

[An appetite whetted – on contemporary art in Greenland. Artikel](#)

by Iben Mondrup and Julie Edel Hardenberg (2008)



Interview by Iben Mondrup and Julie Edel Hardenberg published in “Museums and Diversity,” a magasin by UNESCO, Museum of London, IZIKO Museums of South Africa, University of Bergen og Bergen National Academy of the Arts (2008).

I am sitting a quiet afternoon together with Julie Edel Hardenberg at her large work and dining table. The children are at school and in crèche, the sun is shining coldly on the cliffs outside the windows in the little yellow wooden house in which Julie and her husband live. “Do you want coffee or tea?” Julie asks me, and I answer that I would like tea. “Black, green or white?” Julie asks.

We are in Nuuk, Greenland’s capital, it is October 2007. I am on a short visit in the country together with my family; and as many times before, I end up at Julie’s place, talking about the issue of “the representation of Greenland” in the world of art. “Have you been to see the Nuuk Art Museum?” Julie asks with a sly look. I have not, I answer, I have only seen it from the outside. “You don’t need to either – it is a waste of your time”.

Julie is an artist. She relates, both personally and in her artistic work, to the stereotyping of cultural images, and particularly those that relate to Greenland. She writes herself into the postcolonial discourse and makes questions about ethnic identity to an engagement and a theme for her artistic explorations. As an artist she is more or less alone in taking that position. The majority of her colleagues in Greenland are exponents for a romantic pursuit of cultural origins in Greenland art. The same goes for the art experts

who interpret the art, the curators and the politicians in Greenland. It can be added that art very often – and almost automatically – is written into the political sphere. It is expected to partake in the creation and upholding of the Greenlandic image. In this context there is no place for doubt or criticism as is Julie's practice.

“Nuuk Art Museum is a private art collection that one of Greenland's largest Danish entrepreneurs, Svend Junge, has collected over time. It is primarily made up of landscape paintings of the safe kind and crafts made of tooth and soapstone. Traditional stuff ... not one contemporary artwork amongst them with something to say” Julie says annoyed and continues. “The worst is that they have chosen to call it for an art museum instead of a collection. So people think incorrectly that what they see there is representative for the art of Greenland”. “But isn't the collection representative?” I can't stop myself asking. Julie sighs. “Yes, it is unfortunately. But it represents first of all the entrepreneurs own interests and taste because it is his collection. They should have called it 'Junge's Collection', that would have been more correct.”



The reason that many Greenland artists stay with what one could call decorative art where the main inspiration is, for example, the spectacularity of our nature, is historic. For the population of Greenland

(similarly to many other ethnic minorities) it is necessary to create attention to themselves. Their culture, as everything else small, is in danger of becoming absorbed by Hollywood films, McDonalds, Nintendo etc. They must signal their difference and in this way legitimate their culture's 'authenticity'. It is the only way in which their rights of existence can be assured in a world driven by market forces that only bypass those places and forms of life that are seen as worthy of protection because they are primordial.

In Greenland there are many concerns about the influence of globalisation on the cultural development of the country. In 2005 Greenland's Home Rule legislators presented a cultural policy report where it is suggested that Greenlandic identity should be identified starting from Greenland's cultural heritage, namely the culture of hunters and all that belongs to it in the form of kayak sailing, drum dances, traditional clothing, folklore traditions, myths and legends etc. Globalisation and the cultural challenge shall be met from this authentic, common and solid basis, and it is here that art comes into the picture. Art has appeal, and it can be exposed and distributed widely. It is obvious as a political tool because it is experienced and seen by many (and different) people domestically and internationally; in museums, in galleries, at conferences, on postcards, in newspapers, magazines, in embassies, in shopping malls, libraries etc.

Artists in Greenland often work therefore with a firm commitment toward showing and representing Greenland culture as something particular and different. That is one of their major responsibilities. And Greenlandic artists are good at it. They have an endless source in the landscape, and in mythology. And they speak to an attentive audience. Both the nature and the mythology are favoured themes for the more "civilised" cultures who look back with nostalgia at their own lost origins.

Unfortunately it is almost as if many artists from Greenland are blind to the fact that art can be so much more. This is what Julie scoffs at. "I am tired of nothing being shown in our exhibition halls that asks questions. There are only a few artists who have anything to say but codswallop for gossip. This means that people here simply don't know how to react when they finally meet an artwork that pokes at their understanding of the world. They don't know how to criticise it. It is annoying because that is what contemporary art is so good at. – And there is no lack of themes; there is more than enough to work with here in this country," Julie adds with annoyance in her voice.

