralyze action. Indeed, it's a dangerous trap to believe that we can pursue only "great visions." (Senge et al. 2005)

During my practical training and participation in the workshops, I repeatedly noted a need among young creatives – myself included – to share space with others, to gain inspiration and share ideas in a group. Undoubtedly, the pandemic that was at the time still an active part of our lives, influenced heightened feelings of loneliness and the need for social interaction. A study from 2022 found that children from low-income families and members of sexual- and gender minorities found their experiences of social inclusion especially low during the first year of Covid (Kekkonen et al. 2022).

Towards the end of the training period, there was an idea to organise an art exhibition in Ohjaamo's spaces. I think the initial request came from Ohjaamo's employees, and the idea was brought to me and another trainee Julia, who was also closely involved in the process of TOSI. A group of aspiring artists was gathered through TOSI, as well as my own connections, and necessary concrete factors, like installing picture rails was organized in cooperation with Ohjaamo. Julia, I, and the group of artists involved planned and organised the exhibition that was open from August to October 2021. I will discuss this and the following exhibitions more in detail in chapter 3. For now, it is important to know that said exhibition was what initially started the process of a developing communal identity.

From the group involved in the exhibition as well as TOSI labs, a community started to form. During the planning for the exhibition, we met up a couple of times, and after that we continued to do so – not for any specific purpose, but because we wanted to. In the beginning the activities of the collective were non-official, and no list of participants was kept. The birth of a community was fluid, not forced. Some people only came along a couple of times and continued down other paths, and other members have stayed from the beginning.

From the very start, only from a few conversations, it was clear that the group shared very similar values of artistic expression, equality, and humanity. It's hard to put such an organic process into words, but as the activities and discussions continued, we began establishing and writing down some core values. The initial

reason each of us was involved in the first place was the basic human need for social interaction, that with time evolved into deeper realizations of the system that surrounds and bounds us. We found a shared drive to challenge overlying structures, endless bureaucracy, and hierarchy. For all of us, art was inherently valuable as a form of expression, exploration, and reflection, and we felt that as individual artists it would be difficult to succeed, especially without sacrificing these values. The collective was named Sandbox, reflecting the need within the group to be allowed to play and live authentically.

Notes from a Collective meeting in 2022 state that the collective is a community and in communities people work together. In this meeting, participants were encouraged to think about what they can give to the community so that it can grow and thrive. We view individuality, different skillsets, and ways of thinking, as the ultimate strength in creating a lasting, functional community. The notes say: "We create the future in this moment - with our choices, actions, thoughts, strengths, feelings, dreams, hopes and objectives. In what way would you like to be involved in creating a shared future?"

In 2023, we describe our goals as fostering the value of art and artistry, availability and accessibility of art activities, initiating systemic change, building community and employment. The collective values neither individual nor the collective over the other, but instead views the collective as a part of its sum that is powerful because of its ability to operate both individually and collectively. The focus of the collective isn't to solely create artworks or organise exhibitions, nor is it to practise expressive art methods. Of course, these are integral parts of what we *can* do, and a lot of the expressive methods principles apply in how we operate and communicate as a group. The goals vary and change with circumstances and our collective wishes. In the collective, people who want to do art from their own individualistic and artistic standpoints gather, and the space adapts with the needs and wants of the group.

When I talk about space, I mean the circumstances in which a physical space exists. Entering a conference room can be a very different experience depending on the people inhabiting it and one's relation to those people and the situation. We (The Collective) have inhabited many physical spaces during our existence, and we cannot always affect what kind of space greets us in terms of access,

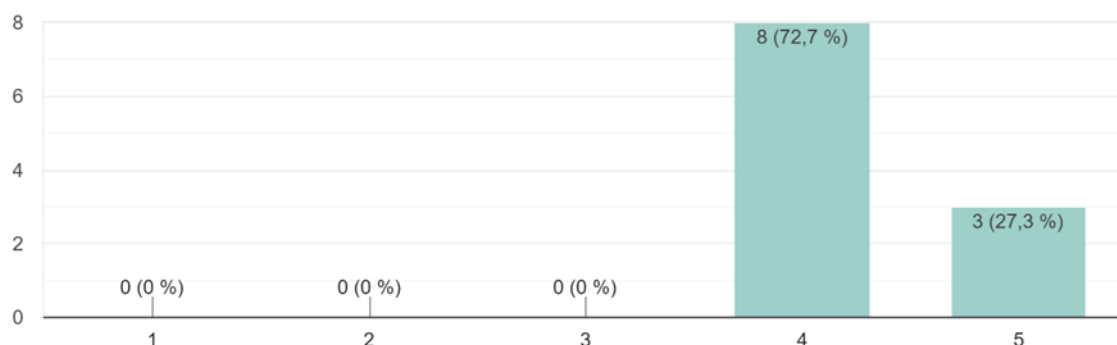
seating, equipment and so on. What we can bring to the space with us, however, is a mutual agreement that aims to create a creative, safer space. A safe or safer place is a set of rules, flexible depending on the situation, that everyone inhabiting the space must agree on. Its origins are unclear, but it's most likely the practise originated in LGBTQ+ communities sometime in the 1960s and spread to more minority communities soon after. The word "safer" is sometimes used instead of "safe" to acknowledge that safety is relative, and that no absolutely safe space can be guaranteed. (Kulttuurilla Kaikille 2021. MHCC 2019.)

