

# THE SÁMI ART MUSEUM: THERE IS NO – OR IS THERE?

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## Abstract

This article aims to answer two questions. The first is: What is a Sámi art museum? The second question considers whether there is no Sámi art museum, as assumed by the Nordnorsk kunstmuseum (NNKM) as the title of a museum performance and exhibition in 2017.

To answer the first question, it is necessary to tell the long story of the Sámi cultural-historical museum in Karasjok, Samiid Vuorká-Dávvirat (SVD). This museum was inaugurated in 1972 as an act of resistance against the increasing assimilation politics towards the Sámi population in the post-war period. The building that was erected became a cultural and political centre, and a living cultural institution that housed the increasing Sámi ethno-political movement and its energy. Furthermore, as I will argue, the activity that took place at the site became a part of Sámi cultural heritage.

The museum has also collected art since 1972 – a collection that today comprises 1400 artworks. Since the 1980s, various plans have been made for a Sámi art museum in a separate building, somehow connected to SVD, however, none of these plans have yet been realised. The article discusses the different reasons for this, and points to the connotations embedded in the SVD building as a cultural and political centre as one of the contributing factors.

To answer the question of whether there is no Sámi art museum, a critical reading of the Nordnorsk kunstmuseum's 2017 museum performance *There Is No* is necessary. My answer to the question is that NNKM, unfortunately, fell into several traps in their attempt to focus on the fact that there is no physical building. One such trap, that is very common in Western museums displaying indigenous art, is their use of traditional art-historical models as interpretive lenses when displaying indigenous art.

A different concept of what an art museum could be today, as a place where things happen, where we could meet counter narratives, or Sámi art and culture could be presented as being part of the present as well as the past and future, would have been closer to a Sámi art museum. I offer this conclusion both through the deeper understanding of Sámi cultural and ethno-political movements as offered in the story of SVD, and through my reading of the theories of the indigenous American scholar John Paul Rangel. While there may indeed be no physical building claiming to be a Sámi art museum, it does in fact exist through the Sámi concept of árbevierru.

**Keywords:** *Sámi art; Sámi art museum; There Is No; Árbevierru; The Sámi Museum (SVD); The indigenous and the contemporary*

## Introduction

In February 2017, the Nordnorsk kunstmuseum (NNKM, The North Norwegian Art Museum) in Tromsø, put on an exhibition performance entitled *There Is No*, transforming the art museum into a potential Sámi Dáiddamusea, a Sámi art museum

(Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum 2017a). On display were selected works from the Sámi art repository (a collection of 1400 artworks managed by RiddoDuottarMuseat (RDM) in Karasjok), as well as a few works belonging to the collection at NNKM. The exhibition turned out to be a great success for NNKM, attracting many visitors and receiving several prizes including Museum of the Year in Norway. However, the great success leaves some questions in its wake. One question is: What is a Sámi art museum? Another question relates to the allegation ‘there is no’. Is there no?

One reason for these critical questions is that whenever there is an asymmetric relationship between those with power and those without, whether racial, based on gender, age, or geography, those in power tend to assume that their standards are the only valid standards. If you do not have the same words, body parts, or institutions as those in power, this is too often characterized as a condition of lack. In this case, the assumption was that there was a lack of a Sámi art museum, since the title stated ‘there is no’. This allegation was formulated by NNKM as the representative of the majority, Norwegian establishment about an indigenous art collection managed by a minority. The allegation is correct in so far as there is no physical museum building with the purpose of displaying the collection of Sámi art. I will, however, argue that this is a misconception of how a Sámi art museum as a concept exists today, drawing upon ideas and critical theories including those of the indigenous American scholar John Paul Rangel. He claims that Western museums displaying indigenous art often fall into traps when using their art-historical models as interpretive lenses. According to him, these lenses work to sublimate indigenous peoples and cultures into an imagined or romanticized past, creating an absence of authentic indigenous representations in the present (Rangel 2012, 32). I will return to how NNKM falls into traps with *There Is No* later in the text.

To elaborate the question of what a Sámi art museum is and how it could be understood, it is necessary to tell a long story, rather than to write about art works. According to Sámi literary scholar Harald Gaski, storytelling, rather than physical legacies, is of great importance in the construction of Sámi history and cultural heritage (Gaski 1997, 11). The late Sámi artist Nils Aslak Valkeapää also indicated the importance of immaterial, inner codes, claiming that art is a part of everyday life for the Sámi people, a part of their philosophy, connected to and in connection with nature, without leaving traces (Valkeapää 1979, 63).

To situate my text as a story, I will apply the Sámi concept *árbevierru*. The Sámi scholar Jelena Porsanger explains this concept as containing two interrelated parts: *vierru*, meaning mode or custom, and *árbi*, meaning heritage or inheritance. The two parts have a reciprocal relationship, which means that neither part of this dual entity is ‘first’ or ‘second’. In turn, this can be connected to indigenous conceptions of time as cyclical, a history without linearity, beginning, or end (Porsanger 2011, 240). To exemplify this, she mentions a specific Maori conception of time based on the idea that ‘the past is never behind but is considered as always in front of the present.’ (Porsanger 2011, 239 quoting Henare 2001, 218). In this conception, I imagine that the history of a Sámi art museum is ahead of us, as something yet to be experienced in an imagined future, while a Sámi art museum might also exist in both the past and the present. As the story will tell, a Sámi art museum is closely connected to and embedded in the story of the Sámi cultural historical museum in Karasjok.

