

INNER LANDSCAPES

*Artists in search of their
Icelandic identities*



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PREFACE

“Icelanders have this reputation of being very wild people, really.”¹

I must have been an Icelander in my past life. Ever since I first set my foot on the island, I have been addicted to the country, its culture and the people. What impressed me most was the way people appreciate and value their country, culture and heritage. When I asked different people about their relationship with their home country, there were many different opinions about things that could be better or improved, but in every answer one could hear how proud of their country and culture Icelandic people are.

It is also amazing, how a country of only less than three hundred thousand people produces so many artists in different fields of art, many of which are widely known. Apparently most of the artists study abroad at some point during their education either to get connections or widen their artistic education to Masters level. Still, many of these artists return to their home country to work as artists, even though the art scene in Iceland is much smaller and less structured than abroad.

These issues eventually guided me towards questions about artists' relationship with their home country. I also wanted to find out what does it mean to the artists to be Icelandic? How do they perceive their Icelandic identity and how they handle these issues in their art?

I ended up concentrating on three artists, Ragna Róbertsdóttir, Anna Líndal, Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir and a group of three artists, Eirún Sigurðardóttir, Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir and Jóni Jónsdóttir that are the Icelandic Love Corporation.² They are all women, which is more a coincidence than a sought quality. I chose these artists merely on the basis of my personal interest. I had seen works by them that made me think about issues handled

¹ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä 19.11.2002.

² In this work I will refer to the artists by their first names, as it is customary to do so in Iceland.

in this study such as places, identity, home, and the ways people experience them.

This study is based on material I gathered during my four-month stay in Iceland. As written material on Icelandic contemporary art is scarce, I have used mostly articles and exhibition catalogues as well as interviews as a source of information. Therefore, this study is largely based on my personal observations and interviews with artists. The artists kindly discussed with me about their relationship with their home country and its culture. Also what was discussed was, what they value in Iceland, what is important for them in the country and its culture and their opinions about Icelandic art and art scene, in comparison to other countries. They also talked about their art and works of art in general. For all the help and interest I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

I also wish to thank all the people in Iceland and in Finland that have helped me throughout this process; my friend Rósa Juliusdóttir, whose encouragement and enthusiasm got me this far. For proofreading and valuable commentary I wish to thank my friend Tiina Tolvanen. My family, whose help and trust in me has been persistent, and my best friend Jesper, for believing in me, thank you all so much.

In the course of making this study, I have had the opportunity to meet several wonderful people, with whom I have had unforgettable moments and experiences, not to mention what I have learned from all of them. This study has been made, in words of the Icelandic Love Corporation, In Memory of Feelings Felt.³

Piia Mettälä

³ Text from the plaques of the *Higher Beings* performance by The Icelandic Love Corporation, <www.ilc.is>, 1999.

INTRODUCTION - home is where the heART is

“I think lot of Icelanders are very much attached to the country, they love Iceland and are also very nationalistic. And I mean it’s not just the beautiful landscape and the contrast of ice and fire.”⁴

In this study, I shall focus on three Icelandic artists, Ragna Róbertsdóttir, Anna Líndal, Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir and a group of three artists, the Icelandic Love Corporation, and the ways they reflect their Icelandic identities in their work. I shall ask questions such as, what are the factors in their home country and culture that they relate to and how do they reflect this relationship in their art works? What does it mean for them to be Icelandic? What are the factors that form their Icelandic identities? This is a qualitative study that analyses the ways these artists experience their Icelandicness and their relationship with their home country and culture. In other words, how their Icelandic identity is reflected in their art. My perspective follows the line of two recent exhibitions set around the theme of identity and the questions that surfaced from the contexts.

When the Finnish Museum of Contemporary Art *Kiasma* was opened in Helsinki in 1998, its first exhibition, *This side of the ocean*, brought up questions of Finnishness and the ways artists express their Finnish identities in the time of European unification. Museum director Tuula Arkio writes in the exhibition catalogue: “Through their art, artists are always integrated into their own time, reflecting or questioning contemporary values. What are the issues that inspire Finnish artists today? How tightly is the artists bond to his or her background, roots, and tradition, consciously or unconsciously?”⁵ Leena Lohiniva, handles similar questions in Nordic context in *Berenice’s hair - in search of Nordic women artist’s identity*. She discusses the matter of Nordic women artist’s relationship with their Nordic

⁴ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä 19.11.2002.

⁵ Arkio, 1998, 22.

background and identity. She asks how much the Nordic dimension of these artists affect their art and how they reflect it in their art works?⁶

What's the fuss about identity?

For years now, people have been studying different aspects of identity and the ways people identify themselves in the world, certain culture, community etc. It appears that identity is always individual and personal, even cultural or national identity. Everybody experiences themselves uniquely as a part of certain culture or nation. All people reflect these identities in a unique and individual way, which also changes throughout the life. Identities are always personal and individual and everybody forms and reflects their identities differently. I find it unnecessary to start making general definitions about identity with its fragmented and changed nature. As it appears, identity is a personal and individual phenomenon that cannot be generalised.

With this, I mean that the identification process is always personal and individual and it includes all personal experiences and thoughts. Although there are similarities in the ways people understand their Icelandicness, there can never be two exactly similar Icelandic identities. This makes studying identities very difficult, as there can be no objective way to look at the issue. Researchers have to accept certain subjectivity when studying identities. Every study is made from certain point of view, from researcher's point of view, and is always dependent on the researcher's personal way of perceiving the world and the construct of one's identity.

How can we find and construct our own identity then? Sakari Hänninen argues that constructing reality means constructing ourselves. This means that we can find ourselves only by making ourselves.⁷ So, identity is not something we find, but something we make and create. This means that

⁶ See Lohiniva, 1999.

⁷ Hänninen, 1998, 6.

identity is a process that lasts a lifetime. Therefore, it also changes all the time in interaction with the surroundings, people, culture and society. We will never be done with the construction of our identity. People construct their identities only in interaction with other people. We need to have something or somebody to compare to or identify with ourselves. This is the process of identification, which is always a social process. Richard Jenkins argues that identity is an active process, "Identity is not 'just there', it must always be established."⁸ So, the question is not so much what we are, but more what we do.

Our culture of origin influences our behaviour throughout our lives as we through interaction with people, artefacts, customs and beliefs learn the patterns of behaviour and thought that are common around us. Oksala confirms the relationship by pressing that culture is always connected to people and people are always connected to culture. This bond is so strong that it can be said that culture is the quality that defines human being. People create culture and depend on it.⁹

Stuart Hall views national culture, however, as a discourse, a way to build up meanings that both direct and organise our view of the world and of ourselves.¹⁰ National cultures are systems that produce meanings. Hall argues that these meanings are hidden in stories that are told in national histories, literature, media and in popular culture. All of these create stories, images, scenarios, national symbols and rituals that represent issues that unite the nation as imagined community.¹¹

This idea originates from Benedict Anderson who understands national identity as an imagined community that is formed by stories, memories and pictures. Understanding community is more imagined than based on real interaction. Nations are imagined communities as most of the population does not know or is not in any interaction with majority of the population.

⁸ Jenkins, 1996, 4.

⁹ Oksala, 1978,15.

¹⁰ Hall, 1999, 47.

¹¹ Hall, 1999, 48.

Still every member of the nation has got an idea of this connection. One major factor in creation of this imagined community is the media.¹² Kellner continues that mass mediated popular culture plays indeed a key role in the structuring of contemporary identity. This means that forms of popular culture, such as television, offer models of thought, behaviour and gender for imitation and therefore have taken a function traditionally ascribed to myth and ritual. So, popular culture provides images and figures, which its audience can identify with and emulate.¹³ Kaunismaa concludes that national identity becomes visible in national history, in stories that tie a group of people as one nation with common past, present and future as well as in symbolic codes meaning all small self-evident things in everyday life.¹⁴

Media culture enables us to see and experience places and cultures far away. This makes terms like home or place more vague, which makes studying identity more difficult. Cultures are no longer restricted within certain boundaries or borders as people move over borders and experience different cultures daily. Identity is no longer defined by where you were born but by what you do. However, we all identify ourselves to certain places that we call home. Home is no longer simply a place of birth but can include several cities and countries as we move along. Still, in order to call a place home, one has to identify oneself as a resident of that place, form emotional and intellectual relationship with a place. Home is indeed where the heart is, but what role does the art play in this saying?

Art of identity

Art is a way of communication. As any creative work, art reflects the artist's self and identity, as the artist always gives a part of her/himself to the work. This can be a feeling, statement or inner unconscious landscape. In a way, art can work as a means to construct identity. Finnish artist Satu Kiljunen

¹² Anderson according to Pakkasvirta 1997, 79-80

¹³ Kellner, 1998, 269.

¹⁴ Kaunismaa, 1997, 42.

comments: "Each work always expresses something about the artist's world view and especially their relation to art and art's role in their world view."¹⁵ When we look at art works, we can understand something about the ways in which artists construct their self-images and build their identities.

It can be argued that in every artwork, artists reflect the world and surroundings they live in. Varto discusses this and argues that making art is one of human's world relations; aspiration to put oneself and one's action in relation to the world where one exists. The making of art means having a particular relationship to one's environment and to oneself, a relationship in which the world is more important than the artist. This is because in making art, the artist understands oneself grown from the world and being the expression of the world. Therefore, all the works made are reflections of the world as well. People are not merely observers of the world but part of the world.¹⁶ Oksala is on the same lines of thought by concluding that art is a social phenomenon because people always relate to a certain cultural environment. Therefore the reality that surrounds people, including religion, mythology, social structures of the culture, norms and customs, are always reflected in art works as well.¹⁷

Personal history and experiences influence the way people relate to their home country, culture and heritage. Art is one way to look at people's identities, as any creative work it constructs people's worldviews, thoughts and memories. With art people can express unconscious feelings and thoughts that can be hard to express verbally, as well as, construct and form their image of themselves and their place in this world. Valjakka emphasises the role of memories, personal and collective, in the making of art. He argues that art and memory are in many ways intertwined. He feels it is even justified to say that memory is a central element of art. Without personal or collective memory there can be no culture or development of tradition. Stories, fairytales, myths and fables are permanent stores of

¹⁵ Kiljunen, 1993, 5.

¹⁶ Varto, 1992, 30-31.

