

## Searching for a Sami Identity in the Contemporary Arts of Sweden – the Personal, the Political and the Poetical in the Art Works of Katarina Pirak Sikku, Liselotte Wajstedt and Carola Grahn

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### **Abstract:**

*Last year the city of Umeå, situated in the North East of Sweden, was acknowledged as the Cultural Capital of Europe 2014. One reason for being nominated was the origin of the Sami culture in the region. The Sami are the indigenous people and original population of a land area called Sápmi (Sami land). It includes the northern parts of Sweden, Norway, Finland and a small part of northwestern Russia in the Kola Peninsula. The Sami people have traditionally been nomads following their reindeer migration from the mountains to the coast, depending on where to find grazing for the reindeer.*

*In 2014 Bildmuseet, a museum for contemporary and visual arts in Umeå, showed eight exhibitions with artists of Sami descent corresponding in time with the eight seasons of the Sami. Three of the artists were Katarina Pirak Sikku, Liselotte Wajstedt and Carola Grahn, and this paper discusses the personal, the political and the poetical aspects of their art works in the exhibitions.*

*There are about 20,000 Sami people living in Sweden today. With the colonization of Sápmi and the exploitation of the natural resources in the region many of the Sami were forced to relocate and lost their rights to land and waters. The colonization also led to a loss of language, religion and sometimes also a loss of cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** Katarina Pirak Sikku, Liselotte Wajstedt, Carola Grahn, Contemporary Art, Sami Identity.

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## Introduction to the exhibitions

Katarina Pirak Sikku has been searching the archives of the State Institute for Racial Biology, which was founded in 1922 in Uppsala, 60 kilometres north of Stockholm. Today the archives belong to the Library of Uppsala University and hold some 12,000 photographs of Sami people and other minorities of Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Katarina Pirak Sikku has followed the footsteps of the racial biologists in their journeys to the north of Sweden, their physical measurement and photographic documentation of the Sami. In the exhibition *Nammaláhpán* (the reindeer without a name) she concludes her own experiences with the stories of elderly people being subjected to the treatment in the form of drawings, photographs, installations and texts.<sup>2</sup>

Liselotte Wajstedt is an artist and filmmaker. In her exhibition *The Lost One* she tells the personal story of her grandmother and finds parallels to her own life. The exhibition is both a film and an installation.<sup>3</sup>

Carola Grahn made a site-specific sound installation for her exhibition *Vidderna ropa* (*A Cry from the Expanses*). It contains a dying pine tree with sound recordings of a reindeer herd, barking dogs and a yoik, the traditional singing of the Sami people.<sup>4</sup>

There are not yet any print catalogues of the exhibitions so this paper aims to be a contribution to the documentation of the three contemporary Sami artists.

## Katarina Pirak Sikku

Katarina Pirak Sikku was born in 1965 and lives in Jokkmokk in the north of Sweden. In 2005 she graduated with a master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Umeå. For her master degree exhibition Katarina Pirak Sikku had collected "everything that hurt" in a room and discussed with other Sami women what was personal and what they had in common in history, for example racial biology, relocation by force and the prohibition of speaking Sami in the early nomad schools in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

In connection with the exhibition, she also found an instrument for measuring skulls in the Research Archives of Umeå University. The instrument came from staff of the State Institute of Racial Biology in Uppsala and had been used in their expedition to Stora Lulevatten (the Great Lake of Luleå), north of Jokkmokk, in 1923.<sup>6</sup> Katarina Pirak Sikku put together the instrument and started to take her own measures. In 2006 she was invited to participate in the exhibition *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*.<sup>7</sup> That was the first time she exhibited an anthropometrical list of Sami people. On top of the list, she wrote her own name and her own measures.

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<sup>1</sup> Uppsala University Library, The Archives of the State Institute of Racial Biology, <http://www.ub.uu.se/samlingar/verk-och-samlingar-i-urval/rasbiologiska-institutet/?languageId=1>

<sup>2</sup> Bildmuseet, Katarina Pirak Sikku, <http://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibition/katarina-pirak-sikku/12046>

<sup>3</sup> Bildmuseet, Liselotte Wajstedt, <http://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibition/liselotte-wajstedt/12052>

<sup>4</sup> Bildmuseet, Carola Grahn, <http://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibition/carola-grahn/12053>

<sup>5</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 9, 20

<sup>6</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 9-10

<sup>7</sup> Kuratorisk Aktion (2006), Act 4: Finnish Sápmi.

