

# Curatorial Activism and Practices of Listening: Revisiting Kuratorisk Aktion's *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* (2006)

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## Resum

Aquest article examina la pràctica curatorial col·lectiva i col·laborativa de Kuratorisk Aktion, fundat per les historiadores d'art i comissàries Frederikke 'Fred' Hansen i Tone Olaf Nielsen, centrant-se en el seu primer projecte expositiu *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts* (2006). L'exposició va abordar la discriminació sistèmica i els silencis racials en relació amb les minories i els pobles indígenes a la regió nòrdica, destacant l'amnèsia col·lectiva que envolta la història colonial nòrdica. Aquest article examina la metodologia curatorial i considera com les comissàries europees

s'enfrontaven a les asimetries històriques entre Dinamarca i Groenlàndia, així com dins de la seva pròpia pràctica i identitat danesa. L'anàlisi se centra en els esforços del projecte per reunir practicants del Nord i del Sud Global a través d'esdeveniments discursius amb l'objectiu de millorar les estratègies de resistència malgrat les divisions geogràfiques, i crear aliances de solidaritat a partir de diferències comunes, com proposen les teòriques feministes com Chandra T. Mohanty (2003). A través d'aquest exemple històric, l'article contribueix a les discussions en curs sobre les formes creatives de resistència, i les aliances entre les arts i els moviments socials en què les assemblees i les reunions formen estratègies generatives. Aquest estudi de cas posa l'accent en l'escolta com a acció política (Lacey, 2013) i com a part d'un ethos decolonial de la relacionalitat (Vásquez, 2020), per suggerir com l'activisme curatorial pot contrarestar l'extractivisme cognitiu, alhora que reflexiona sobre qüestions de privilegi i autoria en pràctiques col·lectives i col·laboratives.

**Paraules clau:** activisme curatorial; escolta; teoria feminista; solidaritat transnacional; art i política; colonialisme nòrdic.

## Abstract

This article examines the collective and collaborative curatorial practice of Kuratorisk Aktion, founded by art historians and curators Frederikke 'Fred' Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen, focusing on their first exhibition project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts* (2006). The exhibition addressed systemic discrimination and racial silences in relation to minorities and Indigenous people in the Nordic region, highlighting the collective amnesia surrounding Nordic colonial history. This article examines the curatorial methodology and considers how the white curators navigated historical asymmetries between Denmark and Greenland, as well as within their own practice and Danish identity. The analysis focuses on the project's efforts to assemble practitioners from the Global North and the Global South through discursive events seeking to enhance strategies of resistance across geographical divides and create alliances of solidarity across common differences, as proposed by feminist theorists, such as Chandra T.

Mohanty (2003). Through this historical example, the article contributes to ongoing discussions of creative forms of resistance, and alliances between arts and social movements in which assemblies and gatherings form generative strategies. This case study emphasises listening as a political action (Lacey, 2013) and as part of a decolonial ethos of relationality (Vásquez, 2020), to suggest how curatorial activism can counter cognitive extractivism, whilst reflecting on issues of privilege and authorship in collective and collaborative practices.

**Key words:** curatorial activism; listening; feminist theory; transnational solidarity; art and politics; Nordic colonialism.

## Introduction

What does it mean to take curatorial action –or in the words of the curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion– to turn political issues into curatorial practice? (Hansen & Bielsen, 2006b). This article delves into the legacy of Kuratorisk Aktion, consisting of the Danish curators Frederikke ‘Fred’ Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen, and their curatorial methodology developed for their first exhibition *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts* (RNC).<sup>1</sup> This exhibition, the last under the auspices of the Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art (NIFCA) –an umbrella institution funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, which closed in 2006– directed a postcolonial and global perspective, informed by intersectional and queer feminism, at the lack of public discourse concerning colonial history in the Nordic countries. As explained in the press release –which was published in English and seven Nordic languages– the show aimed to investigate the connection between colonialism of the past and the

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: A more in-depth discussion and analysis of *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* (2006) can be found in the author’s PhD thesis *Organising, Exhibiting and Curating (in) Solidarity: ‘Kvindeudstillingen’, 1975, ‘Art contre/against Apartheid’ 1983–1984, and ‘Rethinking Nordic Colonialism’ 2006* (2023), funded by the New Carlsberg Foundation as part of the Art as Forum research centre, University of Copenhagen.

contemporary problems of intolerance, xenophobia, and nationalism in the Nordic region.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition consisted of five so-called acts: each act included an exhibition, a film programme, discursive events and happenings. Act 1 took place in Reykjavik, Act 2 in Nuuk, Act 3 in Thorshavn, Act 4 in Rovaniemi and Act 5 was the launch of a website and DVD that documented the project, which took place in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo and Helsinki simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> Altogether the project involved 56 artists, theorists, politicians, and grassroots activists from all over the world.

