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Shamans, Star Charts, and Ecological Lore: Towards Nature-centric Thinking

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A figure wearing a white garment threaded with colourful beads and mystical embroidery slowly treads a fern-lined path. The figure carries a small creature that looks half-human, half-animal – somewhat wolf-like. It lies motionless in the figure's arms, its flesh pink and raw, as if it had been skinned. The surrounding primeval forest is silent. *When I Go Out I Bleed Magic* (2015) is a video by Norwegian artist Ingrid Torvund (b. 1985) fusing sci-fi and fictive mythology. The artist's imagined world is interwoven with elements of pre-Christian religious ritual and the folkloric practices of western Telemark, the location of the film. Torvund is interested in how local pagan traditions have, over the centuries, become intermixed with Christian heritage in the region where her parents grew up.¹

This article reflects on how people feel an increasing urge to connect with the past, to unite ancient customs and rituals with today's digitised existence, and how this has spurred newfound global interest in local heritage, age-old traditions, and alternative belief systems. For instance in northern Europe, established notions about nationalism and the supposed hegemony of mainstream culture are being challenged through the inclusion of local folkloric elements in music, visual art, literature and handicrafts. Many practitioners are also taking a special interest in indigenous peoples and cultures.² Current discourse additionally

- ¹ Torvund has said that one of her main sources of inspiration is an ancient book of spells and enchantments, *Norske Hexeformulärer og magiske opskrifter*. Edward Picot, 'Blood and Magic: An Interview with Ingrid Torvund,' *Furtherfield*, 2015. <http://archive.furtherfield.org/features/interviews/blood-and-magic-interview-ingrid-torvund> (accessed 27 November 2018).
- ² A good example is *ethnofuturism*, an aesthetic and philosophical movement that celebrates the unique character of a marginal cultural or language group, enriching its archaic folklore – such as ancient legends and incantations – with elements of world culture and experimental art and technology. Ethnofuturism is principally found in the Baltic countries and Russia, particularly among Uralic groups. The movement has its roots in Estonia. Ville Ropponen, 'Tulevaisuus on merkitty marginaaliin', *Kulttuurivihkot*, 31. vk, nro. 2–3/2003, 48–51. There is also newfound interest in the cultural heritage of the Sámi, the only indigenous group surviving in the European Union. The Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) honoured the 100th Sámi Jubilee and dedicated its 2017 programme to 'A year of Indigenous art and thought' (Tråante 2017). Also the Lithuanian Nida Art Colony's *Inter-PAGAN* research network for Baltic and Nordic cultural organisations dedicated its summer symposium 'Inter-Format Symposium on Rites and Terrabytes' (20–24 June 2018) to discussing how artists examine and harness local cultural heritage, traditions and belief systems in their art.

emphasises human dependence on the wellbeing of nature, prompted by a rising concern about the threat of climate change.

Rituals and shaman figures

Torvund draws inspiration from the contradictory worlds of ancient spells and enchantments, Christianity, and nature-centric paganism. She finds it significant and intriguing that archaic beliefs are often rooted in the tangible, natural world; she also sees ancient customs and practices as possessing a degree of creative originality that is often unsurpassed by mainstream myth and fable. The figures in her videos practise rituals and ceremonies using props such as glass beads, masks, creative costumes, blood and crystal balls. The artist's fascination with ceremonies and ritualistic paraphernalia dates back to her childhood, when she and her family regularly attended church. In Torvund's art, the church is substituted by the forest, which assumes the role of a temple for various shamanistic figures and mythical creatures to perform sacred rituals and sacrificial rites in locations such as imaginative tents and forbidding caves. The artist has noted that the worship of objects is an inherent part of today's materialistic culture, driving us to invent meaning for our lives through possessions and technical gadgets.³

The shaman is a figure that is recognised in various cultures throughout the world. There are references to shamanistic heritage in ancient Finnish poetry; even the Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala*, includes descriptions of shamans and their travels.⁴ The shaman is traditionally a mediator who walks between worlds – a message-bringer who travels back and forth between the spirit world and physical reality.⁵ *Shaman Drag* (2014), by Paavo Halonen

(b. 1974), depicts a mysterious shamanistic figure wearing a crown of antlers. The shaman rides in an old wooden sleigh wearing a cape-like garment made of long strips of riotously coloured Marimekko fabrics, while the other props in the installation are simple farming implements. The sleigh is pulled by a pair of swans shaped like a plough, their plumage replaced by patterned fabric. The artist describes the swans as *psychopomps*, creatures that safely escort deceased souls from Earth to the afterlife.⁶ Perhaps Halonen's shaman is similarly embarking on a journey to the spirit world. The work challenges us to consider whether our ancient cultural heritage has any genuine relevance to our contemporary reality.⁷

