

Performance

Once Upon a Time

05.07.13



View of Ragnar Kjartansson's installation at Hotel Holt.

“THE PROBLEM WITH SCIENCE is all facts are manipulated.”

The woman was talking to her friend in Kaffismiðja Íslands, a small, homespun café in Reykjavik. Good lattes and buttery croissants. The woman was Scottish, I think. Let’s just say definitely, and she was making a point about Margaret Thatcher—speaking ill of the dead, though respectfully, if one can be said to speak ill of the dead respectfully.

The problem with science is the pleasure with art.

This year’s Sequences VI, a “real-time art festival,” was ten days long, a day for every year that Gretar Reynisson, the festival’s honorary artist, spent making his durational collection “Decade.” I spent five of those days at the festival, wandering, mostly alone, through the quiet streets of a city with only about 120,000 inhabitants. Most places you look there is the chalky white of the mountains or the midnight blue of the ocean—there aren’t so many trees, and the ones that do exist are surprisingly delicate, in that northern stunted way. (What do you do if you’re lost in the forest? asks the Icelandic joke. Stand up.)

Reynisson’s “Decade” began January 1, 2001, and ended December 31, 2010. During this time he worked toward no exhibitions, but rather collected the material and detritus of the everyday: pillows, drinking glasses, white dress shirts. “Some people call this an obsession, but

nevertheless...” the artist explains in a slender catalog. “I like creating rules.”

It’s a romantic idea, at once egomaniacal and Sisyphean: ten years to assemble something that most people will wander through in well under ten minutes. But then, Sequences VI is a romantic festival. “I was very much thirsty for a new approach, something non-academic,” said its curator, Markús Þór Andrésson. I think he was after something thoughtful and theatrical, a festival that wears its heart on its sleeve, only the sleeve is removable. “If we can all just accept this old-fashioned idea of theater, of doing something fake, then something true can happen as well.



View of Gretar Reynisson's “Decade.”

And let’s face it, Iceland is a romantic place, at least for a visitor. True, the locals are worn out with reading foreign press accounts of their remote island utopia. But what are writers without our lazy framing devices? The impulse behind this one is immensely understandable: When you’re on a chunk of volcanic rock in the middle of the Atlantic, slipping from gallery to geothermic hot spring to bar and back again, you’re maybe in the mood to be seduced.

Here’s one hopelessly romantic item: Hotel Holt, where most of the Sequences guests seemed to be staying, houses the largest privately owned art collection in Iceland. None of the usual horrific hotel wall decorations—the place is packed with quality works, and in fact it’s the closest thing the city has to a permanent public display, since the museum doesn’t have one.

“Growing up in Iceland, you never see the art object, you never see art history,” said Ragnar Kjartansson, who these days is working pretty much everywhere. “It’s very hard, if you grow up in this environment, to

understand art as an object. It's also quite good; there's no burden of history."

But of course there's always history. Kjartansson's contribution to Sequences is a set of small self-portraits, the lone figure rather ghostly amid the Easter Egg colors of the room—a room in Hotel Holt, where Kjartansson checked in, ordered room service, and settled in to paint. "Holt was the temple, the only place to see real art," he said. "So this was a total homage."

For the duration of the festival, at least, Kjartansson is in the temple, his paintings tucked amid the modernist abstractions and rugged seascapes that contemporary artists are now saddled with. "You can't show beautiful landscapes and be serious about it, not here," said Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, whose quiet installation at the Reykjavik Sculpture Association manipulates the facts of landscape by placing a little cutout man in the center of an image of a natural amphitheater—ground zero for the shifting tectonic plates of Europe and North America, and also where Iceland's parliament used to meet, back when they were Vikings. He's holding it all together; she's having her cake and eating it too. History.

Several other rooms at Hotel Holt had been taken over by Sequences, including Room 206, where Hans Rosenström's sound piece "Blindsight" was holed up, waiting to whisper, in Icelandic, to an audience of one. Who knows what the neighboring guests made of the traffic in and out at all hours. With any luck, Holt will get a reputation for being one of *those* hotels.



A work by Magnús Logi Kristinsson.

On Saturday night, Holt was overflowing, playing host to an evening of Sequences performance art. The thing with site-specific shows, you

have to be a nimble audience member or you're stuck staring at the backs of taller people's heads. I kept returning to a durational piece by Magnús Logi Kristinsson, which at first blush struck me as eye-rollingly tedious. Great. Another artist in a box; if I'd wanted this I'd have stayed home and gawked at Tilda.

Only you couldn't gawk here, you could only see Kristinsson's left leg and right arm, both extended from the white rectangular box. Someone untied his black dress shoe; someone retied it. People took photographs and giggled, etc. As the veins in his hand began to bulge, my jaded mood shifted. The things people do! I gave his anonymous arm a quick massage, feeling shy and bold at the same time.

This was shortly after, or maybe before, critic Oliver Basciano said to me: "You feel like a cynical bastard. But then that's our job." We both held drinks, as I remember. We both laughed. He was talking about his experience of watching Guido van der Werve's film *nummer veertien, home* at artist-run space Kling & Bang Gallery, which weaves together the everyday business of living with the idea of the epic quest: Van der Werve traveled, triathlon-style, from Frédéric Chopin's birthplace in Warsaw to his grave in Paris, his own personal campaign to keep going.

Basciano was talking, I think, about having to write what exists beyond the pleasing surface. Not to be romanced. I understand what he means, and also I'm not so sure. Is it possible to fail through resistance? "This whole horrible period of postmodernism has created this line," Andrésón had said earlier, with a weary laugh. "Everything must be taken with a distance, with skepticism. It's very difficult to unlearn this, when a whole generation of artists and audiences has been through this."

One of the sections in van der Werve's film is titled "Please Be Safe." On Monday, amid news of the bombings in Boston, I remembered that he had been planning to run the marathon. I was happy to hear that he made it through ok.

— Claudia La Rocco

Sequences VI ran April 5 to 14, 2013 in Reykjavik.