

THE NORDIC THIRD WORLD COUNTRY ?

ICELANDIC ART IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The economic crisis in Iceland serves as a background for this project looking at different artistic strategies dealing with the crisis. By playing with notions of 'pure nature' the project takes to task a common understanding of the mid-Atlantic island

in various ways, telling part of the complex story of a small nation that collapsed in a particular way. Through talks, texts and art exhibitions, this is an attempt to tell a part of the complex story of one of the first nations to collapse in the recent global economic turmoil. It's also a search for an adequate vocabulary to depict the state of exception in a post-industrial nation where the notion of economic progression, from a

Developing to an Industrial country, has been reversed. The artworks and texts in this project are chosen to be part of a collective experiment that attempts to analyse apparent transformations in Icelandic society and culture due to the collapse. This publication serves as an exhibition catalogue and a documentation of the project process, as well as a further investigation into the questions raised.

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INTRODUCTION

BY JONATAN HABIB ENGQVIST, CURATOR

THE ICELANDIC ASH became a household term all over the world this spring as it stopped air traffic over Europe for several days making many people aware of the precariousness of contemporary technology systems and nature. My Icelandic friends were laughing at the pronunciation of “Eyjafjallajökull” and joking about it saying things like “oh, you want cash - I thought you said ash!” or “sorry about that, we were only aiming the volcano at England” as a kind of revenge on accusations of alleged terrorism and the infected Ice-save deal. Without becoming too freudian about these jokes, I dare say that the potential force of nature also had part in their formulation. And nature is definitely present in many aspects of Icelandic life, not the least in art.

It must be said that the artworks and texts in this project are not intended as illustrations or proof of a thesis. They are part of a collective experiment that attempts to analyse apperent transformations in Icelandic society and culture due to the collapse. Artists do not generally have political loyalties, they are neither ambassadors nor journalists – and for

that same reason art work can function as a thermometer of society and the human condition by twisting and turning the way we perceive things. As curator I have asked them to trust me in the context of this project and in return I am responsible for handling their work with care. The process of negotiation involved has been a mandatory part of the project and is reflected in the results.

The project began with a performance by the artist Ragnar Kjartansson and continued with his video-installation ‘Guilt Trip’ (2007) at Färgfabriken in Stockholm, which in this context also became a sound installation and ran throughout the summer of 2010. As a “finissage” Färgfabriken jointly organized a seminar with the Goethe Institute in August 2010 discussing the global economic crisis with Iceland as a focal point. The seminar entitled “The Nordic 3rd World Country - panic or possibility?” discussed the global economic crisis and its relation with contemporary art together with moderator John Swedenmark. Through a clear focus on Iceland, questions that are as vitally important

for the rest of Europe and beyond were materialized and raised: how does contemporary art act and react on the global crisis? In which way does the recent years’ political and economical situation influence contemporary art? How, for example, is the relation between the private, the public and the grassroots initiatives affected? Dorothee Kirsch, director of the Centre for Icelandic Art spoke on “how to fund art without funding” and sociologist Urs Stäheli talked about Pan in panic and the mythologies in global economy. Hildur Margrétardóttir shared her own experiences and engagement as she talked about her ritualistic actions during the pots and pans revolution. After that the project moved to the venue Färgfabriken Norr in Östersund with the exhibition “The Nordic Third Third_ World Country? - Icelandic art in Times of Crises”. Traces of this process are collected in this publication, which will be released in conjunction to a final seminar.

By playing with notions of ‘pure nature’ the project takes to task a common understanding of the mid-Atlantic island in



various ways, telling part of the complex story of a small nation that collapsed in a particular way, due to a combination of nepotism and international bank speculations, with the aforementioned terrorist accusations from Central Europe being a bizarre consequence. As a reaction to the economic situation and the sale of natural resources for corporate interests (such as building of Europe's largest hydroelectric power plant for the benefit of a multinational aluminum corporation, while heading its own national economy off a cliff), the government was overthrown in a cutlery revolution where people banged pots and pans for days on end. Today Iceland's politicians are regulated by the International Monetary Fund and the future is unclear.

THIRD WORLD COUNTRY?

Behind the ironic specificity of the title for this project there is a search for an adequate vocabulary to depict the state of exception in a post-industrial nation where the notion of economic progression, from a "Developing" to "Industrial" country, has been reversed. It points out how we do not have concepts that correspond to this phenomena, even if it has happened before and most certainly will happen again. Whether we turn to economics or the critical vocabulary of the human sciences the line of evolution from developing to industrial to post industrial or post-fordist nation is a prevailing notion. But what happens when a country is forced to reconsider this structure? Can it open up toward a questioning of the fundamental issues – such as the future

of the nation state in relation to global capital? Finally there is a deeper question here about the distribution of responsibility along with a desire to address the use of "green tech" by dirty industries to lure in small nations with natural resources onto non-reversible contracts.

Being a small country, Iceland can serve as a means of analyzing complex interrelationships and transformations that affect contemporary politics with regard to natural resources, corporate interests and the individuals belonging to a nation state.

If the Icelandic ash served as a global reminder of our vulnerability, a closer look at the Icelandic crash might help us catch a glimpse of how the world works. In the words of Andri Snaer Magnason: "Global problems do not really exist – only collections of millions of local problems and challenges people are faced with in their daily lives. Ideologies, values, business, environment, peace, war; everything tangled up in an interconnected web of how the world works... By looking at places like Iceland - you can sometimes see the web clearly." (*Rethink – Contemporary art and climate change*, Alexandra Institute, Århus, 2010, p 36)

INSPIRED BY ICELAND

Of course Iceland is far from being a 'true' third world nation in terms of BNP and infrastructure. But regardless of the country's obvious status as a well fare state, there is a narrative genealogy run

Guilt Trip, Ragnar Kjartansson.

ning through this project as a means of contextualizing Iceland which might clarify the intent of this investigation. As a small isolated colonized Island until the mid 1940's with reoccurring volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and the fishing industry as main income, this island already has a lot of similarities with histories far from the Northern European context, farcically told by Ragnar Kjartansson in *Colonization* (2003). Or as Haukur Már Helgason put it in the Reykjavík Grapevine in April 2009: "Camouflaged in elegant white, we thought that we had passed through as Europeans. As long as we'd keep proper distance from the Inuit and always correct those who think we live in snow houses, we hoped that no one would notice." (The End of Neo-Liberal Neverland, see www.grapevine.is). During the Second World War, or "the blessed war" is it was known locally, Iceland proved to have a geographically strategic position, leading to the establishment of a NATO base during the coming decennia. Military presence in a nation that has never had an army became a guarantee during the cold-war and supplier of basic infrastructure, Coca-Cola and Rock'n'Roll...

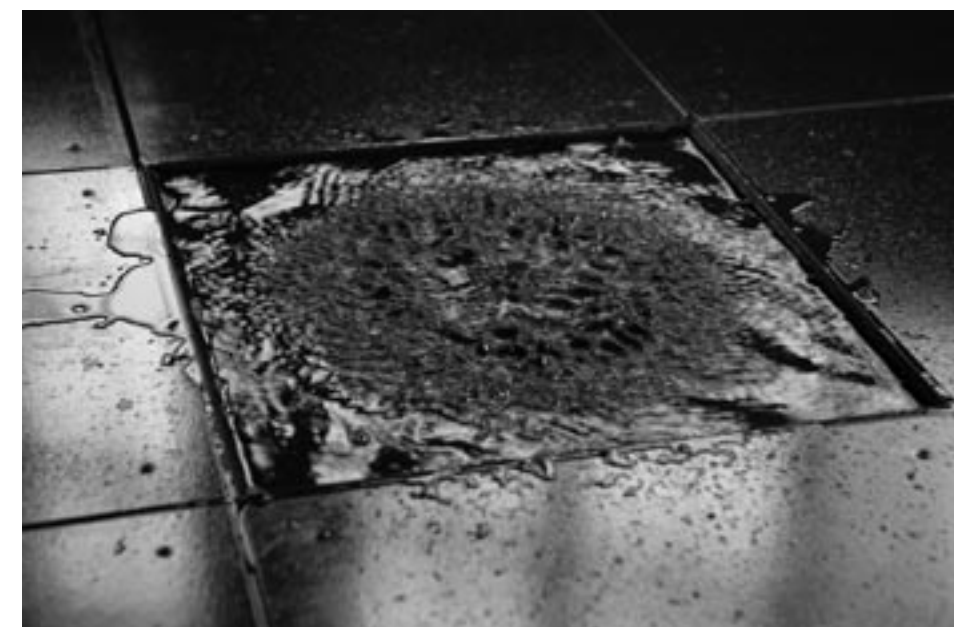
While the European economies were suffering from an economic domino effect, Iceland's failing banks were a big problem for United Kingdom banking customers who had their money tied up in them. In Sweden we were entirely focused on the Baltic region, where "our" money was. The International Monetary Fund eventually brokered a \$10.1 billion economic aid package for Iceland with the assistance of several other European nations which, as Björn Þorsteinsson suggested during the seminar in August 2010, can imply that it does not really matter what colour the government has.

20% of the energy in Iceland is consumed by the population, the rest is primarily pumped straight into the aluminum industry and parallel to Moody's Investors Service labeling the Icelandic economy as "junk" once again in July 2010, the world's most famous Icelander Björk Guðmundsdóttir became spokesperson against a Canadian firm acquiring 98.5% of Iceland's biggest energy company. In an interview with Financial Times Björk expressed that "the deal smells like the leftovers from the corruption that brought us the bank crash." Rather than selling, she argues that Iceland can harness its geothermal power by developing the relationship between nature and technology rather than becoming "Third World slaves...to foreign predators."

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE EXHIBITION

Perhaps one could see this as a landscape exhibition, where several artworks twist a cliché image of Icelandic climate and nature and focus on the complexities of human nature, without having to "represent" an image of a nation. Architectonically the exhibition is built from several components that belong to this idea of "pure nature". A soundscape with ocean sounds, geothermal bubbling from bellow and a roaring storm are omnipresent as one navigates between the high, grass covered cliffs, gorges and hilltops. An uncanny twist is given to these elements once one starts to engage with the artworks. The sound of the Ocean comes from *Rainisdrangur* (2009) a conceptual animation by Erla Silvia Haraldsdóttir paired by a pastiche of Houkousai's "Great Wave" entitled *Flóðbylgja* (2010), the Icelandic word for a tsunami wave; the geothermal activities emanate from *Black box 2* (2010) by Hreinn J Stephensen, which is a tactile sound sculpture where the former president's words of self-defence send tremors through the body and surface as incomprehensible bursts of black liquid. The wind comes from the landscape installation *Stormur*

Black Box 2, Hreinn J. Stephensen.



THANKS

First of all the greatest gratitude to the artists who all did a lot more than is usually expected in a group exhibition. Several works have been produced specifically for this exhibition; going so far as suggesting new works a week before the opening and completing on site. The authors in this publication- Björn Þorsteinsson, Haukur Már Helgason, Iris Erlingsdóttir and John Swedenmark have been more accomplices than merely writers and Lina Lindqvist has adapted to graphic design at uncomfortable hours. Thanks to Joachim Granit and Pernilla Lesse from Färgfabriken for believing in this project all the way – special thanks to Fia Palmgren for always

(2001/2010) by Magnus Sigurðarsson consisting of two tons of salt, industrial fans and 2000 watt building lights, accompanied by a text that lends new meaning to the work in the context of this exhibition: "With our faults exposed we face the elements".

In the large photographic prints from the series *Imported Landscape* (2003 – ongoing) by Pétur Thomsen, we meet an image of sublime nature, where meaning is radically transformed once we realise that the landscape in fact consists of bulldozer tracks. His photographs are from the dam project built to supply an aluminum plant – Kárahnjúkavirkjun, a site under press blackout during the construction period.

HELVÍTIS FOKKING FOKK

Icelandic art has never really been seen as a politically engaged scene in the global context. On the contrary, it is usually packaged as a laissez faire attitude toward day to day politics combined with a belief in gnomes when it is presented internationally. As the story goes, the Icelandic "neo-primitivism" perhaps

even culminates in the decadent so called "golden years" around 2007-2008.

With this exhibition, that reading is hopefully somewhat re-evaluated, not the least through a gesture that juxtaposes Rúrí, one of few Icelandic artists normally seen as politically active, and the Icelandic Love Corporation. Rúrí's *The Golden Car* (1974) brought her to public attention when she smashed a golden Mercedes Benz in the city centre during an out-door exhibition. The Icelandic Love Corporation has been around since 1996 and consists of Eirún Sigurðardóttir, Jóni Jónsdóttir and Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir. Participating with the remixed symbolically charged performance *Déjà vu* (2010), where the remainders of the performance are incorporated into the architecture of the exhibition as well as the video *Dynasty* (2007), the trio comment on decadent and nihilist attitudes of world finance to global warming. The rage and frustration over the stupidity of the situation is present in Hreinn J. Stephensen's concrete with marble boxing sack *Sacked* (2010), as well as the work of Hildur Margrétardóttir, *Niðstáng* (2009). Originally not an artwork, but rather a true magical tool – the severed horse head on a pole was used during the revolution to literally curse the banks – and *The dream catchers for Icelandic nightmares* (2010) were made after the crunch to dampen its effect.

The three films from the series *Waiting* (2008-2009) by Ingvar Högni Ragnarsson document the shock of not knowing what will come. Three 7-minute loops where the only signs of life is the odd raven and a small vehicle at distance. Finally, the 72 drawings from by Bjargey Ólafsdóttir, *Gud betalar* (2007) can be read as a the-day-after analyses of the mechanisms involved in the hysteria preceding the crash.

For Icelandic artists, the crises might not have had a great economical impact. Most artists did not have much funds before the crash in any event. This project has however witnessed that the collapse might even have had some positive effects on the Icelandic art scene with a renewed engagement in social issues and a society forced to decide what really is important. Another theme has been a transition from single-sourced funding to new models of exchange and cultural engagement, for instance the valuable support we received from Íslandsstofu, the Icelandic trade council wasn't economical. They sponsored the exhibition in Östersund with enough dried fish for both the opening and to treat the audience with throughout the entire exhibition period. ■

Installation shots from the exhibition at Färgfabriken Norr, all taken by Pétur Thomsen. **TOP RIGHT:** Erla S. Haraldsdóttir, *Flódbylgja* (2010), oil on canvas. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Hildur Margarétdóttir, *Dreamcatchers for Icelandic nightmares* (2009), sculpture: rope, fish heads, electric pipes. **BELOW:** overview of the exhibition space.





Installation shots from the exhibition at Färgfabriken Norr, all taken by Pétur Thomsen. **TOP LEFT:** Hildur Margarárdóttir, *Funkisbirds* (2010). **BOTTOM LEFT:** Hreinn J. Stephensen, *Black Box 2* (2010). **BELOW:** Five photos from *Imported Landscape* series by Pétur Thomsen (2003-2010). In the foreground we see part of the traces from the performance *Déjà Vu* (2010) by Icelandic Love Corporation.



