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Sami Artist Group 1978–1983 – Otherness or Avant-garde?

In the mid-1970s, five young Sami artists were invited by Arts Council of Norway to make the designs for the mural decorations of the newly erected school in the small village of Láhpoluoppal in the municipality of Kautokeino. The five artists were Synnøve Persen (b. 1950), Aage Gaup (b. 1943), Josef Halse (b. 1951), Ingunn Utsi (b. 1948) and Maja Dunfjeld (b. 1947). Behind the initiative stood Iver Jåks (1932–2007), already a recognised Sami artist, and the architects who had designed the school.¹ The decorations were completed in 1980, but prior to this, the cooperation between the five artists, and the fact that they met, were the beginning of something that none of the involved then would know neither the importance nor the consequences of.

One immediate result was the founding of the Sami Artist Group in 1978. Aage Gaup, Synnøve Persen and Josef Halse continued to cooperate within the artist group. Other members of the group were Hans Ragnar Mathisen (b. 1945), Trygve Lund Guttormsen (b. 1933), Ranveig Persen (b. 1953), and Berit Marit Hætta (b. 1948). Britta Marakatt Labba (b. 1951) joined the group in 1980.² The members were inspired by other artist groups, both in Norway and internationally, which were founded on a collective way of working for a political agenda. Moreover, they were proud of being Sami and therefore wanted the group to be located in Sápmi.³

The other result of the Láhpoluoppal cooperation and the artist group's practice, was the establishment of Sami national art institutions and of a contemporary, genuinely modern Sami art scene. This article will explore whether the practice of the artists in the group in the years from 1978 until 1983 can be understood as an avant-garde project, or

¹ The architects were Kjell Borgen, Ragnvald Bing Lorentzen and Ashish Krisna. The building is presented in *Byggekunst* 1977: 5, pp. 158–160.

² *Sámi Dáiddarleksikona / Samisk kunstnerleksikon*, Alta 1993, p. 17; and *Sámi Dáiddojoavku*. Husmøteprotokoll 1979–1983. Private archive.

³ Hanna H. Hansen. *Fortellinger om samisk samtidskunst*, Karasjok: Davvi Girji, 2007, p. 89.

rather as a neo-avant-garde according to Hal Foster's characterisations. Foster claims that in the first neo-avant-garde in the 1960s, artists searched to find a new platform for their art. The historical avant-garde, including Dada and Duchamp, had then changed from forming a critical perspective on art institutions, to being a part of the same institutions. The neo-avant-garde wanted to explore not only art's relation to space and time, but also its relation to social practice.⁴ Their practice included a critique of the "old charlatanry of the bohemian artists as well as the new institutionality of the avant-garde."⁵ The second neo-avant-garde took the consequence of the critique and moved away from the oppositional positions towards art's institutions to displacements and deconstructions of the same institutions, according to Foster.⁶ It is in this understanding of the second neo-avant-garde the article will explore Sami Artist Group's practice.

The point of such an exploration, whether Sami Artist Group's practice also was a displacement and deconstruction of modernism's art institutions, is not to explore whether Sami art can "fit in" to modern aesthetics, or to inscribe a "forgotten" avant-garde in art-history's canon, but rather to explore different ways to write about Sami art from an art-historical perspective.

The reason to carry out such an exploration is although a lot has changed since the Sami artists started their project, the descriptions and understandings of Sami art still remain locked up in a Eurocentric art history. This understanding situates European art, and later also white American art and artists, in the centre of all development, claiming that the avant-garde tends to come to being in urban centres like Paris, Berlin or New York. Art that does not originate in these centres, like Sami art, is marginalized and characterised by its otherness. Sami art, for example, is not included in Norwegian art history books.⁷ The claimed otherness legitimizes this exclusion.

⁴ Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge Mass., London: MIT Press 1996, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 25.

