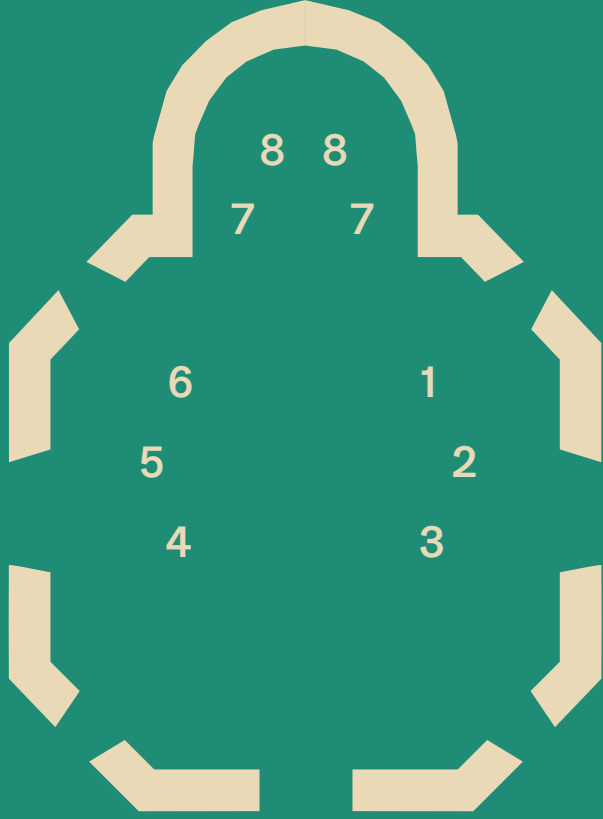


Peripheria X Cor



MANTAS
LESAUSKAS

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Palanga
Amber
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EXHIBITION

I. Action x Interrogation

In the light of the theory of the agency of things, British anthropologist Alfred Gell teaches us to perceive objects as intentional creations of humans, possessing the power to change and reshape our reality.

According to Gell, the agency of things or objects is manifested by evoking fundamental sensations – admiration, desire, anger, fear. By stirring these emotions, objects become active agents, altering the world alongside humans. For example, gold has a potent agency not only because of its aesthetic qualities, but also because of all the trouble we go through to mine it. Reflecting on materials and objects that have acquired special social and economic value, it becomes evident that humans don't always choose ownership – sometimes things demand to be owned.

Mantas Lesauskas, the author behind the Peripheria x Cor exhibition, explores

the influence of amber as a material with significance, dissociating it from national identity and folk narratives. He engages in a dialogue with amber through a method akin to material interrogation. In the realm of design, this allows for a departure from stereotypes, revealing diverse perspectives on the material, and fostering a new dialogue with it. Interrogation of amber in this context goes beyond surface-level understanding and leads to more profound and meaningful artistic expressions.

The exhibited design objects are linked by the thread of amber's degree of autonomy and influence on human actions and perceptions. Aesthetic and functional forms assist the author in imbuing them with ritualistic references. However, the objects themselves are empty, inviting the viewer to fill them with interpretations, just as newly found archeological artefacts do.

II. Interrogation x Extraction

The value of amber (or succinite) is as ambiguous as that of gold or diamonds. Within the last decade, mining and production of said precious stones in African countries has been associated with exploitation, war and violence, whereas in the Western world they symbolise eternal love and exceptional endurance and value.

