



Exhibition Proposal

“To be sure, the techniques of total exclusion from human togetherness were first developed in the colonies. However, once invented and perfected, they did not cease to come back to Europe. Indeed, what the European Christian bourgeoisie could not truly forgive and forget regarding Hitler was ‘not the crime of genocide, but the crime of having applied to Europe the colonialist actions.’ The Nazi’s real crime was to bring the homo sacer to Europe. Today, the homo sacer is in the West and is so in many old and new ways, in expected and unexpected situations.”

Bülent Diken & Carsten Bagge Laustsen¹

“In drawing the new map of Europe, which we will need to accomplish these tasks, we must be prepared to make detours into the imperial and colonial zones where the catastrophic power of race-thinking was first institutionalized and its distinctive anthropologies put to the test, above all, in the civilizing storms of colonial war. Making that long-forgotten history co-extensive with the moral lives of European nations is essential, but a viable anti-racism cannot end with the sense of shame which that story ought to produce. That redemptive movement must be able to pass beyond a compensatory acknowledgement of Europe’s imperial crimes and the significance of its colonies as places of governmental innovation and experiment. The empires were not simply out there – distant terminal points for trading activity where race consciousness could grow – in the torrid zones of the world at the other end of the colonial chain. Imperial mentalities were brought back home long before the immigrants arrived and altered economic, social and cultural relations in the core of Europe’s colonial systems. This shift in standpoint makes those imperial dynamics much more significant in the constitution of national states than they have been allowed to be before. It sets a number of challenges before historians of the post-colonial present.”

Paul Gilroy²

Introduction

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts is a major transnational, multidisciplinary exhibition project about Nordic (post)colonialism. The project sets forth to think through the colonial history of the Nordic region of Europe in order to question current imperial orders in that same region.

The exhibition project is curated by Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen (Kuratorisk Aktion) for NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art and constitutes NIFCA’s last major exhibition production before the institution closes down in 2007, as part of a larger restructuring of the Nordic cultural collaboration.

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism unfolds in different locations in Reykjavik (Iceland), Nuuk (Greenland), Tórshavn (The Faroe Islands), and Rovaniemi (Finnish Sápmi) during the period of March 24 – November 25, 2006. In total, the project presents 56 visual artists and

¹ Bülent Diken & Carsten Bagge Laustsen, “The Refugee Camp,” in Trine Rytter Andersen, Kirsten Dufour, Tone O. Nielsen & Anja Raiihel (ed.), *Minority Report: Challenging Intolerance in Contemporary Denmark_Station 4: The Book*, Aarhus: Aarhus Festival of Contemporary Art 2004, 2004, p. 99. In the quotation, Diken & Laustsen quote Zygmunt Bauman’s unpublished paper “Living together in a full world” from 2002.

² Paul Gilroy, “From Assimilation to Conviviality or, There Are No Second and Third Generation Immigrants,” in Trine Rytter Andersen, Kirsten Dufour, Tone O. Nielsen & Anja Raiihel (ed.), *Minority Report: Challenging Intolerance in Contemporary Denmark_Station 4: The Book*, Aarhus: Aarhus Festival of Contemporary Art 2004, 2004, p. 135.



filmmakers, performers and musicians, theorists and writers, politicians and activists from the region and beyond, who in the course of four exhibitions and a series of public events in each of the four cities exchange (post)colonial experiences and strategies with each other and the audiences.

The many activities and conclusions of *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* are documented and published in a DVD Box Set, which at the end of November 2006 is launched during a series of simultaneous closing events in the Nordic metropolises Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, and Stockholm. With the DVD Box Set, the many postcolonial voices of the region's so-called "peripheries" are made audible to the populations of the once-colonizing countries of the Nordic region – and to the world at large.

Background

The colonial history of the Nordic region is not an unwritten chapter within specialized academic research.³ Although a comprehensive history of Nordic colonialism is yet to be written, accounts of the individual countries' colonial history do exist. Still, as a number of scholars from the emerging field of postcolonial theory in the Nordic region have recently pointed out, this history does not seem to be present in the collective memory of *all* the region's member countries.