¹⁷ Oksala, 1978, 48-49, 94.

human memory. On the other hand, memories form an essential part in the processes of both creating and receiving art. In other words, the interrelated concepts of time, history and memory are by their nature present in every work of art.¹⁸

With art there is always a question of interpretation. When studying identity by analysing art works, there follows undoubtedly a risk of misunderstanding and misinterpreting. How can we in the first place interpret art works that are made in different countries, in different cultural environments? And most of all, how can we trace the reflections of cultural identity and heritage from works that hold meanings unknown to us? Taru Elfving discusses this in her article and questions whether it is possible to understand art works from another culture. However, she continues that cultural differences are not alone in influencing the understanding of the artwork. Age and gender, to name a few, also have influence in the process of understanding. In some ways, we are all strangers to each other and no interpretation can be absolutely correct. Confronting the other, in this case the artwork is always a battlefield of misconception and endless negotiation. We must simply accept this and keep it in mind and this strangeness can turn into a source of revelation.¹⁹

Bear this in mind, I am not trying to draw out any general lines about how people, or even these artists reflect and consider their national or cultural identities, but more to point out certain themes that these artists handle in their works and discuss the ways they experience the influence of their home country and culture in their lives and in art. When we study the ways these artists orientate themselves in the world and the role their home country plays in their lives, we can get some idea of how they construct their Icelandic identities and how much it influences their art.

In the following chapters, I shall present the artists briefly and bring out certain themes that the artists have worked on in relation to their home

¹⁸ Valjakka, 1989, 43-44.

¹⁹ Elfving, 2002, 22-25.

country. Themes can be wide, such as nature or Icelandic society but also more specific such as certain cultural phenomenon or personal experience. What is common to all of these themes, is that they all reflect on a certain relationship these artists have with their home country and culture. As the framework of identity is very personal and individual, I have kept the artists in leading role, by preserving as many direct quotes and notes as possible in the text. This way, I have hoped to maintain a personal tone throughout the study as well as avoided too much generalising.

RAGNA RÓBERTSDÓTTIR - Inner landscapes

“For me this is a landscape, both Icelandic landscape and my inner landscape. My special landscapes.”²⁰

Ragna Róbertsdóttir was born in Reykjavik in 1945. Her interest in art was aroused early on and she was educated at the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts in Reykjavik and in Konstfakt in Stockholm. Her earlier art included textiles but slowly she found her way to using lava rocks and pumice²¹. Since early 1990's, she has focused on the usage of pumice and has also included some artificial material, such as glass and acryl in her works.



“These works are austere and minimalist, yet they manage to channel the vastness of the Icelandic out-of-doors, with all its geological but also cultural and mythic connotations.”²²

When first confronted with the lavascapes of Ragna Róbertsdóttir, they merely appear as dark rectangular or square shapes on the wall. When looked at more carefully, one can see that they are formed by small rocks,

²⁰ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 18.11.2002.

²¹ In the beginning Ragna focused on using lava blocks made of hraungrýti. This form of lava is grey stone that is common on Reykjanes peninsula. Nowadays the form of lava rock she uses is pumice. Pumice is formed when volcanic magma, sprayed into the air, solidifies while in flight.

²² Volk, 2000, 41.

glued to the wall next to each other, revealing small bits of the wall underneath. First impression is very minimalist, as these works repeat in different shapes and sizes and seem to be very difficult to grasp. There are no explanations, just dark *scapes*, like paintings made straight on to the wall. The viewer is left stunned in the silence. The silence is, however, only brief as we take a look at the names of the *scapes*. Heklumyndir? Reproductions of Hekla? Suddenly there are meanings in these rocks that lie in front of us. Are these rocks really from Hekla? Is this the lava that erupts from the depths of the earth and flows red down the volcano? And now it is in front of me inside the rectangular that dominates the entire wall. What a conflict. What chaos in my mind. And still clear as the *scape* in front of me.

Earth full of life

“[What influences me is] mostly my country, the landscape here in Iceland. And the places itself, the material I use itself has a story in it.”²³

Ragna works literally with her homeland, as she uses the Icelandic earth, lava in her works. She has a strong bond to Icelandic nature, where in her view, her heritage and identity crystallizes. Ragna’s working method is simple, yet it allows her to keep the material she uses in leading role, preserving its nature and character. Ragna collects pumice from nature, strains it and chooses only fine, small rocks to take with her. Afterwards, she strains and washes the lava all over again until all the pumice is of similar size and ready for her to use. In the exhibition place Ragna applies the pumice straight to wall with adhesive and forms square or rectangular scenes, lavascapes, with a simple gesture. One by one she glues the lava rocks to the wall creating dark surfaces with slight hints of the surface beneath. Slowly the pumice starts to come together and forms patterns and

²³ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 9.12.2002.

views that Ragna calls her inner landscape.²⁴ Pumice seems to be put out randomly but when looked at more closely, there is a rhythm found in the space. Richard Middleton feels that these lavascapes or lava paintings, are “like the Icelandic landscape itself: while it may appear to have been laid out at random, the landscape is created specifically, with every tiny grain or particle playing its role.”²⁵



“Sharp glass on the wall evokes icy, glacial fields with all their beauty and danger.”²⁶

The medium Ragna uses, lies undefined in borders of painting, sculpture and installation. Gregory Volk discusses this problem of definition saying that Ragna’s paintings are lacking most of the elements that traditionally constitutes painting, including canvas, brush, paint, and image.²⁷ Still they are mostly located on the wall, giving the impression of minimalist, abstract paintings. What results, are depictions of Ragna’s personal relationship with Icelandic landscape: Ragna’s inner landscapes.

²⁴ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 18.11.2002.

²⁵ Middleton, 1999, 50.

²⁶ Gallery I8, <http://www.i8.is/new/ragna.html#>.

²⁷ Volk, 1999, 7. See also Heisler 2003, 17.

The material is the point of departure for Ragna in her art. Whether she works with pumice, glass or acryl, every material holds certain associations, connections to Ragna. Lava holds associations to past, to stories of what has happened in the place where pumice is collected from. The earth preserves the meanings the history has given to the place. Finnish artist Olavi Lanu crystallizes the idea by saying: the soil is a picture that holds the steps of people from millions of years.²⁸

“It is in the material itself, if you look carefully. And often I am trying to tell a story about some special place, like this and that mountain and volcano. And the saga is of course in it. It’s a part of it. It depends where you take the materials.”²⁹

With transparent glass or acryl Ragna creates associations to the glaciers that are strongly present in the Icelandic landscape. Glass is however only a reference to the glaciers, not actual part of them. Therefore glass-scapes do not create similar connection to the place as lavascapes, although they hold similar but disguised connotations. Clear glass holds associations with icy fields in glaciers with its beautiful scenes that reflect light but also with its hints of hidden danger that lies underneath.

Ragna took part in the exhibition in Umedalen in Sweden where she was asked to work with the landscape. She found little paths crossing each others in the forest that reminded her of Icelandic story about elves that meet annually in specific crossroad. She brought red Icelandic lava to the forest and paved the crossroad with it. In her own view she wanted to create a clear connection to this story, as if she had nearly brought the elves with her to Sweden.

²⁸ Hannula quotes Lanu in *Exit – That’s it?*, 1995, 10.

²⁹ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 18.11.2002.



Path

Ragna handles her own relationship with nature and landscape in her works. She is trying to forward the experience of nature to her *scapes*. In lavascapes human meets the nature as Ragna takes nature and forces it into rectangular scenes, forms that do not exist in nature. Hannula points out in *Exit – That's it?*, that in nature there are no straight lines, but more curves and waves. Straight line is the way people move in nature. Rectangular forms and circles are closed forms, points, and stops in the landscape.³⁰

Heisler comments that “even as they [lavascapes] originate in an experience of intimacy with landscape – are actively engaged with the reciprocities of natural form and built form, or the uninhabitable and habitable.”³¹

³⁰ Hannula, 1995, 18.

³¹ Heisler, 2001, 21.

The sense of place

“What results are fields that are at once viscerally engaging and frankly meditative, even sublime.”³²

Ragna has a special relationship with her home country. She reflects her icelandicness by working with the landscape that she knows so well. When she was a child, she travelled around the country with her parents who told her stories about different places. Ever since, these places and stories have followed her and appeared in different ways in her life and work.

“When I was a kid, I had some strong names in my mind, from some places, and it’s always in here and [...] there are some mystic around some names here in Iceland and some names are so strong, some mountains, some pieces of landscape, and the names mean very much for us here in Iceland.”³³

In Iceland, names of the places have a great significance, which comes across from the old saying: “A landscape would be worthless if it didn’t have a name.”³⁴ The large uninhabitable landscape is marked with human history, including not only mountains and rivers but also landmarks of lesser conspicuous such as rocks and hollows.³⁵ The names of the places associate a story, a saga about the history of the place. These sagas are in great importance for Icelanders and are widely known.

Nowadays, Ragna goes back to these places where she feels a strong connection and collects lava for her works. She spends hours or even days in these places to gather the material she needs. She walks in the nature with respect, leaving no signs of her presence. This is where the artwork is born, in the dark earth, in the wideness, in the silence. These are the

³² Volk, 1999, 7.

³³ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 18.11.2002.

³⁴ Heisler, 2003, 15.

³⁵ Heisler, 2003, 16.

journeys of meditation and search for inspiration. These are her ways to look back to her heritage and identity.³⁶



“I do not create in order to explain. The reason for my work comes from an inner need which I do not understand.”³⁷

Ragna wants to associate her work closely to the place where the material comes from. This way she is telling a story of the place, and in the same time brings the place concretely to the gallery space within range of people. Timo Jokela discusses in his article the ways people construct the world through different places. He argues that places have a strong influence on us whether we realise it or not. Often people realise the importance of places when looking at them from the distance. Through memories places become active again in our minds. The experience of place often includes strong aesthetic charge and art can have an important role in the process of understanding the values that we attach to the place, the sense of place.³⁸ Kaija Hannula agrees that people in general have a need to mark and in some ways distinguish the environment that is meaningful and important to

³⁶ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 18.11.2002.

³⁷ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in *Siksi* 3/87, 51.

³⁸ Jokela, 1996, 164.

them and this way tell something about themselves and their way of thinking.³⁹

Volcanoes like Hekla and Katla are often present in Ragna's work. An air of mystery has always surrounded Hekla, where the forces of good and evil combine. Legend says that Mount Hekla is the gateway to Hell, and its lava has even curative properties.⁴⁰ In the old times, it was common knowledge that the gates of hell were to be found in Iceland, and more precisely in the opening of the mount Hekla where the damned souls were sucked. Considering its rough and contradictory nature, the entire country was thought of being in the outskirts of hell itself.⁴¹ In Iceland, Hekla is strongly present in many old beliefs and stories that are known by most of the population. Ragna is aware of this and admits, "everybody knows them, its part of our culture."⁴²

Risto Maula discusses the importance of the landscape in his article. In his view people view landscapes always from their own personal perspective, which is very tightly connected to the culture they live in.⁴³ Often people view landscapes like paintings, especially perspective paintings, from the outside. People feel as outside of the landscape and not as part of it, inside of it. Therefore, the experience of landscapes reminds closely of the experience of artworks. The viewer also attaches personal feelings to certain landscapes, which makes the experience more intimate, personal. In a way, the person is creating an inner landscape that includes personal attachment, feeling to the landscape.⁴⁴

³⁹ Hannula, 1995, 12.

