Fig. 1. Máret Ánne Sara, *Gutted - Gávogálši*, 2022, reindeer stomachs, and *Ale suova sielu sáiget*, 2022, red reindeer calves, cotton, birch branches and shoegrass. Exhibition view at the Sámi Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice (23 April - 27 November 2022). Credits: OCA. Photo: Micheal Miller

Sámi Perspectives at the Venice Biennale. Decolonizing Environmentalism in Contemporary Art

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Introduction

The Arctic is one of the regions where the effects of the climate crisis in the Anthropocene[1] are most visible, both environmentally and socially. For this reason, it has become not only a frontline of ecological transformation, but also a contested space of Indigenous territorial and epistemic struggle. This is particularly evident in the case of the Sámi population, inhabiting *Sápmi,* an area spanning northern Finland, Norway, Sweden, and part of the Kola Peninsula, where environmental degradation intersects with the enduring legacies of colonialism. While often considered a phenomenon of the past, colonial power continues today through extractive economies, industrial development, and state-led interventions. These processes have reshaped landscapes and threatened the continuity of Sámi lifeways, severing long-standing reciprocal relationships with the land that are deeply embedded in their epistemologies. Thus, Sámi Contemporary Art has emerged as a potent site of critique and resistance with a practice that, since the 1970s with the Máze Group, is at the intersection of political activism, ecological imagination, and ontological rewording[2].

This paper explores this intersection by focusing on the Sámi transformations of the Nordic Countries Pavilion at the Venice Biennials of 2022 and 2023 (fig.1), arguing that the revitalisation of Sámi epistemologies, rooted in holistic, land-based knowledge, offers a counter-model to Western modes of seeing, knowing, and inhabiting the world, particularly in the context of the current ecological crisis. Furthermore, it explores how Sámi art enacts a form of Indigenous environmentalism that is at once aesthetic, pedagogical and decolonial. The theoretical approach draws on the work of scholars such as Zoe Todd, Lisa Bloom, alongside Sámi scholars like Rauna Kuokkanen, Harald Gaski, Elina Helander-Renvall, and the contributors to the Sámi Pavilions' catalogue. Their contributions help in expanding in this sense the posthuman discourse, which, as Todd argues, often fails to fully account for the colonial histories embedded in the Anthropocene[3].

While Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* introduces important tools for de-centring the human through *sympoiesis*[4], Todd critiques its Eurocentric framing and calls instead for an "Indigenization of the Anthropocene"[5], meaning a reframing that acknowledges the specific histories of colonial violence and the epistemicide tied to ecological collapse. This aligns with Vanessa Watt's concept of "Indigenous Place-Thought"[6], which posits that land is not inert but alive and thinking, and that both human and non-human agency "derive through the extensions of these thoughts"[7]. Similarly, Kuokkanen's Sámi-based "Indigenous Paradigm"[8] calls for "decolonizing Indigenous minds by 're-centring' Indigenous values and cultural practices and placing Indigenous peoples and their issues into dominant, mainstream discourses"[9], including a critique of Western dualistic metaphysics and a return to Indigenous holistic philosophies.

Such a methodological lens demands a reorientation: not merely including Indigenous perspectives as supplemental but shifting the very framework of analysis. It means engaging with Sámi artists and thinkers on their own terms, acknowledging the limits of speaking from outside the community while working to amplify Indigenous voices with respect. The goal is not to universalize

Sámi experience, but to explore how their worldviews and artistic practices contribute to broader conversations on climate justice, repair and ecological survival. The urgency of adopting such perspectives is grounded in contemporary events that clearly link ongoing colonial practices to ecological devastation. For instance, the continued dispossession of lands through mining, industrialism, green colonialism, and infrastructural violence[10] are evident. As Von Spreter writes, "not only did the Sámi population lose rights and access to their land, the extraction process led to widespread pollution and disappearance of landscapes"[11].

Politics are emblematic of what Rob Nixon has termed *slow violence*: a gradual, dispersed, and largely invisible destruction, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities[12]. Lisa Bloom extends this to include "eroded Indigenous rights, degradation of Indigenous land, extinction of almost invisible species and slow or indirect form of psychological violence"[13]. Responding to these conditions, Sámi artists engage with what Subhankar Banerjee calls *long environmentalism*: the activist-oriented art concerned with "justice, repair and intergenerational survival"[14]. Their work also embodies what T.J. Demos describes as "radical ecological aesthetics"[15], namely interventions that do not just represent crisis but mobilise relations, knowledge, and resistance through an aesthetic practice.

