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The landscape of Iceland



Iceland's Parliament in Reykjavik



The Reykjavik Art Museum

FIRE AND ICE

by Ben Davis

If you haven't thought too much about the cultural life of Iceland, that's probably because the entire population of the island nation -- about 312,000 souls in all -- makes it about half the size of my hometown of Seattle. Reykjavik, the country's clean, modern capital on the southwest coast, is roughly comparable in size to Tacoma, Seattle's more obscure neighbor.

If you have perchance thought of Icelandic culture, it probably has something to do with **Bjork**, the pop diva who wore a swan-shaped dress to the Oscars. If you're in the art world, you probably think of neo-light-and-space wizard **Ólafur Elíasson**, currently being canonized at the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York. And Bjork.

Both were on hand to support the opening of the second-ever visual arts edition of the **Reykjavik Arts Festival**, a triennial occurrence in Iceland and a little gem on the international art circuit (theater and music Festivals have taken place in Reykjavik since 1970). Bjork was present in the form of cameo appearances at various openings (and as the subject of nightly, untrue rumors -- which I somehow imagine are common in Reykjavik -- that she would be deejaying later). Elíasson lent his heft as co-MC of the "Experiment Marathon" at the **Reykjavik Art Museum**, along with ubiquitous art-world pied piper **Hans Ulrich Obrist**.

As the highlight of the nationwide festival, which featured shows across the country, the marathon offered a two-day program of presentations by international artists and scientists, an extension of a project Obrist first staged at the Elíasson-designed **Serpentine Pavilion** in London last year, itself an offshoot of a 2001 exhibition he co-curated in Antwerp called "Laboratorium." Friday, May 16, and Sunday, May 18, saw continuous lectures by the likes of Belgian artificial intelligence expert **Luc Steels** and British cosmologist **Peter Coles**, and performances by art figures including **Jimmy Durham** and **Tony Conrad**. The tone ranged from a research project focusing on the possibilities of a pan-European megacity by starchitect **David Adjaye** to an action by feminist art pioneer **Carolee Schneemann**, for which she "realized" in real life the image in a sketch given to her by the Icelandic painter **Erró** -- having a nude maiden ride into the museum atop a white horse.

For the duration of the festival, the museum is also presenting documentation of Obrist's previous marathon and projects by participants in the Reykjavik installment, as well as a few other works, like those of Iceland-born, New York-based sculptor **Katrin Sigurdardottir**, exhibited because they were deemed somehow to fit the festival's overall rubric of "art-as-experiment." Sigurdardottir's small plaster models of unrealized Icelandic architectural structures that she built and then smashed are a quiet highlight.

The 2008 Marathon's central, ill-fated "experiment" was to have been a collaboration between performance-art pioneer **Marina Abramović** and TV sex doctor **Ruth Westheimer** (aka **Dr. Ruth**). Immediately after the press conference introducing the performers on Friday



Tony Conrad performing at the Experiment Marathon



Carolee Schneemann's action at the Experiment Marathon



Installation view of works by Katrin Sigurdardottir at the Reykjavik Art Museum



morning, rumors began to circulate that all was not well between the two women. It seemed Abramović had hoped to do an interview with Dr. Ruth about the erotic lives of artists, with the goal of leading her into "a more poetic space of desire." Westheimer, meanwhile, somehow showed up in Iceland without knowledge of this plan and flat-out refused to participate, or even have her photo taken with Abramović.

The upshot was that Dr. Ruth presented solo Sunday morning, giving some distinctly un-poetic sex advice (for the ladies, Kegel exercises; for the dudes, 10 minutes a day in front of the mirror, admiring your erection). Abramović, for her part, took her revenge during her own performance, which was the final act of the marathon. Her rather inconclusive piece involved venerated experimental filmmaker **Jonas Mekas** (also in Reykjavik as a performer) reclining atop a metal structure, as Abramović invited eight volunteers to sit onstage, don headphones and observe as she commanded the audience to do various exercises. While all this was being set up, however, the artist offered a film she had whipped together with Mekas in which she narrated her side of the Dr. Ruth blow-out, describing in the breathless persona of a high-school gossip how she had nearly been reduced to tears by the 80-year-old erstwhile TV star.

All this may represent no more than the conflict of two strong-willed figures -- as it happened, humorously, their presentations were mind-body mirror images of one another, with Dr. Ruth commanding the audience to chant the words "orgasm" and "erection," and Abramović leading the audience in tribal breathing exercises and telling crowd members to embrace their neighbors. But it also showed a basic contradiction between two worldviews -- and, by extension, how problematically shapeless Obrist's curatorial idea of bringing together art and science is -- with Westheimer's cheerfully matter-of-fact mindset recoiling from Abramović's more imaginative definition of "experimentation."

If anything, in fact, the Reykjavik Experiment Marathon's theme might have been the perils of art-science intercourse. For the scientists, the event's kick-off presentation by **University of Iceland** physics professor **Thorsteinn I. Sigfusson** was a case study in how science can go wrong fast when presenting for the culture crowd. Sigfusson had his assistants don tinfoil suits with lights on their heads, doing a dance that illustrated something about how water molecules pass through a fuel cell membrane, as he narrated. This goofy bit of amateur theater ended with an implied orgy, and the whole thing made science look not cool and accessible but desperately sexually repressed.

