UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

PERIPHERAL WAY

A JOURNEY INTO ICELANDIC NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE STORYTELLER IN THE WORK OF ÓLÖF NORDAL AND STEINGRÍMUR EYFJÖRÐ

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MAEVE HANNA

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MÉMOIRE

PRÉSENTÉ

COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE

DE LA MAÎTRISE EN HISTOIRE DE L'ART

PAR

MAEVE HANNA

JANVIER 2013

This master's thesis is
dedicated to:
my mother, Barbara, and
the memory of my grandparents,
Barbara and John.

To the Colleary's:
From one isle to another,
I carry you with me.

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Most of all, my mother, Barbara Colleary, for your unwavering support, your critical editing, and above all your love and faith in me. I would not be where I am today without you.

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire explorera l'identité nationale islandaise à travers la notion du raconteur véhiculée par les œuvres de deux artistes contemporains islandais – Ólöf Nordal et Steingrímur Eyfjörð. Le but de ce mémoire est d'interroger ce qui peut constituer une identité nationale islandaise et comment les œuvres examinées ici interprètent et déstabilisent une compréhension normative d'identité dans la culture islandaise. Les principales assises théoriques seront la politique identitaire et la narrativité. À partir d'une investigation de la théorie de la pensée nomade proposée par Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari dans l'ouvrage *Mille Plateaux : La capitalisme et la schizophrénie* et par Rosi Braidotti dans son ouvrage *Nomadic Subjects : Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, une compréhension d'identité nationale islandaise comme nomadique sera élaborée. Des textes de Ernest Renan et de Timothy Brennan informeront également cette étude et la compréhension de « nation » et « nationalisme ». Une considération théorique du rôle du conteur sera entreprise dans le but de mieux comprendre l'héritage de narrativité et de l'identité nationale tel qu' élaboré par Roland Barthes, John Berger, Mieke Bal, Walter Benjamin et Homi K. Bhabha. Leurs propos informeront la lecture de l'identité nationale islandaise et l'influence de la narrativité sur les œuvres de Ólöf Nordal et Steingrímur Eyfjörð.

Mots clés :

Islande ; identité nationale ; la théorie de narrativité ; le conteur ; le mythe ; le nomadisme ; Ólöf Nordal ; Steingrímur Eyfjörð ; l'art contemporain islandais.

ABSTRACT

This master's thesis explores Icelandic national identity through the storyteller, in the work of Icelandic contemporary artists Ólöf Nordal and Steingrímur Eyfjörð. The aim of this master's thesis is to investigate what can be understood as Icelandic national identity and how the artistic works being examined interpret and further destabilize normative understandings of identity in Icelandic culture. The key theoretical areas of research in this master's thesis are identity politics and narrative theory. Through an investigation of nomadology, theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, an understanding of Icelandic national identity as nomadic will be elaborated. Texts by Ernest Renan and Timothy Brennan will also influence the understanding of "nation" and "nationalism." A theoretical investigation of the storyteller will be utilized in order to understand the role of narrative heritage in the works being examined. Critical texts on narrativity and national identity by Roland Barthes, John Berger, Mieke Bal, Walter Benjamin and Homi K. Bhabha will inform the reading of Icelandic national identity and the influence of narrative in the work of Ólöf Nordal and Steingrímur Eyfjörð.

Keywords

Iceland; national identity; narrative theory; storyteller; myth; nomadism; Ólöf Nordal; Steingrímur Eyfjörð; Icelandic contemporary art.

NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

The Icelandic alphabet consists of thirty-two letters, three letters of which do not appear in the modern English or French alphabets, along with seven accented vowels. It is common practice in translating Icelandic words, proper and place names to replace the uncommon letter with a letter found in modern English or French. [Đ, ð] is replaced by [D, d], [Þ, þ] by [P, p] and [Æ, æ] written as two separate letters [AE, ae]. The accented vowels [á, é, í, ó, ö, ú, ý] lose their accents.

