

PILOT STUDY #12

To listen is to hold out  
your hand, and let it  
be held by the other

Elina Waage Mikalsen  
Peter Meanwell



## INTRODUCTION

Between 2022 and 2024, Sea Sámi and Norwegian artist and musician Elina Waage Mikalsen undertook a long-form research, engagement, and performance journey that listened closely to the resonances between Sámi history, identity, and erasure, and the possibilities of experimental sound. Moving through music, noise, silence, and attention itself, the project traced how listening can become a site of shared memory, resistance, and imagination.

Initiated through an invitation from Peter Meanwell, Artistic Director of Borealis – a festival for experimental music in Birgon/Bergen – the work began with a simple yet far-reaching question: *What is Sámi sonic experimentalism?* Together with Indigenous collaborators from across Sápmi<sup>1</sup> and beyond, Mikalsen began by asking who is permitted to define experimentalism, who is listening and in what ways, and which frames shape our participation in sound. The project unfolded as a collective inquiry into power, perception, and the politics of listening.

Over time, three interwoven strands emerged: research and institutional development; Sámi community-centred work; and public presentations. These areas were not fixed from the outset but revealed themselves through an artist-led process attentive to necessity.

↑ Cover photo: Oglala Lakota artist and researcher Susanne Kite in conversation with Elina Waage Mikalsen at Borealis 2023  
Photo by Johanne Karlsrud

The work evolved in dialogue with Mikalsen’s own artistic practice, the cultural ecosystem of Norway during this period, the local political landscape of Birgon/Bergen, and most crucially the needs, values, and methodologies of Sámi experimental sound and music communities. The project culminated in a co-curated edition of Borealis in March 2024, featuring 17 Sámi artists across five days of concerts, installations, discussions, new commissions, and family events.

This wide-ranging project unfolded during a moment of heightened attention to Sámi artists, knowledge systems, and ways of working within Norwegian cultural life, as well as across Sámi communities throughout the Nordic region. It coincided with the publication of the state’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on the ‘Norwegianisation’ process, and its lasting impacts on Sámi, Kven, and Finnskog communities, as well as with powerful protests against the Fosen wind farms in Oslove/Oslo in 2023. Against this backdrop, the project listened not only to sound, but to history in motion – unfinished, contested, and alive.

<sup>1</sup> Sápmi is the homeland and cultural region traditionally inhabited by the Sámi people, stretching over Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Most of Sápmi lies north of the Arctic Circle, bounded by the Barents Sea, Norwegian Sea, and White Sea.



Márja Karlsen (SÁ/NO), Elina Waage Mikalsen (SÁ/NO) and Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg (SÁ/FI) perform at Borealis 2024. Photo by Thor Brødreskift

## Conversation

### Elina Waage Mikalsen (EWM):

Hey Peter! Should we start?

### Peter Meanwell (PM):

Bures, Elina! Where to begin? We first started talking about this project in 2021, I think. I had felt a growing discomfort that I had moved to Norway from the UK and didn't really know anything about Sámi culture. I remember seeing Ande Somby yoiking at an experimental music festival in Oslove/Oslo once, and wondering whether it was really experimental or not – if it was OK to present yoik in this context, or if it became an exoticisation?

I had initiated a system of 'artist residencies' at Borealis that invited artists with exploratory sound and music practices to explore the meeting of social and political ideas that their work might hold in dialogue with the organisation of the festival. And it started to become clear that, as a festival, we needed to think through our relationship as a 'national' institution with the legacy of Norwegian colonialism. How did we relate to Sápmi and Sámi artists? Did we have an obligation in that regard? Did we know what Sámi experimentalism was?

I'd heard you play at a Sound Art Symposium in Lufuohtta/Lofoten in 2018 and heard whispers about an amazing performance in Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland in 2019, so I wanted to invite you to this residency because your work was so embedded simultaneously in experimental sonic worlds and your own Sámi identity. It was proposed as an artist-led research project, and I'm really happy you said yes, even though, looking back,

I'm not totally sure we knew what the plan was or how we were going to move forward.

### EWM:

Hey Peter! Yes, or was it 2022? At least I remember talking on the phone with you while I was installing my work at the Lofoten International Art Festival. At that time, I knew about Borealis through sending a sound piece to your open call for radio works, but had never been to the festival myself. I still felt my work somehow fit within your frames.

