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A skull on the bench

- 1 The skull sits on the bench next to me, stained bone set against the dark wood. A bullet-hole in the forehead forms a sharp, near-perfect circle; the edges are smooth. The skull is not human; it belongs to a reindeer. A year or two ago, still in the flesh, it lay freshly severed in a heap of other heads—piled up, bloodied and frozen, in the snow outside a courthouse in the far north of Norway, in the northernmost province of Finnmark. The heads had been piled as a gesture of protest, marking the beginning of a series of legal tests that culminate here today, in Oslo, in the supreme court hearing of a landmark case that challenges the government’s ongoing mass cull or “forced reduction” (*tvangsreduksjon*) (Reinert 2014) of the indigenous Sámi reindeer herds in Finnmark—the northernmost province of mainland Norway and also part of Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Sámi people. In the courtroom, the skull makes a startling impression: inhuman, unearthly, but also consubstantial (somehow) with the aged mahogany of the walls, the worn benches, the imposing horseshoe table at the far end of the room where the five stern judges sit in formation—just across the flimsy partition that separates us, the watching public, from the unfolding operation of the law.
- 2 Unaccustomed to the setting, many of us pretend to be invisible. Set against the somber interiors, in the bright sharp colors of their *gákti* or traditional garb, the Sámi contingent stands out with almost heroic visibility. Just over the aisle from me sits the protagonist at the heart of the case: Jovsset Ánte Sara, the young herder whose herd, the government has decreed, must be cut down nearly by half, to 75 reindeer—far fewer than the minimum required for him to continue herding. The hearing centers on his claim, and the claim of his lawyer, that this forced reduction is unlawful and in breach of international commitments. The case has already been through two lower courts; in each case the court has ruled in favor of Jovsset Ánte but the government has appealed. This hearing is the highest and final instance. The patterns of Jovsset Ánte’s *gákti* mark him as coming from Kautokeino, one of the core reindeer herding areas in Finnmark; in person I am struck by how young he looks, by the haunted, vulnerable determination of his face.
- 3 The skull and the pile are both devices of Jovsset Ánte’s older sister, Máret Anne Sara—a Sámi artist, writer, and social critic who for several years has been using her art to channel and showcase issues of pastoral governance in Norway, refracting them through a lens of anti-colonial critique. It is hard to describe the sheer *shock* her head-pile conveyed when it first appeared, the raw challenge of it from the doorstep of the court. Blood stained the lens; from the top waved a Norwegian flag. The first time I saw an image of the pile I laughed out loud, stunned, recognizing a kind of brutal, electric charge. It was direct, unapologetic, shredding. For those of us unfamiliar with the history of Sámi protest art, the heads arose as if from nowhere. In their amassment they spoke to an exercise of such overwhelming force that the violence itself had become something obvious and given—like air, or sunlight. I had never seen anything like it; it tore open the asphyxiating mildness of national debates, manifesting in a torrent what the quiet, soft-spoken colonialism of the north—patient as it is, understated, polite, and bureaucratic—kept under wraps.



- 4 The hypnotic force of the image derived, in part, from its historical resonances. The pile functioned—functions—in juxtaposition to other piles. I translate the text that accompanies it:¹

“I am making the installation to visualize the dramatic abuse that is happening, but I am struck by the gust of an ice-cold wind. A disquieting parallel appears. A dark history of colonization from North America in the 1800s. I collect the reindeer heads as images of buffalo heads appear. Millions of buffalo heads, piled into great mountains of trophies. A cold wind blows here in Sápmi as I read on about the buffaloes. About Europeans who almost exterminated the buffalo herd of 50 million animals. The chill deepens. It was a deliberate strategy, ordained from the top. They, the colonists, wanted the land, Regina, as it was to be called—but it was inhabited. The buffalo people stood in the way. The order, the strategy, was simple but effective. Eliminate what the people live off and the people will disappear. The buffalo, bang! Pile o’Bones. I stand here with my reindeer skulls and I shiver with cold. It is no secret that reindeer herders fight a hard battle to protect their pastures against the state’s ongoing push for industry. I try to tie my scarf tighter but I know we are in the way. They want the land, Sápmi as we call it. The reindeer we live from are stacked before me. The state is forcibly reducing the herds, with a model that cuts the throat of future recruitment to herding. The chill is inescapable. *Pile o’Sápmi.*”