⁷ Neither Gunnar Danbolt. *Norsk kunsthistorie: Bilde og skulptur fra vikingtida til i dag*, Oslo: Det norske samlaget, (1997) 2001, Trygve Nergaard. "Mellomkrigstiden"; nor Hans-Jakob Brun. "Etterkrigstid" and "Det siste 10-år", in Knut Berg. *Norges malerkunst*, Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk forlag, 1993; mentions Sami art

Texts written about Sami art tend to recycle old stereotypes and conceptions about the otherness of Sami art, even today.⁸ Harry Fett's article from 1940, "Art of the Finnmark mountain plateau – John Andreas Savio", has in many ways functioned as the foundation which later texts have built upon and related to. In his article, Fett claims that Sami art's otherness is caused by an origin different from western art, namely an origin shared with other indigenous people in the north; "Eskimos" and "Samoyeds" in the "Northern cultural sphere", where a "living Palaeolithicum" still can be found.⁹ From this origin, according to Fett, Sami art has developed a kind of hybridity between the original heritage and the modern. This hybridity makes Sami art simultaneously "Palaeolithic and Parisian".¹⁰ Excluded from western art-history because of its claimed otherness and hybridity, Sami art is thus placed in an ethnographic discourse and characterized by a condition of absence, in particular the absence of art terms in Sami language.¹¹ This ethnification of Sami art leads to an absence of modernism and avant-garde, since such terms belong to art-history – and not to ethnography.

The Eurocentric discourse in which the Other's art is thus described has been criticised from different perspectives. Edward Said's notion of orientalism as a Western form of dominating, restructuring, and gaining authority over the Orient, has been one critical source to Eurocentrism in general.¹² Artist and art critic Rasheed Araeen conveys a more specific art historical criticism. He claims that the exclusion of artists belonging to the Other in the history of modernism is logical in terms of the very idea of an exclusive European modernity rooted in the conception of difference between the European Self and the colonial Other. The European Self is causing development and creating history from the centre. Others are outside the centre, in the margins and outskirts. The

or artists. Sidsel Helliesen. *Norsk grafikk gjennom 100 år*, Oslo: Aschehoug Norsk Forlag, 2000; mentions John Savio (1902–1938), but no other Sami artists.

⁸ Both Hansen 2007, p. 19–44; and Eli Høydalsnes. *Møte mellom tid og sted: Bilder av Nord-Norge*, Oslo: Forlaget Bonytt, 2003, p. 101–122; exemplifies and criticize this tendency.

⁹ Harry Fett. "Finnmarksviddens kunst: John Andreas Savio", *Kunst og kultur* no. 26/1940, p. 233.

¹⁰ See both Fett 1940; and Ernst Manker. *Samefolkets kunst*, Halmstad: Askild & Kärnekull, 1971, p. 175.

¹¹ See for example Morten Johan Svendsen. "Momenter til en samisk kunsthistorie", *Kunst og kultur* 2001: 2, p. 81–94.

¹² Edward Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1978], p.

consequence, Araeen says, is that as an artist you are not defined according to your practice or production, but according to your position in relation to the centre or the periphery.¹³ With reference to Araeen's critique it can be claimed that Sami art is excluded from modernism and art history as a product of the margins or outskirts, which have been constructed as a "Northern Cultural Sphere" by the centre. He calls modernism's art institutional power a bastion of white intellectual supremacy, and claims that its power has been maintained by the exclusion of all non-whites from a subject position in modernism.¹⁴

In the following I will try to explain how Sami Artist Group placed themselves in the subject position as Sami artist and how they built new Sami art institutions, similar to modernism's art institutions. Did they exceed the marginalisation, and was the result a displacement and deconstruction of the same institutions?

The Activities of the Sami Artist Group¹⁷

The artists who founded the group had their family backgrounds in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway. Britta Marakatt Labba who grew up in a small village in the Swedish part of Sápmi, was the only exception. They were all educated in art schools or academies in the national centres in the south: Oslo, Trondheim or Gothenburg.