It is through these practices – this paper argues – that Sámi Contemporary Art articulates a distinctive political ecology: one that unsettles colonial mappings of the Arctic, repair damaged landscapes, and rethinks cohabitation through epistemologies grounded in land, kinship, and interdependence. In this context epistemology is not abstract but lived, constituted through memory, language, artistic expression, and ecological entanglement. The aim is to situate "humans as a part of nature and not separate from it"[16]. To understand such multifaceted framework applied to the Sámi contemporary artistic practice, it is crucial to engage deeply with its epistemological grounding. Sámi ways of knowing are in fact inseparable from Indigenous relationships to land, language, and cultural survival. This becomes evident in the conception of territory itself, which is commonly known as Lapland, whereas in Sámi languages it is known as *Sápmi,* a term that signifies the entanglement of land, people, and language[17]. However, this relationship has been profoundly altered by colonial processes. What began as a context of cohabitation and trade with the Nation-States' populations gradually shifted, "whereby, over millennia, good-neighbourliness and trade relations have been transformed into unequal power relations and colonial structures"[18]. This transformation accelerated in the 19th century with the imposition of assimilationist state policies, reinforced with a Darwinist idea of progress, which cast Sámi identity as racially and culturally inferior. Such ideologies and politics enabled Nation-States to reframe *Sápmi* as *terra nullius* – no man's land – thereby opening it to industrialisation and dispossession.

These material acts of displacement were paralleled by cultural and epistemic violence resulting in what Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines as "epistemicide"[19], whereby the destruction of land also extinguishes the knowledges embedded in it. Kristin Jernsletten underscores this dynamic, noting that "one of the colonial strategies is indeed to implement a language to alienate people from land"[20]. Together, these mechanisms sever Indigenous communities from their environment and lifeways, while legitimising the colonial extractive development. Western worldviews, which facilitated and justified these practices, further entrenched the division between human and nature. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature,* describes how this process was fuelled as well due to the shift from an organic to a mechanistic worldview. She writes:

"as long as the Earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it"[21].

Once stripped of agency and vitality, nature, and by extension people inhabiting it, could be rendered passive, extractable and mute.
Against this backdrop, Sámi epistemology offers a powerful alternative, thanks to "aesthetic frameworks grounded in interdependence, pluralism and care with other living beings and nature"[22]. These contrasts sharply with the linear temporality and nature/culture dualism of the West, proposing cosmologies that are circular, relational, and holistic. Time is not a forward-moving axis, but a cycle, and the environment is not external to human life but co-constitutive. Sámi scholars have provided key articulations of this worldview. Liisa-Rávná Finbog, co-curator of The Sámi Pavilion, critiques the Lockean logic of property that underpinned land dispossession, which held "that any primitive society, if they were nomadic, would be excluded from any property rights" [23]. Sámi modes of life were thus rendered invisible by Enlightenment frameworks that equated land use with enclosure, labour, and ownership.
If, historically, the erasure of culture has been strictly connected to erasure of land sovereignty, today, in response to the past, contemporary Sámi scholarship and activism have centred the revitalisation of such epistemologies within new practices, also comprehending fields of study such as Indigenous Research Methodologies[24] and Relational Ontologies. These new practices reclaim forms of knowledge that centre interconnection, cyclical time, and agency with more-than-human worlds and pose, at the same time, a structural and political critique to the extractive modernity. Moreover, as UNESCO reports, while Indigenous Peoples comprise only 5% of the global population, they safeguard over 80% of the world's biodiversity, underscoring the essential link between Indigenous sovereignty and ecological survival[25]. This is no coincidence: Sámi ecological knowledge is not merely descriptive or symbolic, but performative. It is sustained through land-based practices, oral traditions, and artistic expression, leading to a perspective of the world that Kuokkanen describes as:

"made of relations, constituted of an infinite web of relationships that apply to everybody and everything, including the land which is perceived as a living physical and spiritual entity"[26].