I remember that I wasn't completely sure why you asked me, because while I had been working with sound, performance, and music in different shapes and formats, I had never thought about it in the term 'experimental'. To me, it all was related and connected, and I didn't put any label on it. Sometimes it was noisy and weird, sometimes more poppy, sometimes quiet and with moving bodies.

I had thought many times that there were few spaces for the things I made that were more musical, that there were no established conversations about Sámi experimental music or ways of experimenting, or places that would take care of those expressions. So, through our conversations, and as the project grew into what it became, with all its branches, the need to make that space and invite in other Sámis that I thought would share my experience and interest became stronger.

I'm really happy the residency turned into two years, and also that you and the whole Borealis team allowed for things to be unclear and indecisive. That way of working, I think, is really important and also quite rare in the world of festivals and institutions. Oftentimes, I found myself without answers to your questions or suggestions, and I guess it must have been frus-

trating. I often think back on the conversation we had about the Sámi way of disagreeing, which often is expressed with silence. I tried to be more vocal about what I thought after that.

### PM:

I remember when you told me about silence as a way of disagreeing – it was a paradigm shift in how I had been thinking about our conversations. I have a tendency to fill awkward silences by talking, so it also required me to slow down a bit, and think about how to give space in our discussions.

There are a few other moments that stick out: when we read parts of Dylan Robinson's text *Hungry Listening* with the festival team, it opened up the conversation beyond you and me, and asked some quite complex questions of the organisation. I remember watching the delivery of the Truth and Reconciliation report on TV together and suddenly the weight of that history felt very apparent.

I also remember understanding that there were inherent tensions in what we were proposing, or at least what I had proposed in the funding applications: that engaging with a broad public potentially risked a trivialising of what we were trying to do. That the need for space for this community of Sámi experimental music/sound makers was more important than another 'introduction to yoik' panel discussion. The moment we started to write to ticket holders, asking them to get up to speed through reading and listening, felt like quite a radical gesture in that direction.

At the same time, I'm conscious that you were also doing a lot of heavy lifting, being asked to represent a whole sector of Sámi

artistic practice within a very Norwegian organisation and field (even if we kept saying that you weren't speaking on behalf of anyone else but yourself). Even though so many positive things came out of it, I wonder whether it might have been too much to ask of one person? Whether we had too high expectations of the project?

**EWM:**

Those times, those days in the winter and spring of 2023, where we were reading together, the Fosen demonstrations were happening in Oslove/Oslo, and the Truth and Reconciliation report came out, I remember well. It was a sense of urgency; of long grown issues and violations towards Sámi people, culture, and land coming to the foreground, and it was impossible to not be affected by it. It was, and is, personal.

In our work with the festival and the connecting events we created, it felt good to have a very concrete way of channelling all this energy into things that were building community within the Sámi experimental scene. I can also now see clearer that the reason it was challenging to make all of the ideas come to life was both the amount, me being only one Sámi person, and the big events happening for Sámi people that year, that were both personal and political.

It felt good to ask something from the audience, to refuse to cater for ignorance and having to repeat the same conversations again and again on the basics of Sámi culture. It feels important to stop doing that, because it keeps our culture from developing, and our conversations from deepening. Or at least, I don't want to do that; I would rather like to create space for us to speak and perform on our own terms, and that the audience can inform themselves beforehand.

I was thinking about time, about how the residency itself became two years instead of one, and also that we were allowed to use the spaces and rooms where concerts or performances were going to happen for many days. We could get used to the rooms, 'live into it'. That almost felt like a luxury in the fast-paced reality we live in. But also communication and time, where the Sámi half-hour could turn into a few months of waiting for an answer from an artist, and then suddenly come together very fast. I guess it's not a question, but something that was very present during the whole project, that time was stretched.

**PM:**

Right! I learned a lot about time, and also had to reconsider some of my assumptions and expectations around communicating. I think the culture funding bureaucracy that supports culture in Norway has inadvertently created certain expectations around how artists should think and work. That projects need to be developed and 'sold' before they are even funded or begun. That results can be somehow imagined in advance, when the work might be process-based. Certainly the 'Sámi half-hour' presented some challenges for strict funding deadlines, but it also challenged me to push back against the system, and make stronger cases for unknown outcomes, for process-leading projects.

As we were inviting people to the festival, especially when it took months to hear back, I had this insecurity that artists based in Sápmi might not want to come, might wonder what the point was of going to a festival in Birgon/Bergen, which is outside of the core Sámi area. But on the mornings when I'd walk in to the festival hotel, and there would be a critical mass of amazing Sámi artists, musicians and yoikers at breakfast, it felt that we had achieved something through the gathering of people, through creating space not just for the audience to

hear brilliant artists, but in the hosting, and bringing together of these artists who don't often get represented together on the same bill. This was something that you insisted on the whole way through – that holding space for the community was vital to the entire project.