In May 2022, a survey was conducted within the collective in which all 11 participants answered the question "Has your confidence in your skills improved while in the collective?" positively (FIGURE 1). In said survey, all questions about experiences in the collective and its impact on the self were answered somewhat or extremely positively. All participants also estimated that their ability to function day-to-day outside the collective's activities had improved (8) or stayed the same (3) since joining the collective. This continues the narrative already familiar from TOSI labs that a safe, inclusive space that encourages creativity and authenticity impacts people positively, also in life outside of that space.

FIGURE 1. Survey answers. Question: Has your confidence in your skills improved while in the collective? (1 being significantly worsened, 3 being stayed the same, 5 being improved significantly.) The survey was answered by 11 collective members in May 2022. Survey by Tiia Junnila.

Itsevarmuus omien taitojen suhteen

11 vastausta



In an interview I conducted with a few of the collective members in late 2022, all three said they believe art can impact society. They brought up points about how art has shaped humans, both individually and societally, throughout history. How art doesn't seem to be a scientifically provable necessity, yet we (humans) have always gravitated towards it. How art has been used to influence thought and how other times it has happened naturally. They all also respond positively to the question "Do you think *your* art can impact society?" One member answers: "I think all art does, though the magnitude depends." They describe how it's at the same time unfamiliar and pleasant when people perceive their work, and that they hope their art can inspire people to see things differently.

Art, in all its forms, paired with collective thinking and acting, is what I believe to be one of the most powerful tools for social change. Even if the impact is small when translated and calculated into numbers and compared to other numbers, the impact of enjoying art authentically and using it as a tool for betterment of the self is incredibly valuable to the individual. In an age of capitalism and monetary incentives, we often completely overlook the value of mental benefits, especially on an individual level, because we tend to think it doesn't affect us as a whole. But how else is change initiated, if not by individuals?

2.4. Inclusion versus involvement

The English version of TOSI's project plan uses the word inclusion to describe one of its main objectives. As the project was mainly executed in Finnish, it is difficult to be sure how intentional the English translations are. I feel the Finnish and English versions of the project's name differ in meaning slightly, particularly when it comes to "inclusion" versus "osallisuus" (participation, involvement.)

This brings me to a topic that often came up especially towards the end of the project, in discussions within the collective and with project TOSI members, and that was eventually raised as a topic of discussion in the closing seminar of project TOSI. Professionals in welfare, social and cultural fields are constantly looking for ways to successfully engage younger audiences and find this a difficult task at best. Even if people are successfully engaged, the level of the encounter can remain superficial, and many young people feel professionals don't treat

them as equals when they use city services such as Ohjaamo. Project TOSI succeeded in reaching and engaging the youth, but as it only lasted for three years, it was brought up by Koskela how this process tends to repeat itself fairly successfully, but the impact isn't permanent after the project ends (PiiPoo, 2023). At the end of project TOSI, a seminar was held to discuss the project's achievements as well as tools for continuing this trajectory in the future within youth services and society in general.

For this closing seminar I was invited to participate in a panel discussion about three themes picked from planning discussion with TOSI employees and Collective members. The topic I was assigned, together with Virpi, was *art as a tool for improving personal well-being, common understanding, insight, and connection*. A list of questions was presented to me in preparation for the panel. The first one translates roughly to: *Is there space for young people's cultural involvement and artistic agency?* In my notes, I first wrote no. Then I started unravelling that answer. Here, the difference between inclusion and involvement becomes apparent. Organizations sometimes succeed in inclusion, but active, ongoing involvement of young people that would make the impact more permanent, seems to be an almost impossible task.

Inclusion is, from the perspective of the included, passive. It is when a person or a group of people is tolerated, invited into a space as a viewer or a listener, a customer, a situation in which there is a hierarchy of power between two agents, for example an institution and a client or a museum and a guest. While noble, inclusion does not give space for any further development. It operates within boundaries and systems that are already established. A truly creative space isn't just inclusive, it also involves participants, inviting them to reflect and develop the space as equals.

Involvement is active. It requires both or all parties to accept the situation as is, but also to acknowledge the possibility of change. It requires honesty and openness, willingness to rid oneself of all status and to encounter others as equals. In ideal scenarios, successful involvement feeds itself, motivating people and communities to continue to reflect and better themselves.

