



## **Conventional Ethnographic Display or Subversive Aesthetics? Historical Narratives of the Sami Museum, RiddoDuottarMuseat- Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD) in Karasjok, Norway**

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### **Abstract**

The question of how and where Sámi culture is best represented is a debated issue in Norway. However, politically the problem has been “solved” through the establishment of Sámi museums, run by Sámi people and administered by the Sámi Assembly. The first Sámi museum in Norway was RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD) in Karasjok. Sámi museums have, however, been subjected to considerable criticism. They have been accused for propagating ethnic reification and presenting a stereotypical and static image of Sámi culture and identity. The exhibitions are seen as replicas of conventional ethnographic displays, tending to represent Sámi culture as belonging to a traditional, pre-modern past, due to a lack of chronological narration and historical anchoring. Based on fieldwork at the RDM-SVD, this article presents an analysis of the exhibition practices that challenges such earlier readings. We argue that far from replicating the exhibition language of dominant western ethnography, the exhibitions can be seen as an effort to undermine the conceptions of time and history of the dominant society. Based on a study of the museum display as a total experience, our alternative reading suggests that the museum, by evoking a mythical landscape through aesthetic means, inscribes itself into a Sámi conception of time and space – a Sámi understanding of reality. Thus, we also address the debate concerning museums in non-western spaces, and the question of recognizing indigenous curatorial practices. Not least the art section leaves an impression of a museum space less marked by closure than earlier readings suggest. Here the museum opens up for articulations with the wider world, as Sámi contemporary art not only speaks from a position of a particular locality; it also communicates with the international art scene and incorporates visions and perspectives from a global or multiple world<sup>1</sup>.

In an archive at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, between exhibition sketches and old meeting minutes, we stumble over a photograph that immediately catches our attention.



Figure 1: Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty: Sámi woman in showcase, ca. 1994. © BONO

It is a photograph taken by one of the museums' staff photographers, Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, showing a small section of the arctic exhibition. Two towering museum exhibit cases in dark oak are occupying most of the pictorial plane. One of them contains an exhibition of the familiar, old fashioned kind. A Sámi costume – a man's costume with a so called star hat – is exhibited in front of a map with the core geographical locations of the Sámi people in the North. The Sámi flag and a richly decorated wooden box are also included in the exhibition. It is however the other showcase that represents the element of surprise in the photograph. Here a woman – not a mannequin – but a very much alive woman in Sámi costume, has entered the exhibition case, smilingly ready for the camera.

The photograph also makes us smile – as the woman's pose in the exhibition case may be understood as an ironic comment on the museum's objectification of people from other cultures. But at the same time this, probably spontaneous stunt, opens up for further reflections as it, in its quiet way takes us directly to the core of the museum problem of representation and the inherent questions concerning power and control. It makes us wonder whether the Sámi woman and the

photographer's ironical gesture are to be understood as a way of regaining control over, or at least question, the representation of the Sámi peoples' identity and history in the old ethnographical museum in the Norwegian capital.

It is precisely such a desire to take their own history back, which represents the very foundation of the Sámi people's museum, *RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat*, situated in the community of Karasjok in Northern Norway.



Figure 2: RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway, 2011  
© The authors.

This museum was established in 1972 as the first of eleven Sámi museums in Norway, as a part of the political and cultural mobilization and struggle of the Sámi population. The museum, which is run by Sámi people, sorts administratively under the Sámi Assembly.

The exhibition space of this museum is divided in two different parts: one permanent exhibition of Sámi cultural history, and white cube galleries that present temporary exhibitions of Sámi contemporary art. The renowned Sámi artist Iver Jåks (1932-2007) designed the cultural history displays as well as some sculptural elements in the entrance area. Since its beginning, the museum has collected both cultural history objects as well as objects of contemporary Sámi art. The division between the cultural history and the art sections is however not absolute. The overall design as well as thematic connections blur the border between the different exhibition spaces and make the museum appear as open and seamless.

Sámi museums have been subjected to considerable criticism. They have been accused for propagating ethnic reification, and for presenting stereotypical images of Sámi culture and identity. Based on fieldwork at the museum, this article presents an analysis of the exhibition practices that challenges such critical readings of Sámi Museums in Norway. In our view, these readings are problematic, since they neglect to discuss the fundamental question of how meanings are produced in the museum space. Furthermore, the interplay between the narrative

elements of the different exhibitions in the Sámi museum, both the cultural history and the contemporary art sections, tends to be overlooked. On the basis of a study of the museum display as a total experience, our alternative reading suggests that the museum, by evoking a mythical landscape through aesthetic means, inscribes itself into a Sámi conception of time and space – a Sámi understanding of reality.