As it is beyond the scope of this article to attend to all facets of this extensive exhibition project, I focus specifically on how the exhibition's curatorial methodology and assembling strategies encouraged and formed settings for practises of transnational solidarity through discursive events addressing the relations of coloniality between Denmark and Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat).<sup>4</sup> More specifically, I examine whether the postcolonial approach practiced by Kuratorisk Aktion provided the potential to facilitate the co-production of knowledge within a conversational site of multiplicity and alterity, in addition to illuminating a repressed past. First, I do so, through an analysis of a two-day public hearing debating the question of Greenland's independence from Denmark staged in Nuuk as part of the exhibition's Act 2, in which I consider how an understanding of the active dimension of practices of listening can enhance such transformative and collective processes. Moreover, through my own embodied experience of listening to the recording of the public hearing, I highlight the role and limits of listening practices in solidarity efforts related to difficult heritage and unresolved

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<sup>2</sup> The Nordic region consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and the home ruling countries Greenland (DK), The Faroe Island (DK) and the Islands of Åland (Finland); and Sápmi, the homeland area of the indigenous Sámi extending from Norway, Sweden, inland to the Kola Peninsula in Russia.

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Greenland was under Danish colonial rule from around 1721 until 1953, when Greenland was integrated as a county of Denmark. In 1979 Greenland gained home rule and in 2009, a self-government act expanded Greenland's autonomy, though Denmark still manages foreign policy and defense. Today, the relationship between the two countries is marked by Greenland's increasing pursuit of independence and control over its resources. The exhibition *user guide* (Hansen & Nielsen, 2006a) included a brief overview of the colonial history of each country within the Nordic region, also indicating how the location of each of the five acts spoke to specific colonial trajectories within the region.

colonial histories in the Nordic region. I suggest that the feminist curatorial framework facilitated by Kuratorisk Aktion contributed to the ongoing re-articulation of local decolonial epistemology and imaginaries in novel ways through facilitating –in quite concrete terms– a meeting ground between art and politics. Secondly, I reflect on the predicaments of privilege and the embedded contradictions of the curatorial endeavour. Through contrasting the central strategy of decentering the exhibition project geographically with the centering of the curators in the project and in historiographical contexts, I reflect on the difficulty of transcending the duo authorship of the curators within the value-system and credit-norms of the art world. Finally, I contend with the legacy of this almost two decades old project to reflect on its continued relevance for creative practices of resistance and the generative potential of strategies of assemblies and gatherings in the arts.

### **Curatorial methodology: “We want to turn political issues into curatorial practice”**

Drawing on artist and curator Marion von Osten’s notion of the project exhibition, as implied in the RNC title, Kuratorisk Aktion developed an intersectional and postcapitalist feminist curatorial form of activism to undertake their first collaborative exhibition. According to Osten (2018; 2007) a project exhibition explicitly bridges aesthetic and political concerns, attends to working conditions, focuses on collaborative authorship and is concerned with assembling a forum to engage the public in critical dialogue. Moreover, informed by an increasing awareness of their own white privilege, Kuratorisk Aktion, like von Osten, “found it necessary to supplement Western feminist politics with a global transnational feminism as well as with queer, postcolonial, anti-capitalist, and environmental justice theories” (Dimitrakaki, 2011, 2). Thus, the curatorial strategies developed by Kuratorisk Aktion for RNC might be summarised as follows: 1) the project attended to the myths and blind spots of the Nordic welfare state, notably the silencing of colonial history and continued coloniality; 2) to do so, it included working with curatorial and historical consultants to counter “so-called

blind spots” and awareness of being constructed into white privilege (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021); and 3) it involved an ethics of representation using a quota system to avoid tokenism, ensuring 65% percent were minority subjects and it allowed only 35% white male participants; 4) moreover, it involved decentering through a shift in location: RNC was geographically decentred from the Nordic centres of cultural production to the former colonial territories; and finally, 6) drawing inspiration from transnational feminist thinkers and activists, such as Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), Jacqui M. Alexander (2006), and Vandana Shiva (2005 [1993]), it involved a move from representing the struggles of others to link struggles across *common differences*.<sup>5</sup> These feminist thinkers have in different ways stressed the importance of organising in multidimensional ways through an intersectional approach that moves across dividing and interlocking social positions, categories and boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Notably, in their curatorial strategy of assembling creative resistance practitioners from the Global South and the Global North, Kuratorisk Aktion drew from Mohanty’s deep belief in the ability of feminist thinking to empower and enhance struggles for economic and social justice by taking *common interest* rather than *common experiences* as a potential base for transnational solidarity – and to counter blindness to privilege (Dimitrakaki, 2011; Mohanty, 2003). Moreover, with the curatorial aim of linking “all to the larger project of decolonisation in the age of global capitalism”, the curators drew on British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy’s (2004) reflections on melancholia and conviviality and Alexander’s (2006) insistence that “to move from colonization into solidarity requires desire, hard work and [...] practice” (p. 6). The public hearing of Act 2, which I discuss in the next section, provides a distinct example of how the curators concretely sought to connect and link struggles through strategies of assembly. It also demonstrates the effects of decentering, learning from others,

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<sup>5</sup> Shiva was invited to speak at the workshop in Reykjavik as part of Act 1, but unfortunately had to cancel at the last minute. Alexander participated in Act 2 in Nuuk.