True involvement leads to more wellbeing and more social capital. The term refers to the positive effects of human interactions. The outcomes can be tangible,

or they can be abstract, like information, ideas, and opportunities. Social capital appears as potential between individuals and can be examined as a quality of an individual (benefits to the individual) or a community (why some communities are more successful than others). (Kenton 2022. Lehto et al. 2017)

Creative collectives usually operate democratically and aim to be equitable. Instead of claiming to be individual geniuses, art collectives thrive on dialogue and acknowledge the fact that everything relates to everything. The artists are in dialogue with the past, with each other, and ideally the future (Tate 2022). I believe authentic dialogue is the best way to generate more social capital, severely lacking from the modern world, and collectivity can be a major facilitator for such progress.

3 EXHIBITIONS

In 2021-2022 I participated in four exhibitions organized by the collective. There was also a fifth exhibition, the third one chronologically, that I did not participate in. I was involved in planning, curating, and setting up for all the exhibitions I was a part of, as well as created posters for each of them. All the exhibitions were organised as a collective effort by the participating group, including theming and setting up, but the works exhibited were made as individual artists, except for a few exceptions of collaborative work.

Organising and participating in these exhibitions involved two different processes of learning. The first was one I was aware of from the beginning, that involved the more concrete aspects of exhibiting artwork – the physicality of the works, the setting up, the concrete product of having an exhibition. The second only started becoming clear to me as we continued the exhibitions, maybe around “Kukoistus”, the third exhibition. It is the notion of translating creative processes into text, something that as an artist is crucial in applying for grants, marketing one’s work and reflecting and explaining on the artistic process behind each work, that can also be seen as proficiency in artistic thinking (Säkö 2021).

In the first exhibitions, I found it incredibly difficult to even write the text required for the artwork labels. I was in charge of producing the labels, so I could write as little or as much as I wanted, but I found it extremely challenging to put to words what was going on in my mind while I was making or choosing the work I was exhibiting. This is a skill I noticed slowly improving as time went on, and one that recently I have begun to consciously practise and better. For this thesis, in some cases I was able to recall and word the processes behind each work better than others. I find myself being able to write much more about the recent works, and I believe it is not only because of the time that has passed, but also because of improvement in my artistic thinking and ability to translate this into words.

In her essay in *Convolvulus*, Sofia Molin examines her work as an actress and assigning meaning to explorative, experimental practice afterwards. How to subsequently describe the work done in practise? How does selective memory dictate this process? Is putting an artistic process into words even worth it? Although my field of work is different, I find these questions incredibly relevant in writing

about any kind of artistic process. Molin concludes that construing and analysing one's work isn't necessary for all actors, but that it has helped her to examine the tools available to her and to move on to following, possibly constructive questions. (Molin 2021)

3.1. AEGIS



PICTURE 1, AEGIS exhibition poster. (Vilma Kosola 2021)

AEGIS was the first group exhibition, one that was organized before the collective formed. I oversaw the setup and created the exhibition poster (Picture 1). About half of the group participating went on as active members as the collective, and the exhibition structure was used as a template for the following ones as well. At first, there was no theme, and only after the group of artists had been gathered, we began talking about what could be the connecting theme between the artworks we had chosen or could exhibit. Conversations were had about art and life

in general, and topics that came up included self-searching, self-discovery, nature vs. nurture and so on. From here, questions we defined as guidelines were “Who am I?” and “Who/What guides me?” The exhibition became an exploration of identity, sense of self and one’s connection to the world.

Every participant could decide for themselves how to approach the subject. Some of the works were already completed and some were made specifically or modified with this exhibition in mind. The name AEGIS was pulled from Greek mythology. It was a shield, or a shield-like device Zeus carried. In the modern context doing something “under someone’s aegis” means doing something under the protection of a powerful, knowledgeable, or benevolent source. (Wikipedia)

The first exhibition acted as a chance to practise skills required for setting up an exhibition, as well as a manifest for art in a space of municipal services. For many of the artists, it was their first public exhibition. It allowed the group to publicly exhibit processes that were already in progress, and that would go on to form the collective. AEGIS was permission to be seen, a member describes in an interview I conducted for this thesis.

3.1.1 Collective Memory

My work for the exhibition stemmed from an ongoing interest in my family history. The first thing that came to mind from the themes of the exhibition – identity and guidance – all had to do with my origins and the effect my relatives have had on me. I wanted to explore the *nurture* part of nature & nurture. A family is always a community, often one that affects us on a bigger scale than any other community we take part in during our lives. I decided to create the artwork during the process of exhibition planning, and it was largely inspired by the conversations had within the group as well as my own personal life. The installation Collective Memory (Picture 2) came to fruition relatively spontaneously.