### Critical perspectives on Sámi museums

Several scholars have raised the argument that exhibitions in Sámi museums simply are reproducing older stereotypes. The main point of reference in this discussion is an article from 2000, written by the Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen. He describes the exhibition at the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok as a replica of conventional ethnographic displays. The Sámi culture is presented through a focus on livelihood, handicraft and religion, without any sense of sense of change, historical sequences or chronology. Olsen argues that this lack of historical anchoring of the Sámi culture provides an image of a static, pre-modern Sámi culture. In his view, the exhibition design by Jáks only contributes to accentuate this static and immobile representation of the Sámi past.



Figure 3: Exhibition case by Jáks/Andersen (1972). RidduDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway, 2011 © The authors.

Consequently, the exhibition produces a highly romanticized and idealized image of the Sámi as a people in harmony with nature. As a contrast to the design and object display, the exhibition texts, according to Olsen, focus on suffering and loss, with the Sámi population as victims of colonization and oppression by the Norwegian authorities. He also claims that the contact with the Norwegian majority population is represented in negative terms only. In the exhibition texts, change is solely explained in terms of a break with the past, resulted by the entrance of modernity

and colonialism. Tributes and taxation, government laws, exploitation and discrimination of Sámi language and occupation are also seen as elements in this process of cultural destruction. The “real” and “authentic” Sámi culture, then, existed in the past only. Therefore, in Olsen’s view, the major task of the museum then becomes to save and preserve the memory of this lost heritage. Following from this, he argues that the exhibition replicates ethnographic master narratives of fading and dying traditional cultures – instead of doing what it should have done: show the way the Sámi society always has been in continuous change. Change, he holds, is therefore not just a result of modernity. His conclusion is that, by stripping the Sámi culture of chronology and historical development, the exhibition reproduces the ethnographic stereotypes of peoples with and without history.

Other scholars have supplemented Olsen’s analysis. Sharon Webb (2006), for instance, points to the way the simple, stereotype, and essentialist image of Sáminess was instrumental in the process of ethnic mobilization. Webb’s description and analysis echoes Olsen’s in many ways, but while she too points to the way the exhibition reproduces ethnographic stereotypes, she also understands the alleged representation of Sámi culture as timeless and static as conditioned by politics. In an article that sums up the discussion, Silje Opdahl Mathisen (2010) points to what she sees as a paradox: In taking responsibility for the representation of their own culture and history, the Sámi people reproduce ethnographic stereotypes produced by the majority society. How may Sámi identity be built with the help of categories criticised for being oppressive, estranging and marginalizing, she asks.

These critical views of the Sámi museums can be seen in relation to the broader postcolonial critique of museums, ethnographic museums in particular. When a museum exhibits another culture, it necessarily situates that other in a framework of its own world. Ethnographic displays have, for instance, been criticized for the way they have represented ‘others’ as a primitive contrast to a civilized European ‘self’; as underdeveloped, essentialized and frozen in time. Rooted in western history and ideas, museums are intrinsically connected to the story of imperialism and colonial appropriation (see for instance Barringer & Flynn 1998, Coombes 1994, Karp & Lavine 1991, Henare 2005, Thomas 1994). As western inventions, museums inevitably reproduce western ideology, preoccupations and concerns. From this perspective museums developed in non-western spaces necessarily continue to be influenced by the mission, ideas and practices of western museums. Following this line of thought, the Sámi museums, despite being founded and run by the Sámi people themselves, are criticized for having inherited western museum structures and conventions of display.

However, such views of museums developed in non-western societies have also been challenged. The foundation of the Sámi museums can be seen as part of a larger international development. Since World War II there has been a worldwide growth of museums. Particularly from the 1960s onwards, there has also been a growth of museums established by ethnic minority groups, or first nation groups, aiming to preserve and share their cultural heritage and counterbalance the ways in which the mainstream institutions have represented their culture. As Moira Simpson holds, although being intrinsically tied to the history of colonialism,

[...]museums are now undergoing a radical change in the way that they function and in their relationships with the cultures represented in the collections; a change which reflects shifts in

the relationships between dominant western cultures and those of indigenous, minority, and suppressed cultures everywhere (Simpson 2001: 1).

