

# THE PIGEON-GRAM COLLECTIVE

## Nº1 2021

Writings from and between Arkhangelsk, Bodø, Lainio, Luleå, Nuuk, Petrozavodsk, Romsa/Tromsø, Syktvykar and Tornio

### EDITORIAL

This is a collection of ten texts written by ten members of the Pigeon-Gram Collective.

The Pigeon-Gram Collective is a group of writers based in the Arctic. In a time of heavy restrictions on social interaction and international travel due to the pandemic, we met on-line to exchange texts, opinions and experiences.

Each participant was asked to write a text that started out from their immediate surroundings and moved on to a broader view of their local context via an object – a work of art, a building, a text, etc. To counter a situation that made physical meetings impossible, we also sent each other postcards.

The main idea behind the tripartite schema of the writing exercise was to connect personal experiences, local situations, and common concerns.

Despite the pandemic and the limits it imposed on the project, it has been a privilege and an inspiration to work with the Pigeon-Gram Collective.

Tekstbyrået  
Nina M. Schjønby &  
Halvor Haugen



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A project by Troms and  
Finnmark fylkeskommune,  
developed by Tekstbyrået



# The Pigeon-Gram Collective

No 1 2021

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**BarentsKult**

**NORDISK  
KULTURFOND**

# Lena Ylipää

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I come from Kiruna and live and work in Lainio, in Kiruna municipality.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

Lainio is a small village 130 km north of the arctic circle, surrounded with mires, lakes and forest. It's a forty-minute drive to the nearest grocery store and gas station, but the village has a common sauna which is a good compensation for the lack of natural meeting places, such as shops and the like.

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

I was notified by the editor of the art web-publication Volym that the Pigeon-Gram Collective was about to take form and start working together.

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

The process of writing together with these amazing people has been such a pleasure and very educational. Our common discussions and the feedback from the participants have made me dare to write in a new and more personal way.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

To me, the discussion about art and the regional art scene is most lively and insightful among colleagues.

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Jag är tacksam över att kunna leva och verka i norr, att finnas mitt i berättelsen jag vill berätta.

# Language and my regenerated tail

Lena Ylipää

Everything is there and yet nothing is the same. Our house is for sale. The living room looks like a room that is not for living. There are no dirty socks on the sofa and the cushions are unnaturally puffed and smooth. No breadcrumbs on the table, only the designer candle holders in the shape of skulls. All with unlit candles in them. The right books are on the top of the dresser, but the liquor inside is gone. It is clean and there is a distinct smell of the real estate agent's aftershave in the air.

We are selling our house and moving back home, north. One cannot just keep a house in Boden because it is situated close to Havremagasinet, one of the most interesting art halls in the northern part of Sweden. This place has given me so many good experiences through their exhibitions and activities. The possibility to walk home after a nice opening party has been really convenient. One evening though, I took the car, a five-minute drive, for a guided tour through the exhibitions. I seldom attend guided tours, my walking pace is often too slow, or too fast. But that evening I thought it would be nice to meet some people, at an acceptable social distance of course. The group I joined for this tour is one of Havremagasinet's friend associations. The members are middle-aged and somewhat elderly women and men, often couples. They grew up in Sweden during the sixties and seventies when there was a political consensus that art and culture were part of the common knowledge and a natural part of a democratic society. These art-lovers are really interested in different forms of cultural activities, and social events. They are also good at supporting the local art scene. When I arrived, a few minutes late, the group had already taken the elevator to the sixth floor. The top floors are a little bit cold in the winter, but – somewhat shivering – the group patiently waited for the guide. I joined, warm

and short of breath.

Soon enough we were all warmed up, both by the excitement about the artwork and by walking through the building. The main exhibition this time was called *Språk – Language*. The artwork highlighted many aspects of language, and the different means of expression were interconnected through a subtle sense of material and form. The exhibition pointed out many aspects of communication, loss of language and the right to speak out. Whether it is your personal voice, the voices of our different cultures, or social status. I was thrilled. As an artist I find it hard to problematize and visualize language issues. To me, language is language, filled with letters and words. I have not been able to tear myself away from the syllables when trying to work with questions of language myself. Coming from the Torne Valley, and the minority group of Tornedalians, I have a bilingual background, so the topic is important to me.

When we reached the third floor, I was confronted with a visual experience that completely caught me. The group went on, but I was left with Johanna Gustafsson-Fürst's sculpture, *The Mothertongue*. The sculpture hung, brightly lit, free-floating in a dark part of the room. Parts of bentwood furniture were combined with birch twigs and gnarled branches. The joints were visible and obvious. Sometimes simple and natural, and sometimes the pieces were forced together almost to the breaking point. Some of the twigs were sanded down, hours of hard work had smoothened the surface and some of the worst bumps. The sculpture seemed to twist around itself where disciplined and undisciplined parts were supposed to form a common body. The proper and constructed, in symbiosis with the organically growing. I was overwhelmed

by how strong this sculpture describes both the lack and the longing for my mother tongue, my "kieli". And how it told the story about forcing people into a new language, whether it is a national language or a language that confirms class or status. This artwork represented, or rather embodied, my emotions and experiences with language.

*The Mothertongue* did not leave my mind. When driving home, along the river that forms the border between Finland and Sweden, I was occupied with thoughts about language and my loss. I seldom go to Finland, although it is so nearby. But since the border was closed due to the pandemic I have never wanted to go there more. I am really longing to cross the river. A peaceful border with lots of contacts, cooperation, and married couples, which makes the river more of a long bridge. Whether it is open water or ice, the river joins the two countries, the two riverbanks. It creates a white band of stillness during the winter and when the ice releases, it is like a clock that starts ticking, the movement of time becomes visible. And still it is a national border that cuts our culture in half, or rather cuts us off. For a long time, the border has been easily crossed, especially since the EU and the Schengen agreement. But it is as if this national border takes on a new meaning now that it is closed. I am suddenly a real Swede. Swedish, Swedish, Swedish. Mentality, humour, the way we think and express ourselves is connected to both sides of the river and to language. My first language was not Swedish, but Finnish. Or, as our language is called nowadays, Meänkieli. I have always recognized myself in Finnish literature, visual art and music. This, almost to a point where old Finnish tango music touches me the most, compared to anything else.

I can barely get by on my mother tongue, it was a natural thing for my parents to switch to Swedish when we grew up. They experienced suffering during the process of the "Swedishization" of our region and they wanted us children to manage better. Pure goodwill. But the connection to our history, traditions and to our older relatives weakened. This is recent history, a history that made a generation feel diminished and insecure. And now, the link to my cultural heritage has suddenly been blocked by a

virus and our countries' way of dealing with this situation.

Arriving home, to our small homestead in our remote village, many miles north of the arctic circle, it is already late. The family is at home, a warm light from the windows spreading to the surrounding snow-covered ground, and smoke coming out of the chimney. Compared to the house I left in Boden, this house is so tiny and already fully furnished. I pull myself together to start unloading the trailer. In the light of my headlamp, I stow and press my moving boxes into one of the storehouses. Well, except for those scull-shaped candle holders that will fit nicely on the mantelpiece together with some old tools from my grandfather. Tired from the drive and with that impossible mission to get everything unpacked, I call my mother and ask her about that funny expression that says everything about getting things done. The expression is so figurative and vivid in "Meänkieli". And totally meaningless in Swedish. "Hiat huiskumhaan!" *Nu ska vi vispa med ärmsluten! Let's get the cuffs whisking!* And here I relate to that bodily feeling of language. My regenerated tail wags eagerly with joy when I hear my mother's tongue.



Johanna Gustafsson Fürst  
*Modertungan*  
2019



*January, first view of the sun*



*Going home, late October*

# Elise Sønderland

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live in windy Bodø, Norway. Above the arctic circle. I grew up on a beach in the south of Norway. Where the river meets the sea. Facing an airport watching the planes come and go. I always longed for places far away.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

Bodø has around 50 000 inhabitants and is located by the ocean in Northern Norway. People came here because of the abundance of fish. Bodø formed as a city for trade in the 19th century. After being destroyed during WWII it has been rebuilt and reshaped into a modern city that is constantly developing.

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

The local artist Marianne Bjørnmyr recommended me to apply to be a part of the collective.

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

I started writing after coming back to Bodø from a trip to my hometown. My father had just passed away and it felt like a turning point. Suddenly or finally Bodø felt like my hometown. I was taking in and accepting my reality and my surroundings. I was also reflecting on what Bodø had presented to me. I was feeling grateful.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

Discussions about art are not very present in Bodø. There is no art major at the university and there is only one local newspaper. Art and artists are not overly visible in our society.

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Frihet, likestilling, mangfold, åpenhet, miljø, kunst og kultur.

# A part of the spectacle

Elise Sønderland

## Breathing

I am walking by myself on a narrow path. Up the hill to reach the mountain top. The colour of the grass and leaves enhanced by the warm sun. It is a windless day. An unusual day. I hear the calming sound of the mountain stream. My feet get wet from the dewy grass. I keep a steady rhythm. Coming through the branches I turn my body around. My eyes can see far into the distance. I just returned to the city where I live. It stretches into the Atlantic Ocean.

As I breathe in the fresh air, I feel renewed. In the distance I can catch sight of where I live. The house I share with my family. Built in the post-war era, just as most of the buildings on this large flat peninsula. Our house is semi-detached. The other half is inhabited by Laura who has lived here since she built the house with her husband and their neighbours in 1958. Since moving in we have made a warm and comfortable nest. A shelter from the storms.

I close my eyes and harvest the rays of the sun. I feel grateful for living here. Once, north felt like the wrong direction. Always knowing I had to get away, north was never on my

mind. Now it feels like the only place I want to be.

## Reaching for the Sky

Down on the hard pavement through the broad and straight streets I forget all about the path up the mountain. Walking through the city centre I no longer have an overview of my surroundings. Here I am in the shadow surrounded by concrete.

The strong wind is pushing its way between the heavy buildings that block the view of the ocean. I see the towers of Bodø. The characteristic freestanding bell tower of the cathedral. The tower of the city hall. Towers as elements on hotels and commercial buildings. The recent tall apartment blocks towering over me. It is as if the whole city is reaching for the sky.

Bodø is a city with ambitions. Ambitions to grow. To change. It has changed since its founding in 1816. It has changed since the bombs of WWII. It has changed during the twelve years I have called it my home.

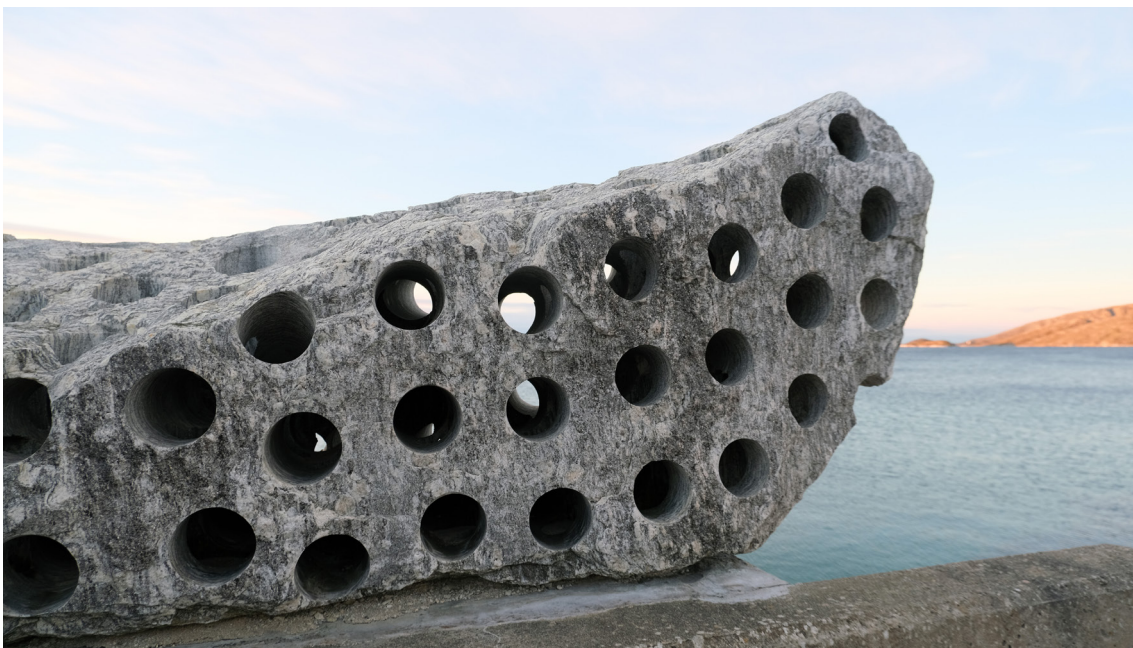
Reconstructing and expanding. Moving the airport to free space for development. Smart City. European Capital of Culture in 2024. Titles and headlines.

all dimensions. We are spectators. Drawn in by the sound image made by Jenny Hval and Lasse Marhaug. Echoes and whispers. Meditative. Sand and crushed shells underneath my feet. I feel the presence of the others. Breathing together. Being here.

