

Reflexive Essay

Playing Along with the Scene: Co-Creation, Curating, and Play as a Methodological Orientation

Terje Toomistu

University of Tartu, Tartu; Tallinn University, Tallinn

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Playing Along with the Scene: Co-Creation, Curating, and Play as a Methodological Orientation

Terje Toomistu

This essay reflects on how play can function as a fruitful methodological orientation in ethnographic research. It draws on my engagement with *Bling*, an annual Estonian house-music festival known for its immersive environments and ethos of playful co-creation. I first encountered *Bling* not as a researcher but as a participant, drawn to its joyful atmosphere shaped by music, dance, costumes, and art. Through dancing, building, cooking, and sharing space with others, I became closely involved with the scene surrounding the event. Such participation—what I call *playing along with the scene*—entailed immersion through affective attunement and collaborative engagement. Only later did I recognize that this immersion had shaped my method of inquiry, as playing along with the scene had created the conditions that gradually informed what became the research. Without a predefined research frame, I set up a video booth at the 2021 festival, inviting participants to record reflections from within the pulse of the event. These recordings later formed the basis for the short documentary *That Estonian Bling Thing* (2024) and the 100 m² 'BLING' section of the exhibition *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024–2025), co-created with community artists. Drawing on sensory ethnography, the anthropology of experience, and my involvement with the scene, I demonstrate how play, as a mode of immersion in lived experience, can orient ethnographic inquiry. In this process, authority is redistributed, and knowledge emerges not simply about a scene but with it—through affective attunement, co-creation, and the generative force of play.

Keywords: co-creation, curating, documentary film, Estonia, ethnographic immersion, house music, play as methodological orientation, sensory ethnography

Prelude: Entering the play

Freedom, play, quality time. A jointly created space. An expression of love. There are many ways to describe *Bling*—a house-music-driven festival scene in Estonia—but one thing is certain: at its heart is music that makes you dance.

When I attended my first *Bling* in 2017, I did not arrive as a researcher but as someone drawn by that year's theme, *Summer of Love*—a nod to the fiftieth anniversary of the Summer of Love in San Francisco (1967). Having just finished my feature-length documentary *Soviet Hippies* (2017), I hoped to screen it at *Bling*, connecting the hippie-spirited people of

past and present. Yet as the three-day camping event unfolded, my search for countercultural continuities shifted into an embodied lesson in what play can do.

Like many festival attendees, I visited the feather-decorated *Boudoir* tent, where makeup, paint, and glitter prepared us for the night's transformation. When I stepped through the decorated gate into the main dance dome, it felt as though I had crossed into another realm: a liminal threshold, in the sense of Victor Turner (1969). Lasers, lights, and smoke; real fire in the center of the space; soft bedding and airy curtains surrounding a dance floor alive with bodies in shimmering costumes. People smiled with a deep, knowing look, as if we were all sharing the secret of this fleeting time and place—the secret of the best party to be. A woman dressed like a fairy swayed between bodies appearing as bears, clowns, tricksters, lovers, and the like, all moving in the pulsing rhythm of house music. I, too, danced among them until morning, welcoming the first sunrays somewhere between the sauna, the river, and the hot tub, washing the night's colors from my skin.

What struck me most at *Bling* was the playfulness of the whole scene—not only the costumes, but the artworks and decorations spread across the event space—and, even more importantly, the ways this setting shaped how people engaged and acted. This essay reflects on how play, as both a methodological orientation and mode of becoming, shaped my engagement with *Bling*—first as a participant and later as an anthropologist, curator, and filmmaker. I approach play as an epistemic condition, one that draws us into experience while temporarily rearranging the boundaries of norms and expectations. Within the frame of play, alternative worlds can emerge: spaces governed by their own rules, sustained as long as the experience remains engaging and meaningful. In this sense, play is an embodied condition rooted in presence and immersion that enables forms of experience that exceed the conventional.

At a grassroots level, anthropological fieldwork often unfolds in a similar way. Even when entering the field with research questions and analytical frameworks in mind, the sensory and affective immediacy of lived encounters may draw the researcher into participation, improvisation, and moments of surrender. Fieldwork places the researcher in unfamiliar situations, opening up forms of embodied experience that exceed what was previously known and familiar. Knowledge here arises through this immediacy of experience. The body learns before the mind explains; and only later—when the intensity of experience begins to recede—can reflection follow and interpretation take shape.

