Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts
Curatorial Afterword

What happens and what is it like when more than fifty people from all over the world travel to the ultimate North to meet each other and to meet local artists, activists, politicians, and academics to discuss the impact of Nordic colonialism on postcolonial societies and peoples of today?

In this afterword, we would like to look back and reflect on the exhibition project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts*, which we curated during our tenure as curators of NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art. Below we want to share in words and pictures what happened during the first four acts as they unfolded in Iceland, Greenland, The Faroe Islands, and Finnish Sápmi from March to July, 2006 — from our point of view.

In order to gauge what has actually come out of the project, we would like to shortly return to its premises. *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* (RNC for short) is based on a set of interrelated theses:

The colonial history of the Nordic region is absent from the collective memory of the once-colonizing countries. It is being forgotten, denied, or repressed — or, on a more cognizant note, being romanticized or otherwise transformed to justify the colonial event. As we see it, there is a direct line between the colonial past and present-day phobias for the “other” alongside the hierarchies they foster. If this is true, then it is necessary to revisit the past and the historical institutionalization of inequality. Otherwise, we will not be able to understand the current sentiments of intolerance, xenophobia, and nationalism that manifest themselves strongly in the Nordic region and elsewhere.

Attempting to deconstruct these phobias and the privileges attached to maintaining them, we found it very important to address not just such categories as national identity, race, class, and culture, but also and specifically categories of gender and sexuality. We hoped that rethinking colonialism, past and present, would show that whilst postcolonial struggles pose a much-needed critique of the dominant Western order, they do not stop short of generating viable and desirable alternatives to it.

In accordance with our theses and assumptions, we embarked on sketching out a first comprehensive history of Nordic colonialism up until today. We
wanted, first, to do so by facilitating a transnational dialogue and by mixing such disciplines as art, politics, and philosophy in four exhibitions, four public events, and a film program. Secondly, we wanted to bring the rich body of aesthetic and theoretical reflections generated throughout the course of the project back to the Scandinavian metropolises through the launch of a documentary DVD and website. There, the reflections can potentially raise a broader awareness as well as enrich the incipient postcolonial studies discipline. Although postcolonial critique is by far more established in other parts of the world, we hoped nonetheless that the Nordic case would evoke interest outside of the region as well.

At the outset, when we first founded our curatorial platform Kuratorisk Aktion, we decided that we would not allow more than 35% white, heterosexual, biological males on any level of our work. In other words, we wanted a majority of people who are aware of and work explicitly with experiences of marginalization. With our slogan 65/35% as a work tool, we set out to conceptualize and plan RNC. We decided that the project should take place in all of the once- or still colonized geographies within the Nordic region. Moreover, we opened it up to a “glocal” dialogue by including other postcolonial experiences from around the globe – many of which we expected to be farther in the process of de-colonization. We believed their experiences and ideas would be a great inspiration and a necessary help to build a critical network of postcolonial thinkers and practitioners centered in the region.

To make clear that RNC is an integral whole, we adopted the theater terminology of the acts and dubbed the project: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts. By bringing in international artists, activists, and artists to meet fellow experts far away from the Nordic centers in Acts 1 – 4, and by documenting their work in the present DVD and website (Act 5), RNC would attempt to short-circuit the idea of a European, and in particular a Scandinavian, “guiding culture” with exemplary values and structures. In other words, we wanted to turn the tables and look at Scandinavia and normative majority culture today.

We are well aware that our agenda has been overambitious and almost bound to fail in a number of ways. Even if the project has been and will still be met with deserved criticism, we nevertheless think that all participants delivered to the fullest and in a truly generous way. We are extremely grateful to them and sincerely hope that publishing the documentation, including a number of new essays, on DVD and as a website will convey and do justice to the remarkable work they have done.

This much said, there has also been a lot of support for the project. It indicates, despite the belatedness of the endeavor, an interest in discussing the Nordic history in order to understand the new types of racism that have emerged there, and how this racism is denied with reference to widely accepted ideas of national culture.

