

*Inuk Silis Høegh:
Arctic Vertigo*



Contents

Inuk Silis Høegh: Arctic Vertigo

Essay by Manuela Well-Off-Man, PhD, Chief Curator,
IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA)

Page 1–14

TV for Earth, Wind, and Fire: Inuk Silis Høegh's Media Sovereignty

Essay by David W. Norman – Essay in connection with *Inuk Silis Høegh: Arctic Vertigo*, MoCNA

Page 15–26

Object list in MoCNA's exhibition

Page 27–28

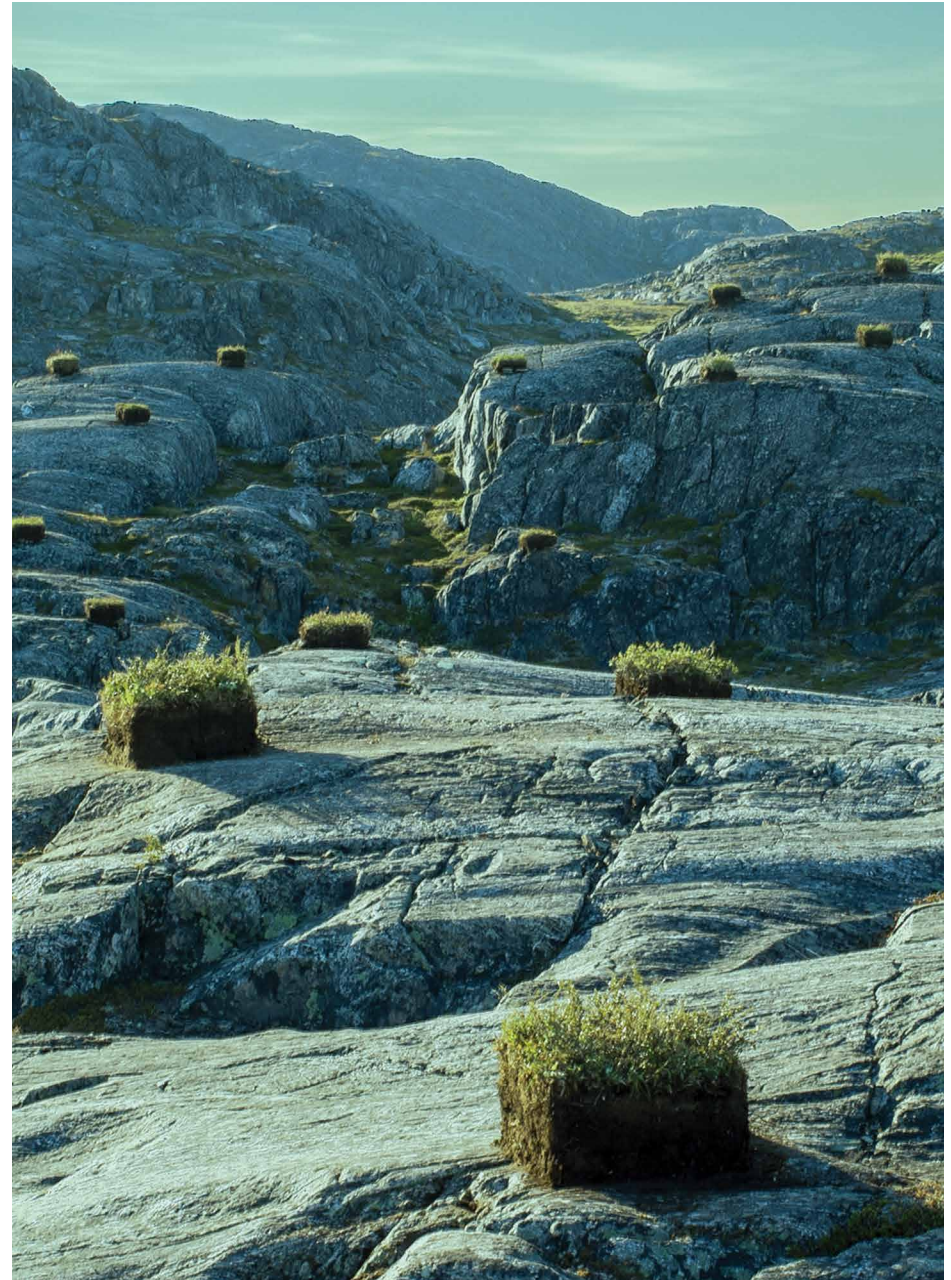


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Inuk Silis Høegh, *The Green Land*, film and land art installation, 34 min.; Inuk Silis Høegh, director; Jacob Kirkegaard, sound artist; Emile Herling Péronard, producer; Ulannaq Ingermann, cinematographer.

Inuk Silis Høegh: Arctic Vertigo

Manuela Well-Off-Man, Ph.D.

“Art can help us ask questions and see the world from a new perspective. Pose questions. To myself as well. It’s all right that it hurts and that they’re difficult to answer because the most difficult questions are the most important ones to answer.” - Inuk Silis Høegh

Inuk Silis Høegh: Arctic Vertigo explores the Greenlandic artist’s experimental and interdisciplinary art practices, including film, installation, sound art, printmaking, and wood carving. The exhibition challenges misconceptions about Inuit art and culture and offers insights into current issues such as the effects of globalization, climate change, on the Arctic and its Inuit population, as well as the impacts of colonization in the North. Høegh’s art contributes to the revival of Greenland’s spirit of independence from Danish rule and reflects the country’s new identity.

Based in Nuuk, Greenland, Inuk Silis Høegh (Kalaaleq) was born in Qaqortoq, Greenland. He graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from the Royal Danish Art Academy in 2010. His work has been shown in Greenland, Denmark, France, Iceland, Finland, Latvia, and Germany, and his short films and documentaries have aired on TV and at film festivals all around the globe.

