



Ethno-Aesthetics*

by Pia Arke

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“Sorrow and happiness wander together!’ We readily could appropriate these words when we met the East Greenlanders. We were happy to have reached them, yet, undeniably, also saddened to see them; for they did not appear as the unspoiled people we had hoped to find! They were already ‘civilized’; but what a civilization! The year before, at Itivdlek, we encountered a group of East Greenlanders about whom we could say that, evidently, these are ‘wild’ people. This year, at Ammassalik, we meet with East Greenlanders, one of which wears a top hat, another knee breeches, stockings, and shoes as if intent on going to a banquet at the emperor of Germany’s court. One presents himself in a coat, another in a normal shirt! Etc. etc.! I nearly burst into tears!”

From the diary of C.P.F. Rüttel, Missionary in East Greenland, 1894 – 1904.

1. The Daily News

Ethno-aesthetics – what about it? What can it tell us about ourselves as ethnic beings? Could we, within such a field, find true expressions of our selves? What is it to say – “Ethnic”?

Suppose, for a start, that it refers to all of us non-Europeans, all positioned, in some or other respect, beyond the borders of the West. Ethno-aesthetics, then, signifies a non-being, our not being Westerners. In other words, ethno-aesthetics is a narrative of the West seen from the outside, from a point of view of the “other”, from a point of view such as mine, the Greenlander’s.

The West, European culture – the best and finest there is; no one is as conscious of the primacy of Europe as the non-European. Conversely, ethnographically sensible Europeans may have a finely tuned ear for the voices arising from the depths of our ethnic origins, a keen eye for our humanity; yet the ethnographies, the display of the collected material, cannot after all fully explicate the relationship

between cultures – in particular, it cannot explain the enthusiasm with which members of Western societies throw themselves on strange and backward cultures.

We, the ethnic in various shapes, on the contrary, have a clear interest in folding the curatorial framing back into the ethnographical display. We have an interest in unveiling the connections leading back to Europe, in the same way as the aesthete has an interest in occupying him- or herself with art. Here you will find no fear of polluting authentic values. This, among other things, was evidenced by a series of articles that appeared in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* under the common title “Between cultures” in 1995. Critic and writer Stefan Jonsson edited the series that crossed the postcolonial paradigm. In his introductory article, “The world examined with new eyes”, he touches on the criticism directed at him for occupying himself with this subject as a Swedish person. For one thing, he is accused of confusing aesthetics with politics, since a novel, it is argued, does not get better for having been written by an author from Guadeloupe. The resistance to ethno-aesthetics here takes the form of a defense of the pure product, the novel, wherever it might be written, whatever subject it might deal with. And, as when speaking of a didactic or a therapeutic art, speaking of an ethnic art causes uneasiness – since the only aesthetics worth considering is the aesthetic one.

Another criticism Stefan Jonsson has been met with argues that no one can be made personally responsible for the injustices of colonialism, and that, consequently, no one today should feel guilty on that account. From the position of the postcolonial formation, the preliminary reply would have to be that guilt has nothing to do with it.

A third objection has it that intellectuals always have to meddle with other people, first with the working class, and now with people in the third and fourth worlds. Why can't they let people speak for themselves!

Jonsson replies that being interested in the so-called postcolonial problem is first and foremost an intellectual opportunity, and that there is no reason whatsoever for not seizing it. Why, he asks, would you close your eyes to the incredible amounts of knowledge about conflicting values and cultural hierarchies represented by this paradigm? Furthermore, he argues, going into this field enables us to better understand the cultural traditions of the West itself. At this

point, I would like to remark that this whole matter, more than anything else, is about Europe. Ethno-aesthetics is an opportunity for dealing with the real thing, the pure product: European culture with its aesthetics, its ethnography and its reason. It is a way of mingling, a mixed-up way, but first and foremost a possible way.

