

SARP (The Sámi Art Research Project)

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SARP – a brief introduction

Svein Aamold, October 2010

SARP, the Sámi Art Research Project, runs for four years, from 2009 to 2013, funded by The Research Council of Norway and the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Tromsø. The project is interdisciplinary and represents a unique possibility to carry out new research on Sámi art and related topics.

The general objectives of SARP include several fields of study within art history, literature, aesthetics, culture and philosophy. The project focuses variously on indigenous and non-indigenous activities, theories and methodologies. Its main objective is, however, to generate new knowledge of Sámi art and bring forth new theoretical approaches to its relevant art discourses. The project also seeks to present empirical data and to deconstruct hitherto prevailing theories and methods in the research on Sámi art. Further, based on its interdisciplinary approaches, the project involves studies of culture, literature, aesthetics and philosophy as relevant in wider contexts of indigenous practices.

The empirical positions within the project may be Sámi art works, duodji, performance, literature or other texts, architecture, institutions such as museums or other collections of Sámi art, etc. The scopes of investigation will possibly combine one or several indigenous, theoretical, ethical, historical and contemporary issues. Other productive approaches will be based on multi-cultural perspectives in studies of how Sámi art and culture is part in of larger, circumpolar or international art-discourses. We also want to question how Sámi art and culture works as a counter-discourse in ethno-political struggles. Thus, the project will function as a focus-point for research in multiple directions.

How can we do this? Only two collaborators in the project are themselves Sámi, the others are Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Danish, German and Swiss. Based on a combination of collaborative efforts, three main conferences (in October 2009, June 2011, and autumn 2012), and investigation on an individual basis, we do hope to produce research that will prove relevant and groundbreaking for a Sámi and non-Sámi public alike.

The beginnings of a proper Sámi art, as differing from duodji (a term often referring to handicrafts, but which also translates as an act, activity or

product, see *The Saami: A Cultural Encyclopaedia*, ed. Ulla-Maija Kulonen, Irja Seurujärvi and Risto Pulkkinen, Vammala, Finland: SKS, 2005: 74), is recent, mainly belonging to the time since the Second World War. And the idea of a proper, Sámi art history is still fresh. The praxis of art as part of traditional Sámi cultures, however, is first of all related to the concept of duodji and the aesthetic tradition determined by religious, representational and commemorative functions.

For more than a decade, quite a few art historians at the University of Tromsø have been actively involved in research on Sámi art. We have experienced, however, that those Eurocentric perspectives of Sámi culture as 'Other', 'different' or even 'exotic' is still upheld in writings and critics on Sámi art. We realized that it is difficult to undertake art historical research on Sámi art unless our perspectives simultaneously are being criticized and new approaches developed. Attempts at bringing forth new empirical knowledge by using traditional historiography and theory are being trapped in some way or another by traditional ethnographical, art historical or comparative analyses.

Our hypothesis is that the traditional investigation falls into such traps due to its lack of a critique of discourses and methods. One discursive point of reference is the writing of history as such. Another is how all art is forced to produce meaning modelled on verbal language. Our project will, based on theories by Manfredo Tafuri, Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, among others, place objects and phenomena at its centres of interest. We want to search further away from language into what is called The iconic turn, or The pictorial turn, taking as a starting point the difference that pictures represents as compared to texts. Such theories also encompass tools for deconstruction and critique.

Indigenous methodology is another point of reference. As Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln have pointed out, however, "[i]ndigenous knowledge systems are too frequently made into objects of study, treated as if they were instances of quaint folk theory held by the members of a primitive culture". SARP aims at reversing this equation, at "making Western systems of knowledge the object of critique and inquiry" (Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction", *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008: 6).

Many Sámi artists of today have probably met with the challenge described by the Cuban critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera, referring to the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo: "Third World artists are constantly asked to display their identity, to be *fantastic*, to look like no one else or to look like Frida..." (Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism" [originally published in *Third Text*, winter 1992/3], *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, transl. by Jaime Flórez, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Oxford et al.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005: 221). On the other hand, extreme anti-Eurocentrism represents the problem of freezing traditional Sámi culture, relegating it to a museum, ignoring living

peoples' need to respond actively to the reality of their time. Further, extreme relativism represents a danger that may result in the lack of internal integration and horizontal communication in contrast with the vertical connection with "The First World". Still another heritage of Eurocentrism that continue to survive is the myth of a universal value in art and the establishment of a hierarchy of works based in the concept of "universality". As Mosquera formulates it, "[a]rt is very linked to cultural specificity, but possess a polysemic ambiguity, open to diverse readings" (Mosquera 2005: 222).