## Spectacle

I walk through the city. I reach the seven granite sculptures by Tony Cragg on the breakwater. The limit where the city meets the ocean. The border where the man-made encounters nature. Artificial versus natural. Innumerable shades of grey. Repetitive holes pierced through the rocks. Like never-ending orbits. Thinking of the constant fluctuations of the sea shaping the landscape. Moving of energy. Part of Artscape Nordland. The wind pushes towards me, breathing through the holes.

Walking on, I think of an evening in September 2018. People gathering. Dispersing. Crowding again. Meeting up on the beach in my neighborhood. The opening night of Bodø Biennale. Enticed here to experience a spectacle. *Diorama* by Ingri Fiksdal. We sit close together facing the ocean. Facing whatever the sea will bring. The sun hiding behind a cold veil. Between the rocks, you can see them. Bodies moving slowly. Breathing. Sea creatures. Covered by sequins that sparkles and shines. Reflecting the light. A showcase for us to experience. Life underneath the surface. A landscape in





Above:  
Ingird Fiksdal  
*Diorama*  
Performance during the Bodø Biennale in 2018.  
Photo: Susanne Forsland.

Facing page:  
Tony Cragg,  
untitled  
1993  
Sculpture commissioned by  
Skulpturlandskap Nordland, located  
on the pier by the marina in central  
Bodø.  
Photo: Elise Sønderland.

# Emma Niemi

## Questionnaire

### Where do you live and where do you come from?

I came from the Neverlands' town in the Neverlands' country. My ancestors crossed the ocean forward to the American Fairytale and backward to the socialist El Dorado. (I was born in Leningrad, the USSR, and my great-grandparents moved from Finland to the USA and then to the USSR.) Now I live on the border with the Nordic countries in Petrozavodsk, Republic of Karelia, Russia.

### Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?

Petrozavodsk is a cocktail of Northern nature, historical events and cultural activities. The core of the town is the giant Onego lake, with myriads of stones along its shore and main local attractions along its quay. Although it is located close to the main cities of Russia, Petrozavodsk still maintains its northern identity.

### How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?

I study Nordic History and always keep myself updated by following the social networks of Nordic countries. The Norwegian Consulate General in St. Petersburg published an open call for the Pigeon-Gram Collective. I sent my application one day before the deadline (as well as my birthday).

### Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?

I drew inspiration from my routine, when strolling along the rocky shore with my husky dogs. Or when visiting the local Art Museum, fulfilling Pigeon-Gram Collective's task of sending the postcard. And finally, when I was with my family at home, carefully observing the children's rooms and noting features of imagination and creativity.

### How is art discussed or talked about in your community?

Art is exhibited in museums and galleries, discussed on radio and TV and created in studios and art-residences. The creative presence (Karelian Mosquito and Rabbit Valley) along with the historical past (the Kizhi Island and the Karelian-Finnish epos 'Kalevala') form an atmosphere of inclusion in the art community among citizens of different ages.

### Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?

Двухлетняя девочка рассказывала, что она, глядя сверху, выбрала себе родителей. Являясь частью этого мира, надо оставаться достойным такого выбора.  
(*A two-year old girl once said that, looking from above (before she was born), she chose her own parents. Being part of this world, one must remain worthy of such a choice.*)

# The magic within

Emma Niemi

## 1

*This celestial plain of potential.  
This stellar collective of  
wide-eyed wanderers and wonderers.*  
– LittleBigPlanet,™

I enter the room and I watch. There is a green bed standing in front of me. The second bed is made of raw wood and is attached on top of the first one. The lower deck is covered by a red blanket. Three books are lying there: "The Magic Creatures of the North", the graphic novel series "Hildafolk" and nursery rhymes. The upper deck is full of dragons: plushy toys, figures, a blanket and even a "How to Train Your Dragon" backpack. There is a chewed tennis ball and a crunched frisbee disk lying on the floor. An opened PlayDoh box and a dusted book "Python for kids" lie next to the bunk bed. The whole room is infused in a magnificent atmosphere of wonder with a creative heart at its core: children's drawings. They are hanging on the wall, to the right and to the left: Raven, Mårnan (or Mörkö, or Hufsa, or Groke), numerous sled-dogs, hearts and trolls. The 25th of December is pointed out in the Moomin wall calendar. Everything brims with circling clouds of imagination and miracle anticipation.

## 2

*Fancy is fertile only when it is futile*  
– Vladimir Nabokov

We are in the renovated Museum of Fine Arts in the heart of Petrozavodsk. Here is the lobby. On the left there is a spacious cloakroom with new peg rails and a *babushka* (an old woman) behind the counter. The *babushka* is responsible for exchanging wooden tickets with simple numbers against the guests' woolen coats, fur cloaks and waterproof jackets. With her shabby cardigan and variegated kerchief, it is as if she has just popped up from a Russian fairy tale. On the right, there is a tiny room with numerous black-and-white screens and one *dedushka* (an old man) behind the glass. The *dedushka's* duty is securing the museum keys and keeping an eye on the visitors. In his sombre green uniform he looks like a whimsical dragon hiding in the damp cave and guarding his treasures.

A dozen of cool white bulbs are highlighting every wrinkle on the visitors' faces. Several female attendants are supervising every speck of dust on the visitors' boots. The polished and gleaming showcases are reflecting the visitors' figures. A woman with a four-year-old boy is standing in the middle of it all. The mother is choosing a postcard

from the numerous souvenirs on the shelves. Vivid pictures printed on rectangular pieces of cardboard are well-known and easily recognizable. They are from the Karelian-Finnish epos, the "Kalevala". The mother is browsing through them, trying to choose which one to buy.

Suddenly one memory strikes her. At home there is a handmade clay heart lying on the shelf next to the bunk bed. The heart was born here, in the Art Museum's left wing. The mother looks to the left and recalls the following: some children are seated at a table. They are willing to soak up everything the local artist says. They are working with the clay. They touch it, they smell it, they feel it. They love that it is slimy and soiled. They can room their entire world in it.

A five-year-old girl is among them. Between her fingers, a piece of clay becomes a simple shape. It is a heart. Her life is in the making. Her soul is full of creation. Her own heart is in love with mummy, daddy, and the entire world. This rounded shape is not an anatomical term for her, but it is the rhythm of her life. Her masterpiece is ready. It is her own and nobody else's. She shows her work to the artist. She is thrilled and encouraged. The artist takes the heart. The artist twirls the heart. The artist ruins the heart. Two Kalevala rune singers sitting in front of each other and holding hands appear instead of the plain heart. The artist says that it is more reasonable to make not just hearts but human beings. Especially this year when we celebrate the anniversary of the epos. It strengthens the local identity and promotes the regional brand. New terms, but no heart for a five-year-old girl.

Absorbed in gloomy memories, the mother hesitates which postcard to get. She asks her young son to choose. The boy points

at a murky monochrome postcard with an unfamiliar non-Kalevala picture. His mind is calling on his feelings and is free of prejudice.

The mother smiles. Her child is coping well with choosing and expressing himself. He expresses thoughts, notions and dreams. No pressure, no destruction, only pure naivety and creativity.

### 3

*Even in the hardest stone the flame of life blazes.*

– Edvard Munch

I stand on the south shore of the chilly northern bay and I watch. There is the reflecting water surface of the second biggest lake in Europe. To the north, beyond it, there are artificial constructions looking recognizable and effortless in transparent air. However, in the fight with the mist, human traces fade and a mysterious cosmos of cold water conceals everything. To the east there are two soaring islands and infinite water behind them. Pure blue or pale grey, depending on the mood of those who rule above.

To the west and behind me lies a quay, a human-made structure of frozen marble and concrete. It is scattered with pavements, sculptures of contemporary art (a hint of sister-cities' relations) and rocks. Colossal and monstrous, medium and middle-sized, tiny and miniature, left behind by glaciers escaping this territory in a hurry. Beneath my feet there is a narrow plain of those stones. Slight pieces of land forced to be a buffer between the water spirit of nature and the manufactured spirit of humankind.

A four-year-old boy considers some stones to be *Bakugans*, a product of modern mass-

media culture. A ten-year-old girl prefers to dive into the stone world of spirits and dragons. And both are eager to imagine that these rocks are trolls. These supernatural beings live on the edge of two worlds, physical and mythical, conscious and cold. They hate our sun. It recharges us, but freezes them, turning them to stones, although still vigorous and alive.

In a world full of rationalism and skepticism, belief in wizardry is crucial. Grown-ups are supposed to be serious and analytical individuals with their inspiration dried up and their imagination hidden deep. But what if the veil of numbness and insensibility vanishes? As the midnight mist wanes at dawn. What if we open our eyes and catch a glimpse of the trolls' metamorphosis? Open our minds and restore the creative paradise that neglects bounds and self-restrains. Is it really "more reasonable" to suppress the fear of being considered fools and idiots, rather than diving into the "pure naivety and creativity" and the "circling clouds of imagination"?

It's time to bond with the magic within. Trigger the inspiration and draw your own troll – in your mind, or even on a piece of paper, hanging next to your bed.





# Anna Näumann

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live in Tromsø, Northern Norway, together with my partner and our cat Stella. I grew up in the south of Norway, in a coastal city called Grimstad.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

A city on an island that is continuously expanding its coastal outline. Dark in the winter, light in the summer. Landscape and cityscape, hand in hand. No gay bars in this city – but we are working on queering up this place ;-)

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

Hilde Sørstrøm (Hakapik) suggested that I apply – luckily I did.

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

Getting the opportunity to write, discuss and share stories and experiences together with a caring and knowledgeable group of women from different areas in the north has been motivating and simply a joy. I feel privileged and grateful for getting this opportunity. Encouraged to take a step back, listen to our

surroundings, and to ourselves.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

The art scene in Tromsø is very much self-organized, and that is also how it has been for a while. You gotta make what ain't. This results in art projects and events that are aiming to create spaces and experiences that are lacking around us. On the art scene, in the city, in the landscape. Art is discussed within the academy, art is discussed at late afterparties at Loftet, art is discussed at Hakapik.no, art is discussed within the artist run initiatives, and sometimes at the institutions. Art is nevertheless very rarely discussed in the local newspapers, and art in Tromsø is rarely discussed in the national press. How is it discussed? Often in relation to our shared experience of being artists outside the capital, outside the money-flow, outside the spotlight, meaning it is actually being discussed in meaningful ways that are vital for our existence.

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Jeg er situert. Jeg er på et sted, et flytende sted. Min utsikt former min innsikt. Hva ser jeg rundt meg, hva ser jeg ikke rundt meg, hva lytter jeg til?

# New neighbours

Anna Näumann

## 1. Meet

The only window to be found in this room is in the slightly angled roof, pointing up, towards the skies. Heavy and dark clouds are passing by slowly before new ones arrive. The remains of the storm that hit the coast yesterday evening. A ray of light travels through the window glass and hits a dusty Phillips Energy Lamp. It is standing on a bookshelf in the corner of the space, patiently waiting for the dark period to arrive, so that it can light up my day. Listen. There is a crack in the windowsill. It slips through fragments of sound, the wind blowing outside, accompanied by a continuously ambient-like noise. Morphed echoes of what may appear as cars passing by, or the never-ending construction work around the island. I turn on the speakers, and put on a field recording from Kvaløya, our neighbour island. I made the recording earlier this year, it calms me down as it gently drowns out the construction landscape on the other side of the wall and takes me back to the seashore. A bit ironic, a bit tragic. Mumbling voices can be heard from the floor underneath me, coming from the gallery space in the Tromsø Art Society. All of a sudden, something lands on the roof. Tiny steps, running back and forth. A fast-moving bird tail is appearing in the window frame. The tail is white, with a black tip. A kittiwake. It does not seem to be aware of the voyeurism going on some centimeters below its butt. I whisper 'hi,' and I tell it how deeply impressed I am by its technique for building

the nests on the wall outside the building.