Films

An award-winning filmmaker, Silis Høegh challenges stereotypes about Inuit, chronicles Greenland’s way to self-government, and addresses environmental threats the country is facing. In *Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution*, he documents the first rock band to sing in the Greenlandic language and captures key moments of cultural and political awakening. Høegh’s new feature film, *The Green Land*, examines Greenland’s monumental nature at a time when the country is undergoing drastic changes and its fragile ecosystem is threatened by the climate crisis.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *The Green Land*, film and land art installation, 34 min.; Inuk Silis Høegh, director; Jacob Kirkegaard, sound artist; Emile Herling Péronard, producer; Ullannaq Ingermann, cinematographer.

Silis Høegh’s *The Green Land* is a feature film and land art project that explores human interference with nature and invites contemplation on the Arctic in a global context. Organized in four stages, Silis Høegh presents Greenland’s epic landscape, where the color green takes shape as fire, water, earth, and air. The viewer is slowly guided through the arctic terrain, which, at times, seems extraterrestrial, partly due to the barren landscape and partly due to the estrangement effect of the color green. Hinting at recent changes and potential threats to Greenland’s monumental nature, the green color appears to be an alien threat or a salvation, depending on how one perceives the landscape—as pristine or poisonous. Greenland’s rich oil, gas, and mineral and rare earth metal deposits, including uranium and lithium, have caused a rush among foreign companies to extract these natural resources. All the while, global warming melts the inland ice and exposes these rich reserves. In the meantime, Greenlanders are struggling to balance economic growth and environmental protection.¹

In the land art component of this work, Silis Høegh places cubes of vegetation on ancient rock formations to let creation and destruction, or manipulation of nature, mirror each other. The images are haunting and almost surreal, even though the filmmaker chose not to use computer-generated effects. The rugged mountains, deep fjords, majestic ice, and lush lowlands take center stage as Silis Høegh intervenes, rearranges, applies color, and adds smoke to investigate key questions. Is the Arctic wilderness only wild because humans cannot control it? Or is it humanity itself that is out of control? Are we witnessing a slow death or a new beginning—apocalypse or creation? However, unlike politically correct art of the 1990s or recent environmental documentaries such as *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), which offers a sobering but visually often stunning look at the horrific ecological damage wrought by modern human civilization,² Silis Høegh's approach is subtle, complex, and sometimes enigmatic, inviting viewers to ask questions and discuss what they just experienced. As art historian David Winfield Norman argues, "These are nothing like the images of ecological catastrophe we've become used to seeing on a daily basis, either in news media or in much self-described 'Anthropocene art.' *The Green Land* instead presents us with a much more indefinite, insidious process of things falling out of balance, of land becoming alien."³ Silis Høegh is more interested in exploring dualities, like fiction vs. reality, and discovering new spaces.⁴ Even though *The Green Land* does not have an actual message, Silis Høegh hopes the film "will help raise new questions about our nature and climate change."⁵

His award winning film *Sumé—The Sound of a Revolution* portrays the progressive Inuit rock band Sumé (Where? in Kalaallisut) during the 1970s—a time when Greenlanders were challenging Danish authority and pushing toward self-governance. As the first rock band to perform in the marginalized Kalaallisut language, Sumé creates songs that inspired and accompanied a political and cultural revolution in Greenland through their outspoken lyrics. One of Sumé's founding members explains, the group's name investigates the question, "Where do we stand in our development, and where are we going?"⁶ The band was part of a youth movement which motivated Greenlanders to reclaim their identity and independence. The protests ultimately led to Greenland's Home Rule Act in 1979 and Act of Self-

Government in 2009. However, Sumé's songs, supported by the majority of Greenlanders, strive for a complete independence from Denmark.⁷ Film critic Stephen Dalton remarks, "Even if the band's soft-rock melodies sounded deceptively mellow, their first album featured a cartoon of an Inuit native dismembering a Norse invader. Hard to miss the subtext, however darkly comic the image."⁸

The documentary combines archival footage, interviews, and rock music, capturing the spirit of nonconformity and change of that time. A reappearing bright red amplifier connects the film narrative with the exciting sound of this revolution. Allegorical images such as the miniature rock band playing in front of a colossal iceberg illustrate the transformative power of music and art. The use of private footage from the 1970s allowed Silis Høegh to portray the socio-political climate of the time and tell the story of what really happened in an authentic way, which became one of the goals of the film. For example, the artist borrowed 8-millimeter film sequences from film producer and collaborator Emile Hertling Péronard's grandfather, who was the first Greenlandic minister of Greenland in the Danish government. The footage shows people opening up in front of the camera, since they knew the filmmaker. These scenes are very different from official Danish TV broadcasting clips "where people were all stiff."⁹

Commenting on the rock band Sumé's influence on Greenland and its music legacy, Silis Høegh explains, "the Sumé revolution, the political revolution, was also a musical revolution. [Band members] went on to Greenland to record a very long series of Greenlandic music. They made a record label, which was the first Greenlandic record label, and they recorded hundreds of records with new Greenlandic bands and a lot of them singing politically."¹⁰ While Sumé inspired an entire Greenlandic tradition of rock music,¹¹ according to OCAD professor of art and science Eric Nay, Silis Høegh's documentary *Sumé: Sound of a Revolution* illustrates, "how stories can be told and travel across time and space through music as a medium."¹² David Winfield Norman points out, "But more than that, it woke viewers up to how much "the big questions of the 1970s," as one young woman interviewed in the film put it—questions of sovereignty, identity, justice, and the politics of history—were still relevant today."¹³



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Angutit* (men), ca. 2003 - present, driftwood, plastic. Image courtesy of Nuuk Kunstmuseum.

