

Episode 2: Outi Pieski – Aahka

Kåre Magnus Bergh: 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 Bergh. Jeg er kunstner og programleder, og dette er Verksted.

Vårt neste kunstverk er rett bak de strenge sikkerhetsslusene med én gang man kommer inn i det som heter A-blokka. For alle som har gått forbi Regjeringskvartalet i Oslo de siste årene, har man vært vant til å se en gigantisk byggeplass med betongsøyler, stillaser og et konstant nærvær av bygningsarbeidere i hjelmer og signalgule klær. Så på høsten i 2025 var det akkurat som om bygningene begynte å tre frem fra kaoset. I blokka, som har nesten samme form som en A, en høy, spiss bygning som er godt synlig fra Akersgata gjennom store glassvinduer, kunne man skimte et ruvende portrett av en kvinne i et tradisjonelt samisk klesplagg med et blikk som ser ut som det stirrer på noe langt, langt borte. Hvem er denne kvinnen, og hva slags skjulte historier finnes i dette verket? Kunstneren du straks skal få møte heter Outi Pieski fra Sápmi og Finland, og verket heter *AAhka*.

Outi Pieski, you are a visual artist and have worked with art in public space before, also in Norway. Your work and artistry is very much connected to Sami craft, called duodji. And your art is exhibited both in the Sami Parliament in Norway and Finland, and acquired by the Norwegian Parliament. First, you were one of eight artists that were invited to present a draft for the new government quarter. What was your relationship to this space at that time?

Outi Pieski: It was a huge honor to get this opportunity to make the art proposal, and at the same time it was also kind of a challenging task to deal with, as an Indigenous Sami artist, to make an art proposal for a Norwegian state building, and to find a balance between all this colonial history. But then I started to think how important it is that we Samis are visible there where the decision-making is happening. I ended up thinking, how could I kind of bring the voice from the Sami lands to this government building.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: For those persons that haven't seen the piece yet through the window at the building, can you describe it? It's huge! It's like a big, big piece.

Outi Pieski: So *AAhka* is an artwork that is like the actual wall of the building, meaning it's a huge portrait of a Sami woman. It's 51 meters high, over 700 square meters, a triangular wall, and it's like a wooden relief made of wooden slats, with some painted and gilded decor elements. And when I was planning the work, the important idea was that it's not an artwork inserted to a building, like in the wall, but it is the actual wall. It cannot be separated from the building, from the architectural plan, but the artwork goes together with it. It's like a wall that is kind of keeping the building high up, and the meaning of *AAhka* comes from this power that it's having.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Sami craft, or duodji, is an important part of your artistry and central to this piece. Can you explain what duodji is, and what it means to you?

Outi Pieski: Well, duodji is like everything that a person is making and doing and being active. A holistic concept that puts together practicalities and practical things together with philosophical and spiritual concepts. I find it's like a collective way of being creative, like we are following the ancestral knowledge and the tradition, but then also putting our individual voices into the duodji. And some scholars have said that duodji is like a language that can be understood for a person who can read or understand the duodji language.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Dette er det største samiske offentlige verket i verden, godt synlig fra gata gjennom store vinduer, spesielt når det er mørkt. For de som kommer innenfor sikkerhetsslusene i Regjeringskvartalet og kan studere verket på nært hold, ser man at verket er laget av spiler av bjørk, som også er en del av den opprinnelige arkitekturen i bygget. Disse har Outi omrokkert til å skape bildet av kvinnen.

KORO announced a competition for an artwork for this particular location. When you were appointed, you already knew that the walls would be built by these pieces of wooden birch slats. It seems like the portrait is almost like a puzzle where you refurbished these pieces into what would become *AAhkA*. The huge wall is also leaning outwards. Can you tell me about the production phases? How did you start out, and how did you model the piece?

Outi Pieski: The starting point for the work was that I wanted to take seriously this use of the materials. And therefore I chose to work with this wall that was already planned to be there, and the architect had planned to make it from these wooden slats. So I just kind of rearranged the wooden structure so that this *AAhkA* could appear. The sketch is like a tiny drawing made by hand. And for the whole process, a very long process of some years, we really wanted to follow the original drawing and kind of keep the intimacy and this kind of personality that can be found in this kind of handmade drawing, even though the work was changed to the digital world and to these kind of digital drawings. It was a really interesting process, and sometimes you could kind of get lost in this digital drawing world, like "how to imagine how it will end up looking?" So in the end it was so exciting and kind of frightening to see the actual wall when it was built up.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: So you started with a drawing, and then it was a digital drawing, and then the whole piece was mounted on this huge wall in this huge building. How was that process, to actually make the piece on the wall?