- 5 *Pile o’Sápmi* is the title of the work: the name encompasses both the pile itself, in its various iterations, and a transnational art community and protest movement that have sprung up around it. As Máret Anne’s text makes clear, the heads and the name both invoke the founding apocalypse² of the United States, the great American genocide: they speak of massacres and exterminations, stolen land, bones piled to the sky. Working through historical amplification, in a mode of echo, the heads articulate a juxtapositional critique—resonating in a manner that makes manifest the disruptive, indirect violence of a cull that directs itself at the basic conditions of indigenous life, at reindeer themselves as the species that makes Sámi herding possible.
- 6 Over the two years since they first appeared, the heads have moved out with viral intensity—traveling further and faster than almost anything else I have seen coming out of Sápmi. The original heads quickly lost their flesh, baring themselves as new skulls joined the ranks, carefully boiled white to contrast with the weathered patina of the first wave—and as the work grew, spreading and translating across newspaper articles, magazine covers, walls, screens, art festivals, and national conferences, it refracted. The skulls reorganized, shifting into new shapes and configurations: boxes, floor patterns, arrays. Today, for the two days of Jovsset Ánte’s hearing, they have arranged themselves in the form of a Sámi flag: a curtain-flag of some 400 skulls, hung before Parliament, in the heart of the capital—as if in response to the provocation of the flag that was planted in the first pile, the flag of the colonist. The title of the work, in this form, is *Pile o’Sápmi Supreme*.

Roving heads

- 7 Working with an artist friend and *verdde*,³ Katrine Dolven, Máret Anne has also released her skulls in a second form today: as a swarm of ghosts that mills through the city, carried by human volunteers; slow cloud of an undead presence drifting up and down the streets, circling, trying to enter public buildings. The human volunteers have been instructed in how to address people, what to tell them, how to answer questions. Sitting

at an outside table, I watch two of them drift past my coffeeshop. Later in the day I come across three more of these skull-human assemblages in the lobby of the visitor entrance to Parliament, sitting patiently outside the security gate; disallowed entry. Security officers apologize but the skulls are objects, and the list of objects that are permitted into the building is extremely circumscribed: pencils, notebooks, certain electronic devices.⁴

- 8 There is something mesmerizing about this perambulatory movement of the skulls: resonant traces come to life, physical memories of violence haunting the massive and venerable architecture of the Enlightenment, the very heart of the power that ghosted them. Dispersed and repeated, the shock of their presence exerts a kind of wounding power, cutting through the skin of the urban fabric to a sorcerous or mythical substrate—a layer of power that underwrites not just the city itself, but the secular State⁵ that contains it. Like magical predators the skulls move through this space, tuned to its disavowed affects and the complex magical operations that sustain it: the sorcery hidden in the surface, in the mantle of its bureaucratic secularity. In this context I read the skulls—no, I *experience* them—as a sort of disruptive counter-sorcery, an act of magical warfare erupting in the cool stone heart of the city, suddenly in the open. Flowing out from their point of release they enact an uncanny transformation, reshaping the city by revealing it as it already was: a landscape of colonial violence made stone, haunted by the exclusions it simultaneously effects and depends on. The skulls manifest, physically, a siege that has gone on for centuries but hidden to your eyes, unavailable.
- 9 This is one point where the apocalyptic resonance of the skulls folds or bifurcates, becoming something more than a simple evocation of things that also happened elsewhere. In *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, “Luciferian Marxist” Evan Calder Williams defines apocalyptic revelation as “a wound of the present that exposes the unseen” (2011: 6). “What is revealed [in the apocalypse],” he argues, “is what has been hidden in plain sight all along, previously only caught askance from the corner of our eye: the sudden exposure of what was present but not visible, because it did not accord with [the] real structuring forces of a totality” (*ibid.*: 5) Apocalyptic knowledge lifts the veil and exposes the unseen: the spectral surplus that hides in the visible, unsymbolized and unreconciled. A knife slices the skin, reveals the pulsing guts: “apocalypse” is not simply an end of the world, or the end of a world, but the wound of revelation—an hour of ghosts in which the unseen comes to light, neglected things appear.
- 10 The resonance with *Pile o’Sápmi* here is obvious but still, faced with that word—“apocalypse”—I hesitate, uneasy. The word has something of the titillating about it: a streak of prurience, redolent of spectacle and sentimental violence, the interminable grind of end-time pornography and death-fulfillment fantasies that saturates us here, on the catastrophic threshold of the Anthropocene. It feels indulgent; more specifically, perhaps, it echoes the affects and fantasies that are invested in the anthropological project of salvage—as a collective enterprise of acquisition and reification rooted, all too often, in the postulate of an apocalypse of *the Other*. In salvage, the discipline continuously risks boiling itself down to a curatorial slideshow, a shifting exhibition carousel of imperiled worlds that *must* be preserved, rescued, restored, mourned, brought back to life but from outside—from within the morbid and hermetically sealed preoccupations of its own disciplinary savior complex. At best this is a distraction, a hindrance that defers real work; at worst, it reflects an affective investment in death that projects itself into the material, infecting it. The violence of good intentions remains violent, even as it is exercised in atonement.