In this essay, I suggest that play can function as a fruitful methodological orientation: a way of generating knowledge through embodied participation, affective attunement, and co-creative engagement. What might be at stake if we consider play as an epistemic condition? What happens when immersion leads inquiry? What if play is not opposed to method but constitutes its precondition: a necessary mode of becoming through which the researcher comes to ask the right questions and to develop appropriate analytical frames?

In what follows, I reflect on how my engagement with a small Estonian subcultural scene surrounding the annual Midsummer event known as *Bling*—through both documentary film and exhibition-making—emerged precisely from playing along with the scene itself. Before turning to these methodological reflections, it is necessary to understand how *Bling* became a living experiment in co-creation. I begin by tracing the development of the festival as a subcultural scene and its ethos of collective play, before returning to how participation in this environment shaped my filmmaking and curatorial practice.



Figure 1. Embodied joy on the dance floor, *Bling* 2017. @ Sten Roosvald, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

From party to practice: The making of *Bling*

Inspired by house music parties on the Thai island of Koh Pha Ngan, a small group of friends organized a dance event in an Estonian forest in the summer of 2012. By autumn, these so-called *Mutionu* ('Mister Mole') parties had evolved into donation-based gatherings of twenty to thirty people in Tallinn. Organizers Pille Heido, Tanel Toomsalu, and Ivo Naries wanted their events to sparkle with a celebration of life and soon began calling them 'the *Bling* parties.'

Bling truly took off on New Year's Eve 2012–2013, when a hundred participants gathered in full costume, surrounded by imaginative decorations and a shared sleeping area outside Tallinn. Over the following years, events were held every few months—sometimes in unusual venues such as the Tallinn Botanical Garden or the 314-meter-high TV Tower—and new organizers joined the team. Yet it was the Midsummer festivals that became the heart of *Bling*: immersive, artistically designed gatherings in the countryside that

hosted not only all-night parties, but also workshops, concerts, yoga sessions, lectures, and sauna. By 2016–2018, the event had grown into a festival of considerable artistic ambition, attracting up to 800 participants.



Figure 2. Sensory spatial design and installations, *Bling* 2017. © Ruudu Rahumaru, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

What distinguished *Bling* from other festivals in Estonia was not only its devotion to house music but its ethos of playful self-expression and voluntary contribution, which gradually turned the gathering into a collectively produced environment. Psychedelia-inspired spatial design (see Fig. 2), interactive art, and exuberant self-expression shaped its sensory atmosphere. Since 2017, art grants funded from the festival revenue have supported participants' creative interventions, foregrounding the principle that everything offered and experienced at *Bling* is created through voluntary sharing and giving. Costumes and adornment were not merely decorative but functioned as instruments of transformation, reflecting its emphasis on self-exploration through dance and play. Humor and self-irony flourished in costumes, absurdist installations, and in the tongue-in-cheek signage at the entrance gate (Fig. 3), echoing another of *Bling's* principles: 'Here, at *Bling*, everything that unites us is welcome.'

These and other guiding ideas were articulated in a set of ten principles formulated in 2014 and printed in the programs, among them: '*Bling* is love and sharing,' '*Bling* is time and space we create together,' and '*Bling* is open to everyone, regardless of gender, species, age, skin color, or belief.' Another principle explicitly detached *Bling* from commercial or financial gain. By distributing the work of making *Bling* across participants, it sought to cultivate an ethos of horizontal collaboration.

In practice, however, during the festival's heyday (2016–2018), co-creation was often enacted more symbolically than materially. While



Figure 3. Greeters at the 2017 festival registration booth. The sign above reads 'Registratuur,' playfully referencing registration desks in medical institutions. @ Sten Roosvald, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

Figure 4. Construction of a tipi at *Bling* 2020. @ Ivar Savin, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.



most participants contributed to the atmosphere—through costumes and shared affection—the bulk of organizational labor remained in the hands of a smaller core group responsible for decorations, construction, cooking, technical setup, and maintenance.