According to Jonsson, postcolonial thought is positioned at the point where anti-colonial cultural struggle and poststructuralist critique of reason intersect. Regarding the former, the struggle for national and cultural liberation is an asymmetrical one; it takes place on the premises, so to speak, of the Western suppressors. For that reason, the struggle invariably ends up with yet another triumph for European culture, so that, as James Clifford has remarked, instead of a struggle, we might rather speak of a play of irony. Regarding the latter, the critique of reason, one of the main ingredients in the struggle or play, attempts to point out cracks and fissures in the apparent self-sufficiency of reason, cracks and fissures in the conscious consciousness, in the aesthetic aesthetics, in all the propriety of the European proper. Yet, this critique to a very large degree is self-critical, a criticism from within.

We, the ethnic, of course can contribute with a critique coming from without; it even seems the right place from which to criticize the claim to self-sufficiency. Yet, it is conditioned by the existence of such a place outside, and we have to presuppose that such a place exists. *We exist, we can exist*, there necessarily has to be something beyond Europe. The ethnic condition is ironic, indeed: on the one hand, by our own example, we are a necessary, external contribution to the European self-perception; on the other hand, due exactly to this self-perception, we are not quite matching the European superiority, and must generally remain a sadly outdistanced supplement, an unbearable reminder of the ethnic, the political, the economic – in short, of everything *un-aesthetic* about aesthetics.

In any case, the road to discovery leads through Europe, and as we search for a lack of coherence there, when we look for fissures, we thereby, more than anything else, cling to the possibility of participating in the festivities, of making a different contribution to the ongoing celebration of European culture. To be let in, to participate, to celebrate, and, paradoxically, by the mere fact of being other, to thereby strengthen the critique of ethno-centrism – in my case the paradox consists in being a natural and at the same time being clumsy – as the original,

Scandinavian import of the latter term is “to be numb with cold”. So, apart from being taken by Boreas, god of the North Wind, let us now see what else defines the ethno-aesthetic condition of my particular origin.

2. Eskimo Art

Thus far, I have used the terms ethno-aesthetics and postcolonialism loosely and indiscriminately. Stefan Jonsson only uses the word postcolonialism in the above mentioned series of articles, whilst the term ethno-aesthetic does not occur. Sure enough, postcolonialism does not necessarily implicate ethno-aesthetics!

I myself prefer the latter term because it is a messy concept, a concept that inspires more work. As already suggested, it concerns two groups of disciplines: on the one hand, ethnology, ethnography, anthropology; on the other, artistic practice, art theory, aesthetics.

The book *Eskimo*¹ by anthropologist Edmund Carpenter is a fine example of ethno-aesthetics. It deals with a certain group of Canadian Eskimos and praises their ability to keep their bearing in the wasteland, their keenness of observation, their mechanical skills, and, most of all, their *artistry*.

True, the Eskimos in question, the Aivilik Eskimos, do not have a word for *art* – nothing in their language corresponds to the European notion of art. However, according to Carpenter, this should merely be taken as a sign of the extent to which art penetrates every part of their existence. They simply do not differentiate between art and artifact, between objects of pure and applied art: “The harpoon is graceful: and deadly. Even the most mundane tool becomes an art object, for the Aivilik – can I say “spontaneously”? – Add a line here, a face there, and it becomes a delight.”

In addition to Carpenter, two other persons are involved in the making of the book: Frederick Varley and Robert Flaherty. Varley's contribution consists in the reproduction of a number of his drawings, watercolours and oil paintings. The motif of the paintings is the rugged beauty of the Arctic wilderness, whereas the drawings are portraits, sketches or studies of Eskimos, sled dogs, tents, etc. In the case of Varley's illustrations, then, ethno-aesthetic refers not so much to the ethnographic encounter with Eskimo art, but rather to an artistic worship of the Eskimo.

The name of Robert Flaherty, too, is connected to ethno-aesthetics in the latter sense, namely due to his film “Nanook of the North” from 1922. The film is a classic within the documentary genre, and is generally considered an early and successful attempt at an empathetic rendering of an ethnic subject. However, Flaherty’s contribution to Carpenter’s *Eskimo* consists in little more than his name: a good part of the eskimologica reproduced in the illustrations of the book was collected by Flaherty during his expeditions to North Eastern Canada in the early 20th century.