### **Samiid Vuorká-Dávvirat/De samiske samlinger/The Sámi Museum (SVD)<sup>1</sup>**

Like many other museums and art collections, The Sámi Museum started as a number of private collections. A museum association was created in 1939 with the aim of establishing a Sámi museum in Karasjok. Objects as well as funding were collected among individuals (Johnsen 2014, 4). Everything that was collected as well as the protocols were lost during WW2, as the Nazi scorched-earth retreat destroyed housing and infrastructure throughout Finnmark. The population was forced to evacuate further south. After the war, the Norwegian Labour government, working to rebuild the country as a new welfare state, did not allow the Sámi population to resume some of their old ways or re-inhabit some of their former territory. Furthermore, the government laid down strict, discriminatory laws around education and assimilation that might have succeeded in destroying the Sámi languages and culture entirely if it had not been for local resistance against such politics (see Bjørklund 2000).



Samiid Vuorká-Dávvirat/De samiske samlinger/The Sámi Museum (SVD) in Karasjok

Photo: Hanna Horsberg Hansen

The museum association in Karasjok was one example of this resistance. Its members continued their work after the war, realising that the increased assimilation politics inflicted upon the Sámi population in the post-war period would cause a gradual disappearance of traditional Sámi culture (Johnsen 2014, 6). Many plans for the museum were presented to different authorities. In 1968, the municipality of Karasjok

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<sup>1</sup> My sources for the history of SVD are partly written sources such as annual reports, articles, and book sections. In addition, I have had personal communications with people who have played different roles in the history of SVD: Anne May Olli, Berit Åse Johnsen, Vigdis Stordahl, Gry Fors, Irene Snarby, Anders Henriksen, Magne Svineng, Hjalmar Strømeng, Knut Eirik Dahl, and Harald Gaski.

granted permission for a property. Four years later, in 1972, the building was completed and given the name Samiid Vuorká-Dávvirat/De samiske samlinger/The Sámi Museum (SVD). The architects were Magda Eide Jessen and Vidar Corn Jessen. In their brief presentation for an architectural review, they claimed that both the structure and the surface materials were based on the specific site's physical characteristics: pinewood and concrete made from sand as a 'native soil argument' (Haugdal 2018, 810). They collaborated with the Sámi artist Iver Jåks, who designed permanent decorations inside and outside the modernist-style building (Haugdal 2010). Jåks's use of materials and iconography was deeply rooted in Sámi mythology, while his style, as well as the designs of the interior and furniture, were contemporary and modernist.

### The first years

In 1972, SVD was the first building built with the purpose of housing a Sámi cultural institution. At the time of its inauguration, there was no permanent museum exhibition, but the museum both acquired art and hosted art exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> Alf Isak Keskitalo, a pioneering Sámi philosopher, was employed as museum leader. Jon Ole Andersen, a pioneering *duojár* (practitioner of traditional Sámi aesthetic practice, *duodji*), worked alongside Keskitalo as museum technician. He would later play a pivotal role in the construction of a permanent museum design together with Jåks. Anne Marie Skoglund had a position responsible for housekeeping (Sará 2014, 24).

This was at the time when the ethno-political movement among Sámi people as well as among indigenous people internationally was becoming stronger, and resistance to the Norwegian assimilation politics was increasing (Bjørklund 2000, 26). The SVD building came to play an important role as a physical site for this evolving resistance movement (Johnsen 2014,18). As there was no permanent museum exhibition during the building's first ten years, the spaces were used for other purposes. The Norwegian broadcasting company's Sámi department (NRK Sámi Radio), Karasjok's association for reindeer herders, and the local branch of The Norwegian Sámi association rented space for their offices and meetings in the building. Tromsø Museum had a field station there, where scholars could stay during field trips to the area. There was a collection of books available, long before a Sámi library existed. From the beginning, the museum was also an important institution for Sámi scholars. During my reading of annual reports, as well as other documents, the name of current scholars appeared frequently; Vigdis Stordahl, Gunvor Guttorm, Hartvig Birkely, and Asta Balto, to mention just a few. They all worked in the institution in different roles, for example as museum guides when at high school, and later as scholars, directors, or board members.

In the first three months of 1973, sixty-three different events took place in the building. Occasionally, the activity exceeded the building's space capacity, as well as its service and staff resources. Nevertheless, the impression was, according to Keskitalo's annual report, that this activity was of great importance to the museum's function in society, hence there was no need to decrease the level of activity (Keskitalo 1973).

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<sup>2</sup> The first proper registrations of art at SVD did not begin until 1978, but art had been collected since 1972 according to the annual reports (Teigmo 1975). Since 1978, there have been two collections at SVD; a cultural-historical collection and an art collection.

### **A living cultural institution**

In 1975, Mari Teigmo<sup>3</sup> was appointed as director after Keskitalo resigned. She continued to use the space in much the same way, claiming that the functions of the building extended far beyond its original purpose as exhibition space for the cultural-historical collection. Due to lack of funding, there was still no permanent exhibition, but the limited budgets allowed acquisitions and exhibitions of art, which at the time were a priority. Artworks by Ellen Kitok Andersen, Iver Jåks, Klemet A. Veimæl, and Nils Turi were acquired. The building also hosted the annual travelling exhibition of north Norwegian art (Nordnorsken) in 1974, as well as a temporary exhibition by the Sámi artist Hans Ragnar Mathisen.

Teigmo wanted to further extend the political and cultural activities in the building and made plans for cultural history classes to take place in order to educate Sámi people in the history of their own culture, arguing that this topic had never been taught at school (Teigmo 1975). She also emphasized the need for the museum to be able to play an internal role as a Sámi cultural institution as well as to mediate information about Sámi issues externally to the non-Sámi population (Teigmo 1977). Teigmo also underlined the need for the museum to be an active part of the contemporaneity and the community in Karasjok; far from urban centres, but at the core of Sápmi (the Sámi area) (Teigmo 1976, 81).