PICTURE 2. Installation "Collective Memory". (Vilma Kosola 2021)

For the work I collected family photos and my own photographs that had either significant meaning or a visual energy that matched the feeling I wanted to convey. I also made some collage inspired by the themes and decided to put the work together as an installation that also included items from my relatives as well as found items, such as books. Much of the work was completed during the week before the exhibition opened. During that week, technical things like installing the art rails were done, and after that I would work on my piece in the same space it was to be exhibited in. I found this method of working particularly enjoyable, as I was able to experiment with what would look good in the space as I was making the collages and choosing the items to be included. The artwork was not carefully planned beforehand, but rather took form as I was working on it. A certain type of flow was reached, and I felt the artwork ended up conveying the atmosphere I had hoped for.

3.2. Keräilyerät



PICTURE 3, Keräilyerät exhibition poster. (Vilma Kosola 2021)

The second exhibition opened October 26th, 2021, and was named Keräilyerät, roughly translation to something like *collection bits*. We had discussed what we wanted to do for the exhibition, and many of us were busy with other projects at the time, so we decided to gather and exhibit old works instead of making new ones. I created the poster (Picture 3) for this exhibition as well and utilised an already existing photograph I'd taken as a part of it. I admit I don't remember having grand intentions with this exhibition, and when interviewing other collective members for this thesis, they all described it similarly. My work wasn't pre-meditated or carefully curated to spur complex thought or emotion, and rather the

3.2.1 Chagrin

For this exhibition, I chose to exhibit some of my favourite works from 2017 that I felt represented my style and techniques well. The pencil work “Chagrin” (Picture 5) I’ve always been particularly proud of because I was able to capture the realism and expression of the person’s face and combine it with a simplistic and more abstract way of depicting the hair and the clothes. Chagrin means dissatisfaction, frustration especially because of failure to meet expectations. It was made during a time when I felt very much that way, and although the result is something I am proud of, the piece also reminds me of a time of personal uncertainty. I wanted to exhibit the piece to reflect on the growth that I had gone through in the four years since making it.



PICTURE 5, Chagrin. (Vilma Kosola 2017)

3.2.2 Odds and Ends I-III

Odds and Ends is a collection of three abstract works made during the Drawing and Painting minor in 2017 with mostly gouache paint (Picture 6). I chose to exhibit them because they are visually pleasing, but also because they mark the beginning of my abstract painting style's development, in addition to the more figurative style I used to be more comfortable with. When I think back to making them, all three pieces were less premeditated than most my work at the time. Some were purely experiments in colour that ended up conveying something much more. It was the first time I created something abstract that I felt conveyed emotion I never intended for. In a way, these works are examples of results from expressive art methods far before I was aware of the concept.



PICTURE 6, Odds and Ends II. (Vilma Kosola 2022)

3.3. Kukoistus

In early 2022, the third exhibition was organized, revolving around the theme of shame. I did not participate in this exhibition or its planning, but it's relevant in

that the next exhibition continued the narrative from shame and self-doubt to being reborn and thriving. “Kukoistus” (Bloom, heyday) opened May 2nd, 2022, and the themes explored within this exhibition included but were not limited to letting go, new beginnings and spring. We wanted to exhibit something more hopeful after the dark theme of shame.

I created the poster for this exhibition, as well as the previous ones, but wanted to challenge myself to create the typography by hand. Inspired by the collective’s shared fascination with Art Nouveau, I researched Art Nouveau typography and designed the poster as a combination of classic and modern visuals. I drew and scanned the letters, coloured, and altered the text digitally and finished the poster with creative commons- licensed background and info text (Pictures 7, 8).



PICTURE 7, 8: Lineart and final poster for Kukoistus. (Vilma Kosola 2022)

3.3.1 August

The first work I did for Kukoistus was more an experiment of materials than anything else. I wanted to take the colour that the theme reminded me of, white, and make an interesting piece using primarily shades of white. This work was largely

made during the gatherings of the collective, which we at the time held once a week at Ohjaamo. During these meetings, the collective would work on art projects, plan the exhibitions, and simply converse about anything that happened to stir our minds that day. The materials used came from TOSI, partners of the collective we'd made connections with as well as my own supplies. I used painting, drawing and mixed media. I ended up with three pieces coming together as one work (Picture 9). The name *August* comes from a poem by Morgan Harper Nichols (Appendix 1). It is about not having to solve or fix everything, and instead letting things happen as they happen, like the changing of seasons. This poem really spoke to me at this point in time, where I was only starting to recognise harmful patterns of perfectionism and the constant need for productivity in my thoughts.