Another telling example of Eskimo aesthetics is the book *Grønlands Kunst* (The Art of Greenland)² by Bodil Kaalund. Kaalund approaches the subject from the art historical and theoretical side. Like Carpenter, Kaalund has to deal with the predicament that, originally, the Eskimo vocabulary contained no word for art. As Kaalund relates, only after pressure from the European scheme of things did the Greenlandic Eskimo word *eqqumiitsuliorneq* come to signify something like the European notion of art. The predicament remains, though, as European art is what Kaalund’s book is *not* about.

Eqqumiitsuliorneq, she writes, signify odd products, something artificial, that is, something actually contradicting Kaalund’s point that what we are dealing with is a most natural and authentic phenomenon. Therefore Kaalund is forced to operate with an extremely widened concept of art, a concept covering all sorts of ethno-archeologica, hunting tools, handicraft, utensils, clothing, amulets, tattoos, etc.

Like Carpenter, Kaalund argues that art, far from being absent, is ubiquitous, that it is an integral part of every Eskimo product. The Eskimo, by constitution, is an artist, which is to say that in the Eskimo view of the world nothing and everything is art. A good harpoon is a beautiful harpoon.³ The worship of the ethnic is a worship of human authenticity, of the original nobility of man, of primitive in the sense of genius. Ethno-aesthetics is a critique of Western civilization carried out by its own members, as the rediscovery of authentic goodness is being connected to art: art is authenticity.

Correspondingly, many of the great artists of the 20th century searched along paths leading toward the stone age, thereby leaving to the following generations of artist, including Kaalund’s, the administration of a modernist heritage with a primitivistic twist. Kaalund mentions artists such as Matisse, Picasso, Paul Klee, Miró, André Breton. Max Ernst looked toward the cultic universes of native

peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific. In Danish art, artists like Asger Jorn, Ejler Bille, Robert Jakobsen and Egill Jacobsen explored the primitivistic path.

In short, the ethno-aesthetic critique of civilization, the auto-criticism of modernism, makes up a strong tradition, which Greenlandic artists of today are up against. This has to do with the above mentioned predicament concerning a specifically Eskimo concept of art, non-existent and, at the same time, all-pervading.

Sculpture can be seen as the traditional Eskimo means of expression, whereas drawing can be traced back to practices such as engravings and tattoos rubbed with lamp soot. Drawing and painting on a flat surface only arrived with the Europeans, and during the 19th century Greenlanders began to assert themselves within the new visual and graphic arts. Unlike their anonymous ancestors, many of the germinating artists are named: Hans Zakæus, Israil Nichodemus Gormansen and Aron from Kangeq have become illustriously known for their personal style and peculiar ways of approaching the new media and materials. About their work Kaalund writes:

“In many cases, these unpretentious and somewhat naïve and clumsy drawings are immensely refined and possess a certain graceful charm due exactly to their makers’ lack of artistic ambition.”⁴

Kaalund is also fascinated by the fine, crisp line, the application of pure colours and the way that the subjects are seen from several angles, like in children’s drawings.

Gradually, educated Greenlanders – Rasmus Berthelsen, Lars Møller and sons – in the circle around colonial administrator Henrik Rink and the newspaper *Atuagagdliutit* progressed within the new arts. The first part of the 20th century saw the rise of consciously Greenlandic artists like Henrik Lund, Peter and Otto Rosing. This development led toward the emergence of academically trained artists, while the tradition of Aron from Kangeq, the self-taught naïvists, the rhapsodists of quotidian life in the colonial outskirts, lived on undauntedly in the works of Isak from Igdlorpait, Kaarali Andreasen, Gerth Lyberth and Jacob Danielsen. A late, yet prominent, offshoot of this tradition is Thomas Fredriksen, who in 1980 hit the walrus bull’s eye with the publication of his *Grønlandske dagbogsblade* (Greenlandic Diary Leaves).