In Iceland people are referred to by their first name as opposed to their last name. Icelandic names are patrilineal, thus a last name simply refers to whose son or daughter one is. For example, someone whose last name is Ævarsdóttir is the daughter of Ævar while another person whose last name is Jónsson is the son of Jón, and so on.

Throughout the body of my master's thesis and in the bibliography I intend to respect the Icelandic alphabet and use the correct spellings, including all uncommon and accented letters, for proper names and places. Furthermore, Icelandic writers and artists will be cited by their first names in both in-text and bibliographic citations.

In order to respect the particularities of the Icelandic language, the alphabetic order in the bibliography will be as follows:

A/Á a/á, B b, C c, D d, Đ ð, E/É e/é, F f, G g, H h, I/Í i/í, J j, K k, L l, M m, N n, O/Ó o/ó, P p, Q q, R r, S s, T t, U/Ú u/ú, V v, W w, X x, Y/Ý y/ý, Z z, Þ þ, Æ æ, Ö ö

GLOSSARY

Alþingi – the original Icelandic parliament located at Þingvellir, near Reykjavík.

Ástmögur þjóðarinnar – meaning darling of the nation, nickname for Jónas Hallgrímsson.

Barangull – Icelandic word meaning children's toy.

Brynhild - a valkyrie; has Sigurður killed and brought to Valhalla.

Ekki gleyma Benedikt Gröndal – Icelandic for Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal, the title of one of Steingrímur's works.

Fafnir – a dragon who guards treasure and was slain by Sigurður of the Volsungs.

Fingurskjá – The name of a piece in the series Gold meaning roughly fingers.

Fjölnir – meaning wise one or much knowing, one of the twelve names for Óðinn, is the name of the intellectual journal established by Jónas Hallgrímsson and his colleagues.

Fjölnirinn (also *Fjölnismenn)* – the members of the journal *Fjölnir*, mainly Jónas Hallgrímsson, Tómas Sæmundsson, Konráð Gíslason and Brynjólfur Pétursson.

Freyja – A goddess, one of the most important in Norse myth.

Geirfugl – Icelandic for Great Auk, and the title of one of Ólöf Nordal's works.

Gull – Icelandic for Gold and one of Ólöf's series.

Hafmeyjaskjá – The name of a piece in the series Gold roughly meaning mermaid.

Heim – Icelandic for home, *heim* is also used as a name for Iceland.

Hugin – One of Óðinn's ravens. Hugin means thought in Norse.

Húldufólk – Icelandic term for elves; literally translates as hidden people.

Húldukind – Icelandic term meaning hidden sheep.

Hvar er þín fornaldarfægð, frelsið og mannadáin bezt – The second line from Jónas Hallgrímsson's poem *Íslands*. The translation is: "Where are your fortune and fame, freedom and happiness now."

Íshoppa – Icelandic for ice cream shop.

Íslands – Icelandic for Iceland and the name of Jónas Hallgrímsson's famous poem from 1835.

Íslands, farsælda frón og hagsælda, hrímvíta móðir – the first line from Jónas Hallgrímsson's poem *Íslands*. The translation is: "Iceland, frost-silvered isle! Our beautiful bountiful mother.

Íslendiga sögur – Icelandic Family Sagas.

Íslenskt dýrasafn – Icelandic for Ólöf Nordal's series Icelandic Specimen Collection.

Kynjamyndir – Icelandic term that roughly translates as strange images.

Kölurinn – Icelandic for the keel.

Lóa – Icelandic for the bird species golden plover and a piece by Steingrímur.

Lóan er komin – Icelandic for The Golden Plover has Arrived; the headline that appears in the newspaper in the spring to announce the return of the Golden Plover and the title of Steingrímur Eyfjörð's suite of works at the 55th Venice Biennale.

Loki – A god in Norse myth but not well respected. He is the son of a giant and has three monstrous children. He is also the father of Óðinn's horse Sleipnir.

Miðgarðsomr –Midgard Serpent. One of Loki's monstrous children, the Midgard serpent was thrown in the ocean by Óðinn and grew so large it is said it encircles all lands. At Ragnarok, the end of the Gods, the Midgard Serpent is killed by Þór after spewing poison over the lands and sea and killing many.