- 11 Earlier this morning, standing in the pre-dawn cold before Parliament on the first day of the hearings, I watched the skull curtain being unveiled. One by one the invited speakers came forward. Most of them were Sámi. Among them was the legendary Niillas Somby—sole remaining survivor from a group of seven whose 1979 hunger strike before Parliament became one of the most iconic moments of the original Alta struggle.⁶ Another was Niillas Beaska, current leader of the Sámi political party Norgga Sámiid Riikkasearvi (NSR).⁷ Gesturing up at the shadowy outline of Parliament behind him, barely visible in the dark, Beaska built his appeal around a sly comparison between that silhouette and the shape of a mountain in his homeland to the north, a mountain named after *Stállo*—a dark, threatening figure in Sámi folklore, often cast in the role of the hostile outsider. “The state is a machine,” he said, “a machine that chews, and grinds, and eats,” referencing the mindless greed often said to drive *Stállo*. “It churns, and churns, and churns away,” he continued. “But today, on a Tuesday morning in Oslo, it is full of Sámi. This is good.” The State *churns*, patient and relentless, grinding things with the limitless endurance of a dominant collective. Shedding and expelling, it consigns the unwanted to nothing, consuming them—recreating them as ghosts in a spectralization that cauterizes injustice, sealing it in the past and rendering its victims residual, voiceless, transparent.
- 12 This leads me back to the problem with “apocalypse”—refracted now through this image of the churning, all-consuming State. Descriptions of the end of the world are never innocent but particularly not here, particularly not if *I* am the one who speaks them—as a settler scholar, with my Norwegian passport, privileged ward of the very State that is doing the ending. A word like “apocalypse” is not just descriptive but alive: possessing a capacity to “make real,” to materialize its referent with a force that verges, inevitably, on complicity—handing out its diagnoses with performative finality. The blurred temporality of the word makes it a gesture of warning that can also foreclose the future, rendering the present as already-gone, the living as already-dead. Speak it and phantasmal machines grind into motion, placing headstones on graves. Speak it and you may find yourself sided *with* those grinding machines—the ones that churn and churn and churn, day and night, to render worlds like those of Jovsset Ánte and Máret Anne already-over, already-past; overcome, *fait accompli*. This is partly why I find the skulls so haunting: in their shocking and animate solidity they articulate an indigenous presence, but in another mode of the spectral—not as vanishment or dissolution but as *implacable return*. One of them sits next to me on the bench, its sockets empty.

A chronic excess

- 13 The Jovsset Ánte case is complex: much has been said about it already,⁸ and much more remains to be said. In a simple sense, the story begins with a 2013 decision by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to implement a “forced reduction”—a cull, or compulsory mass slaughter—of the Sámi reindeer herds (Johnsen *et al.* 2015). It also begins much (much) earlier.
- 14 The image of a reindeer excess has haunted the edges of the State in Norway for almost two centuries now: a fevered, imaginal swarm always threatening to overspill the borders, invade the cities, eating the land bare. Arguments and narratives have shifted over the years but the underlying impulse has persisted: a will to contain the herds, to control them, reduce them—and through this, to control and reduce a segment of the indigenous Sámi population that in conspicuous ways has resisted normalization, simply

by dint of their nomadic livelihood. In recent decades, the narrative being pushed most strongly by actors of the State has been a story of ecological degradation and failed governance. Having failed to regulate themselves, supposedly, reindeer herders have (supposedly) increased their herd sizes beyond a vaguely defined “carrying capacity.” Excessive grazing has degraded the pastures, or it will do in the near future, or it may, and the resulting “desertification” and biodiversity loss will lead, in turn, to the catastrophic mass death of reindeer and the ecological collapse of the tundra ecosystem.