⁴⁰ Laufey Helgadóttir, 1995, 58.

⁴¹ Sjón, 1999.

⁴² Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 9.12.2002.

⁴³ Maula, 1993, 15.

⁴⁴ Maula, 1993, 13-14.

Forming space

“The lava works are an attempt to extend her experiences of intimacy with landscape into the gallery space.”⁴⁵

For Ragna, the experience of space is an important part of the work. She studies the exhibition space carefully before assembling the work. The space of the room is an essential part of the work as they work together to create the whole. The works are produced from a scratch in the exhibition space. Therefore, each work is an inseparable part of the space it exists in. This makes each piece unique, since it is impossible to detach the work from its original place. *Landscape*, made in 1997 in Pálshus in Seyðisfjörður, is situated next to the window of same size. There is a dialog between the window and the work, as it can be seen as a window too, window to the inner world.



“I always do [art works] in the space where I’m going to exhibit. I often go there first to see the place and then I decide what to do, and in connection to that... And then I go and do it.”⁴⁶

Ragna also studies the space outside the exhibition room. In her travels around Iceland, she examines the nature and the space of the places she

⁴⁵ Heisler, 2003, 15.

⁴⁶ Ragna Róbertsdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 9.12.2002.

goes. The dark lava landscape and the wide space without much vegetation reflect to the lavascapes she assembles in the exhibition room. Kaia Lehari argues that a person's non-verbal thinking is always influenced and shaped by both space and objects. The systems of signs made up of spatial behaviour, customs and rituals are generally older than those of verbal language.⁴⁷ People are born and live in a meaningful material and spatial environment. The spatial understanding becomes visible in all activities arranging the space environment, such as arts and design. Therefore, the spatial knowledge and understanding we acquire during our lives, undoubtedly influences the ways we handle and organise the space.⁴⁸

In lavascapes, the nature is tamed to exist in the exhibit space. The lava is forced inside a geometric shape, form that does not appear in nature, creating clear contradictions between human-made and nature. Although lava is concrete part of nature, its nature changes in exhibit space out of its context. Ragna's practice of bringing certain places or sites present in gallery spaces echoes the works of Robert Smithson, whose *Site – Nonsites* handled similar issues in the sixties. Nonsites are representations or samples of specific concrete places, sites, brought into a gallery space. They are not natural sites, as they exist in the artificial gallery space and have no course of life as their birth and fading are as artificial as their existence.⁴⁹ Nonsites always refer to specific sites. Hobbs refers to this and says: "Since a *Nonsite* is the subtraction of a *Site* into an art context, viewers of the *Nonsite* constantly refer back to the *Site*."⁵⁰ Similarly Ragna's *scapes* emphasize the presence of the artist in the site. Artist has visited the site and brought a sample of it to the gallery space, and with this action created the Nonsite.

"Although the Nonsites are constructed of physical materials, they are essentially conceptual works of art."⁵¹ The process of making is essential

⁴⁷ Lehari, 1992, 144.

⁴⁸ Lehari, 1992, 146.

⁴⁹ Sederholm, 2000, 111.

⁵⁰ Hobbs, 1982, 15.

⁵¹ Hobbs, 1982, 15.

part of the work. Trips to collect the material are held as part of the work, since those are the moments that define the works. The works exist as representations of these journeys, as the place where materials are gathered is the key point of the piece. The trips to collect the pumice are an essential part of Ragna's works as they identify themselves to the specific places. The presence is needed in order these works to exist.



The presence of Icelandic nature and landscape is indeed an important part of Ragna's art. She works with Icelandic soil, lava, creating connections to the past, to the stories that crystallise in these rocks. Dark wide fields of lava in contrast with white glowing glaciers and the space around them are the sources of Ragna's inspiration. The real material in Ragna's works is the Icelandic heritage, her own heritage that forms foundation for her work, life and identity.

CURRICULUM VITAE - Ragna Róbertsdóttir

Born in Reykjavik in 1945.

Education

1963 – 1970 The Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts, Iceland

1970 – 1971 The Konstfack Art School, Stockholm, Sweden

Solo Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2003 “At the threshold of visibility”, National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2002 Studio A Ottendorf, Cuxhaven, Germany.
- 2001 Cairn Gallery, Nailsworth, England.
“A longing for landscape”, Horsens Kunstmuseum, Denmark.
- 2000 Sleeper, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- 1999 “Katla”, The Reykjavik Art Museum – Kjarvalsstaðir, Reykjavik, Iceland.
“Two Landscapes”, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany.
- 1998 “Quintate/Fimmt”, Gerdasafn, Kopavogur, Iceland.
- 1997 “Islandische positionen der Gegenwart”, Galerie Dorothea van der Koelen, Mainz, Germany.
- 1996 “Tehus” Verturgata 3, Reykjavik, Iceland.
i8, Reykjavik, Iceland.
“Byinstallationar”, Hordaland Prosjekt Galleri, Bergen, Norway.
- 1994 “Hekla”, La Base, Leyallos, France.
- 1993 Slunkarlki, Gallery, Isafjordur, Iceland.
Portid, International Art Festival, Hafnarfjordur, Iceland.
- 1992 Guachen, Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Birgir Andrésón's gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1991 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.
Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.
- 1989 Krokur, Gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1988 The Window, Gallery, Akureyri, Iceland.
The Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1987 “Four Installations”, Overgaden, Copenhagen, Denmark.
The Corridor, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1986 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2001 “Minimalism”, National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland.
“Experience/Dissolutions”, Göteborgs internationella konstbiennial, Gothenburg, Sweden.
“Drawing Iceland”, Gallerie 54, Gothenburg, Sweden.

- National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland.
 "Camp Lejre", Lejre, Denmark.
 "Confronting nature", The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., U.S.A.
- 2000 "Painting and painting", Kristinehamns konstmuseum, Sweden.
 "White Axis", Bergens Kunstforening, Bergen, Norway.
 "White Axis", Bomuldsfabriken, Arnedal, Norway.
 "Áráttá", Kópavogur Art Museum, Iceland.
 „Bedrock: Six contemporary artists from Iceland“, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Canada.
 Galerie Anhava, Helsinki, Finland.
 "Solitude au Musée", Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Etienne, France.
- 1999 „Solitude im museum“, Staatsgalleri Stuttgart, Germany.
 Galerie Michael Sturm, Stuttgart, Germany.
 "Microwave", 123 Watts Gallery, New York, U.S.A.
 "Paintings Now II", Galerie Schüppenhauer, Köln, Germany.
 "Umedalen skulptur 99", Galleri Stefan Andersson, Umea, Sweden.
 Galerie Artek, Helsinki, Finland.
 Sète, France.
- 1998 Galerie Peter Lindner, Wien, Austria.
 i8, Reykjavlk, Iceland.
- 1997 "A 4", Villa Minimo, Hannover, Germany.
 "Á Seydi", Seydisfjordur, Iceland.
- 1996 "A 4", Gallery Otto Plonk, Bergen, Norway.
 "Synir og veruleiki", Gallery Gulp, Reykjavlk, Iceland.
- 1995 "Snagar", Gallery Greip, Reykjavlk, Iceland.
 "Umedalen Skulptur 95", Umedalen, Sweden.
 "Icelandic Abstract Art - Under review", The Reykjavlk Art Museum, Iceland.
- 1994 "La Hora Del Norte", Madrid and Barcelona, Spain.
 "Drift 94", Art in Landscape, Lista Lighthouse Gallery, Norway.
 "New Acquisitions", The National Gallery of Iceland.
 "Two faces of Iceland", Person and Lindell Gallery, Helsinki, Finland.
- 1993 "Greatness of Smallness", Århus Artmuseum, Denmark.
 "The end of the Century", Museum for Decorativ and Applied Art, Moskow, Russia.
- 1991 "Kunst, Europa", Kolnischer Kunstverein, Köln, Germany.
- 1988 "Aldarspegill", The National Gallery of Iceland.
 "5Dimensioner", Rohsska Museet, Gothenburg and The Nordic House, Torshavn, The Faroe Island.
- 1987 "Scandinavia Today", Tokyo and Kyoto, Japan.
- 1985 12e Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne, Switzerland.
- 1983 Listmunahusid, Gallery, Reykjavlk, Iceland.
- 1982 "Scandinavia Today", New York, Saint Paul, Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles and Helsinki.

ANNA LÍNDAL - Everyday reality

“I’m very aware that you should have this awareness of daily life.
With this awareness you can get so much further.”⁵²

Anna LÍndal is an artist based in Reykjavik and a professor at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts. She studied printmaking at the Academy of the arts in Reykjavik as well as at The Slade School of Fine Art in London. She also participated in exchanges in the Netherlands and in Germany. Her works are mostly installations including materials that vary from kitchenwares to textiles, embroidery and threads. The usage of textiles and threads is natural for her as she also has been educated in dressmaking. She also uses videos and photographs in her work.



“So, it’s always partly the surrounding. You can’t escape your world, because it has such an influence.”⁵³

The focus in Anna LÍndal’s work is in everyday life and in human behaviour. She tackles the question of identity by asking how much do we really control our lives, and how much of us is already made up before we are even born?

⁵² Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁵³ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

How much are we controlled by a predetermined pattern? ⁵⁴ She exposes these patterns as a woman, Icelander, a mother and an artist reflecting all these sides of her identity in her work. The point of departure is her own history and roots, traditions she carries out and forwards to her own children. Anna explores her own place in the course of history. Her works take their influence from the past, become reality in present and create meanings in the future.

“I grew up in the north of Iceland in the countryside and I think it somehow always reflects in one or another way [...] Somehow you always take something from them. But its one part of the family is very perfect and the other half is completely wild. So I got this mixture of this perfection and wildness. And that’s nice. And I really feel I hook up to my tradition and my humour in the North.”⁵⁵

History and culture, generations and places make us who we are and we carry the influence of them with us throughout our lives. The traces of them follow us and influence the way we think as well as act. Tor-Björn Hägglund argues that we carry the past with us with the knowledge of our ancestors deep inside of us. Because people live as a part of their culture and are always under its influence, they internalise both in the conscious and unconscious the externalised elements of their ancestors’ culture, such as personal and collective fantasies, patterns of thought, prejudices, morals and ideals.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Hjalmar Sveinsson, 2000.

⁵⁵ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁵⁶ Hägglund, 1989, 13.

Woman in my culture

“It is the home where everything is crystallised.”⁵⁷

Anna LÍndal analyses the role of women in her own culture. More than a feminist statement it is her way of self-study, a search of her identity. She goes back in history to women in her own family and the ways they have influenced her own life and worldviews. Women in her family have always been skilled in handicrafts. How much influence does that have to Anna and her personal interest in handicrafts and textiles?