This is not a single entity, but a whole – probably also a "pluriverse"[27], if conceptualised as something incommensurable with the universalizing logics of modernity. Helander-Renvall further reminds how Sámi knowledge is fundamentally holistic. For it "the natural environment, the cultural environment, the social environment and the linguistic environment"[28] are not separate domains but aspects of a unified whole. Within this system, the human participation is grounded not in mastery but reciprocity:

"We are part of the ecosystem. Our cultural manifestations are adapted to ecological balance between what nature can give and what can we utilize in relation to nature's productive capacity […], ours is a living culture, always enabling us to adapt to various natural conditions, always acquiring new knowledge which will enable us to survive"[29].

These epistemologies are then not only about survival. They are also forms of memory, imagination, and alternative world-making; they propose different ways of living together and engaging with the Planet. This is why the revitalisation of Sámi Art and thought must be seen as central in both ecological and decolonial discourse today.

Sámi Art and Architecture at the 2022 and 2023 Venice Biennials. Environmentalism, Decoloniality and Sovereignty

In 2022, for the first time in its history, the Nordic Countries pavilion at the Venice Biennale was transformed into *The Sámi Pavilion*. The building, located in the Giardini and originally designed by Sverre Fehn between 1958 and 1962, represents Sweden, Norway, and Finland, and it is built to evoke Nordic light and architectural style. Exhibiting the work of Sámi artists in the pavilion appeared thus revolutionary. For the very first time, the representation of the Nordic Countries was entrusted to the Indigenous population that had faced for centuries the consequences of their colonial politics. The meaning of exhibiting contemporary Sámi art responded to the Venice Biennale main theme of that year. Cecilia Alemani, its artistic director, chose *The Milk of Dreams*[30] as a title, drawing inspiration from Leonora Carrington's Surrealist work. Her aim was to explore survival, the evolving human condition, and its connections with nature resulting in the convergence between post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, through artists who "propose new alliances among species, in worlds inhabited by porous, hybrid, manifold beings"[31].

Following this framework, the works of Sámi artists, who decided to revitalise epistemologies to reconnect with ancestral beings and cosmologies through a lens of ecological relations and Indigenous sovereignty, appear consistent. However, to refer to Indigenous art in an environment such as the Venice Biennale has not been easy. The reason must be seen, as curator Katya García-Antón has explained, in the structure of the Biennale itself, which inherit a colonial history. As it is well-known, the Venice International Art Exhibition was born in the context of the world fairs, which "exhibited and transacted Indigenous bodies, lands, technology and resources to strengthen the Nation State model"[32]. However, even if today a shift is happening towards the listening and envisioning of several perspectives, the doubts about the exhibition's correctness remain difficult to overcome. To respond to these challenges, the pavilion's curator has tried to exhibit Sámi art by respecting indigenous cultures, epistemologies, and identity, maintaining an ongoing dialogue with Sámi people.

This approach has seen the involvement of senior Sámi artists and scholars, including Liisa-Rávná Finbog, Beaska Niillas, and Professor Harald Gaski, who have collaborated with both the curator and the participating artists. These elder contributors, working alongside the younger artists, have taken part in nearly every stage of the creation process. As a result, the artworks emerge as products of a transgenerational dialogue, capable of dealing with the ambiguity of the Biennale's colonial heritage. On the one hand, this collaboration draws upon the deep-rooted traditional meanings of Sámi cultural practices – namely, *duodji* (handicraft), *giella* (language) and *yoik* (music)[33]. On the other, it engages with the potential of new perspectives given by the contemporary condition of Sámi artists. This combination of unique yet interconnected practices, at the intersection of traditional and modern elements, has enabled the expression of the Sámi complex worldview, which combines "spiritual, material and environmental knowledge, concepts of aesthetics and beauty"[34]. Moreover, this interconnected process emphasises the intrinsic collaborative nature of Sámi Contemporary Art, thereby demonstrating its ability to transcend the constraints imposed upon it by the colonial inheritance with the institution in which it is exhibited, and it encourages the exploration of new perspectives and practices within this artistic context.

When entering *The Sámi Pavilion*, the first encounter is with the work of Máret Ánne Sara, artist and writer, whose practice led to an activist attitude intervening at the intersection of Indigenous sovereignty and ecological justice. Such practice has been shaped by her

Fig. 2. Máret Ánne Sara, *Pile o'Sápmi*, in Deatnu / Tana District Court, 2016. Credits: BONO, 2019. Photo: Iris Egilsdatter

upbringing in Kautokeino, Norway, and her initial formation as a journalist who, at the time, shifted from single documentation to embodied practices of resistance. As she recalls, the reason arrived when

"the official narrative was no longer on the destruction of the land through the implementation of their planned industries, but an accusation that Sámi people were destroying the land by herding too many reindeers"[35].