The exhibition also included a full-length photographic portrait of Katarina Pirak Sikku with an instrument for measurement in front of her face, a map of Sápmi made from a membrane of a reindeer abdomen and a sound track with a story about the village of Luovvaluokta near Jokkmokk.<sup>8</sup>

With the map in the exhibition Katarina Pirak Sikku refers to human rights. It is an existential map over a land and a people without rights to their land and history. Human rights are universal, but they are only valid for people belonging to a nation-state. They apply to her as a Swede but not as a Sami.<sup>9</sup> To construct a map is a way of claiming your existence on the same conditions as others.<sup>10</sup>

### *Nammaláhpán*

Katarina Pirak Sikku was the first Sami artist presented by Bildmuseet during the year of Capital of Culture in Umeå 2014. The title of the exhibition, *Nammaláhpán*, is a Sami word and means a reindeer that has lost its name.<sup>11</sup> The title also refers to the anonymous persons in the anthropometric lists and photographs in the archives of the State Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala.

The entrance to the exhibition began with a map of the travels Katarina Pirak Sikku had made in her research to the archives in Uppsala and the places that the racial biologists had visited during their expeditions to the north of Sweden.

In the artwork *Badjelántta luottat (Impressions from the Land Above)* Katarina Pirak Sikku has drawn landscapes from archival photographs and also taken recent colour photographs of the mountains, while walking in the footsteps of the racial biologists. The majestic mountains were a great contrast to the black and white photographs in the archives.

Her large landscape drawings, like for example *Borga (Storm Warning in the March Mountains)* and *Dálveluonddu ivdnevuohhta (The Colourfulness of Winter Nature)*, have a lyrical tone but also convey feelings of threat and danger. Katarina Pirak Sikku finds the landscape difficult to depict because it evokes contradictory feelings. It is beautiful but at the same time it has a history of dark memories.<sup>12</sup>

Katarina Pirak Sikku, *Guorosvuoda ája (The Well of Emptiness)*, 2014. Thanks to the Artist and Bildmuseet.  
Photo: Polly Yassin.



*Guorosvuoda ája (The Well of Emptiness)* is an installation in a room of its own. There is a monumental landscape drawing and a form of a circle filled with broken glass, which has been lowered into the floor. With the installation Katarina Pirak Sikku wants to get away from the romantic view of nature and depict the

<sup>8</sup> Kuratorisk Aktion (2006), Act 4: Finnish Sápmi.

<sup>9</sup> Kuratorisk Aktion (2006), booklet, p. 21

<sup>10</sup> Kuratorisk Aktion (2006), Act 4: Finnish Sápmi.

<sup>11</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 3

<sup>12</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 6

lurking dangers.<sup>13</sup> In wintertime when she goes for a walk the ice cracks under her feet and breaks into pieces. With her drawings and the broken glass Katarina Pirak Sikku wants to convey the feelings racial biology evokes in her. It is like walking on thin ice – for how do you deal with the material in the archives?

There are also two portraits in the exhibition: a colour photograph of Elsa Teilus (1921-2013) near a lake and a black and white photograph copied from the archives in Uppsala. When Elsa saw the picture she recognized the woman in the photograph. It was her aunt Anna. Katarina Pirak Sikku has made a frame with tin embroidery for the photograph because she wanted to bring Aunt Anna back home from the archives.<sup>14</sup> When Elsa recognized her aunt she remembered the measurements she had been subjected to as a child in school and the photographs that were taken: “It was cold, we were freezing”.<sup>15</sup>

The photographs of naked Sami people were the most difficult material to handle in the archives. Katarina Pirak Sikku put herself into the same positions that people had been photographed and then drew the outlines of herself. The pictures are called *Suoláduvvon álásvuohta* (*Stolen nakedness*).

*Nammaláhpahiid nammalistu* (*The List without Names*) is the last artwork in the exhibition. The list is based on a book by Sten Wahnlund called *The Anthropometry of the Swedish Lapps* from 1941. Instead of numbers, Katarina Pirak Sikku has given back the names of the anonymous persons in the lists, since they have a family history and relatives living today.<sup>16</sup>

## **Liselotte Wajstedt**

Liselotte Wajstedt was born in 1973 and lives in Kiruna in the north of Sweden. She is both an artist and a filmmaker. Liselotte Wajstedt has studied painting and fine arts. She has also a bachelor degree in Expression in Convergent Media from the University of Gotland (2010) and has studied video art for one year at The Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm.