In the course of this development there is also a growing recognition of indigenous curatorial practices and concepts of cultural heritage preservation around the world (Simpson 2001, Kreps 2003). Although museums as western cultural forms continue to influence contemporary museum practice everywhere, museums have also developed strategies in order to face this problem (Clifford 1997, Kreps 2003, McLoughlin 1999, Simpson 1996). However, such strategies may easily be ignored. As Kreps contends, to give credence to practices that have been overlooked or devalued is an important step towards the decolonization and democratization of museums and museum practice (Kreps 2003:4). In order to acknowledge these aspects of the curatorial practice of the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok, it is necessary to move beyond the immediate recognizable. This requires not only a closer reading of the exhibitions, but also a more thorough discussion of how meanings are produced in the museum.

### Reading exhibitions

An important aspect of the establishment of a new museology has been the new awareness of the museum as a place, not only for housing, exhibiting and conservation, but also for the production of meaning (Pollock 2007: 1). But how do the museums produce meaning by actively framing their objects? How do we 'read' exhibitions, not just as form, but something that generates meaning? And what meanings are we thinking of? The meanings intended by the exhibition makers, those of the visitors, or the meanings extracted from the exhibitions when studying them for academic purposes?

One way of approaching such questions is to look at exhibitions in the perspective of a pragmatic theory of meaning, in other words as contextual and situated rather than inherent (Macdonald 2011). Inspired by art historical writings, one could develop this further by understanding the meaning of an exhibition in the context of the cultural practice of which it forms a part; a practice characterised by rule-regulated or institutionalised behaviour (Danbolt 2010: 15). The actions and choices made by the participants of this practice, both object and exhibition makers (as acts of expression) and exhibition visitors (as acts of understanding) are all made within this common institutionalised field. Michael Baxandall argues in a similar way for an understanding of the notion of 'exhibition' as a field in which at least three distinct terms are independently in play: makers of object, exhibitors of made objects and viewers of exhibited made objects' (Baxandall 1991). Far from static, these complex, dynamic, and sometimes fraught relations vary from one exhibition to another (Vergo 1989).

So how do we map the possibilities and resources that are culturally available for the respective agents in the cultural practice of museum display? In order to approach this problem, we have to begin with an immanent analysis of the cultural product itself: the exhibition in question. This represents a great challenge, as exhibitions are much more than performative speech acts producing meaning through the gesture of exposure or just saying 'look how it is'. Consisting of objects as well as other elements such as images, texts, sounds and smell, they are multimedial and multisensory in character (Bal 1996: 3, Kratz 2010: 15). Bal also reminds us of how narration in the museum works two ways: First, by the very fact of exposing the object; presenting it while informing about it. Second, it works through the sequential nature of the visit:

the process of walking through the exhibition area, which links together the various elements of the exposition (Bal 2006: 208).

Analyzing such narratives involves raising basic questions, not only about the aesthetics of the exhibition (the ways of telling), but also about power and representation: whose (hi)story is presented, and for whom? In short, we are looking at the poetics as well as the politics of the museum display (Karp & Lavine 1991, Lidchi 2006). This implies looking for more or less explicit ideological subtexts, but also contested meanings, ambiguities, contradictions, etc. Additionally it involves questioning the particular understanding of history, or philosophy of history, which inform the exhibition narrative: Are the objects contextualized or displayed in a way that is aesthetic, decontextualized and ahistorical? Another relevant issue is how the myriads details in the display, such as light design, exhibit texts, and choice of words, may be embedding values (Kratz 2011). Of equal importance is the question of the structure of the overall narrative: Is it non-chronological and fragmented with little or none interpretative clues? Or, are we moving through a succession of exemplary objects in a manner corresponding to what Donald Preziosi has labelled a chronologically choreographed re-enactment of history (Preziosi 2011:50).