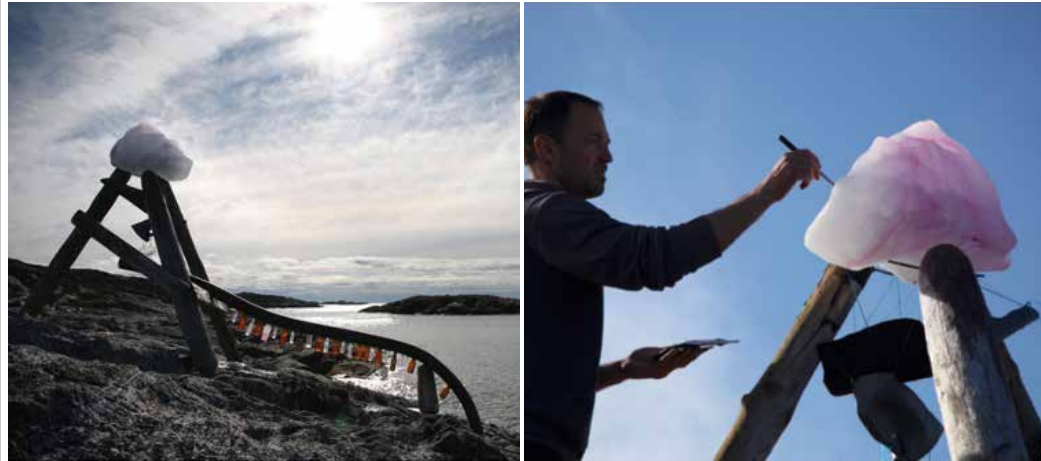
Sculptures

Silis Høegh's hand-carved *Angutit* (Men) sculptures are influenced by historic wooden figures from Greenland, which were created to accompany storytelling about everyday life or for praise or smear purposes. Made of wood, bone, and plastic, two of Silis Høegh's sculptures, *Kunuk* and *Kaali* (2003), merge characteristics of these traditional figures with pop culture. "The two worlds meet in the raw material wood and toy figure plastic legs—horror meets play," comments writer Laura Lentz.¹⁴ The figures are part of his *Angutit* body of work, which challenges the notions of traditional Greenlandic art and pop culture.

Kaali (Karl) was inspired by a male carved figure, believed to be a fertility figure, collected by the anthropologist Therkel Mathiassen in ca. 1931.¹⁵ *Kaali* has the same armless torso and wild eyes as the historic carved driftwood figure. Silis Høegh replaced the two wooden legs with six plastic legs from action

figures, which makes *Kaali* look like a villain from an action movie. The fantasies of both worlds, spirit world and pop culture universe, manifest in the figure. *Kaali*'s composition juxtaposes the old against the new, the organic against the inorganic; a historic fertility figure faces the ideal plastic body of an action figure.

Kunuk (Knud) consists of driftwood with two plastic feet from an action figure. Looking at the feet, it seems *Kunuk* is hiding in the wood block, giving the figure a playful character. Compared to the expressive *Kaali*, *Kunuk*'s composition draws attention to the figure's material. At the back, one can see a faded writing on the driftwood, inviting viewers to speculate where the driftwood came from.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Ice Poem in a Bottle* (also known as *Taanna*), ca. 2013, time-based installation, found objects (driftwood, plastic bottles, frozen sea ice, red ink), ca. 5 ½ x 10 ft. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Installations

Both Silis Høegh's films and his sculptures analyze aspects of life, cultural values, and changes in Greenland. His installation *Ice Poem in a Bottle* is an example of Høegh's experimental art processes. Made of driftwood and beach litter, the "melting machine" addresses the ecological consequences of cargo cults. The work's original version was created for the 2013 Paris exhibition "Cargo Culte Revue II."¹⁶ Curator Sophie Lapalu argues, "By 'Cargo Cult,' anthropologists

meant to designate all the magical beliefs and practices of [isolated Indigenous communities, such as] the Melanesians used to hasten the arrival of the cargo, that is to say the sum of wealth of European origins. However, this is an ethnocentric capitalist interpretation: it is in fact not the quantity of possessions that distinguishes a man in these societies, but the circulation of them . . . 'Cargo Culte Revue II' thus aims to be a space of living words, of exchange, a political space in movement."¹⁷

Silis Høegh explains, "in Greenland—in our isolation on our island at the end of the world and with our scarce resources and industry—we have an artificial relationship to all the products we import. Almost everything is imported from abroad. We have no relation to the manufacture or material, and still we keep asking for more. I wrote a poem or maybe some sort of prayer. I found this place out in nature where a lot of driftwood, plastic, and other material was stranded . . . I built an altar, or a melting machine, from the found materials. I wrote my prayer on a piece of ice and melted it on the altar and down into these bottles found in that place . . . the sun putting the words into the bottles—I'm not finished with finding out what it means . . . Some form of message in a bottle asking for more or less of what came from far away."¹⁸ The increasing demand for more not only impacts Greenland's fragile ecosystem but also those of the rest of the world.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Ice Poem in a Bottle*, ca. 2013, time-based installation, found objects (driftwood, plastic bottles, frozen sea ice, red ink), dimensions variable, Greenland National Museum and Archives. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The new version of *Ice Poem in a Bottle*, on view at MoCNA, consists of some of the driftwood and a small bottle with Silis Høegh's melted ice poem from the original installation. Arranged in a row along the wall and accompanied by photographs depicting *Ice Poem in a Bottle* installed on a beach in Greenland, the work transforms into conceptual art whereby the idea of an artwork is emphasized. Viewing the driftwood remains and small amount of inked ice evokes thoughts of disintegration of organic material like wood and other natural processes, such as the melting of ice. In this context the new version of *Ice Poem in a Bottle* seems to allude to ideas of transience, brevity of life, and irrelevance of material values.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Oqarusuppunga or Words in Bags*, 2006, installation, plastic bags, string, light and sound. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Silis Høegh's art installations often combine familiar objects and repurposed found materials to investigate and comment on feelings of alienation, frustration, or powerlessness. He explains, "**Oqarusuppunga** ('I want to speak' in Kalaallisut) is a multimedia installation dealing with my trouble communicating my inner thoughts to the world. My feelings and thoughts are trapped. It's frustrating not to be able to truly utter what's inside. The words I whisper are an inner