PICTURE 9, Artwork August. (Vilma Kosola 2022)

3.3.2 Näkymätön lapsi



PICTURE 10, Artwork Näkymätön lapsi. (Vilma Kosola 2022)

The name of this artwork is “Invisible child” (Picture 10), borrowed from a story by the same name by Tove Jansson. I wanted to create something for the exhibition that described my coming to terms with my own personality and identity. The work itself is simple, a canvas painted black and a white lace collar with a turquoise satin bow sewn and pinned to the canvas. I portray myself as a shy girl, neither of these things true anymore. As a child, I was outgoing until I got cues from people around me that I was weird. I started getting quieter and masking a lot of my natural behaviours. I fit into the part of a girl, because I did not know there were other options.

This work was very personal, and I felt courageous for putting it out there for the exhibition. I wasn't quite ready to describe its themes publicly, and I wanted viewers to come to their own conclusions. From what I could tell, the work seemed to elicit a stronger emotional response than my other or previous works. It was fascinating to note the intensity by which emotion could radiate from a piece of art even with just a fraction of the context being presented to the viewers. The text I included with the artwork goes as follows:

“As a concept, the invisible child may seem melancholic. Invisibility can also serve as protection – to be invisible is to be guarded from the looks and judgement of others. Only when you let go of the expectations and requirements of others can you truly live life for yourself.”

3.4. Death and Beyond

The theme of Death was brought up in the collective already in early 2022, and it was something we all wanted to explore from the very start. The exhibition revolving around the theme of death was held from October to December 2022. The themes of death and rebirth were somewhat present already in the previous exhibition *Kukoistus*, but this time we wanted to explore death more deeply, both in its most obvious meaning, but also as ego-death, rebirth and letting go.

3.4.1 Studies in Identity

For this exhibition, I started working in collage, giving myself relatively free reign from the starting point of ego-death. The work evolved to portray identity. There are two parts: *Studies in Identity 1: Origin* and *Studies in Identity 2: Gender*. These two are things many people in majority groups often take for granted. They are parts of my own identity that are very different and affect me in different ways. I've had to do a lot of reflection to understand where identities we all have stem from, and what causes some identities to be more personally important or more socially valued than others. With this work I wanted to raise questions in those who have never questioned their identity. It is not set in stone. It is fluid and capable of change when we acquire new knowledge and experiences.



PICTURE 12, Studies in Identity 1: Origin (part 2). (Vilma Kosola 2022)

Text from work: Are you observing something familiar? How about unfamiliar?⁴

⁴ Havaitsetko jotain tuttua? Entä vierasta?

Studies in Identity: Origin stemmed largely from the same themes and narratives as Collective Memory; roots, origin, cultural identity, family ties. The work consists of two collages in antique frames. The first part of the work (Picture 11) is a deliberate, carefully thought-out representation of Finnishness, a certain vision of an idealised history and identity with the underlying themes of foreign influences like the Russian rule. It includes pages from my late grandfather's passport, specifically the pages from his trips to Saint Petersburg and other previously soviet cities. There are cuttings of old Finnish postcards, family album photos, a Helsinki postal stamp and dried flowers picked from near my childhood home. The snippets of text are cut from a work booklet from Tampere Art Museum's exhibition around Magnus Enckell, who is most well-known for the altar piece in Tampere Cathedral. He was a master of Finnish symbolism, and his later work represents a more neo-impressionist style influenced by his time in Paris (Tampereen taide-museo). The booklet in question was offered as a companion to the exhibition, to raise different questions about the works. I reused it as a tool to raise questions about national identity in those who viewed my work.

The second part (Picture 12) aims to mix vintage elements with contemporary, strange, and foreign imagery. This part includes a page from a Swedish-Finnish dictionary, cuttings from fashion magazines like VOGUE, advertisements, discarded photos and once again the Tampere Art Museum booklet. It introduces foreign elements to the traditional Finnish landscape and aims to ask the viewer how they feel about it.

Studies in Identity 2: Gender (Appendix 2) is a work in three frames, including the text: "What can you see? What can you not see? / What kinds of depictions of bodies are we used to? / The sun, our nearest star, is 150 000 000 kilometres away. Around you there are 400 000 000 000 other stars in our own galaxy, The Milky way. In addition, there are 200 000 000 000 other galaxies in the universe."⁵

