

Episode 1: Jumana Manna – Sebastia

Kåre Magnus: I flere år har KORO arbeidet med kunst til det nye regjeringskvartalet i Oslo. Kvartalet rommer en omfattende kunstsamling, og en rekke kunstnere har fått i oppdrag å skape nye verk for spesielt dette stedet. I denne sesongen møter vi seks av kunstnerne som har laget kunst til regjeringskvartalet. Samtalene handler om kunstneriske prosesser, samarbeid, og ideene bak verkene. Felles for disse kunstprosjektene er at de er skapt gjennom kollektivt arbeid. Det klinger godt på et sted som skal være en bastion for demokratiet. Og utføre det beste for fellesskapet.

Jeg heter Kåre Magnus Berg, jeg er kunstner og programleder, og dette er Verksted. Vi begynner denne serien på plassen utenfor alle de ruvende bygningene i det nye regjeringskvartalet. Hver dag beveger det seg travle føtter over et steingulv som ser litt ut som et puslespill av steiner i ulike størrelser og farger. Dette er et av kunstverkene i kvartalet som er tilgjengelig for alle. Det er laget av kunstneren Jumana Manna og har fått navnet sitt fra en landsby i Palestina som heter Sebastia. Gulvet er 800 kvadratmeter stort, på størrelse med en håndballbane, og er satt sammen av gjenbrukt stein, donert fra hele Norge. Hvorfor har akkurat disse steinene blitt valgt og hva er koblingen mellom regjeringskvartalet og et historisk og arkeologisk viktig område i Palestina?

Jumana Manna er en anerkjent palestinsk billedkunstner og filmskaper som er basert i Berlin. Hun har studert på Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo og har hatt flere utstillinger her, blant annet soloutstillingen *A small big thing* i 2018 og *Vi lever på en stjerne* i 2014, begge på Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Hun har også stilt ut på MoMA i New York og Tate Modern i London. Alle landets kommuner ble invitert til å donere stein til prosjektet. Et av hovedpremissene var å bruke rester av stein som allerede fantes, et annet viktig prinsipp var at disse, uansett hvor de opprinnelig hadde kommet fra, skulle omtales som norske. Verket består nå av et puslespill av rester fra blant annet fortau, murer, demninger, kirker, rådhus, skoler og gårder. Steinene kommer fra over 100 steder i Norge og inkluderer hele landet i kunstverket.

Kåre Magnus: Welcome Jumana.

Jumana Manna: Thank you.

Kåre Magnus: First it's a public space and it's open to everyone, but for those who haven't seen it yet, can you describe the artwork?

Jumana Manna: So the artwork looks like a huge puzzle or mosaic or collage made out of stone. And it's a very dense collage in the central part of the mosaic, that's a kind of elongated rectangular oval shape, and then it starts to break apart around the edges. As you mentioned, it has different colors. The stones are of different ages, some are fresh from very new constructions, some are 3 or 400 years old. Some are more organic shaped, some are very industrially cut, so a huge diversity of stone that represents the use of granite and similarly strong stone in the construction of modern Norway, it's the munitions, and it's rebuilding again.

Kåre Magnus: Sebastia is said to be an anti-monumental artwork. How does that term resonate to you?

Jumana Manna: Well because monuments are often representing leaders, states, big men and historical events, right? So it's anti-monumental in that way, that it's not something that it's erect, it's not something we look up at, it's not something that we kind of... it's something that we use, that we walk on, that will be consumed actually, like through our footsteps and become just part of the air. So it's anti-monumental in that way is that it's, it's not vertical, it's horizontal, it's flat, it's underneath your feet, it's not something you look up at. So it has, yeah, these are some of the basic kind of antithetical formal characteristics of the floor that move away from monumentality and what we normally understand as a monument.

Kåre Magnus: You were invited to make a proposal for the city floor. How did you approach this task?

Jumana Manna: Yeah. Well, it started with a very clear exercise from KORO, which is sometimes helpful. You had to have a lot of restrictions. Because then you don't have so many options. So the restrictions were that it needs to be a floor, which means it's flat. It needs to be made from Norwegian stone. That's basically it. It needs to be accessible and functionable. And already in the first meeting that they had with all of the invited artists to the closed competition, we had a review of the different quarries around Norway and all the fantastic colors and possibilities of extracting stone in Norway. And I just had an intuitive response that that seems like a terrible idea to extract new stone for building, rebuilding a floor. So my immediate response to the invitation was how to do this without extracting, without basically engaging with these quarries that we got an introduction to. So that's how the idea started. It was very simple. It was just limiting the exercise even further.