Her practice is thus linked to this inversion of responsibility given by colonial logics, that operate through the distortion of Indigenous relationships with land and produce a narrative *impasse* when, the very practices that ensured ecological balance – such as sustainable reindeer herding done through Indigenous knowledge and practice – were reframed as threats. Through her early novels, she addressed such "tensions arising in the struggle to maintain Sámi worldviews in the face of the modern values of consumption"[36], but, however, the literature she found was not enough. When words failed to generate the necessary resonance, she turned to material practices, shifting toward the Sámi guardianship value of the *duojár* and toward what Boris Groys has named – after Tania Bruguera – "artivism"[37]. That is, an aesthetic form whose political message is inseparable from its performative and fluid character, one that exceeds the boundaries of the art object and demands response.

This shift was represented by one of her most recognised works, *Pile o'Sápmi* (2016-2020, fig. 2), which emerged and faced the legal struggle surrounding the Norwegian Reindeer Husbandry Act of 2007[38]. In fact, this policy mandated herd reductions under the pretext of environmental protection, yet, in practice,

Fig. 3. Máret Ánne Sara, *Pile o'Sápmi Supreme*, 2017, installation view at Neue Neue Galerie (Neue Hauptpost), Kassel, Documenta 14, 2017. Credits: Documenta. Photo: Mathias Völzke

it undermined Sámi sovereignty and survival in the Arctic area of *Sápmi*. As it has been noted, "by reducing the size of herds and their pastures […], Sámi strategies for coping with the harsh environment are destabilised"[39]. As a form of protest, Sara installed a sculptural assemblage of raw reindeer skulls (which will return continuously in her work) stacked in a conical form and crowned with the Norwegian flag, outside the District Court where her brother, Jovsset Ánde Sara, had faced the consequences of such act. The skulls appear as frozen but still bearing eyes, fur, and flesh: elements that have been described as wanting to materialize the violence of a policy that sought to sever Sámi relationship to the land.

The depth of such work, a visceral act of protest in a public space, was not only about State policy but addressed the deeper contradiction of the "divide and destroy' strategy"[40] – a true extractive process cloaked in environmental discourse but driven by settler-industrial expansion. Later versions intended to intensify this gesture and connect it to the environmental struggles. In *Pile o'Sápmi Supreme* the reindeer skulls, now bleached and pierced by bullets, were suspended like a curtain alongside legal documents from her brother's trial[41] (fig.3). Although it was installed in symbolic protest sites such as the Norwegian Parliament and later featured at *documenta 14*[42], the emotional and spiritual tool of such battles remains acute.

As the artist reflects in her contribution to *The Sámi Pavilion*, a shift had happened. Now there is "a strong need to seek and manifest hope"[43]. That, however, does not withdraw her practice from politics, rather expands it towards adopting, this time, healing as a form of resistance toward the reclamation of Indigenous futurities and more-than-human kins. It is in the trio of works presented in the pavilion that this healing practice is presented: titled correspondingly *Gávogálši, Ale suova sielu sáiget* and *Du-ššan-Ahttanuššan*[44]. In each, the

Fig. 4. Máret Ánne Sara, *Ale suova sielu sáiget* (detail), 2022, red reindeer calves, cotton, birch branches and shoegrass, the Sámi Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Credits: OCA. Photo: Micheal Miller

figure of the reindeer is present, appearing as a relational agent of survival, memory, and continuity. "I was looking for this sort of manifesto for hope and positivism for the future after this horrible winter", Sara explains,

"when people were exhausted because, to feed the reindeer herds they had to transport their heavy balls of grass and pellets miles and miles to the tundra"[45].