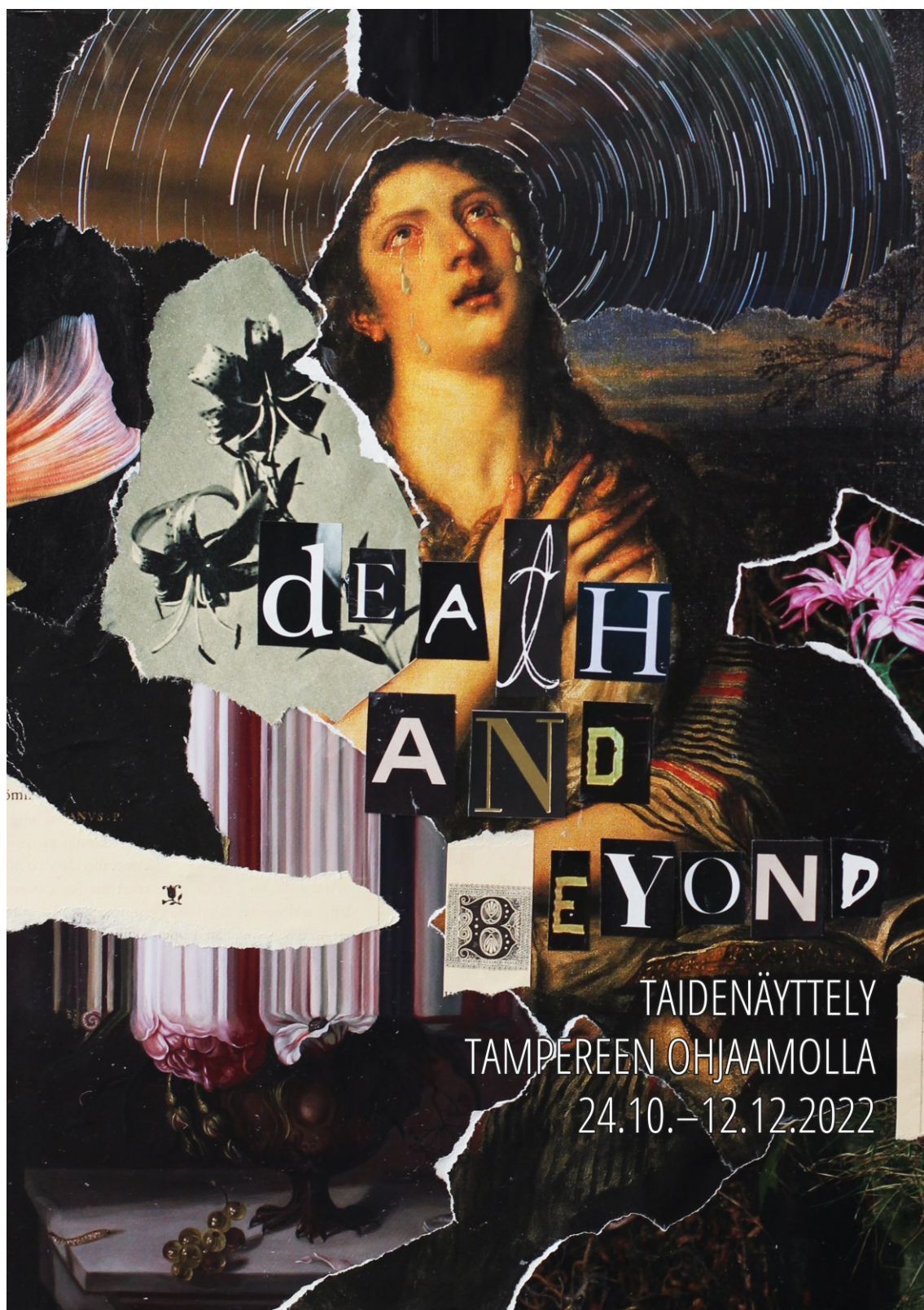
⁵ Mitä näet? Mitä et näe? Minkälaisia kehon kuvauksia olemme tottuneet näkemään? Lähimpään tähteen, Aurinkoon, on matkaa 150 000 000 kilometriä. Ympärilläsi on 400 000 000 000 muuta tähteä omassa galaksissamme Linnunradassa. Linnunradan lisäksi maailmankaikkeudessa on 200 000 000 000 muuta galaksia.

Like *Studies in Identity 1*, this work also aims to challenge those who have never had to question their gender identity or who can't see past binary gender. The first image of the three introduces different visuals easily affiliated with binary gender like high heels and a flat chest and asks the viewer what they see (Picture 13). The second image is black and white, with a drawing by Tom of Finland and cuttings of fashion magazines depicting mostly hands – raised, curled into a fist, grabbing. It asks the question about what we're used to, what we're comfortable with, and challenges the notion of gender and especially gendered bodies as something factual. The third part borrows visuals with both previous images and describes the astronomical distances in our galaxy that are impossible to fully convey, attempting to make the viewer feel small and insignificant and offering the idea "what does gender matter in all this?"



