



► BEFITTING, BEFOGGING, BEGUILING AND BETHINKING

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I will start with a bold statement. Art is not a reflection of nor, a catalyst for, the needs and desires of human kind. Nor is it some kind of a fixed reality. Art, in a similar way as the mass media, dictates to us what reality is, what our needs are and what it is we desire.

What makes art desirable is its inherent possibility of participating in society. Art does this by creating a disturbance that subverts the powers that normalize both mind and matter. Thus, I look at my work as being part of defining the present or at least influencing the direction the discourses of the present can possibly take.

Back to the Province. I believe I was asked to take part in this conference to talk about my art and curatorial projects and some ideas I have about the state of mind of the people that together form the Icelandic society. These are ideas that are very much reflected in my works and that have a lot to do with the term 'provincial'. Rather than referencing scholarly texts to strengthen my discourse I'm going to talk from my gut in a similar way that I do my art.

As a general outline I will first talk about my most recent work, the sculpture Don't stop me now. I'm having such a good time. It is a playful and analytical work about the new Icelandic hero of the post-colonial and newly pros-

perous (nouveau-riche) Icelandic society. Second, I will talk about the work I have travelled with for exhibitions in Berlin, Copenhagen, Reykjavik and later this year to Barcelona. It's title is Don't feed them after midnight - The Cult of the cute gremlin puffin. It too is a playful but analytical work that deals with the image of the young Icelandic artist that has been created by the foreign music press. And lastly I will talk about the curatorial project DIONYSIA, which has been in the making for more than a year now with what can be called mini-residency programs that will take place in eight different provincial towns in Iceland from the 9th to the 19th of June.

Don't stop me now. I'm having such a good time.
I will start by reading the artist's statement that is full of unsupported opinions:

Artist's statement:

The new hero of Icelandic society is the moneymen, the stock venturer, and the bank manager. He shines in a glorious and luminous yet uncivilized light like the one that shone on the fisherman of the past as he sailed on his dangerous journey on the Atlantic Ocean and catches fish on what was then an unlimited horizon. Or similarly, the cowboy of the Wild West in America that rode as fast as the wind and as free as the bird on the plains of the new land as he conquered new provinces.

The mass media is the biggest participant in the creation of the New Hero, with its pages filled with stories of parties, of special deals he receive when his employment contract ends, and news of staggering profits. This is a boy's game, and consequently, a search for the essence of manhood. The Moneyman is expanding his affairs abroad, he is conquering the world, and he throws his friends and beneficiaries grand parties in the spirit of the gods of Valhalla. He is the Man.

The other side of the newly rich Iceland is a discontinued sense of security. Each and everyone thinks solely about themselves and those closest to them and do want that jeep like the advertisements always say. This is a condition that leaves behind a trail of dirty garbage, inner and outer. That which is alluring, the diamonds and the shining cars, are really the sharp oblivion of greed.

The art object in this work is the Moneyman depicted as a young Lucky Luke without saddle, riding his 3 meters tall metal horse that rises on its hind legs up in the air, with the cheerful cowboyish businessman flying in the air. They are at high speed conquering new provinces like the fishermen before, as the horse's mane flies in all directions along with the horseman's arms, and the horse wades in sparkling broken glass that resembles glamorous diamonds. The whole scenery looks extraordinary playful and set in motion with the object itself looking like a kind of old-fashioned monument, only not cast in bronze but instead made of used car tinplates; a material found in abundance in this country.

The material and the formal aspect used here is loaded with symbolism from my personal language: The way the broken security glass is spotlighted to reflect back like diamonds; the use of random colour combination of the tinplates from used cars, the overwhelming size of the horse in comparison to the cowboy riding it and the space in which it is exhibited; the visible use of paper-maché in the cowboy hat; the use of shiny varnish on the face and hands; the clothing combination of suits, cowboy/gangster clothing and cowboy boots; the visibility of the structure and the oil and tar grease on the

other side of the shiny but scratched surfaces of the tin; the caricature-cartoon feeling of the overall sculpture; the two-dimensional title reference; the surface use of humour and play, to name a few elaborately thought-through elements. All of which refers the state of mind in Icelandic society today.

What does this have to do with the term 'provincialism'? When I was studying at the University of Iceland, in the late nineties, I took a lot of theoretical and empirical classes on neo-colonialism and colonial history within the anthropological department. But what struck me most was a course I took in African colonial and post-colonial literature. In those books the authors cleverly described the behaviour of the newly rich, newly empowered political and economical elite of these African countries in their post-colonial state of affairs. What was so interesting about it was how much it reminded me of the situation in Iceland. A very unpopular opinion around here.