Morgunblaðið – a daily newspaper in Iceland.

Munin – Also one of Ódinn's ravens. Munin means memory in Norse.

Norns – female seers in Norse myth, they decide how long one's life will be at birth.

Ódáðahraun – a place of assembly for hidden people similar to Þingvellir.

Óðinn – The oldest and highest of the Norse gods.

Poetic Edda - the collection of Norse skaldic poetry; one of the most intrinsic works of poetry in Nordic literary history.

Prose Edda – the companion text to the *Poetic Edda*, transcribed but not authored by Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century.

Sigurður – a Volsung and slayer of the dragon Fafnir.

Skaldic – the kind of poetry composed in ancient Scandinavia; the poems were characterized by how they honoured heroes in Nordic mythology.

Sleipnir – The horse of Óðinn. It is the child of Loki and Svadilfari. The horse has eight legs giving it great speed and strength. This is also the name of one of the lambs in Ólöf's series *Íslenskt dýrasafn (Icelandic Specimen Collection).*

Snorra-Edda – Icelandic term for the *Prose Edda.*

Stelpur – Icelandic, plural, meaning girls.

Sturlungaöld – the Age of Sturlungs, a time period in Icelandic history. It is named after the Sturluson family who were one of the five founding families of Iceland.

SÚM – thought to stand for *Samband úngra myndlistarmanna* or Association of Young Artists, *SÚM* was an artistic movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Valkyries – An Old Norse term, valkyries are supernatural female figures in Nordic myth who choose those who will be slain in battle and taken to live with Óðinn.

Vestmannæyjar – Icelandic for the Westman Islands, an archipelago of islands south of Reykjavík.

Þingvellir – the original location of the Alþingi, now a UNESCO national park.

Þjóðminjasafn Íslands – Icelandic for the National Museum of Iceland.

Þór – Þór is another Norse god, the son of Óðinn and among the most important and powerful. Þór owns a hammer which he uses to attempt to destroy the Midgard serpent.

Æsir – the Old Norse term for god.

MAP OF ICELAND

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1. Reykjavík
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PREFACE

It was the kind of weather where the air is very still, but there was also a heavy frost. Then Gisli said he wanted to leave the house and head south to his hideout under the ridge, to see if he could get some sleep there. All three of them went. The women were wearing tunics and they trailed along in the frozen dew. Gisli had a piece of wood, on which he scored runes, and as he did so the shavings fell to the ground. [1]

[1] n.a. "Gisli Surrsson's Saga." *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Eds. Örnólfur Þorsson and Bernard Scudder. Trans. Martin S. Regal. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. p. 532.

Jonás Hallgrímsson made a pilgrimage across his country by horse and on foot to write the first description of Iceland, but he was unable to finish. Novelist Halldór Laxness' timeless masterpieces sketch out the intricacies of Icelanders – their lives, their loves and their land. Writer Þórbergur Þórðarson likewise recorded the vastness and the character of the land.

Given the incredible power, openness and grandeur of the Icelandic landscape it seems apparent that it would be present in the collective consciousness of writers and artists and therefore, in the work they create. As one ventures forward at this juncture of questioning our comprehension of Icelandic art within a previously established vernacular, it is imperative to locate a different path, one that leads below the surface understanding of Icelandic art, one that leads away from the landscape. Reading the work of artists and writers alike from a different perspective can then offer a new opportunity: one where we step away from the established tradition.

It is undeniable that the landscape is present in the work of contemporary Icelandic artists. The circumstance of its mere presence becoming a central motif of the work is problematic and creates a misleading forum which only multiplies as more work is created and exhibited. In order to overcome this the work could be presented using a different visual parlance, thus providing the tools for a more enlightened understanding.

Historical and cultural lineage for this apparent traditional use of landscape can be traced back through the work of artists and writers alike. In fact, landscape paintings were the first works of art that inaugurated a visual arts tradition in Iceland. Artists and writers represent what they know and see. However, their work represents a profound perception of this vision, because they are touched by the aesthetic understanding of their art. Artists and writers use their art to translate their experience of the world. The landscape is often used as a means to communicate or

translate the inner life of a story, and contemporary Icelandic artists have been continuing this tradition.