The group was located in Sápmi in the small village of Máze, between Kautokeino and Alta, which provided the artists with both studios and accommodations.¹⁸ In this

¹³ Rasheed Araeen. "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics", *Third Text*, vol 50, 2000, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Op.cit.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ My information about the group and their work is based upon interviews with participants (Hansen 2007, and work in progress for my Phd-thesis), written sources and documents in public and private archives.

¹⁸ I use the Sami name Máze, because this is the only name of the village today. In the written sources, though, the Norwegian name Masi is most common. I use the Norwegian names for other names like Karasjok, Kautokeino, Alta,.

village, the first demonstrations against plans for a gigantic hydroelectric dam project in the Alta-Kautokeino River had taken place a few years earlier. Máze would later on become an important centre for the dam project demonstrations that were to come. The demonstrations lasted from the beginning of the 70s until 1981. Along with the demonstrations a cultural revitalisation took place together with a samipolitical riot and struggle for Sami rights. The political struggle led to new laws in Norway securing Sami people rights to maintain and practice their own cultural traditions and language. A Sami parliament was established in 1989.

This Sami revitalisation needed visual representations for LP-covers, books, and political propaganda, as well as public decorations and exhibitions. In addition to artistic production, the artistgroup also worked hard to secure funding through scholarships and public grants. These objects made the group very productive during its first years.

In February 1979 they made a collective, touring exhibition. The vernissage was at The Sami Museum in Karasjok, before touring to Lakselv, Hammerfest, Máze, Kautokeino and Alta in Finnmark County. The Sami Museum purchased one picture from each of the participant artists. Few other works from this period are documented or available in public archives or collections. The purchase includes paintings by Synnøve Persen, Aage Gaup, and Britta Marakatt, graphic works by Trygve Lund Guttormsen and Hans Ragnar Mathisen as well as a drawing by Berit Marit Hætta. The motives of most of the pictures are landscapes, some abstract, others like topographical studies. Some also depict people in Sami clothes. They can all be easily associated with or connected to Sápmi, but the techniques used by the artists are learned through art education; painting, graphic art and drawing. It is therefore difficult to trace a specific origin of these artworks, which are different from contemporary artworks produced in other localities. It is hardly possible to see a natural link to “The northern cultural sphere”, nor any kind of hybridity between original, recognisable Sami visual culture and the modern – or, in Fett’s words: the Palaeolithic and the modern. The artists in Sami Artist Group simply made pictures of landscapes and people using the tools and techniques that were available to an artist at the time.

The exhibition catalogue underlines the discontinuity and the contemporaneity of their art. Here, Ailo Gaup claims that the pictures are not reminiscent of a lost paradise, but must be understood in the contemporary political context to which they belong.¹⁹ He emphasizes that the Sami Artist Group was part of the larger political and artistic movement which took place in the western world during the 1960s and 70s. Gaup points to the political statements of these pictures within a Sami context.

The driving force behind these pictures is of political character. They are made out of a contemporary understanding of society. They have a political function as well. [...] Each nation has the right to its own visual art, as the people has the right to its own language and culture, the right to rule themselves in the broadest meaning of the word. This is the contribution of visual art to the process of little by little reconquering our human worth and pride belonging to indigenous people.²⁰

In line with this statement, Sami visual art in general and this exhibition in particular, was intended to play a political role in Sami nation-building. Besides being inspired by both indigenous movements and national art movements, the artist group played an important role in the Sami political riots that developed through the demonstrations against the hydroelectric dam project in the Alta-Kautokeino river. The political fight around the hydroelectric dam project was at the same time a political fight for Sami rights to territories as indigenous people.

The artists wanted to spread their art and their message out to “the people” in Sápmi. Art was their political weapon and the means to express their political message in the nation building process. The pictures served as an illustration and a romanticisation of a landscape that had clear political connotations.

These pictures are far from any kind of otherness or hybridisation, but rather close to a political or social commitment, that Foster points out as characteristic of the neo-avant-

¹⁹ Ailo Gaup. “Om å gjenvinne hele vår stolthet”, Exhibition catalogue published by Sáme Dáiduoavku/Samisk kunstnergruppe/Sami Artist Group, Máze 1979, p. 4.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 5, my translation.

garde. The artists take part in the ongoing nation-building process, and in an Hegelian/Herderian tradition, they try to link together nation and art. “This is the contribution of visual art”²², as Gaup expressed it.