So okay it needs to be a floor, it needs to be made from stone from Norway or in Norway. So I kind of made that shift that I won't consider it Norwegian stone, but any stone that is in Norway will be considered for the project, even if it came from India, China, Portugal, wherever else. And then how can we fulfill this exercise without extracting new stones, but simply by reusing materials that are already there. Because I figured there must be tons of leftover stone all over the country. That was just an assumption, and it turned out to be true.

Kåre Magnus: It's a huge piece and a lot of work and so on. What was your first thought when your proposal were selected? Was it like YES or was it like oh god?

Jumana Manna: It was oh god! I was, I'm not sure I want to do this. Because it's a commitment for a long year, long term project. Four years in the making. And also just because of making something in front of the government. I mean, that's a huge responsibility and it's politically questionable also. Like how can you do an artwork that holds its own ground, that holds its own politics and form and won't be subsumed into whatever the government represents and that government represents different things in different times depending on the different elections, right? So I think there was more of these political questions that also I'm not Norwegian, I'm a guest here, I'm a long term cultural worker in this country and tied to the cultural scene, but the state doesn't represent me.

So what does it mean then to be doing kind of a major artwork in front of such a symbolic site of power. So I think this was the main concern I would say for me or the main kind of conceptual challenge. Because I would say the project itself is quite simple, right? Like how to build with reused materials and to find a form that speaks to these themes that I'm interested in which is gathering, a way of bringing things together but also insisting on

heterogeneity, that things don't get become the same, but that we kind of there's a lot of space for difference, for the uniqueness of every stone and that the form itself is brokenness. It's not something that's complete, it's something that you could imagine spreading even further, it doesn't have clear boundaries. So I wanted the formal decisions to kind of reflect the politics that I'm interested in and that I'm dedicated to. But I would say the idea is simple but it came with a lot of layers.

Kåre Magnus: How was the process of collecting the stones?

Jumana Manna: Basically we had to build an infrastructure to receive all of the donations.

Kåre Magnus: Where did it arrive? Did you have like a big space where the stones...

Jumana Manna: We did. Yeah. So we had to put in a system where, first of all, the call out to donations, first of all, we got a lot of enthusiastic responses, but there were some parts of the country that didn't reply, for example. So we had to make some phone calls and say did you see our call, would you like to participate, if you don't that's fine, we just want to make sure you got the call. So there was some follow up from the team to kind of make sure that because sometimes emails just get ignored or whatever. So it felt important, yeah, all of us. It felt important to give people a chance, especially in areas that we assumed were less staffed. Because that's something we noticed, some of the richer areas were quicker to give, to respond and to give large donations and what I assume are like less wealthy parts of the country were slower to respond. So it was an interesting research process to actually figure out what is the use of granite and similar strong stone throughout the building of modern Norway. So that was a big part of the research as well, to create almost a catalog of the use of granite, which first emerged in industry, so in factories and dams and a lot of energy, like in a lot of the waterways of Norway, dams and bridges, that's a major early use. And then with modern times it came to represent statecraft.

As you see also in the government, like with the G-block and a lot of the constructions around, granite became a more kind of standard European material for building cities and state buildings, tax buildings, prisons, schools and so on. We just needed to create a system that would relieve the pressure from me and from the artistic process. So what happened is Johansen Monumenthuggeri, who are a stone specified, yeah, stone crafts workshop, they were actually receiving the donations directly and they had to slice a lot of the stones that came in. Because sometimes we got stones that were in the range of thickness that we could use directly as a tile in the floor, but sometimes we got very big stones. And those needed to be sliced, like you would slice a loaf of bread or a cake or something. And so they would slice those into about 12 centimeter thick slabs. And then those would be sent to Lier. We worked in a barn outside of Oslo in Lier where we composed the dense part of the mosaic, me and Eystein Tollerås did that together. So that was the process kind of, the donations were coming in steadily over two years and we just integrated them into the puzzle or into the collage as they came along. So it was a very intuitive and playful process.