These past days, as I've been drinking my morning coffee in the park outside, I've become an observer of the group of kittiwakes that are nesting on the building. Doing their daily rituals. Making a tremendous amount of noise. Decorating the huge stairway outside the art society with excrements, a lot of it. Flying out to the sea to pick up fish and shrimp to feed their babies. Scratching each other's backs. Doing maintenance work on their nests. Kittiwakes are using their excrement to glue their nests up to the wall. I find it quite outstanding and inspiring. I am glancing down at the floor in my studio again. It is covered with piles of straw, or rather, slightly failed artistic attempts at building kittiwake nests. Unlike the kittiwake, I did not use my own excrements to glue the nest sculptures together, maybe that's why they all look so ridiculously sad and... human. The walls around me are covered with notes, sketches, prints and photos of kittiwakes. A print of the Tromsø Art Society is hanging on one of the walls. A big, beautiful, yellow museum-building, in the heart of Tromsø. This very building houses 6 artists, 1 artist-run space, a gallery, an artist-run book publisher, but most important, 24 nests of the red-listed seagull, the kittiwake, or krykkja, as it is called here.

I am the newest resident here, trying to get to know my neighbours.

## 2. Absorb

Romsa, Tromssa or Tromsø, as I say in Norwegian. Names of the place I now call my home, where I live, work and spend most of my time. Where the forest gives me berries and mushrooms, the ocean shares its seaweed and fish, and the mountains generously offer fresh air and wide perspectives when my anxiety begs for re-connection with life. Romsa, Tromssa, Tromsø is a place with several names and a long history of coexistence, humans as well as non-humans. Stories that are not mine to tell, but stories I attempt to absorb. How can I learn from previous coexistences, lived and experienced by bodies and souls, to be able to re-imagine future possibilities of healing communities and other ways of living together?

I've gotten to know the bird that landed on the roof a bit better. I made a gesture to invite it into the Art Society building for an exhibition I was part of; understandably it did not accept the offer, I guess I have to work on improving my nest-making skills, or most likely find another way to continue this interspecies dialogue, a way that is fruitful for both parts. People in Tromsø are complaining about the kittiwake in the local newspaper. The number of rooftops that are covered with spikes and metal structures to make it impossible for the kittiwake to nest are rising. I keep on wondering why.

Maybe the story of the krykkja is just another example of someone or something being displaced in the name of colonization. But there is something amazing going on here. An act of inspiration. The kittiwake is responding. It's reclaiming the urban landscape. No matter how harsh the city's response seems to be, with violent metal objects on rooftops, the number of kittiwakes choosing to nest on buildings in Tromsø is increasing each year. There is some radical activism going on here! We have to become allies.

For us to learn how to coexist with other species, other forms of knowledge are needed. Forms of knowledge that are hidden in the shadows of the patriarchy that is dominating and penetrating our bodies today. We - the ones within the patriarchal

structures. We, the elements of the planetary symbiosis, need to re-learn how to care. Care for others, care for ourselves. Learn how to listen. Absorb the entanglements of the wet coastline surrounding us. Its fluidity, its cycle. Dive into its transparent present and its archives from the past, filled with stories and wisdom from previous inhabitants, dissolved bodies of water.

Romsa, Tromssa, Tromsø. New neighbourhoods are coming. Old knowledge is needed.

## 3. Listen

My heart is beating faster than normal, because of the crowdedness in the space. I am looking around, at all the faces, trying to remember the last time I found myself amongst so many people. I simply can't remember. Reunited through art again, in these odd and isolated times. A cavity in the COVID-vacuum. Breathe. I am bending my neck backwards, glancing up towards the roof. Such a strange, but beautiful building. While wondering how the construction of these giant walls, that lean towards each other, was made possible, the room suddenly goes silent.

A fragile humming voice slowly becomes a choir of voices. Echoes in my head. Field recordings of birds, some close and some far away. Soundscape of the North. I close my eyes, a trip through different landscapes sets off, I am about to forget time and space. I am floating, out of control and lust to drag myself down to the ground. I feel pelagic, like a kittiwake, drifting around in the open ocean.

She whispers into the microphone, an anecdote about meeting an insect, and listening to it.

She asks: What am I listening to?  
She answers: I wanna listen to my heart, this is my heart.

A contact microphone brings us the sound of her heartbeat. The blood floods through her veins, pumping its way down a long red river on the inside of her skin. Slowly, the sound of the heartbeat transforms into oceanic waves. Wet soundwaves. The fluid connection,

bodies of water. A salty tear presses its way  
out of my eye corner. My palms are sweaty as  
I grab my partner's hand.

Chills down the back is a deep  
understatement. It flows through my veins,  
into the bones. Into my heart.

I think I'm learning to listen now, jeg tror jeg  
lærer å lytte nå.



# Amanda Hakoköngäs

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live and come from Northern Finland, Lapland, but my mind is floating all the time and my body moving constantly between the two main rivers here: Tornionjoki (Torneälv) and Kemijoki (Kemi älv). I think I actually live in those rivers.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

Silent, mysterious language and the space. The amount of sky. The space of the language and the sky.

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

Kaltio Northern Culture magazine is great and has a great editor-in-chief, who introduced me to Pigeon-Gram. Kiitos Paavo!

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

The process was interesting, organic and intuitive. I was writing in different locations, which affected me and the text a lot: in silent museum exhibition halls, or on a bus on early winter mornings. I was constantly seeking for the right tone for this text. It is something between absurdism, weird silence and the Finnish Design canons I am educated to.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

There is barely no discussion about it. I think people here are somehow afraid of art. I have no idea why, but I am trying to find out!

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Ei ole olemassa mitään rajoja. (Borders do not exist.)

# An iconic object / Five pictures about canons and the areas in-between

Amanda Hakoköngäs

## Synopsis

Finland is a happily homogeneous country. Everything is normal here. Everybody wants to be as normal as possible. The everyday design should be as normal as possible. We want to have similar furniture, curtains and mugs. We want to have our first Aalto vase when we graduate from high school. We want to drink coffee from our Moomin mugs our whole lives, sitting in front of our Artek table. This is only a general depiction.

## Characters

### PERSON 1

A person with trust and good taste

### PERSON 2<sup>1</sup>

A person with two chairs and a weird longing for the past (or for something else)

### CHOIR

truths to everybody

Telling known

## Picture 1

*An afternoon.*

*A table. A very normal table. A very normal chair. Everything is normal here. Everything is very normal and safe. Everything is clean and safe and boring. Sometimes expensive.*

PERSON 1 (slowly, without nuances in the voice): Here we are drinking our morning coffee<sup>2</sup>. Around this table. Every morning. And mid-day, and afternoon. From our Moomin mugs. Everyone is having their own Moomin mug. Five-year-old Pekka and 95-year-old Pekka are each having their own Moomin mug. They got them as a birthday and Christmas and wedding and graduation and Father's Day and welcome and good-bye gift.

It is safe and right like that. I drink my coffee every day, 365 days a year, from the Moomin-pappa mug. The black one. Here:  
A mug.

CHOIR (softly):

Classical, icon, iconic object! Canonised canons!

PERSON 2 (pondering):

I would really like to talk with someone.

PERSON 1:

Would you like to have a coffee?

<sup>1</sup> A very unpractical character.

<sup>2</sup> Finnish people drink approximately 10 kg of coffee per person per year.

## Picture 2A

An afternoon.

This is Finland, and the table is by Alvar Aalto. He was, and then he is. The chair and the table are made by him, and the company where the chair and the table come from is called ARTEK. This is where all the tables and chairs come from in Finland. It is safe and beautiful and boring. Finland and tables, Finland and chairs.

PERSON 2 (still pondering):

A three-legged stool, we all know. And a table with white surface which we all know. I still feel so bad because as a child, I used to hate this Aalto stool and table! At pre-school. It was the absolute worst I knew. The firmness of the furniture. There was no space for adventure with it. It was just a normal table and a normal chair. The same ones as in the hospital, or later on, at school.

And the *Iittala* glass birds were the worst. I wanted to drop every single one of them down from the window board. I hated them deeply. Why have something so impractical? A glass bird?

Now, I am walking in the street and I am looking at the windows:

Silent Finnish homes with Marimekko curtains, and those glass birds looking out towards us from the window.

Also: I was taught, if meeting a stranger, that if she or he is wearing Marimekko, they cannot be evil. You can always trust a person wearing the Finnish clothing brand Marimekko. This is the truth, the absolute truth.

CHOIR (getting louder): Classical, icon, iconic object! Canonised canons!

## Picture 2b

An afternoon.

This is Finland, and the table is by Alvar Aalto. He was, and then he is. The chair and the table are by him, and the company where the chair and the table come from is called

ARTEK. This is where all the tables and chairs come from in Finland. It is safe and beautiful and boring. Finland and tables, Finland and chairs.

PERSON 2:

When I got my first salary ever, I bought two Aalto's chair 66. And after two chairs, I could build my life as a fully independent person in Finland. This is what I knew even though no-one told it to me.

A salary, a chair, a clean, white room. A clear form.

CHOIR (monotonously, still with power):

Chair 66 (designer: Alvar Aalto, Year: 1935). Its visible, additive construction logic is full of character and pleasing to the eye. The wide backrest offers comfort and flexibility, while the Finnish birch used to make the chair is both durable and lightweight.<sup>3</sup>

PERSON 2:

Chair by chair, mug by mug, we create our life as it should be.

The objects are becoming bigger and more expensive every year.

This is how we build our lives.

Our homes, and this very tiny world.

And I support the story; the story of these canons. Filling my life with those objects. Creating an illusion of normal life with them. Filling the gaps with them. And falling in love with them.

I still feel there is something beautiful and at the same time horrifying about it.

CHOIR (beautifully, and at the same time horrifyingly):

Clear form, clean surface, equality for everyone!

PERSON 2:

Time is passing, and I just don't get what it is?

PERSON 1:

Some more coffee?

<sup>3</sup> [www.artek.fi/en/products/chair-66](http://www.artek.fi/en/products/chair-66)

### Picture 3

*Our dear characters are sitting in front of the white, very recognizable table on two very recognizable chairs. There is coffee, there is space. This space could be located anywhere in Finland. Silence.*

PERSON 1:

Actually, it is all about simple and practical form. Equality. An equal form for everyone!

PERSON 2:

But you see, Aalto never designed cheap mass products. So, the idea of equality is quite weak in this case. Agricultural Finland did not actually need those items. Or could not afford them.

PERSON 1:

Where do you sit when you go to your school's cafeteria? Where do you lean when you visit your city's hospital?

PERSON 2:

And the size of the Moomin mug is anyway too big, 0,3 liter of coffee is too much!

PERSON 1 (*pouring the hot black liquid into a mug*):

With sugar or milk?

PERSON 2 (*floating into sentimental memories. Almost forgetting the coffee, but then, of course, not forgetting it*):

In the past, we had different forms, practical wooden peasant furniture.

You see, in my childhood we lived in a northern Finnish log house, we never bought any furniture.

Everything was ready for us.

Everything was practical and silent and safe!

You see, as a child I could turn the furniture upside down and it became a boat or a sledge...

or I could stack it all together just to make a totally new world out of it.

Somehow this furniture was open for interpretation.

Chairs full of adventures!

*PERSON 1 pours another cup of coffee, repeating the movement every now and then.*

PERSON 2:

It was all made of a similar strong wood, not too much decoration.

Modest grey or brown colour.

Practical, peaceful and silent.

Hands carved the wood and assembled the pieces together maybe 100 years ago: a chair.

The silence, the unknown makers who silently made this furniture.

PERSON 1:

Is our character falling asleep?

PERSON 2:

I do love my Aalto chairs as well. Those remind me of the story of wealth.

But that old wooden furniture reminds me of another story,

Story of hands,

And their movements.

And the material to be loved.

A chair.

A table.

Finland and tables, Finland and chairs.

PERSON 1 (*almost snoring, then waking up*):

Should I make some more coffee? Yes, I should.

### Picture 4

*Evening.*

*A very typical flat Finnish landscape. The sun is setting. The birds are ordinary and small, not too noisy. There is nothing special in the landscape. The conversation continues, now that it has finally begun.*

PERSON 2:

The Canon of Northern Finnish Art.

What's there in between the canons? I feel there is a place in between.

The art should be something special when it comes from the Northern areas.

Something exotic, or even better, coming from indigenous people.

And today, I don't know who made the canons?