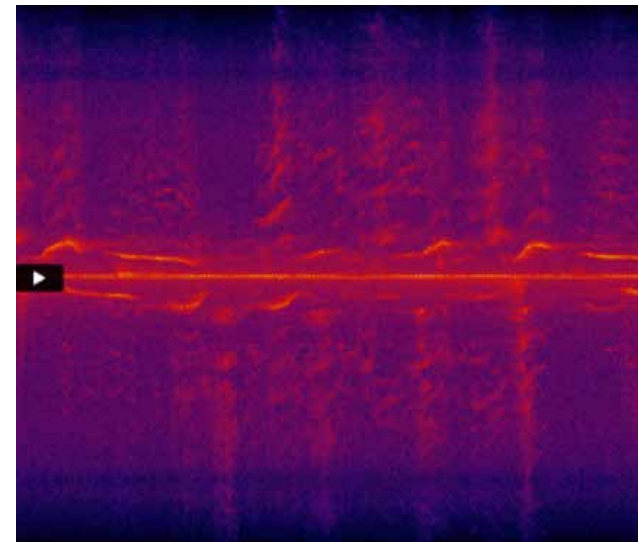
dialogue, words attempting to break out. They express my longing to release my thoughts.”¹⁹ His *Oqarusuppunga* or *Words in Bags* installation also investigates whether art and technology can help us to communicate and understand each other better. The plastic bags filled with the artist’s inner dialogues seem to have a life of their own as they react to movement in the room. Set in motion by the air in the gallery, the inflated bags move in relation to each other and in relation to the viewer’s movement. However, unlike other immersive and interactive installation art, such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *Pulse Topology*, which consists of 3,000 lights,²⁰ or Christopher Bauder’s (WHITEvoid) complex laser projection *FLUIDIC*,²¹ Silis Høegh’s work doesn’t need a lot of energy and expensive technology to engage the audience. By using his own voice and found objects such as plastic bags and strings, he creates a more intimate, yet thought-provoking, playful, and poetic art experience. *Words in Bags* responds to the viewer’s presence and participation, while inviting them to contemplate communication and human relationships in modern society. The installation combines art and sound to address the struggle of sharing inner thoughts and feelings, create intimacy, and strengthen our sense of community.

Print & Sound Art

Fascinated by the sounds of nature, Inuk Silis Høegh conceived the idea for his *Audio Abstracts* when he recorded the calls of a peregrine falcon during a reindeer hunt. His *Audio Abstracts* are digitally processed audio spectrograms printed on aluminum and accompanied by corresponding sound recordings. Viewers can enjoy finding their own images in the abstractions of the spectrograms and choose whether to listen to the sound from the frozen sea ice, narwhals singing at the bottom of the sea, or humpback whales communicating with each other in Greenland’s Davis Strait.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Audio Abstracts*, 2020, spectrograms reprocessed digitally on aluminum. Image courtesy of Greenland Institute of Natural Resources.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *Male Humpback whale, Davis Strait, Winter 2007*, spectrogram reprocessed digitally on aluminum with corresponding sound files. 68.11" x 82.68". Image courtesy of Greenland Institute of Natural Resources. Go to <https://nipit.natur.gl/> to listen to the sounds.

Silis Høegh explains,

The nature of the explorer is not very different from that of the artist—both try to see the world in new ways, and explore spots in the universe that have not been visited before . . . I have always been interested in how sound creates images in my head . . . Audio spectrograms are generated by a computer program and used, among other things, by sound engineers to examine the characteristics of a sound recording through sound frequency, volume, and time. For example, in biology the audio spectrogram can be a useful tool for analyzing animal and nature sounds.

For the *Audio Abstracts*, I have further processed audio spectrograms into graphic color collages. The titles of the works bear witness to the origin of the images as sound recordings from specific places and situations, and I invite you to look for the figurative imprint of sound. I am fascinated by the contrast generated by the transformation of spectrograms into abstract artworks and the familiar sounds, thus creating new adventurous spaces. Because in the abstract color making, the viewer has room to experience his own landscape—his very own place.”²²

Silis Høegh’s *Audio Abstracts* visualize the tranquil sounds of the Arctic in nonfigurative spectrograms, allowing visitors to create their own mental images when viewing the artworks or listening to them.

What unites Silis Høegh’s art is his interdisciplinary practice using found or repurposed objects, resampling common conceptions, addressing environmental threats, and promoting Greenlandic culture and values. Through his works and exhibitions, Silis Høegh elevates contemporary Greenlandic art internationally and contributes to the contemporary Inuit art movement.



Top to bottom: Inuk Silis Høegh: *Arctic Vertigo* exhibit image, images courtesy of the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts Museum.

¹ Betsy Reed, “Nature Doesn’t Fix itself Fast: Greenland Weighs Up Economy v Climate Crisis,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/07/greenland-weighs-up-economy-v-climate-crisis>.

² Bilge Ebiri, “Film Review: Anthropocene: The Human Epoch,” *Spirituality and Health*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.spiritualityhealth.com/reviews/film/2019/04/12/anthropocene-the-human-epoch>.

³ David Winfield Norman, “TV for Earth, Wind, and Fire: Inuk Silis Høegh’s Media Sovereignty,” essay included elsewhere in this publication.

⁴ Inuk Silis Høegh explains, “When I’m in nature by myself, when I hunt, for instance—I think about how as an artist, I’m hunting for images - or discovering new spaces.” Interview with Inuk Silis Høegh, anorakfilm.gl/green-land, December 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=842662823254463>.

⁵ Ann-Sophie Greve Møller, “Inuk Silis Høegh on New Artwork: It Is a Spiritual Experience to be Alone in Nature,” *Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa*. September 20, 2022, <https://knr.gl/da/nyheder/inuk-silis-h%C3%B8egh-om-nyt-kunstv%C3%A6rk-det-er-en-spirituel-oplevelse-v%C3%A6re-alene-i-naturen>.

⁶ Inuk Silis Hoegh, email to the author, December 19, 2023.

⁷ Adriana Craciun, “Interview with Inuk Silis Høegh,” The Arctic Environmental Humanities Workshop Series, Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies, and the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge, December 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Th6H-7Z48>.

⁸ Stephen Dalton. “‘Sumé—The Sound of a Revolution’ (‘Sumé—mumisitsinerup nipaa’): Berlin Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/sum-sound-a-revolution-sum-775218/>.

⁹ Adriana Craciun, Interview with Inuk Silis Høegh.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Berlinale Nighttalk with Inuk Silis Høegh, Sumé—Sound of a Revolution,” *RadioEins*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCbMk4J9i3Y>.