BEING AN ISLAND

BY HAUKUR MÁR HELGASON



WE DO IT SO AS NOT TO BECOME MAD, replied Haraldur, who is tall, nervy and thin with eyes that have the concentrated energy of a laser beam. Not to become mad? *Yes, to keep the beast at bay. The beast? The beast is Iceland, this island on which we live with its terrifyingly harsh nature, its bitter ever-changing weather. It's goya's dark nightmare world, beautiful but grotesque. This is the moody beast of Iceland. We cannot escape it. So we find ways to live with it, to tame it. I do it through my art.*

Haraldur Jónsson, artist.¹

In his 1929 “The Revolt of the Masses”, Manuel y Ortega lays out a concept of the state as a meaningful future-oriented

project. These two interrelated dimensions have been blocked out of Icelandic politics for a long time: the idea of a future and meaning as a function of language. I have come to the opinion that this condition runs deep enough to attempt to understand my country through the concept of schizophrenia.

DO YOU LIKE ME?

It was with a peculiar sense of pride that Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, president of Iceland, appeared on BBC News in springtime 2010, explaining the lessons to be learned from a disruptive volcanic eruption in Iceland. The president

smirked while he issued this warning to the international audience:

I think we have learned above all that there are forces of nature at work in this country, the combination of volcanic eruption and the glacial nature of this part of the country, which can create, for a long period, extraordinary damage, to modern, advanced society. Unfortunately, what we have seen in the last few days could only be a beginning of an experience which might be repeated throughout the 21st century. Because the history of these volcanos in my country shows that they will erupt regularly and the time for example for katla to erupt is coming close. [...] it's much much bigger and what we have seen

*now is in fact a small rehearsal of what would happen — i don't say if, but i say when — Katla will erupt. [...] I think it is high time for european governments and airline authorities all over Europe and the world to start planning for the eventual Katla eruption.*²

Ever since the autumn of 2008, Iceland had been put to shame by its own faults, and resorted to complaining about other countries, notably the UK and Holland, “bullying”. Having the potential of causing ‘extraordinary damage’ can do wonders for your self-esteem. The president’s speech amounted to a proud sigh of relief.

The tourist industry, however, did not appreciate the president’s interpretation and millions of euros were instantly amassed in a joint effort of state and business to launch a summer ad campaign, “Inspired by Iceland”, emphasizing the harmless joys of Iceland. The official campaign video took off with a young, attractive woman seemingly on the verge of bursting from wonder and marvel in the midst of a lava field: “You are not going to believe where I am,” she addresses the camera, “I’m in Iceland. It’s ... it’s amazing!” Then joins her friend to break out in freestyle dance.³

An excessive obsession with how Iceland is perceived by others is anything but new. The book of Settlements is a 13th century manuscript wherein the original viking settlement of Iceland is documented. The truthfulness of its accounts has recently been contested by archaeology and genetics, but the manuscript remains valuable for the truths it unwittingly exposes. In an early version, the scribes cite the main reason for their efforts:

*People often say that writing about the settlement is irrelevant learning, but we think we can better meet the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry.*⁴

Thomasson notes the same preoccupation among the heros of the sagas, written in the same era:

Norway was the center and they them-

selves were the periphery [...] in the sagas and the histories, iceland is outside while norway is “home”. The Icelanders “sail out” to Iceland but “sail home” to Norway. In the sagas, there is avid interest in how norwegian royalty view the Icelanders. The Kings and Earls are always impressed by how splendidly handsome, intelligent, well mannered, noble in behavior, and accomplished in sports the icelanders are. (Thomasson, p. 10).

This characteristic of the national elite seems to be a constant. Five years before aligning himself with a volcano, Mr. Grímsson seemingly had a more stable support for his national sense of pride. In 2005 he was invited to address members of the London Walbrook club. The title of the address was “How to Succeed in Modern Business: Lessons from the Icelandic Voyage”⁵ and serves as an outstanding example of the prevailing mood at the height of Iceland’s boom. The president said he had recently been “pressured to explain how and why daring icelandic entrepreneurs are succeeding where others hesitate or fail, to reveal the secret behind the success they have achieved.” He then offered a list of national characteristics that he saw as crucial to Iceland’s success story: a strong farmer and fisherman-work ethic, a tendency to:

Focus on the results rather than the process [...] to ask when it can be done rather than how. Third, Icelanders are risk takers. They are daring and aggressive [...] fourth, there is absence of bureaucracy in Iceland and a lack of tolerance for bureaucratic methods.

... etc. The list more or less describes a Clint Eastwood vigilante, more keen on action than words. Convinced that others may learn from the Icelandic entrepreneurs, Mr. Grímsson describes their track record as “an interesting standpoint from which to examine the validity of traditional business teaching, of the theories and practice fostered and followed by big corporations and business schools on both sides of the Atlantic.” He then ends on the threatening note: “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

One might speak of hubris of course, but what interests me is the apparent delu-

sion in the President’s speech, the non-discursive habits of the heros described therein, and the pride in being, as it seemed, a bit miraculous. This was a common sentiment. In an article in *The Observer* in May 2008, Dagur B. Eggertsson, a 35-year old sputnik Social-Democrat, is quoted as saying: “Someone called it bumblebee economics: scientifically, aerodynamically, you cannot figure out how it flies, but it does, and very nicely, too.”⁶ In his Walbrook speech President Grímsson phrased the same sentiment of joyful stupefaction: “People even see us as fascinating eccentrics who can do no harm and therefore all doors are thrown wide open when we arrive.”

THE BOSS OF IT ALL

In psychoanalysis psychosis is considered one of three categories of mental disorders, the other two being neurosis and perversion. Schizophrenia is the most common psychotic disorder. The prevailing methods of diagnosis rely on sets of symptoms and the American Psychiatric Association publishes a manual with the standardised criteria.⁷ The listed symptoms, of which two or more must be present, are: delusions, hallucinations, “disorganised speech as a manifestation of formal thought disorder”, grossly disorganised behavior or catatonic behavior, lack in emotional response, lack in speech and lack in motivation. In psychoanalysis, however, the symptoms alone are not conclusive as the nature of disorders depends on the underlying lack around which mental life is centered. A neurotic subject is constituted by the intrusion of Law, relying on an absent figure of authority. Lacan called this figure the-Name-of-the-Father but Lars von Trier’s 2006 comedy titled *The Boss of it All* provides an apt account of its significance: In the film, the Boss of it All is the non-existent superior to whom the film’s main character refers when he makes cuts in the company.⁸ Neuroticisation happens as such a figure of the Law enters a subject’s existence, suppressing desire. However, another attitude is possible: not to suppress desire but ‘disavow’ the Boss of it All, i.e. simply not to register the prohibition otherwise established in his name. Keep showing up for work even if you

have been fired. This is the starting point of a schizoid existence. It is, however, not one of spontaneous, non-suppressed enjoyment: The Law is not restricted to moral injunctions, but is something closer to the concept of Logos — regulation, word and meaning in one bundle. For a ‘normal’, neurotic subject, the Boss of it All is the starting point of signification. “Because he says so” lies at the end of arguments, not merely about whether you must go to school or not, but also if you start voicing doubts as to whether this is a school or not, what it means to be a child etc. The ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ are inseparable under the Law. If its appeal does not reach you, if you ‘disavow’ the Boss of it All, you lack certainty about your world’s fundamental coordinates.

A CONSTITUTIONAL LIE

According to The Book of Settlements, Iceland was settled between 870 and 930 AC.⁹ Among the main reasons to flee Norway at the time was “the desire to escape the rule of Harald Fairhair, who had succeeded in unifying Norway” and was “trying to force all of the petty chieftains to submit to his rule.”¹⁰ However, the exact timeframe of Iceland’s settlement and the origins of its settlers is currently a matter of dispute. A more reliably documented event and, I believe, more decisive in the current context was the formal Christening of Iceland in the year 1000. Major communal decisions were made in an annual summer gathering known as Althingi, where chiefs and freemen came together for potlatch, betrothals, and settling disputes. Christian missionaries had arrived in 995, and as some chiefs were Christened, the country was threatened with major civil unrest. In a heated session at Althingi of 1000, pagans and Christians declared each other “outside the law”. After “negotiations and some bribery, the two parties agreed to put the decision in the hands of the pagan law-speaker, Thorgeir, a much respected man.”¹¹ He is said to have laid pensive under a blanket for a day and a night, before reappearing and declaring his conclusion: since it would be a “sorry plight if men were not to have one law, all of them, in this land; [...] strife would be the result, [and] the land would be laid waste by reason of it”, all Icelanders should be Christened. But, he added: heathen gods could still be celebrated and sacrifices given them, in secret. “However, should anyone witness such sacrifice and testify to it, the culprit would be liable to a charge of lesser outlawry (with a punishment of three years banishment)”.¹² The chiefs all consented. Celebrated novelist Thor Vilhjálmsson would later summarize the millennium thus: “We became betwixt pagans after we became Christians.”¹³

This constitutionalisation of a split between signifier and signified may have been a singular event. Whereas the general observation that signifiers and their supposedly signified content have an implicitly ‘open relationship’ introduces irony, an explicitly declared separation between the two clears the way for cynicism (sometimes confused with ‘tolerance’); a world wherein words are supposed to have neither meaning in the sense of denoting facts, nor performative powers. Such outlawing of the linguistic signifier can be very hard to confront at all, since the cynical attitude thus established can itself fend off any attempted subversion.

MAINTAINING THE SPLIT

If the Christening of Iceland in the year 1000 is taken as the founding gesture of an institutional split between the symbolic level and the Real, inducing a collective schizoid mentality, the split between the prevailing nationalist rant and Iceland’s actual succumbing to and dependency on foreign forces in the 20th century, can be seen as maintenance work.

According to eminent scholar Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974), the first submarine telegram line between Iceland and Europe, laid in 1906, marked the end of the middle ages in Iceland. Yet, admittedly, a lot remained to be done, and much of it was done by or in cooperation with foreign military forces. The British army occupied Iceland in 1941, to be replaced by its American counterpart in 1942. The Americans left after the war, but came back in 1951, after the founding of NATO, to set up a military base in Iceland, as the country had strategic importance during the Cold War. The economic effects were enormous: the U.S. army laid the country’s first functional main road, linking its dispersed municipalities. The military also constructed the country’s international airport, as the British had constructed the domestic airport in the center of Reykjavík. Iceland was the biggest recipient of Marshall aid per capita, even if wartime fish exports had been such an economically fruitful endeavor for Iceland that older people still speak about ‘the blessed war’. Whenever local politics or bad economics steered the country towards trouble, the big ally in the West could be counted on to buy some fish or ‘open up markets’. The corporation founded for military-related construction, IAV, remains by far the largest constructor in the country.

The NATO-treaty was signed by Iceland in 1949 in face of severe protest. The protest was quelled by police forces, using teargas for the first and only time in Iceland’s history, until the mass protest in

2009. The protests, the teargas and the subsequent state persecution of protesters¹⁴ mark the beginning and end of an era, the external and circumstantial nature of which remain disavowed in Iceland’s history as publicly narrated.

What’s remarkable, in the current context, is the relative lack of attention and coverage of the military presence, given its effects. Sure enough, the military base was situated some 50 km outside Reykjavík, putting the soldiers and their facilities physically out of touch with most people, most days. And just as surely, a group of leftists, including my mother and me around the age of 5, would annually march away from the army base, towards Reykjavík, chanting pacifist slogans and songs. Ranging from tens to hundreds of people, the participants were a fringe group, limited in number, and inconsequential. The majority who favored or accepted the military presence, on the other hand, did a fine job of politely ignoring it, while sharing the spoils. This can perhaps be best understood in the light of the nationalist sentiments professed throughout the political spectrum. Even the mainstream right-wing party, which led pro-U.S. governments near-constantly through the Cold War and beyond, is called the Independence Party, founding its identity on Iceland’s supposed independence. Local academia seems to collectively suffer the same ideological obfuscation: except for research done by the American political scientist Michael T. Corgan,¹⁵ the military presence and its effects on Icelandic society remain largely undocumented. The single most important political fact about Iceland in the 20th century, 55 years of military presence, remains the subject-matter of poetry.

After gradually cutting down the facilities in Keflavik, the military left conclusively on the 15th of March 2006, without prior negotiations, without reparations, without any ceremony at all, except for a library of 80 books on strategy and warfare, left as a farewell-present to the Icelandic government. Two years later, as the international banking crisis hit, at the end of September 2008, the US Federal Reserve announced it would assist the central banks in Sweden, Norway and Denmark — but made no mention of Iceland. The signaling was unambiguous: You are now on your own. That was on a Friday. The following Monday, Glitnir was the first of Iceland’s banks to collapse. Within a week all three were on state hands.

In a radio interview in 2009 an ex-editor of the pro-NATO newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, claimed that if the US ‘had still been here’ they would never “have allowed the collapse to happen”.

ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

In 1960 the British psychiatrist R.D. Laing published *The Divided Self* in which he attempted to “characterize the nature of a [schizoid] person’s experience of his world and himself”.¹⁶ Laing used the terms schizoid and schizophrenic to denote “the sane and psychotic positions respectively” — a schizoid’s condition is latent schizophrenia, not yet psychotic, and not even necessarily harmful. As a key-term to understand the schizoid way of being-in-the-world Laing introduced the notion of ‘ontological insecurity’:

A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous. Such a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity. It is often difficult for a person with such a sense of his integral selfhood and personal identity, of the permanency of things, [...] of the substantiality of others, to transpose himself into the world of an individual whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties.*¹⁷

The life of an ontologically insecure person will be marked by responses to a continually perceived threat:

*[T]he ontologically insecure person is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself: the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his low threshold of security [and thus] constitute a continual and deadly threat. [...] He has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self.*¹⁸

This threat takes on three main forms: engulfment, implosion and petrification. The threat of engulfment makes one dread “relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself”, entering any relationships at the risk of losing one’s autonomy and identity. “The main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation”. The threat of implosion stems from a sense of “inner emptiness”, where any contact with reality becomes a threat to one’s identity. The threat of petrification it is the threat of being “turned from a live person into a dead thing, into a stone, into a robot, an automaton, without personal autonomy of action, an it without

subjectivity” or, alternatively, of petrifying others, negating the other’s autonomy, treating him “not as a person, as a free agent, but as an it”.¹⁹

Laing further explains the condition through an example of a patient, 28-year old James. Whereas the most common response to the threat of engulfment and implosion is isolation, James’ response to the threat of petrification was outer compliance, deliberately ‘acting normal’, while mentally petrifying the other:

*Both manoeuvres taken together safeguarded his own subjectivity which he had never to betray openly and which thus could never find direct and immediate expression for itself. [...] With his outer behaviour he forestalled the danger to which he was perpetually subject, namely that of becoming someone else’s thing, by pretending to be no more than a cork. (After all, what safer thing to be in an ocean?).*²⁰

The difference between such a schizoid subject feigning conformity, and an ontologically secure, ‘normal’ one may be hard to perceive. At first, Laing says, he was:

*Agreeably surprised by [James’] apparent ability to reject and disagree with what I said as well as to agree with me. This seemed to indicate that he had more of a mind of his own than he perhaps realized and that he was not too frightened to display some measure of autonomy. However, it became evident that his apparent capacity to act as an autonomous person with me was due to his secret manoeuvre of regarding me not as a live human being, a person in my own right with my own selfhood, but as a sort of robot interpreting device to which he fed input and which after a quick commutation came out with a verbal message to him. With this secret outlook on me as a thing he could appear to be a ‘person’. What he could not sustain was a person-to-person relationship, experienced as such.*²¹

A STONE’S THROW FROM AUSCHWITZ

Socialist frontman Ógmundur Jónasson wrote a newspaper article shortly before his 2010 appointment as Interior Minister, wherein he described the EU’s expansion in terms of search for ‘Lebensraum’, a term with the same connotations in Icelandic as any other European language.²² This is no novelty. Before running for president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson served as a socialist MP for years. In 1992, when Iceland negotiated the EEA-agreement, gaining access the EU’s internal markets, along with Norway and Lichtenstein, Mr. Grímsson contributed the following vision to the debate:

*The train of Europe. We were asked whether we didn’t want to go along on the European train, evoking the image of the high-speed train being constructed in Europe, a new railway that would with blazing speed connect its cities into one whole. Now the image of the European train is the shadow cast by the war when people were transported to captivity and death with the trains of the terror-government that then ruled Germany.*²³

Later on he adds details to this image:

*Richard von Weizsacker, that remarkable president of Germany, a humanist, a great chief and a respectable man, who once visited us Icelanders, cannot even hold a speech in the capital of Germany without a furious crowd of neo-nazis stoning him, so that security guards must defend his life with their shields. The former chairman of the German social-democratic party can be considered lucky to get away from raving extremists in a peace-march in Berlin, where he was nearly mutilated by groups of neo-nazis. Houses are burned, whole cities submit to extremists, and unfortunately the ghost of nazism has appeared again in this leading state within the European union.*²⁴

Iceland eventually signed the EEA-agreement, as initiated by the government and supported by a majority in parliament. During the debate, however, with one notable exception, no member of parliament ever voiced direct support to the union as a political project. All arguments in favor of the agreement were based on the economic bottom-line. No member of parliament ever spoke in favor of migration, freedom of movement, cultural influences, a broader political arena or participation in an extended society. In fact, most supporters fenced off criticism by playing down the agreement’s effects, pointing out that immigration could be controlled, etc. Their main tactic, however, was the same as today: brutish silence.

