

REYKJAVIK REPORT

UNDER THE VOLCANO

Despite ash clouds and the aftermath of Iceland's financial collapse, the venerable Reykjavik Arts Festival soldiered on through its 40th-anniversary edition.

BY LILLY WEI

IT WAS MID-MAY in Reykjavik, the sky an untroubled blue, the temperature surprisingly mild, the land greening, when I arrived to attend the Reykjavik Arts Festival. About 100 miles from the capital, Eyjafjallajökull continued to catapult volcanic ash upward, wreaking havoc on international air travel, but here everything seemed as usual. It wasn't, of course—not since the nation's three major banks collapsed and nearly bankrupted the country in late 2008. But life goes on.

One symbol of the resolve to push forward is Harpa, the striking new concert hall and conference center rising on the water's edge like a glacial massif, albeit a brilliantly translucent one. It was designed by Henning Larsen Architects in collaboration with Danish-Icelandic superstar Ólafur Elíasson, who created its singular facade. Originally scheduled for completion in 2009, the official target date is now May 4, 2011. While other buildings have been abandoned half-built, this one is, as they say, too big to fail, and was taken over by the city and state when the Portus Group, the original developer, faltered. Municipal authorities are uncertain how quickly it will attract sufficient numbers of visitors to sustain it, but hope is what they usually express—that and a national stoicism, as if the unasked for wealth that frugal Iceland briefly possessed had been completely out of character, its loss thus nothing to be mourned. One of Iceland's own international art stars, Ragnar Kjartansson, even celebrates the downturn: "In fact, the collapse energized the local scene and became an opportunity to recalibrate the context. It was kind of irritating when we were so proud of our prosperity, when we were number one," he said, with a disarming, self-mocking smile.¹



Sigurður Guðmundsson:
Horizontal Thoughts, 1970-71,
silverpoint on paper, 13½
inches square. Courtesy i8
Gallery. All photos this article
in the Reykjavik Arts Festival.

That does not mean that Icelanders are not angry that a few bankers and politicians have created havoc for the many. One sign of discontent was the election last June of comedian Jón Gnarr as the new mayor of Reykjavik, underscoring the country's current contempt for professional politicians. Yet even public demonstrations seemed unlike protests elsewhere. The so-called Kitchen Revolution of January 2009, when Icelanders took to the streets of Reykjavik banging pots and pans to call for the end of the

country's conservative government, seemed merely a family squabble compared to the bitter dissent and deadly crackdowns elsewhere.

Official responses to questions about the crisis tend to be optimistic. Minister of Culture Katrín Jacobsdóttir, appointed in February 2009, acknowledged, "Yes, of course things are harder, so we have

to be careful of our resources. Eight percent was cut from the arts allocation and another 8 percent will be cut next year, but we want to stabilize the cuts at 15 to 20 percent, and then in three or four years, we hope to be able to restore them as the economy improves, not only in Iceland but in Europe in general. I would say that things are

writer Damien Rice as well as Steindór Andersen, known for his revival of the *rimur* tradition (Icelandic epic chanting) and for his collaboration with Sigur Rós, the wildly popular Icelandic post-rockers. There was also Villa Reykjavík, in which, under the twin leadership of Reykjavík galleries i8 and Kling & Bang, 14 trendsetting European galler-

were elsewhere, including the Akureyri Art Museum in the north and Skaftfell Center for Visual Art in Seydisfjörður to the east. The program leaned on Icelandic private and museum collections and featured much native talent, although Cindy Sherman and David Byrne both had work on exhibit and were in attendance.



going according to plan, actually slightly better than we expected."

Nonetheless, cultural events have been scaled back. The possibility of Iceland's hosting Manifesta 8 this year, which had been under serious consideration, was dropped when it became clear that funding would be problematic. There had also been art-world rumors that Iceland might not participate in the next Venice Biennale, though they were squelched by the recent announcement that the Spanish-Icelandic team of Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson have been selected for 2011.