Outi Pieski: That was actually the part that I was not involved in at all, because my work was already done at that point. Of course, there were others following the process from KORO, Public Art Norway, who has been a really wonderful producer for this project. I couldn't manage to work without them. And then the gilders were at one point in Oslo to make these gilded parts before they were mounted.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Did you get pictures during the process, or did you just see it finished on the wall?

Outi Pieski: I got some images from the process, and then I also visited there when the scaffoldings were still high in the place. The first time I was able to see the work... It was a

very, very frightening and exciting moment to visit the site. Almost nothing was possible to change at that point, except I found that the red colour in this decor element was not bright enough. So we needed to paint them again.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: You changed the colour?

Outi Pieski: Yes!

Kåre Magnus Bergh: På hodet har AAhkA en ladjogáhpír, en tradisjonell lue, og hun har en stor vandrestav i hånden, hvor det henger ti store messingringer. Noen av ringene er festet i et rombeformet symbol, og helt nederst mot golvplanet henger det 11 vandrestaver.

You said a little bit about it, but there's a lot of symbolic pieces in the artwork. If we start with the hat, it's like a crown-like shape. What can you say about the hat?

Outi Pieski: In *AAhkA* there are several meaningful duodji parts, and one is this *ladjogáhpír* hat, which is connected to the colonial history in Nordic countries, and its disappearance is connected to that. The *ladjogáhpír* hat has been used in the northern part of Sápmi, like in Finnmark and also on the Finnish side of Sápmi. But then it disappeared like in the 1850s, and it's connected to the times when the colonial powers took the heteropatriarchal culture to Sápmi and made the unbalanced situation between the genders. And there is a narrative that Laestadian priests said that the devil lived inside the hat, like in the horn part of the hat.

I have been working with this *ladjogáhpír* with an archaeologist, Eeva-Kristiina Harlin, where we have studied Sami women's history throughout this one old duodji item, the *ladjogáhpír* hat. And we claim that the disappearance of the *ladjogáhpír* hat represents the gender violence that came to Sápmi. One big part of our project has been to revitalize and start using the *ladjogáhpírs* again. When you see them in different places, you can find them as a symbol for a new decolonial feminism. It's a very good example of how the duodji practice is a collective way of being creative, and this kind of craftivism can be really important in a process when dealing with our past and present day's challenges.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: What symbols are in the walking sticks in this piece?

Outi Pieski: This specific stick that she's holding comes from the South Sami area. So *AAhkA* is kind of a person who is putting together different parts of Sápmi, like the northern part and also the South Sami areas. The walking sticks are also carrying a deep knowledge from the duodji practice, with all its details, which you can find from these real-size walking sticks. They are made by three Sami *duojárat*: Nils-Johan Labba, Per Stefan Idivuoma and Johannes Nilsson.

And then in these huge walking sticks in *AAhkA*, there is also one tiny detail: there is a spider staying in the walking stick, and also the ornaments come from the spider net. There is also a narrative that the spider is like a protector. So it's very good connections that we have with different nature elements.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: And then you also have a big brass ring?

Outi Pieski: Especially when you are inside the pyramid room, you can mostly see the hand that is holding the stick very firmly. There are several rings in the hand, with these brass

rings. I wanted to use materials that are speaking loudly, and the presence of the material itself is one meaningful thing in the work. It's a protective metal that in many cultures is meaningful.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: There are also some red triangular shapes here and there on the wall, and also in the floor in the room. They can remind you about a shape of a shawl of traditional Sami clothing. Is there a connection?

Outi Pieski: The triangle is one of the earliest ornament decors, in general in the world, like in crafting traditions, and usually it's talking about the ideas of fertility. And even though *AAhkA* is a half-portrait of a Sami woman, the person is kind of hidden into these ornamental details. So it's not this kind of typical monument of a person, but it's more a fragmental monument that is speaking throughout these fragments. And I find it's an important idea, what the *AAhkA* is talking.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Ordet *AAhkA* har mange forskjellige betydninger avhengig av hvor i Sápmi du befinner deg. Sett fra et sørsamisk perspektiv kan det bety kone, hustru, formor eller kvinnelige åndelige voktere av jorden. På nordsamisk betyr det lignende ordet *ahku* bestemor eller eldre kvinne.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Who is *AAhkA* to you?

Outi Pieski: *AAhkA* is the female guardian spirit in the land, like the Mother Earth. *AAhkA* is also a Sami elder in a sit-in strike in the Norwegian Prime Minister's room during the Alta action in the early 80s. And *AAhkA* is also the young warrior that is nowadays fighting against the industrial land use in the Sami lands. So it has many kinds of meanings.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Your ancestor, Golle Gáddjá, has been an inspiration in the whole creation of *AAhkA*. Who was she, and what did she mean to you?