Sámi art today is part of an international, contemporary art scene. Current Sámi art must, however, satisfy the aesthetic, cultural, social and communicative demands of the community from and for which it is made. As an active part of today's Sámi reality, Sámi art involves mixed, relational, appropriative, and "inauthentic" responses. As Mosquera points out, "[i]n contemporary experience, contextualization, recycling, appropriation and re-semanticisation gain more and more power as a consequence of increased interaction among cultures" (Mosquera 2005: 222-223.)

What Mosquera has called the Marco Polo Syndrome embodies a double-edged sword. It questions the problems of intercultural communication: Marco Polo was a pioneer in the understanding of the Other, but his chances of bridging two cultures were lost through the suspicion provoked from both sides, especially from his. (Mosquera 2005: 218-25.) The postcolonial challenge is to bridge the gaps between our cultures to avoid them from locking themselves in isolating traditions if they want to take part in today's dynamic and offer solutions to their own problems. The problem is not preserving the traditions, but adapting them vigorously within the new epoch. The de-Eurocentralisation in art is not about returning to purity, but about adopting postcolonial "impurity" through which we might express our own thought.

SARP, some individual projects (drafts)

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Image and Embodied Perception – Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer

Ståle Finke

The paper will take issue with the phenomenological account of perception and embodied vision and attempt to shed some light upon the claim made by Gadamer that the image participates in the world. Indeed the image is a fragment of the world itself and, thus, in virtue of being an embodied enactment of appearance, discloses the ways in which things situate our fundamental orientation within the world perceptually.

In particular, two aspects of the phenomenological account will be of crucial concern:

(i) The ways in which modern art, beginning with the still-life, turns the material-specific vehicles of presentation and expression into an explicit aesthetic reflection of the embodied and perceptual nature of the image itself,

its turn towards what Merlau-Ponty calls the depths of the perceived world. (ii) Further, Gadamer thought that the depths of embodied perception requires attention to a specific language of things, makes the image itself a thing among things, a specific nature or formation conveying the significance of thingly natures. Rather than being a representation of the world, inner or outer, the image belongs to the way in which the world shows itself. In this showing, the visible is framed by the invisible.

[Architectural demarcations]

Elin Haugdal

My research interests lie in architecture in Sápmi, official buildings erected between 1950 and today, restricted to the northern parts of the nordic countries. Through a selected numbers of buildings I want to investigate *architectural demarcations*. The term *demarcation* is to be developed and limited throughout the project. Preliminarily it concerns architecture's physical boundaries, the visual outline and the relation between figure and landscape, as well as negotiations of political and cultural borders.

Architecture could be understood as physical boundary in space, dividing inside from outside, offering shelter and space for different purposes. In cold climates this physical boundary between inside and outside is traditionally very definite, resulting in compact and closed building types with only small openings in walls or roofs. Exploiting more advanced technology many official buildings in Sápmi the last decenniums break down the traditional boundaries and integrate architecture and landscape in new and non-typological ways. How this is carried out, also through the use of surface materials, elevation and topographical adaptation, is to be investigated.

The building's surface and outline gather it into a whole, a figure to be visually recognized. Whether the building's figure stands clear and strong against the background or appears as more degenerated and weak, is an interesting point in new sami architecture which is to be explored, likewise how the architectonic figure reveals the surroundings or introduce foreign figures which offer new interpretations of the landscape. Here invisible territorial markers or tresholds, common in traditional and private sami architecture, is part of the topic.

The cultural and political implications of architecture is of course a broad field to investigate, and my purpose is to show how architecture is part of, intentionally or not, cultural and political processes in Sápmi. Building is marking and making cultural territory.

Sámi Art in Finland from 1979

Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja

Heritage of Sámi art reaches back to the prehistorical rock drawings, to the traditional shaman drums and to duodji, handicraft. Despite of long history, modern Sámi art is young. Sámi Artists Association was founded in November 1979. Sámi art today takes its main influences from ideal of western art without forgetting its Sámi basis.