Her first documentary film, *Sámi nieida jojk* (*Sami daughter yoik*), is a road movie that takes place in Sápmi (Samiland). Liselotte Wajstedt packs her things in a suitcase and goes to Kiruna and Kautokeino to look for her Sami roots. She visits music festivals, places of sacrifice, takes part in a yoik course (traditional Sami singing) and a language course in Sami. Liselotte Wajstedt’s aunt also sews a kolt (the traditional Sami costume) for her.

In the film, Liselotte Wajstedt says that she wants to take back the Sami culture since she neither learnt about it in school nor at home. When her aunt wonders why she wants to wear a kolt, Liselotte Wajstedt says that it looks nice, but then she thinks aloud: “I want to wear a kolt, because it makes me feel more like a Sami – and I really want that.”<sup>17</sup>

*Sámi nieida jojk* (*Sami daughter yoik*) is a film about identity, about belonging and being an outsider at the same time. The film has a circular composition. It starts with Liselotte Wajstedt catching the train from Stockholm (the capital of Sweden) and ends with her mother waving to her when she leaves Kiruna. The film is described as a yoik without a song since it

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<sup>13</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (interview), Bildmuseet (2014).

<sup>16</sup> Pirak Sikku, Katarina, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 8

<sup>17</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, *Sámi nieida jojk* (2007). Link to trailer: <https://vimeo.com/6190004> (2:55 min.)

is about a yearning for something. It has been screened at several film festivals, for example Tromsö in Norway, Toronto in Canada and in Japan.

The same year as the documentary film was completed Liselotte Wajstedt worked on three short films: *A Sámi in the City*, *The City Sámi in the Woods* and *The Sámi and Her Body*. In the first film, Liselotte Wajstedt is trying her Sami vocabulary in Stockholm City. She puts Post-it notes with Sami words on clothes and shop-windows. But what are the words for escalator and underground in Sami? Liselotte Wajstedt calls to ask her relatives, but discovers that there are not enough Sami words for the city: “You sort of have to make up the words by yourself.”<sup>18</sup>

But most of Liselotte Wajstedt’s films take place in Kiruna or near the mountains in the north of Sweden. Her second documentary film is about the transition of the town of Kiruna. It was built in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a modern town when the mining company LKAB was established there. But the mining of iron ore has caused cracks and big holes in the ground, so the centre of the town has to be moved and new housing estates have to be built.

The original idea was to document the moving of the town centre, but it took too long before they got started so Liselotte Wajstedt decided to try and recall her childhood memories instead. But what do you remember? And what happens to your memories when the places you grew up in disappear? Liselotte Wajstedt is filming empty apartments and cracks in the façade, the school, the church, the library, the People’s Palace and the sports centre. She interviews family members, classmates, politicians in the community and people in general in town.<sup>19</sup> Interviews are mixed with old photographs, notes from her diary and animations in clay.

The film begins as a fairy tale with excursions in outer space mixed with memories and documentary photographs. Liselotte Wajstedt searches who she once was and finally finds the answer in herself. The documentary film, *Kiruna - Rymdvägen (Kiruna – Space Road)*, has been screened at film festivals in Gothenburg in Sweden, Lübeck in Germany and Tromsö in Norway.

### ***The Lost One***

For the exhibition at Bildmuseet in 2014, Liselotte Wajstedt worked on a personal story about her grandmother. It resulted in an installation with a short film, a sound track with a narrative and a kolt (the traditional Sami costume). There was also a photograph by Lisa Kejonen and a piece of jewellery designed by Ella Máret Valkeapää.<sup>20</sup>

It started with a lost glove on the underground that her aunt had knitted for her and the artist realized that she was the only one who could recreate the pattern from the village of Karesuando. Liselotte Wajstedt started to interview her aunt, but soon understood that the story was also about her mother and grandmother and the female heritage in the family.

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<sup>18</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, *A Sámi in the City* (2007). Link to short film: <https://vimeo.com/7548572> (8:02 min.)

<sup>19</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, *Kiruna – Rymdvägen (Kiruna - Space Road)* (2013). Link to trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91rIXj9v5QI> (1:49 min.)

<sup>20</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, (exhibition brochure), Bildmuseet (2014), p. 2

Liselotte Wajstedt had been given the photo album of her grandmother. On the first page, there was a picture of herself as a small child and on the last page, the announcement of the death of her grandmother's sister. And in between the pages, "the rest of her life".<sup>21</sup>

Liselotte Wajstedt, *The Lost One* (installation), 2014. Thanks to the Artist and Bildmuseet. Photo: Polly Yassin.