It is our earnest hope that the present publication and its contents will be discussed passionately and critically throughout the entire region and well beyond. As Høgni Hoydal, a republican MP from the Faroe Islands and contributor to the project teases: “Postcolonialism? That would be a great idea!”

We dedicate this project to the memory of Marianne Hansen and the long life ahead of Elke Olaf Goll.

Kuratorisk Aktion
Frederikke Hansen & Tone Olaf Nielsen
November, 2006
Artist and environmental activist Ósk Vilhjálmsdóttir’s painting and flag installation “Power in your hands” (2006) is a sharp indictment of the Icelandic government’s decision to sacrifice unique nature and democratic debate to accommodate transnational corporations (TNCs). Venues were prepared and work installed by local museum staff and volunteers, as of course by the NIFCA team and the artists themselves (in the picture Vilhjálmsdóttir applies the final brushstrokes while volunteer Sandra Asgeirs [right] helps out).

Ósk Vilhjálmsdóttir, “Power in your hands” (2006). Work in progress. Detail. The artist put up flags in several sites in Reykjavik, chosen for their emblematic value (here on the balcony of the exhibition venue overlooking the central shopping street Laugavegur).

We hear more and more about philanthropic organizations set up by mega-successful business elites, where millions of dollars are donated to seemingly worthy causes. However, the fact that such donations are needed also serves as an indication that development policies and globalization policies in their current form are not sustainable. Humphrey Polepole (left), head of the Tanzania Youth Coalition, presented a disillusioning analysis of present-day institutionalization of inequality through globalization as a legacy of colonialism. It was presented at a four-day workshop in which we asked scholars, activists, and artists to circumscribe a valid theoretical framework for rethinking Nordic colonialism. Steve Ouditt (right; in front of his work) from Trinidad contributed both as a visual artist and as a workshop participant with “Plantation Economy and Trademark Capital” (2006), a project which identifies and discusses key sites in the colonial continuum by visual and discursive means.
Inuk Silis Høegh's multimedia installation "Melting Barricades" (2004-06; with Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen) is an absurd *detournement* of the Danish government's present control of Greenland's military and foreign affairs and a discussion of the country's transition into an always already globalized future autonomy. Installation shot.


Detail.

Nuuk-based Julie Edel Hardenberg did an enormous amount of work for RNC, not just as an Act 1 exhibitor with three extensive installation pieces, but also by sharing her expertise and network in Greenland and thus substantially supporting the successful organization of the subsequent act.

The paramount priority was to fly in all non-local participants and for everyone to have sufficient time not just to install, perform or, as the case might be, speak, but also to discover and enjoy each other's work. Unfortunately, however, two of the Act 1 artists were not able to travel to Iceland for the show. Represented with a series of 18 water colors and her film "8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker" (2005) (picture), Kara Walker had a very strong presence in Reykjavik, though. The same goes for Maryam Jafri, who sent her poster installation "Siege of Khartoum, 1884" (2005-06) – a very timely and intelligent analysis of empire that unpacks Anglo-American media discourse in times of militarization and war whilst unsettling any modernist notion of historical progress. Also, much to everyone's dismay, Vandana Shiva had to cancel shortly before the workshop began. Honoring her seminal eco-feminist work, and by way of consolation, a field trip was organized. Vilhjálmsdóttir acted as tour guide and gladly shared the newest developments in Icelandic environmental politics.
The public hearing Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism? unfolded over two consecutive days in the qassi of the Teachers’ Training School of Greenland (qassis are Arctic council houses). Audiences were very mixed in terms of nationality, language, race, gender, age, and occupation and included politicians, grassroots activists (national liberation as well as lesbian & gay liberation), journalists, scholars, students, artists, managers, and teachers. Thanks to a remarkable media reception and to local participants and partners’ networking, the project managed to reach a large and broad audience, with Iceland as a possible exception. In Reykjavík, it seemed harder to break the divide between art reception on one hand and political and theoretical discourses on the other.