After establishing the artistgroup, the artists experienced great interest for Sami visual art, and they got in contact with Sami artists in Sweden and Finland. During the *Davvi Šuvva* festival in Kautokeino in June 1979, many Sami artists attended a meeting to discuss the need for an artists’ union. The union would establish cooperation with other art organisations in the Nordic region and contribute to the Sami revitalisation in general and the visual arts in particular.²³

In autumn 1979, the artist group initiated a meeting to found a union. Six Sami visual artists were present at the meeting held in Nils Aslak Valkeapää’s (1943-2001) house in Pättikä, a small village in the Finnish part of Sápmi. Valkeapää became the first elected leader of the union, which was given the name *Sámi Dáidóehppid Searvi* (SDS) [sic] (Sami Artist’s Union).²⁴ Valkeapää had at that time already a well known voice and position as Sami artist and debater. Other board members were Synnøve Persen and Lars Johansson-Nutti. The board gave a press release proclaiming they would work to promote and develop Sami visual art, and to secure Sami visual artists living-conditions similar to other artists in the Nordic region. They would also work for Sami art to be recognised as equal to art among other Nordic nations.²⁵ The union established an organisation structure consisting of a board and an artistic advisory group, similar to other artist unions. Yet, in contrast to the normal practice, SDS also invited photographers, filmmakers and artisans to participate in this project.

The Sami Artist Group played an important role in building the union. They initialized the process and worked as a secretariat. Members of the group worked actively in the union from the beginning. Synnøve Persen was elected leader after Valkeapää on

²² Ailo Gaup 1979, p. 5.

²³ Synnøve Persen. Letter to Nordic Sami Council, Archive SDG, 2/79, 1979.

²⁴ This is how the name is spelled in the first documents. The spelling is wrong. Possibly a result of both bad Sami writing skills and a typewriter without Sami letters. The name today is *Sámi Dáiddaŋehpiid Searvi*/Samiske kunstneres forbund/ Sami Artists Union (SDS).

²⁵ Nils Aslak Valkeapää. Press release, archive *Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš* (SDG), 1979.

the first annual meeting in February 1980, a meeting full of enthusiasm and optimism, according to the reports.²⁶

National artist unions usually relate to their respective national states, but SDS related to the supranational; the Nordic Council of Ministers. SDS also emphasised contact with other Sami organisations, like the recently established Sami union for authors, rather than contact with national or regional artist unions. By focusing on the supranational they compared themselves to representatives from other nations. They were not just an appendix to existing national or regional organisations like The Association of Visual Artists in Northern Norway (NNBK). They were representatives of a nation, different from other nations, but equal to them.

The Sami artists were very active during these years, not just artistically, but also in the establishment of new organisations. In a few years they went from having no organisations at all, to having both an artist group in Máze and an artist union operating across national borders. Both organisations were founded by a few Sami artists. The reports and letters written during these years are full of energy, fury and enthusiasm. In a partly stilted, bureaucratic language, on a typewriter without Sami letters, the artists expressed their demands and presence loud and clear.

The young artists were indeed enthusiastic about being Sami. Some welcomed and supported their enthusiasm, like the artist Per Adde, who was at this time the leader of The Association of Visual Artists in Northern Norway (NNBK). The artists attended meetings in the Nordic capitals, and met with Nordic ministers and the Nordic Art Council in Copenhagen. SDS became a member of the Nordic Art Council in 1981. They were celebrated and welcomed both by politicians and bureaucrats in the capitals, but in Máze, a traditional and conservative Sami village, they also met with resistance. They were harassed and subjected to political surveillance. These experiences were far from their dream of fellowship, innovation and artistic practice in the heart of Sápmi.²⁷

²⁶ SDS. Letter to Nordic Art Union. Synnøve Persen, 13. May 1980, archive SDG, 1980.