The president’s and interior minister’s remarks on the evil nature and intent of the European Union are not on the fringe of the EU-debate in Iceland, but mark one of the two prevalent attitudes to the union. Paranoiac fears about the very existence of Iceland if it should join the European Union run so deep that the recently founded umbrella organisation of EU-supporters is named ‘A stronger Iceland’. The umbrella-organization of EU-opposition, on the other hand, naturally calls itself ‘World View’. Its members proclaim they want to keep Iceland open to the outside world, and not locked up in any particular agreement. Its members range from neo-liberals and conservatives to socialists. They point out the diverse

opportunities in a globalised environment. In 2006, for example, Iceland started negotiations on a free-trade agreement with China.²⁵ Whatever opposition there may be to that agreement it remains subdued and quiet. In parallel, in 1919, due to the importance a fish export agreement made with Mussolini's Italy, Iceland did not participate in founding the League of Nations, which opposed fascism.²⁶ It is not necessary to compare China with fascist Italy, to point out the continuum in Iceland's attitude: any deal is fine, so long as it is purely about business or silent implementation of power and no commitment to cross-border public communication is involved.

MEANING

What is it that happened, which now goes under the name of *The Collapse*? Since the 19th century death of God governments have been busy covering up the lack left by that regulatory principle of social life. As Iceland had merely feigned its Christendom, the event went mostly unnoticed there, while the overwhelming majority of the country's pagan inhabitants remain members of the state-supported Lutheran church to this date. Meanwhile the principle actually responsible for regulating social life, supported in discourse, ideology and by relative economic stability, has been a secular law of sacrifice and reward, or work and pensions. As that principle collapsed, the void left was absolute: there was in a literal sense nothing under our feet, but that rock in the middle of the ocean, as empty of meaning as of trees. The demands of the various groups of demonstrators and commentators who responded to the event can be categorised in the following way:

1. The economic demand that the void be covered up as quickly as possible —i.e. the economy stabilised, the ideological coordinates of discourse fixed again etc. This has been the new government's main aim.

2. The social-democrat demand that the void be not only covered up but filled with the installation of a Boss-of-it-all, such as by EU-membership, so that regulation will be stabilised in some imaginary beyond, the name of which would be Brussels. This neuroticisation has been the government's secondary aim.

3. The anarchist demand that the void be left open — seeing that what was wrong was not the collapse but the construction which deserved to collapse all along. There should be neither any Boss-of-it-all nor substitute pretensions. Some proponents of this view are among the group

known as the *Reykjavík 9*, persecuted by state and police.

4. The communist demand that the void be dealt with as such, for us, the people, to use the opportunity to start from scratch and fill it through slow and conscious deliberation in a communal, egalitarian project. The clearest expression of this was a 2008 declaration urging the foundation of a new republic with a new constitution.

Naomi Klein's notion of shock as the Friedmanite methodology of choice remains eye-opening. Iceland still faces all the dangers described in her book *The Shock Doctrine*.²⁷ There are strong forces pushing and pulling for trading off energy resources and other fundamental valuables for a short term economic fix, while the government elected after the collapse mostly remains only nominally left-wing.²⁸ However, an anti-capitalist movement, absent during the boom years, is now alive and kicking, on fronts ranging from the aforementioned anarchist activists, through the Icelandic Attac affiliate to an array of individual commentators, bloggers and protestors. The sharp difference in public debate before and after Iceland's shock in 2008, is evidence that the Collapse can still prove a vital reality call rather than a death blow. In 2005 no one contested president Grímsson's inherently racial remarks about Icelanders' greatness. His proud impersonation of a volcano in 2010, however, met with stark uproar, and that response itself was criticised and debated as well. The nine-volume long report on politics and business in the advent and aftermath of the economic meltdown, written by an independent committee and published by parliament, is uncontested no. 1 bestseller in 2010, generally hailed as dense, unscrupulous and non-biased. There is a long way to go, but a collective attempt is underway to relate words to reality. This, the possibility of meaning, is a meta-political matter, and in that sense truly political.

In 2005, while the rest of the country was politically dormant, Saving Iceland brought anti-capitalist activism to the country, in a campaign against the aluminum industry. People were outraged at their impolite manners. Icelandic protest movements had never actually anticipated or accomplished change. As already mentioned, for decades anti-NATO demonstrators marched each summer away from the U.S. Army base, restating their intention of futility with each step backwards. In hindsight, the Saving Iceland international protest camp served as training ground for the 2008–2009 protests known as 'the pots-and-pans revolution'. Their methodology was direct ac-

tion, repeatedly obstructing work at the dam that was under construction to power Glencore International's aluminum plant. The tactics and practical know-how of the campaigners proved of major importance after the collapse. No less important, however, was the contagion of mindset: the simple conviction that words and action relate and affect the world. This informal movement, created by free association of individuals, could not have come about if not for the EEA- and Schengen-agreements enforcing Iceland to keep its gates open for European citizens.²⁹

Most of those leftists who do not directly oppose Iceland's application to the EU play down its importance as inconsequential for real, radical politics. Some play both cards. I disagree. As the EEA-agreement is now considered a temporary left-over from a bygone era, the choice, in the long-term, is between full EU membership or ongoing ad-hoc free-trade agreements with China or whoever comes along, with no significance but monetary, no extension of civil rights and no opening up for the free association of people. The capability of words to signify and perform can normally be taken for granted. Only in its absence, in a state of collective delusion, does it become noticeable as a necessary precondition of any politics. After 16 years of EEA-participation, closing down Iceland's borders to Europe would be parallel to abolishing a constitution and narrowing the scope of people's rights to the whimsical decisions of a municipality —an opportunist schizophrenic municipality at that.

I place my bet on the unforeseen potential of a wider society, the unexplored destabilising potential of joining a common neurotic territory. ■

Haukur Már Helgason is a philosopher, poet and writer. Helgason is currently directing and producing the documentary film *a9ainst*, about nine protesters prosecuted for 'attacking parliament' in the winter of the upheavals in 2008-2009, and researching the performativity of the image vis-a-vis Jean-Luc Godard.

NOTES:

1. Carlin in *The Observer*, 2008.
2. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson in *Newsnight*, BBC, April 19th 2010. <http://news.Bbc.Co.Uk/2/hi/8631343.Stm>
3. "Inspired by iceland video", <http://vimeo.Com/12236680>. In monetary terms and otherwise, the country's image abroad is considered so important that the campaign was literally defined as an emergency measure, allowing bureaucratic standards to be momentarily surpassed, and the project assigned to particular agencies without looking for competing offers.
4. Richard F. Thomasson. *Iceland, the first new society*. University of minnesota press, 1980, p. 7.
5. See the full text at the president's official website: <http://forseti.Is/media/files/05.05.03.Walbrook.Club.Pdf>
6. John Carlin. "No wonder iceland has the happiest people on earth". *The Observer*, May 18th 2008.
7. "Schizophrenia". Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. The American Psychiatric Association, 2000.
8. The film features nicely portrayed cranky icelandic 'outvading' business men who, not satisfied to deal with an intermediary, demand to meet with the absent boss of it all, upon which demand an actor is hired to play the role.
9. This has been contested by archaeological findings in the last three decades, supporting claims that nordic settlers may have arrived decades, even centuries earlier.
10. Richard F. Thomasson. *Iceland, the first new society*. University of Minnesota, 1980, p. 5.
11. Thomasson, p. 178.
12. Thomasson p. 179.
13. Thomasson, p. 86.
14. For updates on the ongoing prosecution of nine protesters, see <http://www.Rvk9.Org/in-english/>
15. Michael T. Corgan. *Iceland and its alliances: security for a small state*. The edwin mellen press, 2002.
16. Laing, r.D. *The divided self, an existential study in sanity and madness*. First published by tavistock publications 1959. Version quoted published by penguin books 1990. P. 17
17. Laing, p. 39.
18. Laing, p. 42.
19. Laing, p. 46.
20. Laing, p. 48.
21. Laing, p. 49. Details of a parallel feigned normality abound in Iceland. A signpost by a countryroad in the west of the country,

indicating the site of a monument, reads, in english: so-and-so "the first european woman to give birth in america". A direct translation of the accompanying icelandic text, however, would be: "the first white mother in America". The difference in tonality is no accident: let's play normal and politically correct for the foreigners, but we all know what this is truly about ...

22. "The same could happen to us as the north-american indians. They sacrificed their country for glass jewelry and firewater," mr. Jónasson also wrote in the article "virkisturn í norðri" or "northern outpost of the fortress" published in morgunblaðið august 6 2010.
23. Speech in Althingi, september 9th 1992, 13:39. www.Althingi.Is/altext/116/09/r09133900.Sgml
24. Speech in Althingi, december 15th 1992, 15:47. www.Althingi.Is/altext/116/12/r15154723.Sgml
25. Increased relations with China have among other things brought teams of low-cost construction workers, to erect a gigantic music and conference hall in the center of Reykjavík, remains of bankers' pre-lapse dreams. The workers are lodged in the former military base outside the city, bussed back and forth for their daily shifts, ruling out the possibility of any communication between them and the locals. Whatever can be said about the way icelanders treated polish workers during the boom years, they did enjoy formal civil rights and freedom of movement.
26. See for example Þór Whitehead. *Íslandsævintýri himmlers* 1935–1937. Reykjavík, 1988.

27. Naomi Klein. *The Shock Doctrine*. Metropolitan Books, 2007.
28. Some recent steps taken by the government do seem to move it gradually closer to a leftist agenda, notably a proposed referendum on the future of the quota system for harvesting the common fisheries.
29. The Schengen treaty may be dispacable as implemented by governments inhumanely tossing refugees around, but it is far less so than Iceland's de facto foreign policy since the foundation of the republic. Significantly, when Iceland signed the Schengen treaty it was regretted by the ruling political elite, not for establishing a european fortress, of course, but that the country would have to open up its borders to Europe in order to remain open to the nordic countries. At the time Iceland had granted one person political asylum, over a period of 20 years. See Davíð Oddsson's address to the icelandic lawyers' convention 2002: "crossing borders –human rights or a privilege?" <http://www.Forsaetisraduneyti.Is/radherra/raedur-og-greinar/nr/372>.

JONATAN HABIB ENGQVIST

CURATOR Jonatan Habib Engqvist has a background in philosophy and aesthetic theory. He has worked as an independent curator and theorist in Sweden, Iceland, Italy, India and the USA. He has previously worked as a curator at the *Moderna Museet* in Stockholm where he was one of the initiators of the experimental program in the Studio, as well as at the *Royal Academy of Fine Art* in Stockholm. He has produced international conferences, programs and exhibitions, has edited journals like *Glänta*, *Ord&Bild*, *Motiv* and been an active writer and lecturer on subjects related to philosophy, art and architecture. Engqvist was co-editor of the book *Dharavi: Documenting Informalities* (Stockholm 2008 & New Dehli 2009).



THE NORDIC THIRD WORLD COUNTRY?



Bjargey Ólafsdóttir presents a cluster of 72 different drawings put together on 3 walls measuring a total of approximately 10 metres. This collection of often ironic or humorous reflections on decadence is entitled *Gud betalar* (2007) – *God pays*. A title that could be read as a fact, a sign of hope or perhaps even resignation. Originally drawn in South America in 2007, they might in the context of this exhibition even be understood as a the-day-after analyses of the mechanisms involved in the hysteria preceding the crash, when in the end, “All we really want is love.”



BJARGEY ÓLAFSDÓTTIR

Bjargey Ólafsdóttir (b. 1972) lives and works in Reykjavík. She has studied photography, painting and mixed media at *Iceland Academy of the Arts, Reykjavík* and *Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki*, and *Screenwriting and Directing* in Binger Filmlab, Amsterdam. Ólafsdóttir works with drawing, film, photography and performance, resulting in works full of ironic, sometimes violent or sinister stories that draw on obsession and fantasy in the lives of contemporary urban men and women. Characters in her photography are often stereotypes — subjects lost in familiar but alienating interiors. The works display a play with our preconceptions about what we see, about the mediums of film and photography, questioning what is real and what is fiction. In her photographs, films and drawings Bjargey Ólafsdóttir tells peculiar stories and constructs strange performances and bizarre plots. As her audience, we are complicit in her aesthetic exercise; we read the signs, know the symbols and navigate the plot. She has exhibited her work internationally in venues such as *The Reykjavík Museum of Photography*; *The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík*; *Kunstverein, Munich*; *KunstWerke, Berlin*; and *Galeria Tracchi* in Santiago, Chile.



The oil painting *Flóðbylgja* (2010), which is the Icelandic word for Tsunami wave, measures approximately 180 cm X 130 cm. It has been produced especially for this exhibition with Hokusai's famous wood-block print "the Great Wave" (1831) as an obvious point of reference. Erla S Haraldsdóttir is also participating with the film *Reynisdrangar* (2009) where a well-known environment is transformed into animated scenery interjected by authentically filmed material. Depicting waves breaking against black lava sand and the famous basalt sea stacks in Southern Iceland known as "Reynisdrangar" which according to legend were formed by two petrified trolls, Haraldsdóttir's beach undergoes yet another uncanny transformation as it turns into what might be a tropical island accompanied by the deafening sound of the ocean.