<sup>6</sup> An intersectional feminist approach, as implied here, is most often credited to Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), although the theory of intersectionality can be said to originate in black feminism more broadly. As suggested by feminist scholar Jennifer C. Nash (2019), around the same time sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000 [1990]), for instance, provided a similar conceptualization using the term “matrix of domination” to describe how different forms of oppression intersect.

recognising one's own blind spots, and upholding an ethics of representation.

## **Act 2: Public Hearing in Nuuk and Curatorial Acts of Listening**

Having a voice, giving voice, or finding a voice is central to all kinds of politics. Listening, on the other hand, is the activity of paying attention to something or someone. One depends on the other. Rather than a passive activity, media theorist Kate Lacey positions listening as a category that bridges both the embodied experience of listening and the political realm of debate and discussion. In her book *Listening Publics* (2013) Lacey argues for listening as a political action –in that she proposes the normative ideal of *freedom of speech* should be accompanied with the *freedom of listening*. It is through this understanding that listening opens up a space for a recognition across differences: “plurality as a democratic virtue [...] is guaranteed by the freedom of listening because an individual experiences or inhabits plurality in the act of listening more than in the act of speaking” (Lacey, 2013, p. 177). The author stresses, pointing also to feminist and postcolonial premonitions for counterpointing a plurality of voices, that “listening involves a radical openness towards others” (Lacey, 2013, p. 8). Following Lacey, I am not suggesting that listening as an activity can stand alone, but that a consideration of speaking alongside listening might open new ways of thinking about the role of listening in curatorial practice aimed at conversational gatherings. A public hearing, the political format evoked by Kuratorisk Action in Act 2, speaks to the role of listening in politics. In a public hearing, decision makers are required to listen to public opinion, however, they are not necessarily obliged to base their final decision on what they have heard. Whereas the first four acts of the exhibition project took part in former-colonies, Act 5 (the DVD and website) provides extensive documentation of Act 1–4. In Act 5, as suggested in the exhibition user guide: “the project’s many postcolonial voices reach the once-colonising countries of the Nordic region and become audible to their populations – and to the

world at large” (Hansen & Nielsen, 2006a, p. 120).<sup>7</sup> . I will now tune in on the two-day public hearing with the somewhat provocative, if not in hindsight insensitive, title *Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism?* as part of this listening public.



[Fig. 1]. The audience during the public hearing “Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism?” at The Teachers’ Training School of Greenland, Nuuk, April 22 – 23, 2006. Photography: Knud Josefsen.

The intention behind the public hearing was, as the curators explained on the first day: “for the audience to share their experience with postcolonial issues, with these speakers that we have invited” (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2006a, Day 1, Public Hearing, Act 2). Correspondingly, with chairs arranged in a circle, the non-hierarchical layout of the event facilitated a latent counter-public discourse that privileged affective and expressive approaches, rather than rational-persuasive discourse characteristic of political hearings (Fig. 1). For instance, social anthropologist Aviâja Egede Lynge (2006a), began her

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, outdated technology means that the recordings on the website are currently unavailable to most users.



presentation by distancing herself from an academic approach, saying: “Here, I would like to speak as a Greenlander with feelings” (p. 1).

Listening to the public hearing and its plurality of voices I cannot help being affected through the embodied experience of listening. I can hear a child in the background. Someone fiddling with the microphone, whispers, and other noises. The promise of the recording’s availability is by no means guaranteed. Yet, it permits an emission of how emotions circulate in the conversation around the lack of mental de-colonialisation in Greenland, a continued self-colonialisation in the Faroe Islands, Danish collective amnesia, and the politics of language in the process of decolonisation at that historical moment. Simultaneously, with the naming of these issues, the need to develop a vocabulary and for figuring out what actions to take was recognised. Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]) has written insightfully about this process in her essay titled “The transformation of silence into language and action”, which was also cited by the speaker Trinidadian feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander. Rather than re-presenting art and political struggles, the sharing of experiences during the public hearing elicited a process of connecting and linking, across “common differences” to use Mohanty’s (2003) formulation for solidarity (p. 225). Despite opposing perspectives as to whether the public hearing was well attended, its suggested significance lies in the meeting between art and politics that the overall project facilitated, as subsequently indicated by Aviâja Egede Lynge (2006b):

The RNC project gave us an extraordinary chance to deal with our history and its consequences for the present in completely new ways [...] The fusion of the artistic, the academic, and the political enabled us to openly see, feel and discuss the immense structure of common feelings, “emotional colonialism”, which is so hard to set out in academic or political terms. (p. 9)

