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BEAUTY AND TRUTH

DIALOGUES BETWEEN SAMI ART AND ART HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Beauty and Truth is one final result of the Sami Art Research Project (SARP) run by the department of art history at UiT since 2009. One of the project's goals is to gain more empirical knowledge about Sami art. This goal stems from a desire to make Sami art visible and valuable in an art-historical context and as a field of art historical research. The encounter between Sami art and art historical methods and discourses is, however, not without frictions. Thus, another critical goal of the project is to develop new theoretical approaches and understandings of Sami art. The exhibition *Beauty and Truth*, in conjunction with this book, is an attempt to communicate some of the research in line with the critical perspective.

Research into Sami art is not only key to art historical discourses. It also has to face challenges concerning ethics in indigenous research in general. Questions the researchers have to reflect upon are: Whose research is it? Who owns it? How will the research be disseminated? An imperative in the relationship between research and an indigenous people is, moreover, to disseminate back the final results of a study in a culturally appropriate way and in a language that could be understood.¹ To create a site for dialogue between art and research in the gallery space is an attempt to implement the ethical imperative in accordance with indigenous research.

Beauty and Truth will pave the way for a dialogue between research on Sami art and Sami artists' contemporary practice as an exploration of the relationship between art and science based on the philosopher Ernst Cassirer's thoughts. Cassirer claims that while language and science are abbreviations of reality, a work of art in like manner implies an act of condensation and concentration. Language and science depend upon

¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. 2004. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London and New York: Zed Books, p. 15.

the same process of abstraction, he says, while art can be described as a continuous process of concretisation. Cassirer gives art a special ability to discover reality, rather than to imitate it. The encounter between research's abstraction and art's condensation of reality can, in Cassirer's understanding, be described as a dialogue between truth and beauty – two different, but equally valued forms of cognition.²

In the research project, several Sami artists have played important roles and have not merely been informants. Some have participated with presentations at one of the three conferences arranged under the auspices of the SARP project. Others have been invaluable conversation partners delivering critical perspectives and making other constructive contributions. Through *Beauty and Truth*, the cooperation and dialogue between researchers and artists will move from the field of research to the art scene.

CONCEPTS AND METHODS

Frictions and understandings have been important concepts in the art historical research on Sami art. The researchers' practical work with these concepts is conducted in studies of artworks, archives, collections and texts, in addition to dialogues with artists. The results are analysed and presented in texts and oral presentations, or in Cassirer's words: as abbreviations of reality.

As a curatorial grip, SARP and Tromsø centre for contemporary art have invited the artists who have been involved in the project to apply the same concepts, frictions and understanding, guiding their artistic exploration and reflection. Their results will, in Cassirer's understanding, be a condensation and concentration, and a discovery of reality.

Methodically, research into art history often includes different contextualisations of art. These contexts can be philosophical, historical, contemporary, social, artistic or esthetical. In *Beauty and Truth* the artists are invited to apply the same method by choosing a work of art made by another artist, and present it in relation to their own work as a contextualisation. Finally, the artists are asked to contribute to the catalogue

² Ernst Cassirer. 1974 [1944]. *An essay on man: An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 143.

by writing a text to establish a connection between the two works: their own work and the one they have chosen.

FRICIONS – A SOURCE OF ENERGY

Traditional art history is founded upon narratives that have a periodical, linear structure: Primitive, Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, until we reach modern times, emphasising the latter as a triumphal progress of Western art and architecture. This great narrative of art as development and cultures as hierarchies excludes narratives of all art that does not follow a given “development”, as well as narratives of female artists and all so-called non-Western art. The common understanding of Sami art has been situated, and in many ways also situated itself, in this latter category, non-Western art.³

The Eurocentric and gender biased art history are criticised from several positions. Feministic scholars in the 1970s and 1980s pointed to the fact that female artists were excluded from art history. They also claimed that it was not sufficient to “add” women to the existing canon. What was necessary was to perform empirical research into female artists and at the same time deconstruct current art historical discourses and methods.⁴ In recent years, indigenous scholars have claimed that art made by indigenous peoples encounters the same exclusion and points to the same double-sided strategy for inclusion as experienced by feministic scholars.⁵

Art history’s great narratives are also criticised and discussed within the academic discipline itself, not only by feminists and indigenous scholars. The Australian art historian, artist and art critic Terry Smith claims that the art historical “standard” is not a framework that can be imposed on “non-Western” art for a number of obvious reasons. One reason is that many societies do not share the same concept of art. Another reason is that most non-Western cultures have a concept of visual art that is

³ See Hanna Horsberg Hansen. 2010. *Fluktlinjer: Forståelser av samisk samtidskunst*. PhD thesis. University of Tromsø, p. 18-22.

⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock. 1981. *Old Mistresses: Woman, Art and Ideology*. London: Harper Collins, p. 3.

⁵ Dale Turner. 2006. *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, p. 101.

broader in terms of range of media and in cultural spread than that privileged in the West.⁶

The American art historian James Elkins characterises art history as narratives on how art develops progressively through stages and epochs defined by style, as an incurable Western concept.⁷ Hans Belting, a German art historian, points to the fact that art history as it developed as a European model, is not a general narrative that can easily be applied to other cultures that “lack” such histories. Thus art history, as a given discourse, cannot be exported to other parts of the world without structural changes.⁸

What causes the need for structural changes in our case is the friction between art history as one discursive practise, and the practice among contemporary Sami artists as another. These frictions, however, can be a positive force. Friction creates energy, movement, action and effect. Rather than to conceive of the meeting between two discursive practises as a “clash”, friction can be a metaphor for the many different social interactions constituting our contemporaneity.⁹ Thus far, SARP has contributed to the field with new research where frictions have instead been an inspiration and source of energy rather than something we have tried to avoid.

The specific frictions between art history and Sami art appear very clearly in previous attempts to write about Sami art from an art historical perspective. One reason is, as mentioned, the “standard” and structure within art historical discourse itself. Another reason is the available sources on Sami art.

Art was one of several markers supposed to identify a Sami nation and its people at the beginning of the Sami ethno-political movement in the 1970s. One problem, however, was the scarcity of literature about Sami art. Until the 1970s, research into

⁶ Terry Smith. 2006. ”World Picturing in Contemporary Art: Iconogeographic Turning”, *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art*. Vol. 7, no 1, p. 3.

http://www.terrysmith.net/texts/TS_IconogeographicTurning.pdf

⁷ James Elkins. 2002. *Stories of Art*. New York: Routledge, p. 147.

⁸ Hans Belting. 2003. *Art History after Modernism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 64.

⁹ See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sami culture had been primarily ethnographical and linguistic.¹⁰ Consequently, texts about Sami art are strongly influenced by an ethnographic approach that tends to reuse and recycle conceptions of Sami art as either primitive, exotic, or as a hybrid of tradition and modernity.¹¹ The problem with this labelling or periodisation is that it leaves very limited space for understanding and interpreting Sami art.

Beauty and Truth is meant to discover reality, rather than to describe, abbreviate or imitate it. The new artworks presented in *Beauty and Truth* are in a variety of medias. There are paintings, installations, texts, historical objects, and sound. The contextualisations range from texts by Sami authors, via abstract painting to contemporary visual art in Argentina. The connections between the artists' contemporary work and their own contextualisation of it creates a rhizomatic-like structure concerning time and space¹². Disconnections and ruptures, rather than linearity or historical developments occur. This rhizomatic structure or lack of structure points in turn to the fact that Sami art can be anything, but still – anything cannot be Sami art.

¹⁰ Lars Ivar Hansen and Bjørnar Olsen. 2004. *Samenes historie fram til 1750*. Oslo: Cappelen Akademisk Forlag, p. 9.

¹¹ For a further elaboration on the discourse, see Hanna H. Hansen. 2007. *Fortellinger om samisk samtidskunst*. Karasjok: Davvi Girji, pp. 38-44.

¹² The concept *rhizomatic* refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of this metaphor as a model for thinking differently from the metaphor of a tree with roots, stems and branches. A rhizome is horizontal, decentred and multiple. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 1980. "Introduction: Rhizome" in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Les Éditions Minuit, pp. 9-37.

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