Kåre Magnus: So you made a sketch before that and then you made a system. How was it to work with the composition or the pattern?

Jumana Manna: It was improvisation. There was no plan. So I mean there were sketches, because improvisation always comes from knowledge of some kind, right? It's not random.

So the digital sketching was very important, and that I did already in the proposal phase before my work got selected, but I had to adapt it then once we agreed on the final square meters and shape and footprint of the work. What we did is, so there was the digital sketches which were again, they were like the brainstorm. So I thought, okay it's interesting to have circles next to squares, and then how do we fill the gap with well, banana shaped stones, and then with cobblestones that can be arranged like this, or like this, or like this. So the digital sketching helped already brainstorm because moving stones is very heavy and takes a lot of manpower and machines, so it was very useful to have the digital sketches with us printed out in the barn. But then essentially it was really just intuition. So we would say, okay this stone looks cool next to this one. It was just abstract collage essentially. But of course with time there was patterns that started emerging naturally. If you do something over and over again, it starts to... you start to find a pattern. But there wasn't any pre-existing patterns, let's say.

Kåre Magnus: During the process collecting stones, did you receive any kind of unexpected material or any surprises?

Jumana Manna: Um, hmm. The first roundabout in Norway! I think that was from Sandnes or something. Or the first roundabout in Sandnes. I really like these tiny histories, you know. Like this... like you know, who cares somehow, but also how amazing that you know that. That you know what's the first roundabout in your town, you know. So there was a lot of these like pride of these little stories that came from small towns that I thought were very charming and beautiful. And I think what's fun about the floor is you have that next to like a plinth from the Royal Castle. Or from what's the heavy water factory called now, I've forgotten the name... Rjukan. Exactly. Then you have like this really dense geopolitical history of Rjukan and the heavy water for nuclear, you know, bomb building and so on. And we got also like a tower, from a stone from the acid tower there, we got another like actually a piece of concrete, we made an exception because we thought this is such an important history and we cast it in in a resin of some kind so that it doesn't shatter. So those kind of a very important histories of Norwegian geopolitics and industry next to like a pavement or like a replacing of a cobblestone in Tromsø or... So I think that's what I like, this kind of very non-hierarchical treatment of these different histories, that they're all entangled as a part of again the landscaping, the building of the state and also the state's entanglement with other countries and other economies and political movements.

Kåre Magnus: Can you mention like a few details of the piece. There is for instance an owl in the...

Jumana Manna: Yeah, there needs to be an exception to every rule, you know. So the owl is the exception in the floor. Because it's the only figurative element. And the story of the owl is as such, is that most of the laborers on the floor were Polish, and Robert Adric, he's one of the stonemasons who worked with Agaia, the company who executed the floor with us, and he likes to carve owls. It's what he does aside from working part time as a construction worker in Norway, he's a sculptor and he makes a lot of outdoor animal, mostly animal shapes and statues for different public spaces, I think primarily in Poland. One day I arrived and he had carved an owl into one of the stones. And I was a bit confused actually. Because I thought wait a second, I didn't ask for this. And you've just included your artwork into my artwork. So at the... but I thought it was actually very interesting because I think...

Kåre Magnus: Some people would have been kind of irritated by it, but it was okay with it?

Jumana Manna: So yeah, I think my first response was okay this is charming, but I'm not sure what to do with it. And but I thought there is something interesting then because it points exactly to this issue of authorship that happens in these major artworks, right, is like there's always it goes back to the artist's name and so on, but there's so many people who are involved in making this floor. I mean, Eystein literally made the puzzle with me, for example. Robert was one of the ten stonemasons who were like chiseling the pieces so the puzzle fits more tightly together. Drew Snyder was also there not only as a curator, but also carrying stone and making decisions. So it really was a collective process. So I thought it only makes sense actually to accept the kind of, what to call it, like an unexpected gift from Robert. So that's where the owl comes from, it comes from Robert.

Kåre Magnus: And how did he react when you accepted the owl?

Jumana Manna: I think he was happy. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. He was happy.

Kåre Magnus: How many people worked on the project on site?

