

# Icelandic Art, Because There Is Such a Thing

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Ask an arts professional with knowledge of the contemporary Icelandic art scene to characterize that scene, and you'll hear a persistent refrain: Art made in Iceland is unorthodox, unpredictable, unrestrained. Gallerist Börkur Arnarson claims that contemporary Icelandic artists are unfettered by "tradition, discipline, [and] context." In some countries, artists continue to extend or react against established local conventions, but Arnarson says that, "in Iceland, there's a freedom to try whatever you want, and to get away with it" (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> **Gabríela Friðriksdóttir**, Iceland's representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale, credits her artistic ingenuity to "the freedom...Icelandic people have because of the lack of tradition." In Iceland, she says, there is "an enormous space of nothingness" where cultural customs would usually reign.<sup>2</sup> German art historian Christian Schoen similarly asserts that "Icelandic artists display a refreshingly disrespectful approach to art history," and that if anything typifies art made in Iceland, it is its devotion to transnational trends.<sup>3</sup> The current discourse surrounding Icelandic visual culture leads us to believe that it has severed its ties to a heritage, that it is beholden to any local or national expectations, and that, hence, there is no such thing as "Icelandic Art."

<sup>1</sup> John Rogers, "Icelandic Art, If There Is Such A Thing." *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, May 9, 2014, <http://grapevine.is/mag/feature/2014/05/09/icelandic-art-if-there-is-such-a-thing/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriela Friðriksdóttir and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Hans Ulrich Obrist Interview with Gabriela Friðriksdóttir." I-D, March 2005. <http://www.hamishmorrison.com/assets/files/Fridriksdottir-Gabriela/Fridriksdottir-gabriela-Obrist-interview.pdf>.



## Icelandic Art, If There Is Such A Thing

As it approaches its third decade, *Í8 Gallery* has transcended its roots

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On the ground floor of a grey apartment building, across from Reykjavík's old harbour, around the corner from the Reykjavík Art Museum, and a five minute walk from the heart of the city's centre, sits a quiet gallery space which takes its name—*Í8*—from its original location at Ingólfrstræti 8.

So unassuming is its exterior that you'd be forgiven for mistaking *Í8* altogether, but step into its brightly pristine and cube-like interior on any given day and you'll find yourself surrounded by works of art by Iceland's most brilliant talents and other visionaries and innovators from around the world.

Just last month, guests poured into *Í8* to see a new work by seminal artist Hreinn Friðfinnson. Plopping bottles of Heiðmæli and water from a giant tub of ice by the door, members of Reykjavík's art community chatted cheerfully while making their way around the five-screen video

exhibition. Entitled "A Portrait of a Sculptor as a Sculpture, For a Sculpture by the Sculptor" the show featured Hreinn's friend, the sculptor Kristinn E. Hindriksen, knitting a hat, skating in wide, giddy circles around Tjörnin, vigorously hula-hooping in front of a beautiful shoreline at sunset, and jumping, somewhat precariously, on a trampoline. It was a distinctly festive atmosphere, with children skipping around their parents' legs and bottles clinking, and just one of the many exciting openings that *Í8* will have this year.

Nineteen years since it first opened its doors (coincidentally with a show by Hreinn), *Í8* has become internationally known and respected for its ambitious programme and strong conceptual aesthetic. It was high time that we chat with Björkur Arnason, the man running Iceland's foremost independent gallery and representing 20 artists internationally.

**fig.1** "Icelandic Art, If There Is Such A Thing," John Rogers interview with Björkur Arnason in the *Reykjavík Grapevine*, May 2014.

In its unboundedness, the work of Icelandic artists seems to have become prototypically postnational. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas defines postnationalism as the hypothetical end result of a "historically momentous dynamic," which follows an "abstraction from local, to dynastic, to national, to democratic consciousness" and could culminate in a globalized society that transcends the "affective ties of nation, language, place, and heritage." The Icelandic art scene is not provincial or insular but open to foreign influence and attentive to globally shared interests. Yet when Arnarson, Schoen, and Friðriksdóttir claim that art made in contemporary Iceland is unencumbered by local tradition, they suggest that its significance and global relevance derive from the insignificance and irrelevance of its local borders and history.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Max Pensky, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), xiv, 66, 75.