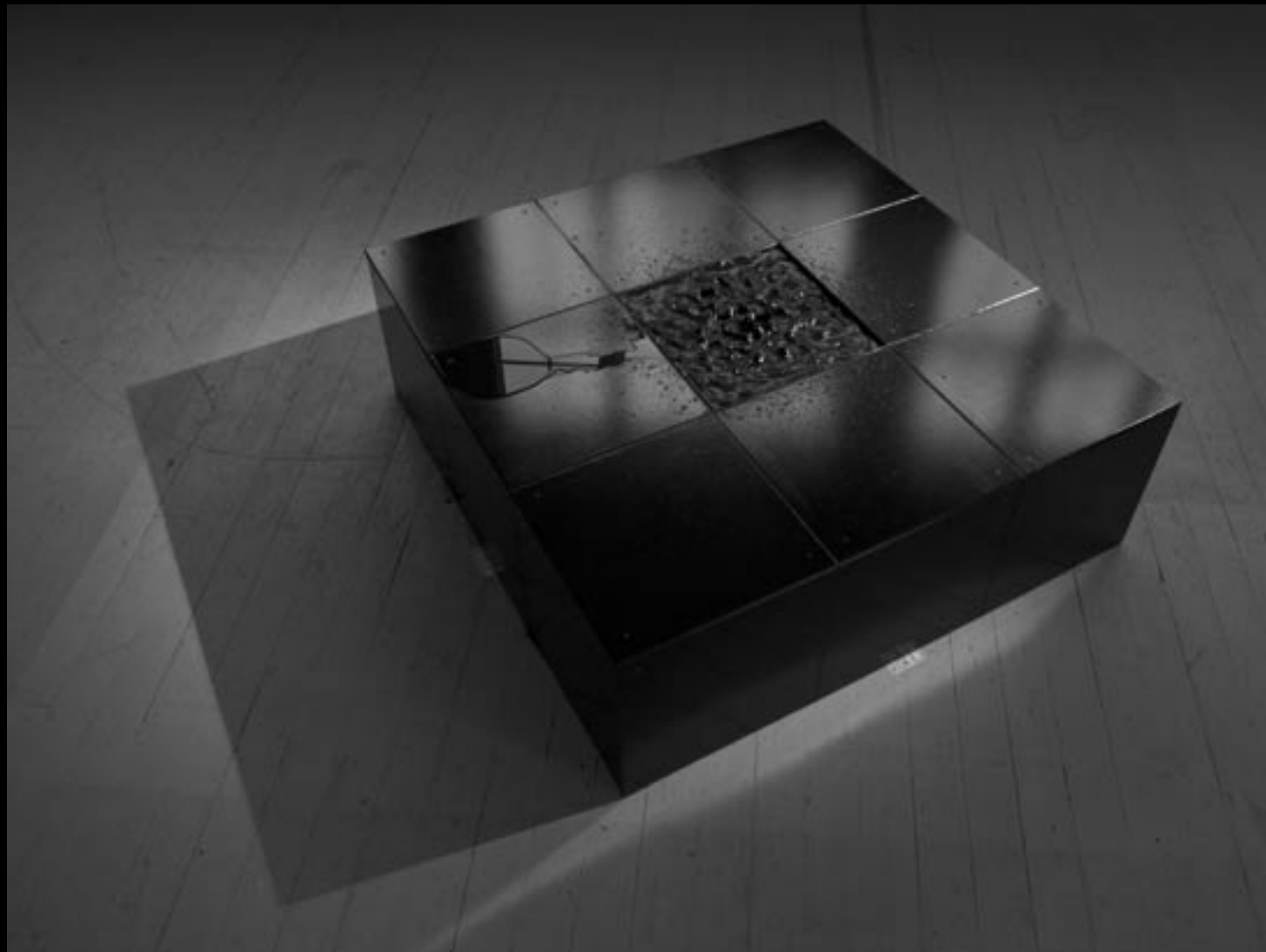


ERLA S. HARALDSDÓTTIR

Erla S. Haraldsdóttir (b. 1967) lives and works in Berlin and Reykjavík. She studied at the *Royal University College of Fine Arts*, Stockholm, the *New Genres Department at the San Francisco Art Institute* and the *Valand School of Fine Art*, Gothenburg. In her work she explores her geographical surroundings, through photography, drawing and video, which she combines in animations and photo collages where well-known neighbourhoods are transformed into animated scenery in which authentically filmed people operate. Her films generate disruptions that radically alter perceptions of the mundane, challenging the existing dynamics between place and population. Central themes are globalisation, gentrification and racism, where she poses the possibility of a different, stranger world nested within the ordinary. She stretches the boundaries of film, drawing and animation, by building on documentary recordings altered by means of actual pencil or felt pen drawings. Her works are more than narrative, since they also give an account of the process of image production, in which you can follow her appropriation and reshaping of reality. A wide array of feelings plays the main role. The works investigate how memories come about, and how emotions and visual perception interact. Haraldsdóttir has exhibited in such institutions as *Scandinavia House*, New York; *Museum of Contemporary Art*, Skopje in Macedonia; and *Singapore History Museum*. She is represented at *Reykjavík Art Museum*, Iceland as well as the *National Public Art Council*, Sweden.



Hreinn J Stephensen has produced two new works specifically for this exhibition. *Black Box 2* (2010) – a title that refers to the minimalist language of the sculpture and simultaneously connotes the technology which can help us figure out what has prefigured an aircraft accident. It is a tactile sound-sculpture where a powerful built-in bass speaker creates a black “geysir”. The rhythmic disruptions and sudden bursts on the surface of the black liquid appear due to the pressure produced by the sound-waves from a recorded human voice; a BBC interview with the former Icelandic president. The minimalist sculptures’ foundation is constructed so that the sound-waves also transplant themselves and resonate through a bystanders feet and up into the body like the early tremors of an earthquake. The single boxing sack cast in white concrete with crushed marble that hangs from the ceiling in a thick, 9 metre rope was something that was produced along the way and speaks for itself – the harder you hit, the more it hurts.



HREINN J STEPHENSEN

Hreinn J Stephensen (b. 1970), lives and works in Stockholm. He is educated at *The Royal University College Of Fine Arts, Stockholm* and *The Icelandic Academy Of Art, Reykjavik*. He works with objects, sound and video, and is also active as a musician. Many of Stephensen’s works deal with our manipulation of nature and ourselves, questioning the boundaries for this manipulation. He shows an awareness of nature as a part of humanity. Stephensen is engaged in trying to demonstrate that ‘the way things are’ can be different from the way things appear. The installations return to basic questions of perception and make us think about the relationship between surface and content – a relationship that is not always obvious either in his artworks or, we come to realise, in life in general. Playing with scale and perspectives, he magnifies, conceals or distorts physical phenomena, as to suggest that we, on a conceptual level will never begin to understand the complexity of our world and the magnitude of our actions. Stephensen has exhibited at *ID:I Gallery, Stockholm*; *Panorama, Olot, Barcelona*; *The Sculpture House, Stockholm*; and *Nam Nam Beauty, Copenhagen*, among other art spaces.

Ingvar Högni Ragnarsson has produced three silent 7-minute loops. They come from the series called *Waiting* (2004–2009) and document an island in chock, where no one knows what will happen next. It is a portrait of a city that starts to decay in the middle of its largest expansion ever. As the odd raven passes by among abandoned streetlight-poles, empty and half-finished houses the nation is waiting.

INGVAR HÖGNI RAGNARSSON

Ingvar Högni Ragnarsson (b. 1981) lives and works in Reykjavík. He graduated from the visual art department of the *Icelandic Academy of the Arts* in 2007, and also studied at the photography department of the *Royal Academy of the Arts* in Den Haag. His main media are photography and video. In static but suggestive images he documents the drastic changes Iceland is going through, depicting decay, desertion and expansion of urban areas and the destruction of nature. Ragnarsson's work takes its starting point in a certain idea or concept, from which he then lets chance and the environment itself take hold of the creation. Alongside his art Ragnarsson is running an artist bookstore called *Útúrdúr* with his wife Bryndís Björnsdotir, and also photographs for various artists, galleries, museums and musicians. His work has been published in numerous magazines and newspapers and he has also published his own artist book, *Pess á milli*, with Nýhil. Ragnarsson has participated in various group exhibitions in venues in Iceland and abroad, like *Oi futuro*, Rio de Janeiro; *The Nordic House*, Reykjavík; *LÁ Art Museum* and *New Live Shop*, Berlin.



Pétur Thomsen shows several photographs from the series *Imported Landscape*. The classic landscape photography, with its against-the-sun image of the sublime, suddenly receives new meaning when we realize that the entire landscape is constructed. Not only in the sense that all images of nature are constructions, but in a very literal way – as the scenery consists of bulldozer tracks or shafted landmass. Since 2003 when The National Power Company of Iceland started the building of the 700 MW Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project in eastern Iceland, Thomsen has taken photographs, even when the area has been under press-blackout due to massive local protests. The project he has followed consists of three dams and a hydroelectric power plant. The dams block several rivers including the glacial river Jökulá á Dal and creates the 57km² artificial lake Háslón in order to supply the increasing demands for electricity created through a new aluminum smelter for Alcoa – the world's third largest producer of aluminum, in the fjord of Reyðarfjörður on the east coast of Iceland.



PETUR THOMSEN

Petur Thomsen (b. 1973) studied art history and archaeology at the *Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III*, Montpellier; photography at *École Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques*, Montpellier and at *École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie (ENSP)*, Arles. Thomsen's photography depicts the Icelandic landscape by following straight compositional rules. In most of his photos the landscape fills the surface completely, with the result that nature's elements attain a graphic quality in the sense that they give the image a specific rhythm. But the magnificent scenes are not always what they seem at a first glance, the photos show the violent intrusion of mankind into Iceland's nature. Whether seen as social criticism or as a romantic statement, his work bears witness to the rapid change of Iceland's land and cityscapes. Thomsen approaches his country with an icy, poetic gaze, still revealing a passion for a land with open scars, wounded by man and our machines intruding on the seemingly serene but naturally violent setting of the Icelandic volcanic landscape. Pétur Thomsen has exhibited at *The National Gallery of Iceland*; *Photo Gallery International*, Tokyo; *Musée de l'Élysée*, Switzerland; *Galería El Ojo Ajeno*, Peru and *PhotoforumPasquArt* in Biel-Bienne, Switzerland, among many other places, and is represented in several public and private collections.

Hildur Margaretardóttir built a “niðstöng”, or a scorn post, with a sculpture resembling a flayed horse head during the demonstrations in Reykjavík 2009. The scorn post was for the Norse and Icelandic vikings an incantation medium, which consisted of a pole with a spike on which a horse head with wide-open mouth was placed, against those who they wished would be hit by accident. The scorn post is thus a symbol of hatred, ridicule and contempt. It is either held or fastened to the ground, while one recites or sings a lampoon that brings down shame over fiends, in this case of the Icelandic finance vikings. Her dreamcatchers work similarly, as they can “catch” and milder the effect of the Icelandic nightmares after the crunch. Playing with functionalist architecture and evolution, her *Funkis-birds* (2010) are a new species that have adapted to a landscape of unfinished buildings.



HILDUR MARGRÉTARDÓTTIR

Hildur Margrétardóttir (b. 1968), studied at *Icelandic College of Art and Craft*; *Utrecht School of Art*, Netherlands and the *Slade School of Fine Art*, London. Ranging from painting to sculpture and photography, Margrétardóttir's art work often plays with the relationship between high and low culture, between folklore and pop-culture interwoven with a subtle political commentary that can be found both in her collages and ink drawings based on tabloid magazines and her intimate photographic portraits. In her installation works, which are primarily created with found materials from discarded building sites, superstition and curses are used to make political statements. Her photography also follows the trajectory of investigations on how mediated stories and the visual conventions from art history that have influenced them infiltrate domestic environments, often intertwined with captions of the intimate moments of everyday life. A household sink might remind us of a Dutch still-life painting, the artist's family and cat form a renaissance triangle as they crowd down in an armchair and we can trace Saint Mary in a 12-year old girl playing Game Boy. She has exhibited internationally over the last 16 years, and participated in exhibitions at the *Reykjavík Museum of Photography*; *Milk Gallery*, New York; and *The Bloomsbury Theatre*, London to mention a few.



MAGNUS SIGURDARSON

Magnus Sigurdarson (b. 1966) who currently lives and works in Miami, USA, graduated from the *Icelandic College of Arts & Crafts* in 1992. He went on to study at *Studio Cecil & Graves* in Florence, Italy, and with a Fulbright scholarship earned an MFA from *Mason Gross School of the Arts* at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He is a conceptual artist working in various media. His room installations often display a minimal but powerful aesthetic. As an Icelander travelling and working abroad he takes advantage of Nordic stereotypes cast upon him, and transforms himself into different aspects of (him)self that explore both the construction of, and others' perceptions of Identity, drawing attention to the interplay between the self and the other. His performance based interactions also play on the multifaceted relationship of power and art while exploiting archetypes of various kinds. Sigurdarson's body of work is filled with irony, satire and humour, but there is also an inclination towards melancholy and nostalgia — he stresses “we should never underestimate the power of the pathetic”. He manages to connect the personal experience to the political situation, raising questions about the progressing globalisation and homogenisation of culture. Sigurdarson's works are in the permanent collections of *The Icelandic National Gallery*, *The Living Art Museum*, and the *Reykjavik Municipal Museum*; *The Collezione La Gaia* in Busca, Italy; *The Focus Group Corporate Collection* in New York, and the *Public Collection of the Royal Caribbean in Miami*, among others. Magnus is represented by *Dorsch Gallery* in Miami and has participated in different venues such as *MOMENTUM '04* in Moss, Norway; *The first Urban Sculpture Biennial* in Shanghai '05; *Art Basel Miami Beach '07* with *Kevin Bruk Gallery* and *It's Not Your Fault* at *Luhring Augustine* in New York '08.

Stormur (2001/2010) by Magnus Sigurdarson consists of a glass wall, two tons of fine grain salt, industrial fans and powerful building lights that draw you into the exhibition like a fly to the bulb. Just like many of the works in the exhibition, *Stormur* gives an uncanny twist to the cliché of Icelandic climate and nature, that also shifts the focus to the perplexities of human nature.

Carolina Marquez: *By definition a haven is any place of shelter and safety; a refuge from a storm. But what if seeking protection was not an option; with no place to run to, where does one hide? Stormur redefines the notion of a haven. An impenetrable snow-scape; the wind is howling and snowflakes blast in a frenzied whirl. Magnus has taken the artist's safe haven and turned it into a storm of vulnerability. Ultimately challenging the concept of not only the physical improbability of a storm actually occurring within a confined space, but is also referencing the struggle of an artist to find refuge from the frigid and merciless wrath of the art world.*

For most, the thought of being caught in the middle of a wintry blizzard with no place to hide is enough to send chills up our spine. Sigurdarson's way of coping with this idea of being helplessly stranded is to create an isolated haven FOR the storm, rather than FROM the storm. By denying the audience access to the piece Magnus is protecting Nature from human beings; or art world from artists. This we can call the artist's protective mechanism, or artistic ingenuity; for he is exposing the storm to its victims, thus placing the power in their hands, and leaving it (the storm) exposed, and vulnerable, to the elements (people).





Rúri shows the documentation of pioneering Icelandic art work – *The Golden Car* (1974), created in a time that also was defined by economical unbalance, but also as a reaction to the effects of aggressive economic thinking on the environment.