Today I feel these canons are limiting us too much?  
 And we should  
 try to change them ourselves.  
 'Cause the canons are not from god (thank god!)

I mean the art here is actually much more diverse  
 than only Särestöniemi or Palsa.  
 And if you are not from Finland,  
 you of course don't know these names.  
 And that's good, keep that!  
 'Cause,  
 I think these guys from Lapland were just  
 exotic enough to get through to the public  
 sphere in Finland.  
 And Särestöniemi painting was sold at Bukowskis Helsinki Spring Sale-auction last  
 spring for 114 571 €.  
 I am not saying it shouldn't be like that.  
 Just, the canon of Northern Finnish art still  
 sticks to them. These few guys.

## Picture 5

*A morning.  
 A table. A very normal table. A very normal  
 chair. Everything is normal here. Everything is  
 very normal and safe. Everything is clean and  
 safe and boring. Sometimes expensive.*

PERSON 1:  
 I am not quite sure what you are trying to say?

PERSON 2:  
 Just trying to understand the big picture,  
 which is actually very small.

PERSON 1:  
 And the picture is?

PERSON 2:  
 In a small country, in a small place, there is  
 not that much space for variations. For exper-  
 iments.

PERSON 1:  
 It is beautiful like that, and there is nothing  
 wrong with it. It is the glue.

PERSON 2:  
 But who decided the canons on art and de-  
 sign? Myths, gods, financial forces?

PERSON 1:  
 I am just ok with that!

PERSON 2:  
 I just want to breathe.

*And then the breathing actually starts:*

*The chairs are singing, the tables are dancing.*

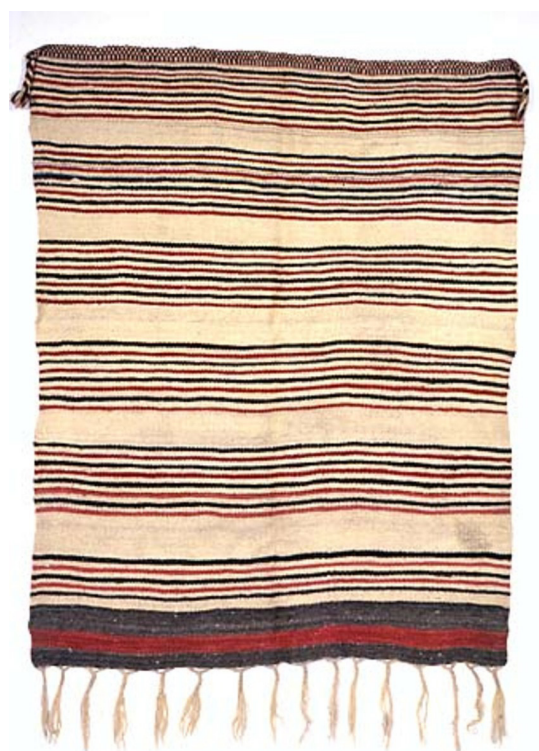
EVERYBODY:  
 Canons are made for playing with them,  
 breaking them,  
 mixing them up and  
 collecting the pieces  
 into a new order.

For someone else to break them in the future.  
 And play with them.

*PERSON 2 is coming back to the stage when  
 the curtains are already closed, and the au-  
 dience has gathered in the cloakroom. Still  
 bursting into laughter from the show but  
 actually thinking about their warm and clean  
 homes filled with objects.*

PERSON 2:  
 Small and silent culture,  
 with many cultures in it.  
 Where everything is small, normal, beautifully  
 boring.  
 Silent rooms and flat endless landscape.  
 Artists and designers going away and coming  
 back.  
 Taking influences from abroad,  
 painting and drawing and forming and then  
 forgetting them.  
 Mixing them up.  
 Walking on the river ice. Understanding the  
 landscape for a moment as it is.  
 The traditional flat woven woolen textiles  
 from Lapland with light and calm tones, sim-  
 ple geometrical forms telling stories about all  
 of this. And totally similar patterns and forms  
 could be found all over the world, my friend!  
 Modest forms. Modest colors.  
 Like silent footprints on the snow.  
 For a brief moment, telling there was some-  
 one there, but only passing by.

*And finally it is totally silent there.  
 Nothing extraordinary.  
 Silence.*



# Stine Lundberg Hansen

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live in Nuuk, have been for 6 years, but I am from Denmark.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

Nuuk is like a building site, constantly expanding. It is the capital of Greenland, and even though there are only 18 000 residents, the city is a metropole. The city is also like a central station: people moving in, people moving out. To and from other cities and towns in Greenland, to and from Denmark, Scandinavia, Europe, Asia and North America. A few years ago there were fifty different nationalities in Nuuk.

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

I had collaborated with project initiator Jasmina Bosnjak from Tromsø about small publications in the North. When she sent out an invite for the Pigeon-Gram Collective I responded.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

We are only two people writing continuously about art in Nuuk and in Greenland. Both

of us are working at the Nuuk Art Museum. Both of us write in Danish. One of us is Greenlandic speaking. I am not. In Greenland there is no difference between hobby art or decorative art and what you in Europe would call high art. Everyone knows someone who draws, paints, carves or is an artist. People are not taking distance to art, whether it is a landscape painting that is quite accessible to everyone or an abstract performance. No one backs out saying "I do not know anything about art". On the other hand, there is no discussion about the quality of art and art as a profession. Which is problematic politically; especially when politicians do not distinguish between the professional artist and the hobby artist. But also, a lot of political thoughts are put into the arts and culture, as Greenland is talking of and moving towards independence. But that kind of political thinking prefers certain genres and a specific view on Greenland, it excludes, more than it includes.

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Uanga aterapunga Stine. Jeg hedder Stine. These are the two languages we constantly move between. Kalaallisut qallunaatullu. Grønlandsk og dansk.

# Pavement

Stine Lundberg Hansen

The interview took place in her apartment in the part of Nuuk called Qinngorput. I took the main road along the fjord and drove behind a dump truck filled with stone, rocks, gravel and dust. Nuuk is constantly renewing itself. I counted 49 cranes hovering over the city. New apartment blocks, new incinerator plant, new airport. Replacing old apartment blocks, replacing the old incinerator plant and the old airport. About 50 years old. She has been living in this apartment for four years with her husband, her 11-year-old daughter, and their Icelandic sheep dog. Many of her articles about art have been written in this apartment with a view over the fjord and the Cook Islands.

We sat across from each other. Her and I. In the sofa and in the rocking chair with our sides to a big window facing the fjord. Recording the conversation on my phone. There was just one question I wanted to ask. She didn't look directly at me while answering the question but didn't avoid it either. She constantly paused, looked out the window, corrected herself, juggling with the words, tumbling with the question over and over again and thinking along as she spoke. I let her think and talk and interrupted as little as possible. As the New York journalist Gay Talese would do, I did not immediately replace an answer with a question. I stayed quiet as he would. A trick to make people go beyond their usual narrative or ways of sayings. I asked the question, I kept quiet and tried to listen.

*Can you tell me why you are here?*

I have lived five summers in Greenland. Every summer, the roads are being re-paved in Nuuk. In Nuuk, in Danish i Nuuk, reminds

me of the Greenlandic word inuk. Inuk means Man or human being. Qallunaaq originally meant stranger or people from outside. Today it means being Danish, and said in a specific way it can be condescending. Qallunaaq! But it goes both ways - between Danes and Greenlanders. Kalak can be said the other way around.

So I am qallunaaq. I moved from Denmark to Greenland. I am told I am Danish, but what does that mean? Basically, a passport, a place and speaking a language. But basically is not the whole picture. As a Dane I carry a history. I was a colonizer of this land. I occupy space. My apartment, my office chair and I write. Writing is also occupying space. But that is really not the answer. I am not here to occupy. Sorry, could we start over? Could you please ask me again?

*Why are you here?*

You might ask what I left behind. A thousand things. Things I miss, things I do not miss at all. Life can be lived in many ways. I do not believe in utopias. Denmark certainly isn't one, and Greenland certainly neither. But anyway I moved here. So let's talk about Greenland. Greenland is exotic. It is a tale. A narrative. Told by many.

Ivnguak` Stork Høegh, an artist, makes this series of artworks called "Arctic Exotic". She is working with photography, collage and drawing in what she calls digital photocollages. In "Arctic Exotic," she mixes African animals of the savanna with Greenlandic nature, urban landscapes and old photographs of Greenlanders. In the work "Zebratiga" (My Own Zebra) Høegh brings together a photography taken around 1900 of a Greenlandic

woman dressed traditionally with a hair knot on top of her head, and the image of a zebra. The lady rides a zebra.

The idea of Africa is closely linked to the animals of the savanna. As the idea of Greenland is closely linked to Inuit, to vast landscapes, to fur and Arctic animals and to tales of kayaking and dog sledging. This idea is a strong narrative told both from outside and from within. Even though, if we take a closer look, different cultures have populated this grand island for the past 4000 years - Saqqaq, Independence I and II and Dorset. A thousand years ago, the Norse settled and named the island Greenland. Hans Egede, viewed as the colonizer of this land, came to look at it for the Norse in 1721. They had already disappeared around 1450. Almost at the same time as Hans Egede, around 1730, Herrnhut, a Christian mission coming from Germany, settled and stayed for the next 200 years. The Greenlandic population today descends from what is called the Thule Culture or Inuit who came from Alaska and settled throughout Greenland about 800 years ago. But that didn't really answer your question. Could you put it in another way?

*Hvorfor er du her?*

My husband is not a doctor like Christine Deichmann's was. She was a female artist from Denmark living in Greenland a hundred years ago - also with her husband and daughter. She painted women and children. No one else did that. She is the Helene Scherfbeck, the Anna Ancher or the Bertha Wegmann of Greenland. Doing something male painters did not do or care about and staying in the margin. Then reappearing on postcards made by women organisations in the late 20th century. She never lived the life she was depicting. I mean, she did live in Greenland for ten years. But as part of the Danish colony she lived quite a different life from the Greenlandic women and children in her paintings. Nevertheless, she was among the Greenlanders. The eye contact in several of her paintings forms some sort of relationship between Deichmann and the models. They look back at us. They were not ethnographic objects. They were women and children - and as that, a subject for her paintings.

\*I am here

These women and children are often drawn absorbed into their own doings. As viewers we are caught as intruders - someone bursting in on a quiet moment. It is like Deichmann gives the women and children their own space; a room of their own.

Anyways, my husband got a job and we moved here. Well, actually we had talked about Greenland several times before. I had met people who had lived and worked here. And I had tried to arrange my fieldwork for my master's thesis in Greenland. So, moving here was no spur of a moment.

On the other hand, life is random, sheer coincidences, where we connect the dots far apart with our narratives. Telling tales, mapping it and finding our place.

My daughter has lived here more than half of her life. Her childhood is so different than mine was. I grew up with trees, she's growing up among stones. I grew up with one language, she's growing up with two. In Greenland we have two seasons - summer and winter, light and dark - and in between a couple of weeks of rain making up spring or fall. I've grown up with four seasons stretching throughout the year, each replacing one another.

This was not the right answer either. Can we... Ok. Let's see. Ask me once more.

*Sooq maaniippit?*

Why do you keep asking that question? The answer could be about anything from human beings on the planet to just this moment right now. I cannot answer it in any satisfactory way. I mean, what do we really hear apart from our own voice? Like, do we feel the skin of the other or just our own skin touching the other?

Maybe that is the answer to your question. The gap. The spaces in between words and sentences. The way we connect the dots. In the end our narratives, no matter how many times they are told, are just dissolving categories, sand between our toes and things that melt between our fingers.

To me, I think, it all comes down to the dots we try to connect. Work, school, friends, these little spaces of possibilities and some kind of rhythm and security. Basically everyday life. That is why we stay, right? Everyday



life - the strongest, yet most complex, narrative we've got.

Anyway, maaniippunga.\*

That reminds me, I have a beer in the fridge. Do you want to share?

And so we shared a beer. The sun brought down its glowing sword on the fjord and put fire to the horizon behind the Cook Islands. Frederick Cook followed Robert Peary on one of his expeditions; later they battled about who reached the North Pole first. It turned out that none of them really did, even though Peary won the honour of it. The North of Greenland has a place called Peary Land. That is also occupying space. Naming places far from home.

While we drank our beers, we could hear a constant banging and engines running in the distance. At one point the entire house shook. A new airport is being built.