²⁷ Synnøve Persen. "Ovdasátni / Forord / Foreword", in the exhibition catalogue *Mázejoavku: Sámi Dáidejoavku: Samisk Kunstnergruppe: Sami Artist Group 1978-1983*, Karasjok: Sámi Dáiddallehpiid Searvi, 2004, p. 6.

The resistance to the artist group was in part politically motivated, but the artists were also criticised for their artistic practice – the fact that they did not make *duodji*, the traditional Sami handicraft and art practice. The resistance was furthermore based on a political fight within the Sami society itself. From the mid-1960s the Norwegian assimilation policy for the Sami population had gained substantial support. The supporters claimed that Sami culture was already dead and an obstacle for further development. Those who opposed the assimilation claimed that the two cultures should be considered equal, in order to make the development of Sami culture and society possible, but such plans were dependant upon support from the Norwegian government.²⁸ These attitudes to the relation between Sami and Norwegian people and culture changed during the 1970s. In particular, the change in attitudes took place in the generation to which the young artists belonged. The artists were in many ways a result of the assimilation policy as well as the rebuilding and nationalisation project conducted by the Norwegian government in Finnmark after the Second World War. The men and women of this generation were educated, they had experienced economic development, and they had learned Norwegian language and culture. Their generation wanted something more than equality between Sami and Norwegian, they wanted more than the possibilities for development which the Norwegian government's alms amounted to. They wanted to build a new nation – Sápmi.

From their childhood they carried different experiences from being Sámi with them. One was the experience of belonging to an oppressed minority. It contained the self-contempt and feeling of being inferior that was indoctrinated through the Norwegian school system, which denied them their own language, and in the spirit of nationalism rather aimed to make them Norwegian. They also carried with them inspiration from other indigenous peoples' movements and from the youth rebellion in the western world.²⁹ In addition, the young artists carried the spirit from the politically loaded contemporary art. It can thus be argued that they were oriented more towards modernity

²⁸ Vigdis Stordahl. "Et samisk alternativ", *Ottar* 2000: 4, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

than towards Sami traditions. Moreover – the Norwegian assimilation project, the “Norwegianisation”, became a double-edged sword – skills and knowledge of Norwegian language and culture, of history and modernity, made the young artists more visible and audible in public spaces, not just as Others, but in fact in the same way as Self.

A good example is the hunger strike in front of the Norwegian parliament as part of the Alta-Kautokeino protest demonstrations in 1979. Hunger strike as a non-violent form of protest has no specific traditions in Sami culture, but is a kind of protest used by Mahatma Ghandi, the republicans in Northern Ireland, and the Suffragettes, to mention some historical examples. Artist and artist group member Synnøve Persen participated in the hunger strike. By choosing this form of action, the strikers used a political repertoire, which was familiar to and recognised by the rest of the world. This may be one reason why their political action would have such a great impact internationally, not only as a protest from a Sami periphery, but as a legitimate protest against national governments’ injustice towards indigenous peoples.

The goal for the new Sami movement was not only to build a Sami nation. They also wanted to create a new Sami self-image, new Sami identities, and new relations between the Sami and the Norwegian society. Their message dealt with how the Sami could unite in the task of liberating themselves from the degrading and pacifying limitations under which they had lived as ethnic minority.³⁰ They found their feeling of Sami community in a common historical and political experience, rather than in a common conception of what it meant to be Sami. The new Sami movement therefore included persons who had previously been excluded from Sami culture. These were for example Sami from the coastal areas, those who did not speak Sami, and those who did not have reindeers. Moreover, one could be accepted as Sámi even without traditional cultural competence. The criteria for being Sami were about to change.³¹ A Sami could be anybody – but anybody could not be a Sami.

³⁰ Harald Eidheim. “Stages in the Development of Sami Selfhood”, Working Paper no.7, Oslo 1992, p. 8.

³¹ *Op. cit.* p. 19.

