BERGEN KUNSTHALL

English

Olof Marsja
A Proposal on How to Mend a Broken Line
9.10.2026–3.1.2027

Olof Marsja's work explores identity, belonging, and history through associative encounters among materials, symbols, sound, and the body. By combining glass, wood, clay, metal, sound, language, and Sámi symbols, Marsja creates a space for a Sámi identity that is complex, fluid, and ever-changing. The boundaries between the traditional and the industrial are blurred through a poetic interplay of language and silence.

In his work, Olof Marsja draws upon the knowledge of his forebears—incorporating *duodji* (Sámi art and craft), mythology, and material realities—to create pieces that move between the past and the present, the personal and the collective, and between what is passed down and what is forgotten. Many of Marsja's works feature Sámi patterns and materials, often in enlarged or reworked forms. Stylised motifs such as snowflakes, birds, and human figures—derived from sources like drums and silver ornaments from the *gákti*—are scaled up and imbued with an industrial character. Natural materials are juxtaposed with components from modern consumer society, creating a tension that challenges established notions of Sámi culture. These recognisable motifs are placed in new contexts, becoming part of a broader visual and material narrative concerning authenticity, heritage, and belonging.

For the exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall, Marsja presents a new constellation of sculptures and figures inhabiting a world where different timelines overlap and conventional categories gradually dissolve.

The subterranean space is a recurring point of reference for Marsja, portrayed as a threshold between different worlds: that of the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, the living and the dead. In Sámi tradition, *Sáivu* can be understood as a spiritual parallel universe—a paradise or realm of the dead that lies in close proximity to the world of the living. Olof Marsja views this hidden realm as a place where boundaries soften and relationships take precedence over hierarchies. Various figures appear in the exhibition as guides, guardians, dancers, spirits, and companions. They inhabit an imagined cosmos where soil, rivers, mountains, languages, and past generations hold equal standing within an expanded family tree. For Marsja, the subterranean space is where diverse histories, life forms, and eras can coexist. It is a world shaped by loss and longing, yet also by humour, vitality, and the power of transformation. In the work *Geist II*, we encounter a figure capable of moving between the past and the present. Clad in reindeer hide, the figure suggests how family history might be carried, embodied, or worn. It appears as a guardian and guide — an entity that observes the choices we make and holds us accountable for the direction we take.

In an era increasingly defined by digitalisation and dematerialisation, the traces of handcraft remain central to Marsja's art. Through work in wood, glass, metal, textiles, and found materials, he places particular emphasis on the creative process itself. The worked-on surfaces reveal how materials can hold memories, knowledge, and relationships. The wall-mounted piece *Tidens hjul* (Wheel of Time) depicts fragments of memories and connections within a non-linear narrative. Together, they form a family tree in which relationships do not follow a chronological order but appear concurrently.

In this convergence of the past and the present, the materials become the bearers of stories. The work can also be interpreted as an enlarged belt—a significant element of identity in Sámi tradition. Suspended from the belt are oversized needle cases made of glass, evocative of small containers for sewing needles. They protect and house a tool fundamental to handcraft. Before mass-produced needles became commonplace, they were often handcrafted from materials such as bone and metal. Such objects held a different value from that of today's industrially manufactured needles. In Marsja's work, the sewing needle acquires a significance that transcends its practical function, while the needle case becomes a metaphor for how knowledge and traditions are passed down, disrupted, and transformed across generations.

The mask is yet another central motif in Marsja's body of work. The mask can be understood as a Janus-like face with multiple facets and roles, raising questions about authenticity and performativity, as well as identity as both heritage and presentation. The reference to the double-faced Roman god Janus—associated with transitions, rebirth, and duality—reinforces this dual nature. With his two faces turned in opposite directions, Janus holds the past and the future joined in a single gaze. Using hollowed-out, negative moulds made of wood or clay, the glass is shaped through a process that can never be fully controlled. The result is a series of glass faces reminiscent of grotesque figures with distorted features, combining both human and animal elements.

A constantly shifting soundscape emerges as a key element of the exhibition. Marsja works with sounds resembling the wind; through his glass-blown works, he forges further connections between breath and material, demonstrating how air breathes life into an otherwise inert mass. The birch-bark horn is closely linked to Swedish and Nordic *fäbod* (summer pasture) culture, where long, funnel-shaped instruments made of birch bark were used during summer grazing to lure, call, or warn. In the work *I min röst bor anden till ett språk* (In My Voice Dwells the Spirit of a Language), sounds flow through birch bark and glass supported by a structure reminiscent of a bonfire. The space also resonates with the sound of poems recited in Northern Sámi by Marsja's own mother. The personal bond between mother and son is reinforced through the dialogue between their two voices, as the mother urges her son to press his ear to the ground, listen to the clattering hooves and the voices carried on the wind, and put the words into his own mouth. The audience is invited into an intimate family space that simultaneously represents a dialogue between the experiences of two different generations.