In retrospect, I see that what the Nordic colonial project was and continues to be about is the removal of language, dismantling of community, and then commodification and exotification of Sápmi for tourism or energy production, or resource extraction. To invest in, and facilitate the building of community, not for the entertainment of a majority Norwegian audience, but for the nourishment of the Sámi artists on their own terms, was a small step in addressing these legacies. Maybe that is one of the strongest things that I step away from this project with – how these structural changes are almost more important than any representational act, and that, as an institution within a colonial context, it is vital that these structures and assumptions are challenged. Because if we're not challenging these, then we're just benefitting ourselves, and perpetuating the dismantling of the cultures we're claiming to celebrate.

**EWM:**

There is an inherent scepticism from Sámi people towards the intention of Norwegian institutions, naturally, that makes the communication a bit harder sometimes. What is it that you want from me? How will I be presented? Am I the only Sámi or Indigenous person on the programme? How will you make sure this is not a one-time thing, but an actual attempt to create bonds and build knowledge on where I come from? These are questions I often ask myself. Working with Borealis made me more aware of how each and every little institution and organisation

should understand and take a role in the reconciliation process with the Sámi people. To do work that builds community is one way, and in the end I'm extremely proud of the process and the programme.

---

**SAMI PHRASES & WORDS**

As posted in the Borealis office

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| (Ollu) Giitu     | (Many) Thanks                                   |
| Bures            | Hello / Good day                                |
| Buorre beaivi    | Good day  |
| Ipmel atti       | Good day (response)                             |
| Mu namma lea...  | My name is...                                   |
| Mo manna?        | How are you?                                    |
| Bures dat manna! | It's well!                                      |
| Oaidnaletne!     | See you later! (For two persons saying goodbye) |
- 



Issát Sámmol (SÁ/NO) performing live at Borealis 2024. Photo by Thor Brødreskift [↑](#)

## On Sámi Listening By Elina Waage Mikalsen

*This text is based on an introduction talk given by Elina Waage Mikalsen at the gathering ‘Šuvva – A Talkshow-Collage’, part of the third edition of ‘Máhcaheapmi (Responses)’ by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 29 March 2025.*

I wanted to talk about a Sámi perspective on listening and our sounding world. How does it differ from, let’s say, Western ways, how can we get to know ourselves better through looking at our musical, oral, vocal, listening traditions? To understand our aural world and how we might listen to it, I want to look to our language, and how our language carries these inter- relational bonds between humans and our siblings the mountains, the rivers, the birds, the happenings long forgotten, our dead ones, our loved ones.

I want to start with the word *jietna*. Jietna means both sound and voice. To me, that says something about a Sámi worldview, where every little sound is a voice, where our surroundings are alive, have agency, and are in constant negotiation and relation with us. The whistling trees, spirits, animals, flowers, stones and human-made objects around us does not just make sound, they are voicing their existence, the history they carry. When I listen, I’m also listened back to, our voices clashing into each other in constant relation, a two-way transaction. So how may I listen?

In Sámi, hearing is *gullat*, and listening is *guldalit*. Guldalit also

means to feel, to touch with your hand. As I see it, to listen is therefore not just an act of receiving sound to your eardrum, but also a careful stretch towards something, to feel it with your hand, with your ears, or with your whole body, to really understand it.

So how do we listen to what is inaudible, to listen with our hearts, with our spirits and. through our dreams? What do we hear from our oral stories? The symbols on our traditional clothing, the *gákti*, the patterns in weaves my grandmother wove, the tools our ancestors held in their hands, the shoe ribbons found in the old barn in my mother’s village, saved from some family members eager to clean out everything by putting it on fire. They talk, and with their voices they share ancient knowledge about the bonds between everything.

We could ask ourselves, who am I to listen to this? Did this place allow my presence? Did I ask for permission? Who am I to enter this inter-relational system and take for granted that these sounds are for me to catch with my recorder and use as I please? I ask myself, from where do I listen? Which stories, experiences, and privileges might I have that created the place I listen from? Positionality matters. Listen without intent, listen without the goal of progression and recognition. I believe a Sámi way of listening is built on permission to take part and relations made over time immemorial. I believe it carries a responsibility.