The practising of new identities, both as Sami and as artists, poses a typical example of what sociologist Anthony Giddens claims is possible in modernity: to choose a lifestyle. Giddens claims that the more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options.³² This possibility, however, means that you have to run a risk, because when you choose, you risk putting something at stake.

The young artists put at stake their legitimacy in being a Sami without being strongly connected to cultural traditions. They performed as Sami artists, without much, if any, skills in *duodji*. They neither had reindeers, nor did they carry a knife, they might not know how to make a stock fire or how to row a boat. Several of them could not speak Sami, none of them could write it properly. Most of them came from the coastal Sami area, and had in common a childhood away from home; in orphanages, boarding schools or hospitals. They were a group of people whose potential connections to Sami traditions, language or lifestyle, had been denied them, oppressed, ridiculed, or concealed. Because of this, in many ways they represented a discontinuity in Sami traditions, at the same time as they insisted on being Sami. The resistance they met in Máze is understandable. The new arena that they were establishing for new art and identities was threatening for a small, conservative village because it changed and raised questions about previously obvious limits between “us” and “them”.

After two and a half years of hard work, successes and failures, weariness became apparent in the group. Continuously the artists had to argue with public funders for investment support. Budgets and accounts were to be kept, bureaucrats and economists had to be dealt with. In addition, the group was criticised by other Sami artists who claimed that the artist group knew nothing about being Sami or even being artists.³³ Most exhausting though, was the struggle against the dam project, the Alta-Kautokeino

³² Giddens 1991, p. 5.

³³ Hansen 2007, p. 90.

demonstrations. In 1981, after several years of protests and demonstrations, it was obvious that they were fighting a losing battle. The dam was built. The river did not flow freely anymore. The loss was a big disappointment and destroyed much of the enthusiasm and energy in the group. In retrospect, the Alta- Kautokeino struggle was of great importance for the Sami movement, but in 1981, this was a perspective no one could see. The artists moved, one by one, from Máze and continued their art practices individually. After spring 1983 there was no longer a group at work in Máze.

A modernisation project?

The story about what happened from the founding of Sami Artist Group in 1978, until it dissolved in 1983, may be just one of many stories about similar artist groups at the same time. What makes the story of the Sami Artist Group different, however, are the elements of nation building, the building of organisations and discontinuity. Besides their artistic production, the group indeed had a social practice as the neo-avant-garde.

According to Anthony Giddens, nation building is the most prominent characteristic of certain distinct social forms produced by modernity. A more general feature of modernity is the rise of the organisation and the fact that modern institutions are in various key respects discontinuous with the gamut of pre-modern cultures and their way of life.³⁴ Based on Giddens' characterisations of modernity, it can be argued that the artist group's social practice was a project of social modernization just as much as an artistic project.

Yet, the project involves a critical moment, namely the insistence of participating and acting in modernity and thereby challenge the western art-institutions and the Eurocentric art-history from which they previously were marginalized. To further investigate whether this practise can be understood as a neo-avant-garde practise, it is

³⁴ Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford Cal.: Stanford University Press 1991, pp. 15-16.

useful to return to Rasheed Araeen's criticism of Eurocentric art history in order to explore how this criticism can also apply to the relation between the Sami Artist Group and modernism's art institutions.

Araeen claims that modernism's art institutional power in the western world is a bastion of white intellectual supremacy. The power he speaks of is the power to define and exclude. Generally, modernity itself produces difference, exclusions and marginalisation, according to Giddens.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, this also applies to the art institutions of modernism, which have maintained their power by the exclusion of all non-whites, denying other cultures or peoples from other cultures their subject positions in modernism.³⁶ The exclusion of Sami art and artists from Norwegian art history is an example of such an exclusion.