Jumana Manna: So the Agaia team shifted, sometimes there was three men there, sometimes six. When it was in crunch time at the end like max ten people. So yeah, it was a changing group. But then there was of course many others involved. So there was the team of Agaya, three project leaders there, there is of course all of the KORO team, there is all the donors who were sending stones, and there is the website that we built. So it's like I would say maybe around 20 people who are involved making the floor. The only stones I carried was like the smaller cobblestones and you know, things that weigh under 20 kilos.

Kåre Magnus: And how was it when you were finished from like from the idea and the sketches and how it looked like when you were finished with the piece. Was it quite similar to what you had thought or has it...

Jumana Manna: Yeah, it was strangely similar.

Kåre Magnus: Were you surprised?

Jumana Manna: Yeah, a little bit. I mean, it's amazing that that we ended up, we were able to manifest this vision. Because I remember seeing the digital collage and thinking this is so beautiful, it would be amazing to do this. And then it just exists now, so. Yeah.

Kåre Magnus: What is the connection between the village of Sebastia and the artwork?

Jumana Manna: Yeah. So first of all the concept of working with reused materials is more of a Palestinian tradition and something I bring from somebody growing up in Palestine. And shared I think with many places in the Global South. I think there is much more of a tradition of working with reuse, both because our homes are demolished so regularly by the Israelis and Palestinians are so stubborn they keep building their home time and time again. So I think there is this, and then there is just an older tradition called spolia, which was very popular both in the Byzantine era but more so also in the Ottoman era and is very prominent in a lot of Islamic architecture where stones were simply reused. So if there was like demolitions during war or whatever, these stones would be repurposed again. So this is

something I know from Jerusalem, from growing up there is when you walk on the streets of Jerusalem, the pavements of the old city are made from diverse stones and you can feel that some are like a thousand years old, some are from a few years ago. And there is this kind of patchwork of layers of time which I find so much more beautiful than unified surfaces that are all made from so called fresh materials. So I wanted to bring this almost anti-modernist or pre-modernist approach to uses of materials where we could use completely new materials, because of course some of the stones in Sebastia, in Oslo Sebastia, are made also from the leftover Evje stone from the pavements in the quarter. So there's new stone, but then again there is like from Nidarosdomen a stone there that's several hundred years old. And personally very much interested in this and how history lives with us in the present and how the present is never the present, the present is the layers of time that are coexisting in one place. So again, this is I think a more obvious thing in Palestine because it's an ancient place and there's many archaeological layers and archaeology is a heavily politicized issue since the colonial era from the 19th century. Archaeology was never neutral, it was always there to support certain national narratives, certain ideologies because you choose to prioritize one layer over the other. And this is what Israel and the Zionist project has been doing very heavily, is misusing the many layers of archaeology to tell only one story rather than the multi-layered history that Palestine carries.

Kåre Magnus: And what is the meaning of Sebastia to you?

Jumana Manna: So I felt that formally the floor always carried this kind of knowledge of archaeology and formal or aesthetic resonances with archaeological sites. And finding a title for a piece like this that again is both simple but I think is politically multi-layered was challenging. And I thought it would be interesting to give the floor a site name. So not like an artwork title, but a site, like somewhere to go to, a name, like like you would name a child or an offspring. I was just there brainstorming different archaeological sites that I thought had a nice sounding name and interesting reference, like stories tied to it. And Sebastia was one of the titles I thought of, I thought of archaeological sites in Gaza as well, and Greece and so on, but Sebastia stuck because it sounds like Sebastian. And so I thought that it sounds like it could sound Norwegian, you know, that it's easy for Norwegians to say that it's um... So we could say, you know, we're gonna meet at Sebastia. So it was important that it would like roll easily on Norwegian tongues, which is again what foreigners do when they move to Norway, no? You have to find a name that works in your culture and works in Norway.