The summer of 2018 marked both a peak and a turning point. Although the event reached its largest scale and highest level of artistic production, the core team experienced growing fatigue. After months of preparation and logistical challenges on spot, several of the organizers realized they were unable to enjoy the festival they had created. The limits of scale and labor became palpable, revealing tensions within the festival's ideal of co-creation.

In 2019, the organizers decided to take a break from producing another large-scale event. Instead, their energy was directed toward building a giant mutant art car—the *Travelling Hedgehog*—which was taken to the *Burning Man* event in the United States. When *Midsummer Bling* returned the following year, its focus shifted from spectacle toward more direct forms of collective making. The festival moved to the countryside property of one of its founders, Ivo Narjes, taking on a more intimate, community-orientated form.

The event was no longer advertised on social media and welcomed no more than 150 participants. Freed from the pressures of large-scale production, it became a clearer expression of its founding ethos: almost everyone contributed to cooking, building, maintenance, or the program, and togetherness mattered more than spectacle.¹ It is within this evolving environment of participation and collective making that my own engagement with *Bling* gradually shifted from attending the festival to documenting it.

Filming without aim: When play directs the method

Events such as *Bling* are often approached in anthropological literature as liminal spaces within a ritual structure (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960), a perspective that has contributed to framing such gatherings as 'transformational.' The notion of transformational festivals is frequently used to describe participatory events that combine music, artistic experimentation, alternative lifestyles, and opportunities for personal change, often associated with New Age-inspired gatherings or *Burning Man* (Johnner, 2015; Schmidt, 2019). *Bling* shares certain characteristics with these events, most notably their emphasis on participation, playful experimentation, the temporary suspension of everyday norms, and connections to *Burning Man* that developed alongside the festival's growth. However, unlike many festivals explicitly oriented toward spirituality or self-development, *Bling* does not foreground personal transformation as an institutionalized goal, although such experiences may arise through the co-created atmosphere. While interpreting this festival through the lens of liminality and transformation offers a useful perspective, my interest here lies less in the ritual structure of

the event than in how such environments foster playful experimentation—and how this immersion can shape ethnographic insight.

When *Bling* was first held at Ivo Naries's countryside property in 2020, the setting was radically different from previous events. Almost devoid of built infrastructure, the atmosphere felt rustic and intimate. Yet this lack of facilities seemed only to strengthen the community's sense of purpose. What stood out to me was how eagerly people took on collective tasks: building outdoor showers, setting up a makeshift water system, and assembling an open-air kitchen. What might elsewhere have been seen as inconvenience became part of the pleasure of co-creation. Just weeks before the event, a large pond had been dug, again with volunteered help from friends. That year, *Bling* took place entirely in the open air beneath the skeletal frame of an unfinished tipi (Fig. 4). We danced on the muddy field, watching the sun rise through mist drifting low across the grass.

Perhaps it is precisely the festival's roughness and sense of shared making that inspired me to contribute something of my own the following year. I realized how my particular skills—as an anthropologist and filmmaker—might serve the event: I would bring a video booth to the next edition.

A photo booth had been part of *Bling* since its early years, giving participants a chance to capture their costumes and moods in an environment where photography was otherwise discouraged. I imagined the video booth as a more immersive continuation: an invitation to speak from within the festival's pulse. I hoped to record those fleeting moments when people were still carried by the rhythm of the night, perhaps sleepless or glowing from collective ecstasy; to trace how they made sense of the creative synergy around them—the utopian promise of what a truly co-created festival might be. At the same time, the gesture increasingly felt ethnographically meaningful.

The following year, without a predefined research frame or prepared interview questions, I set up a playful video booth (Fig. 5) and, over two afternoons, filmed twenty-seven short interviews, including both the festival's founders and first-time participants. At the end of the second day, my helpers insisted that I too sit in front of the camera.

The anthropology of experience distinguishes between reality as it is, lived experience, and its expressions (Bruner, 1986, p. 6). Expressions are the ways in which participants articulate and interpret what they have experienced, yet there is always a gap between the two, since the richness of lived experience can never be fully captured. As Turner (as cited in Bruner, 1986, p. 13) suggests, experience is periodically interrupted by moments of reflexivity. The video booth stepped in precisely at this tension: it recorded participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences of the scene while still immersed in its atmosphere.