We have always been taught that we were one of the best colonies in the world. No slavery, no killings... Why then should we have had a reason to de-colonize? And why should we have a reason to ask questions about the 250 years of colonial presence? Greenlandic social anthropologist Aviâja Egede Lynge’s presentation “The Best Colony in the World” navigated skillfully through the Scylla of nationalism and reversed racism against Danes and the Charybdis of self-colonization and subordination. It was a landmark attempt to analyze the psychological impact of colonialism in today’s Inuit. So far, she argued, there has been too much focus on the struggle for economic and social equality with the once-colonizers. Without mental de-colonization, there will be no national liberation.
Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld (picture), Copenhagen, collaborated with Nuuk-based Ivaq Poulsen from the organization Inuit Youth International and also invited Act 1 participant Humphrey Polepole. Together, they conducted a youth workshop in Nuuk that resulted in a multimedia installation in the Act 2 exhibition Contested Territories: Representing Postcolonial Interests. They set out to examine postcolonial Greenland from the specific perspective of the youth. Complementing the art installation, the multilingual and cross-cultural task force furthermore presented their hopes and aspirations for the future in a performance during the public hearing.

Itself a modern structure, the main building of Greenland National Museum and Archives is situated in the so-called colonial harbor of Nuuk with the home and statue of Hans Egede and the Church of our Savior as neighbors (missionary Hans Egede ushered in the era of colonialism in 1721 by setting up a Lutheran mission and trading station, with the support of the Danish king). We have the impression that RNC’s perhaps most important input to the organization of future discussions in the region was the deliberate and liberating mixing and crossing of boundaries between fields of art, politics, and philosophy. The possibility for politics and emotions to co-exist in this gray area between otherwise clearly demarcated fields seemed especially explosive in Greenland.

Artist Moshekwa Langa and filmmaker Laila Hansen engage in discussion in front of Center for Land Use Interpretation’s installation, “Ultima Thule” (2006). CLUI and Langa, like most of the invited exhibitors, accepted the invitation to produce new work specifically for the RNC project. Even if it puts a lot of pressure on the artists and demands more organization, working with new, project-specific work is, in our experience, the only way to engage complex social problems, without simply claiming that art is inherently progressive and hence harboring a critical movement corresponding to any critical societal problem.
Sámi Finn Marja Helander showed an installation of photography and painting examining the mixed blessings of incorporating two cultures, the one indigenous and marginalized, and the other modern. By way of mimicry, the artist’s alter ego plays out tangible social and political conflicts between the indigenous Sápmi and the Sámi ways of life on one hand, and the Nordic national governments and metropolitan lifestyle on the other. Inevitably, Helander’s identity sensitive and critical work resonated strongly in the Greenlandic audiences. Likewise, meeting and discussing with other people at the public hearing inspired her to rethink the Sámi question and the need for an independent state as the perhaps only viable way forward.

What we all experienced was a truly empowering moment of meeting people and sharing experiences and thus learning more about each other and also about each other’s perhaps more advanced postcolonial struggles. Learning more about South Africa’s experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and British familiarity with new types of racism and ways of coping were such cases in point.

I see our meeting over the next few days – your meeting over the next few days – as part of an opportunity, part of a struggle to give Europe back its past. It seems to me that without access to the past, without the removal of the cultural and psychological screens that block access to it, Europe has no chance, no opportunity to comprehend its present circumstances or to plan for a democratic future in which the creation and reproduction of what we might call a habitable multiculturalism is absolutely critical. Introducing his notions of “melancholia” and “conviviality,” which relate to the loss of global pre-eminence and victimhood respectively to living together with difference, Paul Gilroy’s video letter (picture) – screened in his unfortunate absence – provided the hearing with a useful set of tools for discussing the psychology of postcolonial Europe.

Returning from an early morning boat excursion to a deserted settlement in the fjord of Nuuk just in time to go to the public hearing. The field trips, which we decided to prioritize after the success in Act 1, were social and educative adventures into the environments surrounding the various exhibition locations and brought local and visiting artists, speakers, performers, and organizers much closer together.