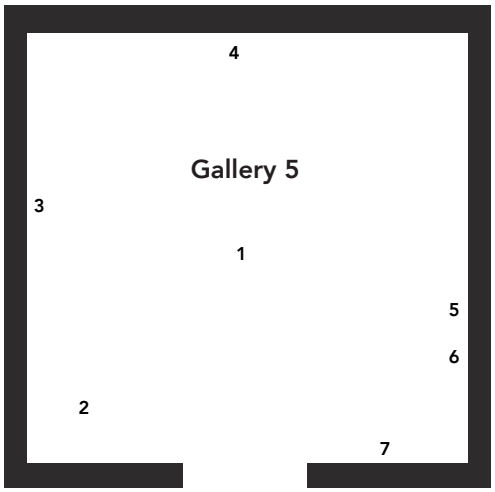
The work *Tiden* (Time) consists of a fragment of an outdoor-brand shell jacket, a piece of oak, a taxidermied greenfinch (an endangered species on the Swedish Red List), and a scarf bearing The North Face logo tied like a scout neckerchief. This juxtaposition draws upon both outdoor culture and the scouting movement, highlighting contemporary, paradoxical notions of nature. On one hand, nature is portrayed as something authentic, primal, and valuable, while on the other hand, it is experienced and consumed through commercialised outdoor activities and a market of specialised gear and products.

The exhibition also features a dancing figure who appears to move freely, unconcerned by the gaze of others. In a text by the Sámi author and activist Niillas Aslaksen Somby, included in the anthology *Inifrån Sápmi: vittnesmål från stulet land*, the author depicts a free Sápmi viewed from above. Hovering above the ground, the narrator observes a dancing Sámi people while reflecting on his own generation's limited opportunities for free bodily expression and movement. Inspired by Somby's text, the sculpture *Dancer I* portrays dance as a collective movement and as a space where belonging and identity can be experienced, expressed, and reclaimed.

The exhibition builds upon artistic explorations from the project "I din röst bor anden till ett språk" (In Your Voice Dwells the Spirit of a Language) at Accelerator in Stockholm, curated by Therese Kellner. In Bergen, the results of these explorations enter into a dialogue with themes concerning the poetics and politics of the subterranean space—themes recently showcased in Bergen Kunsthall's programming, such as the exhibition "Iter Subterraneum" and the *Another Sun* programme series.

Olof Marsja (b. 1986, Gällivare) lives and works in Gothenburg. Recent solo exhibitions include Accelerator, Stockholm; 1646, The Hague; Örebro Konsthall; Dalslands Konstmuseum; and Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš (Sámi Center for Contemporary Art), Karasjok. His work has been exhibited at venues such as Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; Kiasma, Helsinki; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm; and Göteborgs Konsthall.

Curated by Silja Leifsdottir and Kjersti Solbakken



1
Mu Jienas Orru Giela Vuoigŋa (In My Voice Dwells the Spirit of a Language), 2025–26
Glass, birch trumpet, steel, chain, ratchet strap, laser-cut sheet metal, oak, foam rubber, rubber, speaker, speaker cable, sound
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

2
Dancer I, 2023
Wood glue, sand, fabric, Bauhaus ratchet strap, reindeer fur, alder wood, lime wood, pigment, cast aluminium, Jesmonite, acrylic paint, copper, polypore, stoneware, steel, stainless steel bolt
220 x 85 x 155 cm
Courtesy of the artist

3
Tiden (Time), 2021
Finch, oak, scarf ring in reindeer horn, rain jacket
42 x 11 x 7 cm
Courtesy of the artist

4
Tidens hjul (Wheel of Time), 2026
Laser-cut sheet metal, synthetic lasso, reindeer skin, chain, glass, silvered glass, rope, copper, ratchet strap, stainless steel bolt and nut
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

5
MF Topaz, 2025
Silvered glass, aluminium
27 x 29 x 18 cm
Courtesy of the artist

6
Ocean Ape, 2025
Silvered glass, aluminium
24 x 26 x 19 cm
Courtesy of the artist

7
Geist II (Spirit II), 2023
Silvered glass, alder wood, reindeer fur, stainless steel chain, Swedish coin, ratchet strap
175 x 50 x 40 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Bookshop
Are You Freezing?, 2025
Silvered glass, aluminium
28 x 27 x 20 cm
Courtesy of the artist

EVENTS

Opening
Fri 9 Oct 20:00
Free entry during the opening weekend

Opening Party
With DJ Mira Kahrs
Fri 9 Oct 22:00
Landmark
Free

Plattform: Olof Marsja
Date and time TBA
Upstairs
Free

Guided Tours
Every Sunday
13:00 Guided tour and workshop for families
14:00 Guided tour

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