In his 2004 paper "What Is Danish Racism?," Korean-Danish Historian of Ideas Kim Su Rasmussen states: "Another aspect, which is important in order to understand the complexity of the current racism in Denmark, concerns a pervasive historical repression of Denmark's colonial history. In my opinion, there exists amongst the ordinary Dane a pervasive denial of the history of Danish slave trade and the Danish slave colonies in the West Indies. A majority of citizens in Denmark might have heard of the formerly Danish owned West Indies, but only a very few possess a detailed or merely general knowledge of the islands' history and their role in the transatlantic triangular trade. This historical repression does not concern the specialized professional historical treatment, but has to do with the collective memory: the problematics is not about how the history of Danish slave trade is written, but how this history is remembered by the Danish population."⁴

According to Su Rasmussen, this denial is not accidental. Denmark's imperial history – not only in the West Indies, but also in Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Tranquebar, Serampore, Nicobarean, and the Gold Coast of West Africa – paints a picture of the Danes, which is in direct conflict, if not incompatible, with Danish self-perception today as a liberal, tolerant, progressive people. When Denmark's colonial activities occasionally do enter public discourse, they are represented in a nostalgic, even apologetic manner, which tones or plays down the suffering they produced. The historical repression prevents the values, attitudes, and chains of reasoning that structured these activities from being rethought, allowing the historically repressed past to reappear in the form of symptoms: an unproblematized Eurocentric

³ When we in the following refer to the Nordic region, we are referring to the European nation states Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden; the home-ruling countries Greenland (DK), The Faroe Islands (DK), and The Islands of Aaland (FIN); and Sápmi, the homeland area of the indigenous Sámi people covering the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of northwest Russia. We are aware that neglecting such a qualification is only too often a sign of Eurocentric condescension. However, with this exhibition project we hope to complicate any notion of "the Nordic" as a stable symbolic regime and a coherent social system, whether in terms of *realpolitik* or political ethics.

⁴ Kim Su Rasmussen, "Hvad er dansk racisme?," paper delivered during the exhibition *Minority Report: Challenging Intolerance in Contemporary Denmark*, Aarhus, fall 2004. See www.minority-report.dk/dansk/kalender.html. Our translation.



perspective on colonialism, a conspicuous nostalgia towards the “lost” colonies of the West Indies, a pervasive apologetic attitude towards the act of slavery. Su Rasmussen concludes that although material slavery and colonialism in the case of the Danish West Indies have ended, the immaterial values, attitudes, and chains of reasoning continue to make themselves felt in today’s Danish society.

Denmark’s self-perception as a liberal, tolerant, progressive society has not only facilitated the repression of its past colonial activities, but allows it to represent its current control of the home-ruling countries Greenland and the Faroe Islands as an act of duty, even benevolence, towards “less privileged” societies. The infamous Danish social-democratic model of the postwar period enables colonial subordination to organize itself along the lines of class, and not just racial or cultural difference, making it possible for Denmark to justify the continued domination in the name of bringing welfare and equality to its “dependencies.” Thanks to the myth of the benevolent Danish colonizer, Denmark can excuse itself from the postcolonial process, which is regarded as a historical moment in places far away.

It could be argued that this historical repression is characteristic of the other Scandinavian countries also. Sweden’s past colonial activities in the Baltic, the Caribbean, and the Cape Coast, and Norway’s present-day claim to possessions in the Arctic and Antarctica are toned down. The devastating effect that Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish colonization has had, and continues to have, on the indigenous Sámi people living within their respective realms is also played down in favor of a massive exploitation of Sámi identity by the tourist industries of these countries.

Concept & Intentionality

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism takes its thematic and geographical starting point in this historical repression. The project has two objectives. On one hand, it wishes to revisit the colonial history of the Nordic countries and examine various forms of awareness regarding this history and its cultural impact within the region. On the other, it sets forth to capture as well as to encourage postcolonial analyses and discourses within art, activism, and academic work in the Nordic region and beyond.

Admittedly different, these two objectives are interrelated in significant ways. A primary thesis formulated in the project is that in order to understand xenophobic and nationalistic sentiments within the Nordic countries today, we have to arrive at a deeper understanding of the region’s colonial history; specifically how imperial dynamics of the past continue to structure current personal and national politics in the Nordic region. Behind this thesis, of course, lies the political assertion that it is indeed pertinent to negotiate contemporary nationalistic phobias, if not absolutely necessary.

The rethinking of Nordic colonialism thus takes two directions. One will involve an identification of the historical-ideological sources to some of the hierarchies, inequalities, and intolerances, which structure the Nordic societies today. An important part of this identification includes a discussion of the various techniques, which facilitate the repression and romantic valorization of the colonial past and make it possible to forget the inherited economic, cultural, and political advantages stemming from this past. The other entails an encounter with the *postcolonial* as a process of “unthinking” old binary systems and engaging with “difference” as other formations of modernity. Postcolonial critique opens up the possibility of discursively closing the gap



between “Us/Them” and “First World/Third World,” not by bridging these categories but by unthinking them altogether. It allows us to acknowledge formations of modernism different from the white, heterosexual modernism of the West, not as “stolen, inferior, degenerate” copies of colonial modernity but as modernisms “invented and constructed afresh as mixings and hybridities, translations of colonial modernity that produces divergence and difference.”⁵

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism has the potential to become a platform upon which we can *learn from* each other: learn from our different histories and lived experiences with subordination; our different ways of constructing and deconstructing ourselves in response to subordination; our different ways of unthinking categorical maps and escaping/refusing territorialization; in short, our different strategies of transformation and creativity. Quoting Sarat Maharaj once again, “postcolonialism also means new and unexpected intimacies.”