¹² Eric Nay, “Re-telling ‘Sumé: Music and Revolution. Music and Nationalism,’” *Progressive Connexions*, June 2021, <https://www.progressiveconnexions.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Eric-Nay-draftpaper.pdf>.

¹³ David Winfield Norman, “TV for Earth, Wind, and Fire.”

¹⁴ Laura Lentz, “Inuk Silis Kunnak and Kaali,” Nuuk Kunstmuseum, <https://www.nuukkunstmuseum.com/da/bagom-vaerket/inuk-silis-hoeegh-kaali-kunuk-2003/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The term “cargo cult” was first used in anthropology during World War II and describes the belief among isolated Indigenous communities that material wealth can be obtained by worshiping symbols associated with Western technologically advanced societies and imitating colonial officials in the hope of attracting similar benefits. “Cargo Cult,” *Britannica*, updated November 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cargo-cult>.

¹⁷ Sophie Lapalu, “Cargo Culte II, 2012,” accessed December 30, 2023. <https://ddabretagne.org/en/artists/eva-taulois/artworks/cargo-culte-ii>.

¹⁸ The installation was originally titled “Taanna.” Inuk Silis Høegh in David Winfield Norman, “Kalaaleq Filmmaker and Interdisciplinary Artist Inuk Silis Høegh,” *First American Art Magazine* (Summer 2011): 67-68.

¹⁹ Inuk Silis Høegh in email to the author, December 13, 2023.

²⁰ Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s light installation mimics a landscape of upside-down mountains and valleys using touchless biometric technology, which responds to the pulse of visitors’ heartbeats, thus changes with every visit. <https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/exhibitions.php>.

²¹ According to WHITEvoid, “FLUIDIC combines 8 high-speed laser projectors, a point cloud formed by 12,000 spheres and the interactions of its visitors to transform Hyundai’s design philosophy *Fluidic Sculpture* into a vivid art experience” during the 2013 Milan Design Week, WHITEvoid, artists’ website, <https://www.whitevoid.com/fluidic/#:~:text=FLUIDIC%20combines%208%20high%20speed,into%20a%20vivid%20art%20experience>.

²² Inuk Silis Høegh, “The Artists Words About the Works,” Greenland Institute of Natural Resources, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://nipit.natur.gl/>.

TV for Earth, Wind, and Fire: Inuk Silis Høegh's Media Sovereignty

David W. Norman, Ph.D.

For a few minutes in *The Green Land*, Inuk Silis Høegh's boundary-crossing novella film, a dense, frozen surface is all that appears on the screen. The camera has drawn us unnaturally close, as if we've left behind the scale of human perception and are seeing from the vantage of ice itself, watching as a trickle of green slowly appears. The color is subtle at first, perhaps a patch of grass emerging from a thaw. But like a stain bleeding through the screen, this green quickly consumes the ice's interior.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *The Green Land*, film and land art installation, 34 min.; Inuk Silis Høegh, director; Jacob Kirkegaard, sound artist; Emile Herling Péronard, producer; Ulannaq Ingermann, cinematographer.

The Green Land is a slow burn. Over the film's thirty-four minutes, we watch this deeply unnatural color contaminate the four elements. Green fire scars a field of lichen, green smoke consumes cliffs, and earth begins to levitate. On one level, this ghostly disturbance calls to mind extractive industries that have been eying the real, off-screen landscapes of Nunarput/Kalaallit Nunaat in

recent decades. Silis Høegh in fact began developing this project shortly after the Inatsisartut (Greenland's parliament) repealed his country's zero-tolerance ban on uranium extraction in 2013.¹ Although the repeal was later rolled back, it brought the threat of nuclear crisis disturbingly close to home. The film itself, however, makes no reference to any recognizable environmental conflict. These are nothing like the images of ecological catastrophe we've become used to seeing on a daily basis, either in news media or in much self-described "Anthropocene art."² *The Green Land* instead presents us with a much more indefinite, insidious process of things falling out of balance, of land becoming alien.

Silis Høegh has explained that his work takes shape in "the space between fiction and reality, between a subject and the representation of it"—and *The Green Land's* unnatural nature is an excellent example of such a space.³ As strange as these screen-mediated elements might be, they appear strikingly, disturbingly real, which reflects the fact that no postproduction special effects were used to manipulate the film's visuals, aside from superimpositions and dissolves.⁴ In both his filmmaking career and his art practice, Silis Høegh has found many ways of challenging realist conventions. He has developed innovative approaches to the documentary format, as in his award-winning film *Sumé: Mumisitsinerup nipaa* (*Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution*, 2014), which traces the history of Kalaallit Nunaat's first rock band. Many of Silis Høegh's conceptual projects, on the other hand, cunningly subvert mundane elements of daily life, as in the installation *Exit* (2001), one of his first works produced for an exhibition context. Although Silis Høegh has included moving image media as components of several exhibitions, his art career initially grew out of a desire to break away from film's narrative structure, flattened spaces, and administrative hassles.⁵ *The Green Land* is his first major work to deliberately blur the line between art and cinema.

Why have these two worlds just now collided? Is there something about the film medium that makes it uniquely suited to portraying the environmental upheavals ravaging the planet? As Silis Høegh has explained, *The Green Land* seeks to expose "how we humans take possession of land and ultimately will change even the most remote

spots in the world.”⁶ The most direct example of this is the mass expropriation of collectively-held land in service of private property regimes and extractive industries, but camera-based media have their own history as tools for “taking possession.” Just as fences or borders enclose and divide territory, images have been used to colonize land “down to its last square inch,” as the Kalaaleq and Danish artist Pia Arke wrote when discussing colonial photography.⁷ Likewise, film’s capacity to generate lifelike moving images has enabled it to control, manipulate, and exploit perceptions of reality, including by widely circulating misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples, as Michelle Raheja (Seneca) has documented.⁸

But maybe, when wielded differently, film’s capacity for fine-tuned observation can magnify perspectives beyond colonial and anthropocentric points of view. As the film collective Isuma (Inuit) explains, since media have historically operated “as covert forces of persuasion [...] then to decolonize anything first must make potentials of noninvasive, non-persuasive media visible in a multiverse of alternate possibilities.”⁹ Perhaps this is what *The Green Land* is trying to get at by turning our gaze away from the actions of humans, showing instead how those actions reverberate through a “natural” world that’s becoming increasingly unrecognizable. It might seem impossible to show this process without further invading land, or turning ecological violation into spectacle, or exerting equally exploitative control over viewers, but it’s exactly this sort of nonexploitative media ethics that Silis Høegh has been working towards since the start of his career. Across his wide range of film, video, and media advocacy projects, his practice shows us how, like natural and unnatural forces cycling through an environment, media can either support life systems, or break them apart.

