

Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives. S. Aamold, U. A. Jørgensen and E. Haugdal (eds). 2017. Odder, Denmark: Narayana Press. 347 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-87-7184-252-4. DKK 229.95.

Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives is a collection of articles and visual essays resulting from the Sámi Art Research Project (SARP) conducted in the Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø. The project started in 2009 (in fact, the data have been gathered and analysed since the early 2000s) as a timely exploration into a recent increase in creative activity among artists identifying themselves as Sámi, i.e. the only recognised indigenous people of Scandinavia. While this increase, on the one hand, has already revitalised public interest in the present and future of Scandinavian art, and European art in general, it has also drawn attention to the danger of global commoditisation of the indigenous past: traditions are exoticised and turned into ready-for-consumption entertainment products. By placing these discussions in broader historical and contemporary contexts for an international audience the current volume calls attention to the sensitive questions of preserving and transforming traditions, and of the changing relationship between peripheral/backward “Sámi-ness” and the global/civilised “West-ness”, and explores alternative ways to present Sámi art and aesthetics from an art-historical perspective.

The first question that strikes the reader, looking at the book’s cover, is: what is distinctive about Sámi art? Also, further on: what are Sámi—and in the broader sense indigenous—aesthetics? In the search for the answers, the anthology offers 14 multidisciplinary and multinational individual studies (plus an introduction by Svein Aamold and an afterword by Ruth B. Phillips) conducted by art historians, philosophers and artists of European, Scandinavian and Sámi backgrounds. Within the limits of this review, I will focus on a selected number of contributions that, in my opinion, constitute the essence of the entire book.

The volume is divided logically into three well-balanced sections entitled Representations, Critical Terms, and Negotiations. The first part, with five chapters, portrays indigenous inhabitants through the eyes of non-indigenous explorers/visitors, chronologically centred between the early 20th century and the turn of the millennium. In this part, my highlights are the contributions “Art History and the Contact Zone” by Ingeborg Høvik, “Representing the Hidden and the Perceptible” by Svein Aamold, and “The Sculpture of Iver Jåks and the Question of Sámi Aesthetics” by Irene Snarby.

In the first of these, the art historian Ingeborg Høvik examines a reproduction of a drawing created by Hans Zakæus, an Inuit from southwest Greenland, who, on his initiative, arrived in Britain in the early 19th century. She puts forward the term “contact zone,” with reference to the original definition by Mary Loise Pratt, to discuss specific social settings where the distorted relationship of colonisers and colonised acquires a visible and tangible form. Underscoring the importance of the indigenous voice, this chapter can assist wider scientific efforts in reflecting on the colonial part of Arctic history.

Svein Aamold’s study presents the artwork of Johan Turi, also known as “the first author of the Sámi.” Through hand-drawn and painted stories of everyday living, Turi brings to light a mixed relationship between human and spiritual beings in the presence of Arctic nature. This mixture of the perceptible and the hidden is, on the one hand, a result of the artist’s individual creativity. On the other hand, it stems from the concepts of truth and pleasure, where the latter constitutes the very essence of Sámi aesthetics. Thus, a thorough exploration of Turi’s visual world, as Aamold argues, can provide an insight into a deep understanding of the Sámi way of being, with its integral “aesthetic component” (pp. 89, 92).

The final contribution in this section is that by the art historian Irene Snarby. By the example of the works of Sámi artist and sculptor Iver Jåks, she offers an exploration into Sámi aesthetics through the lens of European avant-garde art. In particular, the experimental idea of situating art within nature, following the natural lifecycle, embodied in Jåks’ public artwork “The Holy Drum-Hammer,” draws on ecological thinking and a circular notion of time as embedded in the ancient Sámi worldview. Quoting the artist, “only in this way can we continue into the future and be considered as equivalent to the Norwegians, instead of being reduced to a curiosity . . .” (p. 131).

The second part shapes the conceptual basis of discussions on indigenous art by putting forward important terms and theories. In the case of Sámi, these discussions are centred around the

traditional form of Sámi handicraft duodji, with its fluid meanings varying from utilitarian objects to political and cultural manifestations and poetic reflections on the human–nature relationship. Here the contribution by Charlotte Bydler deals critically and productively with the issue of appropriate transformation of traditions, with reference to the works of the cohort of modern Sámi (and non-Sámi) artists. Through historical analysis, she contemplates the evolution of the material and cultural meaning of duodji, from the tangible core of Sámi-ness to artistic/crafty practices openly accessible to everyone.