RÚRÍ

Rúri (b.1951) lives and works in Reykjavík, and is one of the most prolific Icelandic artists over the past three decades. She came to the attention of the public in the summer of 1974, when she displayed a golden Mercedes Benz as a symbol of materialism and consumerism and then a few days later attacked it with a sledgehammer. In 2003 her international career was propelled after her participation in the 2003 *Venice Biennale*. She has now become one of Iceland's most prominent artists, and many of her works can be found in public spaces and public and private collections. Working in a wide range of media, Rúri presents her concern for threatened nature and for politics, intertwined with and alongside her more conceptual interests in time, relativity, and the ephemeral. She has never confined herself to a single medium, but expresses her ideas through performances, multi media, sculptures, photography, installations and environmental art on a grand scale. Rúri's art often simultaneously presents the raw beauty and the sublime of the environment while asking viewers to reflect critically on their physical relationship with her art and the nature it portrays, as well as stressing the power humans have to alter the natural world, often engaging in a critique of contemporary political conflict or other aspects of environmental devastation. Many of her works also possess a refined elegance and reflect more subtle reflections on conceptual themes. Rúri has been presented in a number of solo shows in Europe, the US and Asia, and the long list of venues where she participated in group exhibitions include *Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art*, Istanbul; *Ars Electronica 2007*, Linz; *The Israel Museum*, Jerusalem; *Spiegel/Lothringen 13*, Munchen and *The Pickled Art Centre*, Beijing. She is also active in numerous artist and public organisations, and gives lectures frequently.





In the installation *Guilt trip* (2007) [p.4] which was shown at Färgfabriken's venue in Stockholm, we see the protagonist wander aimlessly through the wilderness carrying a rifle and a plastic bag from Bonus filled with cartridges. There are no other props: no wig, no make-up and – no comic relief. Every now and then he fires off his weapon at random. The piece is in its ways a tribute to Laddi: a comedian who has been present during the full lives of a generation which Ragnar Kjartansson belongs to. Laddi has invented many characters, in films, on theatres, television, radio and music albums. A whole nation has roared with laughter when Laddi has taken on one of his many roles. Paradoxically, nobody knows him. Behind all identities, extreme personas and all personality layers we find a withdrawn man, so infamous for his shyness that media gave up interviewing him a long time ago. In the context of this project the installation has served as a reflection of the frustration after the Icelandic crises. At Färgfabriken Norr he participates with two video works. *Colonization* (2003), a farcical commentary on Iceland's "post-colonial" past, where images of a Danish Marquis de Sade figure torturing an indigenous peasant are cross cut with postcards from contemporary Copenhagen slowly covered by running red paint was installed in a barn or cellar-like environment. *Satan is Real* (2007) is a tragic, repetitive endurance exercise, which is something that has come to characterise Kjartansson's artistry more recent times. Buried to the waist, he plays the phrase "Satan is real, he's working for me" over and over again, while children lazily licking ice cream cones wander by, watch him for a while before they see a dog that seems more fun and run out of picture. One could say that endurance, melancholia and poetic sadness combined with humour often can be found in his performances as he throws himself between emotions of hopelessness, doom and joie de vivre, in a particular Nordic manner. If Woody Allen once defined comedy as tragedy with distance, perhaps the opposite is at stake in Kjartansson's world – the tragedy created by comedy with no distance what so ever.



RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

Ragnar Kjartansson (b. 1976) studied at *The Icelandic Academy of the Arts* in Reykjavík and in the *Royal Academy* in Stockholm. He lives and works in Reykjavík. Known for experimenting across media, with elements of visual art, film, music and theatre, he considers himself mainly a performance artist. He was also a member of the electronic music group *Trabant*, that played on the boundaries of rock and roll and performance art. He often links performances with videos, installations or paintings. Kjartansson's pieces are characterised by the interplay between contradictory feelings – sorrow and happiness, horror and beauty, drama and humour – revealing his fascination by the tragicomic spectacle of human experience. Repetition or 'the loop' is another important element in his work. The performances and films often include elements of endurance and privation for the artist, as he forces himself to repeat the same action over and over again for a long time. Kjartansson has exhibited at the *Studio, Moderna Museet*, Stockholm; *EX3 Center for Contemporary Art*, Florence; *CCS BARD*, New York among other places, and in 2009 Kjartansson represented Iceland in the *Venice Biennale*.



As well as participating with a performance, the Icelandic Love Corporation are showing the film *Dynasty* (2007) projected in daylight on an almost 4 metre wide surface. It is perhaps a comment to wealth and climate change where rich housewives escape to the cold, snow-covered mountains to enjoy one of the last cold, unexploited places on earth.

THE ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION

The Icelandic Love Corporation is a group of three artists: Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir (b. 1973), Jóni Jónsdóttir (b. 1972) and Eirún Sigurðardóttir (b. 1971). They graduated from the *Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts* in 1996. Since then they have lived and studied in New York, Berlin and Copenhagen and are currently based in Reykjavík. The three of them work together creating performances, installations, videos, photographs and more, with an array of expressions, often playful and poetic. They are famous for expressive performances, where the connection with the audience is central. They are believers in the power of collaboration. Using nearly all possible media the ILC confronts the seriousness of the art world with works that mix playfulness, humour and spectacle with refreshing authenticity and subtle social critique. Their art and performance often incorporates ideas of traditional femininity, but the female subjects are always women on their own terms. The ILC has participated in a large number of solo and group exhibitions, for example at *The Darling Foundry*, Montreal; *The Scandinavia House*, New York; *Centre for Fine Arts*, Brussels; *MassMoca*, Massachusetts; *MIACA*, Tokyo and *Moscow House of Photography*; as well as in film festivals and projects for books and magazines.



THE FUTURE OF THE ARTS IN ICELAND

BY ÍRIS ERLINGSDÓTTIR

"My most heartfelt wish is to be allowed to read nordic studies at the university, because it is my unwavering belief that by doing so i will mature my psyche/soul very well and become a more competent fighter in the battle for my existence. And since life here is an eternal struggle..."

"...My whole body was overwhelmed with persistent fatigue and decrepitude. My ability to study was clouded. My memory deteriorated. My interest faded. I thought I was consumptive. And it was cold in the world, and i was cold and tired, and I was the most miserable man in all of Iceland".

The young man who in 1913 wrote these words was Þórbergur Þórðarson, who for decades suffered near starvation in abject poverty before his fellow countrymen gave him his due as one of Iceland's greatest writers. Þórbergur was nearly fifty years of age when his first real work of fiction, the epic *Icelandic Aristocracy*, was published.

During a recent radio interview, Independent Party MP Ásbjörn Óttarsson complained about the public funding "of the arts in Iceland. At a time when cutbacks are being made at all levels of government, he wondered, why is the government paying artists? "Why can't they get regular jobs, like the rest of us?" Although he was forced to recant his words, I have no doubt that his unedited comment reflects the beliefs of many of my countrymen.

This devaluation of the value of the arts is understandable only in a short-sighted economic worldview. If our society's only goal is for each individual to attain as much wealth as possible before dying, then poetry, sculpture, music, and literature have little meaning. If the meaning of life lies in the small rectangular pieces of paper we carry in our wallets (or in the electrons in our bank computers), it is the acme of foolishness to attempt to transcend our mortal condition. If unquestioned subservience to the beliefs and tastes of our peers is a prerequisite for contentment, only a sociopath would seek beauty.

I believe, however, that our society will be remembered a thousand years from now by its artists. I have no idea who the most successful businessman of ancient Greece may have been, but I know the teachings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and the plays of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes. I'm reasonably sure that Shakespeare was not the wealthiest or most powerful man of his time, but his contemporaries all pale today in comparison to his brilliance.

Until the recent financial crisis, Iceland was known abroad primarily for its artists. Snorri Sturluson was the greatest secular author of the Middle Ages. Hall-dór Laxness won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his realistic portrayals of peasant life in Iceland. Björk's eclectic musical style and Sigur Rós's progressive rock have entranced millions of fans around the planet. Reykjavík's art scene is as lively as any in the world.

At some point in the past few years, however, our art became seen by many as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold, rather than a reflection of our national character. Men with no imagination weighed art's value with the only scale they were capable of understanding, and found it wanting. "If some artists can make millions," they asked, "why should we support the others who can't make it on their own? Why should we provide assistance to individuals whose work we can't stand and who are against everything we stand for?"

If there is one lesson we should have learned over the past couple of years, it is that unquestioned deference to authority is a grave danger to any society. The herd mentality of the boom years led to excesses that nearly destroyed our nation. The intolerance for contrary views among Iceland's elite masked the incompetence

and criminal behavior that characterised this period, and kept our democracy from functioning as it should. That small-mindedness is not a new phenomenon, as writer Pétur Gunnarsson reminds us in his book about Þórbergur Þórðarson, *In The Land Of Poverty*: "Þórbergur experiences his poverty as a consequence of the tightly knit click of moneyed interests, of bureaucrats, oligarchs, and the clergy, who fiercely guard the meat kettles and make sure that access is limited to them and those they deem worthy."

While there is a place for big-ticket items – such as Iceland's new opera house, *Harpa*, which is scheduled to open in the spring of 2011 – it is equally important to fund the dozens of promising artists who have not yet established themselves in order to give them the freedom to explore where their next meal will come from. It is impossible to know in advance which one will make a breakthrough that will dazzle our senses, redefine our perception of the world, and give us a glimpse of our possibilities. ■

Iris Erlingsdottir is an Icelandic journalist and writer who has written numerous features and columns on politics and law, cooking, food, and health for Icelandic and American media. She frequently contributes to the *Huffington Post* and is co-producer of *Iceland is Burning*, a film about Iceland's financial collapse.

THE CORPORATION, THE NATION AND THE PEOPLE

REFLECTIONS FROM A STATE OF FAILURE

BY BJÖRN THORSTEINSSON

BEFORE I BEGIN, I would like to thank Jonatan and Fia and their colleagues and partners for giving me the opportunity to be here, to speak here. Still I have to add, and this cannot wait a moment longer, that being here is strange, bordering on the uncanny. I have the feeling that whatever I say is going to be hopelessly inadequate. I could, almost literally, go on forever. What I would like to call, in Lacanian terms, the Real of the situation in Iceland is inevitably beyond words — not just because, as usual, words

are lacking, limited and poor, but also because the situation is not static but rather in constant flux, shifting and turning. The outcome is far from being decided. The really big question is who gets to decide, who gets to assume power over the situation and turn it into something orderly that, after the fact, will 'posit its presuppositions' as Hegel put it, or, in other words, lend itself legitimacy by rewriting the past. In any case, the role I will assume here — the role I assume that Jonatan had in mind when he asked

This is a transcript of a talk held at the seminar *The Nordic 3rd World Country – Panic or possibility?* at Färgfabriken, Stockholm, 26/8 2010 (see p. 52). Björn Thorsteinsson is a postdoctoral researcher at the *Institute for Philosophy*, University of Iceland.

me to participate in this event — will be something in the order of the cool-headed academic that brings the patience of the concept to bear on an increasingly chaotic and cacophonous reality. (In other words, I will try not to panic!). You definitely don't need me to tell you that, in the midst of, or rather at the very beginning of, the current global financial crisis, there was a crash, a financial meltdown in that remote, rough and peculiar island next to Greenland that, since the 9th century, has been referred to as 'Iceland'. What



really happened there? In the face of this event, thought is needed — thinking is called for to analyse the situation, so that we, as the common phrase runs, won't make the same mistakes all over again. Such a phrase, of course, assumes that there is a subject, a 'we' that is in charge of its destiny — that there may have been a catastrophe, and that this catastrophe may have hit us, but not only that, because the catastrophe could have been averted, it could have been avoided if we had only known what we know now, from bitter experience, and not only known it, but acted upon it. We will return to this.

What happened in Iceland? In 1991, a new government took over, led by a man called Davíð Oddsson, former mayor of Reykjavík and chairman of the Independence Party. Oddsson's government rapidly set about implementing the only political ideology that he knew, namely Thatcherian laissez-faire liberalism. There were some obstacles to be removed, but gradually, Oddsson and his crew managed to privatise a significant part of the public sector, and what they didn't privatise they trimmed down. They also changed the fishing industry in such a way that ownership of fishing quotas became a ludicrous playground for the accumulation of capital. After the turn of the century, looking forward to his second decade at the helm, Oddsson finally turned to the banks and, to cut a long story short, the two political parties in government at the time, Oddsson's own Independence Party and the Progressive Party (an agrarian party turned liberalish in the 1990s, whose main role was to represent and consolidate the powerful co-op conglomerate), settled on an even deal, basically handing the banks over to their respective protégés. So much for privatisation.

Still, according to apparently prestigious international survey institutions such as the one called 'Transparency International', Iceland constantly figured among the least corrupt societies on the planet. Add to this a ceaseless stream of surveys telling us — the Icelanders — that we were not one of, but the happiest nation on Earth, and it became increasingly hard to convince oneself, let alone others, that there might be just something in the order of a snake in paradise, albeit a tiny one. Still, in this atmosphere, a small contingent of unfortunate people found themselves, for some reason, compelled to practice something in the order of what Paul Ricoeur so aptly termed 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'. This they did, for example through academic practices and artistic creation, but rarely with any real effect. I venture to say that these experiments in what could also be called critical social analysis gradually became

less frequent, and when they occurred their subversive power became ever less effective. A curious type of self-censorship prevailed. No one wanted to spoil the party. Or, more precisely, no one was allowed to spoil the party. For Icelanders are no party poopers. If your neighbour is having great fun while his house is burning, you don't alert the authorities — you bring your own bottle of black death and throw yourself in.

So, where were we? Oddsson's government had just handed the banks over to their cronies in true Berlusconi fashion. But he saw clouds on the horizon. To explain, we need a little more historical detail. Oddsson's Independence Party has dominated Icelandic politics since the foundation of the Republic, also often referred to as 'Independence', in 1944, and, actually, longer than that. This domination can be attributed to three apparently contradictory factors: first, a happy symbiosis with Capital with, precisely, a capital C — or, as Jonatan's title for my presentation would have it, the party represents the Corporation which can justifiably be employed here in the singular. For, in a sense, the Capital that the Independence Party represents makes up, in the end, only one big and multi-levelled and many-headed corporation, one that, for all intents and purposes, acts in unison in its efforts to 'serve' the Icelandic consumer. We will return to the issue of Capital in Iceland.

The second factor explaining the dominance of the Independence Party consists of a powerful and extremely effective ideology that tells the voters that, no, the Independence Party does not represent Capital, it represents normal, working people. Albeit not as a whole (as the People in the sense of a mass or a demos) but precisely as independent individuals who — and this is where Iceland's geographical proximity to the USA takes on a very concrete ideological sense — are free to pursue their ideal of the good in any which way they please (within certain limits, but let us not make a big fuss about that). The Independence Party, as one of their classic slogans expressly states, lies beyond any stratification of society, beyond any division of society into classes. It is a party of unity, representing all the classes: the proletariat as well as capitalists, workers as well as petty bourgeois, blue as well as white collar. This then is — one hardly dares to use the past tense here — the ideology. But did it work? Did it become more than just an ideology, did it have concrete effects in the praxis of real people, did it manifest itself in electoral behaviour? The answer, as already implied, is an unequivocal yes. The Independence Party has been historically the 'party of the

people' and miraculously in many regards still is; its share of the votes normally touches 40% in parliamentary elections and in the capital, Reykjavík, it traditionally received the majority of the votes in municipal elections.

The third factor was the Independence Party's close identification with 'the West' during the cold war, strengthened by local paranoia in the face of Soviet expansionist interest in Iceland's strategic geographical situation. The American Navy Base in Iceland at Keflavík was a hot potato in Icelandic politics during the cold war and even later, for the Navy only packed their bags and left (on very short notice) in September 2006. By then the Independence Party, for all its talk of 'independence', had spent years and years begging the Americans to stay just a little longer — or at least until after the next elections. This strategy did not hold up forever.