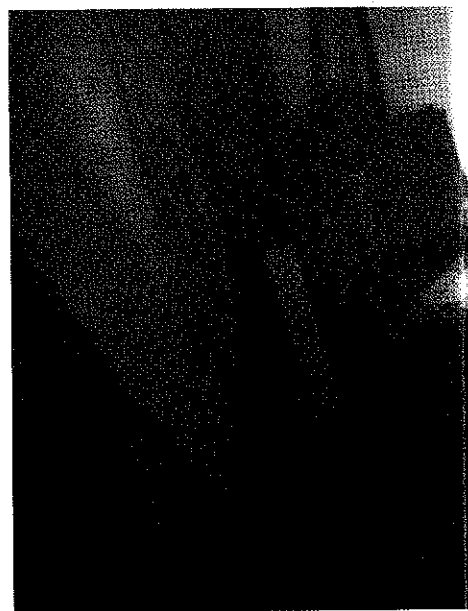
Despite belt-tightening, the summer saw numerous arts initiatives, including the annual Reykjavík Arts Festival (RAF), a star-studded event and one of northern Europe's most highly respected and longest-lived arts festivals, which celebrated its 40th anniversary May 12-June 5 (some exhibitions remained up through August). The pre-launch of Harpa took place June 29, followed by an outdoor concert on July 1 featuring some 17 groups of Icelandic and foreign musicians, including Irish singer/song-

ies (including Zero, Tulips and Roses, IBID Projects and Raster) took over unoccupied spaces in Reykjavík, of which there are many at the moment, in what they called a "meeting," or alternative art fair.

FOUNDED AS A PERFORMANCE festival, the RAF emphasized the visual arts in 2005 and 2008 [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '05]. Those years saw lavish catalogues, numerous commissions from prominent invited curators (Tate Modern's Jessica Morgan in 2005, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ólafur Elíasson in 2008) and extensive rosters of international artists who were flown in to create costly installations at sites across the island—much of this activity underwritten by the nation's banks. This year there was no catalogue, and the curators were Icelanders Æesa Sigurjónsdóttir and Birta Guðjónsdóttir, who each organized one large show; those remaining were organized by the participating venues. The collective focus was on photography, with 20 exhibitions, most of them sited in and around Reykjavík, although a number, if fewer than usual,

Above left, W.G. Collingwood: *Vatnsdalur, July 18th, 1897*, 1897, watercolor, 5¾ by 7¾ inches. Above right, Einar Falur Ingólfsson: *Vatnsdalur (03.08.2008)*, 2008, color photograph, 39¼ by 49¼ inches. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

Below, diptych from Maria Dembek and Robin McAulay's series "111," 2009, C-prints, 35½ by 70¾ inches (left), 8¼ by 11¾ inches (right). Courtesy Kling & Bang.





A laminated poster from David Byrne's "Moral Dilemmas," 1998-2010, 46½ by 33 inches.

"We don't have as much money," RAF director Hrefna Haraldsdóttir admitted, "so we couldn't invite as many artists from abroad. The overall title [of the photography component of the festival], 'Reality Check,' alludes to our situation, and several of our artists have made it their subject." One of these is Spessi (Sigurtór Halbjörnsson), whose photographic still lifes depict the dented pots and pans used in the Kitchen Revolution. The inclusion of Sherman, represented by her "Untitled Film Stills" series

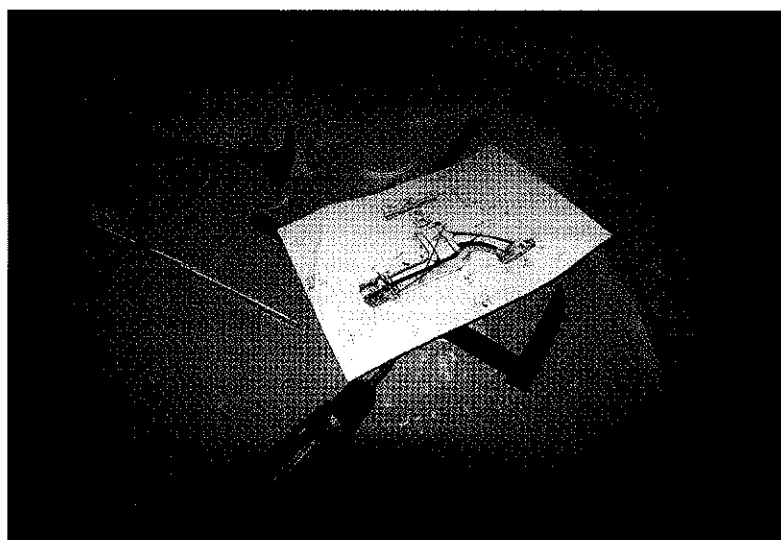
(1977-1980), shown in its entirety for the first time in Iceland, was not the budgetary responsibility of the festival but of the exhibitor, the National Gallery of Iceland.