Overall, things developed in the direction of autonomous art, which is to say that people began to identify themselves as artists, even if they had to make a living as priests or schoolteachers. Looking at the period from the 1940s to the present, one can mention Billiam Jensen, Karl Helmsen, Uusaqqaq, Alibak Johansen, Emil Rosing, Lars Møller Lund, Aqissiaq Møller, Kristian Olsen Aaju and Jens Rosing. A few of these were actually educated at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, among them Hans Lyngø who, according to Kaalund's assessment, rises above his fellow artists. This, she emphasizes, is not due to his academic training alone; if anything, it seems closely connected with the fact much emphasized by Kaalund that at no time during his stay in Copenhagen, Rome and Paris did he forget about his Greenlandic origin.⁵

Thus, we can begin to see the dilemma in which Greenlandic artists are placed by primitivistic discourses such as Kaalund's: we can choose between being true Greenlanders and being true artists, and we are made to understand that, actually, the first alternative is the only right choice. To be sure, we are dealing here with the art of making the twain meet, which is the art that Hans Lyngø mastered better than any of his contemporaries. Still, the danger of compromising your integrity, of falling between two stools, between the all-pervading and the non-existent art, seems imminent.

Indeed, in many cases it has worked out well. The mere fact that a book on the art of Greenland can be written proves the point. The fact is that "if you pay attention and listen well, it is possible to discern something uniquely Greenlandic, a way of expression that goes deep. Three adjectives come to mind in describing the character of [Greenlandic] visual art: the narrative, the fantastic, and the sober observation. Some artists show all three characters in their ways of expression."⁶

Kaalund herself prefers to construe her relation to Greenlandic art as a sort of listening, i.e. a sort of caring, empathic, almost maternal attentiveness that goes deep. By all means available, she eagerly stresses her being in harmony with her subject. In this respect, she also is in full agreement with the statement of Edmund Carpenter: "Aivilik art obeys the ear more than the eye." This is to say that things are rendered so that their relative size corresponds to their importance within the mythic fables.

Empathetic listening as well as sober observation, according to Carpenter, is indicated by the way the Eskimo relates to his traditional materials, ivory and

bone: "As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, 'Who are you? Who hides there?' And then: 'Ah seal!'" The Eskimo never tries to force a form onto the material. Instead he listens to it, assesses its inner potential and merely releases the inherent form hidden in the material. And the material, like the ocean, hides interminable amounts of seal.

In any case, we have to go deep in search of the original qualities manifested in Eskimo artifacts of the time before *eqqumiitsuliorneq*. Again and again Kaalund emphasizes the way in which the art of the modern era came into being as a result of external disturbances of the archaic order. Aron from Kangeq, who produced his drawings while being bedridden with tuberculosis, is a typical example. The drawings came about as a response to Henrik Rink's call to the Greenlanders to submit myths and pictures to help illuminate Greenlandic culture. In other words, they were a result of the hunter being unfit for work due to the white death, and Rink supplying him with drawing paper and other art materials.

The art of the new era was produced by men who had little else to do. Back in the days, they would have died from starvation sooner than from the disease, but now they could make a few pennies by selling out to the white man. However, Kaalund also points to Aron as an example of how the result can be most charming: unpretentious depictions that transcend the economic necessity that gave rise to them, thereby bearing witness to an artistic necessity far deeper imbedded in the Greenlandic philosophy of life – to paraphrase Kaalund.

But then, what about the art of the present, the art that has had the time to overcome the touching, yet unintentional naïvism? The question concerns artists like Aka Høeg, Arnanguaq Høeg, Esajas Isaksen, Anne Birthe Hove, Jessie Kleemann, Kiistat Lund, Buuti Petersen, Miki Jacobsen, Kunuk Platou, Ina Rosing and the writer. "They are fully aware that it is not enough to depict the man in a kayak, or the woman with a knot of hair on top of her head, though it can be done with affection – and talent."⁷ It is not enough; it is no longer enough, we gather, as we have moved past the phase of redeeming naïvism of a self-contained Greenlandic culture.