Extracting amber – whether naturally washed up by the sea waves or excavated – is inseparable from power structures and exploitation. Egyptian pharaohs, Greek kings, Roman emperors, medieval and later European elites not only adorned themselves with amber but also widely used it for gifts as a means of pursuing political goals and establishing status. This encouraged unethical or repression-based extraction methods. For example, when the Teutonic Order monopolised amber collection on the Baltic coast, it laid out the so-called “amber-law”. It was used to rule amber harvesting by oppressed labour and to punish unruly labourers with beatings, exile, or even death. This amber monopoly, later, inherited by imperial, corporate, and ultimately occupying powers, continued to be guided by a strategy of complete control. It’s interesting how the aesthetic or façade side of amber eclipses far less glamorous historical facts about territorial amber extraction monopolies. For instance, it’s almost impossible to find sources in Lithuanian about the “amber gulag” that operated for nearly five years from 1947 in the Kaliningrad region. In her book *Jewels: A Secret Story*, Victoria Finlay shares the account of Nina Melnikova, a former guard at the Palvininkai or Jantarny (“amber”) gulag: “There were two gulags: one for men

working in the mine, the other for women, employed in the factory. Most were political prisoners; others were there for petty crimes, like stealing fish.” Archival sources confirm that in 1948, 2,689 individuals were imprisoned in the Palvininkai forced labour camp.

Active objects, like active materials, possess a plethora of powers, sometimes almost as destructive as those of humans. About 90 percent of the world’s amber reserves lie in the narrow strip of the Sambia Peninsula in the Kaliningrad region, along the Amber Coast. After the Maidan events in Ukraine in 2014, illegal amber mining surged, flooding the largest buyer of amber raw material today, China. The Kaliningrad monopoly was severely shaken as a result. The human element became a driving force behind this.

Before the war, reports of an amber mafia operating in the Zhytomyr, Rivne, and Volhynia regions were occasionally heard, but after 2022, these reports faded into the background. However, before the war, this activity meant instability for the global amber market and environmental damage such as clear-cut or burnt forests, the destruction of natural protections against floods through self-made dams to “wash out” amber, contaminated groundwater and rivers, and erosion. Morbidly, the method of extracting amber that damages nature, carried out by the amber mafia, pushing it to the surface, is also used in amber-rich dryland areas in Poland and Lithuania. Therefore, the fact that officially industrial extraction of amber by suction dredgers hasn’t been carried out in Lithuania for nearly 100 years sounds even more morbid.

III. Extraction x Enchantment

In the exhibition, the design objects actively resist the destructive efforts of humans, ripping amber from the depths of the earth. Only naturally washed-up succinite fragments are used in the intricate designs – the artist deliberately chooses this freely available influential material. After all, if extraction means forcefully pulling something from the earth, then that something becomes “material” or “matter” – an object, no longer a subject – under the dominion of pure will and dominant force. Captured, extracted, compressed, and melted amber will not breathe like a living being.

Amber truly stands out for its vitality or even animality, compared to the other aforementioned influential materials such as gold or diamonds. Its sunny colour, fragility, and plasticity lead the artist to act more freely, more instinctively. Inspired by the spectrum of amber fractions, flashes of fire emerge in the exhibition objects.

In juxtaposing candle flame with pure amber, the artist seeks to emphasise primal fascination with this natural polymer.

“I looked and saw a whirlwind coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing back and forth and brilliant light all around it. In the centre of the fire was a gleam like amber”, testified the prophet Ezekiel experiencing apocalyptic visions. The parallel of amber and fire seems to stimulate historical memory and instinctual primal consciousness.

The fact that amber was burned during ritual practices in Prussian lands is also revealed by its German name *Bernstein* (“burning stone”). The Baltic meaning of amber “to strike, to defend”, derived from the Aestian and Prussian languages, also

confirms its ritualistic use, noting that the primary function of amber was magical rather than aesthetic. Thus, in our Baltic consciousness lies the assertion that “amber is the hardened blood of trees”. It appears in poetry, legends, and incantations. This charming example shows how words that capture the secrets of mythical consciousness eventually turn to chants, solidifying communities united by these mysteries.

The comparison of blood with tree sap, symbolising life in its purest sense, is vital in other cultures as well. Anthropologist Inga Clendinnen, who studied rituals of tribes in Central America, wrote: “Human blood, bright and moist when shed, darkens, thickens <...> The sap of the rubber tree, growing in marshes, flows out as a white mass, then thickens, when acted upon by fire, becomes dark, and again elastic <...>. Copal resin sweats and bubbles in the fire and later turns into very sweet smoke.” Thickened pieces of copal resin resemble amber, and the name copal in the Nahuatl language means incense. In Central American indigenous belief, the smoke of copal carries pleas and prayers to the skies above.