Outi Pieski: Golle Gáddjá is my ancestral mother, who has grandchildren both on the Finnish and Norwegian side here at the Deatnu river valley. She's a matriarchal figure that lived during the times when the border between Norway and Finland was not yet closed, when the Sami society lived still more in the matriarchal culture or non-patriarchal culture. So I find that she's holding a knowledge that is very valuable nowadays, and we need to remember and learn it back. Even though it's ancestral, it's also really important in the present and talking about the future also. And one of the grandchildren of Golle Gáddjá is also Mari Boine, the famous Sami land guardian and singer. Mari is also one of the visual starting points for *AAhkA*, because we say that she's having the voice of the foremothers.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Samene har opplevd undertrykkelse fra statlig hold opp gjennom historien, både i Norge og de andre statene med samisk befolkning. Dette har ikke bare handlet om fornorsking, men også forhindring av at samene kan utøve sin kultur og sine tradisjoner. Fosen-aksjonene i 2023 protesterte mot utbygging av vindkraft i reinbeiteområder i Fosen-området. Fra Fosen går det en historisk linje tilbake til protestene mot utbyggingen av Alta-Kautokeino-vassdraget. På den tiden var det en aksjon hvor en gruppe samiske kvinner okkuperte statsminister Gro Harlem Brundtlands kontor i Høyblokka. Det er med andre ord ikke første gangen samiske kvinner har inntatt regjeringens gemakker.

Outi, you are yourself politically engaged in the questions of nature rights and Sami rights. How does this piece express this?

Outi Pieski: During the process when I have been working with *AAhka*, it was the times when there was the protest against the wind farm industry in Fosen Sami reindeer herding areas. So I have been following that closely and also taking part in the protests. And it has been really frightening how Norway is giving a terrible example of how a nation-state can ignore their own High Court systems. We know in Nordic countries there are many land and water right cases in the High Courts at the moment, and it's a very scary situation.

So *AAhka* is picturing Mother Earth as a legal person, and I have been interested in this term "earth jurisprudence", like the philosophy and the law and the human governance based on the fact that humans are only one part of the wider community of beings. This term can be used against the industrial land use in Sápmi, in Sami regions. There are certain places that hold the right as a legal person, and the people who have been living in the areas before the nation-states were legislated can be spokespersons for these lands. The Samis are the guardians of nature in our lands in Sápmi, and I think this kind of concept could be really useful when we are fighting against the industrial land use in Sápmi.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Having the history of state oppression in mind in Norway, was it at some point hard to make this piece in the centre of Norwegian state power?

Outi Pieski: For sure, it was a very challenging task as an Indigenous Sami artist to make an artwork for a state building. So often there is a nice colourful image on the wall, but we don't have any actual say in decision-making. So I find it very important that the work is bringing the messages from Sápmi, that we are still existing and we hold so much important knowledge for the decision-making that is happening inside this building. I hope that the persons who are the privileged ones who can enter the building, and who are in the position of power, when they face *AAhka* regularly in their everyday life, that it will affect somehow how they are working.

It's an interesting thing to think about public artwork and how it influences the audience. When we are in the cities, we are passing these public artworks, maybe not even thinking of them, but they kind of influence you secretly and give you messages. As we know, buildings of power and cities in general are filled with men in power, and when children are passing these statues, it gives this idea of how the world is built up. In many ways, I find that *AAhka* can have a different kind of image compared to public artworks from the old times.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: And how was it to see the work when it was finished, compared to the first drawing that you made of the piece?

Outi Pieski: It was a really frightening moment to go there and see it, and I was so relieved when I noticed... I found this understanding to my body like, "Oh, there is nothing wrong! I can see this." I was so relieved when I saw that it is like... we really managed to follow this tiny drawing. The small drawing was still visible there, with my personal connection and artistic practice, but then it was made of wood and by somebody else, not only with my small hands. It has been wonderful to work with a big orchestra with a lot of talented persons involved, and then it's really made together.

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Outi, so nice to have you here. Good luck with your art, and good luck in life. Thank you!

Outi Pieski: Thank you for this very nice conversation. Ollu giitu!

Kåre Magnus Bergh: Denne podcasten er produsert av Feelgood Film & TV for KORO, og er laget av Anna Katharina Haukland, Anne-Lill M. Hemmingsen og Nina Frang Høyum fra KORO. Manusforfattere er Anne Gerd Grimsby Haarr og meg, Kåre Magnus Bergh. Episoden er klippet av Jesper Topstad. Produsenter er Miriam Offerdal Berg og Thomas Olaisen.