Exhibition Structure & Thematics

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism is divided into five acts and unfolds consecutively in Reykjavik (Iceland), Nuuk (Greenland), Tórshavn (The Faroe Islands), and Rovaniemi (Finnish Sápmi) from March 24 – July 9, 2006 (Act 1 – 4), to conclude with a launch of a documentary DVD Box Set in the Nordic metropolises on November 25, 2006 (Act 5). Within a center-periphery mindset, these areas of the Nordic region have continuously been designated peripheral and are notably also the areas that have been and in some cases arguably still are colonized by the Scandinavian centers.

Eight Nordic institutions have entered into a partnership with NIFCA and provide venues for the project: The Living Art Museum and The Reykjavik Academy in Reykjavik; Greenland National Museum and Archives and The Teachers’ Training School of Greenland in Nuuk; The Faroe Islands Art Museum and The Nordic House in Tórshavn; and The Arctic Centre and Finnish Railways Locomotive Engine Shed in Rovaniemi.⁶ In each of the four cities, an art exhibition is presented featuring regional and international visual artists and filmmakers, who have worked thoroughly with the questions of colonialism and postcolonialism. Parallel to the four different exhibitions, a series of discursive events are held, during which leading postcolonial thinkers from a variety of disciplines discuss Nordic and global colonialisms from the angle of a set of in-depth questions pertinent to the overarching theme.

In line with our understanding of the postcolonial, an important aim of *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* is to overcome conventional disciplinary borders and let each act become interdisciplinary. In the exhibitions as well as in the discursive events, we have thus strived to represent agents from a broad variety of disciplines and backgrounds.

In total, *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* presents 56 visual artists and filmmakers, performers and musicians, theorists and writers, politicians and activists from around the world, who exchange (post)colonial experiences and strategies during the course of the project. With exhibition participants from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, the project initiates a

⁵ Sarat Maharaj, “Avidya: ‘Non-Knowledge’ Production in the Scene of Visual-Arts Practice,” in *Education, Information, Entertainment*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer, Wien: Institut für Gegenwartskunst, Akademie der Bildende Künsten, Edition Selene, 2000, p. 239.

⁶ The Living Art Museum does not host the exhibition in their own gallery spaces but in a space above the museum kindly sponsored by Stoðir hf.



transnational and interdisciplinary encirclement of (Nordic) colonialism, which due to the diverse starting points of the participants is able to raise new kinds of questions that will hopefully invigorate the postcolonial discussion in the Nordic region.

Act 1 is played out from March 24 – April 16 in Reykjavik. It will give attention to a more theoretical consideration of colonial histories and postcolonial critique in and beyond the Nordic region. In doing so, it will exceed the disciplines of history and political science to embrace fields of postcolonial/cultural studies, feminism, and queer theory. The exhibition will take place in an industrial space above the Living Art Museum and features five artists/artist groups from the Nordic region and postcolonial states around the world, who address fundamental questions of imperial dynamics and the repercussions of colonial amnesia. Likewise, we will host a global, interdisciplinary workshop in Reykjavik Academy featuring five postcolonial thinkers, who will look into the widely forgotten, repressed, or occasionally romanticized histories of Nordic colonialism. The joint investigation aims at providing a set of tools for further investigation and discussion as the exhibition project develops. There will, as a result of the workshop, be a collective conclusion statement presented in the exhibition as well as individual papers for later publication in the DVD Box Set.

Greenland is a self-governing country, which is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. From April 21 – May 14, the capital Nuuk will host **Act 2**, which takes its starting point in the symbolic and lived experiences with postcolonial dependency and marginalization. The exhibition will take place in Greenland National Museum and Archives. In the chiasm of postcolonial subsistence and neo-liberal globalization, five regional and global artists/artist groups will deal with personal experiences of strategies in art and every day culture for resisting being consigned to a position of subordination. Adjacent to the exhibition, a 2-day public hearing in the Teachers' Training School of Greenland with five regional and international keynote speakers will furthermore discuss experiences with home rule – is it autonomy or are we rather dealing with a form of neo- or voluntary colonialism?

From May 12 – June 4, the project moves on to Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands (another self-governing part of the Kingdom of Denmark). In **Act 3**, we want to focus on language and discourse through music, spoken word, and performance art. The exhibition will take place in the Faroe Islands Art Museum and will feature works that deploy deconstructive strategies of reading and re-reading to locate and analyze the impact of imperial dynamics on our bodies and psyches. The exhibition is complemented by a one-evening event in the Nordic House, which features five different live acts exploiting language and performativity in order to exert anti- or postcolonial resistance. Themes discussed in Tórshavn are alterity and the internalization of difference and normality, language and reading (*différance*), and memory along with more cognizant forms of resistance, like “strategic essentialism” or identity politics.