Since the RNC project coincided with many other processes, initiatives, and wishes for decolonisation, Lynge (2006b) suggests “the time was ripe for it” (p. 9). For her, it was the role of art, its ability to include and connect different cultures and different ways of thinking, that made the

project a unique contribution to these ongoing processes. According to her, the non-governmental organisation working for independence, Nammineq, subsequently organised a Greenlandic debate night “after the RNC model” and further proposed to visit populations along the coast to raise questions of mental decolonialisation with them (Lyng 2006b). Or as suggested by M. Jacqui Alexander (2006), who stressed that “decolonization is a project for everyone since everyone has been colonized in some way, though differently” (p. 6), the organization of the hearing created an *aesthetic meeting ground* between art and politics.



[Fig. 2]. The audience during the public hearing “Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism?” at The Teachers’ Training School of Greenland, Nuuk, April 22 – 23, 2006. Photography: Knud Josefsen.

On the second day of the hearing, a growing intensity crystallised in discussions between a South African participant, Jacqui Alexander, several Greenlandic participants and other members of the audience. Reflecting on their role at this moment, as privileged white Danes and professional curators, Kuratorisk Aktion subsequently reflected: “But it was a moment, in which we did not have any expertise, it was a learning process, and we couldn’t actually contribute with anything else but

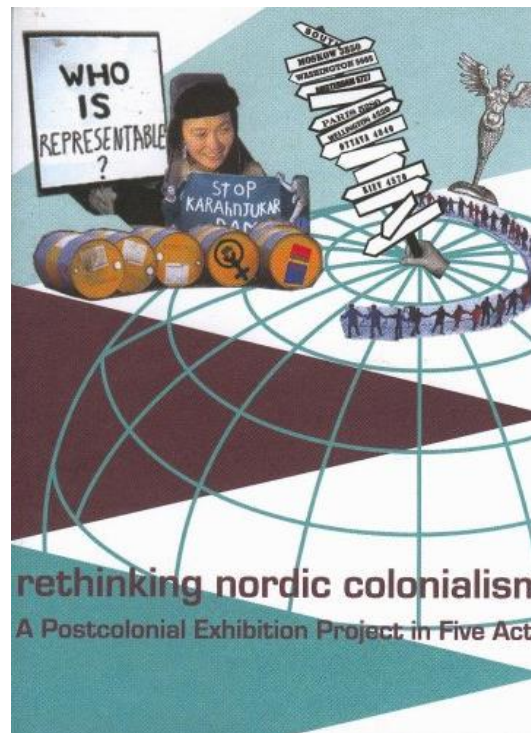
*listening*” (Nielsen 2011, p. 188).<sup>8</sup> Through the change in position experienced by Kuratorisk Aktion, and following Lacey, we might argue that the curators nevertheless contributed actively through listening. In considering questions of decoloniality and listening, such a move in position could also be described using a phrase by decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez, as a “moving away from the projecting forward of enunciation to the opening of reception” (Vázquez 2020, p.156-157). Central to the school of decolonial thinking, is the term “coloniality of power”, coined by sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2007) to describe how colonial hierarchies of race, knowledge, and economics persist through modern institutions and global relations. Decoloniality proposes to delink from these Eurocentric modes of knowing and being to reconnect and recentre Indigenous knowledges as well as other marginalised epistemologies.

In terms of the second day of the public hearing, the conversion shifted away from Eurocentric modes of understanding. As proposed by Walter D. Mignolo (2011a) a “decolonial shift is not just a change in content, but in the logic of conversation” (p. 386).<sup>9</sup> Although the epistemic project of decoloniality that Mignolo, Quijano, Vázquez, and others, such as María Lugones, are part of does not (as yet) seem to directly influence the RCN project and its discourse, it is with this notion of *contributing through listening*, and the possibility of opening a decolonial path through restructuring the terms of conversation, that we might think of curatorial activism as, among other things, a practice of listening. Being internal to Kuratorisk Aktion’s practice, this is not as surprising as it sounds. The act of listening is also to register *who* is not being heard, to listen to the dominance of certain voices and the absences of others, and to ask in the symbolic realm of art “who is representable?” and on what terms, as indicated on a small sign featured on the invitation card, poster, and booklet cover for the exhibition (Fig. 3).