Exit Strategies

In 2001, a television monitor broadcast media’s “persuasive” forces on loop in the atrium of Katuaq Culture Center. The TV set, perched above a pile of VHS tapes like an idol as part of Silis Høegh’s installation *Exit*, joined several other objects representing strategies

desperate people use to drop out of society: a rifle jutting through a mirror and a pair of beer bottles inserted into eyeglass frames.¹⁰ The TV continually played two ten-second clips: one taken from an American western movie, the other from a piece of pornography. This pairing defined the video medium in specifically commercial terms (the ten-second spot was for many years considered TV’s smallest saleable unit).¹¹ With these images of smut and pop endlessly looping inside the installation’s claustrophobic space, it’s easy to imagine viewers succumbing to the sort of TV-induced numbness that Marshall McLuhan called media’s “Narcissus-narcosis” effect. *Exit*, in other words, unmasked commercial television as a medium that sucks the life out of its viewers in a manner comparable to the tragedies of alcoholism, suicide, and drug abuse. With this work, Silis Høegh called out patterns of media consumption that were complicit in harming Kalaallit life—as Ivan Burkal noted in a review, “The exit could easily end up being a one-way street.”¹²

To many Nuummiut who visited *Exit*, the experience of watching low-quality, foreign films on endless repeat may have felt familiar. In the early 2000s, non-Greenlandic film and television remained overrepresented in Kalaallit Nunaat’s media landscape, a result of years of inadequate funding and the Danish media industry’s history of problematic dealings.¹³ In 2007, dissatisfaction with a general lack of support for local cultural industries boiled over when the Inatsisartut canceled plans to open a national design school. In response, arts activists, including Inuk Silis Høegh, founded the protest movement Anersaarta (Let’s Breathe), which lobbied for the formation of a cultural secretariat and drastic increases in the government’s arts budget. In his contributions to the movement, Silis Høegh frequently explained how important it is that media reflect the community they circulate within, stating in one instance, “We would just like to imagine a scenario where we participate in creating some of the cultural offerings on the table. So that we could assure that the cultural experiences we mirror ourselves in are closer to our actual lives, what we represent.”¹⁴

Silis Høegh's filmmaking career had from the start reflected this commitment to community-anchored storytelling, which particularly resonates in his comedic short film *Sinilluarit* (Goodnight, 1999). When he founded the production company Ánorâk Film in partnership with Emile Hertling Péronard (Kalaaleq Inuk and Danish) in 2011, the pair broadened this work to a much larger scale, starting with one breakout documentary.

Televising the Revolution

In the 1970s, before Anersartaa, a different cultural revolt intersected with nationwide demands for self-determination that culminated in Kalaallit Nunaat achieving home rule in 1979. Throughout that decade, youth activists, especially those associated with Kalaallit Inuusuttut Peqatigiit (Council of Young Greenlanders, KIA), vocally called out the economic inequality, forced removals, repression of cultural heritage, and general lack of control over local affairs that characterized Danish imperialism. At the heart of this revolt was Sumé. Accompanied by wailing guitars and the loudest drum tracks they could muster, the first rock band



Sumé Rock band, members: Per Berthelsen, Malik Høegh, Hjalmar Dahl and Hans Fleischer (1972 – 1977). Image from the website, <https://www.last.fm/music/Sume/+wiki>

to perform in Kalaallisut roared onto the scene with songs that shamed capitalist liquor dealers selling misery, commemorated the town of Qullissat whose 1,200 residents were forcibly relocated in 1972, and shouted out calls to wake up and reclaim control after 250 years of sleep. In their track “Kalaaliuvunga” (I Am a Greenlander), they even gave a platform for revitalizing qilaatersorneq (frame drum dancing and singing), which missionaries tried to outlaw in the previous century. The song mixed Egon Sikivat’s (Kalaaleq) drumbeats with a trippy, quintessentially ‘70s guitar wail, and between Sikivat’s ajajas, the band sang out an uncompromising appeal to self-empowerment: “Inuuneq isigalugu / ingerlaannarneq ajornaqaaq ila / Inuuneq misigalugu / uninngaannarneq ajornaqaaq ila.”¹⁵

Sumé: Mumisitsinerup nipaa, Silis Høegh’s documentary of the band, struck a chord in Kalaallit Nunaat and around the world. A close creative collaboration between Silis Høegh and creative producer Emile Hertling Péronard, the film filled a gaping void in music history, telling the story of a rock phenomenon that brought radical messages and a completely new sound to small towns, land-based political gatherings, the Roskilde Festival, and everywhere in between.



Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution, 2014, Feature documentary Director: Inuk Silis Høegh, Producer: Emile Hertling Péronard, Cinematographer: Henrik Bohn Ipsen, Editor: Per K. Kirkegaard Sound Design: Jon McBirnie and Rune Hansen, Sound Mix: Rasmus Winther, Production company: Anorak Film 73 minutes.

But more than that, it woke viewers up to how much “the big questions of the ‘70s,” as one young woman interviewed in the film put it—questions of sovereignty, identity, justice, and the politics of history—were still relevant today.