The artistic response resulted in sculptures that invited the viewer to feel with, rather than look at. The first piece, *Gávogálši,* is an assemblage of suspended reindeer stomachs that took the role of representing "the seat of emotion and a deeper intellect […] a metaphor for the unseen and the non-verbal"[46]. In this sense, the stomach becomes not only a bodily organ but the "first receptors of the events in the world"[47], where emotion, perception and ecological memory converge, and invites "the visitors to generate their own embodied knowledge"[48]. Such sensory pedagogy revitalises Sámi epistemology by challenging the Western division of mind and body with the environment and reasserting the gut as a site of knowing. The artist expresses this when she states:

"I think this was the first piece where I really started to navigate the huge political debate about the individual and mental-health issues in relation to that in our society"[49].

Ale suova sielu sáiget, Sara's second installation in the pavilion, carries these ideas forward by combining dead reindeer calves with cotton grass, representing hope and birch branches, embodying ancestral knowledge. Suspended as well, they recall mourning and renewal, evoking a "carousel of death and re-birth, fear and comfort [that] mourns the dystopian future faced by reindeer and life in Sápmi"[50] (fig 4). Linked to this second piece, the artist notes

Figg. 5 e 6. Pauliina Feodoroff, *Matriarchy*, 2022, performance at the Sámi Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Credits: OCA. Photo: Micheal Miller

Fig. 7. Pauliina Feodoroff, *Matriarchy*, 2022, installation view at the Sámi Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Credits: OCA. Photo: Micheal Miller

that hope is refracted through the newborn calves, whose survival is threatened by climate change-induced scarcity and degradation of pastures. The work thus stages grief and resilience, binding ecological vulnerability to political critique and cultural continuity.

The final work, *Du-šŠan-Ahttanuššan,* departs from the material to form into the immaterial. Being an olfactory installation, composed of liquid smell molecules, it works as a "complex sensorium of human and animal life"[51], where the scent becomes a vector of ancestral memory and interspecies connection, and where land is experienced through immersion, intimacy, and reciprocity. Such installation thus expresses the "indivisibility of Sámi people and land, where land is defined by everything that constitutes it"[52], creating a multisensory choreography and invoking embodied ecological entanglements. Sara shows a way to resist the fragmentation imposed by colonial processes and land governance, reasserting a unity of body and land, memory and material, affect and ecology, and proposing an ontology where knowledge and resistance are sensorially felt in the scent of the reindeer.

If Sara's multisensory installation generates a pedagogy of empathy and memory, the work of Skolt Sámi artist and theatre director Pauliina Feodoroff intensifies the ethic of care into the politics of *rematriation*, namely the return to the land not through ownership or exploitation, but through collective guardianship and reciprocal obligation. Her work responds to the ecological and epistemological claim through an artistic and political practice that extends beyond the stage into acts of ecological restoration and cultural reparation. Through the work presented in the pavilion, *Matriarchy* (2022, fig. 5-7), the artist refers to what she names as two interlocking forces threatening Sámi survival: "the indus-

trial deforestation of old growth forest causing the collapse of rivers, fishing customs and the lichens reindeer feed on" and "state-led privatisation of land that destroys the collective models of existence and care underpinning Sámi society"[53]. Against this threat, Feodoroff offers a counter-practice grounded in Indigenous knowledge and degrowth. With what she defines as "neo-nature" [54], she expresses a mode of ecological consciousness that is neither nostalgic nor idealised, but forged through the labour of recovery and adaptation. Moreover, her involvement with the NGO Snowchange exemplifies this approach with whom she works to document and revitalize ancestral relations to the land as linked to watershed restoration of systems across Indigenous communities in the Arctic. On this, Feodoroff affirms that "it is possible to restore something, even if it will never be the same as it was before damage"[55]. The acts of care and healing are thus not framed as a return to a pristine past, but they are conceived more as a speculative and reparative gesture.

All these themes reunite in *Matriarchy,* staged in the pavilion as a manifest and visceral practice of reparation. Structured in three parts, *First Contact, Auction* and *Matriarchy,* each one exposes the violent power dynamics of settler colonialism and capitalist commodification reimagining possible reparative solutions. It begins with the poem *The Act of Begging*, in which the artist reflects critically on the role of the Indigenous artist in the contemporary art market. Feodoroff writes: "making your culture visible may cause severe protection. Making your story visible may cause severe societal change"[56]. With these words she poses a foundational dilemma: visibility can in fact be both a form of survival and a site of vulnerability. However, it is through begging that the artist reclaims what has long been constructed as submission. She reframes it as a radical act of gifting and vulnerability, embedding the concept of care as expressed by Finbog; that is, a way to return to the land what had previously been taken, an "indigenous ethics that teaches us that we are already involved in and together with land and waters, with the sky and the horizon, with other human and spiritual entities, with other animals and living organisms and with objects and things"[57].