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<sup>8</sup> Italics mine. Author’s translation here and in the following citations, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>9</sup> See also Mignolo (2011b). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

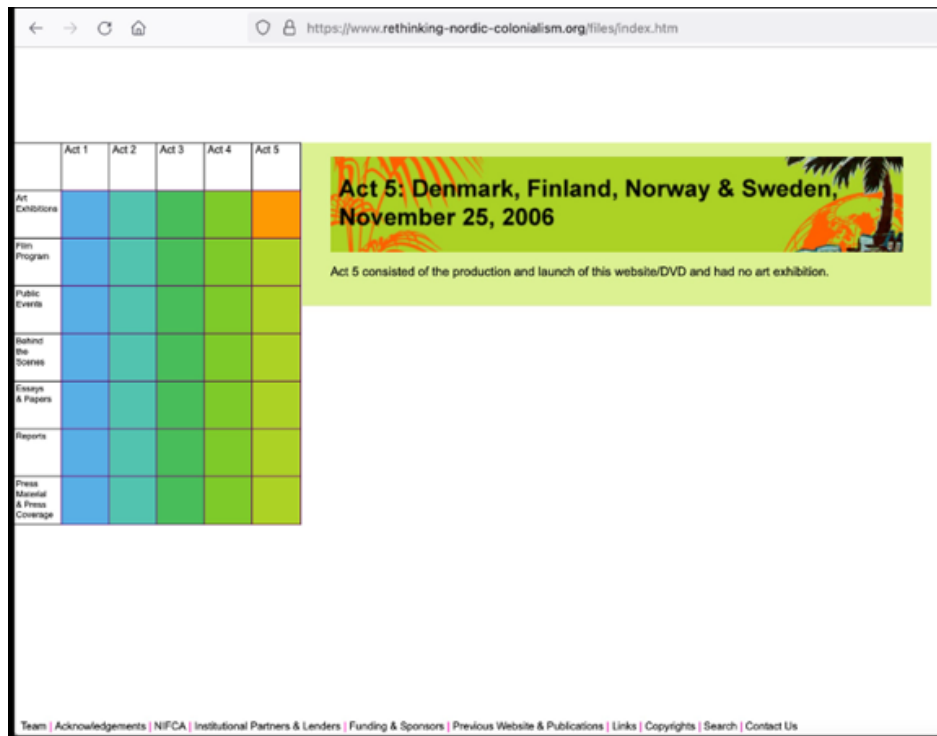


**[Fig. 3].** Kuratorisk Aktion (2006). *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts*, User Guide, cover. Courtesy of the authors. Graphic design: © Ninon Liotet.

This view is not to collapse forms of decolonial practices with the notion of curatorial listening that, for instance, Nielsen notes has been fundamental to her critical consciousness, or Lacey's consideration of the responsive part of "freedom of listening" (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021). Nor does this view suggest that "passing the mic" is the answer to all the perils of curatorial authority in the face of grave injustices. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these differences, I suggest that a shared understanding of the importance of practices of listening as an active and embodied (rather than passive and disembodied) activity might help open conversational 'complexes' across colonial divides. Furthermore, listening in on Act 2 exemplifies this importance. At least the space of the public hearing, in this sense, facilitated a co-production of knowledge with others within a site of multiplicity and alterity.

However, the question of how we are to understand the use of the format “hearing” when no officials were present, is yet to be addressed. Who is being addressed when, as one participant noted in the discussion, what is missing is the colonial voice? The recordings of the public hearing can be understood to address the wider audience of Act 5. The political significance of Act 5 lies in the potential production of “a listening public”, which comes to “inhabit plurality” in the act of listening, to use Lacey’s terms, and who -like the officials at a hearing- is not able to respond (at least not immediately) but bears a responsibility for how this conflictual history is narrated, remembered or forgotten. This public has the potential to expand almost indefinitely across time and space, as long as the recordings are available.

The limitation of this potential, however, lies in the overwhelming amount of documentation and recordings the exhibition produced. The material from which the website and DVD were made comprised of close to 5000 images, 60 hours of video documentation, four local reports, and more than 20 essays, interviews, and manuscripts (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2006b). The documentary material demands that the spectator-listener devotes long periods of time reading, viewing, and listening. Arguably, clicking through an exhibition on a website with a grid-like structure is less appealing to the senses than walking around an exhibition space, and there is no guarantee that audiences will be able to navigate it and the complexity it offers (Fig. 4). Still, the public hearing of Act 2 suggests how a transnational feminism as practiced by Kuratorisk Aktion proposes listening as, not only, a *democratic* and *decolonial* sensibility, but also a curatorial responsibility that decentres the authorial position of curating. Yet, the RNC project, despite its curatorial intentions, recentred the curators’ authorial position in several ways, to which we now turn.



[Fig. 4]. Kuratorisk Aktion & NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (2006). *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*, website screenshot.

## Decentering and Recentering Curatorship

If Kuratorisk Aktion's programmatic curatorial methods demonstrate how to curate (in) solidarity –to take curatorial action, as it were– by being consequential about a socially engaged curatorial practice, each strategy as outlined above, has its own possibilities and limitations, depending on the context and situation. As stated by Kuratorisk Aktion (2006b) in the booklet accompanying the DVD: “We are well aware that our agenda has been overambitious and almost bound to fail in a number of ways”. I will now take a closer look at the implications of the curatorial strategies focusing on how the curatorial position was negotiated in relation to various strategies, privileges and in historiographies of the project.

