

Curera – Geographies is the first residency for curators in Norrbotten. On site, one curator is given the opportunity to develop a curatorial idea in dialogue with the specific cultural and geographical landscape. The residency is not tied to requirements for the production of an exhibition for example, but instead is designed as an opportunity for the curator to meet the artistic and social context in the region.

Zeren Oruc, from Turkey, is the chosen curator for the residency in May 2023.



Photo: Vilmanté Lokcikaić, Novi Sad, 2021

Below is an interview with Zeren, by Lucie Gottlieb, project manager for Curera.

Hi Zeren, you will be Konstfrämjandet Norrbotten's new curator in residence. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Hi Lucie, thanks for having this conversation with me.

I'm an independent curator who mostly works on ecocriticism and overlooked cultural elements in post-modern society. A large portion of my focus is on destructive land and water use, and its effects on ecology. I run a semi-off-grid residency in Spain, where I host artists who are interested in these subjects and provide space for alternative art production and material research.

Aside from that, I see curating beyond its traditional or conventional sense and forms, so my practice varies a lot based on what I want to say and how I want to say it. Sometimes, this gets really challenging, but it's important for me to create open conversation and care in my practice, and find different ways of narration or connection. To be honest, I don't want to be only identified by my practice, which is very hard given the context, but I'm a person with a multitude of interests, wants, and needs, and at some point all of those influence my work too.

You will come during the spring to stay for a month in Norrbotten and this will be your first visit to Sweden. What motivated you to apply for this residency?

As a curator, I'm always on the lookout for new interactions and getting to know places that might create stark contrasts with what I'm familiar with. So when a friend of mine sent me Konstfrämjandet Norrbotten's call, two things resonated with me: the location and the open-ended approach of Curera.

Having never been to Sweden – nor this up north for that matter – was definitely a factor, but I think this specific region played a big part in it. For one, I'm co-curating an ecology-focused project with a Sami curator from Norway, and I wanted to know the land and the regional environmental issues overall, but I think there was something more personal about it too.

In 2017, I got to know the work of Britta Marakatt-Labba through a piece where she addresses the mining industry in northern Sweden. Her work gave me deep sorrow since I come from a country that suffers from irreversible destruction caused by mining, but it also made me realise how our nomadic culture (Yörük and Turkmen people of Turkey) was distanced from contemporary art or any contemporary conversation. So, a part of me wants to understand how this culture and local artists took initiative to continue telling their stories one way or another, and how we did not or could not. I have to thank you, Lucie, for asking this question. I think I never voiced this thought before. This is not on anybody's agenda, and I thought it wouldn't be relevant to anyone else but me, yet I'm happy that you got me thinking about it.

As for the second part, I think Curera's process-oriented approach is rather rare, and as a curator who tries to practise *slow curating*, I find this very valuable. I'm not interested in going somewhere and curating a top-down show in a month or two. It's more important for me to understand the region, local artists, and audiences first, and build a relationship that could turn into something else in the future. Producing takes a lot of effort and resources, and these things are exhaustible, so I would like to be mindful of what we have and what I can do with it.

Can you tell us more about your current research and how you wish to develop it during your stay?

Currently, I'm working on a long-term project focusing on the impact of our food production and consumption habits on the environment. The project researches how excessive agriculture and our cultural eating habits can play a part in the overuse of resources, degradation of land, and forms of exploitation. Moreover, my culture is deeply rooted in food and collective eating. All of this makes me look at how we eat our land, especially when we are living in a place where we don't grow food. So, I seek less extractivist practices such as disappearing knowledge of foraging or seasonal eating, while of course keeping in mind the dangers of elitist rhetoric or shame culture when it comes to choices of food.

Norrbotten's climate and agriculture are incredibly different than the southern coast of Turkey's, where I grew up, or than the southeast coast of Spain's, where I've been managing a residency. Both of these places have a suitable climate for year-long agriculture and are major producers of crops in Europe. Of course, this comes with a greater cost to the land and locals. With this contrast and globalised way of looking into food in mind, I want to explore the various agricultural methods, from modern agriculture to traditional herding or foraging practices, and see how the relationship to food differs here, and of course, if this is a relevant topic for the local art scene. One thing to mention here, I don't have any intention to romanticise a specific way of sourcing food or propose an unrealistic alternative to current practices. I'm here to understand what's happening locally, how people are experiencing it, and how art is reacting to it, but also, I want to be understood and maybe present an alternative reality that comes from the south.

In your application, you talk about the importance of cultivating long-term relationships. How do you incorporate them into your curatorial work?

Tough question to answer since this depends on each case, but I can say I try to see the people I work with for who they are. I know it's a bit vague, but when I work with someone I don't necessarily look at them with their curated professional identities. I try to holistically see and understand the person they are, which means I have to be open to hearing their concerns, anxieties, day-to-day life, what they care about other than art, and so much more. Usually, this makes us vulnerable to each other, but genuinely caring too. So, once that initial reason of interest, which is purely professional, turns into a more meaningful connection, it naturally becomes a long-term relationship for me.

This is a lot easier to practise with people with whom I work/meet somewhat regularly. For instance, I have weekly curatorial sessions* with the artists who participate in my residency. After having those in-depth conversations, there's a sense of mutual understanding between us, and working together becomes organic. So, often I end up conceptualising projects that would bring these artists together, which hopefully, gives them a ground to connect with like-minded people too, aside from having another project to work on.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not always working with the same set of artists. I'm not Tarantino or Scorsese, but I do collaborate with artists multiple times and sometimes this is more on the

ground level with my sessions. I think this is partly because I really enjoy being involved in artistic processes and believe curating can come in any shape and form.

What do you hope to bring with you from this residency?

I would like to go home with some understanding of Norrbotten: the land, the people, the food, and local issues. When I leave the region, I want to know I'm familiar with the place and local art scene as much as possible and feel like I can come back here at some point in the future. In terms of my research, I hope to have a better understanding of what food means to people, get to know different practices, and maybe even learn some local recipes. I have to say Norrbotten is a big unknown to me, and I look forward to being surprised by it and creating new connections to further in many forms.

*Form of consultancy, but a lot more engaged in an artistic capacity without needing to be a co-creator.

*Curera is ongoing between January and June 2023. The project is divided into three overlapping and parallel parts. **Collaboration**; a series of lectures, workshops and network meetings, **Learnings**; a collaboration with the Master's programme in Curating at Stockholm University and **Geographies**; a curator residency on site in Norrbotten. Together the parts contribute in different ways to act for curators as a profession, by creating dialogue with potential commissioners and funders, and initiating public activities at various locations in Norrbotten.*

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