Ivnguak Stork Høegh, *Zegratiga* (2020)



Christine Deichmann, untitled (1909)

# Astrid Fadnes

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live in Tromsø/Romsa, but born and raised on the western coast of Norway, in Molde.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

Tromsø is windy, harsh and urban, dark but also so bright and sharp and full of light. People are trendy and practical and critical and most of them appreciate the long snowy winter, but are relieved when in late spring they can finally store away the snow shovel.

### **How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

Through other writers in Tromsø who have attended workshops with Tekstbyrået.

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

A concrete starting point (the view from my desk and the window between us) led me into both old and new reflections on what is separating and mediating in a city and urban spaces, and also gave me chance to shed light on and revitalize the "matpakke".

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

How art is talked about and discussed seems related to how the art scene is organized – as institutions open up, and make art that relates to different people, more people discuss it, as it becomes more public, it is more prominent in public debates. When art dares to be more controversial, it gets most attention. Like when a proud statue got wrapped in a box, or when a Norwegian flag with oil spills was hoisted. It makes the newspapers' headlines, but maybe it does not lead people closer to the art scene?

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Brød, bevegelse, lytte og lage.

# The windowpane and the three realities

Astrid Fadnes

It is both a separator and a mediator, the windowpane, separating and mediating two realities: the one I live within, my office space – with its heat and smell, with its walls, ceiling and floor, its furniture and office supplies facilitating both activity and mess. And on the other hand, the one I observe through it, the lighthouse on the long pier stretching out into the sea, in between the forested mountains, the roads and the dock, the fishing boats and the sailboats, the birds and the eternal wind, making the rain whip hard against the window glass. Its transparent surface separates the dry and the wet, the warm and the cold, the constructed and the organic, human and nature. It is hard *and* fragile and mediates the sound; not only the whipping rain; I cannot see the wind, but I follow it as it changes directions and strength, bringing white foam to the wave tops and a whizzing sound, whenever I take my headphones off. The window glass separates and mediates the two realities and supports the third – the imagined one: leading me through seaweed and into the underwater streams, up the mountain top, and finally to the rocking position behind the wheel of the fishing boat. The rain whips me inside again to the dry side of the now blurred surface, brings me back to my lived reality, reminding me how ridiculously easily I get seasick.

## 07.45 Autumn-winter scene

Three slices of bread, a sleepy movement spreading the butter, the radio summarizing the news: something about violent outbreaks among immigrant youth in the capital. Unconsciously my brain catches some

fragments, “Swedish conditions”, “Danish ghettos”, while my hands complete making the breakfast. Wrapping the bread into the thin, white paper, pouring the freshly brewed coffee into the thermos, and my eyes, not completely open yet, gazing out of the window.

The Sami count eight seasons, and I believe we have now reached *syystalvi*: autumn-winter, the grass is still green, a few leaves are still clinging to their branches. *Sneakers or winter boots?* I ask myself before I go out, deciding on going for the full package: hat, gloves and a thin layer of wool under the coat, and I realize it’s a point of no return: it will be *gidágiesse* until I reunite with my sneakers again.

## 08.15 Cobblestone core and café scene

*What is the first thing you do, coming to a new city?* I remember this question from a lecture once, and its immediate answer: *you seek the city center*. It’s the core of the city, I think as my winter boots take me through the (only) pedestrian street in the city, exactly paved in cobblestone. *Because while the neighborhoods belong to a selection of people living there, the city center belongs to everyone*. Right?

The warm light from the café windows is reflected on the outside, and a young woman sits inside, facing the glass; she lifts her head up from the newspaper and our eyes meet briefly before she looks back at the paper and takes a sip from her coffee.

It is both a separator and a mediator, the windowpane, separating and mediating two realities: the one I live within, my office space – with its heat and smell, with its walls, ceiling and floor, its furniture and office supplies facilitating both activity and mess. And on the other hand, the one I observe through it, the lighthouse on the long pier stretching out into the sea, in between the forested mountains, the roads and the dock, the fishing boats and the sailboats, the birds and the eternal wind, making the rain whip hard against the window glass. Its transparent surface separates the dry and the wet, the warm and the cold, the constructed and the organic, human and nature. It is hard *and* fragile and mediates the sound; not only the whipping rain; I cannot see the wind, but I follow it as it changes directions and strength, bringing white foam to the wave tops and a whizzing sound, whenever I take my headphones off. The window glass separates and mediates the two realities and supports the third – the imagined one: leading me through seaweed and into the underwater streams, up the mountain top, and finally to the rocking position behind the wheel of the fishing boat. The rain whips me inside again to the dry side of the now blurred surface, brings me back to my lived reality, reminding me how ridiculously easily I get seasick.

#### 07.45 Autumn-winter scene

Three slices of bread, a sleepy movement spreading the butter, the radio summarizing the news: something about violent outbreaks among immigrant youth in the capital. Unconsciously my brain catches some fragments, “Swedish conditions”, “Danish ghettos”, while my hands complete making the breakfast. Wrapping the bread into the thin, white paper, pouring the freshly brewed coffee into the thermos, and my eyes, not completely open yet, gazing out of the window. The Sami count eight seasons, and I believe we have now reached *syystalvi*: autumn-winter, the grass is still green, a few leaves are still clinging to their branches. *Sneakers or winter boots?* I ask myself before I go out, deciding on going for the full package: hat, gloves and a thin layer of wool under the

coat, and I realize it’s a point of no return: it will be *gidágiesse* until I reunite with my sneakers again.

#### 08.15 Cobblestone core and café scene

*What is the first thing you do, coming to a new city?* I remember this question from a lecture once, and its immediate answer: *you seek the city center*. It’s the core of the city, I think as my winter boots take me through the (only) pedestrian street in the city, exactly paved in cobblestone. *Because while the neighborhoods belong to a selection of people living there, the city center belongs to everyone*. Right?

The warm light from the café windows is reflected on the outside, and a young woman sits inside, facing the glass; she lifts her head up from the newspaper and our eyes meet briefly before she looks back at the paper and takes a sip from her coffee.

#### 08.30 Breakfast campaign scene

“Wroom wroom!” People from the public park service in their matching blue overalls are cleaning the autumn streets, and I hear the loud humming noise from the gravel-cleaning vehicle going back and forth from where I insist on having my outdoor breakfast, on a bench by the church. There you get your back sheltered by the church wall, but the ever-blowing wind from the north keeps reaching me.

I unwrap my bread slices. “Matpakke” we call it. Some people highlight it as a proud symbol of the Norwegian social democracy, others on the other hand claim it represents decay, dry bread slices squeezed together, the spread sticking to the paper; “Come on”, time to progress!

*A place you will not be expelled from, where you don’t need to spend half a day’s budget on a coffee, a place where the northern wind doesn’t reach you easily. We need a campaign for matpakke spots in the city.*

### 12.30 Ghost scene

Two neighboring storefronts are completely empty and dark. Bankrupt, I guess, pushed out by the shopping mall ghost, the one haunting all city centers across the country: established on the outskirts, offering free parking, draining the city center, leaving it empty and dark. Except here, space is filled by souvenir shops, 26 in total, I heard.

### 16.30 Open meeting about the city center plan at the townhall scene

They call it “open facade”, pointing at an elongated area on a map, marked in yellow. It’s the municipal strategy to facilitate life in the main streets. They are not literally open – the facades are of glass, blurring the separation between the inside and the outside, the street and the shops, the sidewalks and the coffee-drinking people by the café tables.

The transparency provides the city with life, I guess, but it doesn’t accord with my *matpakke* campaign. I still need to spend a fortune on a coffee to get on the inner side of the open facade, and I can’t simply unwrap my bread slices at the underwear store.

shaping and framing of the window glass has created different styles. *Bring nature into our homes!* For the modernists it became an ideal to bring light and air inside our built environments, as open facades and exposed ground floors became a model embraced by city planners. It is a mediator: the glass visually brings us together, the daylight is brought inside, the artificial light reflects and lightens up the dark streets, sharing signs of life, and at the same time it’s a separator: dividing us, stopping bullets, blocking heat, creating an inside and an outside, exposing our differences. Not least, it is a porous boundary.

Blurring our cities and making borders fade, as it both separates and mediates two realities, while supporting the third one: as it allows my gaze to float beyond the transparent boundary, I can spot it: an open plot, where the northern wind is filtered into a gentle breeze, no fee to enter, no guards to expel you. I finally unwrap the white, thin paper of my *matpakke*.

### 22.45 Bedside table scene

“Maybe there still is an open space in this world,” the writer Wenche Mühleisen wonders in the title of her book, and I title mine “Maybe there still is an open space in this city where I can eat my *matpakke* (and not freeze to the bone in the northern wind)”.

### Blurring boundaries

It is both a separator and a mediator, the window glass. It replaces the solid wall, which becomes a transparent surface; however, it sometimes also appears blurry. Where does the limit go, and when can we cross it? It is smooth and cold, hard and fragile, and since the 1950s we have had insulating glass, we developed tinted glass and even bulletproof glass. Throughout architecture’s history, the





# Mariya Dorofeeva

## Questionnaire

### **Where do you live and where do you come from?**

I live in Arkhangelsk, which is located about 40 kilometers from the White Sea. It's the very first international port of Russia, so a historical place, though nowadays it might not feel much like one. I was born here too.

### **Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?**

The river, on the shores of which the city stands – so you are never far away from it. It's usually frozen in winter, and if you wish so, you can walk or even drive to the river islands that are normally accessible only by boats and steamships. Also wood – in both the amount of trees and the number of wooden buildings (the state they are in varies greatly, though). The local cultural sphere is low-key: there's always plenty of stuff happening, but you won't know about it, unless you intentionally seek it out.

### **- How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?**

The offer came from the Center of Social Innovations, based at our Art Museum of Arctic Exploration, through my colleague, who works at the library's department of arts which often acts as the Center's partner for various art-related initiatives.

### **Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?**

I got the idea for the format of the third text from the style my postcard exchange partner used in her letter to me, for which I'm very very grateful to her! And the second part of the text was probably the most difficult, because the idea I wanted to express became clear to me gradually in the process of writing, and there were a few very frustrating "And now what?" moments. Talking about the subject with other people and reading available information sources really helped me.

### **How is art discussed or talked about in your community?**

Descriptively, most of the time. I don't think there's a lot of discussion happening, but the art community has a certain presence in the local media, which cover interesting events and publish interviews with various personalities, who, of course, also represent themselves through social media. To my knowledge, there's no local outlet that is focusing on the subject of art.

### **Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?**

Будешь делать – будет получаться.  
(This saying has been true more often than not for the past few years of my life and is quite relevant to my experience with the Pigeon-Gram Collective workshop!)

# Arkhangelsk: Inside, out and back again

Mariya Dorofeeva

## My immediate Surroundings

The regional library stands separated from the river by the beach, embankment, alley and road. It is bright white, as is the Assumption church standing to its left side. To its right, there is the music school, a wooden house with an eclectic pre-Revolutionary design.

Every time I come or go here – which happens quite often, as the library is where I happen to work – I have to make a quick choice: left or right. Church or school, big or small, brick or wood, white or a mix of light brown and yellow.

This is the historical center of Arkhangelsk, and these three buildings are a tricky company. The oldest one is simultaneously the youngest, and the opposite is also true. It is a game of build and rebuild – sometimes from scratch – that stands behind the trick, a game that has been popular in this land for centuries.

Now is the time for me to make a choice for the second time of the day. I look to my right and up at the bloody red of the old brewery, its half-demolished tower looming above the tiny body of the music school. In the middle of this sunless day it looks almost ferocious. The sky is colored in various shades of white and gray. There is a stormy wind howling.

can't quite pinpoint it. Was it on a visit to the museum of local history? Were we told about them at school, in an art class? Or was it in kindergarten?

It feels as if it just naturally slipped into my consciousness at a certain point in childhood. And keep in mind, it was not a thorough kind of knowledge, only the mere image of a small clay centaur painted in bright colors and the idea of its geographical connection to Kargopol, a town and a district in the southern part of Arkhangelsk region which I've never been to. And, of course, the concept of it being very old, because that's just the way handicraft is.

This is the case with older things, though, they are not always quite the way you think they are.

This is something I had to get used to, when I started attending the training course for aspiring guides and interpreters almost ten years ago, as Arkhangelsk appeared as a point on the travel route for a couple of foreign cruise ships. But there are things and places where you expect a story, even if you don't know its actual content yet – like the Solovetsky monastery or the Art Museum of Arctic Exploration. And then there are Kargopol toys, of which you never thought as more than advice on the choice of a local souvenir to a friend from another region.