- 15 The science underwriting this narrative is problematic, for a number of reasons.⁹ That aside, however, an issue with this dominant narrative is the manner in which it plays on long-standing prejudices, rooting itself in a persistent framework of racist thought that posits the Sámi as irrational, primitive, unable to govern themselves. The story (and the framework) is easily available and easy to accept, even self-evident to many members of the Norwegian ethnic majority. The narrative of excess has almost universal purchase, particularly in the south of the country: “everyone knows” there are too many reindeer, and that the herders have “failed”—that the tundra has descended into a state of lawless chaos that demands, now, a corrective and punitive intervention by the State. Someone has to *do something*; the government *must* step up, *must* resolve the issue.
- 16 Expediently, the escalation of this failure narrative has coincided neatly with the escalating interest of national and international actors in “developing” the tundra, “realizing” its “economic potential”—a potential that only becomes more attractive with the global depletion of easily available mineral resources, say, but which pastoral land claims stand in the way of (Reinert 2016, 2018). In the years leading up to the current forced slaughter, crisis narratives came to infuse the headlines more and more forcefully—reaching the peaks of a kind of catastrophic ecstasy, a collective reverie played out in a visual syntax of carnage and devastation: blood in the snow, strewn bodies rotting across the land. “Death has occupied the tundra,” one headline proclaimed.¹⁰ Underneath, a reindeer calf faced the camera, eyes luminous in the spotlight: “by the time you read this, this calf will probably be dead.” Animals starved while their owners (supposedly) waged war. The same grisly handful of images recurred, again and again: starving bodies, quartered, neglected, torn apart by predators, decomposing. In a research team I was working with at the time, some of us started referring to this handful of endlessly recycled bodies as “Potemkin cadavers”: capturing the hallucinatory effect of watching the same reindeer dying again and again, story after story—its death dispersed across the region like a cloud, enduring for years.
- 17 Over time, relentlessly, the dominant narrative has installed itself as accepted reality—encompassing the tundra in a charnel swirl of imaginal violence, lawlessness, and death; a morbid present—future moment suspended, chronically, on the cusp of a catastrophic mass event. The miasma of this moment is simultaneously an *effect* and an *instrument* of governance: a kind of ambient manufactured context, operating through unspoken racial and colonial categories that justify and legitimize corrective intervention by the State, as the legitimate and sovereign agency, precisely by pointing to its continuous failure. As a chronic rupture in the fabric of State power, the crisis has generated a continuous demand for intervention. Official threats have issued at uneven intervals, promising massive corrective violence, but over time repetition dulled their edge until they came to seem almost quotidian—empty, unrealistic, faintly absurd even as they were mouthed by every new administration, as every new minister descended on the corrals at the

beginning of their term to pronounce, with swaggering bravado, that they would “sort out the mess.”