Finally, from June 16 – July 9, the exhibition project moves on to Rovaniemi in Finnish Sápmi, where we will host a two-day conference in the Arctic Centre and, of course, a small focused exhibition in Finnish Railways' Locomotive Engine Shed. Being situated in a region that comprises territory of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the focus of **Act 4** is on such issues as indigenous peoples, (cross-)border politics, the right to land and natural resources, self-organization, and questions of representation. The exhibition will feature artists/artists groups with an aboriginal background or focus from the region and beyond. The conference includes academics and theory-inclined artists and activists from Sápmi, Europe, and overseas, who will present their papers and subsequently debate with the public in smaller discussion groups.



Each exhibition in **Act 1 – 4** is accompanied by a film program entitled *Silver Screen Resistance*. The film program reflects four decades of postcolonial cinema with the newest film being made especially for *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*. Featuring prominent examples of resistance in cinema, the program introduces critical notions of postcolonial opposition and documents specific local battles against the tyranny of Western modernization.

Over the course of the four acts, various projects working around the theme of colonialism and postcolonial critique will gradually accumulate. Together, they will generate a rich body of aesthetic and theoretical reflection that will be collected and published as a DVD Box Set at the end of the project. In addition, four artists, critics, and theorists have been invited to submit papers for the DVD Box Set on the politics of representation. Also, four migration political magazines from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have been invited to do interviews with citizens of their cities – giving subjects of once-colonizing countries a voice in the debate that *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* prompts.

On November 25, 2006, the DVD Box Set is launched to the public during a series of simultaneous closing events in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, and Stockholm hosted by the four magazines. This launch constitutes *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism's Act 5* and concludes the exhibition project. With the fifth act, the project's many postcolonial voices reach the past colonizers of the Nordic region and become audible to their present populations – and to the world at large.

In line with our understanding of the postcolonial, an important aim of *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* is to overcome conventional disciplinary borders and let each act become interdisciplinary. In the exhibitions as well as in the discursive events, we will thus strive to represent agents from a broad variety of disciplines and backgrounds.

Targeted Audiences & Publicity

Rethinking Nordic Colonialism hopes first and foremost to reach audience groups in the four exhibition cities, who regard the project as a welcome opportunity to share their (post)colonial experiences with other postcolonial subjects from around the world. Secondly, but equally important, we hope to make these postcolonial voices audible to the Scandinavian populations, who are rarely given the chance to hear them because of the pervasive repression of the region's colonial history.

The announcement of *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* will happen through a series of press releases, posters, invitation cards, programs, and ads in various regional newspapers and international art magazines. In addition, the project is accompanied by a User Guide to the four exhibitions and discursive events as well as a website (www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org). Four local correspondents from each of the four exhibition cities have also been invited to independently document the exhibitions and discursive events. Their reports will be made available to audiences in the four exhibition venues, on the website, and in the DVD Box Set.



Kuratorisk Aktion & Curatorial Methodology

Kuratorisk Aktion is a platform for curators engaged in a critical practice along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The platform was founded by Danish-born curators Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen in spring 2005. Merging feminist, queer, and activist informed approaches, Kuratorisk Aktion pledges itself to raise consciousness on the politics of representation and translate this consciousness into practice. We attempt to achieve this through a 65/35 percent representation of minoritarian and majoritarian subjectivities respectively in all our productions, at the same time as we open this procedure up to critique as part of the curatorial methodology. In this way, Kuratorisk Aktion hopes to demonstrate a politically correct practice – one, however, that steers clear of tokenism and allows alternative thinking to be the dominant trait, not only in terms of the identity politics of the participants but more importantly in terms of their practice. Among other projects, Kuratorisk Aktion earlier this year submitted a proposal entitled *What's Left of the Left? Rethinking Left-Wing Politics in the Age of Globalization* to the First International Festival of Contemporary Art in Denmark 2007. The platform is also presently constructing a website (www.kuratorisk.org).

We are aware that we have relatively similar backgrounds as white, Danish, middle-class women. Thus, we have asked Richard William Hill, aboriginal critic and curator from Canada, and Sarat Maharaj, curator and Professor at Goldsmiths and Lund University, to act as curatorial consultants. They have advised us in our research and curatorial process. With their help, we hope to become investigative facilitators of a more complex discussion that will have multiple references and go well beyond and potentially short-circuit any insights we as curators may offer.

Kuratorisk Aktion (Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen)
December 2005