Northern Lights Episode 10

The Sámi Pavilion

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Interviewees: Marita Isobel Solberg, artist
Liisa-Ravna Finbog, curator of the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022
Anders Sunna, artist

Introduced by: Sarah Mackie

Sarah Mackie
Hello everyone and welcome to Northern Lights, the Harvard Arctic Initiative Student Podcast. The creative expression of Norway, Sweden, and Finland’s Indigenous people has long been underrepresented in a contemporary art context, but, as Allison Agsten discovered, that is all about to change.

Allison Agsten is a mid-career master’s student at Harvard Kennedy School with a background in museum curation.

This is Allison Agsten with ‘The Sámi Pavilion’.

Allison Agsten
In 2017, without prior announcement, the name on the front of the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, the visual arts museum in northern Norway, changed overnight. Suddenly, the sign read Sámi Dáiddamusea. But it wasn't only the name that was different.

Marita Isobel Solberg
So suddenly the museum was different. It was changed with new signs and new cards, new posters, a new collection of art and even a new director.

Allison Agsten
Artist Marita Isobel Solberg was very involved with the new project dedicated to the region's indigenous Sámi art.

Marita Isobel Solberg
This was an initiative from Jérémie McGowan at that time, the director of the North Norwegian Art Museum. And so I was invited into this project as a performance artist to be the director or something else. I could just as well have been the cleaner. And I was also having a performance at the opening.

Allison Agsten
The genesis of this project is worth a closer look.

Liisa-Ravna Finbog
That project was interesting in that it showed that there can be interest for Sámi art in an art museum.

But also, I have to say, what is interesting about that is that it had to be a non Sámi institution that showcased, if you know what I mean, so that the director of the museum at the time, Jérémie McGowan, is not Norwegian himself, which which I think made it a lot easier for him to be aware of some of the things happening in the Sámi community and also looking at Sámi art.

Allison Agsten
That's Sámi scholar Liisa-Ravna Finbog, hinting at Norway's dark history of colonialism. For thousands of years before current borders were drawn, Sámi people occupied northern Europe and Russia.
Liisa-Ravna Finbog
The Sámi homeland, Sapmi, is colonized today by four nation states - Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. And, you know, a big part of that process has been to sort of de-value the culture, languages and also aesthetic expressions of the Sámi people. And that, I think, still holds a lot of sway in contemporary, you know, in today, in contemporary practice.

Allison Agsten
While Sámi Dáiddamusea was a step in the right direction, it was only a temporary project open for a few months. It would take years, but another Sámi takeover of a contemporary art space was on the way. This one of epic proportions.

LRF:
Liisa-Ravna Finbog
So when I got the call, my first response was, are you sure you're contacting the right person now? I mean, you do know what it is I do, right? And but then, you know, the reply was, yes, we do now. And that's why we want you, because I think there are very few of us within Sámi context.

So the Sámi being the indigenous population within Scandinavia and the north, very few of us do have, you know, a competency within museological theories.

Allison Agsten
Liisa-Ravna Finberg studies museums of ethnography. So she was surprised to be asked to curate the Nordic Pavilion, a venue shared by Norway, Sweden and Finland, in arguably the most prestigious art exhibition in the world, the Venice Biennale. And as if that was not enough, the exhibition would feature only Sámi artists.

Anders Sunna
I think it was a really good opportunity to show the art, but also to talk about our history and our living today and how it looks like at the moment.

**Allison Agsten**

Anders Sunna is one of the artists selected to participate in the exhibition.

**Anders Sunna**

I don't know, but I hope it will be a great focus on the community and also what has been to be shown there.

**Allison Agsten**

For Sunna, working with a curator who is also Sámi has been a revelation.

**Anders Sunna**

No, it's good because you have almost the same mindset and you don't have to always explain yourself. And if you work with others or something, then you always have to explain yourself why and so the process will also take a long time. And maybe cannot understand what our point of view.

**Allison Agsten**

Curator Liisa-Ravna Finbog says point of view is indeed crucial.

**Liisa-Ravna Finbog**

For me the you know, the pavilion and what that grants us, the platform that creates is just it's not only about showcasing Sámi art, although that is such an important and very much valid aspect of it. But it's also a place where we have the opportunity to start telling our own story and to start deciding for ourselves how we are to be disseminated and also a place where we can counter, you know, what other might say about us or we can put focus on the things, you know, that the fights for rights that we are involved in at the moment, so it's never only about art, it's like Sunna
the said that artists, you know, artists, a place where we it's only the place where we have a voice left. And that's, I think, really important in this context, because the making the Nordic pavilion into the Sámi pavilion is giving a voice not only to the artists that will be showcased, but also to the collective Sámi people, because we have now the opportunity to sort of write our own faith or our own destiny.

Sarah Mackie
Today’s episode was written and produced by Allison Agsten.

We would like to thank artist Marita Isobel Solberg, Liisa-Ravna Finbog, curator of the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022 and Anders Sunna, artist for the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022.

This podcast was created as part of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Arctic Initiative Podcast Project, led by Dr Sarah Mackie.