Paavo Halonen,
Shaman Drag, 2014,
 mixed media: sleigh, antlers,
 textile shreds, swan herald,
 260cm x 80cm x 6cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Museum of Contemporary Art
 Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Pirje Mykkänen



3 Marie Laland Ekeli, 'Protection against an evil friend', *Blazer Fanzine*, 2018. <https://blazerfanzine.no/2018/01/15/blazer-anbefaler-protection-against-an-evil-friend-av-ingrid-torvund/> (accessed 27 November 2018).

4 See e.g. Risto Pulkkinen, *Suomalainen kansanusko: Samaaneista saunatonnttuihin*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2014, 248–49, 252–53.

5 Pulkkinen, *Suomalainen kansanusko: Samaaneista saunatonnttuihin*, 235–37.

6 Paavo Halonen's email to Paula Korte, 6 November 2018.

7 Paavo Halonen: *Sculptures and assemblages*, press release, Lusto, 27 April 2018 – 6 January 2019.

Earth-saving tradition

Interest in shamanism, earth religions, and indigenous cultures is growing in the Western world. This trend is believed to be associated with contemporary culture having lost its connection with the living Earth.⁸ In indigenous cultures, people are seen as being interwoven in the fabric of nature, integrally embedded in the ecosystem; nature is therefore cherished self-evidently as a thing of value. While the rapacious economic activity of the materialistic fossil age has relegated nature to the status of an exploitable resource, indigenous cultures have never made a clear-cut distinction between nature and culture – the two are seen as being inherently reciprocal.⁹ Growing discontent with neoliberal globalisation and concern about the planet's future are prompting many people to re-evaluate their place in nature and their relationship with non-human species, as well as their own spirituality. While indigenous livelihoods and cultures are facing endangerment due to industrialisation, social change, and environmental problems, there is a great deal that mainstream Western culture could learn from the nature philosophy and sustainability practices of indigenous peoples, for example in the fight against climate change.

The traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous peoples could help us to learn new practices and embrace a more inclusive critical consciousness and heightened awareness of human impacts on the environment and non-human agencies.¹⁰ Many recent artist-led projects have applied traditional indigenous wisdom in solving contemporary challenges such as the impact of the Anthropocene and climate change on the environment and wildlife, but also in addressing issues of inequality between species and genders. Their basic approach is a return to nature-centric thinking. Northern nature and indigenous culture are fused in the work of Utsjoki and Numminen-based Sámi artist Outi Pieski (b. 1973), who finds inspiration in the close bond with the land that is integral to Sámi culture. The Sámi relationship with nature is a tangible, practical, locally rooted one; it has evolved gradually through close daily contact over a long period of time, fostering a special understanding of local conditions, wildlife, vegetation, and the climate.¹¹

The political thrust of Pieski's art is disguised beneath a colourful cloak of multifaceted visuality. The same can be said of Sámi photographer and video artist Marja Helander (b. 1965). Pieski borrows directly from Sámi visual heritage, particularly from traditional handicrafts, or *duodji*,¹² while simultaneously raising political issues related to minority rights. Helander's photographs and videos meanwhile reflect on her dual identity crossing Finnish and Sámi culture, but more recently she has also begun focusing on the bleak postcolonial

8 See e.g. Jim Robbins, 'Native Knowledge: What Ecologists Are Learning from Indigenous People', *Yale Environment* 360, 2018, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/native-knowledge-what-ecologists-are-learning-from-indigenous-people> (accessed 1 December 2018).

9 Heikki Pesonen, 'Näkökulmia ihmisen ja luonnon suhteeseen eri uskontoperinteissä', Faculty of Theology, Study of Religions course materials, University of Helsinki, 2001, http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/kurssit/usk/04_artikkeli2.html (accessed 1 December 2018).

10 Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is a term describing indigenous forms of knowledge about nature and culture handed down from generation to generation either as oral lore or written text. Over the past few years this traditional knowledge has been combined with scientific findings in the research and protection of Arctic peoples and nature. See e.g. Elina Helander-Renvall and Inkeri Markkula, 'Luonnon monimuotoisuus ja saamelaiset: Biologista monimuotoisuutta koskevan artikla 8(j):n toimeenpanoa tukeva selvitys Suomen Saamelaisalueella', *Suomen ympäristö*, 12/2011, Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment, 2011, 10–12.