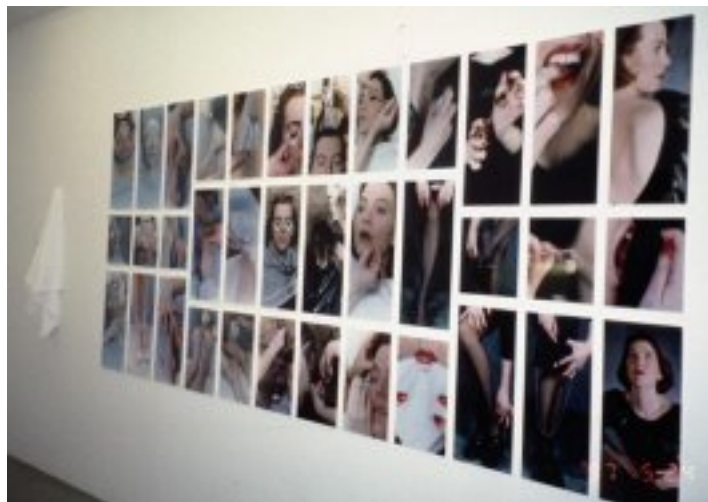
“The spectator feels it deserves better. Involuntarily he turns into the good housewife who thinks: what a shameful sight!”⁵⁸

When Anna was home with her small children, she realised the reality of the role of women. Earlier women were trapped inside the house with children and housework and hardly ever left the house. Although, the isolation inside the house was not that extreme for her, she wanted to examine that role and started to do art that she was able to do entirely inside the house. She made installations with different kitchenwares, threads, cookies, sugar and anything that she was able to find inside the house.

⁵⁷ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁵⁸ Gudbergur Bergsson, 2001,16.

In Icelandic culture, women are considered fairly equal to men. Still both genders have certain cultural roles that have not changed. Although many of these roles are questioned nowadays, many of them still remain unnoticed. Women are expected to make homes and stay with children, know the ways to set the coffee table and so on. These expectations are more rooted inside the culture than we think. Breaking these unwritten rules often means certain crisis. Anna LÍndal wants to uncover these rules by breaking them. In one of her photo series she depicts herself wearing an apron and pouring coffee that spills over. In her view, when people act all the time as expected, nobody notices anything, but as soon as they do something wrong or unexpected, such as pour coffee over, people are shocked. These behaviour patterns are weaved inside the culture and reflect the cultural identity.



Simple gestures such as applying make up, are rooted inside the culture so deep that it is hardly noticed as a ritual that we repeat daily. Anna presents herself applying make up, dressing up nicely and preparing herself for a party in installation of photographs. Photographs depict a process that most women go through frequently in their lives. When brought up in a series of

photos, all together, one is able to see the act as a ritual and not merely a part of everyday life.

Although Anna concentrates mostly on women and customs and traditions that they repeat, she also acknowledges similar customs with men. Her approach is merely personal, being a woman herself, and not that much a gender issue. This goes to the materials and media she uses as well. Anna has a strong tradition of working with textiles and embroidery descending back to the boarding school where she in her own words, did embroidery when she should have been studying.⁵⁹

Everyday life traditions

“It’s the kind of traditions, that you are born with an unopened package and everyone will open it.”⁶⁰

Anna LÍndal explores social rituals and customs that go unnoticed since they are so deeply rooted in the culture. These are simple gestures such as eating with knives and forks. To expose these patterns that are weaved inside the culture and everyday customs, she takes objects that seem the most insignificant, out of their normal context. Potholders that are made of thread, sugar cubes and rags suddenly change their meanings and force the viewer to see this small custom of putting pots from the plate to the kitchen table. Susanne Eriksson comments, that “this everyday act, just like thousands of others of the same kind, took on a new meaning and became the symbolic image of the foundation of everybody’s daily life, for unity and identity.”⁶¹ Small, insignificant customs start to appear as rituals that we repeat daily without ever thinking about them, without understanding their ritualistic nature.

⁵⁹ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁶⁰ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁶¹ Susanne Eriksson, 1996.



“And that’s why I started of with these knives and forks. If you go to the restaurant and see one who wouldn’t use knife and forks, you would be absolutely shocked.”⁶²

Merete Mazzarella writes that often people imagine that they can create themselves and their live styles freely from any norms and authorities. She, however, disagrees with this assumption and continues that nobody lives without influence from outside. People are born into numerous cultural and social stories and traditions that have existed here long before us.⁶³

“So somehow in the beginning we think we are free and individual and you can choose your own way, but it’s such an illusion because you cannot.”⁶⁴

Anna LÍndal enters the holy place of the culture, the kitchen, and unwraps rooted traditions and customs there. It works effectively, as the kitchen is the heart of the house. That is the place where identities become visible. Home is the object of everyday creation, as all people create their own homes and the atmospheres. Anna questions the holiness of it and invades the personal limit. Anna dissects these holy spaces by creating homely atmospheres in the exhibition spaces. In her work she uses everyday objects to make installations. Anna organises them in the exhibition space

⁶² Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁶³ Mazzarella, 2003, 43-44.

⁶⁴ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

to create settings that appear taken from somebody's home. At the same time, these installations include objects that do not fit in the setting, to raise questions and point out the nature of them. These settings appear in the exhibition space, out of their normal cultural context. Minna Tarkka discusses the issue: "When primitive myths and rituals are being detached from their cultural context, they lose their original contents, get rid of their "holiness". Artists approach their own culture and its characteristics with the same ritualism that they direct to other cultures. Artists become the anthropologists of the everyday life. Contemporary culture is been approached with an irony, demythologising, breaking up and exploring myths." ⁶⁵

Anna summarises her approach: "The funny thing is that when different cultures get married it is always the eating problem. It 's a big issue. One will want spicy food and the Scandinavian want what ever. You know, it's such a big part of the life. It is the home where everything is crystallised. And that is the tradition I've been focusing." ⁶⁶

Matti Räsänen argues that food has indeed a special role in the cultural system. It symbolises among others ethnic identity and social status. Eating is not merely an act to guarantee surviving but also a social act. Eating customs always reflect the culture and the time. ⁶⁷

Natural energy

"Between emotions and technology lies unharnessed energy, my artistic struggle largely involves trying to find a suitable visual form of expression to this energy." ⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Tarkka, 1990, 9.

⁶⁶ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁶⁷ Räsänen, 1980, 3-4.

⁶⁸ Anna LÍndal, 2000.

For Anna Iceland is the home. She loves the northern dimension of the country, and the contradictions of it. The winters are cold and dark and for Anna they are the time of calming and self-reflection. Summers are filled with light. At home, she feels the energy that is strongly present in her works. Anna connects this energy with the north and home. First time she realised it when she was a student in England and felt different from others.

“I always remember when I was in England, it was the Nordic exhibition in Oxford [...] I went there and immediately when I walked in I could find out why I was so different from everyone else in the college. It was so Nordic, there were bright colours and it was clean and completely different. And somehow when I walked in I could just see it and feel it. It was completely different.”⁶⁹

This northern dimension is important for Anna as it defines her home and heritage, the surroundings she comes from. Surroundings have an influence on people all the time. It is perhaps not realised, but many decisions that we take, actually come out of circumstances. Anna wants to become aware of these circumstances.

Lately, Anna has been moving towards using more and more video installations in her work. This media suits Anna because videos and television are nowadays such a major part of everyday life. We live our lives in the middle of pictures and images that are fed to us from television and from media in general. Television has become such a big part of our lives that its role is no longer questioned. Watching television is one of the rituals that people repeat without ever realising the ritual nature of this act. Video installations however exist only in the gallery space and therefore have still got the aspect of “strangeness” in them. Anna combines videos with everyday objects in her installations. For Anna videos are also a way to explore the world from her point of view and present this personal experience directly to the viewer. Viewer can look at the world through Anna’s eyes.

⁶⁹ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

“I’m very interested in society, the rules and how people behave [...] so, somehow the society is the base of my works and part of my videos are about being in this male world. So I think in the basic it is this human behaviour that I’m very interested in.”⁷⁰

Much of Anna’s work handles the issues of people trying to make sense of this world by making rules and rituals that make life easier to construct. Similarly, people try to control nature and its power. Especially in Iceland, where the nature is formed by strong contradictions, ice in glaciers and fire in volcanoes, the power of nature is clearly present. In this context it is also easy to see the struggle between human and natural forces, which is an aspect that interests Anna. Her approach to nature is very much connected to people and their attitudes towards natural forces. She is interested in the line where nature meets human society, where two energies tackle each others.



“I think that each individual preserves nature and time within himself or herself, even believing that he owns nature while it is actually nature which owns him.”⁷¹

Anna wanted to explore and study this contradiction of energies and took part in a scientific expedition at the glacier Vatnajökull in 1997. She

⁷⁰ Anna LÍndal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

⁷¹ Anna LÍndal, 2000.

documented and collected material of the ways people study and try to understand the nature and its energies. Same time she documented the relationship of people with nature, her own relationship with the nature of her home country. It became her personal expedition. This expedition gave birth to *Borders*.

Borders is an installation with four television screens on a shelf with photographs and different artefacts. Four videos all present an individual story, showing the forces of nature, landscapes, people experiencing nature, research group at the Vatnajökull glacier and a girl reading aloud Njál's saga. What connects these stories seems to be the attitude towards things people seem to take for granted. All these stories can be seen from screens on top of an Ikea shelf unit, the one that stereotypically can be found in most of the Icelandic homes. Photographs, plants, lights and statues on a shelf connect the work to the daily life, creating a contradiction between the videos and the work itself. Nature meets people and culture, but also Anna's expedition of nature and her roots in nature contradicts her expedition of everyday life.



Anna LÍndal explores her Icelandic identity by focusing on her heritage, on traditions that influence people's lives every day. These traditions reflect in human behaviour, in ways people construct the surroundings they live in. By exploring and questioning these traditions, Anna is looking for her place in the world. It is important to know where one comes from, in order to know where to go. The energy Anna feels in the North is what defines home for her. In this energy crystallises the spirit that she calls her Icelandic identity.

CURRICULUM VITAE - Anna LÍndal

Born in Víðidal in 1957.

Professor at the Iceland Academy of the Arts (2000 -).