A wise man, contemporary Icelandic artist Haraldur Jónsson, described Iceland to me one day in July 2011. We, the Icelandic Field School, were in Egilsstaðir outside Hallórmstaðir at an *íshoppa* in East Iceland. As we stood in line at 9:30 am before we headed off to Borgarsfjörður-Estrey, home town of the landscape painter Jóhannes S. Kjarval and also a puffin haven, Haraldur grabbed a napkin and drew an image on it (Figure 1), while the ice cream server and I observed. "Körlurinn" he said to me, "it means *the keel* in Icelandic. It is the spine of the island, all the energy comes from here." Little volcanoes were drawn around *körlurinn*. It did not fully make sense until after we had said goodbye in Reykjavík, until I was on a plane flying north to Akuryeri watching the land pass by below. During that plane ride I wrote:

> We know the country is young, and the nature is a phenomenon that brings people from all over the world here. But Iceland is not simply Eyjafallajökull, Mount Hekla, Geysir and Gullfoss. Iceland is like an upside down book, lying on the ocean surface, waiting to be read deeply from one end to the other. The spine of the book of Iceland is *körlurinn* – the keel, the backbone. It runs down the centre of the island lined with volcanoes, life bubbling up from below the crust of the earth's surface. The force of nature roots itself here, but we cannot simply walk along the covers of this book feeling the power of its spine like the veins of the rivers running through the highlands. Iceland is waiting for the citizens of the world to dive below the surface, below the nature, below the volcanoes, geysirs and waterfalls, below the surface of only seeing nature, to the history, the depths of history, the very deepest crevices. Just as this small plane rocks back and forth through the clouds when we emerge surrounded by moss covered mountains, green fields dotted with red roofed farm houses isolated out here, when we land on the land where do we go?
>
> Deeper.
> We must go deeper still.
>
> - Maeve Hanna. Grimsby, ON June 2012

INTRODUCTION

In Icelandic history the land and literature held prominent roles in the shaping of Icelanders' understanding of themselves and their society. Literary heritage is a long established tradition in Iceland originating from the time of settlement in the 9th century. For contemporary Icelandic artists Ólöf Nordal (1961) and Steingrímur Eyfjörð (1954), national identity holds a significant position in their work, acting as a leitmotif throughout their respective *oeuvres*. Their investigations are explored from a different standpoint than that which has been seen as the common *modus operandi*. Both artists challenge perceptions of national identity through aspects of cultural heritage. They lead the viewer away from the comfortable perspective of landscape and into their worlds surrounded by collections of strange animals, artefacts and the investigation of national heritage.

This master's thesis aims to open a dialogue onto the work of these two relatively unknown contemporary Icelandic artists through an exploration of their understanding of Icelandic national identity. The theoretical base for this investigation is founded in identity politics and narrative theory, in particular a theoretical look at the storyteller. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Rosi Braidotti's understanding of nomadism as a form of identity provides an opportunity to examine Icelandic national identity from a radical standpoint. Nomadism will equally offer an opportunity to lead the conventional understanding of national identity away from traditional boundaries. Nomadism as a form of identity exists on the margins of traditional hegemonic thought, and thus resists the established understandings of identity which circulate around the dominant white male perspective. Narrative is the means by which Ólöf and Steingrímur investigate national identity. Their examination pivots on the narrative history of Iceland through their adaptation of the role of contemporary storyteller. Texts examining narrativity and the storyteller by

Mieke Bal, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, John Berger and Homi K. Bhabha enrich the discussion. These texts provide an evaluation of the progression of the theory of narrativity, an understanding of the storyteller and how this can contribute to a contemporary nomadic understanding of national identity in Iceland.