Importantly, however, I arrived at this particular method of inquiry—the video booth at the pulse of the event—through my own participation in the flow of experience sustained by play. The video booth did

not emerge from a research design but from participation itself, from playing along with the experience that *Bling* enabled. In this sense, play functioned as a methodological orientation, guiding my transition from the flow of lived experience toward its articulation in expressions.



Figure 5. The author recording participants' testimonials at the video booth, *Bling* 2021.
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Curating play: Translating the experience into an exhibition

I never watched the recordings. In fact, I had almost forgotten about them—until the curator Karin Leivategija from the Estonian National Museum invited me to co-curate a major exhibition about nightlife. Her invitation brought the footage back to mind. By playfully embracing the co-creative ethos of *Bling*, I had in fact gathered a trace of oral history of that particular scene in Estonia.

What had begun as filming without aim now returned as a methodological question: how to represent a scene that resists capture—this affective assemblage of bodies, sound, and atmosphere, the fleeting nature of the experience itself? How might its sensorial force be carried into the institutional space of the museum?

Revisiting the footage, I encountered fragmented yet intimate testimonials, all shimmering with immediacy. As Bruner (1986) notes,

participants in a collective performance do not necessarily share a common interpretation of events; what they share is their participation (p. 11). The recordings revealed precisely this: participants described their experiences in strikingly different ways—playful, artistic, constitutive to one’s identity, spiritual, or simply joyful—yet all spoke from within the same shared field of participation.

I also returned to my own embodied memories of these gatherings. What was the pull that kept bringing me back year after year?

I wanted the affective rhythm of *Bling* to guide the curatorial process. I therefore agreed to curate this project on one condition: that the ‘BLING’ section of the exhibition would be designed together with artists from the community. Only then could we create a multisensory environment capable of evoking what *it feels like* rather than merely explaining it. Together with *Bling*’s former artistic director, Eva Reiska, who became the lead artist of the 100 m² installation, we constructed the exhibit largely from reused materials, following the festival’s ecological ethos, and incorporated sound as a central element.

Before entering the exhibition space, visitors received wireless headphones playing *Bling*-inspired music.² They moved through what we called the *State Tunnel* (Fig. 6)³, a corridor of shifting light and floating fabric that culminated in a mirror, before encountering the story of the *Bling* scene unfolding through a series of hidden compartments behind small doors. These had to be physically opened, just as one must open oneself to fully experience *Bling*. Behind each door was a fragment of the community’s history: the first New Year’s Eve parties, the creation of immersive spaces, the role of costumes, humor and play, sensorial practices and interactive art, and the evolving futures of the festival. A playful photo booth invited visitors to capture their transformed selves, echoing *Bling*’s longstanding tradition.

The journey ended in a soft, dim room furnished with couches and a familiar unicorn sculpture from *Bling* gatherings (Fig. 7). There, the documentary *That Estonian Bling Thing*—based on the video booth interviews I had recorded—played in a loop, its soundtrack carried through the headphones. The curatorial translation—from festival to film to exhibition—extended *Bling*’s logic of co-creation into an institutional setting, allowing sensory immersion through music, light, and space to become a mode of knowing the scene and thus further enacting the playful methodological orientation through which the research itself had emerged.