According to Habermas, a postnational society may be expected to take into account "the autonomy, particularity, and uniqueness of formerly sovereign states." Such a society represents a "new multiplicity" of interconnected cultures dedicated to the cultivation of complex forms of inclusion and belonging.<sup>4</sup> The assertion that art made in contemporary Iceland bubbles up from a cultural vacuum or a "space of nothingness" threatens to homogenize Iceland's best-known art into a kind of global artistic monoculture, erasing its singularity rather than acknowledging its place in a truly postnational constellation of hybridized cultures. In truth, Iceland's cultural identity has not dissolved into that of a globalized community, or even that of mainland Europe. Such declarations can be dangerous, for when we interpret art within an exclusively global rather than postnational framework, certain cultural nuances are lost or misunderstood, as are the affective ties and forms of inclusion they generate. I argue that we come closer to achieving a Habermasian postnationalist ideal when we acknowledge contemporary art's rootedness in the heritage of various national cultures than when we deny and devalue those roots.

The following case study presents an internationally successful Icelandic artist, Ragnar Kjartansson, whose art, I contend, is often misread because its national context is overlooked. Rather than conceiving of Kjartansson's work in terms of international postmodernism, as many critics and curators do, we are better served by reinterpreting it as playing along a continuum with the premodern performative practices of his Icelandic ancestors. In doing so, we acknowledge the work's ability to foster a culturally sensitive international exchange; the

unification of a global public does not depend on the disappearance of traditional vernacular but may be achieved as multiple vernaculars interpermeate foreign aesthetics and motifs.

For the past fifteen years, Kjartansson has followed a specific artistic strategy: his artworks are episodic, appropriative, and structured through repetition. A performance piece titled Sorrow Conquers Happiness exemplifies this strategy. Dressed in a tuxedo, clean-shaven, with his hair slicked back, Kjartansson mournfully and repeatedly sings the phrase, “Sorrow conquers happiness,” to a subtly morphing melody composed by his friend, Davíð Þór Jónsson. Once Kjartansson completes his rendition of the song, he begins it again. The performance lasts seven hours. When Kjartansson debuted the piece on a small stage in a downtown Reykjavik restaurant, he sang in English while a local jazz trio accompanied him.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later, performing in a train station in St. Petersburg, he sang in Russian, supported by a chamber orchestra and choir.<sup>6</sup> The piece has also been transformed into a videowork titled God (2007), in which Kjartansson and an eleven-piece orchestra perform in a large concrete hall whose walls have been hidden behind gaudy pink satin curtains (figs. 2 and 3). When God is exhibited in museums and galleries, the video loops on a large screen in its own room, which is likewise covered floor to ceiling in bright pink satin (fig. 4).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “sorrow conquers happiness.mov,” YouTube video, 1:48, from Kjartansson’s live performance of *Sorrow Conquers Happiness* at Iðnó Restaurant in Reykjavik in 2004, posted by Dallimus, October 7, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGe5JWpmJjY>.

<sup>6</sup> “MANIFESTA 10. Public program. Ragnar Kjartansson. ‘Sorrow Conquers Happiness’. (long version).” YouTube video, 25:04, from Kjartansson’s live performance of *Sorrow Conquers Happiness* at MANIFESTA 10 in St. Petersburg, Russia, posted by Manifesta Foundation, November 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH-LD8wD62M>.

<sup>7</sup> Ragnar Kjartansson, *God*, 2007; Video, 30:07 min.

Each of Kjartansson’s artworks centers on a discrete phrase or gesture (e.g., “sorrow conquers happiness”) that suggests an excerpt from a larger narrative—a solitary line or piece of choreography isolated from some larger play or opera. These key phrases often cite the work of another artist, such as Jónsson, and are rendered in one of several conventional pop-cultural styles. In God, Kjartansson’s sleek getup, big band, and glamorous backdrop allude to Rat Pack crooners like Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin.

