

Folding Forced Utopias, for you Joar Nango



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NATIVE**
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Architectural Potential and Indigeneity: A conversation between Joar Nango and Rebecca Lemire

Rebecca Lemire

Joar Nango works across the fields of art and architecture, as part of a practice which explores the self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and improvisational competence that is central to the Sámi way of living and creating on the land. Through this work, he is continually challenging formal representations of 'Sáminess' and western-based definitions of Indigeneity in relation to the design process. On the occasion of his exhibition at Gallery 44, Joar Nango and Rebecca Lemire sat down to speak about his work around Indigenous architecture, symbolism versus pragmatism, and how he would design a space based on Sámi self-governance.

Joar Nango: I recently read an article about parliament buildings and the architecture of assemblies, and how these designs are connected to our ways of thinking about democracy. The article laid out five parliamentary design categories, and the graphics were very well done so you could easily spot the differences between countries such as Britain, Germany, Norway, etc. Looking at these categories, it made me think about Indigenous architecture as a way of rethinking architecture, or even re-thinking democracy and by extension, the world we have structured around us. There is such a huge potential within Indigenous architecture to reimagine these structures, because it is connected to a non-industrial way of living in and on the land.

The Sámi parliament, for example, is a semi circle; a half *lavvu* building. It's interesting because it implies that we have a democracy, which we don't. We have a parliamentary system but it's completely subservient to the Norwegian system. There are no autonomous decisions being made on behalf of the Sámi people there. So in one way, it has a representational quality to it, but really it's a way of distracting us to make us believe that we are succeeding more than we are. It makes me think about creating a new parliament building where we could really rethink our political systems. For example, The Sámi are a people who live across four nation states. How great would it be if we created a political system that included the people on all sides of the borders? And if you created a parliament around that constellation. This parliament could be moveable, and could be made up of four huge trailer trucks that would drive around. Each truck could park side by side and pull this huge tent structure between them. The back doors would open up, creating this gigantic caravan tent; a space for negotiation. And based on that concept, the way you negotiate would change, would develop. There's a sense of hierarchy in architecture that can become very static, and this would serve to counter that issue.

Rebecca Lemire: It makes me think about what would happen if you took away the vast geographical distance that often exists between a politician and his/her constituents in Canada. What if these politicians were required to be

physically in communities when they made decisions about them, instead of behind the doors of these privileged chambers in Ottawa?

Are you also talking about the idea of starting with architecture, and having the political system flow from there? I'm not sure if that is entirely what you meant, but I think it might be fruitful to think about.

JN: That's also an interesting concept, but yes, to at least let them follow each other. I have been thinking about this alternative parliament idea a lot lately. It would be great to think about architecture not as resistance, not in opposition to anything, but still as something based on structures of power and diplomacy. In the past, our decision-making was always done through smaller family units coming together to negotiate on a very local, regional scale. The current idea of a parliamentary system is a very large-scale way of structuring societies. I think that it would be a really great contribution to the world if we were allowed to keep our old ways of making decisions and created our own societies and parliaments surrounding our way of living. To this effect, architecture can be very productive in terms of considering differences, agreements and borders; all these strange categories that we put on ourselves as human beings on this planet.

RL: The idea of considering the architectural potential of resurging Sámi ways of governing reminds me of the piece you did with your art and architecture collective *FFB* called "Meahccetrošša/Matatu". It was a multi-location travelling show of sorts, for which you had to cross the Norwegian border into Finland.

JN: Yes, that is relevant in that we took ancient routes and lanes of traffic as a starting point for the installation. The border there between Finland and Norway is very new and you can really feel its effects on the communities. For example, part of the border was erected between these twin villages on the same riverbank that had always had a lot of traffic and exchange between them. We thought it would be interesting to look at the interaction between them and so we established an informal 'wilderness tour'- style shuttle to transport people across the border, negotiating and engaging in conversations with people. It's interesting to think about the shuttle as a kind of flexible space. As we were moving between the different spaces on opening day, we had parties and gatherings, and we built various improvised structures in these places. At the gas station we used the plexiglass from the Shell sign and built furniture for the party, and then we made a new sign that said "We don't follow routes, and we don't conform to regulated orders." So it was a text relating to these old, informal routes of travelling within a borderless culture, and, of course, about an anarchist energy, opposing the law, and keeping our traditions alive. There is a saying in the Sámi area, "If you want to be Sámi, you have to break the law." It is not because you have to break the law directly,



Joar Nango, *Ashtray at the entrance of the Sámi parliament that looks like the Sámi parliaments assembly hall*, 2015

but because the things that make you Sámi, the things you do, that were originally your livelihood, like fishing in the river have been made illegal. So it was about trying to open doors in those ways but without being too direct about it, or being too verbal about it. I think that is an important aspect to all my projects, that they are not too framed or conceptualized.

RL: This pressure to be representational and symbolic in art and architecture is something I'd like us to expand upon. How does this pressure limit form? I think this idea of 'symbolic form' is something that is so deeply imbedded in a western way of looking at things. It is so hard for those coming from this perspective to get away from the (ultimately absurd) notion that architecture must take on a specific representational articulation, or an immediately identifiable 'style'.