Um, and then finally there was the fact that I'm working with ruins in a time when Palestine is being annihilated and the genocide is ongoing. And I'm... all I'm seeing throughout the three years of making this floor is the destruction of my people and all of our built structures in Gaza and not only, I mean now it's spreading to South Lebanon, it's across the West Bank. And so there was this irony I would say of having the honor and responsibility of taking care of all of these stones that people have given to me with their histories and cultural provenance that we're recording with so much care and means and so on, whilst we can't do the same in Palestine. So I wanted also to carry this experience into into the floor in some way because it was so present for me. And titling it was a way to orient that also for the memory of the work and in the moment in which it was built. I mean Sebastia is a site that was heavily affected by the Oslo Accords. I think by now the Oslo Accords have lost their glorious status in Norway and we know that those who were involved were now also in the Epstein files and it's been a hot mess. But we know as Palestinians that it was a deeply,

deeply corrupt project from the beginning and it was essentially the Oslo Accords was there to facilitate an easier handover of Palestinian lands to the occupation and to put in place a Palestinian authority that would manage the occupation for the Israeli occupation. So the Oslo Accords in Palestine is like a curse, actually. So we use the word Oslo all the time, but not speaking about the city Oslo that we're sitting in. Oslo is like, it's the end of the Palestinian revolution, it's the putting down of arms, it's a kind of capitulation of a vision of liberation in service of this idea of a state but without liberation. I was trying to figure out how I can reverse this. How, like the way we say Oslo all the time in Palestine to refer to something, how Norwegians can say a Palestinian place name in the everyday and that become integrated into a Norwegian reality in some way. And of course as a reminder of some kind of also Norway's entangled history with Palestine and ongoing responsibility towards it.

Kåre Magnus: One of the key words for this project might be democracy. What does that word mean to you?

Jumana Manna: Not much.

Kåre Magnus: No. I can imagine.

Jumana Manna: Maybe governance was more something that I was thinking about. Governance, how materials play into the governance of people and land. Democracy is an emptied out term today, unfortunately. As we've seen, like so much in the name of democracy has been actually xenophobic, anti-immigrant, fascist tendencies, hypocritical, I don't know. So I don't know what to do with the term democracy. Of course in principle it's something I support and we would need to see more of, but it's not a term I spend much time working on. So I think governance was a more useful term because we're in the government and the governance of materials is what I was interested in. So this interplay between the land, how the land is turned into material that serves economies and how those economies serve societies and transform the landscape again. So I think that term was the primary, one of the key terms that I was trying to understand and think about, and think about what kind of governance do we actually want.

Kåre Magnus: Does it help to make like a political statement through art?

Jumana Manna: So I think art has can do a lot, but helpful or not I think is a bit too reductive, but it does something in the world. Again, otherwise the Trump administration wouldn't be cracking down on museums, for example. I mean, so it clearly has a power. And I think what we've seen in the past three years with the genocide and all of the epistemological violence that has been a part of this genocide, which is the war on universities, on cultural spaces, you know, most extreme in Germany, UK and the US, but in softer way in many other places across the West. That's because of the power of art and what art can do in terms of promoting something that's different than what fascists and genocidal ideologies want to say about a certain people. And again, every movement needs a form. Every movement needs good music and needs to dance and needs good films to promote certain narratives and needs really good art as well.

Kåre Magnus: Maybe a hard question, but what do you hope that people are thinking when they're walking on it or look at the piece. What is your hope they're thinking when they see your artwork?

Jumana Manna: I hope they just enjoy it. I don't know. Yeah. I mean I can have all of these ideas and we're also coming out with a book that has more of the kind of discursive and political layers that the project I think carries. But in the end I think with public art I think it's important that it draws people, that there's a sense of love towards it. People like to encounter it because the worst case is when a public artwork just disappears, you know. It becomes like a piece of furniture in the city and nobody thinks about it anymore. So hopefully it's there just as a site of inspiration for whatever, you know, whatever people would like to read into it. And as a reminder I think of the importance of being aware of materials, you know. Like there is a lot of discourse around ecology and Norway's good at it discursively, but not so many artworks are paying attention to this. There is so much toxicity that goes also into production of artworks and exhibition making and, you know, there's a lot of waste. And this waste is part of the destruction of our planet, you know? So I think on a very basic level, I think the politics of the work is a kind of a refusal of waste and a refusal of disposability. And I hope that at least an appreciation of how beautiful that can be, you know? That if we actually take care of our leftovers, you can have something much more beautiful than trying to produce something new.

Kåre Magnus: I think it's a nice way to end the conversation. Hope and it matters. Thank you for the chat. Really nice to meet you.

Jumana Manna: My pleasure. Nice to meet you too.

Kåre Magnus: And good luck with your art and your life. So nice to meet you.

Jumana Manna: Likewise.