The other crisis

- 18 Consider this, now. Arctic pastoralism operates in complex, rapidly shifting, and often unpredictable environments. Reflecting this—with some allowance for differences in herding style and form—most reindeer herds are also dynamic and changeable entities, structured and restructured in ongoing adjustment to the shifting conditions of their environment. Throughout the 20th century, however, State interventions into herding have been premised, almost universally, on assumptions derived from equilibrium ecology and a mass productivist industrial paradigm that tends towards abstracting all its variables—land, animals, practices—to their simplest and most universal form. Among these guiding assumptions are the idea of a fixed, stable, universally relevant “optimal density” of reindeer, distributing themselves across a terrain—and attendant on this, also, the idea of an “optimal,” “rationalized” herd. The specific structure of this “optimal herd”—e.g. a minimized complement of reproductive males; no non-reproductive reindeer on the winter pastures; maximized “turnover” of calves, capitalizing on the rapid growth of the young—is designed to maximize meat production in an environment assumed to be stable, predictable, and with minimal or no predators.¹¹ The principles that structure this abstract image of a herd were imported (and imposed) by Norwegian administrators and scientists in the 1970s, based on practices from “rationalized” commercial sheep farming in the south. The problem here can be stated very simply: in a non-equilibrium environment, where environmental conditions vary wildly and the herd is subject to predation from multiple species, the objective of “stabilizing” a “total population” at a fixed, “sustainable” number, achieving “ideal density” with “optimized herd structure,” is, quite simply, a managerial delusion (Reinert & Benjaminsen 2015)—ideological debris, left over from the agroindustrial mass ecologies of the 20th century and sustained, for decades, by the sheer power asymmetries that structure the field of pastoral policy in Norway.
- 19 Consider this, too. Small herds have small margins: below a certain number of reindeer—some say 200, as a rule of thumb—the herd becomes economically unviable; generally speaking, it simply does not generate enough surplus to sustain its herder(s). Small herds are also structurally fragile, less resilient, less able to defend themselves against predators. Bad years are inevitable and when they come, a large herd may well survive the losses, retaining enough reproductive capital to regenerate itself. A small herd, on the other hand, may well collapse—reduced to the point where it is unable to reproduce itself. In a newspaper interview a decade or so back, during an earlier peak of reindeer-crisis discourse, a herder named Johan Mathis Oskal put this issue very succinctly: “If the authorities do cut the number of animals by half, and we then get a bad year [*uår*], we might be left with no reindeer at all. That would be an *eternal catastrophe*” (emphasis added).¹²
- 20 “Eternal catastrophe.” To someone like Johan Mathis, excess appears as a temporary and survivable mismatch in the calibration of herd size to grazing resources. The problem resolves itself: “nature itself reduces the numbers,” he says at another point in the interview, “the way it always has.” Contrast this to the State narrative—in which excess¹³ appears as the continuous potential for a terrifying breakdown, a rampant and

unregulated proliferation in which the dead will scatter like leaves, chaotic and numberless across an incompletely known terrain. Even the *possibility* of that crisis disrupts the sovereign claim of the State over death. The threat of force tries to reestablish that claim, at least symbolically—aligning reality with a theory of power that takes this control (over death) as simultaneously total and already-given *but also* always under threat, inherently insufficient. In the crisis, the State falls chronically short of its own theoretical claims; the answer to that “failure” is expansion, growth, intensification of control, the further consolidation of power. In this sense, the reindeer crisis is *also* legible as a performance, a spectacle of justification orchestrated by the State in its own periphery: “disaster as a form of governance” (Ophir 2007; also Roitman 2014), a technology of control that achieves its effects not through resolution but through continuous deferral, in the cultivated durational tense of a crisis that generates the permanent demand not just for a solution, but also for the agent that can deliver that solution.

- 21 Set against the cataclysmic imaginary of uncontrolled excess, mass death, and system collapse that structures the “official” narrative of the State, Johan Mathis’ “eternal catastrophe” functions as a mirror: a pastoral imaginary of catastrophe oriented not by excess, but by the sudden extinction that can come with insufficiency; a catastrophe of the not-enough, rather than the too-much. The skull curtain manifests this other catastrophe, capturing the world-ending, agentive violence *of the State itself*—a violence that threatens Jovsset Ánte’s herd as much as it also animates the skulls, driving them out into the city. For decades—despite protests, media coverage, binding international agreements—this violence has been operating, patiently and consistently, to cut, reduce, and limit the space, resources, and choices available to indigenous pastoralists in Norway. Jovsset Ánte is currently the public face of this violence—exemplary victim but also a focus of resistance, reluctantly iconic. The story of the skulls is also the story of his herd, his family, his district, his livelihood, and his people, his way of life, the life of his ancestors and descendants. The “forced reduction” will cut his herd down to 75 reindeer: well below the threshold of viability, although the State argues otherwise, claiming that he can continue to herd with those 75—and even if he cannot, the State declares (with paternal conceit), the decision is not only lawful but for the greater good *of herding itself*, and of the herders who cannot (supposedly) look after themselves, never mind govern their herds. Cutting down his herd, the State exposes it to collapse—and exposing the herds, it exposes the herders, exposes the livelihood, exposes a mode of indigenous life whose protection it is, nominally, committed to. No one can herd without a herd. If the herd disappears, so does the herder.