Such theoretical and methodological considerations are not to be found in the earlier mentioned critical readings of the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok. Olsen's reading of the exhibition is for example limited to categorizing the different objects on display: as connected to practices of religion, craft, fishing etc. The question as to how these objects are presented and integrated in the artist's Jáks design, is not given any further consideration than to state that they appear to "belong to a unspecified, traditional past" (Olsen 2000: 18). His reading does however reveal a more fundamental interest in the exhibition texts, which paradoxically only represent minor elements when looking at the display as a totality. The interplay between words and objects is another issue that could have been, but is not discussed in this context. In his article, Olsen also has avoided to address the part of the museum dedicated to contemporary Sámi art. A closer study of this art section might have opened up for the kind of experiences that he and Webb (2006: 173) claim to be absent in the Sámi museums: reflections on change, the relationship between past and present, between traditional and modern Sámi life, tensions of identity, politics, problems and challenges.

We shall now return to the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok. While we are not able to go into too much detail of the many aspects listed above, our analysis maintains a focus on the interplay between the poetics and politics of display, a perspective that opens up for alternative readings of the representations of Sámi past and present in this museum. In order to discover this, it is necessary to move through the museum's exhibitions in the same way as the visitors. Only then will we be able to see clearly how the objects on display re-enact history in the museum space.

### **An alternative reading of the exhibitions in the Sámi Museum, RDM-SVD, in Karasjok**

Let us imagine that we are there, in a landscape of hills and scattered pines in Karasjok, and that we are slowly approaching the museum building with its wood- and concrete walls and large glass windows. It is placed very low in the terrain, clearly in adaptation to the local environment. As we get closer to the solid door in dark wood, we notice a sculpturally formed door handle in

brass, a sacred material in the Sámi society, designed by Jåks. This motif is, as noted by Caroline Serck-Hansen, drawn from a shaman drum, and symbolises the sexual union of man and woman. Thus, the door handle is literally an introduction to the fertility theme expressed in the artworks that we meet in the front hall, after having entered the museum (Serck-Hanssen 2002: 43).

Jåks is also responsible for the wooden sculptures of stylized human figures that are to be seen in an airy exhibition box by the door.



Figure 4: Iver Jaaks: Sculpture in the entrance area at RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway, 2011 © The authors.

The brightness of the snowy landscape which is reflected in the large glass windows throws life and shadows over the solid, but yet dancingly light figures. They thus seem to be in full movement, and are in this way also contributing to the experience of bringing the outdoor

landscape into the museum building. This movement is continued in Jåks large relief in concrete and wood in the entrance hall.



Figure 5: Iver Jåks, *The Dance of the Gods*, Relief (1972), RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway © Iver Jåks / BONO 2012

On this complexly composed wall, the figures from the three-dimensional entrance sculpture seem to have danced their way further into the museum complex. They now form a chain of voluptuous women and ox-like strong male bodies, surrounded by warm flickering sunrays. As indicated by its title, *The Dance of the Gods*, the work carries allusions to Sámi cosmology. In Sámi cosmology the sun was an ancient cosmic being which carried the other gods on its rays. The artwork represents five cosmological figures: the god of the winds, the father of origin flanked by his wife and son, and the spring goddess. There is as strong erotic element in this: the work of creation obtains its energy and growth-potential from the cosmic life-giving forces embodied by the gods (Serck-Hanssen 2002: 42-43). Through this artwork Jåks establishes a connection between the Sámi museum and Sámi cosmological worlds. But Jåks has also, in cooperation with the duodji-artist, Jon Ole Andersen, made the design for the exhibition rooms of the museum. This design is based on a consequent use of simple natural materials: the exhibition cases, walls and ceiling in pine – and the rustic stone and sisal floors.

From *The Dance of the Gods* in the entrance area, the attention of the museum visitor is directed towards to the central element of the permanent exhibition: the drum of the shaman.



Figure 6: Shaman-drum at RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway, 2011 © The authors.

This drum, which is the great pride of the museum, is (due to conservation issues) exhibited as a replica. The original, also in possession of the museum, belonged to the shaman Anders Poulsson from Varanger. Paulsen, as the museum text informs us, was summoned before the Danish-

Norwegian court in 1692, and murdered by an allegedly mentally disturbed person, just before the sentence was to be declared. In this way, the centrally positioned drum stands as a reminder of the painful sides of the Sámi people's past: the violence and cultural and religious oppression of the Sámi by the colonial authorities and the majority population. Iconic of Sámi religious practice, as the link between people and the spiritual world, the drum connects the timelessness of the mythical space to specific references to concrete historical events.

