

Participating artists, ART CAPTURES

Thinh Nguyen, Vietnam

Thinh Nguyen is an interdisciplinary artist working with film and photography, with a practice deeply rooted in social and political issues. He uses art as a tool to observe and understand the world, exploring memory, change, and existential boundaries, and how people remember, forget, and continue to live amid social upheaval. In recent years, Thinh has worked under surveillance and restriction, deepening his understanding of the relationship that exists between an artist and their surroundings — between being seen and being watched. For him, photography is not only about capturing images but about preserving fragments of reality that might otherwise disappear. Thinh came to Norway in 2024 through SafeMUSE's Artist-in-Residency program, which has enabled him to continue his artistic work. He is now based in Oslo.

The photo series *We Are Still Here* examines the consequences of forced gentrification in the village of Dương Nội, Vietnam. Through carefully composed portraits, the artist highlights the farmers' loss of land and livelihood as traditional landscapes are replaced by luxury housing and development projects.

In a society with limited freedom of expression, photography becomes a tool for documenting stories that would otherwise be silenced. The images portray the quiet resistance of the farmers, standing amid new buildings that serve as reminders of what they have lost.

Thinh Nguyen's work stems from experiences of censorship and repression, raising questions about justice, ownership, and human rights. The project reaches beyond a single village to illuminate a broader social issue affecting many Vietnamese people facing state control and economic inequality.

Nurperi Orunbaeva, Kyrgyzstan

Nurperi Orunbaeva is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, and activist. Her practice combines painting, graphics, sculpture, installations, and textiles, reflecting on the rights, history, and culture of women. She highlights women who are often overlooked or suppressed, exploring her country's darkest chapters while examining how memory and identity take shape where tradition meets the contemporary. In her installations, she brings past and present into dialogue, in line with the saying "forgetting your roots is like losing your veins." Nurperi participated in SafeMUSE's Artist-in-Residency program in 2025.

Sanzhyra is rooted in the absence of female recognition in the artist's family history. In Kyrgyzstan, genealogical records have traditionally been reserved for male names, while women's names are rarely documented. The genealogical book, often portrayed as a large and powerful tree, thus becomes a symbol of this imbalance and of the invisible connections that have been lost. The work gives voice to forgotten women, making their legacy and significance visible in the present. At the same time, *Sanzhyra* represents an invisible network between women; a community of belonging, strength, and solidarity that binds generations together.

The installation consists of long, white roots inspired by the gray braids of mothers. The roots point to women's quiet, yet sustaining role, as those who keep the family's history, culture, and memories alive. Through materiality and form, the work creates a poetic expression of heritage, presence, and continuity.

Petr Sarukhanov, Russia/Georgia

Petr Sarukhanov is a graphic artist and painter known for his thousands of illustrations in Novaya Gazeta. His drawings function as metaphors for reality; he observes details closely and interprets what he sees with wit and precision. The drawings are not created under any directives from the publication and reflect current events in Russia and the world. Petr lives in Tbilisi, Georgia, combining his work for the newspaper with international exhibitions of his paintings.

Novaya Gazeta is an independent Russian newspaper with over 30 years of history. In 2022, Novaya Gazeta was stripped of its publishing license due to its anti-war stance, an action which restricted its circulation severely, down to only 999 copies. The editorial team, still working from Moscow, therefore publishes the paper in a samizdat format. This is a form of underground self-publishing that originated in Soviet times, when banned or censored literature was produced and distributed by alternative means. The paper also runs its own Telegram channel, where articles are published regularly. Here, it continues to post covers of "unpublished" issues, under the caption "This is what the front page would have looked like if the newspaper had been published." The front-page illustrations comment on current events in international and Russian politics, and the texts are printed in both Russian and English.

The exhibition presents these front pages from the "unpublished newspaper," along with examples of the monthly samizdat editions still physically printed in Moscow. It also includes unique covers from the final issues of Novaya Gazeta published in Russia in early 2022, right before and during the first days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Anna Tolkacheva, Russia

Anna Tolkacheva is a media artist, researcher, and poet experimenting with new ways of creating and approaching text through unconventional interfaces and controllers. Her work explores freedom and authority, and how structures, both social, political, and digital, shape human actions and experiences. She uses experimental video, interactive installations, and media poetry to make abstract power structures visible in engaging and often indirect ways. By challenging traditional interfaces and mechanisms of control in art, she questions how we are monitored, guided, or restricted, both in the physical and digital spheres.