The activity and energy of the people who worked in or visited the building during these first years is, as I will argue, important for what later happened to the planned art museum. At that time, the SVD building was a site where people went to be educated in their own culture, to celebrate, to attend meetings, to work, and to discuss politics. According to the first president of Sámediggi (The Sámi Parliament), Ole Henrik Magga, this was the first location where Sámi people did not need to ‘bow and scrape’, and it became extremely important in furthering Sámi rights (Snarby 2017, 122). The museum building was alive, and all those who lived through this time share a collective memory of how the Sámi politics of the day changed the Sámi community thanks to the activities that took place there (Sárá 2014, 31). Formally, there was a director, but the museum was inherently community-based. It was an early example of how museums in indigenous societies replaced a focus on objects with a focus on social subjects and concerns (Harrison 2005, 43).

Art was acquired every year, and was considered very important for the Sámi population; hence, there was a need for a permanent place to house and display the growing art collection. Otherwise, the director feared that external buyers would acquire the art and make it inaccessible to the Sámi people themselves (Teigmo 1978). This attitude formulated by the museum director must be read in the context of the development of Sámi organizations that took place at the time. The Sámi Artists’ Union/Sámi Dáiddačhepiid Searvi (SDS) was established in 1979, as well as the Sámi Authors’ Union/Sámi Girječálliid Searvi (SGS). The ethno-political movement considered the Sámi people as independent and with the same rights to nation- and organization-building as other nations. To establish one’s own cultural institutions, and to include the local community rather than external experts in the process, was a way for Sámi people to claim the right to be active subjects during the revitalization of the Sámi culture that was going on (Teigmo 1976, 80).

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<sup>3</sup> She later became known as Mari Teigmo Eira

Parallel in time to the institutionalization of the Sámi museum, a political movement evolved to protest against a gigantic hydroelectric plant project on the Kautokeino-Alta river. The demonstrations lasted throughout the 1970s until 1981. Together with the cultural revitalization that took place, the protests led to a change in the Norwegian constitution, and the passing of the Sámi act that secured Sámi people the right to maintain and practise their own cultural traditions and language (Government.no). Finally, in 1989, Sámediggi was established. The fight against the gigantic dam project was lost, but the protests led to a significant change in the relationship between the majority and the indigenous people (Stordahl 1996, 92).

### **A Sámi way of exhibiting**

In 1982, the permanent cultural-historical exhibition was finally completed. The idea behind the exhibition was to promote a Sámi way of exhibiting. What this Sámi way might be was a recurring question.

The discussions about ‘a Sámi way’ also touched upon the relation between tradition and modernity in Sámi art and culture. One result was that objects classified as *duodji* were on display in a separate section of the cultural-historical exhibition, while the growing art collection, which was not considered as *duodji*, was archived in the basement. This perception of the different status of traditional *duodji* and modernist art has been a frequently debated topic and object for negotiation in the construction of Sámi heritage. According to the Sámi social anthropologist Vigdis Stordahl, a dichotomy between tradition and modernity was typical of the first years of the Sámi ethno-political movement in the 1970s (Stordahl 1996, 97).

One consequence of this construction was that the ‘traditional’ art, labelled *duodji*, was considered authentic Sámi and connected to a specific past. The modernist art, *dáidda*, was considered to be non-Sámi, hence more in line with Western or Nordic art. This was indeed a construction borrowed from Western academic discourses and understandings of the privileged West as developer of modernity as well as modernist and contemporary art (Phillips 1994, 39, Clifford 1988, 198). To exhibit in a Sámi way seems in this context to lead to an exclusion of what was not considered as ‘traditional’.

During the 1980s, ideas about the art collection and its purpose changed. The annual report from 1984 states that the art collection, if exhibited, would enable SVD to show the development and diversity of Sámi art and crafts. These ideas opened up a new understanding of Sámi art that exceeded the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, instead emphasizing the connections between tradition and modernity as part of the creation of development and diversity in contemporary Sámi art. The Canadian curator and art historian Diana Nemiroff writes about a parallel change in perspective in North America. Nemiroff explains that while reading texts from the 1980s by indigenous artists such as Robert Houle and Jimmie Durham, she realised that for them, the most fundamental was reclaiming change and diversity as integral aspects of indigenous traditions carried into the present (Nemiroff 1996, 429).

As a continuation of the discussions about a Sámi way, there was a discussion about how a Sámi museum differed from other museums. These discussions about specific ‘Sáminess’ evolved in many areas within Sámi societies at the time. In the aftermath of the Alta struggle, the focus was more inward and self-reflective, rather than in opposition to the majority society (Stordahl 1996, 101). The conclusion of the discussion was that Sámi museums are cultural institutions where Sámi languages,

values, and social conventions are applied (Eira 1988). The focus was not on objects as heritage constructors, but rather upon more immaterial aspects as dynamic processes and ongoing interactions between people.

### **The first plans for a Sámi National Gallery**

The Sámi Artists' Union (SDS) was well established by the end of the 1980s, and they put pressure upon SVD to work towards the establishment of a Sámi art museum. Though some works from the art collection participated in travelling exhibitions, most works were inaccessible and stored in the basement of SVD. Pressure also came from the Sámi association in Karasjok, who addressed Arts Council Norway about the case. The local Sámi association established a group consisting of Arne Nystad, Iver Jåks, and Mari Teigmo Eira to develop a pilot project for a Sámi art gallery, or as they put it in brackets, a national gallery (Nystad 1990). The group collaborated with Blå Strek architects, based in Tromsø, represented by Knut Eirik Dahl and Nils Mjaaland, who were already involved in plans for a sculpture park and an indigenous art academy in Karasjok together with the Sámi artist Aage Gaup and the medical doctor Knut Johnsen.

In a letter to Arts Council Norway, the group working for a Sámi national gallery described the conceptual frame for the museum/gallery as a site that should display a Sámi approach to landscape. It was to be a site where, they claimed, the encounter between history and new art could have the potential to create confrontation and thereby become a foundation for new understandings and insights. They argued that a close relation to and experience of nature inside the gallery should play a decisive role. The interior should provide the visitor with a flow of experiences where contrasts between exterior and interior would become an additional experience. They considered buildings to be of less importance than the surrounding landscape (Nystad 1990). A sketch of the planned building shows a low, star-shaped house, connected to the existing SVD building.