Feodoroff performance – also described as "fugitive aesthetics"[58] – by escaping from dominant narratives, creates a dissonant space where colonial power is inverted. In her own words: "I'm showing footage from the watershed restoration that we're doing. I'm showing the results of microplastics studies that we're doing […] I want to do it visibly. I'm begging you on my knees"[59]. With this gesture, she choreographs a complex ecology of care: offering food, offering knowledge, offering herself, while simultaneously exposing the commodification of Indigenous land and art and exposing the tension between gift and transaction as a laid bare, able to create space to interrogate the very structures that frame Indigenous visibility today. The auction becomes an act of critique and intervention: the video portraits of threatened Indigenous landscapes that were installed in the pavilion are sold not as property but as artworks, shifting the buyer's role from consumer to custodian. Such act reframes the environment not as territory to be conquered, but as a relation to be maintained also by the western buyer, embedding and hoping for an ethical long-term responsibility.

The final act, *Matriarchy,* stages "a configuration of Indigenous and accomplice female bodies converging in actions that do not beg"[60] performing a bodily purging of "colonially transmitted and inherited forms of mobility and existence"[61]. The matriarchal values are thus not idealised as origin but activated as future: structures of care, resilience, and sovereignty. According to Feodoroff, *Matriarchy*

"makes works of art out of land areas that the Begging Queen auctions off in the performance. Please do not buy our lands,

Fig. 8. Anders Sunna, *Illegal Spirits of Sápmi*, 2022, mixed media, sound, archive documents, the Sámi Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Credits: OCA. Photo: Micheal Miller

buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells views of her land as portraits"[62].

In this poetic reversal, the artist confronts the paradox of being visible within the colonial institution of art while simultaneously refusing its terms. The landscape becomes both artwork and witness (subject, not object) binding together Sámi ways of knowing, collective struggle, and ecological repair.

The exhibition ends with Anders Sunna, whose work, like that of Sara and Feodoroff, focuses on the entanglement of ecology, sovereignty, and memory. From Kieksiäisvaara, in the Swedish part of Sápmi, Sunna's politically charged practice exposes the violent legal and institutional machinery that has long undermined Sámi land rights. His work chronicles not only collective histories of oppression, but the struggle of his own family locked for decades in court battles against dispossession and State-sanctioned erasure, aligning in this sense to the work of Sara. The medium implied, varying from painting to political graffiti, creates a visual language that oscillates between satire, protest and guerrilla resistance. Moreover, being deliberately confrontational, he renders institutions as grotesque figures (often in Nazi uniforms), positioning Sámi land defenders on the contrary as outlaws or insurgents. These figures, decapitating reindeers and presiding over barren landscapes, evoke the ongoing ecocide policies that convert Indigenous presence into criminality sided by the figure of the reindeer that once again, returns as a central figure and living measure of such ecological destruction.

In Sunna's work, the assault on reindeer herding is inseparable from the assault on Sámi epistemologies and ecological stewardship. Such critique clearly emerges in the installation presented in the pavilion. Entitled *Illegal Spirits of Sápmi* (2022, fig. 8),

Fig. 9. Installation view of *Girjegumpi*, 2023, the Sámi Architecture Library by Joar Nango and collaborators at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2023. Credits: ArkDes. Photo: Laurian Ghinițoiu

it was conceived in close collaboration with his brother. The piece consists of six freestanding panels sided by archive units, each corresponding to a decade of their family's legal struggle. The first five panels exhibit paintings and trial documents chronicling successive waves of injustice and Court documentation, while the sixth envisions a future. This one, represented not as resolution, but as a charred absence is composed by "burnt remains"[63], since the artist had set it on fire beforehand. The destruction here is central to the meaning of the artwork, being as it is both performative and ritualised:

"by laying the ashes on the ground of 'The Sámi Pavilion' next to the last depicted decade, Sunna effectively rises with his family from those ashes like a phoenix […] as for a call of conviction for a new and truly postcolonial, Indigenised future"[64].