The Law of the Pig

- 22 “Catastrophe” is a technology of the modern political imagination¹⁴—a diffuse concept, possessed of a shape-shifting power that allows it to shift and leap, constantly adjusting itself to the terms of one future after the other. The shape or mechanism of specific catastrophes is in a sense less important than the general orientation that the concept itself fosters in time: a mode of waiting by which the chloroformed present is pinned like an insect to the horizon of a cataclysmic future that is always on the cusp of happening, always jumping back at the last minute, always withdrawing. Again and again catastrophe recedes behind the next bend in the road, laughing, even as its presence bleeds back into

the present and restructures it. This near-future imminence of the catastrophe constitutes an unspoken contract, an eventuality that binds the citizen to an image of the *providential State* (Ophir 2007)—as an anti-catastrophic entity that wards off harm, precisely as it universalizes the potentiality of that harm and renders the future prospect of it permanent, continuous, ever-present. The anti-catastrophic State exists to avert a catastrophic potential; naturalizing catastrophe as the ground of being, it makes itself eternal.

- 23 Acting on the vision of a vast catastrophe—a charnel dream of bodies that rot in the snow, devastation, collapsing systems, the stench of blood—the providential State deploys the killing-violence apotropaically, in a preemptive move: “To prevent them from dying, they must be killed.”¹⁵ In an important sense, the social body that corresponds to this apocalypse of mass starvation, and which is threatened by it, is not the pastoral community—but rather the moral community that recognizes itself *in the State*, identifying with the appearance of propriety that its actions communicate.¹⁶ This is also the point where the skulls intervene—interrupting the apocalyptic fantasy and mirroring it back inside out, like an inverted glove, exposing both the providential State in its catastrophic aspect *and* the mechanism by which catastrophic anticipation manifests the catastrophe it anticipates. Offering the spectacle of horror as the *effect* rather than the cause of State action, it articulates the State’s investment (and complicity) in apocalypse—concretizing the incessant secret longing of the providential State for a catastrophe that sustains (and justifies) its expansion. With this it brings into view a second apocalypse, Oskal’s “eternal catastrophe,” the catastrophe of extinction: not the one the State acts *against*, but the one that it *causes*—even as it claims its own violence as salvific. This second apocalypse, too, has its correlate in a social body: the moral community of those who recognize themselves not in the propriety of the State, but in the violence that the State directs against them.
- 24 Through the day, a strange pair of masked figures moves in and out among the skulls. One of them is a large and powerful pig, humanoid, pulling a thin, reindeer-antlered servant by a chain. The antlered servant is attired like a ghost, in mortuary face-paint, and the pig carries a red book—a copy of the laws of Norway that has been scrawled over, defaced with a new name: *The Law of the Pig* (*Grisens Lov*). In the half-light before dawn their presence is intense, amplified by the exaggerated theatrical precision of their gestures and the strange, hallucinatory tableaux they compose. The antlered ghost is Sámi, the herder: indigenous, shackled and bound, colonized, obedient. The pig is the State, perfectly captured in its aspect as demonic bureaucrat or infernal middle manager—a grotesque jester, elegant and malign, commanding. In the weeks that follow the protest—as I wrestle with the truth mechanism of the curtain, trying to grasp how it works—the two keep coming back to me; again and again I come up short, haunted by the sense that something eludes me.
- 25 The basic structure of the curtain is a veil, suspended before Parliament; through that veil, the executive locus of State power appears as if seen through the sinister, hovering heads of its victims—a haunted shape, incriminated. Something about that simple gesture—of covering something to reveal the truth of it—continues to nag at me. Superficially at least, the gesture seems to invert the epistemic movement of “apocalypse” (*apokalúpsis*): the lifting of the veil, the revelation or uncovering that brings truth. As a visual metaphor for knowledge, the lifted veil locates *truth* in the removal of an outer surface, in the clearing (or construction) of a line of sight that was previously obstructed. The truth of

uncovering or unmasking is subtractive, in this sense that it is generated in the removal of an impediment: *taking away* something, eliminating concealment, you arrive at the underlying reality. The truth of the skull curtain, however, is neither of the hidden depth nor of revealed appearance; it works instead by *addition*, through an adornment or supplementation that manifests the truth of its object more clearly than the object does on its own. As an optical machine it approximates the truthfulness of the photographic filter, if such exists: a truth that functions not by unmasking but by *masking*, in the application of a mask more truthful (somehow) than the face it covers; cousin and kin, I think, to the truths of caricature, exaggeration, and the grotesque. What is this if not a “skilled revelation” (Taussig 2016 [1998]: 273)? The curtain *is* the mask of the pig; an apocalyptic redescription that lifts one veil by applying another.