The plan was never realised, but provides a glimpse of how ideas around a Sámi art museum exceeded the constraints that traditional art museums were subject to at that time. The idea was not to make a copy of the Western art-historical concept of a linear history explained by a canon, but rather a postmodern approach blurring the difference between art and life, text and context, culture and nature. The proposed building itself was to be strongly connected to the landscape and the site, rather than to the Western concept of art museums that situates these in the same architectural class as temples, churches, shrines, or certain kinds of palaces: buildings constructed so as to dominate or simply neglect the landscape (Duncan 1978, 28). The ideas expressed from the group about the function of an art museum or gallery also differ from the white-cube context of modernist art galleries. The plans exaggerate the importance of contact between spectator, art, and context, while the white cube, according to Brian O'Doherty, aims at the opposite: the main purpose of the white-cube context is to keep the outside world outside and separated from the inside where art is on display (O'Doherty 1986, 15).

Later in the 1990s, the Boym committee was established to make plans for a future Sámi art museum. The committee concluded that it should be built physically connected to the existing SVD building. The reason for this was, according to the committee, the

important relation between art and tradition. Thus, the art-historical and cultural-historical collections could mutually benefit from and enrich each other (Boym 1995, 42). The committee also proposed to appoint an art professional to the museum, and in 1998, Morten Johan Svendsen was employed for a limited time. One of his tasks was to be a spokesman for Sámi art as a professional field (Boym 1995, 35).

Sámediggi established another local committee, the Guttorm committee, in 1997. They agreed with the Boym committee's proposals regarding the museum's purpose, and additionally proposed that the art museum should be part of the cultural-historical museum and thus create a Sámi national museum of art and cultural history (Guttormkomiteen 1997). Sámediggi accepted these proposals.

In 2002, Sámediggi took over the responsibility for Sámi museums. SVD was organized into departments: art; cultural history; and conservation. At the same time, a permanent position for an art professional was established. The first to be employed was art historian Irene Snarby. This was of great importance to the art collection. Exhibitions based on the art collection were curated and displayed both at SVD and as touring exhibitions. Connections were developed both internationally, as part of the rising global indigenous art world, as well as with local and regional collaborators. Diversity and dynamics in Sámi art became leading ideas, such as in connection with the travelling exhibition *Gierdu* that was curated and produced in cooperation with the organization SKINN<sup>4</sup> (Snarby and Vikjord 2009, 7).



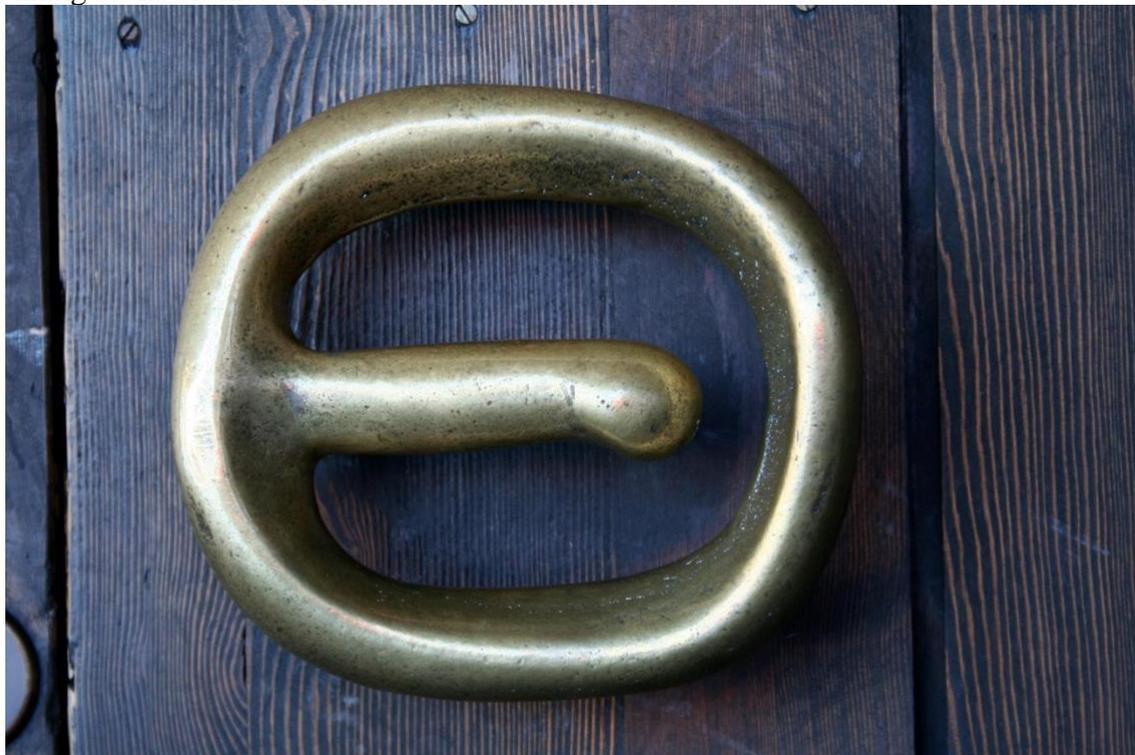
Exterior of the exhibition area of SVD. In the window, a part of the Sámi artist Aslaug Juliussen's work *Oktavuođat* (Connections) from 2004 is visible. The work belongs to RDM.

Photo: Hanna Horsberg Hansen

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<sup>4</sup> Se Kunst i Nord Norge (See art in northern Norway)

In 2002, Sámediggi gave a grant to SVD to start planning a new building for an art museum physically connected to the SVD building. The plan was completed in 2007 (Nordvest Samisk 2007, 4). At the same time, and on a larger scale, a Norwegian museum reform took place. This reform turned out to have a great impact on the planning of the art museum.