The objective of this master's thesis is to open the conversation on Icelandic contemporary art by providing a new venue for discussion. This study will also allow for in-depth readings of works that have yet to be examined broadly beyond the boundaries of Iceland. Despite exhibiting their work widely across Europe and in North America, Ólöf and Steingrímur remain relatively unknown outside of Iceland. Both artists pursued post-graduate studies abroad and have been included in a number of large-scale exhibitions in Iceland. Steingrímur represented Iceland at the 55th Venice Biennale. Ólöf and Steingrímur both represent the community from which they originate; however, their understanding of their own identity and their analysis of this has a far-reaching impact that bridges both cultural divides as well as literal distance in time and space.

In the first chapter there will be a brief examination of Icelandic history in order to establish a context within which this study can develop. Iceland experienced a short-lived autonomous home rule after which its history unfolded under colonial rule well into the 20th century. Denmark controlled Iceland from 1380 to 1944 and maintained strict colonial power. The geographical specificities unique to Iceland gave rise to myriad natural disasters. Volcanic eruptions, plagues and famine coupled with the strict colonial rule caused a great deal of strife for Icelanders. They were poverty-stricken and filled with hopelessness for nearly 1000 years of their history.

Despite harsh living conditions, literature flourished in Iceland. Among the most important literary works to emerge were the medieval texts of the *Íslendiga sögur (Icelandic Family Sagas)*, *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda.* The strong position

literature held historically and continues to hold today demonstrates its intrinsic role in contributing to an understanding of Iceland as a nation. This examination focuses on two distinct epochs in the literary heritage of Iceland. The first is a perusal of the medieval texts – the *Sagas* and *Eddas* – outlining the history, importance and impact these works had on Icelandic society. The second focuses on the Romantic era literary work of natural scientist and poet Jónas Hallgrímsson. Jónas was part of a group of intellectuals known as *Fjölnir* who used writing, including poetry, as a platform for their vision and stance on the need for independence. These influential individuals played an intrinsic role in the reestablishment of home rule and eventual independence for Iceland.

There will be a review of Icelandic art history in the second chapter in order to demonstrate the evolution of the visual arts in Iceland. Key moments in the art history of Iceland will be examined including the flourishing of landscape painting, the emergence of SÚM[2] in the 1960s and 1970s and the movement towards conceptual art and lyricism. The pieces by Ólöf and Steingrímur outlined in this chapter will allow for a preliminary investigation of their work and the progression of association between their *oeuvres* and the central themes of this study. While interpreting their singular approaches to national identity, commonalities between their practices will emerge and begin to intersect with ideas of national identity and narrative heritage. The presence and appropriation of narrative characteristics including the characters and creatures that populate the *Sagas* and *Eddas* and a critical examination of landmarks of cultural and national heritage will be discussed in this chapter.

In chapter 3 there will be an investigation of the question of national identity using nomadism as an approach to identity politics developed notably by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their publication *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism*

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[2] SÚM was an artistic movement headed by a collective of artists that began in the 1960s. This important movement will be elaborated upon in Chapter 2, section 2.1.

and Schizophrenia. Their "Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine" reveals their vision of nomadism as a philosophical concept and how it can apply to a contemporary understanding of identity. Rosi Bradiotti has used the work of Deleuze and Guattari to further this theory within a feminist perspective, notably in her work *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Together these theorists offer a radical approach to identity which becomes an ideal position in which to examine Icelandic national identity.

Chapter 3 also includes an examination of an entirely different side of the theoretical basis of this study. Here, narrative theory, the progression from narratology – a semiotics based science – to the post-structuralist theory of narrativity will be reviewed to offer an understanding of what narrativity as a theory is and how it can be used to analyse works of art. Texts by cultural theorists Mieke Bal and Roland Barthes will help elaborate this investigation. Beyond this concept of narrativity, a discussion will commence around the theoretical approach to the storyteller as the prominent narrative presence in the works of Ólöf and Steingrímur. The theoretical understanding of the storyteller will be examined through readings by Walter Benjamin and John Berger. Through these readings, the storyteller emerges as not merely an element of a given narrative, but the very origin of the stories found in narratives. Ólöf and Steingrímur become contemporary storytellers, using the visual arts to tell their stories.