Although Kjartansson’s works are repetitive, they are not automated. While the artist could easily record a three-minute phrase and electronically loop it, he and his collaborators instead sustain the event through live action; they stretch their vocal chords to their limits, collapse on the stage in exhaustion, and make mistakes. In 2013, the artist hired an American band called



fig. 2 and 3 Ragnar Kjartansson, *God*, 2007: Still images from video, 30:07 min.



**fig. 4** Ragnar Kjartansson, *God*, 2007/2011: Installation view at the Frankfurter Kunstverein.

The National to perform their song “Sorrow” for six hours at MoMA PS1’s VW Dome. Lead guitarist Bryce Dessner played a slightly different guitar line for each of the 105 times he performed the song. Each of the song’s iterations was further distinguished by the drummer’s presence or absence, the state of the lead singer’s voice, and the enthusiasm and size of the audience.<sup>8</sup> In Sorrow Conquers Happiness, Kjartansson varies each iteration of the song’s lyrics by holding different notes and varying the song’s melody and dynamics ever so slightly. Each live performance of the piece is unique, adapted to the appearance and acoustics of the performance space, the size and makeup of Kjartansson’s band, Kjartansson’s physical condition, and, especially, the nature of his audience.

<sup>8</sup> Drew Daniel, “The Song Remains the Same: Ragnar Kjartansson and the Quality of Quantity.” *Parkett* 94 (2014): 134–47.

Because art critics and curators operate on the premise that Icelandic art has no local precedent, they often associate specific elements of Kjartansson’s strategy with primary features of international postmodernism—that is, they associate his use of appropriation with pastiche and his work’s episodic looping with a schizophrenic conception of time. For example, Italian curator Cecilia Alemani interprets Kjartansson’s donning of the guise of a Rat Pack crooner in God as a detached and empty mimicry, maintaining that it preserves none of the masculine or romantic connotations that originally saturated the Rat Pack’s style, and generates none of its own. She compares Kjartansson’s work to a cabaret performance by a “Vaudevillian idiot savant”; it is interesting, entertaining, even “soothing” and “reassuring,” but otherwise deliberately meaningless.<sup>9</sup> Understood within a postmodern framework, Kjartansson’s work, according to Alemani, represents an impasse in which elements of the past are neutrally replicated, without nostalgia or special concern for their import.

<sup>9</sup> Ragnar Kjartansson et al., *The End—Ragnar Kjartansson*, ed. Christian Schoen (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 39–50.

Critics who understand Kjartansson’s strategy in these terms have had difficulty reconciling the detachment and perpetual “present-ness” implied by this postmodern interpretation with the authenticity and sincerity that other audiences perceive in his work. Alemani identifies a “tension between authenticity and simulation, between sincerity and sophistication.” Curator Adam Budak has also read Kjartansson’s work as postmodern, describing his work as both “real and alarming” and “fake and kitschy.” But curator Caroline Corbetta claims, “Kjartansson’s attitude is always equipped with an emotional authenticity and intensity,” and Christian Schoen calls Kjartansson one of the “most genuine artists of his generation.”<sup>10</sup>



While the contradictions Alemani and Budak perceive make for interesting analysis, I submit that it is unnecessary to invoke discrepancy to reconcile Kjartansson's strategy with the earnestness Corbetta and Schoen celebrate. Kjartansson's strategy is not an exclusive invention of postmodernism—it is also a reworking of pre-modern mechanisms in the context of contemporary globalization.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 7–45.