At first, in 1980s, it seemed to be a little bit problematic to define what is Sámi art and who is Sámi artist. Sometimes the definition was based on art itself: its relationship with duodji or Sámi culture, generally, or Sámi mythologies. Sometimes it was based on artist: his/her ethnical background or ability to speak Sámi.

In Finland, today there are artists as Petteri Laiti and Tuula-Maija Magga-Hetta, whose art gets influences from duodji. Seija Ranttila's modern design is based on Sámi clothes and culture. Some artists as Merja Helander, Satu Natunen, Outi Pieski and Merja Aletta Ranttila have been in art schools. Some artists are born and live in South Finland and can not speak Sámi language. Specially for them, art seems to be a tool to handle their own identity. Sometimes Sámi art is between Sámi tradition and western art and makes its interpretation of these two traditions. Because of Sámi art takes many forms and contents, the researchers have to be aware of Sámi culture and to take account of different other contexts.

Sápmi revisited: Superimpositions of body and landscape in contemporary Sámi art

Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen

The sub-project will look into how Sámi national identity is negotiated and re-formulated in the eyes of those contemporary artists who are born, educated, or, living other places than Sápmi. Through the use of the modern western art concept they revisit the land of their origin and offer an outside gaze (John Urry) informed by post-colonial critique (Homi Bhabha, Edward Said). In Jorma Puranen's photo series "Imaginary Homecoming" (1993), Marja Helander's photo series "Modern Nomads" (2001) and Katarina Pirak Sikku's installations "Dollet" (2006) and "Here begins Sápmi" (2008) superimpositions of body and landscape produce a displacement between territory and subject that is characteristic of the negotiation of the nation in globalized culture where both deterritorialization and reterritorialization are at work (John Tomlinson, Arjun Appadurai, Ronald Robertson).

Curating Sámi art / exhibiting Sámi artists

Jan Erik Lundström

Employing my own curatorial practice - performed through a series of exhibitions ranging from 1992 – 2010 –as primary source material, this research project will explore a cluster of issues that arise when engaging curatorially in the work of artists, in the field of contemporary art, with a Sámi background.

Issues of inclusion/exclusion, of separation/incorporation, are one strand of concerns where the call for specific narratives of the development of Sámi art and of very particular engagements with Sámi tradition, articulations of and explorations of identity, run parallel to or are even opposed to the equally crucial call for locating the work of Sámi artists within their – proper – national/international context.

Another set of concerns address the rich and complex relationship between the Sámi-specific tradition of duodji and a variety of practices among contemporary artists – both making use of inherited duodji methods, as well as revising, reinventing, or simply leaving them behind.

A third set of concerns focus the problematic of ethnification, the tendency of reducing the practices of Sámi artists to nothing but expressions of or the outcome of their Sámi identity.

The sampling of exhibitions include thematic shows as well as group shows, solo exhibitions as well as non-Sami-specific exhibitions where the Sámi artist meet with non Sámi artists. Exhibitions investigated will include *At the Borders: Photography and Cultural Identity, Människor I Norr/People of the North*, *Same,same but Different* and *Being A Part*.

Routing Roots – Aspects of Anthropologization in Global Contemporary Art Birgit Mersmann

In the course of the globalization of art since the 1990s, anthropology has gained new attention and prestige as both artistic theme and art-theoretical perspective. First and foremost, this is due to the fact that anthropology in general and anthropology of art in particular has always been investigating cultural artefacts, traditions and practices cross-culturally; as a science of alterity, it has persistently challenged and questioned the Western categories and systematics of art history and aesthetics.

Meanwhile, anthropologists, art historians, and cultural critics have recognized the anthropological turn in the global contemporary art world and reflected upon it. Be it that Georges E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers call for a Critical Art Ethnography to track the new global traffic in art and culture; that Hans Belting observes the acknowledgment and reconfiguration of ethnic arts as global contemporary art; or that Hal Foster detects an “ethnographic self-fashioning” as contemporary art practice. A characteristic of this contemporary reawakening of the ethnographic in art is its ambivalent nature shifting between the post- and neo-ethnic perspective. It is a conflictual dilemma, contemporary Sami art is likewise confronted with.