For the artists, on the other hand, Obrist's interview on Sunday with weather-beaten thinker **John Brockman** had a more sobering lesson. Would-be polymath Obrist clearly has a special identification with Brockman, whose shtick is that he is a creativity guru who bridges the arts and sciences with his website **Edge.org**. For those disinclined to take seriously the possible impact of Obrist's pop-intellectual art-science synthesis, however, Brockman's description of how he went from hanging out with **John Cage** and pondering the implications of cybernetics to consulting for the Pentagon provides a cautionary note as to where an approach that turns art into just another technology to research might lead.

Most exciting were the presentations that seemed to stand relatively independently of the overall theme of the marathon. In particular, **Tris Vonna-Michell** -- a rising British art star -- offered the latest iteration of a performance series for which he re-narrates a story again and again, each time varying it a little based on his location, audience and the duration set for him by an egg timer. Speaking at lightning speed, so that his story moved faster than his audience

Left to right: Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann and Dr. Ruth at the press conference for the Experiment Marathon



Dr. Ruth giving her presentation



Marina Abramović performing during the Experiment Marathon (with Jonas Mekas)



Thorsteinn I. Sigfusson's presentation at the Experiment Marathon



could absorb, and accompanied by a slideshow of fragmentary images that moved in and out of relation to his narrative, Vonna-Michell thrillingly skated on the edge of definition.

At the same time, real magic could be found in an art piece by **Hreinn Fridfinnsson**, one of Ólafur Elíasson's mentors. Elíasson introduced the work, and the ensuing performance saw Fridfinnsson's assistant grip a vial of opalescent liquid, letting his hand's warmth slowly cause ripples to emanate from the walls of the beaker. Conceptual in an understated, Scandinavian kind of way, the work gave a glimpse of an elemental tradition that informs Elíasson's more celebrated practice. And it threw into relief what was given short-shrift by the Experiment Marathon: Iceland itself. For that, you had to get outside, and on to the rest of the festival.

It is a small arts scene, obviously. Iceland is the kind of place where the president, **Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**, not only threw a reception at his house to open the triennial, but also went on to attend an opening night concert of local rockers **Amiina**, whose instruments include the xylophone, the laptop and the old finger-round-the-edge-of-a-crystal-wine-glass trick. (Of course, it is the prime minister who has the real power in Iceland -- though Grímsson does have some killer pics of himself with **George W. Bush** and **Hu Jintao** in his waiting room.) In a book published for the 10th anniversary of **i8**, one of Reykjavik's few blue chip galleries (showing **Ernesto Neto** for the festival), critic **Guðbergur Bergsson** argues that avant-garde dynamism "is least likely to be found among the people of Iceland where most have been born and raised in the same kettle of fish and others outside of the milieu are generally not eager to find the pot and dive in at once." This from a champion of Icelandic culture!

Major international forces are stirring up this particular fish kettle, however. On the political front, this is a time of landmark change in Iceland. The single most controversial issue in recent memory for Icelanders is the government's 2002 decision to turn over a large section of the interior to U.S. aluminum giant **Alcoa** in order to construct a smelter at Fjardabyggd, along with a monumental hydroelectric dam to power it at Kárahnjúkar. Apparently, Iceland's formidable natural power resources are highly attractive to the energy-intensive -- and intensely polluting -- aluminum industry, with a series of aggressive future collaborations planned between local power companies and international investors (Bjork's mother became something of a symbol of environmental protest when she went on hunger strike in hopes of blocking the dam.)

Meanwhile, all the concentrated international investment led the Icelandic currency to gain huge weight on international markets, roughly up until the Alcoa project finished construction in 2007. This, in turn, caused Iceland's financial institutions to overextend themselves massively, becoming all but insolvent after global credit markets froze last year. Just last week, a consortium of Nordic banks had to come to the rescue. The Icelandic króna has lost half its value against the euro in the last year, with politicians now floating the idea of surrendering economic sovereignty and switching to the European currency. Iceland is a little, open country, buffeted by international forces that are all out of scale with it.

The Reykjavik Arts Festival, in its way, reflects all this. The second day produced a handy, if benign, symbol of the disorienting state of affairs, when guests of the festival were flown around the country to various other openings. These included a stop in Iceland's second city, the northern town of Akureyri. There, the **Akureyri Art Museum** was inaugurating a show of superstar Chinese "cynical realist" painting by the likes of **Fang Lijun**, **Yue Minjun** and **Zhang Xiaogang**, from the collection of Dutchman **Fu Ruide**. Even the museum's director admitted that the artists' globe-stomping

Hans Ulrich Obrist [left] interviewing John Brockman



Tris Vonna-Michell in performance at the Experiment Marathon



Performing a Hreinn Fríðfinnsson art piece



Ólafur Elíasson observing Hreinn Fríðfinnsson performance



Jonas Mekas filming Icelandic president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson as he greets guests

superstar status might seem charmingly out of place in this town of 17,300 people.