First, the geographical dispersion that RNC entailed was arguably profound, in that it reconfigured the right of authority and access, adding infrastructural support for contemporary art and socio-political

conversations to take place in the so-called Nordic periphery.<sup>10</sup> The project thus provided an infrastructure for conversations to happen that would arguably not have taken place elsewhere or otherwise. At the same time, this approach compromised a “Scandinavian audience”, who would not necessarily be able to visit the exhibition physically. According to one of the curators, this approach “led to a certain irritation at the centres that the show was inaccessible to them” (Hansen, 2006, p. 14). The extensive documentation on the website and DVD (Act 5) was, as discussed above, made to compensate for this. Equally, documentation and dissemination were important because the project was conceived as a knowledge production.<sup>11</sup>

In the effort to bring diverse perspectives together, it was paramount for Kuratorisk Aktion (2006b) not only to “fly in non-local participants” but also for “everyone to have sufficient time not just to install, perform, or, [...] speak, but also to enjoy each other’s work”. In practical terms, the importance of these physical meetings as part of the exhibition projects was costly and required extensive fundraising (“imagine the cost of bringing a group from Indonesia, ruangrupa, to the Faroe Islands”).<sup>12</sup> Conscious of not pulling money from underfunded “postcolonial areas” to their own project, funding was secured through a set of self-implemented rules to ensure funds recirculated back into local communities. Concurrently, the act of “flying in” prominent international speakers and experts (artists, activists, academics), although providing the ground for a meeting to foster solidarity, can also be seen to feed into a highly unsustainable global art circuit economy, inseparable from art’s neoliberal globalisation and epitomised by large-scale contemporary art events, such as the biennial model (Green & Gardener, 2006; Filipovic et al., 2010). Nevertheless, by devising a transnational methodology that brought together “postcolonial” professionals from around the world in

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<sup>10</sup> Prior to this project most of NIFCAs activities took place in the Nordic metropolises and through engagement with the Baltic capitals.

<sup>11</sup> As noted in a footnote by Erik Gant (2011), 3000 free copies of the RCN DVD set were distributed to libraries and educational institutions in the Nordic region in 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, initially the curators envisioned all participants to be part of all acts, but due to costs and time constraints the idea was dropped (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

remote locations, RNC structurally established a situation whereby Western hegemonic anchoring could be bypassed as argued above.

Inevitably engaging the local through the global in this way, language was another issue to be tactfully negotiated. Seeking to make an inclusive and open framework, live interpretation was available at all the public events, and press material was translated into local languages. The issue of language was addressed by the curators at the beginning of almost all the discursive events. For instance, introducing the workshop in English in Reykjavik, they noted: "For some of us [English] is our first language, for most of us it's not. I hope that you will ask to have things repeated if you don't understand or if it goes too fast" (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2006a, 11.21 min.). In Nuuk, for the public event of Act 2, the curator switched between languages during the introduction. English as the main language was, on the one hand, indisputable considering the global ambition of the project and the international participants in each act. On the other hand, English became a barrier to be overcome for non-native English speakers and local audiences. This situation raises the question of the curator's own position in these meetings in the so-called periphery.

Unsurprisingly, RNC was met with scepticism and suspicion in several locations.<sup>13</sup> Considering the Danes had continuously come to both Greenland and the Faroe Islands to "teach people how to do things right" (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021), RCN could be seen to continue such asymmetrically configured relationships and their coloniality. The core contradiction of the project was perhaps that two Danish feminist curators sought to "liberate" postcolonial minds in former colonial territories. This point is acknowledged by the curators themselves, who reflected that even as they sought "to collapse the centre-periphery spectrum [...] there is no getting around our central or authoritative position" (Hansen & Nielsen, 2009, 38). In addition, a circling back to a collective of white, Scandinavian women written by another white Scandinavian woman (me), could be said to further re-

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<sup>13</sup> The responses and postcolonial situations also varied greatly. Iceland, for instance, had obtained full independence from Denmark after World War 2, whereas Greenland and the Faroe Islands are still part of the Danish Realm. Moreover, Greenlanders had been racialised in a way that Icelanders and Faroese had not. As Hansen recalls, the Faroese distanced themselves from the Greenlanders, exactly for reasons of racialisation (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021).



centerer the white curatorial subjects. Listening to the recordings of various discursive events, the curators continuously seek to counter this issue by pointing to and contextualising their own position while acknowledging and foregrounding how support and help from local actors and partners aided their organisation.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, despite this humble and open approach, the curatorial position proved difficult and contradictory.

