

CHARLOTTE HASLUND-CHRISTENSEN in conversation with JANE ROWLEY 2008

You've called your exhibition *Natives: The Danes*. Why?

I remember when I was a child going to the local library and finding all these books about what were called Eskimos and Pygmies and other 'exotic' people - and their title was always like the title of my exhibition: 'Natives' and then a colon before the 'people'. But I never saw books like that about white people.

How did your current art project emerge?

It's taken a long time. In retrospect it feels like everything I've produced over the past decade has led me here. When I graduated from ICP [International Center of Photography] in New York in 1997 I realised that Greenland is never spoken of as a colony in Denmark. Unlike other nations, Denmark and Danes have hardly acknowledged their colonial past - or colonial present. And without that acknowledgement a post-colonial consciousness and critique has been difficult to develop or articulate in a Danish context.

How did your work in Greenland influence *Natives: The Danes*?

I originally set out to create a different image of Greenland to the images I'd been fed with in Denmark. For me the region had been reduced to two distinct visual stereotypes. The first, the exotic hunter and hunted polar bear in a vast white landscape. And the second, an alcoholised, depressed society. The first was easy to avoid - I was always more interested in urban contexts and modernity in countries where I had photography assignments for NGOs. But the second was more problematic. Because what I was confronted with were the very real issues of the violence done to and done in a colonised society.

So given the obvious influence of post-colonialism in your current work, why wasn't that something you wanted to develop?

I couldn't reconcile myself to being yet another white Dane depicting social problems in Greenland - producing the kind of images that are so obviously used to justify our presence there. Although I was really shocked by the sheer visual presence of colonisation. Something I'd never seen as a focus for the many Danes who had 'documented' Greenland photographically. Which in itself is interesting - the apparent longing for an untouched, 'authentic' people, unharmed by the sheer brutality of those who apparently thought they knew best.

I found myself on another continent buying stamps in post office that was identical to my local post office in Denmark. The counters, the curtains, everything was exactly the same. Made in Denmark, exported and installed. The supermarket looked Danish, the food on the shelves was the same as in Denmark. And perhaps not surprisingly, every time I went out at night as soon as people had had a few beers the anti-Danish feelings surfaced. And no matter how politically correct I might have felt myself and my work to be, I was just another 'fucking Dane' - another representative of the colonial power.

That in itself was obviously a personal challenge. But equally frustrating was that despite my efforts to avoid the cultural stereotypes that preceded me, when I came back to Denmark between my trips to Greenland I was

repeatedly confronted by how strong and all dominating the visual and photographic archive is. The influence of the representations people were used to seeing – and expecting to see. It was astonishing. A portrait of my good friend Rasmus from Qaanaaq would be met with comments like ‘Look, he’s wearing trainers,’ or ‘Is that an Ikea sofa?’ as if all Greenlanders still wear sealskin kamiks and live in igloos.

No matter what I did, I didn’t seem able to escape my images being constantly reinscribed, constantly relocated by others within the colonial gaze and its representations. That’s when I started to become really aware of the role played by photography in the creation and perception of ‘the Other’ – of just how powerful that visual archive is in generating and preserving stereotypes.

Within the visual archive, *Natives: The Danes* has an obvious basis in and critique of anthropological representations. When did that become a focus for your work?

When I returned from Greenland I started exploring my own family archive. My grandfather was one of the contributors to the anthropological archive I started researching - one of the white male explorers *Natives: The Danes* critiques through the performance of ‘an expedition’. My grandfather travelled to Mongolia in the 1930s, and wrote books about the adventure of meeting ‘a princess in the desert’. Books that before the TV age were probably the main representation of a Western fantasy of exotic, primitive, ‘authentic’ people.

I never met my grandfather – he died when my father was a child - but I grew up with this myth of the explorer hero who wrote books, brought artefacts back to Denmark’s National Museum – and took photographs. It was his archive at the Ethnographical Department of The National Museum where I started to explore the role of photography and the colonial stereotypes of Danish anthropology. I had, of course, also read Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

I’d say that it was during my research at the museum that the concept and political point of the exhibition became clear.

I know that you have had other major exhibitions between leaving Greenland and starting to work directly on *Natives: The Danes*. The experiential basis in Greenland and autobiographical basis with your grandfather predate the project. So why now?