From a cinematography standpoint, the film made striking use of found images to communicate this resonance. While traveling across the country for research, the crew found hours of private super8 footage of daily life between the 1950s and ‘70s—almost all shot by Kalaallit amateur filmmakers showing life through their own eyes. Almost none had ever been shown publicly. After the film opened, Silis Høegh and Péronard gifted this collection of footage to the public through the freely accessible film archive Inuiaat Isaat (Eyes of the People).¹⁶

Sumé: Mumisitsinerup nipaa also cleverly subverted the exoticizing gaze of colonial film history. In some scenes, Sumé’s call-to-arms protest ballads are juxtaposed with kitschy early 20th century images shot by anthropologists (who have long produced sensationalist and deeply misrepresentative portrayals of Inuit communities) so that the folks depicted in them now appear to be readying for battle. The effect is similar to a juxtaposition Silis Høegh incorporated in one of his best-known projects: the happenings and multimedia installation he produced with Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen titled *Melting Barricades* (2005-6). The project turned colonial power on its head, but through somewhat different methods than *Sumé*. *Melting Barricades* assembled a fictional Greenlandic army to invade Denmark (and then the world) utilizing all the requisite tools of a colonizer, including a recruitment video. The short video *Sooq Akersuuttugut* (Why We Fight) borrowed its name from an actual propaganda film series produced by the US State Department during World War II. Again, it paired footage of Inuit captured through anthropologists’ lenses with commercial TV images and messages that reframed their agency: now they were called on to defend the homeland from a world “ready to take over our culture and our human and natural resources.”

But between the project’s machine gun qajaqs and map of Denmark covered by a new inland ice, *Melting Barricades*’s tongue is planted firmly in its frozen (melting?) cheek. And here is the subversive, complex humor that is one of Silis Høegh’s

calling cards. The project laughs at the colonizer, but it also poses questions to nationalist rhetoric. The *Sumé* documentary illustrates how present-day achievements in cultural politics are indebted to the activism of the ‘70s, while *Melting Barricades* indicated that new power dynamics are also on the rise, dynamics that pose new questions as well. As Silis Høegh explains, “More than pointing towards answers, I attempt to question the state of things.”¹⁷ Which brings us back to *The Green Land*.

Weather Channel

Only one of *The Green Land*’s four sequences does not feature the intrusive, teal color. The film’s earth chapter begins with a closeup of water pouring down from fibrous roots, which slowly begin to rise. In the next scenes, the shadows of dangling tendrils darken sun-drenched bedrock. Eventually we see that soil has risen from the ground by its own devices and resettled across the landscape into a neat, evenly distributed grid.



Inuk Silis Høegh, *The Green Land*, film and land art installation, 34 min.; Ink Silis Høegh, director; Jacob Kirkegaard, sound artist; Emile Herling Péronard, producer; Ulannaq Ingermann, cinematographer.

Even though land in Kalaallit Nunaat is still collectively owned, the image immediately evokes thoughts of allotment and other private property systems that carve out the earth, and in doing so subjugate it to the interests of owners and developers—which is

why it's so striking that signs of human presence are as absent from this sequence as from all the others. Like a mutation or a cancerous growth, it's as if the land has evolved in reaction to the disruptions it might experience in the future. After all, the once-in-a-century wildfires, hurricanes, and floods the world now sees on a monthly basis are in fact the inverse effects of centuries of colonial and ecological abuse, as our environments now turn *human* actions back on us. "Green" is itself closely tied to human beings' sometimes contradictory ideas about the natural world. Green can be a sign of organic growth or contamination, or it can suggest "sustainable" technologies that create growth for some communities while poisoning others' water. Water defenders from the Fort McDermitt Paiute, Shoshone, and Bannock Tribes resisting the encroachment of lithium mining on their homelands in Nevada know this all too well.

The four elements are a natural embodiment of the monstrous, human yet more-than-human forms of energy Silis Høegh is calling our attention to. Earth, air, water, and fire are not "elements" in the scientific sense; these are *states of being*, Manichean forces that envelope all life, threatening to swallow it whole. But the elements are also communicators, whether as metaphors, spiritual entities, or literal "mediums"—spaces in the middle that pass messages from one place to the next.¹⁸ The air transmits radio signals across the globe, the earth collects and stores solar energy, and water transports cultures from shore to shore. Understanding how the elements share information *with us* might become particularly important if we're going to attempt to coexist with these unruly forces for much longer.

In *The Green Land*, the camera sees all of this. The way it shifts slowly between an unnaturally close vantage and a vast panoramic distance, sometimes in near total darkness, is just as nonhuman as the land it observes. This extreme variation in scale, witnessed through a slowed down sense of time, tells us that the camera is not an extension of the human eye, but another perceiving being altogether, one that watches the world through a sovereign lens, and might in turn allow us to see our world differently. In this decision to not reproduce the sort of perspective seen in nature documentaries, but to bring the camera closer to the scale and glacial speed of land itself, the film is aligned with a long tradition of radical environmental



Inuk Silis Høegh, *The Green Land*, film and land art installation, 34 min.; Inuk Silis Høegh, director; Jacob Kirkegaard, sound artist; Emile Herling Péronard, producer; Ulannaq Ingermann, cinematographer.

video artists who have used media to expand our perception of what constitutes life. As Ina Blom argues, there are potentially fruitful parallels between an understanding of biological "life" as a capacity to retain memory across generations and the memorizing capacities of video media.¹⁹ If we open ourselves to the idea that a machine force like the film camera might view and retain memories of the world that do not necessarily prioritize humans over others, maybe we might see things differently.

Ultimately, *The Green Land* is both a warning and an invitation to look beyond colonial, anthropocentric perspectives. Its complexity is at least on par with major works in the history of environmental film and video like Mi'kmaq artist Mike MacDonald's *Seven Sisters* (1989), a seven-channel installation that looped healing and destructive images of a sacred mountain range as a critical contribution to the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations' land claims struggles in British Columbia.²⁰ Likewise, the sense of synesthesia that comes from watching *The Green Land* and listening to its alien (yet entirely terrestrial) soundscape, composed by Jakob Kirkegaard, calls to mind the atmospheric films of Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians descent). But within the full spectrum of Inuk Silis Høegh's work, *The Green Land* is just the latest in his long career of making films that show life in Kalaallit Nunaat from all possible perspectives. And if we look close enough at this menacing yet beautiful land, we might just see ourselves reflected in its tufts of smoke.