But the resemblance has never been stronger than now. As many of you know, the term of 'province' was created in a colonial situation to describe areas conquered by the more powerful centre. The term was thus created as a power tool to maintain power relations between centre and its peripheries of power, undermining the rest of the world, the Other. The post-colonial situation enacts a very reactionary atmosphere to the stigma of being labelled a 'province'. A post-colonial situation is in my mind characterised by an overemphasis on belonging to the contemporary centre through gaining of possession of all the symbols that define that very same centre.

In a post-colonial situation the need to prove oneself as being contemporary is very important. In my work, Don't stop me now. I'm having such a good time, I'm not criticising but analysing a situation that should be discussed from many different points of view. I'm directly including the financial sector in the work by paying for the cost of its production with a grant from Glitnir, which is one of the main international investments banks in

the country. I don't see it as a black and white Cold War situation that many always seem to want to lead any kind of discussion towards. The important function of art here being the ability to criticize, to analyze and to define the moment. I think it is time to acknowledge the fact that we are still constantly reacting to the stigma of the 'province' label every step of the way.

And on that note of being reactionary I go to the second topic on my list.

Don't feed them after midnight - The Cult of the cute gremlin puffin

I start again by reading the artist's statement, also full of unsupported opinions:

Artist's statement:

The figure of the Icelandic artist has over the past few years achieved an original status through an identification process that has been granted by the international music press. This has involved the creation of a mythology that revolves around an identity of cuteness that affects the psyche of the individual artist to the extent that he has come to look upon the myth as being his own creation

At this point one can talk about the mystifying cult of the cute, weird, elf-like and nature-oriented phenomena of the Icelandic artist. The reality of this cute (krutt) image comes with a proviso, especially within Reykjavik's promiscuous bar scene: Like Gremlins, the cute often becomes monstrous after midnight. This Gremlin is both exotic and erotically charged, and it's not afraid to play with these elements. Icelandic art Gremlins, in particular, are a real curiosity.

Here it is interesting to note how the image of the puffin – a bird native to Iceland – has been changed to cater to the tourist industry. The more recent images being a direct visual reference to Minnie Mouse. The puffin as a special brand, as opposed to the bloodthirsty carnivore, has become the icon of cuteness with big, round, endearing eyes and a soft cuddly body. A parallel can

under these circumstances be drawn between the mechanism of cuteness and that of horniness. The postures and intonations of the classical porn scene utilizes the same mechanisms as does an extremely cute puffin in that it invokes an involuntary response of a sympathetic nature. The puffin, like Minnie Mouse before her, has become a curious hybrid of desire production.

Gizmo turning into a Gremlin, as the reverse process of the puffin turning into Minnie Mouse, and the artist changed by the Cult of the Cute, are all examples of opportunities of ironic intervention – a tool that our generation has to fight the melancholic boredom that accompanies the seemingly latté-ridden meaninglessness of modern life. It is a game of re-appropriation, of taking control over the creation of meaning of the symbols that represent one's own identity.

The art object in this work is an installation with a soft puppet sculpture; a video which is somewhere between being a documentation of a street performance and being an independent expressionistic video work in itself; a heavily photoshopped photograph; a dirty cancan dress on the floor and hand-painted or printed puffin hoods.

The central piece, the sculpture, is at the same time some kind of a hybrid between being a puffin and a woman, and a performance outfit and a sculpture. Worn as a costume during the street performance, it gets transformed into a string puppet in the exhibition space.

The performance took place in one of the main gallery streets in the art metropolis of Berlin with the cute hybrid puffinwoman roaming confusingly around the street in front of the Kunst-werke with a sign that said on one side: 'I'm a very special artist from Iceland', but on the flip side saying 'Do you want to fuck?' A very disturbing message from such a Disney-like character evoking all kinds of responses from the art-world pedestrians on the street that range from 'See you later sweetie,' or 'Do you remember me?' to people dancing the puffin dance.

The documentation of the puffin strolling through the

street, along with footage of people's responses from the puffin's point of view, was mixed in the video, with confusingly shot street scenery, also seen from the eyes of the puffin. The soundtrack is a mix of the famous Sigurrós song Saeljon and a song by Thor that bears a striking resemblance to the cute like music of Mum with all its bells and analog sound clips.

The photograph being an image of the puffin as a woman in the colourful Minnie mouse style red dress, mirrored at the middle with vagina symbols all over it, is another disturbing mix of cute and erotic. In the photo, the puffinwoman is an empowered erotic goddess looking at you from above, contradicting the self-humiliated puffin of the video.