Education

- 1987-1990 The Slade School of Fine Art, University Collage, London, England. Higher diploma in Fine Art
- 1988 Hochschule der Kunst. Berlín, Deutschland. Exchange program
- 1981- 1986 The Icelandic Collage of Art and Craft. Reykjavík, Iceland
- 1984 AKI - Akademie voor Beeldende Kunst. Enschede, Netherland. Exchange program
- College of Trades. Reykjavík, Iceland. Apprenticeship in garment making

Solo Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2001 The living Art Museum, Iceland.
Art & Public, Genf, Switzerland.
- 2000 Gallerí Sævars Karls, Reykjavík, Iceland.
Gerðuberg, The Reykjavík Culture Centre, Iceland.
Künstlerhause Schloss Wiepersdorf, Germany.
- 1999 Gallery Pascale Cottard-Olsson, Stockholm, Sweden.
- 1998 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
Safnasafnið, Svalbarðsströnd, Iceland.
- 1997 Ingólfsstræti 8 Reykjavík, Iceland.
RAM gallerí, Osló, Norway.
- 1996 Sjónarhóll, Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 1994 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 1992 Gallerí Sævars Karls, Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 1991 Hvammstangi V-Húnavatnsýsla, Iceland.
- 1990 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2002 Petta vil ég sjá, Gerðuberg, Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 2001 Mynd – íslensk samtímalist, Listasafn Reykjavíkur, Iceland.
- 2000 Akureyri Art Museum, Akureyri, Iceland.
Kwangjubiennale, Kwangju, S-Korea.
Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax Exhibition of International Contemporary Art, Canada.
- 1999 Stockholm Art Fair, Stockholm, Sweden.
Magasinet, Wanås, Sweden.
Listasafn Árnesinga, Selfoss, Iceland.
Reykjavík Municipal Art Museum Reykjavík, Iceland.
The National Gallery of Iceland Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 1998 The Living Art Museum Reykjavík, Iceland.

- Fjörðurinn Hafnarfjörður, Iceland.
 Villa du Park, Annemasse, France.
 Beaux-Arts, Villa de Saint-Etienne, France.
 LNM Gallery, Oslo, Norway.
- 1997 The National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 Konstcentrum Gävle, Gävle, Sweden.
 Reykjavík Municipal Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland
 5th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey.
 Kultur Bahnhof Eller, Dusseldorf, Germany.
 Triennale Internationale de Tournai, Belgium.
- 1996 The National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 Eesti Kunstimuseum, Tallin, Estonia.
 Nord-Jyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, Denmark.
 The Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius, Litauvia.
 Malmö Konstmuseum, Malmö, Sweden.
 Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, N-Ireland.
 Síðumúlafangelsi Reykjavík, Iceland.
- 1995 Reykjavík Municipal Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 Amos Andersons Museum, Helsinki, Finland.
 Stavanger Kunstforening, Stavanger, Norway.
 Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden.
 Oulu Art Museum, Oulu, Finland.
- 1994 Reykjavík Municipal Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland.
 Turku Art Museum, Turku, Finland.
- 1992 Vaxjö Konsthall, Vaxjö, Sweden.
- 1990 Bankside Gallery, London, England.

GUNNHILDUR HAUKSDÓTTIR - Let's do it!

“When you work here, it’s very much do it attitude, rather than contemplating much about it. It is more like yes, lets do it.”⁷²

Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir is a young artist doing her Masters in Fine Arts at The Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam. She studied at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts in Reykjavik and graduated from the multimedia department in 2002. Her career as an artist is not yet very long, but she has been exhibiting for few years now both in Iceland and abroad. Although Gunnhildur studies abroad at the moment, she is later returning home to Iceland to work as an artist.



“Look at the art and take everything in and make your own mind about it, and you have everything in your mind to do that.”⁷³

Gunnhildur works with any media that provides the best way of expression of her ideas. Her art includes three-dimensional installations, performances, video and photographs. The point of departure in many of her works is human behaviour and communication. Many of her works relate back to the

⁷² Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁷³ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

Icelandic society and its art scene. With her works Gunnhildur is keen to raise questions, take a stand and also make a difference. Gunnhildur has a strong bond to her culture and history. In Iceland the heritage is present everywhere and people are well aware of their Viking roots. Gunnhildur however focuses more in present day and in future, although she acknowledges the influence of her heritage. The past is foundation of her life, where she builds her identity.

“I am brought up by a Viking, my father is like a Icelandic Viking guy, so the sagas, I know a lot about the heathen religious and I have always been very much influenced by that, by being Viking woman witch sort of. I really think of myself like a Viking.”⁷⁴

Doing It

“I think that it’s really easy to work with other people here. There is this do it attitude, there are always something going on, you just do things easily, you just do it and it’s lot of fun.”⁷⁵

For Gunnhildur art is the way of influencing in matters that are important to her. The environment and the people are her source of influence and inspiration and she reflects the Icelandic society and art scene her in her works.

“It is like out in the countryside where everyone is helping everyone. And its life that’s sparkling.”⁷⁶

Gunnhildur works actively in the local art community taking part in discussions on contemporary art in Iceland. Many of her works handle issues concerning the situation of the Icelandic art scene. The Icelandic art scene is energetic and there are regularly exiting initiatives. As Gunnhildur

⁷⁴ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁷⁵ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁷⁶ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

puts it, there prevails a Do it – attitude in the art scene. But at the same time, as Bjargey Ólafsdóttir and Unnar Örn Jónasson note, the art scene is also somewhat chaotic. The lack of curators and collectors as well as an unorganised grant and exhibition system can lead to a great artistic variety and virtually no censorship.⁷⁷

Gunnhildur takes part in actions within the contemporary art field. In February 1999, four young artists squatted at an abandoned house in central Reykjavik and turned it into a young artists' working and exhibition space. Gunnhildur was one of the artists taking over the Yellow House. The house was squatted, because the young artists felt there was no other space for them to work and exhibit. Their aim was to create their own space, free from clichés, a place where anything could happen.⁷⁸ In the house, they came to organise exhibitions and happenings of all kinds of contemporary art from visual arts to dance, concerts and literature. The Yellow House was running for few years until the owner, a large shipping company, tore it down. This did not however stop the artists planning similar actions in the future. Gunnhildur confirms: "And the spirit of the house was strong and it is still alive."⁷⁹

Gunnhildur feels the situation at the Icelandic art scene both problematic and full of possibilities. Without a strictly organised system, artists are very active themselves in organising and committing in different events and happenings. In the same time, the problem of having no frame around contemporary art, meaning professional art researchers or curators, lot of interesting art is forgotten and left unstudied. This makes it difficult for the field to develop and thus art can remain at a superficial level to the wider public.

"There are lot of good things and everything is easy. That's a good thing but it can also be a bad thing. Because it's not very serious. And it's

⁷⁷ Bjargey Ólafsdóttir, Unnar Örn Jónasson, 2000, 8.

⁷⁸ Bjargey Ólafsdóttir, Unnar Örn Jónasson, 2000, 8.

⁷⁹ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

more like “some people doing some fun things, ooh, these crazy people, ooh they are so funny.” That’s fun and everybody enjoys it, but it is not taken seriously.”⁸⁰

These are issues that specially concern Gunnhildur, and in which she takes a strong stand. She wants to make contemporary art easier to approach and understand for all people. She is keen to discuss art with people and even to go to schools and talk about contemporary art with children and youngsters. In her view, people are afraid of art because they do not know how to look at art, especially contemporary art. She recognises the problem, as she was first introduced to the contemporary art when she attended the art academy.

“I graduated from the multimedia department. It introduced me contemporary art. It was very mind opening for me. Anything can be art. I didn’t know it. And that is the biggest thing this art education did to me.”⁸¹

Kaija Kaitavuori argues that communal art is an effective way to make art more part of everyday life for wide public. She feels that only way to make art more approachable and easier to understand is to bring it straight to people and work actively with and amongst people. Kaitavuori interviewed communal artist, Johanna Pohjalainen, who worked in Helsinki 1996 giving “bread and flowers” to people and made the meeting with the artist as part of everyday life. In her view, when artist turns into a person that you can meet everyday, the glamour disappears fairly quickly!⁸²

⁸⁰ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁸¹ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁸² Kaitavuori, 2003, 50.

Communication with and through art

“I was just saying that look with your eyes and think, that’s it!”⁸³

Gunnhildur likes to raise questions with her art, whether they involve political, social or personal issues. She focuses on ways people communicate with each other as well as the problems of communication in this time of multiple communication methods. Nowadays, it is so easy to communicate with people on the other side of the world. In the era of multimedia with internet etc. it is possible to communicate with millions of people all over the world representing different cultures. There are numerous possibilities of communicating and art is one of those ways.



Conversations of love

Gunnhildur made a work called *Fræðsla* for the Grasrót exhibition for young artists in the Living Art Museum in 2002. *Fræðsla* was a performance, which she held once a week at the museum by guiding the audience through the exhibition. In this performance, she introduced the exhibition for the people by explaining the works from her point of view, talking about the ways she experienced the works. The difference to a guided tour was that she explained everything she felt of the pieces and left the audience without a

⁸³ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

chance to think for themselves. Her aim was to show people the basic way to look at contemporary art. At the same time, she claimed the entire exhibition for herself in making a piece from the entire exhibition. In one way, she is guiding the public how to look at contemporary art but in the same time she is taking away the viewer's possibility to think and feel the art for themselves.

“And then it was also about me being, in between the public and the pieces, which is very demanding but I also stole something from the other artists and the public, by giving them everything, not letting them think for it themselves.”⁸⁴

With Fræðsla, Gunnhildur wanted to point out that there are no right or wrong interpretations in art. She focuses on making contemporary art more familiar to the wider public. The focus of art in Iceland has always been on literature, since there is a long literal tradition descending back to the Sagas. The wider public is mostly familiar with landscape painting or traditional sculpture. Public schools do not normally provide any kind of teaching in art history. So, most people familiar with contemporary visual art are the ones working within the field, either as educated artists or art researchers.⁸⁵ In Iceland, the situation is more culminated compared to other countries due to its small population.

“Because the public in Iceland is often very much afraid of the art and they do not understand the purpose of it, they think it is supposed to be something more than it is, think it supposed to be something very fantastic, although sometimes it is just a small feeling, and this was directed to it, taking public and explaining very basic way how to look at contemporary art.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁸⁵ In Iceland there are no possibilities to study art history or related studies in higher education level. Therefore all the art historians have been educated abroad. Due the lack of interest and appreciation of visual arts in Iceland, there are not that many art research done by educated professionals. This adds to the problem of the gap between the wide public and the contemporary visual art, as there are very little material available of the field.

⁸⁶ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

With *Fræðsla*, Gunnhildur studies communication by spreading information to people, but at the same time communication is only one-sided as she takes away the public's chance to reply or question her words by stating that she is talking from her point of view, bringing out only her own visions about art. Communication failed?

Often Gunnhildur's works indeed handle the question of communication that is not quite working. In *Conversations of love*, which is a video installation made in 2001, Gunnhildur displays two television screens side by side. In one of the screens she shows a man and in the other one a woman lying on the floor having a conversation with each other.



The woman on the screen talks sincerely about her feelings, hurts and sorrows as on the other screen the man tries to comfort her. It appears as they are talking to each other but the dialogue does not match. In reality, there is no communication between them. Both of the people exist in their own screens, in their own worlds, cultures, and although they talk to each other, the real connection is lacking.