¹ For an overview of artistic responses to the uranium debate, see Nivi Katrine Christensen's essay in *Exposure: Native Art and Political Ecology* (Santa Fe: IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2021).

² Andrea Carlson (Ojibwe) has critiqued the overuse of the term "Anthropocene." As she explains, Anthropocene discourse has tended to diminish the climate emergency's ties to settler colonial displacement while ignoring the ways many Indigenous nations are working to reaffirm kinship relations with their ancestral lands and waterways. Andrea Carlson, "The Mississippi River is the Opposite of the Anthropocene," *Anthropocene Curriculum* (2020): <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/the-mississippi-river-is-the-opposite-of-the-anthropocene>.

³ Quoted in Tupaarnaq Rosing Olsen (ed), *Kimik—ukiut 20 år* (Nuuk: Milik, 2016), 62. My translation.

⁴ Mai Misfeldt, *The Green Land: A Film Installation by Inuk Silis Høegh*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Nordatlantens Brygge, 2023), 18.

⁵ When discussing why his film and artmaking careers generally haven't intersected, Silis Høegh explained in an interview, "[I]t was like I couldn't snap out of making cinematic stories with the camera, so it didn't make sense to me to make art films." David Winfield Norman, "Inuk Silis Høegh, Kalaaleq Filmmaker and Interdisciplinary Artist," *First American Art Magazine* 7 (Summer 2015): 67.

⁶ Quoted in Norman, "Inuk Silis Høegh," 67.

⁷ Pia Arke, *Stories from Scoresbysund: Photographs, Colonisation and Mapping*, 2nd ed., trans. John Kendal (Copenhagen: Kuratorisk Aktion, 2010), 11

⁸ Michelle H Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

⁹ Isuma, response to "A Questionnaire on Decolonization," *October* 174 (2020): 60.

¹⁰ Another component—a set of "binoculars" constructed from two chillum pipes—was stolen from the exhibition. After the theft, Silis Høegh hung the police report in their place. "Qinngut Exit ujaarineqartoq / Exit-kikkert efterlyses," reproduced in Olsen, *Kimik*, 65. *Exit* was shown within the Kimik artist association's annual exhibition.

¹¹ David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 156.

¹² Ivan Burkal, "Forårsudstilling med KIMIK," *Neriusaaq* 1 (June 2001): 31.

¹³ Television was legalized in Kalaallit Nunaat in 1980. In its first years, the national Greenlandic TV industry was closely tied to the Danish state network DR, as described in Birna Kleivan and Ulla Hjorth Nielsen, *KNR-TVs første år* (Nuuk: Tusarliivik, 1984). Still, Aviaq Fleischer has shown that despite the limitations that came from this, Kalaallit producers found ways to use the medium for community-building purposes, describing as an example the broadcast of an elders' conference in Sisimiut in 1983 that addressed many of the same social concerns referenced in *Exit*. Aviaq Fleischer, "The First Ten Years of Nationwide Television in Greenland," *Iisimatusaat* (2019): 8-9.

¹⁴ Quoted in Iben Mondrup Salto, "Når sindet sulter," *Tidsskriftet Grønland* 5-6 (2007), 213.

¹⁵ Life, simply looking at it / will lead nowhere / Life, if you truly feel it / then you have to do something.

¹⁶ "Inuk Silis Høegh giver filmarkiv til samfundet," *Sermitsiaq* 21 June 2015, <https://sermitsiaq.ag/node/179927>. Silis Høegh explained that Péronard spearheaded the Inuiaat Isaat project. Email to the author, January 8, 2024.

¹⁷ Quoted in Olsen, *Kimik*, 62.

¹⁸ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016)

²⁰ See Lisa Myers, "Push the Record Button: Aesthetics of Evidence in Mike MacDonald's Art Practice," in *Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada*, ed. Deanna Bowen (Toronto: Media Arts Network of Ontario, 2019), 206-217.

Object list in MoCNA's exhibition



The Green Land, 2021
Film installation
34 minutes
Collection of the Artist



Words In Bags, 2006
Installation, plastic bags, string,
light and sound
Collection of the Artist



Taanna (Ice Poem in a Bottle), ca. 2012
Time-based installation
Found objects (driftwood, plastic bottles,
frozen sea ice, red ink)
Greenland National Museum
and Archives



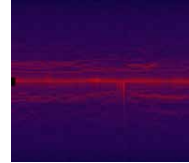
KunukCo (8 Carved wooden sculptures)
2010 to present.
Driftwood, found objects
Collection of the Artist



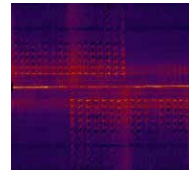
Sumé: The Sound of a Revolution, 2014
Feature documentary
1 hour 13 minutes
Collection of the Artist



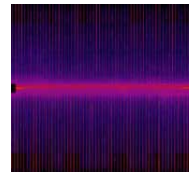
Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on alu-
minum with corresponding sound files
Narwhals at the Bottom of the Sea,
Nuussuaq, Melville Bay, Summer 2014
Collection of the Artist



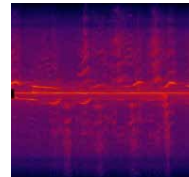
Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on
aluminum with corresponding sound
files. Solid Ice, Recorded Under Water,
Recorded near Niaqornat, Winter 2013
Collection of the Artist



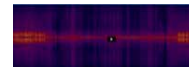
Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on
aluminum with corresponding sound
files. Peregrine Falcon between the
Slopes, Kangiusaq August 2016
Collection of the Artist



Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on
aluminum with corresponding sound
files. Water Dripping Inside Moss,
Kobbefjord, Nuuk, August 2017
Collection of the Artist



Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on
aluminum with corresponding sound
files. Male Humpback whale, Davis
Strait, Winter 2007
Collection of the Artist



Audio Abstracts, 2020
Spectrograms reprocessed digitally on
aluminum with corresponding sound
files. Dogs near the City Ilulissat,
March 2012
Collection of the Artist