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## The Case of Kargopol Clay Toys

I try to remember how old I was when Kargopol clay toys became a part of my general knowledge about the world, but I

"See these?" Mr. Artist asks, waving his hand at the shelf where the little clay toys stand, under the pane of glass, colored in white, blue and reddish brown. "This is the modern style,

but the original toys never used such bright colors.”

“Why not?” Ms. Tourist asks, curious, looking somewhat fascinated at the other shelf, which is home to another family of clay figures, only instead of cute they look a bit menacing, their colors a mix of black and bleak brown.

“Because,” Mr. Artist explains, “back in the old days paints were hard to get in rural territories. So, a toy would be covered by thin flour dough and put into the oven. And since you can’t really control the fire, each toy would have a unique design, produced by Mother Nature herself.”

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This is a paraphrase, as the conversation happened more than a year ago. I was part of it too, as an interpreter, as Mr. Artist was a local of Kargopol and Ms. Tourist was from Canada. She and I came to the town in a taxi from Nyandoma, where we had traveled from Arkhangelsk – an almost seven-hour-long ride on a night train. Naturally, she didn’t know much about the history of this specific craft, but as it turned out, neither did I. Toys sold in the souvenir shops of Arkhangelsk never looked like the black and brown batch. It had never even occurred to me that there was an original style, as opposed to a modern one. “The Case of the Kargopol Clay Toys” would make a good chapter – one of the highlights even – in the “101 Things I Learned About My Region While Being a Guide” book, if I ever get to writing it. There’s already an introductory plot twist, but the bigger story will also contain the always-engaging theme of death and resurrection carried by some charismatic characters. For, you see, the very craft of Kargopol clay toys survived up to today thanks to two specific people. The first one was Ulyana Babkina, an elderly lady who kept making them even after the art of pottery and ceramics all but died in the district. The second one was Yuri Arbat, a middle-aged writer who brought Babkina’s toys to exhibitions in Moscow and wrote about them in his books. Eventually they gathered enough attention for the Kargopol authorities to decide to try and revive the craft, sponsoring the training of the new generation of artists. Mr. Artist, whom we met in Kargopol, belongs to the generation that came after that.

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“Do you remember when you first learnt about Kargopol toys?” I ask an older colleague back in Arkhangelsk, as I show her Mrs. Crow, a clay figurine of an anthropomorphic bird made in the original style. I brought it with me from the trip.

“Maybe at school?”

“No, before that,” she replies. “We had a book about them at home, a big format one, with lots of illustrations. And a slide film, I think. Do you remember slide films?”

Not very well, but I do remember them. We kept a collection of tiny tubes with slide films in a huge candy box. I was not allowed to turn the projector on by myself and had to ask mom or dad to do it for me if I wanted to watch a film.

Was the one about Kargopol clay toys among them? Is it where I know them from?

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It bothers me to think about the world around without these little clay toys. The scenario itself is quite plausible. Imagine that Ulyana Babkina never became interested in pottery and ceramics. Or that she died before 1958, when Yuri Arbat went in search of Grinyovo village – his only geographical clue about the possible whereabouts of Kargopol’s ceramic culture.

Or what if, for example, he just hadn’t been interested in folk crafts enough to travel and then write about them in his books?

It probably wouldn’t make that great of an impact on my life, that much is true.

Arkhangelsk and Kargopol are, after all, divided by a distance of 350 km, and I don’t go to souvenir shops very often. But that’s exactly why I find the idea so unsettling. What other tiny pieces of my reality can be removed before it actually starts to hurt?

And how many never appeared because someone died untimely, or had no one to write about their work?

### **A Biased Point of View**

The weather is very nice today. Really, it has no business being so nice at the end of October.

I turn around to look at the church and it’s as solid and white as ever – as it must have

been before it was demolished in the 1930s. A church on a river against the chintzy background of the Solombala islands, with its bridge and the shipyard and apartment houses of all sizes and textures. All framed by the bluest of skies, colored pink at the edges by sunlight. The picture is idyllic and demands if not a painting, then at least an Instagram photo. It will certainly bring you some likes, and perhaps the following comment from a former classmate who left Arkhangelsk for another city or country a few years ago: "Nostalgic! God, sometimes I really miss those strolls on the Embankment..." Let me take this stroll today for both of us, former classmate. Our final point is Red Quay. There is something there I want you to see.

First stop. Kirche, the Lutheran church which is neither a church anymore nor a sports hall, but the concert space of the Philharmonic Society. We didn't come here very often, when we were in school, did we? 'Classic organ music' does not sound very entertaining, when you are a child or a teenager, and our parents are no fans either. They've got special music programs for kids now. They've got everything now that is culture-related: music, and public lectures, and movie screenings and God knows what else. Perhaps fine arts are underrepresented here, but not for lack of willingness – the interiors of churches are hard to adapt for exhibitions.

Last time I was there, the event was a mix of music and video art based on Kandinsky's paintings. If you were with me, former classmate, we could take a selfie together. The accompanying text would go like this: 'M. and I raising our culture stats tonight, xoxo. Not sure if we got all of it, but it certainly was interesting. Keep up the good job, Kirche. <3' Next stop, the Square of Peace, where the war memorials are naturally located. Yes, in plural. Since you've left, the trio of the Eternal Fire got a bronze ship and a seal as neighbours. The square environment, so to say, got a little more local in terms of history and at the same time less solemn and serious. The seal looks adorable, even as it stares at you from its bed of granite ice, keeping a horrifying story to itself.

A selfie would probably be a little inappropriate here, so we would have to do with a normal photo. Me sitting on the

platform of the Eternal Fire, you on the parapet next to the seal. Or perhaps both of us standing together between the seal and the ship against the background of the river. On a good weather day, there are many people around. I'm sure someone would agree to take the photo for us.

Then, the Merchand Yards. No photo, as I plan to drag you inside for a tour on another day. Truly a people's museum, open till 7 p.m. And isn't it amazing in itself that it is actually open nowadays? The oldest building in the city, and it probably spent more time abandoned than in use. The restoration started when we were in kindergarten and ended a few years after we graduated from university. And now it's rapidly making up for the decades of enforced idleness, acquiring and trying on new techniques and styles to turn local history into an experience. If you don't feel very historical, we could just pay a quick visit to their art gallery before going to one of the music events the museum organizes in collaboration with Kirche. Kirche collaborates with everyone, nowadays, including my library.

Everyone collaborates with everyone in the culture sphere, as there is an understanding that strength lies in unity and rivalry is not really an option. And it's not only about events.

We are finally at the Red Quay. It looks very different from what you remember, right? It also looks different from what I remember, even though I've been here a couple of months ago. The renovation started in September with new benches, deck chairs and swings, strategically situated as close to the river as possible. It was mostly met with approval from the public. After all, who would be against the idea of enjoying the Northern sunsets, swaying back and forth to enhance the calmness of harmony? The chess and tennis tables generated some discontented comments, but mostly of practical nature.

"Is it really a good idea to put them up in autumn? What if they don't survive the winter? What if they don't survive the vandals?" And then the Taybola squad, the masterminds behind the art festival, won the governor's contest and got funds and permission to decorate the Embankment with art objects

of their own making. And Taybola's style is well-known when it comes to their art objects: wood, wood and more wood.

It doesn't seem very provocative; it shouldn't bring up any hostility. And yet, it was really their sculptures that became the apple of discord: for apparently, a wooden figure of a lamplighter executed in an intentionally primitivist style is so offensive that, and I quote here, "one more of such constructions and people really will just have to stop coming to Embankment so that their mood is not ruined by such 'art'!"

"This is not even tasteless, it's just ugly both the aesthetics and the execution"

"How much more do they plan on ridiculing the city?"

And the enigmatic one:

'Oh, the morals!'

Expressions I would never have expected to hear when discussing a wooden figure of a lamplighter.

News29, forever the neutral one, ran a vote at its VK group with a simple like / dislike system, and the results came in divided 50/50 between 350 participants. When I think about it, there were actually some positive comments, even under the original post, but they got buried under all the negativity. Then again, if not for this negativity, I myself wouldn't probably have noticed the changes to the Embankment, only when they reached the Pur-Navolok Cape and then became visible on my routine walk from my work to the bus station. But after all the buzz, I had to see it with my own eyes to form an opinion. I didn't notice anything tasteless or immoral in the photos, but when the object in question is a mix of sculpture and street art, it really should be seen in its natural habitat.

Though, to be honest, I'm biased towards team Taybola here – I know them, because they had events at the library, because they put up cool decorations for bus stations last June for the Festival of Street Theaters, and because my colleague went to their festival twice, back when she was in a music band, and speaks fondly about this experience.

And would you believe it, now that we are here at the quay, the reality check happens

just as I thought it would. There's really nothing wrong with the sculptures. Neither with the lamplighter nor with the Arctic expedition – it took me a couple of weeks after reading that discussion to actually go on this stroll, and in the meantime Taybola has set up 'one more such construction' in the same area.

Yes, they are in no way realistic, but how on earth is that offensive or mocking?

Seems like the 1970s never called and asked to have their social realism back, so some of us have to keep it and take good care of it and not let it interact with any of those troublemaking styles.

Shame on you, troublemakers. They won't let you run on the streets of Saint Petersburg, so don't think you are allowed any freedom here, either.

You have no business being art here.

In our highly sophisticated land of wood, cod and depression.

If those commenters at VK had any real power over the city, former classmate, I too might have probably decided to leave, after all. Thank God, they don't. They might scoff and complain and draw comparisons and pretend to be morally indignant over a wooden figure of a lamplighter, but the Embankment belongs to them no more than it does to me or to the artists.

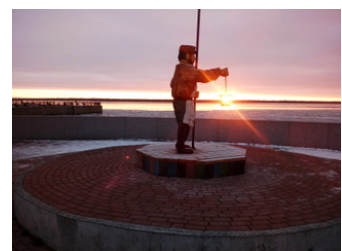
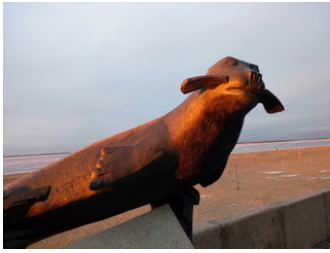
Or to the head of the local maritime museum who stated on his social media accounts that 'these wooden guys' were 'the best sculptures to appear in Arkhangelsk in the past 20 years'.

Or to that kid at the platform of the Arctic expedition who's now trying to pet one of the wooden laikas, as his mother is fidgeting with her phone trying to find the best angle for the photo.

We are quite a solid company here of people who don't think that only bronze and marble are acceptable in the public spaces of Arkhangelsk.

Perhaps somebody really will just have to stop coming to the Embankment so that their mood is not ruined by 'such art'.

But somehow, I don't think we will miss them very much there.



# Olga Demidenko

## Questionnaire

### Where do you live and where do you come from?

I live in Syktyvkar, the capital city of the Komi Republic. It is two hours away by plane from Moscow and Saint Petersburg – just to give you an idea. I was born in Vorkuta, a coal mining town, at the 67<sup>th</sup> parallel north, 50 km north of the Arctic Circle.

### Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?

The Komi Republic has a vast area covered by pristine forests protected by UNESCO since 1995, with the Urals in the east and the Pechora Sea in the north. With an area that could easily host ten European countries, the republic has a small population of about 840,000. 24% of people living here are indigenous Komi (or Komi Zyrians), speaking a language of the Finno-Ugric group, just like Finnish, Estonian and Karelian, for example. Speaking of history, the first oil refinery in the world was founded in Komi, in 1746. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Komi was notoriously famous as a place of exile, and later for the Gulag prison camps. The most famous person from Komi is probably Pitirim Sorokin, the founder of the Department of Sociology at Harvard University. The second most famous is Raisa Smetanina, of Komi descent, the first woman to win ten Winter Olympic medals. Speaking of the taste of Komi, I recommend the local pastries called 'shanga' and the local beer 'sur'.

### How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?

I saw the announcement in the Russian social network VKontakte, in a public group of the Consulate General of Norway in Saint Petersburg. At that point I had no idea about art criticism, but wanted to do something meaningful in a multicultural team. I think I was lucky to be accepted nonetheless.

### Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?

It was quite painful, erratic, intuitive and slow. I groped in the dark until I found the voice and the theme. Soon I recognized that I was writing from my head instead of looking closer at reality. A bit of research saved the effort. The best part was our group discussions. These two-hour online sessions meant the world to me.