Araeen reveals the paradox and the Eurocentric reasoning that lies behind this kind of exclusion. He claims that modernism in many ways is a hegemonic project, distributed and exported all over the world.³⁷ Modernity, and with it modernism, was first imposed on the colonised world, but then the colonised accepted it at face value, because of its progressive and enlightened ideas, and, paradoxically, the very same ideas about modernism equipped the colonised with tools and ideas to get rid of colonialism. Liberation from colonialism did not mean a return to pre-colonial structures but a redefinition of modernity, and a Third World claim to its own modernising and progressive ideas, empowering the liberated in their journey to full freedom and self-determination.³⁸

Many artists came from non-European countries to the European centres of modernism in the middle of the twentieth century. Araeen himself came from Karachi in Pakistan, previously a British colony, to London. Both Araeen and other immigrating artists had received an art-education based on the principles of modernism, but were trained outside of Europe, whether in Karachi, Caracas or Cuba. They were raised on the

³⁵ Giddens 1991, p. 6.

³⁶ Araeen 2000, pp. 4-5.

³⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 11.

³⁸ *Op. cit.* p. 6.

ideas of modernity, trained in academies of modernism and prepared to claim a central place in modernism. The story of these artists is therefore the story of a struggle between what they really wanted to do and what was denied them by the dominant culture. While they struggled to place themselves at the centre of what was then going on within modernism, they were constantly pushed out on the basis of their Otherness – which was invoked both racially and culturally.³⁹

The fact that artists who arrived from outside Europe were not entering another culture, but rather a culture they were already familiar with because of modernity's hegemony, was of little importance compared to the Otherness they were constructed into by the white bastion. If they were included as modernist artists at all, it was as a hybrid. This hybrid, according to Araeen, does not stand for a process of all cultural interchanges or inter-mixings and what results from them in the contemporary global world; it is something specific, which results only when a non-western culture enters western culture. To enter or encounter the dominant culture, the artists must locate themselves within a specific space – an in-between space. They must declare themselves ethnically, artistically or culturally different – show their otherness – in order to get a position. This means that they have to carry an “ethnic identity card” showing their cultural origin. The result, Araeen says, “is the power of the mule which always carries the burden and the sign of its breeding”.⁴⁰

Araeen's story of the exclusion of the Other from modernism and the premises of being included, has many similarities with the story about the Sami Artist Group. Similarly to the artists from Karachi, Caracas and Cuba arriving in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, members of the Sami Artist group also grew up in modernity. The Norwegian modernisation and assimilation project in the Sami population had provided them with a big dose of modernity. Their art educations from Oslo, Trondheim or Gothenburg had trained them in modernism. The Nordic, European or global society was in no way unfamiliar to the Sami artists.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

There is, however, one important difference between Araeen and his colleagues, and the Sami Artist group. While the artists from Karachi, Caracas and Cuba went to the European centres of modernism, ready to claim their place in opposition to modernism's art institutions the Sami artist made their own centre, and put themselves in the middle of it. Their demand was to be considered as equal to other nations, and therefore they built the same organisations and structures, which traditionally belonged to a nation's art institutions. By doing this, they created and declared their own centre, their own space, which was not an in-between space or a hybrid space in the "Northern cultural sphere". They displaced modernity's art institutions to become also Sami institutions and they displaced themselves to become modernist artists.

They execute modernity, territorialize a centre of their own, from a subject position – they are not being modernised. Consequently they exceed the marginalisation, which in turn challenges and deconstruct modernism's art institutions. According to Hal Foster's description of the second neo-avant-garde, the conclusion is that Sami Artist Group's practise is possible to read and understand in the same way; not as an opposition to existing art institutions, but as a displacement of them.

List of illustrations

1. p. xxx Synnøve Persen: *Skábma* 1979. Oil on canvas 64,5 x 64,5 cm. Sámiid Vuorká – Davvirat/De samiske samlinger/ The Sami museum (SVD). © Synnøve Persen/BONO 2010. © Photo: Hanna H. Hansen

2. p. xxx Hans Ragnar Mathisen: *Sálašvaggis* 1979. Lithography 38 x 51,5 cm. SVD, © Hans Ragnar Mathisen/BONO 2010. © Photo: Hanna H. Hansen

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