Be that as it may, then; but what were the clouds on the horizon that I mentioned, the reptiles in the Paradise of economic liberalism that Oddsson had turned Iceland into? Was it perhaps that he had to face an upsurge in public commitment to what we might call 'the health of the state', a brave and organised association of defenders of the common interest as opposed to the interests of capital? Of course you know the answer as well as I do and the answer is no, not at all. The worries came from within the capitalist party, from the rise of new capitalists which, we were told, were altogether different from the ones we had grown up with; they were reckless, immoral and cared only about profit. I don't know how this strikes you, but I have to confess that I've had a really hard time comprehending what the real difference is — and to tell the truth, this rhetoric separating 'good' capitalists from 'bad' ones always sounded rather hollow coming from a party whose main ideologist never misses an opportunity to declare his boundless admiration for the likes of Hayek and Friedman. Friedman who? Well, the one that stated so categorically that businessmen had only one duty, that of increasing profits!

But there we were, facing the upsurge of the bad capitalists. To cut an already too long story short, Oddsson's government spent enormous time and energy trying to impede their growth. Looking back, we now realise that, when all is said and done, these theatricals amounted to nothing more than a big distraction. Not only in the sense of 'futile entertainment', but also in an almost military sense; for while much of the Icelandic societal apparatus spent its time on following, or participating in, the siege of the bad capitalists, the

'good' ones, that is the ones enjoying the protection and blessing of the ruling political parties, quietly started digging into the piles of gold that they had been given. This was a dirty war, and of course, like in any other war, the ones that ended up suffering most were not the chieftains of the warring armies, but common people. For, as I said, the newly established clan of Icelandic 'financial moguls', in keeping with their self-declared 'Viking ideology', moved swiftly and deliberately into foreign markets, ostensibly buying all sorts of companies and assets. I say ostensibly for after the Icelandic banks crashed in early October 2008 it turned out that the whole thing was a scam; a Potemkin village built on sand, to mix at least two metaphors. The assets, apparently, evaporated as soon as they appeared, they turned out to have been only a mirage, or, like the quintessential Icelandic troll, they turned to stone the minute daylight broke and then, unlike normal trolls, they disappeared from the landscape. Then the Icelandic people were the only ones around to pick up the bill. However, there is a persistent rumour being investigated by people such as the Norwegian-French magistrate Eva Joly — a true folk hero in Iceland at the moment — that the trolls miraculously turned up in another part of the world, on other islands mainly in the Caribbean.

In any case, taking my cue from these metaphors, this is where I could without doubt turn this presentation into a long excursion into Marx's analysis of capital, which, for all intents and purposes, would be largely in harmony with the discourse promulgated by the Icelandic capitalists themselves — the endless self-justifying interviews, blogs and articles issuing, after the fact, from their respective Olympian heights. For capital is nothing without movement, capital is not a pile of gold but a process, an endless flow that seeks to soothe the craving for surplus value, an insatiable will to, as the English phrase so succinctly has it, make money. This is what 'we', the small and deranged island nation up there next to Greenland, wanted to do — or at least these self-proclaimed worthy inheritors of the so-called 'Viking heritage' that lost no time in seizing the money they found in the banks, stuffing it in their pockets and flying off in their private jets. We — or, rather, they — wanted to make money, we wanted to demonstrate to the world that even if we have only been 'independent' for half a century (or so), we could catch up with the rest, we could act swiftly and quickly, for, as one of the Icelandic business Vikings put it so memorably in a Danish documentary on the marvellous success of Icelandic capitalists in Denmark: "What we (Icelanders, or rather Icelandic capitalists) are

good at, is turning companies that are losing money into companies that make money." Indeed. And this the Icelandic businesspeople wanted to demonstrate, this is what they wanted to achieve, and for a time they really did. But how did they do it, what was their secret? Their secret was no secret at all, it just came down to assuming that capital grows all by itself, or more precisely that capital can be created ex nihilo, and that when you borrow money, you can go to the next bank and say "hey, I have acquired some money, won't you give me some more?", and despite any old-fashioned, bureaucratic and paternalistic-minded claims to the contrary, it works, it really works, and then you buy some companies and sell them again when you need the cash, preferably to your friends (who are your friends as long as everything is running smoothly), and this carousel goes on forever, there is no stopping us, and to the tune of Queen's intolerable 'Don't stop me now!', played endlessly during these years in one of Iceland's oil companies' advertising campaigns, we ran, and we ran, and we went around in circles, and nothing could go wrong...

Until it did. But it was not our fault, or so we were told. Iceland is in many ways a desolate place, at the mercy of the wind and the sky and the sea, and is often hit by storms that some other nations would probably refer to as tropical. One of these storms hit us. Just like any of those storms, this one originated elsewhere, in Wall Street and beyond, and then it came and destroyed us. Such was the discourse that we, the Icelandic people, were offered in the days and weeks following the crash. It would have gone on forever, had it not been for that damned storm. But not everyone believed this. Incredibly, people, the Icelandic people, the proverbial man in the street, had suddenly had enough. It took only three months of protests to chase the government away. In January 2009, a left-wing coalition (for lack of a better word) assumed power. The Independence Party was no longer at the helm after nearly 18 years in office. But maybe the new government would have liked to take over under more advantageous circumstances. The IMF was already in town, and as any reader of Naomi Klein's classic *The Shock Doctrine* is quick to realise, that means that any type of leftist policy is not likely to be given the opportunity to flourish. And it hasn't.

Now, to finish: what the Icelandic 'business Vikings' wanted to do was to move beyond Iceland. They wanted to separate themselves from the hardships involved in being born into a nation that through the 20th century mainly lived off fish and sheep farming. In a sense, they couldn't

stand being Icelanders (even if the Icelandic nation, led by the president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, quickly developed the habit of portraying them as their favoured offspring). They only wanted to get rich in order to be able to leave the country. And leave the country they did. In a mess. And we, the Icelandic people, are in the midst of it. We don't know where we're going. We worry. Perhaps the main source of our worry is that this is where our real involvement with capitalism starts, that the next step, which would indeed be quite logical considering our subjugation to the IMF, will be that Big Foreign Capital moves in and takes over our natural resources — the energy, the fish, the water, and whatever else: the banks, the insurance companies, the phone companies, and so on. About which the government can do nothing, because hey, this is globalisation!

But let me tell you one thing before I stop, one thing that I have to make clear before I stop talking at this symposium, under this heading: Iceland is no Third World Country. Two weeks ago, an event occurred that didn't attract much attention in Iceland, but it may well be symptomatic of things to come. An Icelandic vessel belonging to the coast guard, on assignment in the Mediterranean, came across two open boats carrying 70 Africans en route to the Spanish coast. Icelandic state radio proudly described the way in which the Icelandic crew saved these people on behalf of Frontex, the EU border agency, and then, in keeping with the established procedures, alerted the local authorities. Not a word about the plight of the boat people themselves, about the so-called immigrant 'problem' within the EU, about the dubious nature of 'Fort Europa' or about the immigrant camps that perforate the face of Europe. But at least this was an example of Icelanders coming into direct contact with refugees, with what Giorgio Agamben has called "perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day". For, let us face the facts, the nation-state is withering away in a very definitive sense. 'We', Icelandic nationals, could not have prevented the crash. For as long as there is globalised, geared-up, financial capitalism, such things will occur. Producing people that feel desolate, betrayed and cheated, and cannot help but start dreaming of moving beyond, of breaking out of their entrenchment, out of the trap in which they find themselves. Out of the seemingly all-encompassing circus of Capital. For, as Agamben points out, as we witness "the dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty [...], the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come". ■

ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION

INTERVIEW BY KARIN ENGLUND

This interview was originally published in the exhibition catalogue for *Re:think, Contemporary Art and Climate Change*, in Copenhagen, autumn 2009.

You all graduated from the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts in 1996. Why did you form the ILC back then, and are the motives for working as a group still the same?

We formed the group because we saw the potential of collaboration all around and in ourselves. We did not foresee that we would still be working together thirteen years later, but the motives are still the same. Even though we have hopefully grown and changed in many ways.

When did you realize you wanted to become artists? Was it always a dream?

We have talked about this among us and all of us realized this around the age of 6 or 7. More like destiny than a dream.

Could you tell us a little about your work process?

Some ideas seem to jump out like a light bulb above all of our heads. Some ideas and projects need a lot of time and nurturing. Some linger around and appear again and again in many different ways. Some are fun for a while and then just vanish. It is never the same.

What is the difference between working collectively and as solo artists?

There is a big difference. Working together demands a lot of talking and explaining. Negotiations and compromises. It can make ideas grow fast and we feel that it is in some ways addicting. We have also practiced trust and "gut feeling" kind of work, to try to eliminate too much discussion and allow the sub-conscious to take over. This is maybe easier when you are working as a solo artist.

What are your influences and inspirations?

Us ourselves and life around us. It is very hard to pin point. Our latest performance piece took place at a lighthouse, where we collaborated with a marching band. The influences and inspirations were political and

historical; we drew inspiration from sailors, navigation, fashion, fascism, trash, birds and emotions to name just a few of the ingredients.

Are there any particular things that disrupt your creativity and work process?

We don't like to force things and we don't like workaholism. It happens very seldom, but when we witness arguments, negativity and disrespect, we get a little puzzled.

Nature often seems to play an important role in your works. For example, in the video *Where do we go from here* (2001), that takes place in the spectacular Icelandic landscape, a poem is being sung where the line "never reason with nature" stands out. What does this mean to you?

It means that it is dangerous to think that humans are above nature and are able to control it. Humans can collaborate with nature as they are a part of the system but they cannot take over.

What do you think happens with our perception of, and relationship with, nature in the wake of the growing awareness of environmental problems and climate change?

*Like you say it will result in growing awareness, which hopefully results in more respect for nature and less exploitation by faceless corporations. In our piece *Dynasty* (2007) we addressed the climate change. Rich house-wives escape to the mountains to enjoy one of the last cold and barren places on earth, going back to basics in their own way. In our work we sometimes like to see things in such a way that it inspires people to think of themselves within the bigger picture. Maybe we like to look at serious matters in a comical way. In case of environmental problems it is maybe hard to see how these growing problems hit everyone personally. It is also hard to look at the doomsday, propagandaish films and websites without feeling helpless. But still it seems obvious that everybody must ask themselves how they can contribute and change themselves.*

What's the art world like in Iceland? How is it affected by the recent economic crisis?

The art world in Iceland is used to doing things without much money. People help each other and do things because they feel creative, not to sell products. The last ten years were abnormal. Now it's back to normal again. The country is facing major cuts in its economy and culture is a luxury that maybe goes first. But this economic crisis has also damaged our self image. The work of a few people has left the rest of us with insane debt, anger and a feeling of being abused. Already artworks are being made from this frustration or as an attempt to come to terms with this. It was Icelandic artists who put Iceland on the map in recent years and these business men used this image in a distorted way to enhance their profit and have now made us all look like greedy, arrogant, pompous fools. This is a confusing situation, but hopefully we will get back on our feet soon and learn from the mistakes.

In general, how do you see the artist's role in society?

They should infiltrate on every level. ■

Déjà vu, performance by The Icelandic Love Corporation at the opening of *The Nordic Third World Country?* at Färgfabriken Norr, Östersund, October 2010. Photo: Nikolina Stållborn.





DÉJÀ VU

PERFORMANCE BY THE ICELANDIC
LOVE CORPORATION

There is a trajectory that runs through many performances by the Icelandic Love Corporation since they were founded in the middle of the 1990s, where a camouflaged or masked identity is interwoven with corporal experience as a way of understanding and being in the world. It is a lineage that not only points out how we constantly step into different roles for others, but also how we do it for ourselves. We conceal and deceive ourselves in order to handle the diverse and contradictory multiplicity that surrounds us — overt only in rare instances. It seems like the Icelandic Love Corporation want to create and intensify these moments.

The exhibition *The Nordic Third World country? – Icelandic art in times of crisis* opened with a new remix performance entitled *Déjà Vú*. An intense performance with layers of symbolical reference, humour and a touch of magic. It was put together on the basis of three performances originally arranged between 2004 and 2009 that address the complexities of human nature and with uncanny intuition prefigure the consequences of political and economic decisions taken, not only in Iceland, during that period:

Eruption – Corruption (2004–09) begins with a metamorphosis from independent cocoons to an untied force. By the tent they saw, hammer and construct in order to brutally splinter their own creation with axes and finally unite by collectively drinking from the grail of milk.

Creation – Corruption – Celebration (2005) where the trio, like ravens on a cold winter's day, build a nest to endure the harsh weather. They print money and the audience is encouraged to help burn it all.

Invasion – Expansion (2005), which is a tribute to the rough seagull, with its irritating laughter and screams that penetrate the eardrums as it feasts on others' food. "The seagull has few fans despite its excellent ability to adjust and exquisite cunning. Not unlike a sly businessman or politician that exploits the world's resources. A true global bully."

All physical traces of the performance remain in the venue for the entire exhibition period along with a photographic documentation from the opening.

/Jonatan Habib Engqvist



FROM GOLDEN CARS TO WATERFALLS...



A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JONATAN HABIB ENGQVIST AND RÚRÍ, OCTOBER 2010

JONATAN HABIB ENGQVIST: *When we first were in touch about this exhibition, I stated that I do not believe that the contemporaneity of an artwork always stands in direct relation to its year of production. By this, I was trying to say that artworks can sometimes say a lot about a current situation even if they have been produced in a different time and context. In this case, the specific piece was your influential performance in central Reykjavik with the destruction of a gold-painted car, which is presented in the context of the exhibition in Östersund. I guess that the emotions expressed in that performance partly co-relate to many of the newer works in this specific exhibition and also can serve as an art historical reference for the current artistic situation in Iceland, due to the fact that it also was also created in a situation of economic and political crisis, but I do not think that this is the whole story. What do you think? Or rather, what are your spontaneous general reflections about this 1974 performance with regard to it being shown in 2010 in general, and to it's being viewed as a comment to the present Icelandic crisis in particular?*

RÚRÍ: An important detail regarding the Golden Car happening, is that the car itself was not any common car, but an early luxury model of Mercedes Benz family car, a status symbol of its time. Unfortunately, since 1974 few changes in human behaviour or society have occurred that would put the work out of date. This being the situation, I can only be pleased that the work still has relevance in contemporary exhibitions.

JHE: *I would also say that you have played a prominent role as perhaps one of the few explicitly socially engaged visual artists in Iceland. One critical point that came up in the seminar in August 2010 at Färgfabriken's venue in Stockholm was that it seems that other cultural practitioners, such as poets, actors, filmmakers, authors and musicians, have historically been better at expressing a political position with regard to local and international politics, not the least during the so-called 'pots and pans' revolution. How do you react to that rather harsh statement? Is visual art simply a 'slower' medium, or is there more to this position? Would you, for instance, agree that your own social engagement mostly has involved co-operation with other artistic expressions? And could there be some element of this involved?*

R: One should not forget that several other Icelandic artists, such as Jon Gunnar Arnason and Roska in the seventies, have expressed strong social criticism through their artworks. The local media has a strong tendency to focus on 'stars' or celebrities, and popular actors, film directors or pop artists will be a favoured choice before attention is paid to visual artists. There is nothing new about this situation, and it certainly is not limited to the present crisis situation. Visual art has never been appreciated in the media, especially not on Icelandic TV. Many visual artists approached the economical and political landscape of the pre-collapse period in their works and presented performances at large demonstrations or conferences. Others designed and prepared posters and banners that were highly

visible while the artists themselves remained anonymous. To give just one example: a group exhibition of provocative and political art called BÆ BÆ Ísland was put on at the Akureyri Art Museum in March 2008. The title can be translated directly as 'Bye Bye Iceland', but considering the sounds of the words, it could just as well mean 'Buy Buy Iceland'.^{1,2} The exhibition was ignored by the press and art critics at large. The author/artist Hallgrímur Helgason nonetheless refers to the exhibition in an article he wrote in Frettabladid in January 2009, shortly after the 'pots and pans' revolution.

