

A portrait of the filmmaker and choreographer Elle Sofe Sara, who is bringing her work “Vástádus eana – The answer is land” to Tanz im August.

They moved to the coast earlier this year. Winter in the northern Norwegian tundra was erratic. The temperatures varied. The snow thawed, and then iced over again in the next cold spell. The ice made it impossible for the reindeer to graze. So the choreographer and filmmaker Elle Sofe Sara moved with her husband, her children and her reindeer to their summer quarters in a village on the coast.

From there we speak via video; she is wearing a palm-sized amulet made of elk antlers. During the migration period in spring and autumn, she says, she avoids fixing dates for her artistic work. She tries to orient her ‘annual wheel’ to the rhythm of the reindeer. She has dedicated her life to art since the age of 16: she studied in London and Oslo, but nonetheless decided to return to the Sápmi region where she was born. “I felt I had lost contact with the people and the land where my parents, my grandparents and my ancestors are. I didn’t want to become an artist who only had art. I seek a holistic way of life.”

In this search Elle Sofe Sara is deeply involved with the lost and still surviving traditions of the Sámi, the indigenous inhabitants of northern Scandinavia and of the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Her first language is Northern Sámi, the most widely spoken of all Sámi languages, which only has around 20 000 speakers today. “Dálvi bohtos ain – Let the winter come” is the short text of a yoik she composed for “Vástádus Eana – The answer is land”. Yoiking is the creation of a living relationship between a person and her surroundings through the medium of voice. The song produces a sensory reality that is perceived as being alive. So you don’t sing about a mountain, rather, it’s the mountain itself that is sung, as it reveals itself to the singer. Yoiks can also come about for people, and they grow over the course of the life of the child for which they were created.

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Elle Sofe Sara encountered yoiking in her childhood, but in secret. She remembers; “In my family, people thought yoiking was a sin”. She sees the reason for this in the centuries-old church prohibition. The public performance of traditional song was forbidden. Only in the 1960s was it slowly freed from its banishment into secrecy, although it took much longer to shed its stigma.

In Sara’s “Vástádus Eana – The answer is land”, banishment is constantly present. Inhabiting the space, full of serenity, dignity, sadness and longing, it evokes the pull of an aesthet-

ic landscape that can’t be seen but can be felt. A sung landscape that invites you to relate to it, to become part of it, to dissolve into it. In his third collaboration with Elle Sofe Sara, the Sámi composer Frode Fjellheim has set the yoiks polyphonically. The four female singers and three female dancers didn’t learn them from reading scores, as scores are usually learnt in classical music, but from recordings and through workshops according to the oral tradition.

In addition to writing the text for one of the yoiks, Elle Sofe Sara contributed a composition of her own. Other yoiks come from historical archive recordings. And there is a song of the Skolt Sámi, a people who have completely lost their traditional environment due to the demarcation of the Russian-Finnish border and Russian resettlement politics. Only a few dozen people now speak their language. The landscape of their songs no longer exists.

In post-colonial northern Norway and Sweden, the landscapes and way of life of the Sámi are still subject to the state and EU politics, largely out of economic interests. One example is the recent decision in Sweden to approve iron-ore extraction near Jokkmokk by the British company Beowulf Mining. The Sámi Parliament declared its strict opposition; the local population protested, with the support of climate activists Greta Thunberg and others.

A stir was also caused by the curtain of reindeer skulls at documenta 14. It was created by the artist Maret Anne Sara, who belongs to the Sámi artist collective Dáiddadállu, which was co-founded by Elle Sofe Sara. The vertical cemetery with visible bullet holes in the reindeer skulls refers to a Norwegian law that is responsible for the decimation of reindeer herds for reasons of landscape conservation – while at the same time focusing on the industrial development of the region. Despite winning two court cases, the artist’s brother was forced in the last instance to shoot part of his herd. The Sámi’s demand to regulate the size of reindeer herds autonomously was ignored.

The reindeer herd tended by Elle Sofe Sara’s husband has not yet had to be decimated because of its small size, but it isn’t easy for her family to define its place within the legal regime. “It’s difficult to make laws,” says Sara. “Many of them are a big challenge for us. For example, only one person can be registered as a reindeer herder. Other family members can’t be named. But reindeer-herding is a group activity, a way of life”.