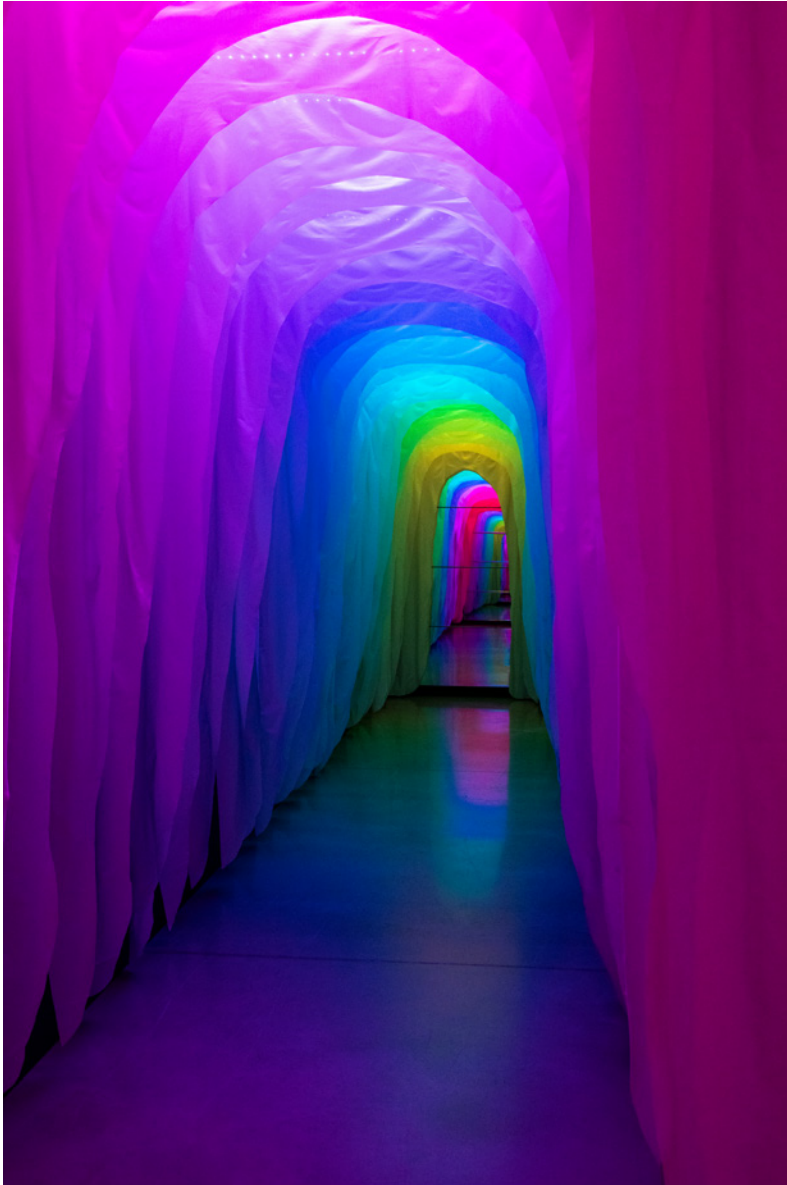


Figure 6. A textile installation by V2GI, the 'BLING' section of *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024–2025). @ Berta Jänes, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.



Figure 7.
An installation view of *That Estonian Bling Thing* documentary, the 'BLING' section of *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024–2025).
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Playing along with the scene: Methodological reflections

What began as a playful act of documentation gradually folded into an anthropological project, unsettling the boundaries between the two. In what might be described as research-by-emergence, knowledge arose not through predetermined inquiry but through embodied participation and playful contribution shaped by the event's ethos of co-creation. The process unfolded through sensory immersion while playing along with the scene: dancing, building, cooking, and sharing space with others became ways of noticing, attuning, and understanding, as well as the sources of methodological inspiration. It was through this immersion that the specific forms of documentation that shaped the research—the video booth, the film, and the exhibition—gradually took form.

Such an approach echoes a broader current in anthropology that emphasizes knowing through embodied and sensory engagement. Rather than treating experience as something to be observed from a distance, sensory ethnography foregrounds how knowledge emerges through the researcher's multisensory participation in the field (Culhane, 2017; Pink, 2015). In this sense, ethnography can be understood as an attunement to the affective textures of life, inviting attention to the subtle intensities and atmospheres through which meaning takes shape (Stewart, 2007). In the context of *Bling*, this attunement was not merely observational but participatory. I not only became part of the collective rhythm of music, I also contributed to the collaborative making of the event. Such participation—what I call here *playing along with the scene*, a mode of engagement based on immersion, affective attunement, and co-

creative involvement—became a condition for the insights that gradually formed and ultimately shaped the research.

Practice-based approaches to ethnography similarly treat making, experimenting, and collaborating as modes of inquiry in their own right. As Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane (2017) suggest, imaginative and creative methodologies allow knowledge to emerge through processes of doing rather than predetermined analytical structures. From this perspective, the film and the exhibition were not merely outputs of research; they were also sites where ethnographic thinking unfolded. Curating the 'BLING' section of the *Who Claims the Night?* exhibition at the Estonian National Museum became, in this sense, a methodological continuation of *Bling's* ethos of co-creation and embodied participation. In this process, distinctions between artist and audience, researcher and participant begin to blur, and knowledge takes shape through affective attunement and participation rather than analytical distance. Developed together with community members, the installation's design invited visitors to sense, touch, and play rather than simply observe. Curating thus became a way of thinking through space, sound, and collaboration, with the aim of creating an atmosphere in which play could function as a mode of knowledge.