The archival material, accessible through QR codes inserted in the paintings, offers audio testimonies, interviews and recordings that document the family's struggle. This kind of event and the impossibility of justice within existing legal infrastructures further reveals that concept of slow violence and explains the artist's insistence on visualising Indigenous resistance as guerrilla warfare. "What can happen if you oppress people for too long"[65], he notes in an interview, is rebellion. And yet, his imagery does not simply dwell in anger, it channels it. In a region where reindeer herders face rising suicide rates, Sunna affirms "learning the skill of channelling

anger for art production is literally life-saving"[66]. Here, art becomes a means of personal, collective, ecological and intergenerational survival. Thus, the burnt future laying its ashes on the pavilion floor is not one of despair but of transformation, so that the work regenerates as the relation with the land and the other living beings. It also insists on how it is in the ruins of colonial modernity that another future is possible.

As an overall, the works of Sara, Feodoroff and Sunna position *The Sámi Pavilion* as a space of resistance, care, and ecological justice, where art becomes a tool for survival, remembrance, and the envisioning of Indigenous futures.

If at the Venice Art Biennale in 2022 these issues were mainly faced through visual and performative artistic practices, they were further extended by Joar Nango at the 2023's Venice Architecture Biennale. Here Nango's practice reactivated Sámi ancestral knowledge through architectural systems made from found materials and nomadic design. Challenging colonial spatial logics and proposing infrastructures grounded in reciprocity and repair, Joar Nango's *Girjegumpi* (2018-today) shaped the Nordic Countries pavilion with a nomadic Sámi architectural library (fig. 9). Curated by ArkDes, the exhibition was inserted in an edition whose aim – testified by artistic director Lesley Lokko – was to question and resonate the diasporic knowledge and to ask how architecture, through different perspectives and imagination, allowed for the envisioning of different futures. Trying to answer this question, the project does not provide a form, but rather a method or a living process rooted in situated knowledge, care for the land, and improvisational capacities of Indigenous survival in a damaged world. However, before digging in such project, it can be useful to cite other artworks that help better frame Nango's practice.

Coming from Alta in Norway, Nango combines a practice that spans experimental architecture, public art, performative installations, pedagogy, and activism. Drawing from an ongoing reciprocal engagement with Sámi and other Indigenous communities, his work and methodology unfold as what he describes as an

"interdisciplinary practice [that] involves experimental architecture, performative interventions in public space combining research with activism, and site-specific projects dedicated to exploring social relations and local and Indigenous cultures"[67].

The result is the showcase of experiences that can offer a model of material and epistemic resistance. Nango's contribution is thus also deeply grounded in relational ecologies: it emphasizes a decolonial ethic of repair, adaptability, and communal resilience.

Moreover, as an architect and artist, he is first and foremost a scholar whose aim is to focus attention on the message rather than the object. He believes that:

"instead of letting an ethnical viewpoint simplify the picture and define the Sámi building tradition as a whole, it's more useful to focus on the Sámi way of thinking, where the unified Sámi building traditions is recognized by a sensitive relation to the landscape and the specific ecological, spiritual and historical criteria provided by the site itself"[68].

Nango does not want to monumentalize architecture, he wants to reclaim

Fig. 10. Joar Nango, Anders Rimpi, *Fijfere Vanás Geađgi (Burl Boat Stone)*, 2018-2023, permanent installation in Giella Preschool, Jokkmokk, Sweden. Credits: Public Art Agency Sweden. Photo: Ricard Estay

both its processional and transformative nature, as a practice of *duodji,* and its capacity of adaptation and deep attentiveness to the place.

One emblematic project that defines his practice is *Fijfere Vanás Geađgi (Burl Boat Stone,* 2023, fig. 10), a form of public artwork and playground he made in Jokkmokk, Sweden. Created in collaboration with Anders Rimpi, it takes shape as a pedagogical space for play and reflection, composed of elements like birch swings, boats and a storytelling stone equipped with a speaker broadcasting Sámi fairy tales. Additionally, the structure was built with locally sourced and found materials, since Nango and his collaborators "wanted to reuse what already existed on site, which happened to be a pair of fully functional tool sheds outside the old preschool"[69]. Through this work, Nango creates sustainable imagery not only through the employed materials, but also on a cultural level thanks to the fairy tales that invite children to "care about [and] re-sanctify their view of nature"[70].