While it may seem farfetched to situate Kjartansson's work within a premodern Icelandic tradition rather than a more contemporary transnational framework, the connection is less tenuous if we set aside Kjartansson's status as an internationally renowned artist and consider instead his Icelandic heritage. The structure of Kjartansson's artworks and the way in which he performs them subtly but pervasively resembles those of premodern Icelandic performers. Fourteenth-century manuscripts record the earliest Icelandic melodic verses, early relatives of the *rímur* (sing. *ríma*) that would develop as an art form over the next six hundred years. *Rímur* are orally performed epic poems that conform to strict formal rules: they are sung by performers called *kvæðamenn* (sing. *kvæðamaður*) to unique, repetitive, semi-tonic melodies, following complicated rhyming and alliterative patterns. For over half a millennium, *kvæðamenn* traveled throughout the Icelandic countryside, improvising new verses and performing old standards at farms and fishing camps in exchange for room and board or, occasionally, some form of payment (fig. 5).<sup>11</sup> Until electricity (and radio) reached the most rural districts in the latter half of the twentieth century, alliterative poetry was Icelanders' choice of medium for entertainment, education, political discourse, and gossip.<sup>12</sup> Even today, Icelanders perform traditional *rímur* and informally compose alliterative verse to commemorate notable events such as births, retirements, and political gaffes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hreinn Steingrímsson, *Kvæðaskapur: Icelandic Epic Song*, ed. Dorothy Stone and Stephen L. Mosko, 2000, <http://luxstar.org/KVAEDASKAPUR/main.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah M. Brownsberger, "Poetry, Hunger, and Electric Lights: Lessons from Iceland on Poetry and Its Audience," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (September 2015): 202–12.

<sup>13</sup> Watch elderly farmers perform traditional *rímur* at "Erlingur og Jóhannes kveða rímur.mpg": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWad1EQBoyQ>. Steindór Andersen and Sigur Rós's collaboration, "Fjöll í austri fagurblá," presents a more modern take on the traditional *ríma* structure: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=8yYP\\_Sw6fYQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8yYP_Sw6fYQ). See also: Hreinn Steingrímsson's e-book, *Kvæðaskapur*, cited above, for rare audio recordings, transcriptions, and translations of traditional performances by professional *kvæðamenn*.

Early Icelandic oral compositions relied on sketches, or brief modular episodes that were rarely performed in sequence. Each



**fig. 5** August Schiøtt, *Húslestur*, 1861: Oil on canvas: Dimensions unknown. This painting by Danish artist August Schiøtt shows a *kvæðamaður* performing in the communal living space of an Icelandic farm.

episode could be contained within the length of a single stanza or short series of stanzas and could be combined at the performer's discretion with a variety of other episodes to create a performance that lasted several hours. This performance could easily be carried on nightly for months on end. Lacking the lexical opportunity to loop back, reread, and be reminded of the events of earlier pages, listeners relied on redundancy or repetitions in the ríma to stay on track with the narrative and remain "in the loop." In this sense, the conditions of premodern oral performances recall those of contemporary fine art installations and performances, which are generally unavailable for private perusal at home and are typically affected by viewers' freedom to wander in and out of a venue, as well as by the interference of noisy crowds. By performing songs repeatedly, Kjartansson displays a tolerance for these conditions. He caters his performances to audiences who will visit, linger a while, leave, and then possibly return hours or days later, looking to reenter the work at their convenience without missing out on any of the content.

Premodern oral poets repeated episodes to ensure that their listeners could keep up with their stories, but they also repeated grander narratives in order to conserve hard-won knowledge. Poems typically contained a complex web of kenningar (sing. kenning), metaphorical devices that rely on allusions to the stories chronicled in medieval Icelandic texts.<sup>14</sup> While oral poets sometimes invented their own kenningar, they often cherry-picked and rearranged old favorites to suit their topical messages and to make sure they were understood. This repetition and appropriation of timeworn metaphors helped poets meet formal alliterative and syllabic requirements extemporaneously, embedding new works within a long poetic lineage and conserving valuable cultural lore.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Graybeard's mead-horn liquor" is a kenning for poetry; "Graybeard" is one of Óðin's many epithets, and according to Norse mythology, Óðin brought poetry to mankind in a horn of magic mead he stole from dwarfs and giants. See: Halldór Laxness, *World Light*, trans. Magnús Magnússon (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Julian Freeman, ed., *Landscapes from a High Latitude: Icelandic Art, 1909-1989*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1989), 16.