Kaalund bears with the experiments of the young artists of the present. The trouble with them, we may speculate, is that nothing secures their works being

Greenlandic; for even though the young artists listen to the material before them much as their ancestors did, it is hard to discern anything specifically Greenlandic in listening to photographs, acrylic or videotape. And if it is not Greenlandic, perhaps it also is not art:

“After all, becoming an artist is not merely a question of education, but rather a process founded on the culturally rooted – an anchoring from where development can progress. Blindly to adopt a foreign conception of art is not development but mere superficial imitation.”⁸

Still, as said, we must be forbearing. As noticed by Kaalund herself, if the young artists have indeed loosened their cultural ties, they cannot by the same token be accused of blindly and superficially adopting their predecessors’ conception of art. So maybe we only have to listen deeper for that which we so eagerly hope to hear: “Man, as mentioned before, is the great theme, though placed in a universal context. MAN, ANIMAL and NATURE are the deep triad sounding through all materials, through all times of Greenlandic art.”⁹

Kaalund’s own dilemma is that of the historian, as history catches up with her: eventually, the history comes to concern the case of Kaalund herself. She herself has noticed “the odd mixture of protectionism and suppression with which the Greenlanders was treated.”¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the use of the past tense is not called for, as reminiscences of the odd mixture is prescribed to this day, e.g. in Kaalund’s book.

In the above, I have touched upon the tutelary, caring attitude toward the children of nature, just as I have pointed to the suppressive effect of this. Kaalund’s devotion to the authentic artistry of the Greenlanders, her embracing the naïvism of the quotidian by the younger generations of artists have to be experienced as an attempt to hold them back, to retain them under Kaalund’s curatorial wings.

Much as Kaalund deplores the development toward artificiality, *eqqumiitsuliorneq*, she does very little to shed any light on her own hand in the matter. Throughout the last centuries, accelerating in the 20th century, Danish, American, British and Dutch anthropologists, traders and artists have ransacked the Greenlandic curiosity shop down to its last pieces of authenticity, and by their insatiable demand they have promoted the production of artificial copies. Kaalund’s work,

with its insistent listening, fits well in this process, so that she has done her bit in turning us into a nation of idlers, spending our days at home carving away in soap stone instead of going hunting. In Kaalund's protective and forbearing embracement of the young artists, one cannot help detecting a certain indeterminacy and confusion. Is this caused by an identification on Kaalund's part, by her having listened herself to the point of total immersion in the insecurity and confusion of the young artists in search of an identity? Actually, I am more inclined to think that the young Greenlandic artists have taken to examine their own specific condition. They no longer accept the unsustainable ideas about unspoiled Eskimo life, but rather focus on the dubious practice of the continual reproduction of these ideas. In this way, Kaalund herself gets taken under treatment and gets to taste her own medicine.

With that, I have reached the contours of a new kind of ethno-aesthetics. In many ways, it resembles the old one; if you will, you could even call it a clever imitation of ethno-aesthetics. Yet, it is also targeted at it. The ethnic in this way subject their aesthetization to itself. In this way, in a confused operation of reproduction, objectification and tender suppression, they attempt to get on top of ethno-aesthetics.

3. James Clifford

"On Ethnographic Surrealism" is the title of chapter 4 of James Clifford's excellent book *The Predicament of Culture*.¹¹ In this essay, Clifford deals with the peculiar mix of ethnology and surrealism cultured in Paris between the World Wars. As already mentioned when discussing Kaalund's book, actors on the side of visual art were such people as Picasso, Breton and Guillaume Apollinaire. Likewise, people from the other side, the side of ethnology, like Paul Rivet, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss, contributed heavily to the mixing up of surrealism and ethnology so common at that time.

In no way can one speak of pure disciplines here, of pure science, pure art, pure surrealism. From all sides people enthusiastically joined in the phenomenon, the phenomenon being among other things Josephine Baker in a banana-skirt, jazz and all sorts of interest in African objects. The war had crazed all traditional beliefs in Western reason, beauty and normality and caused a dire need for alternatives to these beliefs, alternatives through which the disillusion and the new insights into cultural validity could find expression.

Ethnology and surrealism are elements in the play of the well-known and the strange, a play that, according to Clifford, is basic to the cultural condition of modernism. As far as I can see, the two initially are inseparable. Their confusion of each other is fundamental to the modernist scene of inter-war Paris. And it is only from this initial confusion that pure forms would gradually emerge; from the confusion arose the various cultivated, purified forms of modernist art, as did the structural ethnology of the humanities institutionalized at the Musée de l'Homme.