IV. Enchantment x Recovery

Merely by holding a piece of amber one can feel the weight of a time capsule millions of years old. This living mineral preserves traces of prehistoric nature – pine sap, dust, plants and animals caught in its flow. Ancient Roman poet Martial, renowned for his epigrams satirically depicting the everyday life of the old city, recorded another magical property of amber. Among the numerous witty lines, three inscriptions allegorically depict death using amber as a symbol of eternity. A feeble ant trapped in the sap becomes a treasure; for the bee, amber becomes a luxurious sarcophagus as a reward for hard work, and even Cleopatra might envy the eternal afterlife of a viper trapped in the resin. Martial not only poeticised burial rituals and the importance of posthumous gifts, but also revealed the unique power of amber to capture time. In the exhibition objects, amber also functions as the Greek ἤλεκτρον (Elektron – amber). In this constructed narrative of objects, it attracts not only people – viewers and interpreters – but also familial materials – living and artificial, raw and processed,

grounding and electrifying. Here, amber merges with precious metals, synthetic ivory substitutes for 3D printers, orange calcite, and various natural resins such as copal, kauri gum, linen, woven wicker.

In the narrative constructed by his creations, the artist seeks to compel the viewer to think through materials: to promote consciousness, to reveal the assumptions of the existence of these materials in our environment, and to initiate discussion. Therefore, avoiding clichés and learned narratives, amber is chosen for its controversial load – weighty emotional, cultural, and ideological baggage opposing its geological purity.

Similarly significant weight is given to the artist's gaze by today's ecological discourse, widely known as the Anthropocene geological era as coined by Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen. This aspect urges us to look at amber and its extraction even more consciously, to turn even more directly to the relationships between human activity and natural processes, and to feel even more acutely that humanity, having become a geological force, is obliged to seek significantly more sustainable and fair decisions.

V. Periphery x Centre

Material kinship illuminates the violent logic of history-making narratives that have shaped and continue to shape human history. Through domination and oppression, colonialism named most life, land, people and waterways as “material” or “property”. This leads straight to its conversion to capital. This mode of thinking leads from the material to territorial interrogation of amber, related to the Amber Road and trade exchanges in the Bronze Age, continuing the purpose of this exhibition.

Cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman, in the light of his theory of centre and periphery as a meaning-producing engine, argued that it is precisely on the periphery, i.e., the edge of the dominant culture, that new meanings are most intensively created, supporting and sometimes overtaking the relevance of the centre. According to him, it is not the centre, not the canon, but the periphery that is the condition for cultural renewal. In the early history of amber, this is evidenced by how influential centres of that time shifted their interest into far lands of the southeastern Baltics due to unseen, beautiful stones resembling the sun itself.

In the theory of world systems though, the core - industrialised capitalist or imperialist countries, depend on appropriation and resource acquisition from peripheral or semi-peripheral countries. The Amber Road was an important factor that allowed for the development of early European political structures (the system of centres and peripheries in the East and Mediterranean), which slowed the spread of innovation and conducted active interventions in controlling trade routes in the further northern parts of Europe. During the Soviet era, the Baltic region became a periphery in rela-

tion to Moscow, and the most significant geological amber findings from Kaliningrad travelled to the amber exchange in Saint Petersburg.

Amber played a significant role in the reconstruction and control of Lithuanian historical memory, directed by the colonialist centre - Moscow - during the Soviet occupation years. Amber, along with song festivals or the Rumšiškės ethnographic museum of folk life, was employed as an “object of emotion,” assigned emotions of joy, diverting attention from other expectations of nationality.