Kenningar also helped to assimilate ideas and episodes from foreign stories into Iceland's poetic canon. Poets read or heard tales on their travels, which they then translated into Icelandic, cast in alliterative verse, and infused with familiar references so that the context would be accessible to their countrymen. For example, one of Iceland's best-known poets, Pastor Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674), put the biblical First Book of Samuel and the Protestant catechism into verse. He also composed rímur based on One Thousand and One Nights, which had made its way to Scandinavia from the Middle East via Italy, and Kaiser Oktavianus, a German

chapbook that was introduced to Iceland via Denmark. Once these stories had been tailored to local audiences, they became common knowledge. As part of the Icelandic canon, these verses have withstood the test of time; some of Pétursson's stanzas are still performed in Icelandic elementary schools today.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Margrét Eggertsdóttir, "Skáldið: Um Hallgrím Pétursson og Passiusálmæna," *Passiusálmænar Hallgríms Péturssonar*, 1998. <http://servefir.ruv.is/passiusalmar/>.

Kjartansson, like the oral poets of yore, quotes other artists and repeats familiar tropes whose authors have long since been forgotten. He chooses stories from both Icelandic and foreign sources and retells them; in Sorrow Conquers Happiness, he introduces Jónsson's melodic progression and reminds his audience of Rat Pack performances. By tailoring each of his own performances to its locale—for example, translating Sorrow Conquers Happiness into Russian for his visit to St. Petersburg—he makes sure that he is using his audience's vernacular. Through repetition, he familiarizes his listeners with his performances' content. In doing so, he not only adapts his peers' and predecessors' aesthetic for the benefit of his own song and audience, but he also places himself within a rich cultural lineage while simultaneously converting international pop culture into something canonical.

By re-presenting elements of globalized culture in a way that both engages and gratifies the requirements of contemporary international audiences, Kjartansson fosters a communal and empathetic environment. Bryce Dessner was astonished by the commitment viewers showed to The National's performance of "Sorrow," reporting, "[T]here were at least three hundred, four hundred people who were there for most of the six hours, often singing every note. By the end, Matt [Berninger, the lead singer] lost his voice and fumbled a verse, and the audience felt it and rose up around him and sang the whole song really loud."<sup>17</sup> Although the divide between the performers and audience members remains intact, listeners become vital contributors to Kjartansson's project; they feel such an involvement in the performance that they adapt to maintain it when its continuation is threatened. As Caroline Corbetta puts it, "[E]ach iteration [of a phrase in Kjartansson's work] takes on a different shading, gradually generating an emotional surge inside the performer which then expands out to the audience."<sup>18</sup> While this effect is somewhat lessened in Kjartansson's installation works, where live performance is not included, specially designated spaces, such as the gallery covered in pink curtains in God, create at least an illusion of intimacy between Kjartansson and his audience. Through these emotional connections, Kjartansson transfers his devotion to the cultural elements he is perpetuating—from the Rat Pack to rímur—into interested audience members.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel. "The Song Remains the Same," 137.

<sup>18</sup> Kjartansson et al., *The End-Ragnar Kjartansson*, 34.

Whether its essence is premodern, postmodern, or both, Kjartansson's work is notable for the way in which it engages an international audience. By appropriating other people's work and deemphasizing private ingenuity, Kjartansson's art moves beyond national and across historical boundaries, interweaving diverse elements and achieving a carefully crafted hybridity. It respectfully preserves and adapts pop-cultural gems for modern audiences while gently winning their emotional investment. When critics relegate Kjartansson's work to the category of international postmodernism, however, they overlook its simultaneous transcendence and celebration of the "affective ties of nation, language, place and heritage." It is only when we acknowledge Kjartansson's Icelandic roots that we can fully appreciate his work as a poignant attempt to create an international and indeed postnational community—a series of connections that both acknowledge and penetrate national borders.