Finally, belonging to the piece are puffin hoods that are thought of as an extension of the performance part of the installation. During the opening in Berlin, six individuals walked around in the hoods and interacted with the guests. Today the hoods are sold in concept design shops in Berlin, Reykjavik and Barcelona. Those who buy them will become a part of the Cult of the cute gremlin puffin, unknowingly performing as they walk around on the street.

And what has this to do with the term 'provincialism'? The idea for the work arose from a little less than two decades of experience of living extensively abroad and experiencing the images of the Icelander being bombarded on my own senses. Living in the States when the Sugarcubes became famous in the early nineties, I had my first experience of being an exotic object. There, at that time, I was some kind of weird ice-princess living in an igloo back home, and was of course very special. Then this image developed through massive marketing within the international music press to the point where the first question I normally received from prominent people within the art scene, while living in Berlin last year, having become; 'Do you believe in elves?' Of course I could have stuck to the image and sold myself as an artist of special interest to these people by replying 'Yes'. But I didn't. It is my belief that this exoticisa-

tion that has brought so much interest and opportunities for the Icelandic artist is also our Achilles heal. If we continue to verify the image it will sooner than later turn on us. What we are doing is getting caught in the old fashioned dichotomy of the urban versus the province, physically and exotically remote, outdated and only a matter of curiosity instead of being a valuable member of the intellectual discourse taking place. As soon as the hype of the Scandinavian exotic Other loses its interest in the eye of the art power elite, constantly in search of the New Hot, we will be left behind with no real substance.

This is the same as happened to the image of the puffin. What is this Disney figure we see everywhere? It has little to do with the original living animal. A complex being of many nexuses. Identity is not fixed. It is dynamic and changes with every new experience and context. It's a fictional and personal creation. We don't want to become a product that meets the demand for an exotic Other. In this work art becomes a game of taking the symbols that define you into your own hands in order to regain power over them by creating your own mythology. This is a mythology that helps us to deal with the future with all its open possibilities. We are in control of our own destiny.

Dionysia

Lingering on the dramatizing concept of destiny, I will turn to my last topic. The curatorial project DIONYSIA. I start with the 5-Ws. What?

DIONYSIA is all about breaking boundaries, inner and outer, which are created by the categorization fixation and the hierarchical thinking that evolves from it. More than 40 artists are going in small groups to eight different villages around Iceland. The idea is that the artists work



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(Left) Don't feed them after midnight.
 The Cult of the Cute Gremlin Puffin. Digital
 print 120x60 cm, from a mixed media
 installation by the same name.

(Right) Don't feed them after midnight.
 The Cult of the Cute Gremlin Puffin.
 Silkscreen printed hoodies, limited edition,
 from a mixed media installation by the
 same name.



together and with the local creative talents. The project is heavily sponsored by these townships that are giving the artists a place to sleep, work and perform or exhibit. The municipalities are also serving as a key to the community by offering to connect people together. Another main sponsor is Orkan gasoline, which is paying for gasoline for everybody to get to the places. Enough sponsor talk!

Where?

DIO chooses places that are really obscure and out of the main ring road number one, which goes all around the country, dividing the coastline from the uninhabitable highland. This is the road that most travellers in Iceland limit their experience to. DIO choose places like Djúpavík á Ströndum, Bolungarvík, Hafnir, Grundarfjörður, Borgarfjörður Eystri, Stöðvarfjörður, Hofsós and Siglufjörður, which all have in common that you will have to drive for hours off the main road just to reach your destination. In the eyes of the Reykjavík art crowd, these are the real provinces of the country.

Who?

DIO puts great emphasize on that the purpose of this residency programme is to get artists of different creative backgrounds to work together. Therefore we have chosen people with backgrounds in music, writing, theory, documentary, visual arts, theatre and happenings and design, to participate. This is an international crowd of young artists under 40 years of age and is a nice mix of individuals in their mid-careers, just starting or still a student.

DIO also sees the creative talents in the townships as important participants and has great expectations towards their contribution. Contrary to the aluminium-focused government we believe the country to be full of those talents and that they have the creativity that has the potential of blossoming. We want to connect these people.

When?

The project has been in preparation for more than a year now. It has grown from being a small idea to becoming a gigantic organizational task. Since January a committee of ten artists from different backgrounds have been working together intensively to make it happen. These days DÍÓ is running the final few meters with 13 cars leaving Reykjavík on the 9th of June heading in all different directions. The residency is planned to last ten days characterized by intense work and networking.

The kick-start will be a welcoming meeting hosted by the townships on the day of arrival where locals and outsiders are brought together. Before leaving town, art exhibitions will be opened and left to stand for the rest of the summer. That does not mean that DIONYSIA has reached its end. Several ideas for future events are boiling in the pots. For example publishing an art book and using texts and other visual material created during these ten days as building blocks and having some kind of harvest festival in Reykjavík next year where it all comes together. And of course what is most important is the contacts that have been made and can last well into the future.