Although Kuratorisk Aktion intended to decentre the curatorial subject, there is no denying the privileged position of the curators, who travelled with the project for six months and attended all the events and discussions. Thus, the curators, as they also acknowledge, became the most privileged audience of their own show. Commissioning local journalists to write about the project from their perspective –one report for each act– was another attempt at circumventing their central authoritative voice. Despite these independent reports and other reviews and comments, however, the “curatorial voice” of Kuratorisk Aktion appears dominant. Although a curatorial collective that initiates a larger team of collaborators in their projects and actively seeks to engage with participants and audiences, Kuratorisk Aktion remain the clear authorial signatures that, through several interviews and texts, have historicised, theorised, and self-reflexively commented on the RNC project. This self-historicization is undoubtedly an attempt to compensate for the lack of critical engagement in the art world and the media.<sup>15</sup> However, even as I seek to evaluate the exhibition away from the subjects that initiated it, to honour the pluralising and decentralised aspect of this very case, the curatorial subjects haunt the project as much as they animated it at the time.<sup>16</sup> This reflects the author-centric credit-

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, in the introduction to the workshop in Act 1 and in the Curatorial Afterword where the curators write: “Nuuk-based [artist] Julie Edel Hardenberg did an enormous amount of work for RCN [...] sharing her expertise and network in Greenland and thus substantially supporting the successful organisation of the subsequent act” (Kuratorisk Aktion, 2006b).

<sup>15</sup> The reception in the Nordic centers was limited, see Act 5: Press Material and Press Coverage, <https://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/files/index.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> I acknowledge that I also reinforced this tendency by conducting an interview with the collective myself. In hindsight additional interviews with other participants and artists would have been preferable.

norms so “stubbornly embedded in art”, as art theorist Kim Charnley (2021, p. 28) has suggested, and indicate the need for rethinking how better to value and credit collaborative efforts in the arts.

Although it might seem problematic that white Danish feminists initiated this project, it was significant and important work, not least by employing postcolonial theory in a Nordic context that disavowed its colonial past. On the one hand, postcolonial theory was already in some academic circles deemed “passé” at the time.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, very little postcolonial research had been conducted on the Nordic region's colonial past, and postcolonial theory played a minor role within academic circles in the region (Stien, 2009). In addition, in RNC, “postcolonial” refers not only to an academic discourse but is also a temporal marker that points to the aftermath of colonialism, in which decolonisation, as it appears in in the discourse of RNC, speaks to the material, political, and mental processes and practices in postcolonial times.<sup>18</sup>

RCN's postcolonial perspective also connects the project to other exhibition practices around the millennium. Arguably, both RNC and *documenta 11* (2002) operated the double perspective of “postcolonialism and globalisation”.<sup>19</sup> With the aim of inverting the logic of the exhibition's centrality, the idea of decentring discourse by changing location was one hallmark of curator Okwui Enwezor's *documenta 11*. For his edition of the prestigious exhibition, Enwezor decentralised the exhibition format into five so-called platforms spread across the world, preceding the exhibition in Kassel: “The project of *documenta* was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres” rearticulating “a new understanding of the domain of the discursive rather than the museological” (Enwezor, 2002, p. 54). The RCN exhibition could be seen to reproduce Enwezor's model though its

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<sup>17</sup> Maharaj Sarat uses this expression, in *Kuratering på tværs* (Hansen & Nielsen, 2011, p. 185). For a discussion on the epistemological and methodological limitation of postcolonial theory, see for example Afzal-Khan & Seshadri-Crooks, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Similar to the compelling argument made by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) in their much-cited article, with reference to continued Indigenous struggles against settler colonialism.

<sup>19</sup> A perspective not entirely new at the time (Green & Gardner, 2016). Enwezor's Johannesburg Biennale and *documenta X* are cited examples (both from 1997).

discursive drive and by structurally beginning in the periphery and ending at the centre, although the curators maintain *documenta 11* was not a direct influence.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, there is a resonance between the idea of five platforms and the idea of five acts. Moreover, the writer and curator Sarat Maharaj was part of Enwezor's curatorial team, as well as that of Kuratorisk Aktion, who acknowledge their indebtedness to him as an adviser. Both *documenta 11* and RNC were part of the same conscious effort to critique Eurocentric domination in discourses that engaged art and politics. Indeed, influenced by *documenta X*, directed by Catherine David (1997), *documenta 11* was underpinned by a *millennial mode of exhibition making*, identified by art historians Charles Green and Anthony Gardner (2016) through "its postcolonial, geographic dispersion" and "diffused curatorship" (p. 183) through close collaboration with a team. The same characteristics can be distinguished in RCN, albeit with a feminist activist imaginary committed to social justice.