PICTURE 13, *Studies in Identity 2: Gender (part 1)*. (Vilma Kosola 2022)

3.4.2 Endymion (Death and Beyond exhibition poster)



PICTURE 14, Endymion (Death and Beyond exhibition poster). (Vilma Kosola 2022)

For my second piece (Picture 14), I chose to make the poster by hand instead of digitally, like I had done previous times. I created a collage on A3-paper, choosing imagery I associated with death and rebirth. For the poster the image was cropped, and informational text was added digitally. The tones of the piece are dark, and a cutting of Titian's *Repentant Mary Madgalene* (1565) takes a central place with a faint cross over her head. These images are inherently Christian, which reflects both what was available to me; publications from Finland, Sweden, Russia and the UK, and how religious imagery tends to be relevant in the topic of death even if we are not religious ourselves.

The collage also includes pieces of pages used from a book called "Endymion", which prompted some research and eventually gave the piece its name. In Greek mythology, he was the mortal lover of the moon goddess Selene. There are different versions of the story. In one version, to preserve Endymion's youth and beauty, Selene asks Zeus to grant him eternal youth so that he would never leave her. Alternatively, Zeus either allowed Endymion to be the keeper of his own death and to decide on his own when he would die, or punished him for falling in love with Hera. (Encyclopedia Mythica 1997)

These different versions of Endymion's story encompassed so many of the themes we had discussed for the exhibition that it inspired me to name the piece after him. In the work, I tried to capture the beliefs and symbols we have for death and life beyond death, the mysticism of it, rather than the natural process of death.

4 DISCUSSION

In my own work during these five exhibitions and especially examining the process afterwards, I notice a significant increase in artistic intent. I've always created images, but for most of my life it was something I didn't really plan beforehand. After becoming familiar with expressive art methods, I began to more clearly distinguish images made to pass time versus images made with artistic intent, meant from the very start to be exhibited as artworks. Both ways of creating can be used for self-reflection, and neither is intrinsically better or more valuable than the other.

In the collective, we've discussed at length about change, both personal and societal. Many of us feel that systematic change is needed, that the system that controls us is too rigid for our creative needs. We've wondered, maybe we're on the cusp of a new age, that we're part of a generation that can change the future. The more we talk the more I believe this, and the more I read, the more I question this. Does every generation, or at least, the progressive, artistic subgroup of every generation, think they'll be the ones to change the world?

In *Presence* (2005), Senge, Scharmer, Jarowski and Flower discuss events from their careers in which they felt moments of collective awakening, going back as far as 1990. They go on to describe presence as "deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense". I believe that while the events they describe is powerful and impactful, the feelings of collective awakening are not unique to the 1990's. Nor are they unique to the 2020's, but rather points in a continuous process, in which a young generation of creatives is always at a forefront. We're in a constant battle against losing our empathetic abilities as individuals and as communities. Creative people, no matter how they use their creativity, have always been pioneers of social change, and moments of collective awakening can include realizations of this.

In her essay in *Convolvulus*, Lindeman (2021) wonders: "What if we artists could lead the way, inspiring others to find their purpose, their role in life, thus breaking down barriers and creating new, shared playgrounds?" I believe this is essentially the role of artists and creatives in society. To lead, not by rules but

by new ideas, intuition, and emotion. It is also fascinating to note how many creative professionals also talk about arts and culture as a “playground” and about creativity as a child-like wonder that a person needs in order to change themselves and their surroundings. Collective Sandbox is named as it is because we believe this creativity and playfulness is key to the changes we want to see in society.

As a society, we simultaneously don't respect art enough to give it sufficient funding, but also put so much meaning and value on art we become detached from it. We've started experiencing art as only viewers, not doers. Many are afraid to try making art because they think a certain skill level is required, failing to recognise a skill isn't something anyone has inherently, and that despite one's level, creativity can be used in many different ways. During the expressive art workshops, it was delightful to notice pivotal changes in participants that previously thought they couldn't or *shouldn't* draw, paint, write or dance.

When we – artists, cultural activists etc. – talk of art and its importance, we're not saying everyone needs to learn how to draw humans anatomically correct or that everyone needs to visit museums and be able to analyse everything they see critically. Quite the opposite. At its core, art is intuitive, a flow, something used to express feelings and thoughts that are too abstract to be put to words or too painful to voice out loud. Art is something anyone can utilise as a tool of self-discovery. This is what expressive art methods aims to reveal; the capability each of us have when we acquire the right tools for self-reflection and understanding. Art, in this context, can be thought of much in the same way as exercise – something we should societally recognise beneficial for all human beings, regardless of if the goal is to become a professional or to maintain one's wellbeing. It should be a tool available to everyone.

In a collective, the community benefits greatly from people with different skillsets coming together and working toward shared goals. From personal experience I can confidently say a supportive community can lead to an individual to being braver and taking calculated risks that can lead to positive change. Even more so, working and creating in a group forces you to be empathetic and adaptable, which leads to improvement in social aspects but also in how we view and treat ourselves. In an age where everyone is a critic, the last thing we need is our own

mind attacking everything we think or do with negativity. It is essential we learn to dismantle these harmful loops and be kind to ourselves, so that we can be kind to others.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. *August* by Morgan harper Nichols.