This work echoes problems of communication in the network of digital media. Teppo Turkki discusses the changes of communication due the development in information technology. He argues that communication nowadays, through electronic mail or short messages, has made the contact between people more impersonal and abstract. It is hard to be sure whether the information we receive is accurate or even whether people mean what

they say, as we do not really know with whom we communicate. Mostly we are connected only by digital network.⁸⁷ When the world is becoming more and more digital, the real connection between people decreases. Communication becomes a private action, where people experience the world through media.⁸⁸ The world is turning more a lonely place. Gunnhildur looks for her place in this world.

Outside inside

“And then this sort of just came up, because everything you do with art, is sort of that you go back of your head and this was there and then you just start working with it.”⁸⁹

Gunnhildur looks at her home country and heritage with an outsider's view. She likes to take things out of their normal context and see what happens. This is how she approaches Icelandic culture as well. She stirs the stereotypes and settled ideas by taking some things out of their normal context or adding something to the Icelandic context that is not usually there.

“I have some idea of putting this in different context and seeing what happens or looking from other peoples point of views.”⁹⁰

Gunnhildur reflects her personal experiences and memories in her work and combines things from foreign cultures to the Icelandic context, making combinations that reflect her idea of home, that is nowadays so different from before. People are no longer staying in one place throughout their lives, which widens people's definitions of home. It seems that home has become a loose term to describe our present place of stay although for some people home is always the place of origin, country or more precisely certain part of the country. Nowadays we live in a media culture that allows

⁸⁷ Turkki, 1998, 46.

⁸⁸ Turkki, 1998, 43-44.

⁸⁹ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

⁹⁰ Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 19.11.2002.

us to be virtually present in different countries and cultures and their influence is part of our lives. Media also affects the ways we perceive certain cultures or even ourselves.⁹¹

In an *Indian dance and a bonfire* happening in 1999 Gunnhildur built a big bonfire in the city of Reykjavik and invited a Native American to dress up in traditional Navajo costume and dance around the fire. She passed the word around that people could come and join dancing and cooking food. She wanted to see the reactions of people to this unordinary happening. Gunnhildur herself was familiar of Navajo culture, as she had been staying in Navajo reservations in United States on several occasions. With this happening she wanted to bring this Navajo tradition to the Icelandic context, distance it from its usual place and this way stir the ways people perceive their own culture and foreign cultures.



Gunnhildur also likes to tackle with stereotypes and images. The ways people perceive Icelandic country and people in particular interest her. She handles these issues in a video called *Icelandic Drama* she made in collaboration with Asdis Sif Gunnarsdottir and Ingibjorg Magnadottir. In this video there are three women sitting around a table, talking about the men in their life and their ambitions. Whenever they get upset, emotional blood starts pouring from their faces, from their eyes, ears and nose. They laugh

⁹¹Kellner, 1998, 9.

and cry and are hysterical. This video was shown in the Art-Action Festival 2000-2001 *roARTorio* in the International Paris/Berlin Meetings.

Icelandic drama has a humour towards Icelandic mood. The society is presented exaggeratedly dark and dramatic, giving an impression of soap opera where everything is felt 'bigger' and more in depth. This stereotypically dark, somewhat violent mood is often connected with northern countries such as Iceland. The small society amplifies the soap opera affect as most of the population are at least in some level acquaintances and therefore can be seen as the network of complicated relationships. The description at the official *roARTorio* homepage says: "The size of the community also causes frequent soap operas among friends."⁹²



In the video Gunnhildur is talking about her feelings and sorrows. She is presenting herself as an active part of the Icelandic community. Many of her works are indeed about her being in this world and in Icelandic society with

⁹² Art-Action Festival 2000-2001 *roARTorio*. *The International Paris/Berlin Meetings* catalogue, <http://www.art-action.org/site/fr/catalog/00_01/htm/1161.htm> 2000.

all its connotations and stereotypes. In the roARTorio homepage they continue: "Ingibjörg, Ásdís and Gunnhildur interpret Iceland in their video as a bleeding society where the more darkness and the more drama comes up to the surface, the more they bleed." ⁹³

Gunnhildur reflects her Icelandicness by focusing on the contemporary culture and society and herself as a member of them. For her Icelandicness means having a strong bond to the past, being a Viking woman, but focusing on the world around her in present. In Gunnhildur's art, she reflects the world through herself, looking for a place in a world that changes in rapid speed. Iceland is her home base, the point of departure, but her Icelandicness includes lot of foreign experiences, having been abroad a lot. In some ways she has a stranger's view towards her home country and culture, which she uses to point out stereotypes and generalisations. Many of her works and actions focus on improving or changing the society and art scene in particular in Iceland. Art and art scene are her ways of influencing the world and Icelandic society. She is still looking for a red thread in her art, and with that search, she is looking for her identity too. For her, identity takes shape in actions.

⁹³ Art-Action Festival 2000-2001 roARTorio. *The International Paris/Berlin Meetings* catalogue, <http://www.art-action.org/site/fr/catalog/00_01/htm/1161.htm> 2000.

CURRICULUM VITAE - Gunnhildur Hauksdottir

Born in Reykjavik in 1972.

Education

- 2002 – 2004 The Sandberg Institute, Fine arts department (MFA)
Amsterdam, Holland.
- 2000 The Dieter Roth Academy under the guidance of Björn Roth.
- 1998 – 2002 Icelandic Academy of the Arts, mixed media department (BA).
Reykjavik, Iceland.

Solo exhibitions (Selected)

- 2002 Side specific work in Reykjavik. *The Artist on the Corner*.
"Daughters of Earth", Reykjavik, Iceland
- 2001 Gallery Nema Hvad. "Nature children", installation. Reykjavik,
Iceland.
- 1999 Gallery Nema Hvad. "Conversation of love". Video installation in
collaboration with Ragnar Kjartansson, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Group exhibitions (Selected)

- 2003 Alaska studios, *A new dawn in Alaska*, "Meat in Currie" and
"Hunter" Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2001 The Living Art Museum. *Grassroots*. Reykjavik, Iceland.
Bakenhoff, Atelier 4. *bingur-haufen-pile*. "Inside/Outside"
Worpswede, Germany.
The City Hall of Reykjavik. *The Artist on the Corner*. "Daughter
of Earth" Reykjavik, Iceland.
Gallerí Sævars Karls. *The Bebop kid*. The Second exhibition of
five in the series "The Tiger and The Polar bear". Reykjavik
Iceland.
The Living Art Museum. *Abandon Ship*. "The Goddess of
Justice". Reykjavik, Iceland.
Skaftfell. *Group exhibition in Skaftfell*. "Chats Morts"
and "Watching the Bridges of Madison County" Seydisfjord,
Iceland.
Slunkaríki. *The Battle of Good and Evil*, The first exhibition of
five in the series "The Tiger and The Polar bear". Isafjörd,
Iceland.
Skaftfell. *Skaftfell on Range*. "Wall Without Consideration".
Seydisfjord, Iceland.
The Yellow House. *Ready Made in the House*. "Pantyhose"
Reykjavik, Iceland.
The Yellow House. *Bitch*. "Minkbouquet in Lamb" Reykjavik,

- Iceland.
roARTorio. *The International Paris/Berlin Meetings*. Video episode: "Icelandic Drama" Paris, France and Berlin, Germany. Gallery Reykjavik. *Videos of the Month*. "Crash Bandicot" and "Fishing hook in nose". Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2000 Nordic Light festival. *Forces of Light*. Nine outdoor solariums stationed in a swamp and "Light flight" over the city of Reykjavik. In collaboration with Reykjavik Cultural City 2000 and The Reykjavik Electric Company. Reykjavik, Iceland.
Sidespecific on gasoline pumps in Reykjavik. *The pump pumps on*. Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1999 The Yellow House. *Emotion, Influence, Excitement, Attention*. Reykjavik, Iceland.
The Yellow House. "The House Takeover". Video and photo installation, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Performances and Happenings (Selected)

- 2003 Culture night. "The Projects". Collaboration with Reykjavik city and Samskip. Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2002 The Reykjavik Art Festival and the Icelandic radio Theatre, "Footbath". Collaboration between the Reykjavik Art Festival, the Writers Association and the Icelandic Radio Theatre. Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2000 The Reykjavik Art Museum, *Light in The Dark*, "Group, pile-dance". Reykjavik, Iceland.
The Living Art museum. *Performance week*. Performance and video: "A dog carrying rocks". Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1999 Yellow House, happening; *Indian dance and a bonfire*. Reykjavik, Iceland.
Yellow House, *IETM Conference*. Performance. "The Haunted House" Reykjavik Iceland.
The Yellow House, *Squatting For The Benefit of Arts*. Performance. Reykjavik, Iceland.
National Museum of Iceland. "Applause". Performance. Reykjavik, Iceland.

THE ICELANDIC LOVE CORPORATION - Higher Beings

We are all higher beings. We are situated in an adventure where everything is real. Do you feel bad? You can change that. Are you sour? You can be sweet. Are you happy? You can be even happier...⁹⁴

The Icelandic Love Corporation or Gjörningaklúbburinn⁹⁵ as they call themselves in Icelandic, originally consisted of four Icelandic women, Jóni Jónsdóttir, Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir, Eirún Sigurðardóttir and Dóra Ísléifsdóttir. They all studied in the Icelandic Art Academy in Reykjavik and started working together in 1995 on a studytrip to Ars 95 in Finland. In year 2001, there was a change in the corporation as Dóra left the group and the Icelandic Love Corporation continued with only three members.



The art of the Icelandic Love Corporation combines different media, from performance to installations and sculpture. In future, they are perhaps going to include prints and graphics to their works.⁹⁶ Gregory Volk describes their

⁹⁴ Poem from the performance Higher Beings, <<http://www.ilc.is/publications/poetry/index.asp>>1999.

⁹⁵ I will refer to the group as ILC, as it is commonly used abbreviation in the articles about the Icelandic Love Corporation.

⁹⁶ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

actions: “Mixing performance and installation, their subsequent events have combined innocence and irony, girlish exuberance and media-savvy aplomb, antic humour and ritualistic ceremony.”⁹⁷

According to the name, the Icelandic Love Corporation, the group identifies itself strongly as Icelandic. It also states the emphasis of corporation; the group works as one, being a corporate mind, where all ideas are shared, and all the glory is shared. As identity is such a personal phenomenon, it is difficult to have a group of three artists as an object of study in the field of identity. However, everybody in ILC participates in the works and gives something from herself to the works. Therefore it is possible to draw some kinds of lines how this group handles the issue of Icelandicness and Icelandic identity.

“I think its like, it’s a little bit child of its time. This name. I really care for it, its really sweet. But there was also this wave of Iceland being like hip hip spot. [...] And also to put a label on yourself, where you’re from, try to figure out who you are maybe...”⁹⁸

Icelandic women artists?