The festival did, however, commission two series from Byrne. "Inside Out," five lushly colored, semitransparent trompe l'oeil scrimms printed with photos of sumptuous, old-fashioned theatrical curtains and a doorway, was installed in the large ground-level windows of the Hafnarhús, one of the three buildings that compose the Reykjavík Art Museum (RAM). "Moral Dilemmas," 20 eye-catching posters placed in

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information kiosks throughout the city, pose disconcerting multiple-choice questions that often refer to the present crisis, each accompanied by an image of a CCTV camera. One text reads: "Alien invaders threaten to turn everyone into mindless drones—but everyone will get rich. Do you A) Take the money and adapt, B) Fight to the death and stay poor, C) Fake adaptation." While Byrne's work is more impressive when it incorporates performance, the themes raised by his iconography of curtains, cameras and kiosks—concealment and display, seeing without being seen and the deceptiveness of appearances—touched on several hot-button issues in our security-obsessed age.

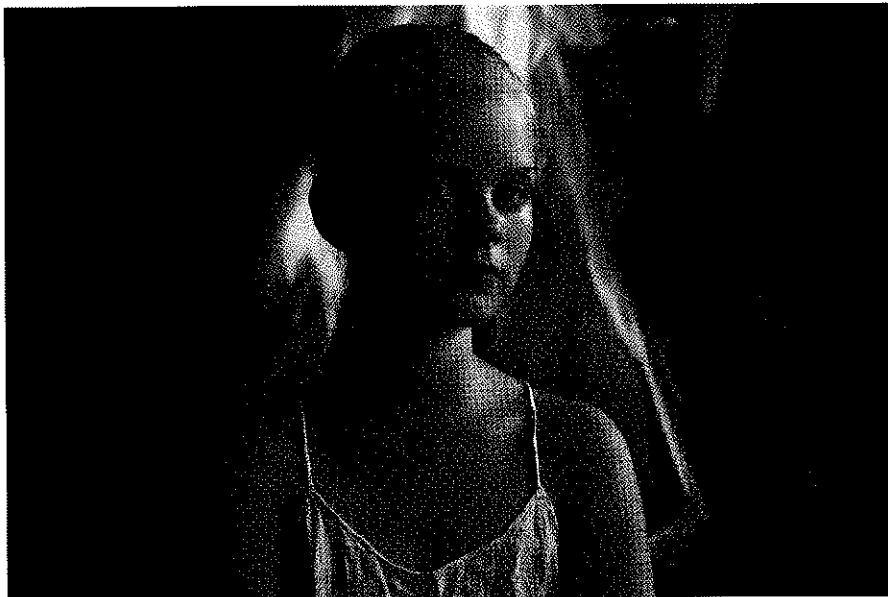
Another notable exhibition was RAM's presentation (at Hafnarhús) of New York-based Gary Schneider's 30 unnerving life-size, digitally printed color photographs of naked subjects (2002 to '04). Over a one-hour period that recalls the extended exposures of early photography, Schneider lights



his recumbent subjects inch by inch with a small flashlight in a blacked-out studio. The uneven lighting creates eerie results, like glowing faces and seemingly bruised skin. The vertical display of reclining figures is disorienting, for the women's breasts look unnaturally splayed, and the feet appear to be in *en pointe* position though no weight is actually supported. The end result is the very opposite of commercial, airbrushed perfection: the human body in all its strangeness, beauty and vulnerability.

document his travels through open country (*Touching Rocks by Hand* and *Small Birds*, both 1994), and his compatriot Ian Hamilton Finlay by *Seasons* (1994), a black-and-white photo of a stream accompanied by a poem. Icelandic conceptual artist Hreinn Fridfinnsson's *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972) is a pair of black-and-white photographs of rocky outcroppings separated by a panel featuring text, drawn from the anonymous folk literature called the Sagas of Icelanders, that refers to spells cast

"ALTERNATIVE EYE" CONSTITUTED A COMPELLING INTERNATIONAL GROUP ESSAY ON THE WAYS THAT THE PERCEPTION OF NATURE IS COLORED BY TEMPERAMENT AND IDEOLOGY.



Katrín Elvarsdóttir: *Girl and Fire*, 2009, digital inkjet print, 40½ by 56½ inches. Courtesy Gallerí Agúst.