### How is art discussed or talked about in your community?

There are five specialized venues that display art exhibitions and host public events in my city. A new exhibition always draws attention from the media, but does not draw crowds, unless there is a household name. Discussing art is something we are not properly taught. However, I guess everyone can produce an opinion if/when asked. Public and private art schools for children and adults, the art college, and the institute of art at Syktyvkar University prepare future designers and artists. Apparently, these are the places where people talk about art all the time. On second thought, drawing workshops have become a popular pastime in the weekend. You can attend an art class with friends and try your hand at drawing and painting. This is a highly emotional experience that is inevitably accompanied by some sort of important conversation.

### Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?

Russian: **любовь, правда, свобода и мир.**  
Komi: **муслун, веськыдлун, асшод и сӧгласӧн олӧм.** (Love, truth, freedom and peace).

# The old, the new and the inevitable

Olga Demidenko

I walk into this quiet lane from a bustling street and find myself in a peculiar neighborhood of countryside log houses. None of them are painted. All of them are half hidden behind unfriendly wooden fences, seasoned with rain and snow. I walk on with a feeling of total privacy and cross paths with a shady grey tomcat. He does not turn his head to look at me. He has business to do. He sneaks under the fence, a fleeting stranger.

Lined with wild, unkempt raspberry bushes, the lane turns into a dirt road leading to the newly constructed tall and sleek blocks of flats, all alike, huddled up next to their dwarfish wooden brothers. The construction rubbish is piled on the side of the lane, a messy triumph of broken glass, bricks, tiles, boards and perennial plastic bottles. An empty red and yellow playground and a small parking lot, also empty, stick to the unfinished housing project. There is anticipation in the air. The depressing log houses will be razed soon, giving way to falsely optimistic urban architecture. The tomcat will probably find himself another home.

I linger for a few minutes, lost in contemplation about the old, the new, and the inevitable. It is sad to think that these log houses will be demolished, disfigured, dismantled, and the cityscape will do fine without them.

I am thinking about the word 'contemplation', which means 'the act of thinking deeply about something', 'the act of looking at something in a calm and careful way'; looking closely and thinking deeply, which is contrary to action and movement. There are places assigned for contemplation. This discreet neighborhood of old wooden houses, or the seashore, or the mountains, the graveyard, the Kamppi Chapel in Helsinki...

My next stop is one of such places – the city

art gallery, a ten-minute walk from here.

Never crowded, always airy, it offers a short spell of being one to one with old and new pieces of art. Mostly old. As a state-funded institution, the National Gallery of the Komi Republic is a conservative venue where experiment and avant-garde are looked upon with caution or disdain. Here, the old and the young masters would never meet to engage in a passionate interchange of clashing styles. The place is prim and smug and sober and aloof.

The young progressive artists, who I for some reason imagine to be healthily angry, have found themselves a home elsewhere, outside, in the streets or in cluttered art studios. I fancy how they could storm and seize this quiet building shouting: "New is better than old. Young is better than old. Junior, modern, recent is better than old. You, creatures from the past, what do you have to say about tomorrow? We are the future: young, aggressive, daring, fast-paced, digital and mobile. Our angular, fierce, dynamic art installations will offend your fading vision, but appeal to the appetite of the young. Our freshly sprayed graffiti will decorate your stale tombstones after you are gone. Meanwhile, go sit in the park, feed the breadcrumbs to the pigeons. You belong with yesterday. Clear the pasture of the bright today from your annoying presence. We are letting you go".

The old masters could probably respond: "We are tested with time and entrusted with responsibility. We are the foundation and the source of your imitations and rebellions. Go and play with colors and forms – you will be always coming back to see what it means to be faithful to nature".

Of course, no dialogue of the kind happens in reality. This is my mind speaking, producing exaggerated cliché ideas,

probably based on the knowledge of the acts committed by such radical groups as Pussy Riot. Are they artists or just militant women with a questionable taste? What do I know about young artists at all?

The gallery will speak for itself. The gallery will give all the answers. I hope.  
The last time I visited this art museum was about a year ago. So, I have to start with the main exhibition to refresh the memories. I walk from canvas to canvas, scrutinizing the faces in the portraits, the sunsets and sunrises in heavily gilded frames. Four centuries of sunsets and sunrises, birch groves and river dales, portraits of Italian fishermen and Russian monarchs – it is a fine collection of Russian and West-European old school, noble and dignified.

Although it is supposed to be the national gallery of Komi, the bulk of the art objects came from Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Tver, Vladimir and other Russian cities. In the late 1920s, the Committee for Support to the Peoples of the Northern Outskirts set forth the goal of bringing art and culture to less privileged minorities, living far from the center of things. Later, the Russian State Museum donated over thirty exhibits from its monstrously large collection, without feeling much damage. Second-rate works of first-rate artists – this would be a precise description of the original acquisitions.

Now one third of the gallery's collection represents professional artists from the Komi Republic. Art which is socially and politically appropriate, committed to local subjects, approved for non-adult audiences – generally good.

A smaller room in the right wing of the gallery houses an exhibition of young artists who in the summer of 2020 embarked on an expedition to the countryside to practice painting 'en plein air' and get an idea of how Komi people used to live a while ago. I look around the room and my heart is suddenly washed by a warm wave of nostalgia: the old log houses, Komi huts, virgin and intact, peep out of every second painting. In their natural environment, not bossed down by the tall city buildings, they feel good and at ease, at dusk, at sunset and at dawn. They seem particularly perky and young in the new

frames. Wiped out from the urban reality, they please the eye of a local in the local gallery. Amen.

I skip the room with the Soviet period and head downstairs, cherishing a sense of harmony with the world. Then, in a split second, I do not even know why, but I feel properly enraged by all the beauty I have seen today. It is hard to breathe, and angry tears swamp my eyes. Young and old artists, escaping into their easels and palettes and dragging us into the cushions of their painted world, what do they have to say on the inevitable reality that smothers us when we step out of the gallery halls? If you have eyes and ears, if you read the news and live in social media, you know the reality is gaping at you like Edvard Munch's screaming man on the bridge. The injustice, the ugliness, the poverty have corrupted the country that has plenty of resources to be rich, just and beautiful. What has happened to the artists' sense of reality, their eyesight and insight? Some artists seem to have grown themselves a tight and thick skin. They do not scream any more. They decorate the walls of art studios creating more and more rubbish that would fit their artistic conception of life.

Reality is about the inevitable. We lean on the past looking into the future, but avoid talking about the inevitable. About now.

One artist who effectively managed to patch up the difference between the real and painted world was Wassily Kandinsky. At some point, Kandinsky just dropped endless copying of what the eye could see and plunged into abstraction. Wikipedia brands him as 'the pioneer of abstract art', 'an artistic and spiritual theorist'.

He is a big deal here, in Komi. Supposedly, the spiritual revolution occurred in him in May 1889 while Kandinsky, a student of law and economics, travelled to our northern province as part of an ethnographic research group and found himself fascinated and inspired by the Komi-Zyryan culture and beliefs. His travels to Ust-Sysolsk, Ust-Kulom and Kerchomia were no less than a spiritual journey.

Kandinsky's diary from that trip, sketchy and chaotic, is a poem of self-retreat, self-analysis

and self-discovery.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is the anatomy of the strange beauty that he encountered in the interiors of Komi huts where domestic objects – stoves, benches, tables, hand tools – were covered with sweeping cryptic ornaments in colors brimful of symbolic meaning. He entered a Komi hut as if he entered a picture. It was a sensation of being within.

As he wrote years later, “it took me several years to find a means to introduce the viewer into the picture so that he could revolve in it, selflessly dissolved in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Kandinsky as an abstractionist was not formed in that short summer trip in the cold and dreary reality of the Komi-Zyryan people. The evolution, or rather metamorphosis, took a decade or more. However, some hidden spring was abruptly released in him as he absorbed the semi-pagan, semi-Christian culture surrounding him – and this is a documented fact.<sup>3</sup>

Today Kandinsky’s diary is kept in the graphic art collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It was acquired from his widow Nina Kandinsky in 1981. It is from that year that researchers started exploring the origin of his artistic style and vision. The diary is a pocket notebook of 503 pages, 14 x 18 cm, with page numbers and dates of the Julian (and Gregorian) calendar of 1889. Travel notes with poems and sketches take 22 pages, written in pencil, sometimes in ink, in Russian and in German, often in barely discernible handwriting.

The artist also jotted down the Komi words that he had learnt from the locals: Шой-яг (‘shoy-yug’ for ‘?’), пеля-шапка (‘pelya-shapka’ for hat with ear flaps), вөрса (‘vorsa’ for ‘forest spirit’), рыныш (‘rynysh’ for ‘barn’), пывсян (‘pyvsian’ for ‘bath house’), Коми войтыр (‘Komi voytyr’ for ‘Komi people’), and керка (‘kerka’ for ‘house’). But then, almost on the same page Kandinsky shoots a string of German and Latin words, thinking in several languages at once: etwas, chambres Verstopfen, O Stella mea! Es ist

lossgegangen, Simplicitas morum!

I imagine how he is bucking along in a horse cart on a bumpy countryside road, wrapped tightly in a sheepskin coat (the end of May frosts are biting), stooping over the diary on his lap, scribbling something – leaving evidence of his initiation in art to future art historians.

Later, Kandinsky wrote about Komi-Zyryans more than once, but the Vologda diary remains a visual narrative of his immediate, concentrated impressions, and even of the colour scheme that he would pursue. Take, for example, a sketch of a tabletop with a flowered pattern, which he marked as “a) red; b) yellow; c) blue; d) yellow; e) green; f) white”, and a note: “a strong love for tables painted with bright colors.”

There is a house in the town of Murnau, an hour drive from Munich, popularly known as the ‘Russenhaus,’ where Wassily Kandinsky spent five years of his life, from 1909 to 1914. Some furniture in the house, a tall imposing wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a bookshelf and the side of the staircase are decorated with designs similar to those he described in the Komi diary. There is even a Komi-style rug on the floor. The guidebook says, “the interiors, stairs and furniture painted by the artist testify to the influence of traditional Bavarian folk art”. Well, we should disagree. And yes, you enter the ‘Russenhaus’ as if you enter a picture – the illusion is complete.

Kandinsky’s rapturous glance at the interior of the Komi house is only balanced with his unenthusiastic description of the Komi-Zyryan reality: “The beer is then drunk by everyone. They drink, sing, dance. They also dance and sing at the ‘merrymaking,’ but there are no songs of their own; there are only translations from Russian;” “Everything is wild and infinitely poor. It is poor, poor everywhere. Only complaints, only words.” Could it be that due to such a state of the physical world, reality started gradually disappearing from Kandinsky’s paintings, giving way first to semi-mythical images, then to abstractions?

<sup>1</sup> Wassily Kandinsky. *Carnet 1 (voyage en Vologda)*, 1889. Indissociable set of artworks, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Izbrannyye trudy po teorii iskusstva v 2 t., vol. 1: 1901–1914* [Selected works on the theory of art in 2 vols.] (Moscow: Gileya Publ., 2008), pp. 308–309. Quotation translated by O.D.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

I have mentioned that Kandinsky is the number one celebrity in Komi. He discovered something so special on the periphery of the Vologda Province that today's local art historians and art curators gingerly believe it is still there. There is an attempt to rediscover the beauty he saw, dig and find it. You just need to follow his route. I read in the news that the expedition of young (and not very young) artists from North-Western Russia actually undertook to repeat Kandinsky's itinerary. More than that, this is going to be an annual field trip with more and more artists visiting Komi villages, living in the local environment, looking for virgin beauty, harvesting inspiration and gaining secret knowledge.

I do not know what is left of the spirit of the place one hundred and thirty years later. Even in 1889, Kandinsky complained that few traces of the indigenous culture of the 'Komi voytyr' could be found. Today at least traditional Komi houses have survived in the countryside – if we assume that it was on account of these houses and their interiors that the miracle occurred. Can we repeat the miracle?