Danish-based Brazilian artist Tamar Guimarães and M. Jacqui Alexander, a Caribbean feminist and scholar living and working in Toronto, on the plane back to the (colonial) hub Copenhagen. Guimarães’ contribution to the project, “Jan Leetun and the Archive” (2006), is a truly impressive conceptual slide projection and sound piece investigating the story of a Caribbean man who was brought as a gift to the Bailiff of Skagen, Denmark, at the height of the country’s colonial involvement in the Americas. As the man antedates most of the sources on him, the piece enters the contested field of how Denmark and the Danes relate to their colonial past.

At the public hearing, Alexander picked up the thread from Paul Gilroy. She demonstrated how amnesia is becoming a national culture in Europe and that it has profound psychological consequences for how the presence is lived. This moment in history, Alexander said, is a moment of empire building and war – a moment that requires a patriotism of silence. However, like Gilroy, she sees cracks and fissures within the present racialized, sexualized, and gendered order in which interdisciplinary and transnational networks must operate and link what the state segregates.
Opening speech by Kuratorisk Aktion in The Faroe Islands Art Museum. Behind the curators, in more than one sense, museum director Helgi Fossádal and NIFCA director Cecilia Gelin. We made a great deal out of returning the authority imparted to us as curators to the participants and the audiences, who with all probability have been thinking about colonialism for much longer than we. As Danes, we have been taught practically nothing about our colonial past. Later, when we realized this and began to realize what it meant, we found it difficult to discuss issues of race and racism as it is seen as an essentially un-Danish and hence irrelevant problem to tackle. NIFCA and RNC’s institutional partners provided a platform for insisting on its relevance.

I remember when I was a little Black girl child... In the performance “Living in the Light & B4T (before testosterone),” Imani Henry tells about his childhood as the firstborn of Jamaican immigrants to the US and about what he, in his mid-twenties, couldn’t tell his hospitalized, god-fearing grandma without provoking her sudden cardiac death: about being an artist, an activist, working with people with AIDS, being gay and going in for chest surgery and taking testosterone. Lesbians and gay men, let alone transgender and transsexual people, do not enjoy legal protection against discrimination or hate crime in the Faroe Islands, a country that is often described as a Christian fundamentalist and patriarchal stronghold. Henry’s performance challenged the audience by relating ideas of European Christianity to such tabooed themes as sexuality, heteronormativity, and, importantly, to racism, and the African Diaspora.

Norðurlandahúsið (The Nordic House), an arts and cultural center under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, was the perfect venue for our spoken word/performance/music event Reinventing the Postcolonial Self with its versatile architecture and multiple stages. Like the exhibition in the Faroe Islands Art Museum, this one-night event focused on how colonial dynamics operate through and in language, and how language embeds those dynamics in our psyches and bodies. Poets, performers, and punk-rockers from all corners of the world demonstrated in various ways how language can be subverted to complicate and potentially “unlearn” received ideas. Besides Henry, the event featured a performance by Jane Jin Kaisen & Tobias Hübinette, spoken word sensation Anida Yoeu Esguerra, 200 (a Faroese band notorious nation-wide for its pro-independence and anti-homophobia lyrics and actions) and the dynamic DJ duo HYDROXYBROMIDE – a part of the Jakarta-based artists’ collective Ruangrupa.
Act 2 participant-turned-volunteer Ivaaq Poulsen assists Kaisen, while Indonesia-based Malaysian artist Nadiah Bamadhaj (left) hangs her work “I bestow this upon you” (2006). This and an accompanying video piece impose an unmistakably Oriental typology onto vernacular structures that are, supposedly, distinctly Faroese. The result is a beautiful mismatch that folds back onto itself as a sort of fallacy: if the “colonizing” shapes are not Oriental in the first place, but rather Orientalist, i.e. themselves the hybrid product of the West’s imaginary, what is then really vernacular, authentic, original, and by extension, Faroese? In the background, Faroese artist Rannvá Holm Mortensen’s “Communication” (2006), a ground-breaking feminist analysis of Faroese cultural history and the country’s own involvement in repression and war, whether voluntary or forced through the union with Denmark.