Under the Control: In 2020, same-sex marriage was banned in the Russian constitution. In 2022, all information equating queer and heterosexual love was prohibited, on par with propaganda for pedophilia. There even exists a website where citizens can report such "prohibited" LGBTQ+ information to the authorities.

The Freedom is a poetic video work based on a text by the renowned contemporary Russian poet Vsevolod Nekrasov. The text itself consists solely of the repetition of two words in Russian: свобода (“freedom”) and есть — which, depending on context, can mean either “is” or “exists.” A hamster, trapped in a running wheel, emerges as the text’s physical resonance. Through its repetitive movements, it articulates the words without language; until it chooses to stop, escaping the circle’s compulsion. In that moment, it embodies the gesture of freedom, and the final есть can rightfully be understood as “exists.”

Saba Pouyeshman, Iran

With a background as a screenwriter and actor, Saba Pouyeshman combines performing and visual arts in her practice, particularly drawing and painting. Her work explores dark, poetic themes inspired by Persian mythology, witchcraft, magic, and dreams, examining how stories and myths can reflect both inner and collective experiences. At the center of her art is the woman, who bears, transforms, and challenges these mythic narratives. Saba came to Norway in 2024 through SafeMUSE’s Artist-in-Residency program and is now based in Oslo.

The word Jahī originates from the Proto-Indo-European root $g^{w}enh_2-$, meaning “woman.” This root appears in several Indo-European languages, for example in Sanskrit as jānī (“wife, woman”) and in Greek as gynē (“woman”). In its earliest meaning, the word was neutral; describing a woman without moral judgment, neither sacred nor profane.

Through the evolution of the Iranian languages, the meaning gradually shifted from neutral to morally charged. In Avesta, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, an ancient Iranian religion, Jahī no longer means “woman” but “the corrupt, lustful, or impure woman.”

Over time, Jahī evolved from a moral concept into a mythic figure. She was portrayed as a female demon, the original harlot who awakens Ahriman, the evil spirit, to destroy and defile the world. Among the acts attributed to her is one that particularly inspired the artist: the interpretation in which she devours the sacred Haoma plant, an act that was originally part of a holy ritual.

The work portrays a woman, a marginalized and forbidden figure, consuming the sacred. Through this act, themes of defiance, justice, and resistance to oppressive structures are explored as a commentary on power, gender, and social norms, and on how the individual can challenge patriarchal and theocratic systems.

Vera Shysh, Belarus

Vera Shysh is an independent animation director. For security reasons, her identity and biographical details are kept confidential due to ongoing repression in Belarus, where political persecution and restrictions on artistic freedom continue. Vera has been part of SafeMUSE’s Artist-in-Residency program.

The Care Package tells a story inspired by a fairy tale written by a sister to her imprisoned brother in Belarus, where more than 1,200 political prisoners remain behind bars. Political prisoners are consistently treated worse than other inmates. They are often denied visits or phone calls, even with their closest family members. A care package thus becomes, at times, the only connection to the outside world. In this story, the package comes to life and becomes a character that interacts with the prisoner.

Alisa Gorshenina (Alice Hualice), Russia

Alisa Gorshenina is an interdisciplinary artist working in the tension between life and art, a concept she describes as “self-artification.” In her practice, the personal grows into the mythological, becoming a means of communicating with the outside world. Established notions of self, body, and social roles are challenged. She explores the role of craft in contemporary art and creates narratives that merge myth, identity, and everyday life through masquerades, textiles, ceramics, painting, drawing, photography, and video.

Pain is part of the project *I Hear the Voices of Russia*, in which the artist explores the different languages of people across Russia. The series began when the Russian army invaded Ukraine in 2022 and serves as an artistic response to the war, as well as an attempt to show that not all Russians support the conflict. The artist collected words and expressions from people of various ethnic backgrounds throughout the country. The word *Pain* is embroidered about twenty times on an anatomical heart in these different languages, to express that regardless of nationality, many share the same sentiment.