"Wasn't there an exhibition on postcolonial Greenlandic identity recently, and wasn't that different than much of what one sees otherwise in art exhibitions here?" I ask referring to an exhibition that was first shown at the Nordatlantens Brygge in Copenhagen and then later in Katuaq, the cultural centre in Nuuk. "Yes. And I was a part of it. But that was put up by some art history students from Denmark who were interested in postcolonial tendencies in contemporary art. It was met with silence here. Not one person questioned or reacted to the otherwise very provocative work I had made; a tunic made of two flags – the Greenlandic and the Danish. The work problematised the tense identity sphere that we find ourselves in, in our postcolonial relationship between Greenland and Denmark. I called the work Rigsfællesskabspause (a national pause) ... we all need a break sometimes, where we don't need to relate to whether we belong to the one or the other culture, or if we are third ..." Julie sighs. "What is paradoxical is that the tunic received much attention in many other countries. People have asked and talked and written; it has really caused debate, just not at home."

Postcolonial theory – or the postcolonial condition – has in recent years been one of the themes of contemporary art. Interest has been particularly focused on studies of cultural meetings and the representation of indigenous people in literature and film. The international art biennale Documenta 11 (2002) explicitly made the postcolonial field a central theme and showed works about – and by artist from earlier colonies. There has been, in other words, massive awareness about the previously colonised narratives about themselves and history. But the interest has obviously not yet reached Greenland.

Nuuk Art Museum has just built an annex for temporary exhibitions. In the meantime the museum's original founder has passed away, and the building with its collection has been given to Nuuk Council. A museum director has been employed who, in his capacity as archaeologist, looks after the changing exhibitions. "Just now there is an exhibition of Greenlandic precious stones" Julie says, "and afterwards they will show a travelling exhibition where Nordic artists problematise 'nature' in their work. The exhibition is taking place after the initiative of The Nordic House – a Nordic cultural centre in the Faroe Islands, so no new Greenlandic thinking there –."



"Is it the artists who should educate people in more critical thinking?" I ask. "We have at least as much responsibility as others. And we have some abilities and a tradition for turning world perceptions on their head. The problem is that we in Greenland in general lack visionary people in the whole art field; people who could dare to think beyond the banal and the clichéd. We lack someone who can understand that art can be so much more than pretty or beautiful and comment on the relationship between nature and people. Someone for whom art can be an analytical tool, that can challenge philosophy and politics and

romanticism side by side – and that can in the end say so much more about Greenlandic identity and ideas. But it is not only the artists that are the problem. We lack inquisitive writers who dare write about art, and visionary curators who dare put something together,” Julie says.

“But can’t one be provocative and claim that the dialogical element in art is a tradition that has very little to do with Greenlandic traditions, and that therefore it is not strange that Greenlandic artists don’t want to work with something that perhaps is not representative for them?” I ask to push at Julie’s position and attitudes. Her reaction comes quickly. “We live here and now in a society which in all ways is being revised all the time, so that it is consistent with our needs and desires. And we must therefore question it. I also have a responsibility to participate in that process. As artists we have visual tools that speak to ideas and feelings in a completely unique way. It is a shame not to use it,” Julie answers. “And furthermore,” she adds, “one can also argue that the Greenlandic stereotype in pictorial art is a colonial perspective; namely a continuation of the exotic difference.”

“But won’t that all change when Greenland gets its own National Gallery in Nuuk”, I ask. “Hopefully. But the pressure to show Greenland as a picture postcard, is large. Remember: We are far too dependent of goodwill here. We are a tiny population on a very big continent, we have use for positive attention, at least for the moment. The Home Rule parliament has need for us artists to help them, and funds art is given is dependent upon it. Unfortunately the results follow; well-meaning, but toothless art.”

I lift the teapot. Our white tea has been drunk. Julie lives on the top of a mountain with a view far into the fjord. Together we stare out of the window; a couple of boats are on their way out; it is the season for reindeer hunting. I think I will visit the Nuuk Art Museum just to get a sense of it. At the same time I consider trying to curate an exhibition in the town’s large, beautiful cultural centre. At least my appetite has been whetted.

This interview was constructed and therefore represents both author’s reflections and perspectives.

It can be read in the book

Photo#1: painting by Emanuel A. Petersen (1894-1948), photo#2: handcraft by Johannes Kreutzmann (1862-1940). – Both Nuuk Kunstmuseum possessions. Photo#3 “Made in” (1998) by Julie Edel Hardenberg.