I think the most direct political impetus for the project came from the rising racism in Denmark. At the last election in Denmark in 2007 twenty percent of the Danish population voted for a party whose main political platform is anti-immigration. That’s something I find shocking – and incomprehensible. Denmark is a wealthy country, unemployment is at a record low, so you’d expect more - not less - openness and tolerance. But instead there’s all this anxiety and political scaremongering. All this talk about ‘Danishness,’ which nobody - not even those claiming to protect it with anti-immigration legislation - can define.

I’m not claiming this as unique to Denmark. Increasing nationalism is one of the well-documented consequences of contemporary globalisation. But I do consider myself to have a personal responsibility as an artist from and in Denmark.

How did you decide to deploy your observations about the photographic archive, anthropology and racial stereotypes?

I'd never claim myself to be entirely free of stereotypes, prejudice or a Western colonial gaze. That would be naïve. But in my work I strive to challenge and deconstruct the mechanisms and representations that reflect, form and reinforce those stereotypes.

With *Natives: The Danes* I wanted to reverse the colonial gaze. To make ethnic Danes the object of the gaze, in the same way that Western visual representations have stereotyped others. Historically the links between Western colonialism and the invention of photography are well documented. Photography was seen - and all too often still is - as an objective and scientific medium. Its alleged transparency and direct registration of reality often distracts from or disguises the ideological role it plays. As far as I'm concerned - and I'm not alone - photography has been an obvious tool of colonialism in representing 'primitive' peoples and all that Western 'civilisation' has to offer. A virtually Darwinist discourse of cultural - and racial - evolution in which media representations - including photography - continue to play a central role in the global media.

During my research I found a book called *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* - a kind of fieldwork manual for anthropologists. It had a whole chapter on photography, including how to photograph 'natives': from the front, from behind, using tape measures and rulers. A pseudo-scientific approach of categories and measurements.

How has that influenced your methodology in producing *Natives: The Danes*?

Well, it wasn't as if there was a precise blueprint. But looking through the plates in historical anthropological texts and photographs a very clear pattern started to emerge. I decided to take the most dominant and common characteristics of traditional, anthropological photography and put another object in front of the lens - to subject Danes to one of their historical tools of colonialism.

There was also a performative aspect to the project, in that I adopted the role of my own grandfather and embarked on an expedition as an explorer attempting to chart the phenomenon of 'Danishness' by meeting the natives of Denmark. The expedition was complete with a local guide/interpreter, and the technical equipment necessary for documenting and registering my findings - all loaded into the expedition vehicle we travelled and camped in.

How was your role as a photographer incorporated in the expedition concept?

The historical basis of the project was underlined by my choice of an old Rolleiflex camera - on loan from one of Denmark's ethnographic collections. A choice that also emphasised the performance of the photographer and the photographed in order to challenge the alleged authenticity or transparency of the registration which photography as a medium still labours under.

All the natives I photographed were placed at exactly the same distance from the camera. A lot of time was spent measuring and positioning them and the camera and tripod. The actual prints in the exhibition could maybe have been produced digitally, but the performative aspect that emerged in using this

complicated old equipment made the roles of the object and subject in the act of photography explicit, which was important for me. I wanted to experience and demonstrate the conditions under which the representations that have entered Western public consciousness were created. The objectification involved is made very obvious in the act of setting up the shot and photographing in this way.

The people depicted in the works are also not photographed in their domestic surroundings. They are severed from context – apart from the obvious difference between urban and rural environments.

This was a very conscious choice, because otherwise the images would be open to an entirely different process of cultural decoding by the viewer – what kind of house, what kind of furniture, and all the cultural competence that goes into categorising people on that basis. In the exhibition itself the works are only titled 'Plate I', 'Plate II', etc. Those portrayed have no name, and their location in Denmark is on a separate blown-up 'appendix' of natives and region, as they often are in the anthropological texts I studied.

I've also deliberately – and ironically – cast myself in the historical role of the explorer, dressed as an upper-class, European male explorer at the turn of the last century. I did try a safari helmet, which would have been hilarious, but it was impossible to photograph wearing it. So I settled for a tweed and brogues explorer costume.

The next step is how *Natives: The Danes* will be seen when it's exhibited beyond Denmark's borders. Whether the images will be seen as some kind of authentic representation of a tribe, an entire nation, a continent, or 'the West.' Just as the minute slice of the lives of others staged for and captured through the anthropological lens has come to represent a claimed cultural truth about 'Africa', 'the Orient' – or in our immediate political context 'the Muslims.'

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