- 26 The pig and the curtain both possess, it seems to me, a similar intensity—a kind of vibrant, exuberant vitality; strange as it may seem, there is almost something joyful about them. It is not particularly hard to find a wellspring for this affect. “Apocalypse” may be the catastrophe of the world ending, but for some (for many), survival inside the territorial machine of the modern nation-State is *already* a post-catastrophic existence: a way of life that comes after the end of something else, composed in defiance, unfolding in the ruins of an undeclared state of war. Against this, the skull curtain drops like a demand, sudden and eruptive, to be *seen*—to exist in the present as something more than the memory of a supposedly resolved injustice, a relic of something that was finished. Necessarily, in forming a demand, the curtain also envisages (or creates) the possibility of things being otherwise. It forces into place *the possibility*, even if negated, of a world in which what it makes visible is seen. Playing both on “the end” and on “revelation,” thus, the curtain also points the way towards a third modality of apocalypse, one that lies just under the horizon: the affect of a *millenarian joy* (Cohn 1970), a celebration that revels in the end of the world—because with that end might also come freedom, the restoration of justice, an end to the Law of the Pig.

Coda

- 27 Two weeks after the protest, just a few days before Christmas, the Supreme Court returns its verdict. It is disastrous. With a four to one majority, the court overrules the two lower courts, overturning their verdicts and ruling the actions of the State lawful.¹⁷ The judgment seems almost demonstrative—an assertion of force in which the complex violence of the State makes itself obvious, to the point of excess. Even Norwegian-language media in the south question the verdict. For myself, I cannot help but wonder if the State has overplayed its hand here: as if in the ferocity of the counterattack it had revealed *to itself* its second face, the face it only shows to the disallowed; the cruel pig dancing among the skulls, murderous and grotesque—but also, in its own way, ridiculous. As I write this, Jovsset Ánte and his lawyer have announced they will be taking the case either to the European Court of Human Rights or to the UN Human Rights Committee; Máret Anne and her skulls are raising funds for the next round of her brother’s trial.¹⁸
- 28 In a now-deleted text,¹⁹ Máret Anne once described doing battle with the State as confronting “a dragon that no one else can see.” Over the months that follow, as the shock of the verdict fades and debates begin to unfold, one moment in particular keeps coming back to me. During the first day of the hearings, the leader of one of the governing coalition parties—Trine Skei Grande, of the Liberal Party (*Venstre*)—walked out

on the steps of Parliament and took a photo, which she posted to her personal Instagram feed.²⁰ The image went out, to her 8,000 or so followers, with the hashtag “#ChristmasMood” (“#julestemning”). What it showed was the annual winter market along Karl Johan, the main street that leads up from Parliament to the royal castle. Illuminated garlands wrapped the trees, market stalls sold candy-floss and boar sausage. In the centre of the image, across the park through a large glowing Ferris wheel, the royal palace itself was visible. An idyllic scene. In the foreground, tucked away near the bottom of the image, almost invisible, stood a small figure in a red jacket, next to a metal frame: Måret Anne, with her 400 skulls. Small, unremarkable—subsumed, almost entirely, in the smooth and expansive perfection of the Norwegian minister’s Christmas mood. Apocalypses come and go; worlds end without being noticed. The dragon (that no one can see) sees what it wants.