For a few years the organ of ethnographic surrealism was the periodical *Documents* edited by Georges Bataille. Bataille together with Antonin Artaud and Michel Leiris, among others, had left André Breton's surrealist movement in 1929. The group of dissidents also included Alfred Métraux, Marcel Griaule, André Schaeffner as well as Paul Rivet, who was later to found the Musée de l'Homme.

According to Clifford, the group's main inspirational force was Marcel Mauss, whose teaching at the Institut d'Ethnologie and the École Pratique des Hautes Études all members of the group had either attended or heard of through their friends. For example, Clifford mentions that Bataille in his book *L'érotisme* from 1957 heralded: "Transgression does not negate an interdiction, it transcends and completes it."¹² Bataille's friend Alfred Métraux traces this statement back to Mauss, as he during the course of a lecture had heard Mauss say: "Taboos are made to be violated."¹³

The conception of culture as an order including rules as well as their transgression expressed itself in the interest in wild men and women, in the subversion, by way of ethnographica and such, of traditional perspectives on the aesthetic. And the ethnographic surrealists feared neither exotic pollution of European culture, nor, conversely, the pollution of the exotic by Western culture, such as could be seen in renderings of wild men equipped with rifles. Griaule argued for a break with the white man's curious prejudices, including those concerning products that seems updated or massproduced.

As noticed by Clifford, the ethnographic surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s – with its rebuttal of organic unity, of functional integrity, and of historic continuity – clearly anticipates views to be picked up in the latter half of the century, in the 1970s and onwards: "Their conception of culture can be called, without undue

anachronism, semiotic. Cultural reality was composed of artificial codes, ideological identities, and objects susceptible to inventive recombination and juxtaposition: Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine, a violin and a pair of hands slapping the African dirt."¹⁴

However, the pendulum was soon to swing in the direction of disciplinary cleansing, of separating surrealism and ethnography, assigning them respectively to the genius of the profoundly individual and that of the profoundly primitive.

The two did remain intimately related in certain respects, i.e. not on the surface of things, but in the depth of our being: "All people create, love, work, worship. A stable, complete 'humanity' is confirmed. Such a whole presupposes an omission, the excluded source of the projection. What were not displayed in the Musée de l'Homme were the modern west, its art, institutions, and techniques. Thus the orders of the west were everywhere present in the Musée de l'Homme, except on display."¹⁵

Clearly, it is such a modernist tradition, roaming, as we choose to see it here, in the prolonged interim between the ethnographic surrealism of the 20s and 30s and the rediscovery of its semiotic import in the 70s and 80s – it is within the continuation of this tradition that Kaalund writes and into which she inserts her description of Greenlandic art, more Greenlandic than artistic, a lovely, little art that she, standing on the shoulders of anthropological humanism and Hans Lynge, towers above. It is the projection of Western order with its claim to categorical and essential purity up against the cultural flea market of modern-day Greenland.

According to Clifford, though, it is misleading to view anthropological humanism and ethnographic surrealism as being mutually exclusive. To be sure, the strategy of anthropological humanism, by way of naming, consists in ordering, necessitating and uniting everything into a whole, making the strange well-known in the process – while ethnographic surrealism does the exact opposite. Yet, precisely by being opposites, the two can be seen as conditioning each other, and as equally important moments in the constant, ironic play between likeness and difference characteristic of global modernity.

To the extent that such a global modernity can be found, it will have to include us Greenlanders. Indeed, we have to abide by the same general terms as the

rest of the world. Therefore, in one moment, we cling to the authentic values cultivated by the anthropologists. In this way, we let our cultural capital work for us, as we do the next moment, too, when we turn to the anthropological humanism to study it studying us, re-appropriating its conceptions of our selves. The strange, the foreign at play, is us, we say. If nothing else, this explains the energy with which we hurl ourselves into the game.

4. The Daily News Revisited

Let me turn one more time to the series of articles in *Dagens Nyheter*, of which the introductory article by Stefan Jonsson was touched upon above. His interview with me, printed on March 18, 1995, ended the series, after my photographs had been used as illustrations throughout it. In addition, the series included articles by Neferti Xina Tadiar, Saree Makdisi, Stefan Jonsson on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Valentin Yves Mudimbe, Stefan Hegelsson on African literature and Homi. K. Bhabha as well as an article by Bhabha himself.