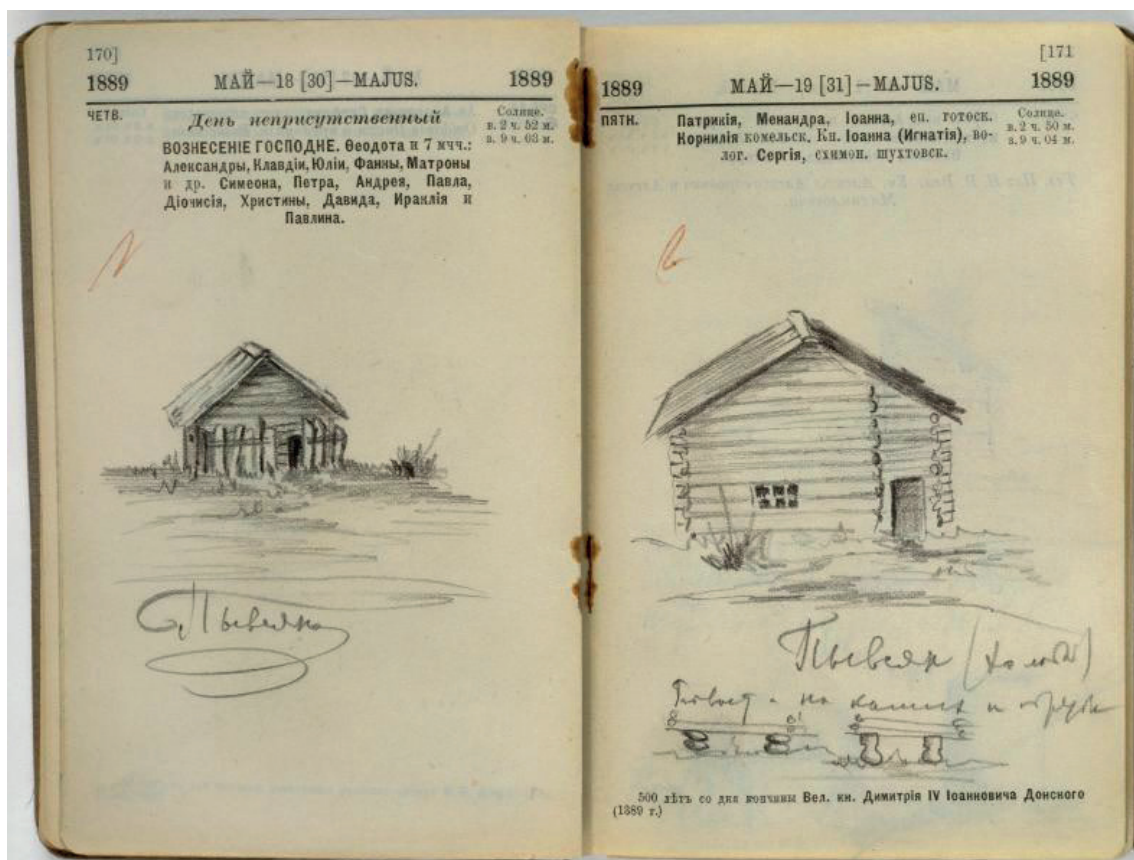
However, Wassily Kandinsky made a few interesting observations regarding the Komi-Zyryan outlook. Talking with Zyryan people, fishing for scraps of ancient folklore, remnants of old beliefs, recording his findings in his diary, Kandinsky revealed the essential feature of the Zyryan worldview – their focus on the afterlife. Death as the central event of life – how more pagan can you get?

Among other things, Komi-Zyryans believed in a parallel reality where you could meet your double. 'Mort' is a Komi word for 'man'. 'Ort' is a Komi word for the man's double that reveals oneself to a person or the person's family only when it is time to go, time to say good-bye to the world of the living.

A painting is another parallel reality where you will inevitably meet your double, the reflection of yourself across the painted surface, whether you are an artist or an onlooker. Beware of what you see. Be grateful for what you see.







Wassily Kandinsky  
Notebook from trip to Vologda,  
1889. Drawings of bathhouse.  
Centre Pompidou.

# Silvia Colombo

## Questionnaire

### Where do you live and where do you come from?

I am Italian, (almost) Milanese to the bone, and moved to Sweden in 2017. I have lived in Luleå since then.

### Could you name a few characteristics of the place where you live?

When I moved I thought Luleå was exotic (and it still is, somehow), it is definitely windy and cozy - you know someone that knows someone you certainly know.

### How were you recruited to the Pigeon-Gram Collective?

I received an email from the artist and editor Ida Rödén where she asked me if I was interested in this workshop. Four days later I was in.

### Can you tell us about the process of writing the text for this publication?

I don't have a process when I write since I usually follow the creative flow that goes from my mind to my hands. I cannot really explain how it happens because I write just when I am up to it. This time, being a part of a writing group, being inspired by the others and receiving feedback helped me to process the text, both in terms of structure and content.

### How is art discussed or talked about in your community?

Since I moved here, I have been noticing an increasing buzz and interest towards and within the creative community. Art is usually discussed in smaller communities of art- and culture-interested people, but in the last few years a lot of effort has been made in order to make art more accessible and inclusive.

### Could you tell us something that is important to you in your own native language?

*Oltre ai miei affetti personali, trovo importante lavorare costantemente su di me, per perseguire i miei piccoli e grandi obiettivi. Inoltre non potrei fare a meno di libri, arte e viaggi.*

(besides my beloved ones, I think it's important to work with myself constantly, in order to pursue small and bigger goals. Moreover, I couldn't live without books, art and traveling).

# Letter from Norrbotten

Silvia Colombo

## 1. My place

I am sitting here, in the corner of an aseptic office illuminated by neon lights – the computer screen in front of me, the rest of the room behind my back. Yellow walls, yellow light, sort-of-yellow desk, orangey floor – a monotone palette, I should say.

I am writing during a break, while I am still at my desk, surrounded by a multitude of work-related objects. Books, post-it notes, magazines, old advertisements suggest that I am in my office at the library, at the moment. Overall, the environment is silent, except for the clock that is ticking and for the laptops that are buzzing.

Sometimes the phone rings, the doorbell rings, I also hear people talking, from afar. Here and now, this is the place where I am.

## 2. The lines of the landscape

The rest is around me, the rest is outside. I sit here half of my work week, at the ground floor of a peculiar building. It used to be a hospital, once, and then became a nursing home. Today it is a weird mix of various activities: the main entrance suggests that it is a medical centre, with a bar, a pharmacy and a hairdresser. But one must pay attention to the signs, like hints spread all over the building. Only then, one will discover that the building also houses a kindergarten and a school. Plus, three departments of the regional museum: the conservation, the

cultural department and the library/archive.

Finding your way to the offices, the collections and the archive is challenging. For us, employees, but especially for the visitors coming from the outside. They ask, they call, they get lost. All the time.

Every morning, when I start working, I park the car, pass through a secondary entrance and walk along an incredibly long corridor, stepping on yellow and burgundy linoleum. Tip after tap, tap after tip.

So little natural light is coming in, and this makes me suffer – this makes everyone suffer, I guess. Particularly if we are talking about an architectural structure located in a place so up north, where one needs to see and enjoy the light as long as there is some. Even the weakest ray.

I consider this peculiar building, with its multitude of identities, as a metaphor for Norrbotten, the place where I have been living for almost four years now. A region that is so beautiful and yet so dramatically full of contradictions. A wild territory where nature is predominant but also intensively exploited by humans and companies. Where cities are moving (or have been moved, according to the point of view) and historical buildings are being demolished – everything changes, but at the same time, nothing changes. Welcome to the place where the population is diminishing but somehow new buildings are designed, planned, built, day after day. Minute after minute.

This is the area where minorities and

majorities live together, side by side, enriching the local culture and its way of being. But then, what is “minor” and what is “major”? Is quantity making the difference here? Who has the right to decide where the border between them is?

You, I, every one of us could read this through the lines of the landscape. Through the pages of nature, retouched, rewritten and modified by humans. Natural and artificial, wild and domesticated, trained. Erected and destroyed. You, I, every one of us could read this through the lens of art.

### 3. Art raises its voice

In Norrbotten art doesn't speak just for itself. It's not art for art's sake, *l'art pour l'art*. It's not just an aesthetic tantrum. Art takes the mic, raises its voice and talks – for me, for you, for the whole society. Or, better, for those who (want to) listen.

Will you listen? Can you hear it?

Norrbotten's art, nowadays, has a verve that got lost in most places. Places where the exhibition system and the art market have ingurgitated and assimilated authenticity.

Here we might live in the periphery of the world, as ‘they’ say, but the engagement and the genuineness of the arts are intact. I admire the involvement the artists show and the efforts they put in creating meaningful expressions, in finding appropriate verses, in building and sending proper messages. In mirroring the naked reality we live in. In speaking the truth – no filters needed. Let me tell you about two different art projects where this comes to the forth.

*First example: Norrakollektivet – From mining to art.*

Again. We find ourselves in Norrbotten, Gällivare municipality and, even more closely, just outside the open pit copper mine of Aitik, owned by a company called Boliden and put in production in 1968. FYI. The mine has been active since then.

What does it mean that a mining site

is active? It means mineral extractions, territorial impoverishing, and nature exploitation. Finding a new, disruptive balance. Plus, being an open pit mine, implies digging a hole. A big one. If you compare historical and current maps, you will see the difference. You will understand the impact caused by the industrialization of this land. Norrakollektivet, that consists of the three artists Fanny Carinasdotter, Tomas Örn and Anja Örn, has focused on this mine and its implications in their art practice. Together, they identified: A place (Aitik), a time (present), an issue (the encounter/clash between nature and industry). And they have formulated a question: “Where does nature cease to be nature and where does the memory of the cultural landscapes end up?” Their work started four years ago and continues with those principles in mind.

Through a double-edged dynamic they engage themselves and their viewers, moving the focus in their film and photo documentation from one pole to the other. The result is a two-sided story told by images that mixes up Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, negativity and glimpses of positivity. Where one part of their project, called “Using Landscapes”, is the *pars destruens*, the one dealing with the natural consequences caused by the mining facility. And the other part, called “A place disappearing”, embodies the (semi) *pars construens*, representing the attempt of saving the microorganisms living inside the wood of the trees that have been moving (because of the mine expansion).

Even if I have never been there, I can clearly picture myself standing right by this giant pit, “one of Europe's largest open pit copper mines”, actually – as Wikipedia meticulously reports. I am looking at this empty plot of land, a series of oversized steps suitable to giants, while the wind is whipping my hair against my face. Redundantly. Infinitely.

I can clearly imagine all the people who have visited this place, from time to time, staring at the same, huge void surrounded by a disappearing forest, dismantled piece by piece. Tree by tree. Trunk by trunk. Branch by branch. Until nothing remains.

I picture this in my mind, all this, because Norrakollektivet turned ugliness into a frantic lament. They have turned this mine into art.

*Second example: Anders Sunna – (We Are) Still Here.*

Now it's time to leave, it's time to leave Aitik behind. Remembering but passing over, in need to go somewhere else, with the urgency to experience more. And more.

We abandon the mine to embrace the forest, moving towards the woods. We walk around the trees where someone once passed, some others lived, or – I guess – at least stopped by. We retrace the path cut through by people who have been here before, we keep the same pace and yet we are so different from each other.

Running around, our look is captured by shadows claiming their territories – against unfair appropriations, undeserved and forced migrations. The transparency of their presence alludes to the crystalline truth they are speaking. Their traditional costumes are a clear reference to their identity. Those female profiles painted with spray colours that will certainly fade away with time are Sami women claiming their presence in the society they belong to. Their stencil faces are repeatedly sprayed on a plastic film suspended between the trees. Once, twice, maybe thrice. They emerge from the dark, from the snow, rising against the forest, in order to remind us that they have been and will be here. Forever.

Anders Sunna's artwork is site-specific and deliberately includes a multitude of references. It lies in a secluded place, but it has been spread publicly. It talks about the injustices Sami people have been suffering – then and now, here and there, a never ending loop. Anders Sunna, with his direct and unfiltered images, tells the unbearable truth.

At this point, the forest begins to fade. The dark hour has come, and the road has reached its end. It is time for me to go back to where it all started. Suddenly, I find myself in my office again – facing the wall, the window on my side. A quiet environment that lets my thoughts swim freely.

This is Norrbotten. Or, at least, a bite of it. Eat it, read it, comment it, absorb it. Much more is left to say, much more is left to write. Next time it will be your turn. I am back – here and now, in the corner of an aseptic office illuminated by neon lights.

Facing page:  
Anders Sunna  
*Still Here*  
2015  
Courtesy of the artist



Above:  
Norrakollektivet (Anja Örn,  
Fanny Carinasdotter & Tomas  
Örn)  
*Using landscapes*  
2017  
Courtesy of the artists



Above:  
 Norrakollektivet (Anja Örn, Fanny  
 Carinasdotter & Tomas Örn)  
*A Place Disappearing*  
 2020  
 Courtesy of the artists







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