JHE: *Could you elaborate on the context of the group of artists who organised an art action in order to bring attention to the Karahnjúkar Power Plant and the performance carried out in the highlands at Eyjabakkar, north of Vatnajökull?*

R: During the winter of 1998 to 1999, a group of people gathered in front of the Parliament every single Wednesday at noon and demonstrated against the planned destruction of the highlands by means of a mega damming project. The demonstrations took the form of the reading or singing of texts and poetry, some of which were taken from classical Icelandic literature, while others were composed for the occasion. There were also some symbolic performances or acts. Many of the demonstrators were actors, authors and artists. The central group came to be known as the Poem-Group. Simultaneously a group of visual artists who called themselves Fjallkonurnar ('Mountain Women', referring to the figure of Fjallkonan, the Moun-

Black and white version of *Terminated* (2009).

tain Woman, a recognised mythical symbolic image representing 'mother nature' in Iceland) staged several acts and performances and a huge meeting took place in the University conference hall. During the summer of 1999, more visual artists joined the central group of organisers, and together they worked on planning an act that would encourage the direct participation of more people and be more visible. This was going to take place at the actual location of the planned four kilometre long dam at Eyjabakkar. The result was the Eyjabakkar Performance, which not only drew some 150 individuals from all over Iceland into the highlands (a considerable number considering the effort it took to get to the location), at least 120 individuals participated in the performance itself. The performance attracted quite a bit of attention, not only from the local

Icelandic media, but also from the foreign media, and this in turn proved instrumental in bringing awareness of the situation to the international level. This then gave increased weight to the voices of those opting for the protection of nature.

JHE: *Your work is in many ways dedicated to questions that concern the relationship between nature and economy. Especially in your recent work questions concerning the environment and water resources seem to play a central role. One of the contentions in this process of trying to articulate the current situation in Iceland and how that relates to the rest of the world has been that large damming projects have played a major part in the financial causes of recent events. It would be interesting to hear what you think about that.*

R: We have witnessed an era in which economic powers have been taking over natural resources on a global scale. The rights to these resources dwelt for centuries with the people living on the lands where these resources are located. This applies to gold, metals, minerals, oil and so on, and in recent years water has been added to the list. When resources of unpolluted water are on the decline globally, the economical implications are obvious. This development has been increasing tremendously in recent years. At the same time, some economists have claimed that damming projects have another larger aim that goes beyond just producing electrical power for mega-industry: the larger scheme is that of gaining control of the water rights!

In Iceland, the first step towards the handing over of rights to natural resources was taken in the eighties when the rights to fishing in local waters were handed over by the government to certain individuals and firms. This was the beginning of the economical imbalance in Iceland. It was developed further with the privatisation of the nationally owned banks and certain key institutions and firms, such as the national telephone company. In the nineties, the government initiated a plan to gain national ownership or rather governmental control of local natural resources, which, from the settlement of the country, had belonged to local farmers and landowners. Part of this plan involved gaining control over the highlands, the glaciers, and the glacial rivers, and then being able to hand the rights over to certain companies for utilisation. In fact, these former governments were working towards depriving the general public of their rights and possessions, and handing these resources over to certain individuals. The Karahnjúkar project was not the cause of the collapse, but it had the effect of increasing the unhealthy swelling of the economical system in Iceland, and consequently increasing the magnitude of the collapse.

JHE: *The sub-title of the seminar in Stockholm was 'Panic or Possibility?' and one remaining impression was the current coming together and self-organisation of taking place among artists and activists. How would you describe the situation? Is there an 'awakening' taking place with regard to these issues?*

R: I believe there is, but it takes a lot of planning and negotiation, and a new way of thinking for most people. This takes time to bring it into effect, especially for those that may have regarded themselves as existing outside society or being on its edge, not necessarily feeling any obligation to take on any responsibility.

At the time of writing, huge demonstrations are again taking place outside the parliament building, the largest ones to date. One can only hope that the members of parliament will realise the simple fact that they were not elected (hired by the nation) to quarrel and bitch about every single matter, but instead to serve the nation in

the best way that they can; and this applies equally to those members of parliament belonging to the parties in government and those in opposition. They must unite and focus on solutions, on rebuilding the society, or leave and make space for others who are ready to take on the obligations.

Turning back to your question on social engagement: one can argue that all artistic expression is in itself a form of social engagement, but some art is more so than others. With regard to my own art, there has always been a political edge to many of my works, from the beginning right up to the present, for instance in works like *Glassrain* (1984), or *Paradise? - When?* (1998). But it is only in recent years that I have been collaborating with artists from other genres. This co-operation has been an enjoyable and thrilling experience, and the results have been works that have exciting dimensions such as *Vocal IV*, a multimedia performance in collaboration with musicians and sound artists, and the Icelandic Sound-Poem Choir at the Reykjavik Art Museum Hafnarhus just six days after the beginning of the collapse.³

JHE: *I would like to end by returning to the artist-as-reporter by asking you to mention something about the relationship between the press and art, which I guess goes back to where we started. Spontaneously I wonder if there is a distinction that could be drawn that has to do with modality: that art often, if not "predicts", at least in a broad way can sense a coming cause of events; whereas media tries to analyse what has taken place. For instance, Magnus Sigurðardsson was saying that even if artists are not journalists - they can sometimes operate as a kind of "reporters on the human condition" and thereby be sensitive to situations before they are fully at hand on a conceptual level. I am not mentioning this in an attempt to judge or to romanticise the artist/activist, rather I am trying to formulate a description of activist art as something that acts on potentiality, whereas journalism (and other kinds of political activism) mostly reacts to actuality, and can not see — let's say the virtual as part of reality.*

R: Many artists and journalists alike are sensitive to shifting of the balance within society, and they regard it as their role to observe the past and the present, and predict on the future. But I think that mass media in Iceland lacks independence both economically and politically, in order to support journalist that take on this role, and to be able to cover the society, politics, culture and arts objectively. ■

NOTES:

¹ My contribution to this exhibition was the interactive installation *Tortími*, english: ter-mining, that when approached starts shredding a seven-metre-long photograph of a waterfall, continuing for a while, and then halting. The duration of each shredding period was random.

² See the catalogue at: <http://issuu.com/akureyriart/docs/bae-bae-skra>. The artists: Ásmundur Ásmundsson, Berglind Jóna Hlynisdóttir, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson,

Erling P. V. Klingenberg, Hallgrímur Helgason, Hannes Lárússon, Hlynur Hallsson, Inga Svala Þórsdóttir & Wu Shan Zhuan, Kolbeinn Hugi Höskuldsson, Líbia Pérez De Siles De Castro & Ólafur Árni Ólafsson, Magnús Sigurðarson, Ólafur Sveinn Gíslason, Ólöf Nordal, Ósk Vilhjámsdóttir, Rúrí, Steingrímur Eyfjörð, Unnar Örn Auðarson & Huginn Þór Arason, Þorvaldur Þorsteinsson, Þórdís Alda Sigurðardóttir.

³ Performance at 'Sequences 2008'. Sequences honorary artist Rúrí, in collaboration with

Johann Johannsson, composer. A multi media performance with a large multi layered video projection and another smaller on a side wall of the space. Performing artists: Johann Johannsson, conducting and guitar; Matthias Hemstock & Steingrímur Guðmundsson, percussion on sound shapes; Petur Hallgrímsson, Hilmar Jensson & S. Björn Blöndal, guitar; Guðmundur Vignir Karlsson, keyboard. Nylokorinn directed by Hordur Bragason – vocalisation and performing (24 persons), Rúrí. Duration 39 min.

TRANSLATED ENCOUNTERS

BY JOHN SWEDENMARK

I HAVEN'T VISITED ICELAND after the crash. I have followed the fluctuations from afar; news reports, articles, video clips and conversations with friends were my main source of information, no doubt with a radical and critical bias given the inclinations of my informants.

I gauge the following judgement however from the knowledge passed on to me through the medium of literature. As a translator of first-rate literary works, I have the privilege of encountering the mechanisms that make up a novel, a play or a poem. Among these constituents, I do not only count the linguistic stuff, the literary and cultural heritage nested therein; it is also my conviction that each literary work which aims at rendering the actual circumstances of a given historical situation provides an account pertaining to political geography. That is to say that a work of serious intent necessarily draws a map of the world, or a restricted part of the world (depending on perspective). This even goes for conscientious fantasy writing, as put forth in several essays on her craft by Ursula K Le Guin.

Thus, my very first assignment, the Devil's Island trilogy by Einar Káráson, gave me invaluable insights into the far reaching transformations of Icelandic society effected by the U.S. occupation: its impact on economy, demography and ideology, as well as on the minds, traditions and habits of individuals.

The Iceland I have gotten to know during my service as translator of recent Icelandic literature is a harsh corporatist society, run by uncontested economic powers with both the means of production and the mechanisms of

political decision at their disposal. A society of unevenly distributed wealth with a constant chasm between the better off people and ordinary people; the former possessing remarkable treasures, the latter striving to keep the ghost of (the memory of) hunger at a distance. A rigid class state controlled by a species of nomenclatura, since the affluent constantly have invested in control over the administration and the management of labour and money.

For instance, translating *Jöklaleikhúsid* by Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, about a coastal town totally reigned by one man's almost Caesarean megalomania, taught me a great deal about the permeability of local hegemony – insights that later were recalled into service in connection with Mats O. Sundqvist's disconcerted ravaging in Jämtland (Sweden).

Noticing the upsurge in Icelandic economy, and the manic moods of revenge on sensing the fast opportunity of becoming a major player within world business through the victories of the útrásarmenn, I was astonished, but did not care much, since none of these gains seemed to reach the pockets of my friends (or mine, a letter to Kaupthing concerning the promotion of Icelandic literature abroad was never even acknowledged).

And when I learned about the crash, I most of all saw the opportunities. Might it be possible to shift from an unfair system and overturn the existent hierarchies? The uprising that caused a change of government carried the promise of an end to the settled colonial structures, for I am convinced that the arrangement of the Icelandic state is due

to a conservation of structural hardships founded during the abasement under the Danish crown.

I still have not completely abandoned this rather romantic hope of a revolution, lest there exist a possibility of knitting new institutions in the wake of the old ones. Although the dictatorship of the IMF has implemented a neo-liberal sovereignty worthy of any indebted third-world country, it is not beyond imagination that the forthcoming process of reshaping Icelandic governance in a more democratic direction, under the eyes of an interested world, might lead to fruitful experimentation as opposed to public resignation and cynicism. Certain measures taken can be perceived to point in such a direction, such as the attitude concerning freedom of speech on the internet.

While waiting for the outcome of this deliberative, unforeseeable process, I turn to literature in order to probe the situation — at least as it is on my fictional island.

Ísak Harðarson's collection of poems *Rising at night (Rennur upp um nótt, 2009)* heralds a merciless criticism of consumer society, as opposed to a humble return to basic human relations, in the vein of the Christian ideal of charity as an enactment of Divine Love here on earth. The typical figure for this is, as often with Ísak, a precipitating sense of the closeness of heaven even in everyday affairs. A typical poem lists exhaustively all the worries and hangups of Modern Man (and Woman), only to reveal them all as a bad dream, had by Eve in Paradise. The kernel of Ísaks new book is a frank account of a personal crisis



Photographs by Frederick W.W. Howell, Cornell University Library.

slowly transformed into the realisation of a pursue-able, low-key life.

The other recent book that comes to my mind is the collection of short stories by Gyrðir Elíasson, *In between the trees (Milli trjáanna, 2009)*, whose 50 autonomous parts expand on a general sense of unexplained catastrophe. Time after time, tense social and existential situations tip over into death and violence or depressed considerations on the transience of human life. In the story "Fellingjar" (deposits), it is conceivable to interpret this fundamental insecurity as a manifestation of a more general devastation on the level of society.

The proméneur solitaire (one of many in the book, most of them devoid of names) is busy studying some interesting

minerals rippled on a stone block in a small forest. Suddenly, he becomes aware that the river, which has been running its course since time immemorial, is now dry, and that the whole town has come out to scrutinise this phenomenon. In utter silence they stand, as if performing some kind of rite, while the narrator concludes:

I walked with my book over the bridge and in among the aspen trees, strangely empty inside my head, as if some of the riverbeds in there had gone dry, too. The only thought I had left was to heed and investigate the glimmering stripes in the rock, whether they were still there. ■

John Swedenmark is a Swedish writer, cultural editor and a translator of Icelandic literature.

THE NORDIC THIRD WORLD COUNTRY

– PANIC OR POSSIBILITY?

A SEMINAR AT FÄRGFABRIKEN STOCKHOLM, 26/8 2010

TEXT BY
KARIN ENGLUND FÄRGFABRIKEN

THE SEMINAR IS AN ATTEMPT to open up the discussion about the global economic crisis, seen through the situation in Iceland, and to address the role of art and the people in the cultural fields in relation to the rest of society before and during the still ongoing crisis.

Curator Jonatan Habib Engqvist starts by explaining the structure of the project and introduces the idea of discussing crises as a transformative moment for the cultural scene in Iceland. The public seminar is presented as a part of the investigation itself and crucial for the curatorial process.

HOW TO FUND ART WITHOUT FUNDING

Dorothee Kirsch is director of the Centre for Icelandic Art (CIA), an organisation dedicated to funding and promoting Icelandic art shares her insights about funding culture during the crises. In her presentation, the Icelandic pavilion for the Venice biennial 2009, became a symbol for the rapid shift in economy and an example on how to find new ways of funding when the economy failed. During the early 2008 preparation started and a project budget of about 300 000 € was established, where one half was contributed by the Icelandic state and the

other was to be found through other sources. With the spirit of the golden years still present the organisers were convinced this shouldn't be a problem, with rich banks and other institutions to turn to. However, autumn came along and literally the same day as letters asking for support were sent out, the first bank crumbled. Within a week no one on the list was a valid candidate. Kirch was faced with the problem of how to fund without funding, how to find money where there is none. Luckily, the artist chosen to represent Iceland in the biennial, Ragnar Kjartansson, was working with an American gallery that helped with most of the funding. This strategy became one of the solutions – to go outside Iceland for support.

When she applied for the job at the Centre for Icelandic Art, she knew the economic situation was bad, but not how bad. However, she was surprised to find that after the crash it was easier to obtain little sums, or rather services and goods. She says this situation is completely new, and that people seem to have a different point of view, feeling what it actually means to not have any money. People are not travelling or shopping as before, but there is a greater need for actively taking part in cultural life. While all public institutions had serious cut backs by over 20% due to the crash, the attendance to museums, concerts etc. increased by the same percentage. It seems like people are reconsidering what values are necessary in life.

Although it is impossible, as Dorothee Kirch points out, to fund art without funding, there are many ways to get by, not the least through people's goodwill. More people are now willing to help out and chip in. "This is a time of shifting of values and consciousness". Her reflection on the title of the seminar – "Panic or possibility?" is that we are in the middle of a "panic-possibility", which is serious and tough, but in fact also a time for unexpected possibilities.