Precisely what is the connection between the series of articles and my photographs? What does saying that they serve as illustrations mean? Of course, you might say that all of it, text as well as pictures, serves to illustrate, to shed light on the subject of postcolonialism, in a process ending with subjecting the photographic illustrations to their own activity.

Besides, of all the persons concerned, writers or people written about or interviewed, I alone was portrayed, in a standard 1-column width photo halfway through the text of the interview. As for the photograph accompanying the interview, it reproduces a view of a South Greenland fjord. The scenery of the ice-strewn fjord leading toward the Ice Sheet within an ancient geology of rounded mountains is rendered in a hazy, dreamlike and timeless fashion due to the hour-long exposure time demanded by the zero degree pinhole-lens of the camera. The text below the picture reads: "The camera as linkage. In her pictures, Pia Arke emphasizes the tension between an old colonial power and a colonized culture."

Here, then, is the difference that I with my photographs was supposed to make. The text mentions that the interview took place in a hotel-room somewhere on the central Copenhagen street of Vesterbrogade, far away, that is, from my native soil. At the time, however, I lived in an apartment in the municipality of Frederiksberg, not very far from Vesterbrogade. Had we, then, rented a hotel

room for the sole purpose of being able to make a suitcase-style interview? Yes and no, as the interview took place in Johnson's hotel room, far from his home in Stockholm. Anyway, the interview deals with my life and work since, at the age of 12, I was sent to an art school in Denmark. Actually, I was sent to a boarding school; in the text in Swedish, the difference is one between *konst* – art – and *kost* – board. Yet, the intrusion of the letter *n* is justified, as my relocation at an early age did in fact influence the postcolonial turn of my work.

Allusions to hotels and suitcases also appear in connection with the camera obscura, big enough for a person to stand inside it during exposure, even to spend the night in it, should the need arise. As the text has it, this weather-beaten shack "is a metaphor for the questions about identity that distinguishes the postcolonial condition. The camera is a sort of linkage between Arke's life in Copenhagen and her life in Greenlandic localities. This bastard of a camera, furthermore, is an ironic reference to all of the instruments the Danish transported to Greenland to measure and determine with scientific precision the truth about the country, its exact nature and geography."

5. Interpretations

Under the headline "Empire of the minorities",¹⁶ Neferti Xina Tadiar accuses the postcolonial project of distorting reality as seen from a perspective of the Third World. Tadiar teaches at the University of the Philippines and is at the same time a Ph.D. student at the American Duke University. Neither as an outsider in USA, nor at home in Manila, is she able to recognize Bhabha's perspective of the in-between.

According to Tadiar, Bhabha's view on the postcolonial condition as a marginal position from where we are able to free ourselves from traditional ideas about colonizers and colonized eventually will turn all non-Western cultures into global minorities within a "United Nations of America". However, at home in the Philippines Tadiar does not belong to any margin or minority. There, the Third World surroundings are the only condition that meets the eye.

In my illustration accompanying Tadiar's article, you see a toy dog placed on a shelf with a book end on either side of it. The text below the illustration reads: "Postcolonial dog. Greenlandic artist Pia Arke got this toy as a child of a man who worked at the American air base in Thule in the Danish colony of Greenland. By now, the dog has migrated to Copenhagen, where it was photographed by Arke on a library shelf."

Like all of my images, this one is wide open to interpretations, and yet it invites the humoristic or lightly sarcastic comment (the dog has migrated to Copenhagen). In the same way, its being appointed to postcolonial dog appears quite playful when taken together with the reference to the American Air Base and with the picture's placement within Tadiar's article.

Makdisi in her article "Postcolonial glory is no guarantee of quality" deals with a critique of the postcolonial project similar to Tadiar's. What exactly lies in the term postcolonial, she asks, and whom exactly does it concern? She concludes that the term postcolonial is not only misleading but even dangerous, as it represent colonialism as a thing of the past, which, moreover, did not concern anyone except the now de-colonized peoples of the Third World.