The desire to continue the tradition of amber-based national narratives today may lead to Thomas Meyer’s theory of identity mania. The problem of identity as part of post-colonial discourse is highlighted as a sum of various aspects of society and its representation. Nowadays, identity is perceived as a multifaceted phenomenon, as a narrative or storytelling, constructed rather than emerging on its own. Reflecting on this, the author of this exhibition avoids familiar symbolism that could be related to national identity. Even his use of a 3D modelling process for the objects, taking place in virtual reality, allowed their existence in an undefined geography.

Raw amber and its familial natural materials, used to create the design objects in the exhibition, arrived from various places around the world. This code allows them to start deconstructing the colonial relationship between the centre and periphery, breaking down the monopoly of amber into mere dust. Take a look at these magnetic objects around you and hear them tell a story of how contemporary creative consciousness recreates old narratives and establishes new praxis of knowledge acquisition.

About the Author

Mantas Lesauskas (1984) is a designer and researcher renowned for his limited-edition furniture and sculptural design pieces that blur the lines between art and design. Known for his tactile approach, Lesauskas experiments with techniques and long-lasting natural materials to explore archetypes and rituals. His work is driven by a fascination with the narratives evoked by objects, aiming to create pieces that challenge and engage, much like art pieces do. His commitment to combining artisanal craftsmanship with innovative industrial processes is reflected in his design pieces.

A Vilnius Academy of Arts alum, Lesauskas earned a Licentiate of Arts in 2011 with his thesis 'Narratives of Nostalgia in Design Objects'. He is also an associate professor at the Design Department at Vilnius Academy of Arts. Lesauskas has had several solo exhibitions in various art galleries; his work can be found in Lithuanian museums as well as in private collections in Lithuania and abroad.

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The exhibition architecture contains organic latex harvested from the Brazilian rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*). The bark of this tree exudes a milky white fluid, which later solidifies into a transparent yellowish gum. In the plane of material kinship, latex bleeding from the trees resembles the prehistoric infancy of amber. The country of origin of this latex is Malaysia. Meanwhile, the consoles were made out of pine wood, weathered by sanding and coated with natural tinted oil imported from Denmark.

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Objects

1 CANDELABRA

Cast bronze (LT)
Silicone bronze rods (UK)
Dominican amber (DO)
Freeform raw malachite (MX)
Religious candles (MX)

2 BREAD CONTAINER, 2024

Verdigris patinated cast bronze (LT)
Straw plaited in an ancient method (straw
plaiter Irena Vapšienė, Kupiškis, LT)
Amber with natural holes (LT)

3 CANDLESTICK, 2024

Patinated cast bronze (LT)
Polished brass (LT)
Baltic amber (LT)
Kauri tree gum (NZ)
Religious candle (MX)

4 BREAD STAND / AMBER DUST INCENSE HOLDER

Cloth interwoven with linen and amber
(weaver Inita Dzalbe, LV)
Amber with natural holes (LT)
Verdigris patinated cast bronze (LT)
Amber dust (LT)
Copal (MX)
Myrrh (SO)
Frankincense (SO)
Benzoin (ID)
Arabic Lump Resin (SO)
Guggul Gum (IN)
Sourdough bread
(made at the bakery Druska Miltai Vanduo, LT)
Charcoal

5 BOOK STAND, 2024

Silver plated cast bronze (LT)
Twisted bronze wire (UK)
Digory®: 3D Printed alternative to ivory (AT)
Baltic amber (LT)
Candles (LT)

6 GATHERERS' BASKETS, 2024

Woven straw
(straw weaver Irena Vapšienė, Kupiškis, LT)
Bronze wire (UK)
Amber beads (LT)
Yellow calcite (MX)
White copal resin (MX)

7 ARMCHAIR XB-70 V, 2022

Blackened and limed oak
Brushed aluminium
Cotton canvas tarpaulin
Baltic sea sand
Yellow glass

8 SIDE TABLE F15 E, 2022

Blackened and limed oak
Brushed aluminium
Cotton canvas tarpaulin

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