In 1906 the Norwegian geologist Amund Helland wrote in his book on the people in Finnmark:

“The small songs the Finns in Finnmark call *luohtte*, is accompanied with a monotone melody, which in stranger’s ears

sounds utterly uncomfortable. The content is normally quite poor and the structure itself is very uneven. When they drink, they improvise some gibberish with grunting sounds. Yoiking is a peculiar recitative, but cannot really be counted as poetry and song.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 1600s, the Swedish priest Olaus Niurenius described, after a trip to Ume areas, a *noaide* (Sámi shaman) yoik like this: “[...] and then this man sings his songs with a hideous voice, like a barking dog.”<sup>2</sup>

The sámi word for yoik is *luohti*. This is our own vocal tradition, older than most vocal traditions in Europe. As we also know, it was for a long time forbidden by the forming nation states that sent missionaries into Sámi lands. Through a prohibition of yoiking, our bonds to our world weakened, leading to a break in the relationship many Sámis have to our own *luohtis*, and thereby, the land.

Luohti is the art of remembrance, it’s the music of memory, of the mind. It is our lands, Histories, and people reoccurring in song through our bodies and our voices. It moves as the subject yoiked moves, and because it’s circular, it can be both very short, and potentially everlasting. The *luohti* creates a valuable and important picture of an embodied sound practice, a sound practice with deep connections.

More than just a memory or a portrait, there is a mutual connection between the one who yoiks and what is being yoiked, for instance where the river comes to us, but we also journey to the river. It is a passage in time and space, a shift or glitch; a landscape where everything is alive, and each time the *luohti*

<sup>1</sup> Helland, Amund (1906, p. 375), *Norges land og folk : topografisk-statistisk beskrevet : topografisk-statistisk beskrivelse over Finmarkens amt*, Aschehoug, (my own translation from Norwegian to English)  
<sup>2</sup> Plantinus, Ericus (1905, p. 21), *Lappland, eller beskrivning över den nordiska trakt, som lapparne bebo i de avlägsnaste delarne af Skandien eller Sverge av Olaus Petri Niurenius jämte svar på åtskilliga frågor rörande lapparne av Ericus Plantinus*, Wretmans boktryckeri, (my own translation from Swedish to English)

is yoiked it reappears as it was at the time the luohiti was first made. Luohiti is an aural trace, a trace of time, or perhaps a witness?

How can truth and reconciliation relate to listening and hearing? I think we can all agree that for the findings of the report, and the lived experiences of all Sámi people, it can be hard to see how truths shared, and reconciliation achieved, can happen in practice. The space between truths and, ultimately, reconciliation is so grand, there's so many actions to be taken, so many feelings to be expressed. And there is so much listening to be done, so much listening beyond hearing, beyond our ears.

To start to understand truth, reconciliation, and listening, we might look at the word *gulahallat* – a North Sámi word put together by the words *gullat*, ‘to hear’, and *hallat*, which is a reciprocal suffix, meaning it happens in relation to other beings and is mutual. *Gulahallat* has multilayered meanings. As Britt Kramvig, Hanna Ellen Guttorm and Lea Kantonen describe in their text “Pluriversal stories with Indigenous wor(I)ds creating paths behind the next mountain”:

“As *gulahallat* is connected to hearing, or listening in-between and hearing or listening together, it is basically something that one can only practise with others. [...] *Gulahallat* emerges from and with my body-heart-soul meeting the environment, encountering the land, encountering the waters, encountering the animals, the plants, the human beings.”<sup>3</sup>

This event, and the Šuvva platform, are trying to create space for Sámis and other Indigenous people to express their truths, the voices from in between, the stretchy, strange, secret, exper-

imental, explorational, unexploited, unceded, unrecognisable world of sounds, music and listening, and want to invite you to be witnesses to that – to listen, to let your bodies be filters for these soundwaves, these stories, these secrets, these unreadable messages, these dreams.

Even though you sometimes might find yourself not understanding what you hear, even though what we tell is not pleasurable, even though you don't recognise it from within your own listening positionality, we need you to witness it. We need you to listen to our voices, to our actions, to our knowledges, but more than just listening to it, you are also responsible for what you hear, for how it makes you react, and what actions you take. We need our truths to land somewhere.

Not long ago, I was in the audience when an artist spoke about being an Indigenous artist in this world, and she responded to a question about gut feeling by suggesting, “*Guldat suorpmaguin!*” – Listen with your fingers! – And my ears are indeed fingers, they are hands stretching out to lift the song being sung, to let the fingers run through the story you tell, to hold the dream up for others to see. To listen is to hold out your hand, and let it be held by the other.