The drum therefore seems to represent a kind of prologue in relation to the story which is told by the other elements of the permanent exhibition: the objects in the solid pine cases on the walls and the mannequins and larger objects which are placed more freely in the exhibition area. Not linked to any specific historic event, these are thematically organised in relation to different aspects of Sámi livelihood and culture; hunting, fishing, reindeer herding and agriculture, boat building, forestry, housing and craft production (*duodji*). However, decorative panels with motifs from the shaman drums rhetorically frame this part of the exhibition, which mainly comprises objects of a relatively new date, i.e. from the eighteenth and the nineteenth century.



Figure 7: The cultural history exhibition with Ják's wall panels at RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD), Karasjok, Northern Norway, 2011 © The authors.

To sum up our reading of the cultural history part of the museum exhibition at the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok: Far from replication the exhibition language of dominant western ethnography, the exhibition can be seen as an effort to undermine the conceptions of time and history of the dominant majority.

But as earlier mentioned, the Sámi museum in Karasjok is not only a cultural history museum. It is also a museum that has built up a considerable collection of contemporary art by Sámi artists. Much of the material cultural heritage in the northern regions of Norway was destroyed during the last phases of World War II, due to the German occupational forces' scorched earth

tactics. Therefore the museum has deliberately chosen to focus in particular on the collection and exhibition of Sámi contemporary artworks. The visitors' experience of the museum thus also includes an experience of contemporary Sámi art in the gallery rooms that are closely connected to the cultural history exhibition.

Walking through this art exhibition, one cannot help noticing that photography appears to have gained something near to a dominant position. Let us therefore briefly take a closer look at three chosen examples of such photography-based contemporary Sámi art: In a work titled *Margit Ellinor*, the artist Bente Geving, born 1952, presents a series of small kitsch still-lives from a coffee table – many of them with prominent Sámi imagery.



Figure 8: Bente Geving, *Margit Ellinor II*. Photograph, 30X40 cm. 2002. RiddoDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD) © Bente Geving

It is tempting to read these close ups of decorative objects as an intimate portrait of the person who arranged them, the artist's mother, Margit Ellinor, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2001 and died in 2007. This understanding also seems to be in line with by the artist's own statement about the work:

I started to photograph my mother's room in 2002. At that time she had begun to rearrange images and decorative objects, bringing forth things that had been stuffed away in drawers and cupboards, while removing others. She decorated and combined different objects on tables, on shelves and in cabinets. She did small changes – and moved things around. Every time I visited her there were new constellations and arrangements. I became fascinated by the colors and her compositions – and also interested in going into her world to make my pictures out of her pictures. It became important. She said it was her work. (Geving 2005: 1)

The photographs of Margit Ellinor's kitsch installations may thus be seen as an arena for articulating a sense of memory loss, not only on a personal, but also on a broader, collective level.

This also seems to be the case in the work of the younger artist Gjert Rognli. His artistic production is to a larger extent multimedial and comprises film, photography and performances. *Behind the Silverwiths*, a still photograph from a film with the same title from 2005, is a striking image of a river, red like blood, which calmly passes through a landscape of birches and green forest floor.



Figure 9: Gjert Rognli, *Behind the Silverwiths*, Photograph, 80x80 cm. 2005. RidduDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD) © Gjert Rognli

According to the art historian Kjellaug Isaksen, this work must be understood in relation to the artist's personal background in a Sámi coastal area which in the past has been subjected to a brutal politics of assimilation by the Norwegian government. Rognli and other younger artists' way of responding to this painful past, has been to invigorate and make use of suppressed Sami cultural elements. Isaksen reads *Silverwiths* as an invitation to enter a universe in which echoes from the past again reaches the surface (Isaksen 2010: 21). On the one hand, the red river carries

allusions to past Sámi ritual practices of sacrifice, and how the river carried the blood from these sacrifices away through the landscape. On the other hand, the work may be understood as an articulation of post-colonial experiences; the loss of history and the loss of traditions.

The last work we would like to point to, is *Transteinen* by the photographer and poet, Hege Siri (b. 1973).



Figure 10: Hege Siri, *Transteinen*. Photograph 2005. RidduDuottarMuseat-Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (RDM-SVD) © Hege Siri.