Why?

Why are we putting all this effort into this? Now I'm going to be on a very personal note again. Hope it will not become boring for you. This may sound over-dramatic but when I got the idea for the project one and a half year ago I felt like I wanted to give something back to the universe. I had been planning to exhibit and meet people in many different art centres of the USA and Europe and had the feeling that the number of opportunities for young Icelandic artists were growing very rapidly. Since then my network and curriculum vitae has grown even stronger. All this was exciting to me but I felt the whirlwind close to the centre of the art world was not really satisfying in the end. Sure I met many interesting people, famous people, super intelligent and talented people, and had many interesting discussions and adventures that I love but I wanted something with more substance. I found it strange that it was cheaper

and easier for me to Paris, Copenhagen and inside my own country could also feel a real around me to move than in Reykjavík.

During the course of project I have talked out many different not. A good example we were really interested students as we took care of your were really interesting between students, surprisingly, in the end are Icelandic art students within surprising when a trip, Hringferdin, of the visual arts people from that then it was looked inexperienced art but today the story many in the eyes ing towards the takes place.

So in the end, participating are young of the international appreciate the Half of the party fits nicely to the networked and back home.

What has this Well the DIONYSIA provincial is re provincial, in the

and easier for me to go and stay in New York, London, Paris, Copenhagen and Berlin than to go to any place inside my own country, except maybe Seydisfjörður. I could also feel a real desire among the Icelandic artists around me to move or stay for a while somewhere else than in Reykjavík.

During the course of the planning of the DIONYSIA project I have talked to hundreds of people and found out many different things. Some were surprising, others not. A good example is the following: At the beginning we were really interested in mobilising the Icelandic art students as we thought about the project in terms of taking care of your own garden and at the same time we were really interested in crossing the invisible boundaries between student artists and graduated artists. Surprisingly, in the end only ten of over forty participants are Icelandic art students coming from the different departments within the Icelandic Academy of the Arts. It is surprising when compared to the Ring-road exhibition trip, Hringferdin, which was organised for the students of the visual arts department in the year 2000. Then 45 people from that department alone participated. Back then it was looked upon as a real opportunity for the inexperienced art student to exhibit in the countryside but today the story is different. The opportunities are so many in the eyes of the students. They are already looking towards the international scene where the selection takes place.

So in the end, the main bulk of Icelandic artists participating are young artists already with some experience of the international art scene and that have learned to appreciate the opportunities in their own back garden. Half of the participants are international which we think fits nicely to the project. We have gone to the centre, networked and now we are bringing those connections back home.

What has this to do with the term 'provincialism'? Well the DIONYSIA project shows very well that being provincial is relative. In the art centre, Reykjavík is provincial, in the eyes of the 101 crowd, the villages

are provincial, in the eyes of the foreigner, the whole of Iceland is avant-garde. I wrote this lecture in Borgarfjörður Eystri, a tiny village of 100 people. In the eyes of the people here I'm Skulína which is a female version of my employers name. Soon when DIONYSIA arrives my identity will probably change. I have the feeling that when the concept of provincialism is being visualized it is done in terms of geography with some fixed people within that category. Accordingly, particular people belong to particular provinces and are provincial per se, or urban if we look at it from the other perspective.

Well this is a feudal and outdated way of thinking. As outdated as classically defined left and right winged politics. Or a Cold War dichotomy. Personally, I look at myself as living at the same time in Reykjavík, Berlin and Borgarfjörður Eystri as I have an active social role and identity in each of these places. Who am I? Metropolitan, urban, provincial or some kind of floating entity? The same person can be a nexus of many different identities. In the same way as I'm seen as a student or a teacher or a filmmaker or a visual artist or an anthropologist or a designer or a patient or a party-girl or a daughter or a trouble maker or a loser or an overachiever or a journalist or a lecturer, or a Berliner, depending on who is looking at me, the same person can be provincial and urban and whatever she likes at the same time. The same person can be an actor in Berlin, visual artist in Reykjavík, a guesthouse manager in Borgarfjörður Eystri and a filmmaker at some international conference.

It is all a construction of the mind that has been heavily influenced by outdated categories and hierarchies. This mindset needs to be broken down in order to be creatively free. And because the rest of the world mostly thinks in hierarchies as an Icelander I will always be provincial when leaving Iceland to go to the metropolis. But let's not forget that a truly creative metropolis is built up of people from everywhere, from all the provinces. That is why it is metropolis; it is the biggest Province. Having lost the feudal thinking about myself and the Other, I'm ready to befit, befog, beguile and bethink.