Doorhandle at the entrance of SVD in brass, designed by Iver Jåks  
Photo: Hanna Horsberg Hansen

### **The rise and fall of plans**

For a while, SVD functioned as a Sámi national museum in Norway. This changed, however, in 2002, when Sámediggi took over the responsibility for all Sámi museums, and the aforementioned Norwegian museum reform took place. One consequence of this was that it was decided that no single museum should have the position of a Sámi national museum. Thus in 2006, a new organization was established, Nordvestsamisk museumssiida, later named RiddoDuottarMuseat (RDM). This organization consisted of SVD, Porsanger Museum, Kautokeino bygdetun (a local museum in Kautokeino), and Kokelv sjøsamiske museum (a sea-Sámi museum in the coastal municipality of Kvalsund) (Johnsen 2011, 21).

When RDM was established in 2006, an agreement concerning the relation between SVD and RDM was signed. RDM was given the responsibility to conduct all museum activities, to maintain the buildings, to use them, and to take over responsibility for the staff.<sup>5</sup> The ownership to the building, as well as the cultural-historical collections,

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<sup>5</sup> Driftsavtale mellom Stiftelsen Nordvestsamisk museumssiida og Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat/De Samiske samlinger (agreement between the board of Nordvestsamisk museumssiida and Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat),

remained with SVD and was to be managed by a foundation represented by a board elected by the museum association. SVD's art department, which had managed the art collection, became an art repository – not as part of SVD, but as part of RDM.

The planning of the art museum continued until 2009, and then Sámediggi asked Statsbygg, the Norwegian government's key advisor in construction and property affairs as well as its building commissioner, to conduct preparations for new premises for the art collection in connection to the existing museum building. In the assignment, Statsbygg was asked to conduct the planning in close collaboration with RDM as well as the owners of the museum building – SVD – as agreed in 2006. Statsbygg delivered their report and building programme in December 2010. The report states that the programming was conducted in collaboration with RDM employees in 2010. The report was partly based upon previous plans from 2007, made by SVD/RDM, stating that the art museum would make Sámi heritage visible to the public as well as to future generations. In addition, the report says that the art museum would operate in close connection with the Sámi community, and be available, open, and open minded in an ongoing dialogue with them. The report also stated that the museum should demonstrate the diversity and the best in Sámi and other indigenous art in a flexible and expressive manner (Statsbygg 2010, 12).

In the introduction to the report, Statsbygg stated that the existing SVD building would need renovation in order to be physically connected to the planned new building (Statsbygg 2010, 12). To carry out these renovations, Statsbygg would need to acquire the building. Sámediggi then sent a letter to the board of SVD, asking them whether they could accept such a solution (Svineng 2012).

The board replied that due to lack of funding from Sámediggi to work on further ownership models for the building, they refused to give an answer.<sup>6</sup> Instead, an answer was sent from the owners of the building, the museum foundation's board, terminating the 2006 agreement between SVD and RDM.<sup>7</sup> Sámediggi then sent a quick reply to the SVD foundation to inform them that previous plans for a shared location for SVD and any future art museum would be set aside. This meant in practice that Sámediggi preferred to discuss other solutions with the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Statsbygg than to include the premises of SVD in further plans for a Sámi art museum.<sup>8</sup> This new turn was not rooted in any new political decision, and it was in fact never realised.

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signed by chair Liv Østmo, Nordvestsamisk museumssiida, and chair Ragnhild L. Nystad, Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat/De Samiske samlinger in Karasjok, 20th June 2007. Nordvestsamisk museumssiida was the first name of the new museum structure. The name was later changed to RiddoDuottarMuseat, which is the name I use here in order to avoid confusion.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from chair of the board at SVD The Sámi Museum, Thoralf Henriksen, to Sámediggi – Sametinget, att. Vibeke Larsen. Karasjok, 27th August 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Stiftelsen De Samiske Samlinger/Sámiid Vuorká Dávvirat (The SVD foundation) to RiddoDuottarMuseat att. Chair Kåre Olli. Oppsigelse av driftsavtalen (Termination of management agreement), dated 27th August 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Stiftelsen De Samiske Samlinger/Sámiid Vuorká Dávvirat (The SVD foundation) from Vibeke Larsen, rådsmedlem (member of advisory board) Sámediggi/Sametinget, 29th August 2012. 11/5253-8.

It seems that the SVD foundation was a scapegoat in this case. The fact was that neither Statsbygg nor Sámediggi had included them in the process, and no attempts were made to negotiate with them. The assignment from Sámediggi to Statsbygg was clear: to conduct the planning in cooperation with both the owners of the building (the SVD foundation) and RDM. Statsbygg, however, conducted their work in close cooperation with the staff at RDM, but did not include SVD.

### **The elders as gate watchers**

The only official supporter of the rejection was the local history and museum association (NRK Sápmi 2013). There were probably many reasons for the rejection of the proposal to hand over the building to Statsbygg, but certainly all the memories connected to the building played a role: the energy; the political discussions; the identity building that took place there; the importance of the building as a cultural institution where Sámi language, values, and social conventions were applied. The colonial power, represented by Statsbygg, was perhaps not welcome as the owner of this heritage without any negotiations, understanding, or recognition of the symbolic significance of the building. All the personal communications I have had with people involved in the process confirm this impression.

From being the first, and for a long time the most important site of Sámi resistance, revitalization, identity building, and politics, SVD and its owners had over the course of a few years experienced what they regarded as a robbery of status: not only as the national Sámi museum, but also as a competent and professional museum (compared to the other museums in RDM), and as the owners of the art collection (now a Sámi art repository). They had no representation on the RDM board, and as such little influence on the decisions it made. To be ignored as the owners of this significant building was out of the question. They would rather use it for their own purposes (NRK Sápmi 2013).