“Sometimes we have to explain ourselves, since we are women but we just happen to be women and of course they [art works] show what we are...that we are artists.”⁹⁹

The Icelandic name of the group, Gjörningaklúbburinn, has a meaning of performance or happening club. The word has connotations to Icelandic saumaklúbbur, sewing circles. The name holds in a way a very innocent and also a sarcastic tone at the same time. Þorhallur Magnússon describes this in his article: “ We Icelanders then smile and think of just another pre-

⁹⁷ Volk, 2000, 43.

⁹⁸ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

⁹⁹ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

feministic female club that has something to do with sewing or making food. “Ahh, very nice, indeed, “ we think, “when young girls are active and joyful” and do not suspect anything at all.”¹⁰⁰

“All of our work is feministic, or has connotations to that, I mean, it’s kinda boring to talk about that.”¹⁰¹

All of the ILC’s happenings are highly visual and in many ways aesthetic. Clothing and other accessories are always carefully considered and self made. These girls do not hesitate to show their femininity, with hairdoes, jewellery and strong make up. There lies though a strong feministic attitude underneath all this fuss. They do not want themselves to be considered as a group of women artists, but merely as a group of artists. Therefore, they almost overdo their femininity to show that being women is a great part of them but not the only thing they have in them.¹⁰² Clothing they use in their art varies between doctor’s gowns and miniskirts to elf’s costumes. Champagne and glitter are always present at the performances of the ILC.

In a way, ILC represents trendy hip women, being aware and conscious of everything around them. At the same time, they ridicule these roles they play, by playing them too well, over the top, so that the ridicule state, nature of these roles becomes visible. In the same way, they break those persistent stereotypes and clichés of their home country and culture. In many of their art works they even use elements such as ice and fire that are generally connected to Iceland. However, the group combines these elements with contemporary culture and life. Female world and perceptions as well as western consumption culture are constant targets of ILC’s analysis.

¹⁰⁰ Magnússon, 2000, pp. 4.

¹⁰¹ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

¹⁰² ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.



“Ice, the most tired of metaphors, [...], has in several of their works been instantly revitalized as a national cliché. If anything, is there ice on Iceland or what? And what better way to confront the issues at stake than with the handiest tools around: blow dryers.”¹⁰³

Performance called *Blow Job* is a good example of the group's approach to melt down the ice around issues they value. In *Blow Job* (1997), ILC froze a giant lipstick and then defrost it with blow dryers examining it carefully at the same time. The group performs the ritual with scientific precise, wearing white scientist's gowns and safety glasses. With respect to the object studied, they naturally wore short red dresses underneath the gowns as well as high heels. After all, they examine the same culture that they consume themselves. After long defrosting and examining, it is time to pop up the champagne, as usual in the performances of ILC.

“All this will make us and It free. It is what's inside that matters. We will reveal the unifying symbol.”¹⁰⁴

With this gesture the group examines the symbol of the western female world. What kind of a woman does not carry a lipstick with her? But for the

¹⁰³ Mir, 1997, 5

¹⁰⁴ Poem from *Blow Job*, McKee, 2002(1), 27.

group the gigantic lipstick is also male symbol and by defrosting it they unify the two worlds of male and female.

In the art works, ILC presents images and moments of the world viewed from the woman's point of view. This is not however an emphasised focus of the group. Being a woman is not the main thing in their lives, but only a part of their identities. More importantly that is a way for the girls to express themselves by what they are, Icelandic women artists.

Contemporary culture in consumption

“Maybe it's this weird energy and this close proximity of everything, that is very inspiring...”¹⁰⁵

The Icelandic Love Corporation draws their inspiration from the contemporary western culture but they also criticise it. They acknowledge that most of the people in western cultures live in the world of consumption, power of money and appearances, themselves included. They know the importance of appearances, the market, and the money but also realise how the role of these things has changed nowadays and they have become objects of worship. Þórhallur Magnússon discusses their approach: “They [ILC] have designed a logo for themselves, and that logo is the post-modern equivalent to the old religious symbols. Where we once had symbols for transcendental reality, we now have logos: trademarks that denote things constituting the world of commodities. And matching this: what we once called the "heavenly sphere" we now call "the Market".”¹⁰⁶

The close proximity of their home country and society both inspires and suffocates the Icelandic Love Corporation. Due to the small size of the country, it is quite easy to become known in the art circles. It is however, somewhat difficult to establish something entirely new and different in the

¹⁰⁵ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

¹⁰⁶ Þórhallur Magnússon, <www.ilc.is>, 2000,

arts due to the fact that the art field in Iceland is fairly homogenic.¹⁰⁷ This small, homogenic, peripheric society has its good sides as well. As Alexandra Mir points out, the benefit of reporting back to a place with a low population count is that the significance of one's voice becomes amplified and woven into the general fabric of culture at much higher speed than in any metropole.¹⁰⁸ This small town phenomena is indeed present in ILC:s works, as in their ideology.



Girls of ILC often take their inspiration from Icelandic cultural phenomena, and digest them in their group stomach to suit their purposes. They make spectacles out of these stereotypes or phenomena and this way they analyse their own cultural identities. *Thank You* is a video where the three girls are dressed in the same confirmation style dresses, looking like twenty-first century pixies, and cut up a cod. In the video girls seem to cut up a cod and put its entrails back inside of the fish. "The sequins on their skin match the light shinning off the fish and the reflective fabric of their dresses. Strange NASA-style headphones complete their ensembles."¹⁰⁹ In the video the girls literally dissect their Icelandic heritage and study the entrails of one of the cornerstones of the Icelandic economy and tradition. The cod stands for a symbol of their northern identity and the girls both appreciate it, hence

¹⁰⁷ Mir, 1997, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Mir, 1997, 55.

¹⁰⁹ <http://nyartsmagazine.com/bbs2/messages/2679.html>

the name of the work, and question it by cutting it open and study its entrails. What lies underneath these scales of their identity?

Many of the works by ILC are also seriously political in the sense that there is an apparent acknowledgement of the privileged world they live in. They consume the western culture but also want to make people to understand the consequences. They use and play with the rules of this post-modern consumption society. They approach people in terms of entertainment with positive messages with glitter and champagne, while understanding that the world has its downsides as well.

“Higher Beings are strong, beautiful and untouchable. [...] everybody is a Higher Being inside themselves. People should respect themselves and enjoy life.”¹¹⁰

Higher Beings was a performance that was originally performed in Amsterdam’s red light district in 1999. For this performance ILC mounted six metal plaques commemorating all the emotions that were felt in the streets and strip clubs of the area. In several performances they christened the plaques with champagne and vaginal shaped cakes that they gave to people passing by.¹¹¹



¹¹⁰ ILC, <www.ilc.is>, 1999.

¹¹¹ McKee, <www.ilc.is>, 2002.

Higher Beings are combinations of priestess-like-women and materialistic party women that wear golden outfits from head to toe and spread their happy message with little help of champagne and glitter. The outfits emphasise their divine nature as priestesses, as golden colour is known to symbolise the divinity and power of god. In art golden is often used to describe saints or other divine creatures.¹¹²



“We saw this mixture of prostitution and drugs and tourists and church with nuns giving help and it was a mixture of many feelings and then we decided to be the higher beings, they are like mixture of all these. Like in these fancy costumes and golden shoes and maybe related to the prostitution but also then like priestesses and good.”¹¹³

The Icelandic Love Corporation analyses contemporary culture and the society they live in. Everything in the world is influential for these girls. The young idealised western popular culture that prevails in Iceland nowadays,

¹¹² Levanto, 1989, 50-51.

¹¹³ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

the party culture, beauty, appearances, style, become visible in their performances. Glenna Gordon questions, however, whether underneath all the glitter and party, there really is any message left in ILC's actions. "Afterwards I was left feeling that they hadn't shaken anything except their bottle of champagne. The performance piece did promote love and friendship, the primary goals of the ILC, but this is a far cry from questioning gender roles, sexual stereotypes, or being anything more than an opportunity for celebration."¹¹⁴

One has to ask, however, how much depth there is in the contemporary consumption culture that idealises the surface and the style? ILC crystallises the reality around us nowadays, the media culture, consumption paradise, and the emptiness of it as well as its lack of meaning. Minna Tarkka comments that performing arts live nowadays more clearly in the media and by the rules of the media. The culture of screens, where the experiences, whether informational or aesthetic, happen mostly through glowing glass surfaces, has made appearances, surface, and style more important elements in the world.¹¹⁵ The western world idealises the surface, beautiful covers. ILC overdoes it, making it appear 'oh so nice' but also showing the emptiness of it. Champagne only gets you this far, and in their world, all the way.

Serious entertainment

"Yes, there is this shift between sarcasm and total sincerity. So we mean everything, absolutely, but then again it's completely sarcastic at the same time, which is interesting."¹¹⁶

Working as a group has liberated ILC from many restraints in the work. As a group they feel more at ease doing things they would not probably do on

¹¹⁴ Gordon, <http://nyartsmagazine.com/bbs2/messages/2679.html>, 2004,

¹¹⁵ Tarkka, 1995, 233.

¹¹⁶ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 10.12.2002.

their own. The group is there to back up each other. They can “just let go and do it”¹¹⁷ without thinking and analysing too much. This results as fresh and sometimes even improvisational feeling in their performances and works. This kind of “do it – mentality” describes the group very well. The art happens when the performance happens, too much analysing and planning only ruins the moment. This is also an important issue for the Icelandic Love Corporation. They do not want to hide behind too much practice or even professionalism as it could result as a distance between them and their audience.¹¹⁸

This attitude can be seen in all of the interviews and writings about ILC. Since the art circles in Iceland are fairly small, the group wants to touch all the people, no matter whether they are fishermen or artists. They want to work with the audience in their performances. Therefore many of their shows are not too practiced and interpreted but have a sense of improvisation and co-operation with the audience. The group refuses to analyse the works and ideas with difficult terms or with the language of art history. They want to rely on the participation of every person and not just the small group of people that understands the terminology.

Francis McKee discusses this side of ILC’s performances: “There is a deliberate degree of amateurism in the way a work is presented which reduces the distance between the performers and their audience. This encourages a kind of intimacy and lack of pretension that is generally absent in Rart performance. It also renders the performers more vulnerable. Similarly the aspects of fairy tale, children’s storytelling and of girlishness that characterize the work help to draw us back to a world we experienced before irony. If this is misunderstood then the work becomes weightless. By cultivating an atmosphere of intimacy and trust, the Love Corporation overcome this danger and create a space through performance where it becomes possible to communicate positively.”¹¹⁹ This seemingly naïve and

¹¹⁷ ILC in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 20.11.2002.

¹¹⁸ McKee, <www.ilc.is>,2002.