In recent years, both the artist and her work have been subjected to censorship and reprisals in Russia due to her anti-war stance. Exhibitions have been canceled, projects shut down, and she has been repeatedly fined for “discrediting the Russian armed forces.” In April 2025, three new cases were brought against her: for “discrediting the army,” “LGBT propaganda,” and “extremist symbols”, based on social media posts she had shared. In one of the cases, she was sentenced to ten days in prison. During her sentence, she used drawing as a survival strategy, spending the days reading and making art.

“I spent the days reading and drawing — a pure act of survival. Sometimes I mirrored my surroundings; other times I escaped them through my subjects. The drawings became a symbol of freedom, and a reminder that I will never again make art in captivity.

Andrei Busel, Belarus

Andrei Busel combines architecture and two-dimensional street art in a visual practice exploring resistance, solidarity, and civil rights. He investigates how art can express both personal and collective experiences in the face of political oppression. With a background in architecture, he also creates design and interior objects, clothing and accessories. Following his arrest and forced exile in

2023, he joined SafeMUSE's Artist-in-Residency program, which has been crucial to his continued work.

The installation *Suspicious Objects* presents a collection of neutral, everyday items — clothing, household goods, books, and food items — that in today's Belarus have become banned, labeled as extremist, or declared undesirable. Each object is accompanied by a story of prohibition, punishment, or other forms of repression, revealing the mechanisms of state control and censorship.

The work explores the boundaries of what is permitted and how the ordinary can be transformed into a potential target of persecution. In an authoritarian context, even the most innocent objects lose their neutrality and gain political meaning. A color, an inscription, or a simple shape can become grounds for accusations of "extremism" or "discrediting the state."

The installation questions the limits of artistic and personal freedom under an oppressive regime. It shows how narrow the space for expression and creativity has become. Even small gestures, such as wearing a certain color, quoting a book, or holding a blank sheet of paper or a bouquet of flowers, can be interpreted as acts of protest.

About the exhibited objects:

Cardboard Box

After the ban on the white-red-white flag, people began hanging objects on their balconies resembling it by color. A TV box with a red label could be perceived as a provocation.

Red-and-White Socks

Clothing in red-and-white colors is a potential marker of oppositional views.

Precedent: numerous detentions occurred over clothing — sometimes for the most minor details. In such cases, wearing these colors was equated with picketing.

Canadian Flag

the combination of white and red colors can be regarded as a disguise for opposition symbolism.

Precedent: a Minsk resident received 15 days of arrest for displaying a Canadian flag in his window.

Book by Irvine Welsh

The list of banned books in the country is regularly expanded. The last update included titles found on many private bookshelves — among them Hunter S. Thompson, Yukio Mishima, Irvine Welsh, Donna Tartt, Ryu Murakami, and many others. Alongside contemporary writers, even classic Belarusian works have fallen under suspicion or prohibition.

Precedent: mass detention of pensioners reading Vladimir Korotkevich on a train.

Flower

The use of flowers during peaceful rallies, the creation of memorials for victims of repression, gifts to female protesters, or even simply holding a bouquet could be interpreted as an unauthorized demonstration.

Precedent: Stepan Latypau, sentenced to 8 years in prison, became known as the man who handed flowers to women during protest marches.

White Bracelet

A symbol of support for opposition candidates during elections.

Precedent: frequent detentions for wearing white bracelets, interpreted as participation in unauthorized demonstrations.

Pendant “Kahanne”

Belaruski Cry brand, designated as an extremist formation.

Description: the word “kahanne” — meaning “love” in Belarusian — became grounds for criminal prosecution. One of the brand’s co-founders is currently imprisoned.

Red-and-White Sweets

Confectionery can be seen as a form of political expression. Posting images of such sweets on social media often attracts the attention of security services.

Precedent: a bakery received a warning for selling cakes decorated in red and white.

Red or White Umbrellas

Using umbrellas in the “forbidden” color palette may be considered a display of opposition symbols.

Precedent: a person was detained during a protest for holding a red-and-white umbrella.

Sheet of White Paper in a Window

During the protests, white sheets of paper were used as a sign of solidarity and dissent.

Precedent: documented cases of violence, including a gunshot fired at a window displaying a white sheet.

This collection is not an archive of political artifacts but a catalog of fear and absurdity. Objects created for peace, comfort, and beauty have become evidence of guilt. They remind us that in some societies, everyday life itself can be declared a crime.