Further to this, Nango's practice is also founded on the element of Indigenous improvisation and adaptation to the crises. Another of his works, *Post-Capitalist Architecture TV*[71] (fig. 11) can be taken as

an example. It is an ongoing film series that, since 2020, has been recorded and transmitted from a mobile studio located in a van. The different episodes show interviews and site visits across Europe made together with Sámi filmmaker Ken Are Bongo. The film series explores concepts such as "Indigenuity"[72], a term coined by the artist himself to describe Indigenous resourcefulness, adaptability and on-site problem solving or self-sufficiency, adaptability, and on-site solutions as part of Indigenous Sámi improvisational competences. The van becomes a traveling, improvised architecture that reflects the flexible and situated nature of Indigenous spatial practices.

It is from this project that the artwork presented at the Biennale was born. Its title, *Girjegumpi*, derives from a combination of two Northern Sámi words: *'Girji'*, meaning book, and *'Gumpi'*, meaning a small, mobile reindeer herder's cabin on sledges[73], typically pulled by a snowmobile. However, *'Gumpi'* also denotes a structure used to store and transport materials. More than a single artwork, *Girjegumpi* is the result of the artist's attempt of collecting literature, essays, maps, found object, artworks, and materials relating to Indigenous architecture, land relations and decolonial theory, so that it concretises as a true materialisation of a Sámi Moving Library

Fig. 11. Joar Nango, Ken Are Bongo, *Post-Capitalist Architecture TV, Part 3: On decolonization and architecture* (video still), 2020. The artist with the van used as TV studio. Photo: Ken Are Bongo

Fig. 12. *Girjegumpi*, 2023, the Sámi Architecture Library by Joar Nango and collaborators at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2023. Credits: ArkDes. Photo: Laurian Ghinițoiu

(fig. 12-13). The arguments and issues that this library comprehend do not concern only architecture. For the artist they form "an eclectic, undefined collection of knowledge and books"[74]. Additionally, the structure changes every time it is exhibited, adapting to each new space, region, and context. This mirrors the logic of Sámi dwelling, the *lávvu,* by which it is inspired, and its atonement to place. In Venice it transformed the pavilion into a truly lived place, a space of engagement, reflection and the sharing of knowledge, including an important series of public events. In Nango's own words:

"Girjegumpi is a living project addressing the relevance of indigenous culture in architectural discourse and construction today: the importance of collaborative work, building techniques and use of resources in rapidly changing climate conditions, the use of locally grounded material flow and sensitive approaches to landscapes and nature"[75].

The library is thus interdisciplinary, accessible and sustainable since it contains open access to critical works and books which are always consultable, thanks to what resulted in the *Virtual Library of Sámi Architecture*[76] (fig. 14), an online platform that hosts the entire Nango collection, along with essays, documentation and visual media. Incorporating all these characteristics, *Girjegumpi* becomes truly nomadic in the sense that it is transformed into a resource accessible beyond geographic limits and capable of opening new dialogues around Sámi

Fig. 13. *Girjegumpi*, 2023, the Sámi Architecture Library by Joar Nango and collaborators at the Nordic Countries Pavilion, 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2023. Credits: ArkDes. Photo: Laurian Ghinițoiu

Fig. 14. The Virtual Library of Sámi Architecture web site from Joar Nango's project *Girjegumpi* project

and Indigenous knowledge. By criticising on one hand, the state of art and culture but, on the other, proposing new and exciting solutions each time, the art of Nango can be seen as a perfect way to intervene, joyously and with motivation, in a world in crisis.

It is through holism, more-than-human relations, ecological activism, improvisation, and adaptation, that these few examples show how Sámi Contemporary Art emerges as one of the most compelling expressions of ecological and decolonial resistance. When applied to artistic practices, Sámi ways of living and epistemologies can, within their porous and layered essence, challenge extractive realities and offer grounded, relational alternatives for coexisting with the land and its more-than-human inhabitants. Sámi artists do not merely resist, they also imagine, they reweave kinship, culture, and sovereignty through aesthetic forms that are both symbolic and deeply political.

Therefore, the two Sámi pavilions at the 2022 and 2023 Venice Art and Architecture Biennials stand as a testament to the urgency of these visions. They remind us that the Arctic is not a distant frontier, that we are not detached from the natural phenomena. Instead, we are embedded in that same crucial space of planetary concern, and we need to take action, collectively and creatively, to avoid – or at least try to – the ecological collapse.

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