JN: When you are educated to be an architect you are trained in this language of symbols, and an abstract way of thinking; designing from above, planning, and organizing, these kind of methodologies. For me, working with and learning from Indigenous architecture asks that I am more conscious rather than just accepting these methodologies that I'm taught to use blindly.



Joar Nango, *FFB serving Burgers at a parking lot as part of the Meahččetrossa project*, 2015

In relation to this, have you read the Rasquachismo Manifesto? It is an aspect of Chicano culture, which I learned about through a friend of mine that is about hybrids and mixing vulgarities as a sort of anti-aesthetical way of behaving. It's about mish-mashing, using the knife and fork the wrong way just to create something new. The manifesto states that "Rasquachismo is neither an idea nor a style, but more of an attitude or taste. Taste cannot be codified as a system with a comparative proof." It's a fantastic text. I see a big connection between this Chicano sensibility of hybridization and 'non-taste', and the roll of the trickster in Indigenous mythology as an evasive, shit-disturber of sorts. I also see it as relating to the Indigenuity project I have been working on for years, which I think is really about anti-representation. I discovered, very quickly, when engaging with Indigenous architecture that there is an absurd amount of static symbols, such as the giant *Lavvus*. Indigenuity on the other hand is an attitude, an evasive, pragmatic sort of approach to architecture. It represents an energy, a way of doing and thinking. It is a style that is not recognizable unless you really know the people who created it, and there is also an important humorous, anti-design element to it. That sort of philosophy, that lifestyle, became for me such an obvious alternative to more formal architectural representations. In many ways, it is about the rejection of categories that the outside observer tries to impose on you, and a way of showing resistance through re-appropriating the oppressors' style. Like the idea of 'oh you tell me to wear my shirt like that? I'll wear it inside out just to annoy you'.

Then again, lets look at it from another point of view. In some cases, a recognizable form and self-representation are very important. For example, with the Sámi in Russia, the people there are working in a political context in which they are made invisible by the state. For them having the visibility of a giant *Lavvu* building means everything. How awful would it be if I criticized that? That would make me very insensitive to the political context and the differences between the privileged and the non-privileged. So I think there is always a relative discussion that needs to take place.

1 Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. "Rasquachismo: a Chicano sensibility." In *Chicano aesthetics : Rasquachismo*, 5-8. Exh. cat., Phenix, Aruz. : MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989., 5.

Cover Image

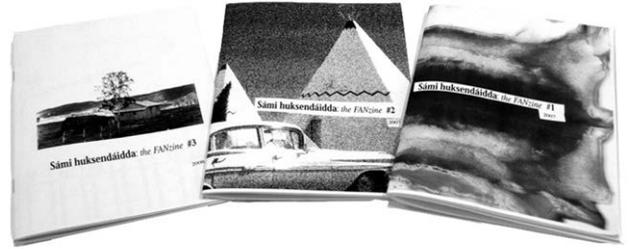
Joar Nango, *Folding Forced Utopias*, 2016

Image Right

Sámi huksendáidda: The Fanzine, Fanzine about Sámi architecture, b/w, A5 print on paper, 2007-2011

Poster Image

Sámi Church Tower, 2016



Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing art form. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Joar Nango is an architect with a degree from NTNU in Norway. He works with place-specific installations and self-made publications which explore the boundary between architecture, design and visual art. Thematically speaking, his work relates to questions of indigenous identity, often through investigating the oppositions and contradictions in contemporary architecture. Recently, he has worked on the theme *The Modern Sámi Space* through, amongst other things, a self-published zine series entitled *Sámi Huksendáidda: the Fanzine*, design project *Sámi Shelters* and the mixtape/clothing project *Land & Language*. He is also a founding member of the architecture collective *FFB*, which works with temporary installations in urban contexts. At the moment he lives and works in Tromsø, Norway. He has done several exhibitions in Canada, at 161 Gallon gallery and Gallery Deluxe Gallery in Halifax (2007 & 08), at Galerie SAW Gallery in Ottawa (2013) and at Western Front (Vancouver) in 2014. Joar's work has also been exhibited internationally in places like Ukraine, Finland, China, Russia, Colombia and Bolivia. Next year he is invited to exhibit at Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel.

Rebecca Lemire is a writer and art historian based in Montreal. Currently, she is studying towards her PhD at Concordia University where her research looks at the intersection of Indigenous design practices and organic modernism in North America. Prior to her doctoral studies she held positions at Emily Carr University of Art & Design, Indigenous Arts at The Banff Centre, the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, and the Design Exchange Museum. She also curates and writes exhibition texts, and has organized shows such as *Probing McLuhan* for the CONTACT Photography Festival and *Myth into Matter: Inuit Sculpture at the University of Toronto Art Centre*. She has received fellowships from both the University of Toronto and Concordia University and in 2013 was awarded the Martin Eli Weil National Prize for her essay on the work of Douglas Cardinal. Most recently, she received support from the Terra Foundation for American Art to conduct research in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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