Following my research into this story, I would claim that the SVD foundation's decision can be understood as an example of how the elders in Sámi communities – as in other indigenous communities – manage and protect *árbevierru* (See Gaski 2019). As stated earlier, *árbevierru* is not just about the past, but connects past, present, and future time. In this case, the SVD foundation, acting as 'elders', sought to preserve the collective memory embedded in the building. This memory includes the building's early years, and the political significance of the activities that took place there. As the SVD building itself was based on the physical characteristics of the specific site, pinewood and concrete made from sand as a 'native soil argument', forty years of ethno-political struggle was also immaterially embedded there. It had in fact become part of Sámi cultural heritage, and it demonstrates how indigenous connections to place also happen in contemporary urban settings, as well as in rural areas (Greenop 2018, 547). In this case, the SVD foundation took the responsibility to protect this heritage for the future.

### A museum performance in Tromsø

The story of SVD, the art collection, and the plans for a Sámi art museum did not come across at NNKM's exhibition *There Is No*, which instead constructed a very different narrative.

In an introductory text, mounted on the wall by the entrance, the curators presented the twofold project: 'To shed light upon the fact that there is No, and to give visitors to Sámi Dáiddamusea an introduction to the wide diversity of Sámi art, with the materials, formats and media employed matched by the range of motifs and concepts communicated.'

The introduction then highlighted a few well-known Sámi artists in chronological order: 'from pioneers like John Savio (1902-1938) and Iver Jåks (1932-2007), through to Synnøve Persen (b. 1950), Britta Marakatt-Labba (b. 1951), and other members of the Máze Group, and onwards to today's generation such as Joar Nango (b. 1979) and Hanne Grieg Hermansen (b. 1984)', and ended with the following claim: '*There Is No* offers up a series of dynamic and vibrant manifestations of cultural expression that strategically resist, extend, and challenge established ways of thinking about mainstream art history' (Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum 2017b) .

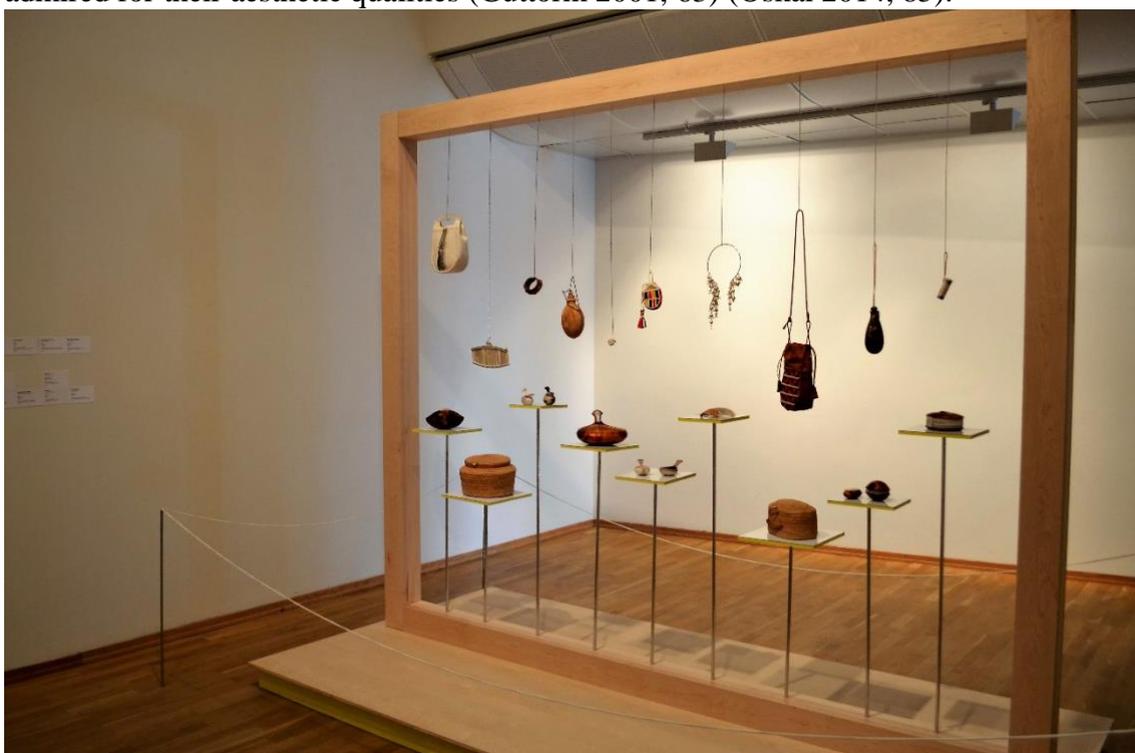
I find these statements problematic. In fact, the diversity of Sámi art is well demonstrated and documented in previous exhibitions, for example *Gierdu*, that was curated by SVD/RDM together with SKINN in 2009. Diversity has also been an important feature in all the ideas and discussions around a Sámi art museum since the 1980s. Therefore, how can you challenge established ways of thinking by confirming what is already said and done? The listing of 'central figures within Sámi art' appears to be an attempt to construct a canon of Sámi artists. Is this the way to 'challenge established ways of thinking in mainstream history'?

NNKM's introduction also touches upon the idea that 'there is no word for art in my language'. This has been an important concept in North American indigenous discourses since the 1980s, including as a way to reject the Western concept of art (Mithlo 2012, 116). I have, however, not found any reference in Sámi discourses to this means of understanding, though the description of a lack of a Sámi word for art is frequently repeated as a reason for the construction of the word *dáidda*. Rather, what I have found is an embracement of and the application of the concept of 'art'. As I demonstrated earlier, this embracement was formulated by Valkeapää who claimed that art is part of everyday life, a part of Sámi philosophy, connected to and in connection with nature, without leaving any trace (Valkeapää 1979, 63). The phrase 'there is no word for art in my language' is not only a description of a lack, it also lays claim to the ownership of language, 'my language'. Today such an understanding of art is frequently questioned in favour of a rejection of existing categories and a construction and articulation of counter-narratives drawn from indigenous traditions and philosophies (Mithlo 2012, 123). NNKM's appropriation of the concept thus achieved the opposite of what it (presumably) intended: rather than validating indigenous understandings, it instead pandered to Western assumptions of art ownership and the status of museums.