11 For more on this topic, see e.g. the *Viidon Sieiddit* art/research project, which aspires to define the 21st century Sámi relationship with nature through the lens of Sámi contemporary art and sociological studies, <http://viidonsieiddit.fi> (accessed 2 December 2018).

12 Gunvor Guttorm, 'The Power of Natural Materials and Environments in Contemporary Duodji', in Svein Aamold, Elin Haugdal & Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen (eds.), *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2017, 163–77.



Marja Helander, installation view of *Eatnanvuloš lottit / Birds in the Earth*, 2017, still from video, duration 10min 40s, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

landscapes of Sápmi (the territory inhabited by the Sámi), particularly the scars left by the global mining industry.¹³

Pieski's installations combine the colours, forms and techniques of traditional Sámi handicrafts with various natural materials. *Our Land, Our Running Colours* (2015) paints the silhouette of northern fells with colourful threads evoking the silk tassels of traditional Sámi dress, or *gákti*. Suspended from debarked rowan branches, the threads create an ethereal, three-dimensional landscape, while literally tying it to a specific cultural context. Conflicts between modern society and the traditional Sámi way of life are meanwhile highlighted by Helander in her experimental dance film *Eatnanvuloš lottit (Birds in the Earth)*, 2017.¹⁴ The leading roles in this visually stunning and politically incisive film are performed by two young Sámi dance students, Birit and Katja Haarla. Through the gestures of classical ballet, Helander's film questions who is rightfully entitled to the lands and waters of Sápmi.¹⁵

Accessing more-than-human knowledge

Spirituality and more-than-human knowledge have emerged as popular themes in recent times, also in the visual arts. UK artist Hestia Peppe draws attention to how global threats such as climate change, wars and hostilities are making people feel they are losing their grip on their truth and agency. Many are therefore exploring alternative avenues to regain

13 Marja Helander, Artist's statement, <http://www.marjahelander.com/statement> (accessed 1 December 2018).

14 Marja Helander's video *Eatnanvuloš lottit / Birds in the Earth* (2017) is summarised on the website of the AV-arkki Centre for Finnish Media Art, <http://www.av-arkki.fi/teokset/eatnanvulo-lottit-maan-sisalla-linnut> (accessed 1 December 2018).

15 Xia Torikka, 'Saamelastaiteilijan uusi lyhytelokuva ottaa kantaa Saamenmaan omistussuhteisiin', YLE Sápmi, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9761724> (accessed 1 December 2018).

a sense of balance, stability, and power over their lives and environment.¹⁶ The call for greater mindfulness of the environment and other organisms sharing this planet comes with the reminder that all existence on Earth is always fundamentally enmeshed, entangled and overlaid.¹⁷

Neospiritualism is an umbrella term describing the practice of seeking stimulation and inspiration from alternative faiths, rituals and belief systems. The neospiritual movement advocates the prerogative of everyone to construct their own faith by adopting, rejecting and reshaping elements and fragments of existing religions and belief systems. The movement has its roots in the writings of the spiritualist and occult author Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), the mystic G.I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949) and the psychologist C. G. Jung (1885–1961),¹⁸ whose ideas have had an enduring influence on the work of many artists, starting with Symbolist painters around the turn of the 20th century and their fascination with occultism, theosophy, anthroposophy, esotericism and mysticism. Religious studies expert Christopher Partridge describes this new religio-culture milieu using the term ‘occulture’, which abandons institutionalised religion in favour of alternative modes of spirituality.¹⁹

The paintings of Muriel Kuoppala (b. 1981) are inspired by mandalas, the circular symbols found in Hinduism and Buddhism that are linked to Jung’s analytical psychology. Originally used in sacred rituals and as a focusing aid in meditation, the mandala underpins the visual vocabulary of Kuoppala’s paintings, which occupy a territory somewhere between the abstract and the geometrical. Her technique is also mandala-like; it is a slow, meditative exercise focusing on the exploration of pigments and water as they interact on the canvas. Her painting *Gate* (2012) consists of three rectangles that pull our gaze into a large black gateway, toward a circle in the middle of the canvas. Within a Jungian frame of interpretation, this can be viewed as a reference to the Self, the *ego*, the central point within the psyche to which everything else is related.²⁰ The forms and symbols appearing in Kuoppala’s paintings – crystals, mandalas and myriad swirls of colour – often allude to the passage of time



Muriel Kuoppala,
Gate, 2012,
oil and ink on canvas,
160cm x 160cm
Seppo Fränti Collection,
Finnish National Gallery /
Museum of Contemporary Art
Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Kirsi Halkola