Viktor Bomstad (SÁ/FI) performs *Mosku* at Nordnes Sjøbad, Borealis 2024. Photo by Thor Brødreskift



3 Guttorm, Hanna; Kantonen, Lea; Kramvig, Britt (2019, Volume 3, Issue 2, p. 157-159), *Pluriversal stories with Indigenous wor(I)ds creating paths to the other side of the mountain*, Sámi language and culture association



Gangere (SÁ/NO) performing live at Borealis 2024. Photo by Thor Brødreskift



Wimme & Rinne (SÁ/FI) playing live at Borealis 2024. Photo by Thor Brødreskift

## CONTEXT

This text is one of the pilot studies of *Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action*. In these contributions we explore and reflect on artistic practices and experimental approaches in the cultural field that can engage and activate audiences and communities to address ecological, social, and political challenges. The pilot studies provide an overview of practices of cultural organisations that can serve as models, recipes, or tools for transformation for current and future generations of cultural workers and artists.

*Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action (2023–2027)* is a four-year transnational co-creation and circulation project of fourteen interdisciplinary art organisations across Europe. The project aims to equip and empower young Europeans through artistic practices to better withstand societal challenges triggered by rapid climate change.

The Re-Imagine Europe partnership is a collaboration of:

Paradiso<sup>(NL)</sup>, Sonic Acts<sup>(NL)</sup>, Elevate Festival<sup>(AT)</sup>, INA grm<sup>(FR)</sup>, A4<sup>(SK)</sup>, Borealis<sup>(NO)</sup>, KONTEJNER<sup>(HR)</sup>, BEK<sup>(NO)</sup>, RUPERT<sup>(LT)</sup>, Disruption Network Lab<sup>(DE)</sup>, Semibreve<sup>(PT)</sup>, Parco Arte Vivente<sup>(IT)</sup>, Kontrapunkt<sup>(MK)</sup> and Radio Web MACBA<sup>(ES)</sup>.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Elina Waage Mikalsen** is a multidisciplinary artist and musician from Romssa/Tromsø. She works with sound, textiles, text, performance and installations, drawing on a Sámi understanding of the world, with hidden stories and knowledges. Based on her áhkku's (grandmother's) weaving tools, she builds her own musical instruments, creating sonic spaces between reality and fantasy. The holes that Norwegian colonisation left in her own family history have become a starting point for fantasising about and discussing what these gaps represent, and how they still effect people's understanding of themselves. Mikalsen runs Šuvva, a platform for Sámi experimental music, sound and listening. She has a Master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslove/Oslo and has exhibited and performed at institutions such as Toronto Biennale, Oslo Kunstforening, Kunsternes Hus, Munch Museum, National Museum in Oslo, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Singapore Biennale and Lofoten International Art Festival.

**Peter Meanwell** is a curator and radio maker working with experimental sound, music and listening, and their intersections with social and political concerns. He is currently director of Lydgalleriet, an exhibition and community space in Birgon/Bergen, Norway, dedicated to sound and listening practices. From 2014 to 2025 he was the artistic director of Borealis – a festival for experimental music – commissioning and programming new music, as well as sound and art works for a yearly festival. In 2014, Meanwell also founded Reduced Listening, a radio and podcast production company based in London, UK, producing progressive arts and politics content. He occasionally writes and teaches, and is also a co-author of *The Breakfast Bible*, a compendium of breakfast recipes.

Author Elina Waage Mikalsen  
Peter Meanwell

↳ [re-imagine-europe.eu](https://re-imagine-europe.eu)

Photos Thor Brødreskift  
Johanne Karlsrud

Copy editor Alice Rougeaux

Publication Annette Wolfsberger  
Coordination

Graphic Design Henri Kutsar

Publisher Paradiso Press 2026

CC Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0  
International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)  
[creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0)

This pilot project was curated by Peter Meanwell, and produced and mediated by Borealis – a festival for experimental music – in collaboration with Birgon ja biras sámiid searvi (the Bergen Sámi Association). The project was generously funded by Arts Council Norway, Nordic Culture Fund and Nordic Culture Point, with project support from Vestland County Council and the Fritt Ord Foundation and was a part of Re-Imagine Europe, co-funded by the European Union.

*Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.*

**BOREALIS**  
en festival for eksperimentell musikk