THE CORPORATION, THE NATION AND THE PEOPLE

Philosopher Björn Thorsteinsson, who's talk is transcribed in its entirety on pages 39–41 in this publication, gives us an overview of the history and politics

leading up to today's situation, starting from questions like "who has the power over the situation?"; "who will tell this story in the future?" and "can we prevent the same mistakes from being made again?". Moderator John Swedenmark picks up on these issues in a discussion with Björn Thorsteinsson and Dorothee Kirch. Together they try to describe the relationship between the state and the individual in Iceland. Thorsteinsson draws parallels between that relationship and the one between Iceland and the European Union – wanting to be a part of something, receiving benefits but without taking responsibility or seeing the connection between taxes and social services.

In this context they also discuss the value of art and the role of the artists. Kirch tells us about how art has traditionally been seen as a nice hobby in Iceland, but being an artist wasn't seen as a real job. But after the great bankers have been dethroned and faith in the greatness of Iceland has been undermined, artists have come forward, protesting in the streets and using their practice to make a difference. The climate in the public debate is rapidly shifting from a culture where problems are ignored and power isn't being questioned, to a situation with open discussions and new voices, which according to the speakers opens the potential for art and philosophy and new ways of being together. People have started to engage in and take responsibility for the ever-ongoing creation of society. "When everyone is open and vulnerable, and don't want to make a mistake again, it's very easy to start a discussion, to start a dialogue and to do things together" Kirch says. Thorsteinsson agrees, and emphasises the necessity for the individual to realise that she is part of a larger context – a society.

MYTHOLOGIES OF PANIC

Giving us a background to the mythologies in modern global economy, German sociologist Urs Stäheli presents the myth of Pan, hiding in the concept of pan-ic. Stäheli is a cultural sociologist who has studied the functions of culture within the economic system, or the culturality of economics. Economy, he says, does not make sense on its own. It has to be understood through different systems, discourses, narratives and metaphors. In



Photo: Hildur Margarétardóttir

Greek mythology the myth of Pan can be seen as an attempt to explain something that cannot be explained. Pan amused himself by frightening both the lonely wanderer and herds of goats and sheep and is a source of our modern understanding of the word panic – a sudden sensation of fear so strong that it prevents reason and logical thinking, replacing it with overwhelming feelings of anxiety and agitation. Panic can occur in individuals and manifest itself in large groups. A panic attack hits without prior announcement and can come from anywhere, just like Pan, the god of ether, according to the myth could be everywhere in nature.

This mythology has been taken up in many fields, like crowd psychology and it can also be applied to the question of panic in economy. Attempting to depict the unexplainable or "non-economy" mechanisms within economy this points out the inherent irrationality of the system. Without a hidden god who causes panic, these functions become immanent. Panic no longer comes from an external source but rises from within.

The myth is also reflected in the vocabulary and metaphors of the discourse surrounding global economy: expressions like "fastest spreading contagion", "outbreak of mass panic" or "anxiety" are commonly used. This means that economic panic in a sense also is seen as a

bodily process. Symptoms like sweat, tremors etc, concepts not usually mentioned in economic theory, are frequently used in depictions of economic instability. Panic becomes contagious, an epidemic, a disease.

Stäheli also examines the temporal and spatial rules of panic, and states that since the concept of panic emphasises immediacy, sudden fright without a cause or warning, normal spatial laws of proximity no longer work. A global economic crisis thus also changes traditional geographical borders. Places far apart can suddenly be close to each other – something that could certainly be said about the crises in Iceland, where the effects of a small trigger event spread to distant places, leading to reconfigurations of global spatial organisation.

UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS

How we speak about financial crises also prefigures and frames how we deal with them. After the first outburst of panic, people tend to look back not accepting the immediacy in how it came about, trying to re-tell the story of how it started. This can be done in order to re-establish causalities and a distribution of space that makes sense again by selectively examining history and trying to produce a narrative. It is an approach that proves a belief in the possibility of telling a rat-

ional story about a financial crisis where one can figure out who is responsible for what. Looking back, you can pinpoint ignored warnings. It is a sort of politics that believes in the possibility of a rational economy – a point of view that Stäheli sees as problematic. Instead you should try another position when trying to make sense of what happened, one that tries to take the fact that panic always lurks within financial systems seriously acknowledging that it is impossible to find fully rational explanations of economy.

One way of avoiding future crashes of this magnitude in the future could be a process of “netting off” or “de-networking”. For a long time networking has been the model for almost anything, but now the webs have become too complicated and we have to start cutting links. We need to be inventing firewalls and other tools to stop contagions. These actions are not just metaphors but actual actions in order to “net off”.

Another necessary step is to induce variety to counter homogenous markets. Here, art could serve as a source of inspiration. We also need new ways of visualising, since the market has been represented in a way that has made it impossible to see the threats lurking. The visualisation of markets is an important but politically neglected question. Stäheli stresses that economy and art could work together, since artists are trained in challenging representations and producing fiction, and economy in fact produces fiction too.

THE CONDITIONS FOR ART PRACTICE AND THE RISE OF THE BUBBLE

Stäheli's discussion is followed by an account of actual experiences of the crisis in Iceland. Hildur Margrétardóttir shares her own story as an Icelandic citizen and artist during the crisis and her participation in the pots and pans revolution. She says there are not many places on the island for artists to exhibit, and Icelandic artists are used to doing everything on their own (writing, hanging, guarding the exhibition, dealing with the press etc), including paying for a lot of things involved in an exhibition production. This means that they in a way have a lot of influence, but hardly sell anything and that the space for art critique in media is very limited. Crisis or not, it's generally tough being an artist in Iceland.

But in 2003-2008 a few “good years” came along, in certain ways changing the

art landscape when there suddenly were private art patrons and banks who could fund things. There was almost a new aristocracy of celebrities and newly rich who took an interest in sponsoring art and culture. The banks were financing things on every level of society, in culture, sports and politics. All museums became admission free. Banks and other institutions also sponsored positions in the university. But if anybody tried to look at the financial situation in any other way than projected by the banks, sponsors would shut them down. Where did the money come from? Probably from the people, that had large mortgages with costs doubled over night. The owners of one of the banks were it's biggest debtors (please see: <http://sic.althingi.is>). Everybody seemed to have been taking part in spending the money the banks didn't own.

HELVÍTIS FOKKING FOKK

Although protests had been held before the credit crunch, traditionally Icelanders don't protest. They have never felt that it makes a difference. But when the economic system crashed in 2008, and the Icelandic people were even seen as terrorists or compared to Nigerian swindlers, serious protests arose. Regardless of harsh winter weather, protesters from all over gathered every Saturday to listen to speeches and show their discontent. It was almost surreal and fighting spirits soared. The agony of not being able to explain the anger or do anything about the situation was perhaps best expressed on one of the protesters' sign: “helvítis fokking fokk”. “And that was how we all felt” Margrétardóttir says.

The anger and disappointment with the government representatives grew larger and in January 2009 protesters decided to make their work unbearable by drowning them in noise, shouting and banging pots, pans and drums outside parliament. Margrétardóttir herself decided to make a scorn post – the ultimate Viking insult; a horse head on a pole directed towards your enemy “to turn what they did to us back in their faces. Although it's commonly thought that you don't double with magic, I found the courage and I know it worked.” Just an hour after the horse's head had sent its' powers into the building, protesters tried to break into the bank. A couple of days later the government fell. But, Margrétardóttir adds, there weren't a lot of fine artists around in the protests; the most prominent artists were not seen in front of the parliament – the general

public were the most creative artists during the protests, and the musicians and writers were out there along with them. She searched for artworks criticising the situation of 2008-2009, but they were scarce.

NEW OUTLOOKS ON THE FUTURE

There has been an election since the crash but “unfortunately this government isn't better than the last”. Simultaneously things are changing on a local level; people have woken up and are starting local parties, for example “The best party” that gained the power in Reykjavík. It mostly consists of former punk rockers and actors. In smaller towns, alternative parties were formed, where artists now play an important role. Margrétardóttir herself took part in starting a best party in her town, even though she used to think that artists should stay out of politics. Nevertheless, there's still a lot to do. The same people who caused the crunch are still working in high positions and corruption is definitely still an issue.

To summarise the two latest talks moderator John Swedenmark establishes that although bleak, both these narratives can give us hope since they demonstrate that the situation after a panic attack might lead to something new. Urs Stäheli is intrigued by the idea of magic expressed in Hildur Margrétardóttir's talk, since it addresses the irrational moment in economy and actually uses it to fight back. He draws parallels between this and his theory of panic as something irrational within the system itself. Margrétardóttir states that the panic also was enhanced by the realisation of being an island. “We could be completely shut of from the rest of the world! How can we manage by ourselves? We realised we need more diversity in our own production.” This realisation gave rise to a new wave of creativity; for example people started knitting and yarn was becoming hard to get hold of.

This connects to Stäheli's theories about how panic changes the way we perceive space. Before the crash Iceland was connected to the world, a part of the globalisation, but suddenly it's more about survival and clinging to what's closest, thereby also rediscovering what's around you. ■



Hildur Margrétardóttir with *Níðstöng* (2009). Photo: Anton Edvard Kristensen

080929: The Icelandic bank collapse begins when the government takes control over Glitnir, the smallest of the three banks on the island. Glitnir has acute financial trouble as a direct effect of the collapse of American investment bank Lehman Brothers.

081006: A storm of protests against the second largest bank on Iceland, Landsbanki, after all transactions through the British daughter-company Icesave have been stopped and savers receive unclear information about what will happen. Great Britain's prime-minister Gordon Brown uses anti-terrorism legislation to freeze Icelandic assets.

081007: The Icelandic department of finance take over Landsbanki parallel to increased pressure from concerned savers in the largest Icelandic bank Kaupthing.

081008: The situation for Kaupthing quickly deteriorates. In Sweden and many other countries the central banks take action to save national Kaupthing savers.

081009: Kaupthing is taken over by the Icelandic government. When no-one takes responsibility for the crash the chock soon turns into anger. A peoples protest grows with three main calls: The government must resign, there should be new elections in Iceland and the directors of the central bank and finance inspection should be fired. The economic crises has become a political one.

090120: Demonstrations outside the parliament in Reykjavik collect increasing amounts of protesters. Eggs and stones are thrown at the police, who answer with pepper-spray and arrest 26 people. The protests continue through the night with bonfires.

090121: Violence escalates. Demonstrators surround prime-minister Geir Haarde's car. Icelandic police use tear-gas against civilians for the first time in 60 years.

090123: Prime-minister Geir Haarde declares that he will resign at the next party congress, due to cancer. He proposes new elections on Iceland on May 9th. However, protesters are not content.

090126: Geir Haarde gives way for the protestors demands. The entire government resigns.

090127: The president, Olafur Grimson, requests that the social democrats create a temporary government together with the Green Left.

090201: A temporary Government is presented. Prime-minister Johanna Sigurðardóttir from the social democrats and minister of finance Steingrímur Sigfússon from the the Green Left. The temporary government announces elections April 25th.

100616: The new Icelandic Parliament votes to set up a directly elected Constitutional Assembly “for the purpose of reviewing the Constitution of the Republic”. The news is overshadowed “the best party” who win local elections making comedian Jon Gnarr major of Reykjavik.

100929: Iceland's former Prime Minister becomes the first politician to face charges due to the financial crisis, after the Icelandic parliament voted to bring negligence charges against him.



Photo from the opening
by Pétur Thomsen.



Photos from the opening and artist talks by Färgfabriken.

EXHIBITED WORKS

HREINN J. STEPHENSEN

Untitled/Utan titel, 2010.
White concrete and crushed marble.
Black Box 2, 2010.
Mixed media: MDF-board, subwoofer, rubber mat, chinese ink, water.

PÉTUR THOMSEN

Imported Landscape, AL3_1d, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2003. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL3_9a, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2003. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL9_8d, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2005. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL7_25d, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2005. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL4_1c, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2004. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL7_9c, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2005. Archival Inkjet print.
Imported Landscape, AL12_23c, Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, 2006. Archival Inkjet print.

ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION

Dynasty, 2007.
HD video, 11 min.
Déjà Vu, 2010.
Performance/documentation: digital slideshow, mixed media.

HILDUR MARGARÉTARDÓTTIR

Dreamcatchers for Icelandic nightmares, 2009.
Sculpture: rope, fishheads, electric pipes.
Funkisbirds, 2010.
Sculpture, mixed media.
Níðstöng, 2009.
Sculpture, mixed media.

RAGNAR KJARTANSSON

Satan is Real, 2007.
Single channel video, 64 min.
Courtesy of the artist and i8 gallery.
Colonization, 2003.
Single channel video, 13,25 min.
Courtesy of the artist and i8 gallery.

ERLA S. HARALDSDÓTTIR

Flóbylgja, 2010.
Oil on canvas.
Reynisdrangar, 2009.
HDV-animation, Quicktime Pro-file, 3 min.

INGVAR HÖGNI RAGNARSSON

Ravens, 2009.
Video, 7 min, part of the series *Waiting*.
Raven, 2009.
Video, 7 min, part of the series *Waiting*.
Poles, 2009.
Video, 7 min, part of the series *Waiting*.

RÚRÍ

Golden Car, 1974.
Archival prints. Courtesy of the artist and photographers Olafur Larusson and Thorgeir Petursson.

BJARGEY ÓLAFSDÓTTIR

Gud betalar, 2010.
71 drawings.

MAGNUS SIGURDARSON

Stormur, 2010.
Salt, fans, glass.

THE NORDIC THIRD WORLD COUNTRY?

ICELANDIC ART IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Swedish title: *Nordens U-land?*
– *Isländsk konst i kristid*

EXHIBITION AT
FÄRGFABRIKEN NORR, ÖSTERSUND
16/10 2010–16/1 2011

The project also included:

Ragnar Kjartansson, *Guilt Trip*.
An exhibition at Färgfabriken,
Stockholm 20/5–22/8 2010.

The Nordic 3rd World Country
– *Panic or possibility?* A seminar at
Färgfabriken, Stockholm 26/8 2010.

Participating artists:

Bjargey Ólafsdóttir
Erla S. Haraldsdóttir
Hildur Margarétdóttir
Hreinn J. Stephensen
Ingvar Högni Ragnarsson
Magnús Sigurdarson
Pétur Thomsen
Ragnar Kjartansson
Rúrí
The Icelandic Love Corporation

Curator: Jonatan Habib Engqvist

Project managers: Fia Palmgren,
Karin Englund

Project manager at Jämtland
County Council: Marie Andersson

Exhibition technique coordinator:
MIQ Bohlin

Exhibition assembly and coordination:
MIQ Bohlin, Anders Ramsell, Magnus
Vikberg, Johanna Grinde, Thilda Persson

Carpenters: Leif Eriksson, Mike Baker

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Editorial assistant: Jared Davis

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Matti Molin, Carolina Marquez

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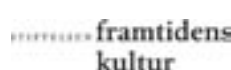


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**BJARGEY OLAFSDOTTÍR.
ERLA S HARALDSDOTTÍR.
HILDUR
MARGARÉTARDOTTÍR.
HREINN J STEPHENSEN.
INGVAR HÖGNI
RAGNARSSON.
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SIGURDARSON.
PÉTUR THOMSEN.
RAGNAR KJARTANSSON.
RÚRÍ.
THE ICELANDIC LOVE
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