Birta Gudjónsdóttir, artist and director of the Living Art Museum, Reykjavík's first artist-run nonprofit institution, served as the curator of "Alternative Eye," a selection of photographs from the extensive holdings of husband-and-wife collectors Petúr Arason and Ragna Róbertsdóttir that was shown at RAM's Kjarvalsstaðir exhibition hall as part of the festival. Included was Roman Signer's *Circle* (1981), six photos of a ring of burn holes in the snow created by departing bottle rockets. There was an extensive selection of works by Roni Horn, many of them images of water, many produced in Iceland. Scottish artist Hamish Fulton was represented by two photographs that

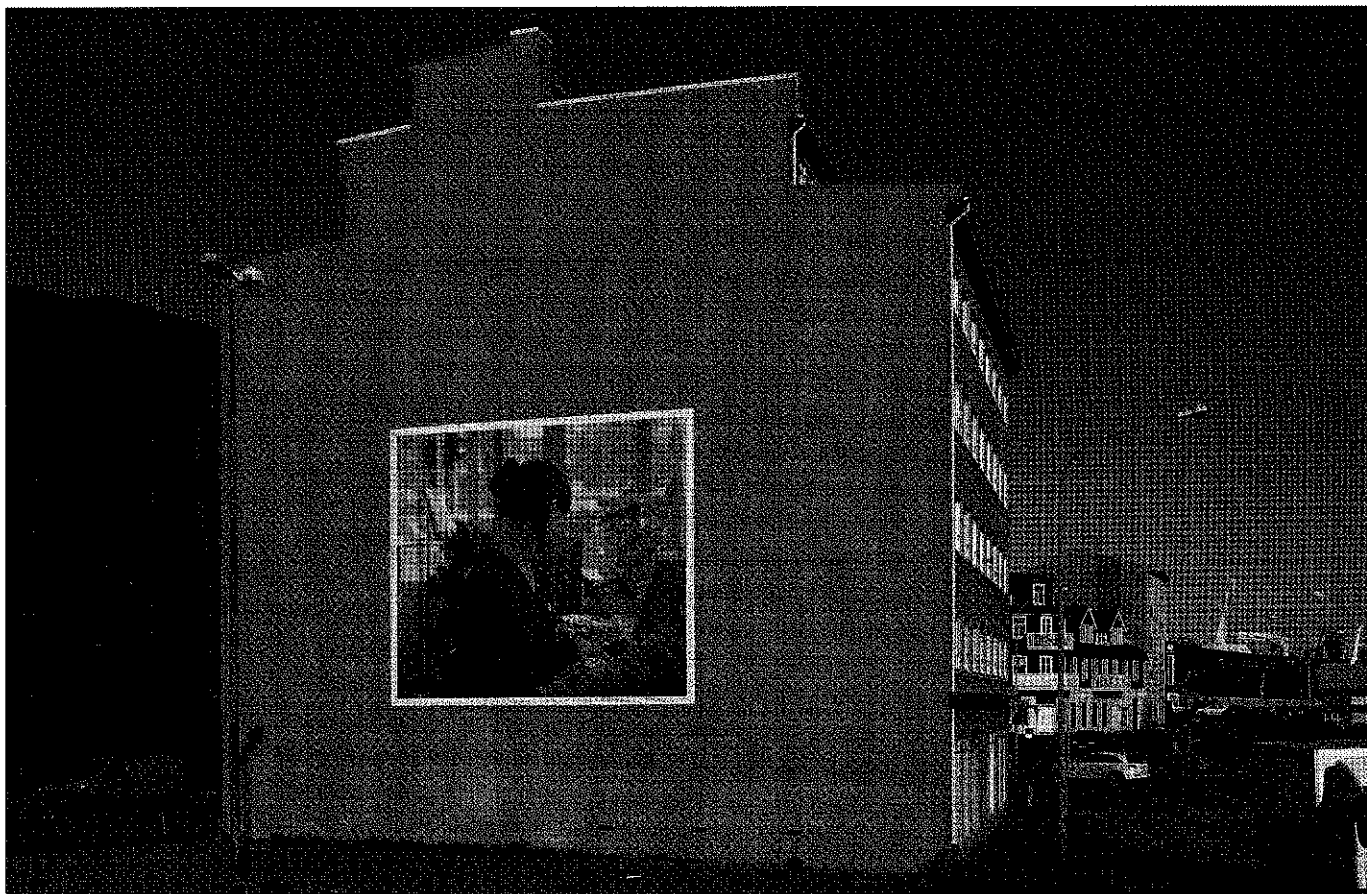
on the land. While the show was not confined to landscape photographs, these works constituted a compelling international group essay on the ways that the perception of nature is colored by temperament and ideology.

For an exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, Einar Falur Ingólfsson retraced the 10-week trek taken through Iceland by British antiquarian W.G. Collingwood in 1897. In search of Icelandic Saga sites, Collingwood recorded what he saw in watercolors, drawings and photographs, some of which were paired here with Ingólfsson's work. Ingólfsson's preternaturally sharp photographs, often shot from the same vantage points as Collingwood's, juxtapose natural splendor and human intrusions, such as the view of the rusting shell of a bus in a verdant field stretching toward a distant mountain: *vanitas*, Icelandic style.