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NOTES

1. The work on the artist's site, <http://www.pileosapmi.com/pile-o-sapmi-tittelverket-av-maret-anne-sara/>, accessed April 10, 2019. Artist website, <http://www.pileosapmi.com/>, accessed April 10, 2019.
2. I use the term "apocalypse" here with particular reference to the "post-apocalypse theory" of the A'aninin thinker Sidner Larson, who observes that "American Indian people have recently witnessed the end of the world" (2000: 25) through the genocidal violence of settler colonialism. Anishinaabe scholar Laurence Gross (2015) also develops an account of apocalyptic trauma and the "post-apocalypse stress syndrome" of Native American survivors. More recently, see also Whyte (2018). I find this line of argument – that events such as the extermination of a people constitute the end of a world, and therefore an apocalypse – particularly relevant in the present context.
3. A Sámi term for a reciprocal, cooperative personal bond between a reindeer herder and a non-herder. The term translates roughly as "guest-friend": see, e.g., Sara (2002).
4. This is Scandinavia, after all. Ominous ghosts that emanate from the post-colony must follow the rules, like everyone else.
5. I capitalize that term here, "the State," as a nod to the various scholars who have explored its complex reality in registers such as sorcery, fetishism, magic, or psychoanalysis; see particularly Taussig (1992, 1997) – and for an overview of the classical literature on the subject, Hansen and Stepputat (2001). In some ways, for all its supposedly secularity, the "magical" aspects of the State – its omnipresence, say, its near-total saturation across every sphere of life – are nowhere more apparent than in Scandinavia.
6. A protracted battle against the government over the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Alta river, in Finnmark. The protests became a central moment in the ethno-political mobilization of the Sámi for indigenous and land rights in the second half of the 20th century: see, e.g., Minde (2003).
7. *Norgga Sámiid Riikkasearvi* (NSR).
8. The case received attention from a wide range of international media, including major German, British, Italian, and US newspapers: e.g. *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/europe/reindeer-norway-trial.html>).
9. See particularly Benjaminsen *et al.* (2016). In English, see also Benjaminsen *et al.* (2015) and Reinert (2014).
10. News article, <https://www.nrk.no/sapmi/doden-har-inntatt-finnmarksvidda-1.7405119>, accessed April 10, 2019.
11. As I have argued elsewhere, a biopolitics of the "barnyard space" – a parallel, perhaps, to Anna Tsing's discussion of the plantation as a spatial device: see, e.g., Reinert (2009, 2014), Reinert and Benjaminsen (2015); also Tsing (2012).
12. Newspaper interview, <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/k6wMk/--Naturen-ma-bestemme>, accessed April 10, 2019.
13. It is worth noting that within this optic, excess is *the only significant relation* between the size of a herd and its environment; the problem of insufficiently large herds is almost

unavailable, or unthinkable, within the logic of the dominant State narrative; Reinert (2013).

14. On this I have found Janet Roitman's study *Anti-Crisis* (2014) particularly useful; see also James Berger's classic text, *After the End* (1999).

15. On the biopolitics of the slaughterhouse, animal killing, culling, mass disposability, and "invisible" violence in the context of reindeer pastoralism in Norway, see Reinert (2009, 2013, 2014); also Reinert (2007).

16. "If we keep ignoring the responsibility," a Norwegian politician argued in 2010, criticizing her own government for acting with insufficient speed and force on the reindeer "problem," "nature will finally resolve the issue with a mass reindeer death. But of course we are a proper society, and we cannot conduct reindeer herding in this way" (my translation; emphasis added). https://www.nrk.no/troms/_-reinkrisen-darlig-handtert-1.7443722, accessed April 10, 2019.

17. Of the five judges, three were from Oslo. The one judge who gave a dissenting opinion grew up in the far north, in Vadsø – an area with a strong presence of reindeer herding. <http://nordnorskdebatt.no/article/norges-hoyeste-rett-jovsset-ante>, accessed April 10, 2019.

18. Her GoFundMe page is here: <https://www.gofundme.com/protect-sami-reindeer-herding>, accessed April 10, 2019.

19. Originally posted at <http://arcticarts.no/pile-o-sapmi/>, no longer available. Parts of the text are quoted here: <http://www.settnordfra.no/2016/02/kunst-mot-statlig-overgrep/>, accessed April 10, 2019.

20. The image on Trine Skei Grande's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BcUJnPifxwU/>, accessed April 10, 2019. Image now available on: <https://www.ifinnmark.no/finnmark/reindriftpolitikk/la-ut-julehilsen-uten-a-bemerke-reinskallene-i-bildet-forst-og-fremst-pinlig/s/5-81-645095>

ABSTRACTS

In late 2017, protesting the ongoing forced slaughter of indigenous reindeer herds in Norway, a young Sámi artist traveled to Oslo to set up a "curtain" of some 400 reindeer skulls in front of the national parliament. The demonstration drew considerable attention, both nationally and internationally, and mobilized a complex range of historical resonances—from the first Sámi protests against the Alta hydroelectric project, half a century earlier, to the vast piles of bison skulls that accumulated during the US campaign against the Plains Indians in the 19th century. Situating the curtain in a context of chronic state violence, indigenous invisibility, and crisis biopolitics, the article examines the multiple apocalyptic logics summoned in the work.

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Keywords: forced slaughter, pastoral economy, ecological demonstration, Sami

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