The paper will look at the historical conditions and current motivations for this anthropological turn of the global art world from the angle of exhibition culture. By comparatively analyzing four different exhibitions that deal with the anthropologization of art: 1. *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (MoMA 1984), 2. *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou 1989), 3. *Bildwelten. Afrika, Ozeanien und die Moderne* (Fondation Beyeler 2009), 4. *Permanent Exhibition Quai Branly* (Paris 2010), it hopes to shed light onto the old and new problem how to negotiate alterity and identity in art.

Actual Differences? Cultural Competence as a Key Factor of Interpretation and Discourse in Relation to Iver Jåks's Sculptural Works

Irene Snarby

In this project I aim to make a contribution to the scientific community with an interpretative and a theoretically more nuanced approach to the artist Iver Jåks and his sculptural art works. Iver Jåks integrated both western modernist art concepts and Sami "duodji" tradition into his sculptural art works. I define "duodji" as the whole handicraft process from thought till the end product. This resulted in a mixed reception of his art within the world of art critics due to a confused understanding of his work, since few have managed to integrate this duality. I intend to establish a culturally informed perspective from within the "duodji" tradition combined with the modern theory and a global point of view.

Jåks challenge of western modernist art concepts require a great effort to understand his works in the present global perspective, where the values of western art institutions are questioned from emerging markets and local cultural societies. Jåks pragmatic expression has made a significant impact on several Sami artists and "duojarer" (= artisans). This new perspective aims to equal the balance on discourses related to Sami arts in the historical as well as in the modern art perspective.

I intend to research and analyse particular three-dimensional works by Iver Jåks based on these assumptions and discourses. The central theme lies in documenting the interaction of his works with a qualified audience and knowledgeable sources filtered through language and cultural belongings. In addition I will evaluate how contemporary currents and other related factors, formed Iver Jåks's artistic development. Through semi-structured interviews and research of sources I wish to discover new aspects of his works from a culturally interpretative context.

Sami Ornament?

Christian Spies

One of the main topics within the debate on ornament in Germany at the end of the 19th century was the anthropological impulse for the invention of ornamental decoration and its historical evolution. Ornaments were either said to be founded on material aspects and technical production, illustrated by weaving (Gottfried Semper). Or they were defined as autonomous decorative articulations situated within an original artistic drive (Alois Riegl).

Until today this 19th century discussion stands for the common understanding of ornament as 'transcultural constant' and marks a methodological problem: Can ornament actually be seen as fundamental anthropological drive for artistic articulation that goes beyond historical shifts and cultural differences?

Looking at Sami Ornaments on textiles, and especially the ornamental images on the Sami drums, will allow to highlight this 19th century debate. Early (German) research on Sami objects like Ernst Manker's book on the "Lappische Zaubertrommel" (1938) can be related to the Riegl/Semper

debate. Furthermore a close reading of the drum images as amalgamations of different types of pictorial representation (symbolic representation, writing, ornament, cartography, perspective, etc.) can lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the use of ornament within a very special cultural and historical field.

The ambiguities of cultural translation (preliminary note)

Kirsten Thisted

I will write an abstract called “The ambiguities of cultural translation”. With the Sami and Greenlandic literature as example, I will try to show how cultural transfer does not always eliminate, but can also be a means of securing the minority language.

Sámi Abstract Art?

Svein Aamold

This project focuses on works by a few contemporary Sámi artists within the field of abstract art, especially paintings by Synnøve Persen (b.1950) and Alf Magne Salo (b.1959). I will question how these artworks relate to, use or subvert the “boom” of abstract art in America and Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. Abstract art has been labelled in many ways, such as oscillating between positions based on stringent compositions linked to ideas of geometry and constructivism, on the subjective or personal expressions of lyrical or abstract expressionism, and on concepts of play, chance and the unconscious in surrealist or avant-garde art.

Why do some contemporary Sámi artists take on abstract art, and especially its modernist traditions? How do their works differ, comment or criticize earlier abstract art? What impacts of Sámi contexts, historical, cultural, artistic, personal, political or other are relevant when discussing these works? In what ways do such works relate to current topics in Sámi culture, such as discussions based on various concepts of difference, otherness, identity, hybridization, etc.?

Secondly, how do contemporary, abstract Sámi art challenge our understanding of abstractness in art? Historically, the reception of abstract art varies between ideas of the decorative or the ornamental on the one hand, and, on the other, ideas of art as “other”, to the utopian, to human values, to religious and metaphysical concepts, or to ideals about art and society, art and the human, art and the eternal.