### **The four topics**

The didactic part of the exhibition *There Is No* was divided into four topics: ‘Duodji and dáidda’, ‘Portraiture and identity’, ‘Sámi Artist Group (Máze Group)’, and ‘Iver Jåks’. Each topic was presented through texts on the walls, and was presumably related to the different topics.

The text connected to the ‘Duodji and dáidda’ topic explained that ‘*Duodji* refers to both the act of making by the *duojár* and the finished work. It encompasses notions of tacit knowledge and skilled practice, and is often associated with the making of practical objects from natural materials’. *Dáidda*, on the other hand, ‘emerged within the Sámi art scene during 1970s to describe forms of visual art such as painting, sculpture, installation and performance’.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned earlier, the division between *duodji*, the specific Sámi visual traditions, and *dáidda*, as a Sámi word for art, was an important division in the 1970s. The question today is whether this division, as a loan from Western academic discourses, is still relevant for a potential Sámi art museum. I find that this definition of *duodji* and the distinction between the two visual traditions is outdated, agreeing with Mithloe’s rejection of existing categories discussed above. *Duodji* has, due to changes in culture and lifestyle, turned from the production of (principally) utilities into a production of aesthetic objects made to be also exhibited and admired for their aesthetic qualities (Guttorm 2001, 63) (Oskal 2014, 85).



From the display of *duodji* at NNKM, *There Is No*.  
Photo: Hanna Horsberg Hansen

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from the display text to ‘Duodji and Dáidda’.

In the exhibition at NNKM, all objects identifiable as *duodji* were placed in one room, except for the knives on display in a glass-covered display case in the ‘Identity and portraiture’ section. Most of the *duodji* objects were rather small. They were all placed inside a freestanding wooden frame in the middle of the room. Some were displayed on a small platform on top of vertical metal poles of different heights, and others were suspended from the top of the frame. There was a rope surrounding the frame to prevent spectators from touching or coming close to the objects. The display labels for each object were mounted on the wall some distance away from the objects themselves, which made it difficult for visitors to find the connection between object and label.

Coffee bags, boxes, silver necklaces, and small bags were displayed side by side without any explanations or opportunity for spectators to relate the objects to each other or perceive them as independent works of art. Instead, they floated in the air or upon tiny poles as if in a timeless frame at a distance from us. Fifteen *duojarát* participated with works, but none of them were included in the ‘canon’ presented in the introductory text. The fact that each little piece of *duodji* carries a story about the *duojarát*’s origin or family connection was ignored. Nor was there any information about the unique story that unfolds in each piece through carved ornamentation, the patterns of the woven bands, the different techniques, and how they are conducted (Fors 2017, 13). Why ignore this?

‘Portraiture and identity’ was another topic. The accompanying text explained it thus: ‘A common feature of many of the works in this exhibition is the conversations they initiate between the past and the present, blurring boundaries of history to address themes of identity politics, cultural belonging, and self-determination.’ Some of the artworks can certainly be analysed in this way, but the museum’s description is nevertheless stereotypical. This is precisely what the mainstream, Western art world expects indigenous artists to be concerned about in their art production.

One example is Arnold Johansen’s folded photographs in the ‘Identity and portraiture’ section. His images could be read as dealing with identity, as they merge two portraiture photos into one. However, I find this reading superficial. Some of these photos, which are part of a larger series, merge two different people. Others merge one person who is differently dressed in the two images. The *en face* portraits are reminiscent of and connected to former ethnographic portraiture – like the photographs taken of Sámi people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Roland Bonaparte. In its turn, this connection evokes ideas about identity as something essential and reflected in physiognomy. In Johansen’s photographs, two different identities are interconnected and indeed inseparable. What you see depends upon your position or perspective as spectator. In my view, the photographs play with the spectator’s expectations about identity through the reference to early ethnographic descriptions. The reason why ‘portraiture and identity’ is chosen as a specific topic in the exhibition seems to be a curatorial construction. To my knowledge, this topic is seldom mentioned by Sámi artists, and according to my research was hardly raised either during the discussions about a future Sámi art museum or in previous exhibitions based upon the collection.

The third topic was ‘Sámi Artist Group (Máze Group)’. This was an artist group that was established in 1978 and existed until 1983 and was of great importance for the

ethno-political struggles as well as in organization building among Sámi artists (Hansen 2014b, 97). The text that presented the group claimed that ‘eight young artists united by a common interest in redefining the terms of Sámi identity established the Sámi Artist Group in the town of Máze’. This misconception about their motivation and desires may have a connection to the exhibition’s misguided notion of ‘portraiture and identity’. I have conducted extensive research on the Sámi Artist Group, but this motivation never came to light (Hansen 2014b). In fact, they were recently graduated artists, proud of being Sámi, and in need of a place to work. They wanted to work together in an artist group, just like other artists with a political agenda at the time (Hansen 2014b, 89). What they did as artists, how they performed their Sámi identity and took part in the construction of new Sámi identities at the time, was an effect of the group, but this was never their motivation or *raison d’être*. The group was more engaged in broader political struggles such as the Alta conflict, more concerned about institution- and nation-building in Sápmi, than in their own, individual identity struggles.

The text also claims that when the Sámi museum in Karasjok acquired one work from each of the artists that participated in a touring exhibition staged by the group, ‘this marked the start of a collection for a future museum that would grow to become Sámi Dáiddamusea almost forty years on’. This is simply incorrect, as we have seen. The collection of art started at the inauguration of the museum building in 1972.