The Ruangrupas inserted themselves as an Indonesian minority into the Faroese capital in the project “You’re Welcome” (2006). Distributing posters and postcards in schools, shops, and in the streets, they introduced themselves and their backgrounds as new citizens to the fellow island country in the North. As a further move meant to ease the acceptance of the newcomers on the part of the locals, the artists had adopted and put pro-openness and -diversity quotes by prominent Faroese writers on t-shirts and pins, which they had produced inexpensively at home and now gave away to the people of Tórshavn.

Godfried Donkor’s “In the age of Enlightenment” (2006) examines the interlocking systems of colonialism and Enlightenment and elucidates how the age of rationalism, liberalism, and modern democracy is not simply concurrent with the age of colonial expansion and slave trade, but also deeply embedded within and formed by colonial and racist discourses. Staged as a neo-classical picture gallery with scenarios juxtaposing distinguished and anonymous historical figures encased in heavy gilded picture frames on a lush salmon pink, the installation evokes the age of European pre-eminence and invites the viewer to rethink the present moment and how it is shaped by what we know, or perhaps decide not to know, about our past.
In Tórshavn and Rovaniemi, artists, performers, and speakers lived together with RNC team members in private apartments, whereas hotels were sponsoring us in both Reykjavik and Nuuk. Although greatly appreciating the sponsorships, the communal living situation turned out to be our favorite as it enhanced communication and entertainment within the larger group.

At the opening of the art exhibition, Kaisen & Hübinette engaged the audience in the performance “Transmitting: (Dis)ComfortAN(d)AleNation,” which was followed up the next day at our performance event with a lecture-performance titled “(Dis)ComfortAN(d)AleNation: The X-Raced Mut(ated) Speak” (in the picture project coordinator Aura Seikkula colors curator Tone Olaf Nielsen’s white mask). Both are adopted from South Korea into Scandinavian families, the one an artist, the other an academic. Together, they created the momentous installation and performance piece, “Tracing Trades: International Adoption and Nordic Colonialism” (2006), which examines overseas adoption and its problematic relation to Western colonial history.
Greenlandic politician and former Minister of Culture and Education Henriette Rasmussen explains that the Inuit must demand more feedback and better solutions to actual problems in Greenland from the foreign scientists, who study and hence objectify them: **We know the importance of studying our environment as a unique and exciting source of knowledge, especially in the light of climate change. But we want to participate in defining the needs and priorities of the research. Therefore, we are building a new university campus in Nuuk, not only to elevate the educational level in Greenland, but also to offer a place for scholars from outside to do their research and studies in our own educational institution.**

Kuratorisk Aktion in action – getting the Locomotive Engine Shed ready for the exhibition and the accompanying film program *Silver Screen Resistance*. Whereas each act presented a new exhibition, the film program remained the same throughout the project. Together, the eight films document four decades of postcolonial critique and struggle in cinema and beyond. We were able to commission one new video film by Randi Broberg in cooperation with Tine Bryld and Helene Thiesen, but regrettably not to fly in the filmmakers. Laila Hansen came to Act 2 on her own account, though.

Cree artist and filmmaker Kent Monkman showed three films as part of Act 4. Visually and narratively experimental in character, they would conflate gender, sexuality, and indigeneity into a complex field of power and control. In this respect, his contribution beautifully complemented and reframed the films in *Silver Screen Resistance*.

Katarina Pirak Sikku draws a complex map of Sápmi with reindeer omenta and tin (the omentum is a membrane lining the abdomen of mammals). The result is an existential atlas based on memories and tales of a people without rights to their own history and their own land. Making it, Sikku claims those human rights that have been declared as universal, but in actuality only apply to people who belong to a nation state. As a Sámi, the artist has no land and no human rights. As a Swede, she does. The finished installation, titled “Dollet” (Grasp) (2006), contained many more elements which in concert analyzed the de-humanization of the Sámi through modern sciences.