THE CONTEMPORARY gallery scene in Iceland is not large but makes up for that by its liveliness. It tends toward artists' cooperatives and non-commercial ventures such as Kling & Bang, established by artists in 2003, whose international activities center on collaborative projects and exchange programs. Here Polish artist Maria Dembek and British artist Robin McAulay, both currently living in Berlin, showed "111" (2009), a series of photographic diptychs that document the edifice at Torstrasse 111 in the former East Berlin. The abandoned 40-room residential building, erected circa 1880, was reclaimed in 2000 to house an art collective, workspace and gallery. The pairs of images, each consisting of one photo taken with a medium-format pinhole camera and one 35mm snapshot, reveal how the resident artists constantly reconfigured the building during the course of 2009, dismantling barriers to create one large, open space. For a New Yorker like myself, the project's do-it-yourself spirit recalled the best of the SoHo and East Village art scenes.

Commercial venues with festival-related programming included i8 Gallery, which presented an array of engaging photographs from 1970 to 1982 by expatriate Icelandic artist Sigurdur Gudmundsson, who has lived in China for over 20 years. Depicting staged situations, and influenced by Conceptual and Fluxus art, Gudmundsson has created a body of work that poses existential questions with wry, off-beat humor, intelligence and poetry. The black-and-white photo *Horizontal Thoughts* (1970-71) shows two men contemplating the ocean, with hand-drawn thought bubbles over their heads, each partially filled with wavering lines like a child's sketch of water—the sublime delivered in cartoon form.

Iceland's most fully international gallery, i8 has an impressive stable of



Kristleifur Björnsson:
Every Second Day, 2009,
color photograph on vinyl,
23 by 19¾ feet. Photo
Guðmundur Ingólfsson.

artists that it promotes abroad. "We're not affected that much by the collapse since our clients are outside of Iceland," explained Borkur Arnarson, the director. The gallery has a few faithful Icelandic collectors, but mostly it sells across Europe and, increasingly, in the United States, relying on art fairs. "We don't promote Icelandic artists as such," said Arnarson, but we work with Icelandic artists—Katrín Sigurdardóttir, Ragnar Kjartansson, Finnbogi Pétursson, Elín Hansdóttir—as well as Lawrence Weiner, Ólafur Elíasson, Ernesto Neto, Roni Horn and many others."

Galerí Ágúst, another ambitious Reykjavík venue, showed a selection from photographer Katrín Elvarsdóttir's series of quietly intense portraits of women, their enigmatic expressions hinting at complex inner lives, in evocative interiors marked by a sense of disquiet. The photos' richness of color is countered by a stringency of expression and com-

position. The 2009 digital inkjet print *Girl and Fire* features a stunning elfin blonde who looks like she might be related to the young women depicted across the centuries by Petrus Christus, Vermeer, Gerhard Richter and Rineke Dijkstra.

Established in 2007 by Sigrun Sandra Olafsdóttir, Galerí Ágúst has contended with Iceland's economic failure for most of its short life. "I've had to adjust my plans, but I'm lucky in my artists," Olafsdóttir says. "I usually deal with young, mostly Icelandic artists, but I also represent one Japanese artist and one from Argentina, and the art, of course, is not affected."

A two-pronged affair, the group exhibition "Reality Check" was organized by independent curator Æesa Sigurjónsdóttir. One part was held in Reykjavík, the other distributed around the country in six functioning power stations—not uncommon venues for art exhibitions in Iceland. Installed in outdoor public spaces in the center of Reykjavík, small- to billboard-size

weatherproof photographic prints by a dozen Icelandic artists and photo-journalists addressed various social, economic, environmental and political issues, from the real estate crisis and the cessation of construction to the toppling of the conservative governing party, the national debt, consumerism, a ban on whaling and national identity. Silja Sallé's photographs, matter-of-fact but quietly poignant, seek the Iceland of her childhood in images of her family's farm, one example of the agrarian tradition that is fast disappearing from the countryside.

Sallé's backward-looking photographs convey one part of Iceland's dilemma: it is a nation torn between the need to be modern and global (though now acutely aware of the penalties of interconnectedness) and a desire to retain its customary

self-sufficient way of life. How then, will Iceland go forward, knowing that, in the 21st century, not even this island nation is truly an island? ○

¹ All quotes from conversations with the author, summer 2010.

The Reykjavík Arts Festival took place May 12-June 5.

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