The third topic was ‘Iver Jåks’, described as ‘a trailblazer in the history of Sámi art’. He was, however, also very important as a mediator between Sámi and Norwegian institutions in the 1960s and 70s, as a constructor and designer at SVD and at Tromsø Museum for the permanent exhibition on Sámi culture, as well as a developer of *duodji*. In 1998, he had a solo exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo. Obviously, he was important, but why should NNKM canonize him within the history of Sámi art as a pioneer? Why not rather consider previous attempts at canonization, such as Sámediggi’s presentation of their art in the building published in connection to the 25th anniversary? This canon is listed as Per Hætta, Lars Dunfjeld, Iver Jåks, and Jon Ole Andersen (Isaksen 2014). There is also a canon from 1940, listing Johan Turi, Nils Nilsson Skum, and John Savio (Fett 1940), and another from the 1970s: Johan Turi, Nils Nilsson Skum, John Savio, Jon Pålsson Fanki, Per Hætta, Iver Jåks, Esajas Poggats, and Lars Pirak (Manker 1971). It would surely have been better to leave out old-fashioned, Western canon-building in art history, since it is unlikely to be the best method for telling the histories of Sámi art.

### **Falling into traps**

Although this was not the intention, NNKM fell into several traps. Rather than a potential Sámi art museum, *There Is No* was an example of how an exhibition of real, authentic, indigenous art, as something different from contemporary or modernist art, fictionalizes a fissure in cultural production instead of allowing for a more nuanced representation of a living, continuous, thriving culture, as underlined in all previous visions of a Sámi art museum. According to Rangel, referring to the North American discourse, this dichotomous taxonomy of ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ utilized in

interpreting indigenous art results in a reductive privileging of the non-indigenous voice and its presentation as the authority that decides what constitutes the field.

Rangel claims that the indigenous museum, on the other hand, is tasked with the responsibility of casting off these reductive and constrictive binary models and recontextualizing what indigenous art is and means within an indigenous context (Rangel 2012, 32). In my view, this should also be the case with a Sámi art museum. The plans and ideas that have evolved over the decades emphasize openness and dialogue with the surrounding community. As far as I can see, *There Is No* applied none of these ideas, but rather the traditions from Western art history and museum practice, analysed through interpretive lenses coming from that same tradition.

My conclusion is that *There Is No* failed at its attempt to be a potential Sámi art museum. The director of RDM, Anne May Olli, who was the main partner for NNKM, made a speech at a seminar in connection with the museum performance. In the speech, she declared how happy she was for all the attention given to the fact that there is no Sámi art museum. She added to this a reservation about the exhibition as a potential Sámi art museum because NNKM and its curators probably used a different approach from those that a Sámi institution and curator would have used.<sup>10</sup> I think she is right, and RDM demonstrated a very different curatorial and conceptual approach in a small-scale exhibition at Sámediggi in 2019. RDM was invited to present works from the art collection in a small glass display case in the hallway of the Sámediggi building. Rather than bringing in Western ideas of art display, they instead used the opportunity to make a statement about the still unresolved situation regarding a Sámi art museum. Their choice was to display only the rear side of two paintings by Nils Nilsson Skum, a pioneering Sámi artist. This way of protest could perhaps be perceived as an iconoclastic act, refusing to show the art. Another interpretation could be to understand this act as a demonstration of the fact that the artworks in the collection are inaccessible. However, a third possibility could be to interpret this act as a specific Sámi way of protesting, in order to make an inversion or a silent, paradoxical protest, saying one thing by saying something else. Perhaps this explains Olli's reservations concerning *There Is No* as a potential Sámi art museum, and perhaps the curatorial and conceptual decision made by RDM in the small-scale exhibition can give us an idea of what this difference might be, pointing to 'a Sámi way of exhibiting'.

Despite the failure as a potential Sámi art museum, the NNKM performance perhaps demonstrated the urgent need for a place for the Sámi art collection, and succeeded in its aim to refocus attention on this issue. In 2018, after further and more inclusive negotiations, the SVD foundation agreed to hand over the SVD building to Statsbygg. The planning of a Sámi art museum in connection to the SVD building was resumed in 2019.

### **Is there no?**

Looking into plans and ideas for a Sámi art museum, as well as to the example of RDM's display of Nils Nilssons Skum's paintings at Sámediggi, I am convinced that it

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<sup>10</sup> E-mail communication with Anne May Olli, 14th February 2019.

will not resemble the standard Western museum format. Since SVD was a political and cultural community centre that took part in contemporary culture in the 1970s, the existing plans will open up the same possibilities for the art museum. This corresponds well to what we might call the global age and a changing art world. According to art historian Hans Belting, art museums no longer represent a master narrative of art. As contemporary art production expands across the globe, traditional museum practice no longer follows a single, mainstream notion of art – the purpose for which the museum was invented (Belting 2013, 246).

One example of this change in how art museums operate could be the plans for a Sámi national gallery from 1990, but it also fits a description of The Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA by John Paul Rangel. He underlines the importance of moving beyond the expected, to present counter narratives, and to promote living people. He claims that the museum's effort to interpret and contextualize indigenous people and cultures as being part of the present is an essential model of indigenous representation (Rangel 2012, 46). The philosopher Boris Groys also points to the importance of contemporaneity and to the fact that museums today have ceased to be spaces of contemplation but have instead become places where things happen. Thus, he claims, the museum presents not a universal history of art, but rather its own history, in the chain of events staged by the museum itself (Groys 2016, 18).

I find these ideas very much in line with the current ideas about a Sámi art museum. The building is not yet there, but as *árbevierru* it exists, both in the past and in an imagined future. In the present, we can tell stories about it, share dreams, victories, and failures along the way. These actions are already building it, as an everyday practice, without leaving any traces.

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