Elle Sofe Sara has coined a new idiom from this way of life and her involvement with yoiking: the ‘yoiking hand’. She derives the term from the existing ‘lasso hand’, used in a narrow sense for people who are particularly good at lassoing reindeer. In a wider sense it means being particularly skilled with one’s hands. In her short film “Juoigangieht / The Yoiking Hand”, from 2011, she attempts to give yoiking a body. She

Vástádus eana – The answer is land

Merging with a disappearing landscape

Text: Astrid Kaminski



explains her motivation as follows: "Because it was forbidden, many people would only yoik when drunk. When yoiking became possible once again, its public performances initially seemed stiff and rigid. The stiffness was supposed to emphasise that the performers weren't drunk. I thought it was a pity that we didn't use our bodies, so I asked singers to integrate the hand gestures they felt into their song. Through my film the term 'yoiking hand' is gradually becoming a concept".

In "Vástádus eana – The answer is land" the bodies of the singers are mostly still, however. They seem to concentrate on being an open vessel for song, in a sensitive tension in which fingers sometimes seem like antennae, or they appear to hold the space of the breathing body energetically, as can often be observed in singers. Despite this reduced movement, the singers never give the impression of rigidity. Instead they gradually enter the flow of the landscape their song embodies, grouping around the dancers to absorb their atmosphere or falling in with the choreographed steps to the sound of drums. Sometimes this deteriorates into stamping; sometimes the steps draw on folkdance; sometimes surpris-

ingly phrased rhythmic patterns emerge, with small delays that increase the excitement.

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Elle Sofe Sara doesn't adhere to one particular dance style. She makes equal use of contemporary dance, release technique, aerobics, tap-dancing, folkdance and meditation practices. Her dance isn't solely built on Sámi traditions, rather it creates a world of its own. Love of movement and what she feels to be the healing possibilities of dance are the two poles between which she operates.

These elements have been important to her since her first encounter with contemporary dance. "At 16 I went to an acting school. Our dance teacher came from the Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London. She took me under her wing. I felt that I had dance in me, and also that it did me good, that it

had a therapeutic energy. I was carrying things around in me from my childhood that needed healing. The combination of expressive techniques and inner contemplation, like yoga and other meditative practices, strengthened my body".

The question of emotional balance is central to many of Elle Sofe Sara's works. It has to do with both individual sensitivity and the possibilities and difficulties of social frameworks, as well as those of a more-than-human realm of life. Taboos are also up for discussion: the film "Sámi Bojá / Sami Boy" (2014) addresses the high suicide rate among young men. There's a suicide every year in her village, says Sara, and her own family is no exception. In her current film, "Árru", the question of sexual abuse arises. "Is abuse within indigenous families a result of the historical violence against the community, of the loss of way of life and culture?" she asks. It's an open question.

Connectedness means being mutually responsible.

In her film "Giitu giitu – Thank you Lord" (2019) Elle Sofe Sara reconstructed the ecstatic technique of likhahus, which was used to gain relief within the imposed Christian belief system and involved jumping and yelling to sermons from the Bible. In this way the Sámi transformed the church of a religion that mistrusts physical needs into the ritual site of transformation.

The creation of a place where transformation is possible is also the intention of "Vástádus eana – The answer is land". The piece makes room for despair, for searching, for the struggle of an individual with herself. Her journey is followed by the group of performers – they are there when needed, transforming breathlessness and trepidation into new impulses. But acceptance is nevertheless eroded by silent grief. A mourning for the loss of the sung landscape. The seven performers wear black, except for the red ear caps individually designed by different hat-makers. Christian colonisers saw the Devil in the traditional headwear, which had to forego its once cylindrical form and lie flatter against the head. In the piece the hats seem to symbolise a possibility of connectedness – also in their emphasis of the tradition of the craft. Elle Sofe Sara values the continuation and further development of textile art in her own daily life as a ritual maintenance of the relationship to past and future. Connectedness with one another or with a place can't be taken for granted, she says: "Connectedness means being mutually responsible".

Übersetzt aus dem Deutschen von Michael Turnbull.

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