In such practice, authority is redistributed. The anthropologist does not stand outside or above but co-plays, co-feels, and co-creates. To approach play as a methodological orientation, then, is to embrace immersion as an epistemic force. What emerges is not knowledge *about* a scene but knowledge *with* it, in which the anthropologist, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1984) suggests, speaks *nearby* rather than from above.

After the beat: Sustaining the joy

In 2023, I attended the Midsummer *Bling* with my two-month-old baby. It felt important to be there: it was the opening of the collectively built *Crazy Bear Saloon*—the new heart of *Bling*, a handmade gathering space meant to sustain the community beyond the three days of the annual festival. By the following summer, the Saloon felt complete: beautifully decorated and equipped for year-round gatherings. But on a stormy night in October, everything changed: the Saloon burned down completely within a few hours. The place that had held so much collective joy, labor, and imaginative future was suddenly gone.

The loss was devastating. Yet what struck me most was the community's almost immediate response. Rather than despair, there was determination: *we will build another one—bigger, better, together again*. Ivo's wry remark captured the mood: 'Now we are officially *burners*.'⁴ In those days, *Bling's* ethos became particularly clear: a commitment to renewal through co-creation, where even destruction becomes part of the play. By the following summer, a new structure stood, this time with proper foundations, water closets, and even greater capacity.

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) reminds us that play is a primary condition of culture. Play can be a practice of care and resilience; it can also be an act of resistance. In the anxious climate following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—and amid broader global tensions—such spaces of shared joy feel especially vital. Perhaps this is also what continues to draw me to *Bling*. The festival has taught me to honor the healing power of music and dance, to relax when tension builds, and to trust in the strength of gatherings shaped by co-creation and play.

Here, however, I have sought to demonstrate the methodological potential of play for ethnography: play as a mode of immersion in lived experience allows the researcher to attune to the affective and embodied dimensions of the field, through which interpretation and analytical framing take shape. This, I suggest, is what it means to recognize the generative force of play: across anthropology, in curating, and in practices of living together.

Back on the dance floor, as the bassline swells and mist drifts through the light, method folds back into movement—into immersion—inviting us, once again, to play along with the scene.



Fig. 8. A still from the documentary film *That Estonian Bling Thing* (2024, dir. Terje Toomistu). To watch a fragment of the film, follow [this link](#).

1. Since 2019, alongside the scaled-down *Bling*, members of the same organizing circle began hosting artistically ambitious, ticketed *Travelling Hedgehog* parties in Tallinn, attracting up to 1,700 participants. While these events diverged from *Bling's* non-commercial ethos, they retained elements of its aesthetic and participatory principles, particularly inclusion and play.
2. Music at the 'BLING' section of the *Who Claims the Night?* exhibition was composed by Ivo Naries and Villem Vatter.
3. The textile installation inside the 'State Tunnel' was created by V2GI (Auli Uiboupin, Eva Reiska).
4. 'Burners' refers to participants in the global *Burning Man* community, which originated around the annual *Burning Man* event held in Nevada's Black Rock Desert and has since expanded worldwide.

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Author's Bio

Dr. Terje Toomistu is an anthropologist, curator, and documentary filmmaker based in Estonia. Her work explores gender, mobility, affective belonging, and multimodal ethnography across postsocialist and postcolonial contexts. She is currently a research fellow in creative ethnography and global mobility at the University of Tartu and a research fellow at Tallinn University, Estonia. She has previously been a Fulbright scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, USA, and a visiting fellow at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. Among her creative research projects, she directed the documentary *Soviet Hippies* (2017) and co-curated the exhibition *Who Claims the Night?* (2024–2025) at the Estonian National Museum. Her work is characterized by methodological experimentation, interdisciplinary scope, and a sustained commitment to public anthropology.

E-mail: terje.toomistu@ut.ee

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1850-1375>