My illustration to Makdisi's article is a version of the above mentioned view of a South Greenlandic fjord: the photograph on this occasion was blown up into a photostat format, which was torn into pieces and then reassembled with clearly visible cracks between the pieces. Some of the pieces were overwritten with text consisting of quotations from an ethnographic collection of East Greenlandic Eskimo songs. The text below the illustration paraphrases Makdisi's text: "Problems of definition. Is a Danish author with Greenlandic origins postcolonial?"

The way I see it, the problem of definition concerns the relationship between the text and the picture. In the case of the torn photostat, there is no clear or simple connection between picture and the two levels of text, the handwritten text on the stitched together fragments of the photostat and the text below the picture. Thus, replacing author with visual artist, it cannot be determined if the question is about me, if it is put to me or if it me who poses the question by way of my imagery.

All of the illustrations were created independently of the series of articles, and, so, were not originally meant to illustrate the postcolonial context. The interview of March 18th tells of the creation of the camera obscura photographs, noticing how "during the development of the pictures a strange beauty emerged". Evidently, then, they are aesthetic objects, i.e. objects with a degree of autonomy that makes it very difficult to keep them anchored within the context of the articles.

Even so, the editors of the series in the strange beauty of the pictures must have glimpsed the possibility of effecting the displacement whereby the aesthetic is pre-fixed with *ethno*-. A similar displacement is happening to the articles of Tadiar and Makdisi, in as much as they are inserted into the context that they criticize. Given this, their criticism can only be construed as self-criticism, and, even though they both emphasize their extra-Western descent and perspective, inevitably it is their position within Western intellectualism that is underlined by the context. They are exploring the land of intellectual opportunities.

So, faced with Western mechanisms of appropriation and marginalization, the strange is constantly at stake. You may want to stress that postcolonialism is an intellectual invention combining postmodernism and anti-colonialism in a way that conceals the continuation of colonialism by renewed forms of suppression and exploitation of the Third World. However, this is not an insight that by itself will transcend the regime of Western intellectualism from which it has sprung.

Correspondingly, ethno-aesthetics can be analyzed as an event combining ethno-centrism and anthropological humanism at which, as remarked by James Clifford, the only people actually present are the people that are not displayed, i.e. the Europeans. And, as said, this is not an insight that by itself will bring the strange out into the light. Thus, my ethno-aesthetic issue with ethno-aesthetics constantly runs into the inconceivable fact that the suppressed remains suppressed no matter how conscious I am of its suppression.

The critique of ethno-aesthetics – of ethno-aesthetics on the one hand and of nomadism on the other – is most optimistically and enthusiastically circumscribed by Mario Perniola: “The archetypical, the autochthonous, and the native will everywhere disappear in a dizzying multiplication of themselves that will make them transmittable, communicable and fertile to other cultures.”¹⁷ At the same time, we are taught by current critique of reason to be skeptical about the possibility of such a dizzying transport.

All the same – even when realizing that studying the marginalized is marginalizing in itself – there are quite a few of us who belong neither in the West, nor in the marginalized rest. If we are to belong in a place, we will have to create that place ourselves. We need an expansion of the border; we need to create a third place that will seriously disturb the binary logic of First and Third World relations.

Creating a third place for us, who belongs neither within the ethnographic object, nor the ethnographic subject, thus becomes more than just an intellectual opportunity. There is a sense of urgent necessity about our play with the pieces of different worlds.

Translated from Danish by Erik Gant.

Notes

* This text is an English translation of the author's essay "Etnoæstetik", originally published in Danish by the Danish art magazine *ARK* in 1995.

1. Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

2. Bodil Kaalund, *Grønlands Kunst*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990 (2. revised and enlarged edition). Original edition 1979, English translation: *The art of Greenland: sculpture, crafts, painting*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

3. Carpenter, *op. cit.*

4. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

5. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

6. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

7. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

8. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

9. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

10. Kaalund, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

11. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

12. Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

15. Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

16. The series consisted of altogether seven articles that appeared in *Dagens Nyheter* (Stockholm, Sweden) between January 15 – February 23, 1995.

17. Mario Perniola, *Kunsten som Neutral Mutant*, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 1996, p. 22.