Let July be July.

Let August be August.

And let yourself

just be

even in

the uncertainty.

You don't have to fix

everything.

You don't have solve

everything.

And you can still

find peace

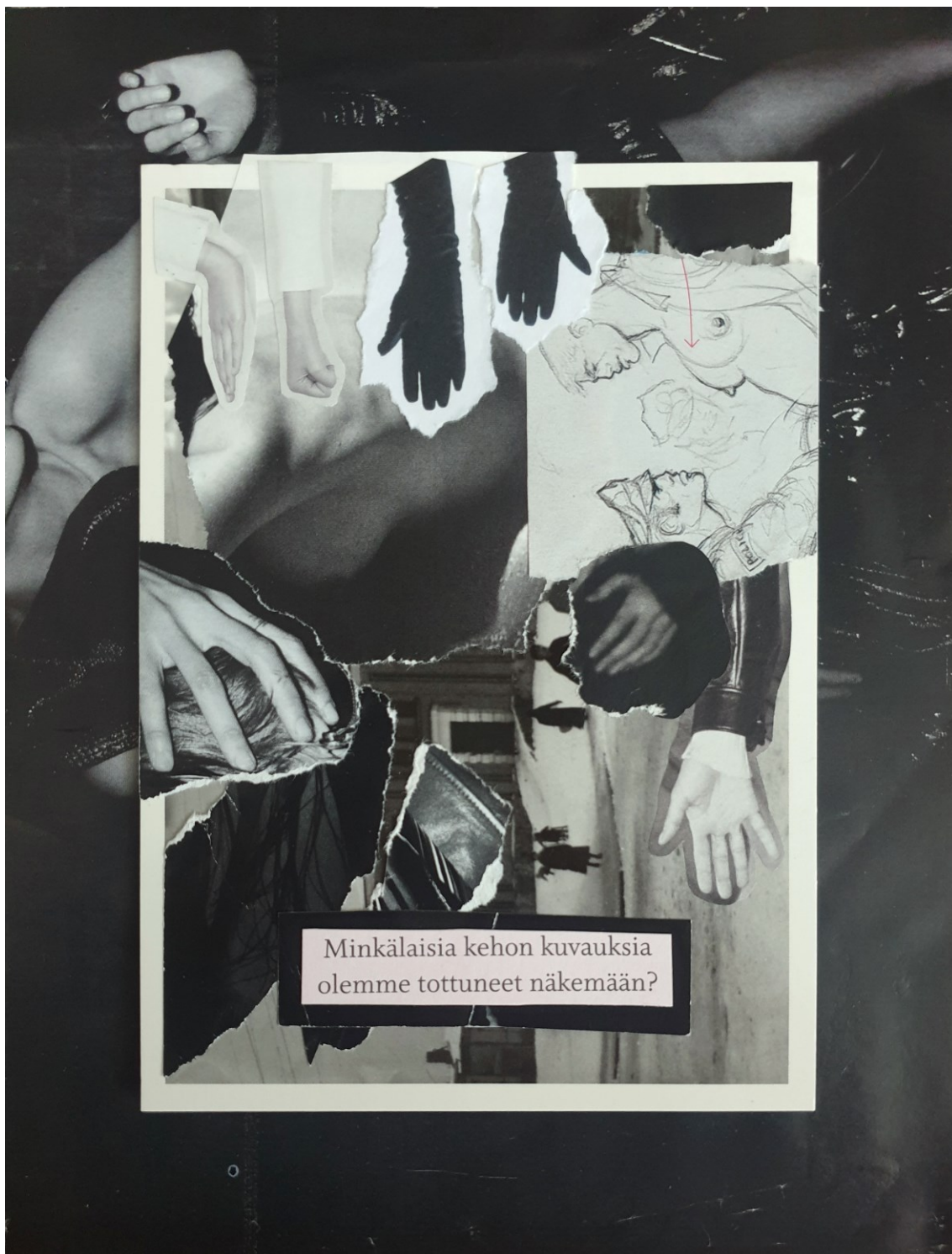
and grow

in the wild

of changing things.

Appendix 2. Studies in Identity 2: Gender





Minkälaisia kehon kuvauksia
olemme tottuneet näkemään?

Lähimpään tähteen, Aurinkoon, on matkaa 150 000 000 kilometriä.

Ympärilläsi on 400 000 000 000 muuta tähteä omassa

galaksissamme Linnunradassa.

Linnunradan lisäksi

maailmankaikkeudessa on

200 000 000 000

muuta galaksia.

bi-
leinä
a-aine-
inä huo-
n, lienee
tua erikoi-
vi jelysmah-
ista johtuu.

