

The International Wood Firing Residency 'Kohila', Estonia
July 4-28, 2025

Material in Motion - Ruta Butkute

I participated in the 25th Kohila International Wood-Firing Ceramics residency, held from July 4 to July 28, 2025, at the historic Tohisoo Manor in Kohila, Estonia. This anniversary edition marked a significant milestone for one of the Baltic region's most enduring and collaborative events in contemporary ceramics. The event was curated and organized by sculptor Jekaterina Kaplan and the board of the Estonian Ceramists Association.

The residency program provides opportunities for large-scale sculpture creation and incorporates a traditional wood firing process. The residency's wood-firing technique is inspired by the Japanese Anagama firing tradition, which involves a three-day kiln firing. This process includes working directly with the kiln, making sculptures from various types of clay, drying the sculptures, glazing them, loading them into the kiln, and participating in the entire firing process. High experimentation with glazes and firing techniques during this process leads to unpredictable and unique surface finishes.

The program offers continuous technical support and personalized guidance while also providing access to local materials and fostering meaningful exchanges among international artists. The residency program features two Anagama firing sessions, allowing participants to develop sculptural works and explore their outcomes. I have received technical knowledge and guidance from the technical team, including Andreas Allik, Joonas Parve, and Kris Ojasuu. I have been working alongside a team of international artists, which includes Rikki Winde (Sweden/Norway), Tosha Parmar (India), Paula Ruuttunen (Finland), Rūta Butkutė (Lithuania/Netherlands), Ieva Rute (Lithuania), Kala Kovács (Hungary/Netherlands), Peter Christian Johnson, Stephen Driver (USA), Henri Hütt (Estonia), and Juss Heinsa (Estonia).

The kiln has been developed over the years through a highly professional technical process. Originally built by Andreas Allik, he participates throughout the entire firing process to guide the resident artists. The careful way in which a sculpture piece is placed and carried to the kiln, accompanied by focused silence, signifies that the firing process has already begun. Observing the connection between the kiln space and the shape of the sculpture can indicate the outcome and the energies of the fire—how much it can embrace, shift, crystallize, ash, transform, and ultimately become.

My extensive residency experience has led to unique sculptural results and distinctive surfaces, particularly in capturing the ash produced during firing. I would call it the participation in the technical dance around the kiln as wood was placed to fire. The way the body moves influences the speed at which the fire burns. It is a long and intense process that requires careful observation and appropriate actions, moving in harmony with the fire and adjusting to the temperature in the kiln.



Ruta Butkute, wood firing process, anagama kiln, 2025, Kohila, Estonia



Andreas Allik, technical master, unpacking anagama kiln, 2025



Material in Motion, Ruta Butkute, 2025, sculptures, anagama firing, Kohila, Estonia (unloading anagama with technical team: Andreas Allik, Kriss Ojassu, Joonas Parve)

The wood-firing method has been practiced since prehistoric times, as fire transforms clay into a new form. However, the wood firing process often seems impractical. Electric kilns can never truly replicate the direct effects of flames produced by wood firing. The flames alter the shape and surface of the pieces, bringing them to life. The outcome is not entirely within the maker's control; while years of experience may allow them to influence it to some extent, they cannot dictate the colors and textures, as those are determined solely by fire. During the long firing process, some pieces may crack, some may explode, and others may remain intact—this is often left to chance. The results can vary widely: some are dark, grey, some bright brown, and some exhibit bright oranges; it's a true surprise or perhaps a conscious decision to accept whatever emerges.

My sculpture project, "Material In Motion," aimed to create a large sculptural installation that captures the marks of flames and ashes. The results of my sculptural pieces reflect the patterns of the fire, and visible cracks show how I have been testing the limits of the material. I explored the potential for larger sculptures in the wood-firing kiln, taking significant risks in the process. My research focused on the "skin" of the clay sculptures, enhancing surface quality through the use of ash and oxides, and optimizing firing results. Throughout my research, I discovered new textural traces that can be created on sculptures, observing how clay burns and resembles wood or coal. Clay can evolve from a simple material into unpredictable results with marked surfaces due to the lengthy firing process and the movement of flames alongside temperature changes. I investigated the performance of clay, constantly responding to it in physical processes, playing with chance and coincidence, and embracing unexpected outcomes marked by natural processes.

The installation "Material in Motion" was temporarily set up for the opening festive event, the exhibition at Tohisoo Manor House in Kohila. My artworks have raised new questions about how to preserve the ash on the sculptures and maintain the firing marks and traces created during the process. As part of this installation, I aim to exhibit these objects in the same positions they lay in the kiln, which is a careful and deliberate process. I am exploring ways to showcase the artwork in a manner that reflects the firing processes the artwork undergoes. Additionally, discovering how to recreate the ash after it falls off during transportation.

The experiences at the residency inspire me to explore how the temporality of fire can be manifested through indirect materials and shapes, as well as how movement can be made visible. My artwork is currently being transported to the Netherlands, where it will be integrated into the final installation in a collaboration with gallery Bradwolff & Partners in Amsterdam.



Material in Motion, Ruta Butkute, 2025, sculptures, anagama firing, Kohila, Estonia

Residency Public Program:

- Artist Talk: July 7, 2025, at historic Tohisoo Manor in Kohila, Estonia
- Open Studios: July 10, 2025, at historic Tohisoo Manor in Kohila, Estonia
- Anniversary Exhibition: July 27-28, 2025, at historic Tohisoo Manor in Kohila, Estonia
- upcoming: As part of this anniversary edition, the artworks created during the residency will be featured in the exhibition "After Fire, After Life," which will take place on September 29, 2025, during the Tallinn Design Festival XX at Krulli Kvartal in Tallinn.

Residency website: <https://www.kohilasymposium.com>

Artist website: www.rutabutkute.com

Exhibition reviews:

<https://echogonewrong.com/photo-reportage-from-the-25th-kohila-international-wood-firing-ceramics-symposium-at-tohisoo-manor-in-kohila-estonia/>
<https://www.sirp.ee/savist-sild-sattumuslikkusesse/>



Material in Motion, Ruta Butkute, 2025, Installation detail, 700 x 200 x 100 cm, Tohisoo Manor Kohila, Estonia





Material in Motion, Ruta Butkute, 2025, Installation detail, 700 x 200 x 100 cm, Tohisoo Manor Kohila, Estonia