As for the environmental question, back at the capital, if one could break away from the marathon, sharp-eyed curator **Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir** had put together "Dreams of Sublime and Nowhere in Contemporary Icelandic Art" at the Reykjavik Art Museum's other building, focusing on native artists' reactions to the changing landscape. These included **Olga Bergmann's** large collage painting featuring elements of nature thrown together into a subtly mind-bending panorama, and **Hrafnkell Sigurdsson's** *Sixth Conversion*, a large horizontal panel printed with a photo of a snowy wilderness, the sides of which can be folded in like the wings of an altarpiece, converting it to an image of a pile of trash. Most interestingly, **Ragnar Kjartansson** -- set to be Iceland's representative at the **Venice Biennale** next year -- offered a video piece starring Icelandic comedian **Laddi**, who is depicted wandering in the snow, holding a shotgun and firing randomly into the nothingness. It was titled *Guilt Trip*. (We ran into the charming Kjartansson later at the **LA Art Museum** in the small town of Hveragerði, where he was thwarted from doing a planned fireworks-show-and-hash-smoking piece by local regulations.)

A trip through the small but spirited local gallery scene provided still another example of environmental angst at the small nonprofit **Start Art**, where **Rúri** (Iceland's 2003 emissary to Venice) had an installation that took direct aim at Alcoa's Kárahnjúkar hydroelectric dam. On one large screen was a rushing waterfall, while three smaller screens played images of nesting geese, taken during the dam's construction and illustrating the birds' confusion and displacement. According to the artist, some 15,000 migratory birds didn't lay their eggs this year because of the project. A third wall of the gallery had a projection of scrolling phrases itemizing the environmental effects, against a backdrop of water.

Contrast Rúri's approach to the show at **Gallerí Ágúst**, where the festival coincided with an opening by **Andrea Maack**, a 2005 graduate of **Icelandic Academy of the Arts**. As an art project, Maack had devised her own luxury scent, *Smart*, which she then had manufactured in a limited edition by **Apf**, the French perfume company. The gallery was selling it for 250,000 krónur a bottle (about \$3,400, at the current exchange rate), but Maack was on hand to spray samples onto small cardboard strips which she handed out to visitors, as enticement and souvenir. With the sophisticated irony of a pro, the younger artist's work incarnated all the material seductions of globalization.

Between the two shows, you can nicely plot the lines of force that affect the contemporary Icelandic art scene. Not least, they illustrate the kind of ideological duty Elíasson's work performs, mediating a primary contradiction -- his particular brand of installation art is both somehow environmentally conscious and distinctly corporate.

But, coming full circle, this contradiction also gives the full context for Elíasson and Obrist's Experiment Marathon initiative at the Reykjavik Art Museum. What is striking is not just that the marathon's focus seems particularly to displace political themes, as *Art Review* critic **James Westcott** astutely observes in his **blog report** on the weekend. Nor is it even that specifically environmental concerns -- clearly a "scientific" question, and a preoccupation of Icelanders -- were notably invisible.

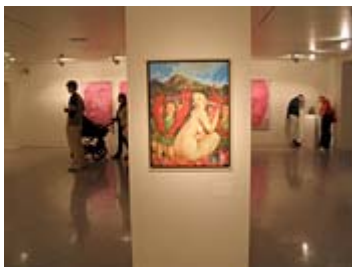
As an initiative, the Experiment Marathon is pitched as a sort of Renaissance coming together of disciplines. In practice, however, the format of having celebrity speakers parachute in for 20 minute lectures seems more like an example of turning what Obrist does



Amiina in performance



2007 poster from SavingIceland.org



Painting by Wei Dong in "Facing China" at the Akureyri Art Museum



Dutch collector Fu Ruide receiving a gift from Akureyri Art Museum director Hannes Sigurðsson

best -- networking -- into an esthetic experience all its own. You can't say the "meeting of the minds" thing is a terrible idea, and the placement of emerging talent alongside important figures is admirable. But then, whenever I got a chance to pick the brains of younger artists involved -- Vonna-Michel, **Fia Backstrom**, **Benn Northover** -- they were honored to be part of the experience, but also disoriented and filled with questions about what it meant for their practice to touch down in a foreign land as an exhibit in the rolling cultural carnival. Clearly, some thoughtful reflection on the phenomenon of Obrist's super-cosmopolitanism is in order, rather than uncritical celebration.

In this sense, the Reykjavik Experiment Marathon both deflected the turbulence of the moment in Iceland -- in its elision of the issues faced by the local scene -- and reflected it -- mirroring a certain stimulating but also blind and haphazard side of international integration. These sorts of fraught relations are always present on the global art circuit, of course. It may just be that -- returning to Obrist's love of the "laboratory" metaphor -- Iceland, being small, is a particularly controlled environment in which to watch it all happen.

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Ragnar Kjartansson
Guilt Trip (still)
 2007
 Reykjavik Art Museum



Ragnar Kjartansson [with fireworks] at the LA Art Museum



Rüri, with her installation *Flooding*, at Start Art



Outside Start Art in Reykjavik



Andrea Maack, with her sculpture
Smart, at Gallerí Ágúst