In the film, *The Lost One*, Liselotte Wajstedt sews on a white kolt to the memory of her grandmother. There are printed photographs on the kolt of her grandmother, children and grandchildren. The camera changes position between photographs of Liselotte Wajstedt's grandmother in the kitchen, by the stove and in the lavvu (cot), and close ups of Liselotte's face leaning against a birch trunk. The film starts with Liselotte Wajstedt walking in the woods with the hem of the kolt, and ends with

her putting on the kolt to images of the autumn landscape.<sup>22</sup>

Liselotte Wajstedt wrote the story first and then asked Hanna Nutti to compose the lyrics and music. It is a family story about love, loss and regrets. Liselotte Wajstedt's grandmother was married to a man when she was young, but was in love with another man who married her sister. When her sister dies, Liselotte's grandmother leaves her husband and children and decides to go and live with the love of her youth.

The short film begins with a yoik (the traditional Sami singing) and then the lyrics and music of Hanna Nutti follow. It is a bittersweet melody and makes the film a collective artwork together with Liselotte Wajstedt's dreamy images. The refrain of Hanna Nutti also emphasizes Liselotte's statement in the sound track to the narrative: "I have to tell the story about my grandmother because it is the story of myself."<sup>23</sup>

*The Lost One* is Liselotte Wajstedt's tribute to her grandmother, who does not live any longer. Liselotte wonders about her grandmother's choice of life and how it has affected her mother, her aunt and herself. It is a personal story where Liselotte Wajstedt tries to find an answer to the question of where she comes from.

## Carola Grahn

Carola Grahn was born in 1982 in Jokkmokk, but lives in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. In 2007 she attended a two year long course in fashion photography at the School of Photography in Gamleby in the South of Sweden. In 2009 she was accepted as a student at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and in 2013 she finished her master's degree.

As an art student she worked on different projects on the theme of female photographer and male model. Together with a friend she started a project called *Young men told to look sexy*, a sort of equivalence to the looks of young girls in the fashion world. They photographed young and nude male models, but there was no exhibition.

<sup>21</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, (interview), Bildmuseet (2014)

<sup>22</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, *The Lost One*, (2014). Link to short film: <https://vimeo.com/107564306> (6:34 min.)

<sup>23</sup> Wajstedt, Liselotte, *The Lost One*, (2014). Sound track of narrative (16:25 min.)

In her bachelor degree exhibition, *Överenskommelsen & Redogörelsen (The Agreement & The Statement)* from 2011, Carola Grahn continued on the same theme, but now with older men and herself, a young woman, as a photographer. In one of the meeting rooms at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, among the portraits from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, she photographed men in suits and white shirts, but with their pants down.<sup>24</sup> Carola Grahn wanted to examine the roles and the dynamics between the female photographer and the male model. She thinks male fashion photographers are maintaining a voyeuristic tradition and do not take responsibility in their work.

Carola Grahn's master's degree exhibition from 2013 included a pencil with a point of steel, a novel, *Lo & professorn (Lo & the Professor)*, and photographs of crying men.<sup>25</sup> Carola Grahn wanted to investigate men and power in the proximity. In the fictitious novel she takes a nude photograph of her professor. After the photography session the project becomes depraved and turns into a fight about power. In the novel, the art student Lo has to change professors to be able to finish her studies. To take charge of the main character in the novel, the professor, was a part of the investigation.

In the art journal, *Konstnären (The Artist)*, Fia-Stina Sandlund, who is an artist too, says that Carola Grahn is using "fiction as a weapon" in her art. With fiction you create an uncertainty about what is true and what is false and therefore you give yourself a position of power.<sup>26</sup>

In 2014 Carola Grahn participated in the exhibition *The Photographer – A Social History of Photography* at Gallery Jinsun in Seoul, South Korea. There she showed photographs of crying men. In the exhibition catalogue, the film researcher Annika Wik writes:

"Carola Grahn is also challenging conventional concepts. Her crying men came from an exploration of the gender power structure that traditionally has had a significant impact on the history of photography. In Grahn's images, men risk dropping their surface or lose face. Earlier, Grahn has pointed her camera at men who literally have their pants down. Here, she has taken on men who are weeping. Exposed and revealed, the men are captured in vulnerability. She becomes a witness with her camera, and maybe even guilty."<sup>27</sup>

After Carola Grahn had finished the novel she put an end to the projects of men and power.