### **The legacy of RNC and questions of "time" and "processing"**

Overall, RCN challenged the narratives of Denmark and the other colonial powers in the Nordic regions as harbingers of a benign or benevolent form of colonialism.<sup>21</sup> Whereas these narratives are increasingly challenged today, the project was at the time met with, in Hansen's words, a "deafening silence" back in the Nordic metropolises (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021). As Nielsen remarked during the public hearing, the notion of "rethinking" in the project's title was perhaps premature, considering the dearth of reflection and the level of ignorance, especially among Danes (Kuratorisk

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<sup>20</sup> Sabine Dahl Nielsen and Anne Ring Petersen note that these two descriptors "a constellation of public spheres" and a "discursive" rather than "museological" impetus, also describes the modus operandi of Kuratorisk Aktion's center for art on migration politics CAMP (2013–2020), see Nielsen and Petersen (2020). The same dimensions could also be seen to be active in RNC. The curator's disavowal of *documenta 11*, one of the most influential exhibitions around the millennium, might perhaps be understood in relation to the highly critical assessments that emerged in the years following the opening in 2002. See Green and Gardner (2016, p. 197–199).

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the legacy of Danish colonialism, see Brimnes, Niels (2021).

Aktion, 2006a). To an international community, the furore of the Danish Cartoon crisis of 2005–2006 revealed the not-so-perfect side of the Nordic model society, in which racism and xenophobia shone through the otherwise strong moral idealism of freedom, tolerance, and equality (Morris, 2006). In contrast, two years later, Kuratorisk Aktion (2009) adamantly insisted, although they might have accumulated some knowledge on the subject, that they were “notoriously late” (p. 35) in attending to this history. These questions of temporality and resonance suggest the need to complicate the notion of listening I have been advancing. Discussing this notion, Hansen emphasized that listening is not enough; the dimensions of “time” and “processing” must also be added, especially regarding reconnecting with the past by forging a politics of memory to deal with the trauma of colonialism (Kuratorisk Aktion, personal communication, November 1, 2021).<sup>22</sup>

If RNC was largely ignored in the Nordic metropolises, this indicates an active colonial complicity and silencing as well as the difficult politics of memory and the affective dimension of coming to terms with uncomfortable and painful pasts (Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017; Agostinho et al., 2019). Listening to the material today, it might be argued that the historical moment of its significance has been subsided by the growing number of scholars, activists, and artists in the Nordic region who now research and work with Nordic colonial history to challenge existing narratives of Denmark as a benign colonial power.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, to curatorially pursue the difficult process of decolonisation from both sides of the colonial divide is no less relevant today than it was in 2006. So too is the acknowledgement of asymmetrical divisions of privileges and power and the radical proposal of quotas in the arts. Notwithstanding the predicaments and challenges of Kuratorisk Aktion's uncompromising curatorial activism, which has placed them in continuously precarious employment positions, they

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<sup>22</sup> Hansen is making a reference to British Ghanaian critic Kobena Mercer (who took part in Act 5), see Kuratorisk Aktion (2009, p. 36).

<sup>23</sup> For example, the research project *The Art of Nordic Colonialism: Writing Transcultural Art Histories (2019-2023)* led by art historian Mathias Danbolt at UCPH; and Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) which, under the directorship of curator Katya García-Antón (2013-2022), has generated significant focus on Indigenising practices and knowledges through its curatorial programs and publications. See García-Antón (2020; 2018) and Hætta (2020). See also Finbog (2023).

continued to *stay with the trouble*, as Hansen framed it.<sup>24</sup> The RNC project was, for Kuratorisk Aktion, the beginning of almost a decade of work on Nordic colonialism and artistic decolonial practices.<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, through the conscious efforts of decentring and re-centring the participants, curators and audiences, RNC managed, “to establish a situation where other lines of thought could be explored” (Nielsen & Hansen, 2011, p. 188). A situation that through its *specificity* – to use an expression by political theorist Shane Phelan (1996) – “provided the ground for commonality without sameness” (p. 70). Unlike a curatorial practice concerned primarily with the symbolic work of representation and the relation of artworks within it, to take *curatorial action*, is a practice in which the representational and symbolic work is matched by infrastructural conditions. Ideally, such a practice creates, through the exhibition framework with all its temporal limitations, a forum for alternative ways of working collaboratively for social change, providing an aesthetic meeting ground for solidarity across common differences.

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<sup>24</sup> The title of an influential book by Donna Haraway (2016), the phrase indicates a theoretical and methodological approach that proposes to “stay with the trouble” of living on a planet amid ecological crisis and destruction – that is to live and think and move with these troubles rather than building or thinking a relation to a future that would have solved the current trouble.

<sup>25</sup> In 2008 followed the project *The Road to Mental Decolonization* for the Sami Art Festival and Tromsø Gallery of Contemporary Art, and after several years of research the touring exhibition *Tupilakosaurus: Pia Arke’s Issue with Art, Ethnicity and Colonialism, 1981-2006* in 2010. From 2013-2020 Kuratorisk Aktion focused on issues of migration through the establishment of CAMP/Center for Art on Migration Politics. Trampoline House, a refugee community centre in Copenhagen (2010–), co-founded by Tone Olaf Nielsen, was a ‘lumbung partner’ in documenta 15 and Frederikke ‘Fred’ Hansen was part of the artistic team under the artistic direction of the Indonesian artists collective ruangrupa.

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