¹¹⁹ McKee, 2002(1), 6-7.

innocent view of the world is presented, though, with a serious tone, that makes it impossible not to take them seriously. But not too seriously, as they want to make their statement with a humorous attitude, filled with champagne and glitter.

Often their performances are indeed very entertaining and therefore easier to approach, as majority of the people in Iceland are more familiar with entertainment culture than contemporary visual art. There are though serious messages behind every work. This gives an opportunity to share opinions and statements that are important to ILC with the wide audience, as their main interest is to communicate with all kinds of people and to spread their message. They wish to remain without too much of interpretation and analysis as it, in their opinion, creates too wide a gap between the group and the audience.¹²⁰



“Three of the hats are for the members of the Love Corporation, the remaining two are for guests, inviting us to join them in their fictive universe.”¹²¹

In the exhibition called *Places of Worship* in 2001, they presented several objects that do not really fit into the categories of sculptures and

¹²⁰ Mir, 1997, 58.

¹²¹ McKee, 2002(1), 7.

installations. The objects are different from any sculptures or installations in the matter that they are not independent but rather demand participation and reflection from the viewer. On a shelf, there are five stovepipe hats with ribbons. Three of them belong to the members of the group (used in a performance called *Sympathy*) and two others are like invitations to the audience to join to the world of the Love Corporation. This reflects their immense desire to share their ideas and experiences with their audience, as well as the tendency to demand participation from the audience. Without the audience, they would not exist either.

Identity forms in interaction with other people. ILC wants to communicate on personal level with as many different people as possible. They express serious issues in their art works and performances and show them to the world as they see it through their eyes. Naïvely but aware, seriously and with a twinkle in the eye, these girls approach people with a spectacle. Icelandic culture and heritage is presented with humour and irony, not forgetting to add a personal touch with glitter and champagne. These girls reflect themselves and their sense of icelandicness in interaction with people, Icelandic and foreign, and try to understand their place in this world and within the Icelandic culture.

CURRICULUM VITAE - The Icelandic Love Corporation

Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir, born in Reykjavik in 1973.

Jóni Jónsdóttir, born in Reykjavik in 1972.

Eirún Sigurðardóttir, born in Reykjavik in 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 Reykjavik

Solo exhibitions (Selected)

- 2004 "Cardiac Circus" – Art Statements, Basel Art Fair, Switzerland.
"The Icelandic Love Corporation" – Jack The Pelican Presents, New York, U.S.A.
- 2003 "Behind the Eyes" – Galerie Zink&Gegner, Munich, Germany.
"Sympathy" – Galleri Verkligheten, umeå, Sweden.
- 2002 "Places of Worship" – Leisure Club Mogadishni, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- 2001 "The Icelandic Love Corporation" – galleri@hlemmur.is, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2000 "Ongarden" – i8 gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1999 "Hope" – OneOOne Gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.
"Higher Beings" – Gallery GUK, Garden, Udhus, Kitchen, Selfoss, Leijre, Hannover.
- 1998 "The Future is Beautiful" – Gallery Sævar Karl, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1997 "Freedom – Beauty – Freetime" – Gerduberg Cultural Center, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1996 "Laboratory L.O.V.E" – Café Mokka, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Group exhibitions (Selected)

- 2004 "Sons and Dottirs" – Tent, Rotterdam, Netherlands.
"Brooklyn EUphoria" – Volume, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A.
"Cold Climates" – A.P.T. Gallery, London, U.K.
"Boys and Girls" – Zacheta Gallery, Warsaw, Poland.
- 2003 "Thank You" – Bergen Kunsthall, Norway.
"Behind the Eyes" – video screening – culture night, National Gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland.
"LA International" – LAtch Gallery, Los Angeles, U.S.A.
"Greyscale/Cmyk" – Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland.
- 2002 "Rendez-vous" – Greyscale/CMYK, Tramway, Glasgow
"Magic" – Artcite, Windsor, Canada.
- 2001 "Disklo" and "Hotel Paradise" – Anteprema Bovisa, Palazzo della Triennale, Milan, Italy.

- “Melody” – Multikulturiimaja on wheels, Sanatorium, Narva-Joesuu, Estonia.
- 2000 “Hope” – Centre d’Art Contemporain, Sete, France.
“Ongarden” – LKW, Kunst in der Stadt, Kunstverein Bregenz, Austria.
- 1999 “Higher Beings” – An Icelandic Bone in a Swedish Sock, Gallery 54, Gothenburg, Sweden.
“Higher Beings” – Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers, Red Light District, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- 1998 “Hotel Paradise” - -30/60+, Kjarvalsstadir, Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland.
“A Fresh Start II” – Momentum Biennial, Moss, Norway.
- 1997 “Women good enough to eat” – Myndlist 97, Hafnarhusid, Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland.

Performances (Selected)

- 2004 “Intimacy Circus” – Motel Mozaique Festival, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Jack The Pelican Presents, New York, U.S.A.
“Crystal Rain” with Ragnar Kjartansson – Boys and Girls, Zacheta Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, Berlin North, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany.
- 2003 “Crystal Rain” with Ragnar Kjartansson – Opening of Nordatlantisk Brygge, Copenhagen, Denmark, Behind the Eyes, Bergen Kunsthall, Norway.
- 2002 “Sympathy” – Greyscale/CMYK, Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland.
“Thank You” – Mosaik, RUV National Television, Reykjavik, Iceland.
“Rendez-vous” – ILC and The Reykjavik Fire Department, Open air, Reykjavik, Iceland.
“Showgirls” – Strompleikurinn, National Theatre, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 2001 “Higher Beings Love Champagne” – The Cargo Club, London Art Week, Lotta Hammer Gallery, London, England.
“Poem” – Y2K, Caen, France.
- 2000 “Higher Beings – We are the world, we are the children” and “Blow Job” – Batofar, Paris, France.
“Blow Job” - LKW, Kunst in der Stadt, Kunstverein Bregenz, Austria.
- 1999 “Higher Beings” – Odense Performance Festival, Denmark.
“Higher Beings, Wish moment” – Kjarvalsstadir, Cultural Night, Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1998 “Wish Kit on the Beach” – Axis Mundi, performance/rock festival, Kristiansand, Norway.
- 1997 “Blow Job” – On Iceland, The Living Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.
- 1996 “Kiss Performance” – Dagsljós, RUV National Television, Reykjavik, Iceland.

CONCLUSION - Icelandic energy

“It’s somehow this energy, this basic energy that comes through in Iceland. And I have always experienced, that somehow it is different.”¹²²

We all have our roots: we are born somewhere, we grow up somewhere, and we belong somewhere. These places influence the way we lead our lives and construct our identities. Artists construct and reflect their identities in their art works, creating themselves a place in this world through their art. Their home countries, cultures and personal experiences all contribute in the process of constructing their identities and these processes are often reflected in art works. Through their art they reflect themselves, their inner landscapes, whether in forms of paintings, photographs, videos or performances. In these inner landscapes, crystallises the artist’s relationship with the world, with the environment around him/her and all the personal experiences he/she has had.

Iceland is present in the lives and art of Ragna Róbertsdóttir, Anna Línal, Gunnhildur Hauksdóttir and the Icelandic Love Corporation. Icelandic culture and heritage, language, history and contemporary society, all affect the ways these artists perceive the world. Their identities are in constant change, as the world and culture around them changes. They form their Icelandic identities in interaction with other people as well as with cultural traditions. Through this interaction they form their places in the world and in course of time. Anna Línal focuses on studying her identity by looking back in history and unveiling traditions and rituals that still control our lives. Human behaviour in this world, and especially in her own culture, intrigues her. For Anna, Icelandic identity forms throughout the history, as people forward their heritage to the next generation. Identity is not merely focused on a place but it also includes time, history of place.

¹²²Anna Línal in an interview with Piia Mettälä in Reykjavik 27.11.2002.

In contemporary world, media has a strong influence in the ways people construct their worldviews as well as their identities. In the Icelandic Love Corporation's works, the Icelandic contemporary culture is presented with humour, and irony. The western popular culture that prevails in Iceland nowadays, and the ideology of appearances and surface are in the focus in ILC's art. The group forwards a positive attitude towards the world but also criticises down the line the emptiness and artificiality that spreads all over the world. ILC works by the rules of media and the market economy. This group questions the norms of the Icelandic society and makes fun of serious cultural phenomena, handling them with irony. Serious issues can be entertaining and entertainment can be serious.

Art is a form of communication. When artists reflect their own personal experiences and identities in their art works, they also influence the society around them. Artists work in interaction with the society and the environment and have a possibility to influence on the local identity. Gunnhildur focuses on these identity processes by working closely with the society and people. She observes the Icelandic culture and country with a stranger's view. In her videos, she is both the observer and the object of observation. Along with the culture in general, she is observing her own reactions and forms of behaviour. She keeps herself as the point of departure, the focus. This way she filters the world through herself, and looks for the place where she belongs.

Icelandic history, sagas and legends are very important to Icelandic people. The national history and cultural heritage unifies Icelandic people as a nation with a shared past, present and future. Icelandic heritage is the point of departure for Ragna in her art and identity. The nature is a major part of Ragna's life as she wanders there and looks for silence and peace in the Icelandic landscape. She makes art works, *scapes*, that connect herself to the land and at the same time, forwards the solitude she feels to the viewer. The land holds connotations to the past stories, sagas that for Ragna, represent the Icelandicness, the pride for her country and heritage.

Nowadays, in this changing world, I do not think we will ever be done with the discussion of identity and its changes. It is not even necessary to be done with it, more important is to keep discussing. With this study I hope to have participated in this discussion by bringing up some perspectives on Icelandic artists and the ways Icelandic country and culture influences their work. This discussion could be widened to handle many more Icelandic artists, especially male artists, to get a broader view on themes, such as Icelandic identity.

All the artists in this study reflect their Icelandicness, their relationship with their home country and culture, in their art works. The landscape, nature, society, cultural traditions, childhood memories and contemporary life, they all create meanings that form the relationship with their home country. However different the approaches of these artists are, one thing remains the same. They all have a strong relationship with their home country, its culture, nature and society. It seems that they all have this sense of Icelandicness being a feeling, an energy, that is nowhere else to be found but at home in Iceland. This Icelandic energy is undoubtedly present in the art works of these artists. Still, it remains indefinable as the Icelandicness itself. Just as you think you know what it is all about, they come up with something new.

Gregory Volk finishes this thought nicely: “No matter how internationally minded Icelandic artists are (and almost all have studied and lived abroad) eventually the country comes to figure in their work: as a physical locus, as a trove of images and materials or - more mysteriously for outsiders – as a comprehensive force with which one is perpetually in dialogue... [Iceland is] there, in the deep grain of the inquiry, a constant presence that can be approached with a sense of wonder, humor or irony, via poetic engagement or tough-minded criticism.”¹²³

¹²³ Volk, 2000, 40-45.

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