Her photographs serve as yet another example of the tendency of expressing issues of memory and loss. In 2009 Siri exhibited a series of photographs of places that were considered sacred in the Sámi tradition. But her work also seems to talk about how these sacred places of the past are experienced in the presence. As remarked by the photography historian Mette Sandbye, photography is well suited to the task of representing a traumatic past. Strictly speaking, photography cannot tell us more than that something once took place in the past. But if this is transferred into what Sandbye, inspired by Jean-Francois Lyotard, calls an anamnetic micro-story in artistic form, the photograph can unfold a much larger story. The anamnesis, which is a term for a patient's own story of her disease, may help to bring the world into speaking terms again.

This is based on the recognition that it is the human being or the artist herself who must put her mark on it – or code it – in order to re-imagine the past and make the world exist (Sandbye 2001: 167-171). Such anamnestic stories seem to represent an underlying theme in Sami contemporary art.

### **Concluding remarks**

History told tends to belong to the dominant forces within a society, while the history of the minor forces tends to be defined in relation to the dominant forces. The critique voiced against Sámi museums maintains that in order to avoid reproduction of ethnic stereotypes, the exhibitions should avoid the timelessness of conventional ethnographic displays, which freezes and essentializes the Sámi, by adding chronological history to the exhibition narrative. However, one could argue that history structured by chronological time is just another imposition of an order pertaining to the dominant society. In our view, the aesthetic framing of the cultural history display at the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok indicates a very different notion of the past. In this light, the display may be seen as an effort to break also with dominant ways of structuring the past. The lack of chronological time as a prime organizing principle of historical narration may be seen as alternative way of configuring the past; a way that distances itself from dominant historiography, like an anti-history if you like – or a transhistory.

Thus, the cultural history display can be seen as an effort to overcome, surpass or transcend time and the constraints imposed by time. The timelessness invoked by the display does not make it ahistorical, but signals another mode of historicity (Castoriadis 1997: 185), as a response to a world where history may as much be a burden as a source of power. Typical to non-centralized societies like the Sámi and in contrast to centralized societies, memories of the past that are inscribed in practices, places, material objects and bodies, may be just as important as those articulated in verbal narratives. Traces of, and references to, the past are not woven into a totality, and encompassed into one authoritative story of the past. Instead, this is a mode of historicity that can be described as both fragmented and dispersed (Nielsen 2011). As we see it, this is the mode of historicity that the museum draws upon and seeks to recreate in the exhibitions, both the cultural history and the art sections. By evoking a mythical landscape through aesthetic means, the museum inscribes itself into a Sámi conception of time and space – a Sámi understanding of reality. As a result, an image of Sáminess emerges as something that transgresses the limits of time and space.

Writing about museum representations of Native Canadians, Moira McLaughlin (1999) make similar observations of the exhibitions in what she terms tribal museums. She describes how the exhibitions in some ways look surprisingly familiar to the exhibitions in the larger, government run museums. However, also here the framing is different. While the museums reject an isolation of First Nations into a mythic ahistoric past, this past is not rejected. Instead, “[t]his past, which freezes and essentializes native Canadians at the larger museums, here works to enrich and guide a present and future” (McLaughlin 1999: 250). The past becomes the foundation of contemporary life. This is very similar to what goes on in the Sámi Museum, *RDM-SVD*, in Karasjok. The image of Sáminess produced in the cultural history display may serve as a pool, or a platform of coherence, to be drawn upon in a world of dispersion and fragmentation, in the process of self-definition and self-determination. Somehow this is part of what happens in the

contemporary art section. The past moves into a present that is both personal and political. As McLaughlin notes, stereotypes are not easy to do away with (McLaughlin 1999: 238). Images of buffalo hunters, shaman or tipi dwellers, or as in the Sámi context of the reindeer herders and the *lavvu* (tent), are today easily read as stereotypes. But stereotypes may also be re-appropriated, turned into irony or incorporated into experimental artistic journeys.

While the aesthetic framing of the cultural history exhibition establishes a connection to the contemporary art section, and as such also establishes a link between the past and the present, the latter additionally suggests an orientation towards the future. While the artworks may draw on the past and address issues of remembrance and loss, they also point to identity conflicts, tensions within the Sámi community in addition to on-going difficulties in the relation to the majority community, which for many among the Sámi population still is seen as a colonial force. Not least does the contemporary art section leave an impression of a museum space that is less marked by closure than earlier readings suggest. Here the museum opens up for articulations with the outer world, as Sámi contemporary art speaks not only from the position of a particular locality; it also communicates with the international art scene and incorporates visions and perspectives from a global or multiple world.

## Notes

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