- 16 Tom Jeffreys, ‘The Return of the Witch in Contemporary Culture’, *Frieze*, November 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/return-witch-contemporary-culture> (accessed 1 December 2018). The curator Lars Bang Larsen has noted how many artists have recently turned towards ‘the invisible’ and the occult in their efforts to ‘transcend spectacle’ and discover gateways to the past amid the grand narratives of modernism and the contemporary world. Bang Larsen, ‘The Other Side’, *Frieze*, Issue 6, April 2007, <https://frieze.com/article/other-side> (accessed 5 December 2018). In the introduction to *Imaging the Spiritual Quest: Explorations in Art, Religion and Spirituality*, artist Grant White similarly describes how religion and spirituality continue to motivate artistic production and the quest to feel and experience something beyond the technocratic, consumerist plane of contemporary existence. Grant White, ‘Introduction’, in Frank Brummel & Grant White (eds.), *Imaging the Spiritual Quest: Explorations in Art, Religion and Spirituality*. Writings from the Academy of Fine Arts 06. Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts, 2018, 13–17.
- 17 See e.g. Gary Zhexi Zhang, ‘Other Minds’, *Frieze*, July 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/other-minds> (accessed 3 December 2018).
- 18 Terhi Utriainen & Tommy Ramstedt, ‘Uushenkisyys’, in Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola, Riitta Latvio & Jussi Sohlberg (eds.), *Monien uskontojen ja katsomusten Suomi*. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen verkkojulkaisu 48. Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2017, 213–23.
- 19 Partridge describes *occulture* as including ‘those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices’. Niina Kokkinen, ‘Okkulttuuri-käsitteen mahdollisuudet ja edellytykset modernin taiteen uskonnollisuuden tutkimuksessa’, *TAHITI – Taidehistoria tieteenä*, 03/2012, <http://tahiti.fi/03-2012/tieteelliset-artikkelit/okkulttuuri-kasitteen-mahdollisuudet-ja-edellytykset-modernin-taiteen-uskonnollisuuden-tutkimuksessa/> (accessed 2 December 2018).
- 20 See e.g. Daryl Sharp, *Jung Lexicon. A Primer of Terms and Concepts*, 1991, <https://www.innercitybooks.net/pdf/books/junglexicon.pdf> (accessed 3 December 2018).



Hannaleena Heiska, *Something There Is*, 2016,
installation: charcoal on plywood
Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

and the process of change. Her paintings can be seen as offering ‘perspectives on different worlds and interdimensional spaces’.²¹

Something There Is (2016) by Hannaleena Heiska (b. 1973) is an installation featuring a giant, dark-hued charcoal drawing that fills the space like a theatrical backdrop. The piece is stylistically inspired by the 17th-century uranometria star charts depicting constellations in the night sky, often in the form of assorted creatures, both real and imaginary.²² Various symbols are concealed in the darkness of Heiska’s star charts, such as eyes, planets and birds, which are linked in her imagination to questions that have puzzled humanity since time immemorial: the meaning of life, the finite duration of our life on Earth, and the possible existence of parallel realities. Heiska often ponders the idea of the *multiverse*, a hypothetical group of multiple universes that includes the physical reality we occupy and the laws governing it, but also other parallel realities. Her contemplations address the question of whether an afterlife might await us in a parallel dimension.²³

Art and artists can be our guides in the quest for sustainable interspecies coexistence in the post-fossil age. By sharing wisdom and examples of folk tradition, indigenous nature philosophy and alternative domains of spiritual and non-human knowledge, artists can propose new ways of thinking and behaving that could help us regain a sense of control over our lives and to establish a coexistence of reciprocal wellbeing with the planet. Rituals, shamans, traditional lore, and new spirituality can challenge entrenched modes of thought; by opening doors to alternative knowledge and new ways of thought that emanate from awareness of more-than-human agencies, we can achieve a new level of understanding between species, cultures, and universes.

21 Lars Bang Larsen, ‘Muriel Lässer – About the work’, <http://murielkuoppala.net/new-page-1/> (accessed 3 December 2018).

22 Tiina Penttilä, ‘Hannaleena Heiska – Something There Is’, 2016, http://www.hannaleenaheiska.com/texts/in_search_of_the_present_emma_museum/ (accessed 2 December 2018).

23 Hannaleena Heiska, *Shadows and Stardust*, Helsinki Contemporary, 7–30 August 2015, <https://helsinkicontemporary.com/exhibition/shadows-and-stardust> (accessed 2 December 2018).