The four venues were quite different from one another. Whereas the Act 2 and 3 exhibitions took place in museums (one devoted to Greenland’s cultural history, the other to Faroese high art), Act 1 and 4 were far from “white cube” situations. In Reykjavik, an empty 1990s-style office floor above the partner Nýlistasafnið (The Living Art Museum) was turned into an art gallery for the duration of the show. Finnish Railways generously lend their now defunct locomotive engine shed Veturitalli to NIFCA for the Act 4 exhibition, which as the only one was realized without direct affiliation with a local art institution. Being spectacular and spacious, the Veturitalli has been a dream location for local cultural producers in need of a place to work and assemble. Actually, their dream came true in the wake of RNC.
As the title *Beyond Subject and State? Indigenous Interests in the Age of Globalization* suggests, our international two-day conference, co-hosted by the Arctic Centre, focused on globalization, empire building, and agency from the point of view of indigenous peoples’ struggles. Staging Act 4 in Rovaniemi, the gateway to Finnish Sápmi, was of utmost importance in order to insist on debating the political, social, and environmental problems faced by the Sámi and Inuit as intrinsic to an unrecognized and hence ongoing inner-Nordic colonialism. Whilst Kaisa Raitio (speaking) would discuss Sámi-state relationships and the way both parties enter and address conflict over land use in the Finnish region of Anár, Richard William Hill (front row; fourth person from the right) examined representations of “the Indian” and their impact on agency, historically and currently. Makere Stewart-Harawira (front row; second from left) specifically addressed how globalization impacts indigenous peoples. All three speakers would clearly demonstrate that the indigenous struggles that they as academics, activists, and cultural workers represent are not aimed at simple inclusion in the dominant system, which is colonial at its basis.

With NIFCA being closed at the end of 2006, time to conceptualize, organize, and realize the project was limited. Without project coordinators Aura Seikkula and Kyongfa Che (picture), the project would not have been possible to make in its full scope.

Rauna Kuokkanen’s presentation of her excellent paper “Sámi Women, Autonomy, and Decolonization” was documented along with all the other presentations, performances, and discussions that took place throughout the entire project. Operating in a highly symbolic field, it was important to us from the onset to draw on different types of documentation, not so much because of the obvious fact that audio, video, and text documentation have different advantageous qualities, but more because giving one format and one type of reading precedence would have political implications in a project like ours, which involved many geographies and mother-tongues, but only one project language.

Co-exhibitors Fatimah Tuggar (right) and Archana Hande (left) in front of “Mun rahn stan – in mun ge” (2005), Geir Tore Holm’s Sámi remake of Gainsbourg’s succès de scandale “Je t’aime – moi non plus.” The video is a personal commentary with political undertones featuring footage of the artist himself as chanteur and charmer interspersed with stereotypical imagery of women dancing and hackneyed Nordic nature scenes. Hande, an artist based in Mumbai, also delivered a paper, “Home Grown,” at the conference, which of course is part of the Act 5 publication, as is an interactive art piece by Tuggar titled “Triad Raid” (2006).
The objectives of Act 5 were an examination of how postcolonial critique is received and addressed in the Scandinavian centers at the same time as encouraging an “external” analysis that will complicate on one hand the idea of Nordicness as a unified political and symbolic order and on the other the idea of a unified (non-racialized, non-gendered, and non-classed) postcolonial experience.

For the “external” critique we are indebted to Reina Lewis and Kobena Mercer. We are also indebted to the magazines VISION – den om lighed (Copenhagen), Voima (Helsinki), New Meaning (Oslo), and Slut (Stockholm), who have conducted a range of interviews on colonialism at home, and to Bolette Benedictsen Blaagaard (pictured while attending the Act 4 conference in Rovaniemi) and Pia Arke, who, in addition to contributing to Act 5, participated as a visual artist in Act 3 (boat trip picture.) As we conclude this afterword, launching the publication together with the four magazines still lies ahead of us.