### *A Cry from the Expanses*

For the exhibition, *Vidderna ropa (A Cry from the Expanses)*, at Bildmuseet in 2014 Carola Grahn made a site-specific sound installation with a dying pine tree. It was placed on the terrace of the museum building with a view of the River of Umeå in the background. From the speakers in the pine tree you could hear a melancholy yoik (the traditional Sami singing), a reindeer herd set in motion and barking dogs.<sup>28</sup>

Carola Grahn, *Vidderna ropa (A Cry from the Expanses)*, 2014. Thanks to the Artist and Bildmuseet.

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<sup>24</sup> Grahn, Carola, <http://www.carolagrahn.se/>

<sup>25</sup> The Royal Institute of Art, <http://www.kkh.se/index.php/sv/utstaellningar/arkiv/galler-mejan-arkiv/309-galeri-mejan-examensutsaellningar-2012-13/1941-carola-grahn>

<sup>26</sup> Therén, Ida. "Fia-Stina Sandlund" [interview], *Konstnären*, 2014:4, p. 17. Link to article in full text (in Swedish): <http://www.kro.se/node/230>

<sup>27</sup> Grahn, Carola, <http://www.carolagrahn.se>

<sup>28</sup> Bildmuseet, Carola Grahn, <http://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/sv/utstaelling/carola-grahn/12053>

Photo: Polly Yassin.



The art work represents nature as a collective memory and the idea that nature cries out the stories that have been silenced. Carola Grahn found inspiration to the art work from a quote in the Bible: "I tell you that if these were silent, the stones would cry out."<sup>29</sup> In an interview in the local paper, *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, she says: "It is an idea I have had for a long time – I wanted to try and create the moment when the vast expanses start crying out [their truths]."<sup>30</sup>

The site-specific sound installation marks a Sami presence in the landscape but Carola Grahn also wanted to create a place for contemplation. Carola Grahn thinks that Sami history is about sorrow and tragedies to a large extent and she thinks it is a typical "minority thing" to relate to tragic stories.<sup>31</sup>

In May 2015 Carola Grahn was a guest artist at the gallery Small Projects in Tromsø in Norway. It was an art project and exhibition she called *The Horizon of Me(aning)*. The idea was to build sculptures while stacking wood and having a conversation with participants about difficult subjects. To work together is a way of coping with difficulties and reality.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

How do you articulate your identity in a culture that has lost a great part of its lifestyle, religion, language and traditional knowledge? Is there not a risk of losing your cultural identity as well? The Sami culture is and has been threatened in several ways. How do you deal with that as a Sami and as an artist?

The Sami identity is articulated by the artists in an individual or collective way. All three of them have been using symbols for Sami culture, for example the yoik, the kolt, the reindeer and the Sami language(s), but in different ways.

Liselotte Wajstedt has the most personal approach of the artists. She asks questions about who she is and where she comes from and she uses herself to a large degree in her art works. She articulates Sami culture through the yoik, the kolt and the Sami language in her experiences of homelessness, loss of language and search for an identity. In the film and installation *The Lost One*, she examines herself, her relatives and her family history. But her films are often also about dreams and memories.

Katarina Pirak Sikku takes a clear political stand in her art works. She searches the archives and investigates the Sami history in her exhibition *Nammaláhpán*. She discusses the human rights and the politics conducted to the Sami through history. She uses the reindeer, Sami crafts and languages to articulate a Sami identity, but also draws landscapes to express feelings of pain and sorrow.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 19:40. (For different translations, please see: <http://sv.bibelsite.com/multi/luke/19-40.htm>)

<sup>30</sup> Meidell, Sara, "Historien ropar tillbaka" [review], *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, 23 May, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Böhlin, Lars, "Bortglömda historier tar konstnärlig form" [review], *Västerbottens-Folkblad*, 24 May, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Small Projects, Carola Grahn, <http://smallprojects.no/carola.html>



Carola Grahn's exhibition *A Cry from the Expanses* is a poetical sound installation with political implications. Now it is time nature calls back the stories that have been silenced! She uses a dying pine tree, a yoik, a reindeer herd and barking dogs to articulate Sami culture. But she also explores the gender power structures in her art works.

To express experiences and feelings of loss is a way to decolonization and reconciliation. If the Sami rehabilitate their collective history and identity they can also strengthen their self-image and bring about political change.

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