The exploration of today's meaning of duodji continues in the article “The Power of Natural Materials and Environments in Contemporary Duodji” by Sámi researcher and artist Gunvor Guttorm. Complementary to Bydler's cases, with the emphasis on community, Guttorm puts forward the personal meaning based on her own artistic and duodji practice as well as on works by Folke Fjällström and Max Lundström. To convey the significance of practice, she draws on philosophical foundations of art and craft within the system of indigenous knowledge, and interpretations of the human–nature relationship within the everyday life of Sámi.

The third part is devoted to a variety of negotiations of contemporary art in the North (in fact, only Sápmi and, strangely enough, Greenland are covered). It starts with one of the best contributions, in my opinion, i.e. “Strategies of Monumentality in Contemporary Sámi Architecture” by the art historian Elin Haugdal. Her richly detailed and solidly argued article expands the thematic scope of the volume towards contemporary indigenous architecture. Highlighting the experience of Sámi institutionalisation in Norway and Finland, it presents the story of a recently appeared phenomenon of Sámi public architecture as a form of re-establishing cultural identity and collective self-esteem. Three examples of this phenomenon under study are as follows: Kautokeino Cultural Centre (1981), the Sámi Parliament building in Karasjok (2000), and the Siida Museum in Inari (1998). In her thorough analysis, Haugdal employs the concepts of “critical regionalism,” drawn from works by architect and historian Kenneth Frampton and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak, and “weak monumentality,” as introduced by philosophers Ignasi de Sola-Morales and Gianni Vattimo.

These common theoretical foundations, as Haugdal observes, yielded three physically and conceptually different outcomes: Kautokeino Cultural Centre represents “its regionalism and its Sáminess in a form and with materials that managed to resist, even in an institutional sense, the central, dominant and universal culture” (p. 219); the Sámi Parliament building provides for open interpretation in a way that makes it “possible for new generations

to appropriate it, to produce and recollect other stories of the Sámi people, and thus to ascribe new layers of meaning” (p. 225); and the Siida Museum becomes “a space to reflect on life and culture” (p. 235), rather than an icon of Sámi culture or a monument to their traditions and history.

The Sámi artist Geir Tore Holm offers another way to expand the genre and geographical scope of the book: his contribution comes in the form of a visual essay that contains images from his art project Travelogue. It is a visual documentation of the artist's travels from Chile to Canada, with emphasis on interactions between humans and natural environments/ecological discourses, self-definition on a global/intercultural scale. However, most of the message behind this artwork remains unclear, and thus the presentation urgently calls for brief textual explanations either by the artist himself or an art-historian expert.

To continue with critical comments, I would highlight the geographical issue that stems from the discrepancy between the title and the actual content of the volume. While the primary geographical scope is defined as Sápmi (and Sámi), in the course of the editor's introduction and further chapters we find the cases from Greenland, without convincing clarification. At the same time, the editors seem to overlook the extensive body of data on contemporary art and artists from the Russian part of Sápmi or, based on the geographical understanding of Europe, of the European part of the Russian North, from the Kola Peninsula to the Kanin Peninsula and the Polar Urals.

Despite this criticism, *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives* is a valuable contribution to the growing field of research on circumpolar art. Of course, the book does not provide a direct answer to the question of what Sámi art and aesthetics exactly are. Instead, it goes way beyond straightforward definitions and guidelines. It implicitly puts a reader's mind right on track by providing a conceptual toolkit—basic notions, approaches, case studies—and thus facilitates a safe and thorough self-immersion into present-day complexities of contemporary art in a particular part of the Arctic, where emerging postcolonial forms of creative practices are coupled with historically grounded political resistance. Overall, *Sámi Art and Aesthetics* enables a reader to come up with a hands-on definition of aesthetics deeply embedded into his/her personal (natural and social) context. (Svetlana Usenyuk-Kravchuk, Ural State University of Architecture and Art, Department of Research, K. Liebknecht St. 23, Ekaterinburg, Russia (svetlana.usenyuk@gmail.com))

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