In chapter 3 I will further expand on the idea of narrative within the context of the nation and the idea of how a nation is written. This idea is analysed by Homi K. Bhabha in his influential text "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" from the book *Nation and Narration*. A nomadic tendency emerges almost instantly in Bhabha's text. Bhabha examines the idea of nation and narrative theory from a post-colonial perspective. In the context of this master's thesis, Bhabha's perspective acts to highlight Iceland's colonial history. His text

enunciates the perspective of marginality inherent in nomadic thought, which further destabilizes normative approaches to the analysis of contemporary culture.

In the fourth chapter I will tie together the material developed over the three previous chapters. This chapter will examine what can be thought of as a way of *seeing* Icelandic national identity, creating a path to follow in this discovery. In chapter 4 there will also be a re-examination of the role of the storyteller, as theorized by Walter Benjamin, and how this plays out in the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur. In addition, a more direct look at a concept of nationalism and nation will be examined, developed by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Renan and Timothy Brennan. Lastly this chapter will provide a forum for the notion of Icelandic identity as nomadic, elaborated upon and apparent in the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur. This will be explored through a deeper discussion of their work while also elucidating how their role as contemporary storyteller plays out in their work and comments on the nomadic notion of identity.

It was a deliberate choice to focus on the work of Ólöf Nordal and Steingrímur Eyfjörð. During the course of my degree, faithful and dedicated study of many different Icelandic artists led me to discover their work. A prominent part of this research took place in the summer of 2011 I spent in Iceland. Within the framework of the Icelandic Field School at the University of Manitoba, led by two professors of the department with eight participants including a filmmaker and a composer, I was able to see the world of Icelandic culture first hand through the only lens one can: the poetic. The journey led us to many corners of this small Island where we were allowed the freedom to fulfil the mission of the field school: explore and perceive. Through this radical pedagogical approach my study of Icelandic contemporary art flourished. The same approach will inevitably emerge in the following pages and, in fact, surfaces as its own methodology within this thesis. My experience in learning, studying, researching and living on the Island has allowed me to incorporate the everyday poetry I experienced there.

After the Field School ended I explored the Island on my own terms, which had been undoubtedly influenced by my experience with the Field School. I visited museums and art galleries in the capital city of Reykjavík and surrounding area. I returned to Akureyri in northern Iceland to help curate and install a retrospective exhibition of the work of Icelandic artist Gústav Geir Bollason entitled *Hýslar umbreytingarinnar* (no translation available) at the Akureyri Art Museum. I also assisted by editing the catalogue for this exhibition. Throughout my stay in Iceland, I met with a number of artists, curators, writers, art historians, and directors of the most influential arts organizations in the country. These discussions were an integral part of my educational process. The individuals I met greatly influenced my understanding of landscape in modern and contemporary Icelandic art. Through many discussions I was offered a great deal of knowledge and expertise I was struggling to find elsewhere, as the resources I had available to me were limited. In the spirit of educational models such as the Copenhagen Free University[3], I approached my research in a most uncommon way and embraced the approach of the people in the country who had welcomed me and were showing me an alternative perspective.

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[3] "The [Copenhagen] Free University is an artist run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language. We do not accept the so-called new knowledge economy as the framing understanding of knowledge. We work with forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arisen on a social excursion – collectively."
Copenhagen Free University. "Information." *Copenhagen Free University*. n.d. 3 November 2012. Web. [http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/infouk.html].

CHAPTER 1

ICELANDIC HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

1.1 Icelandic History and the Narrativity of the Nation.

Before the 9th century AD Iceland was uninhabited, a rocky isle shrouded in mystery. Records state that the first people to discover the island were Irish monks who travelled there by boat to find solace for meditation. They found the island by following the path of migratory birds in flight. However, their stay on the Northern Isle was short lived.

Between 870 and 930 AD, the Norwegians fleeing the tyranny of their King Harald Fair Hair found and settled the uninhabited isle. This historical period is known as Settlement and marked the birth of Iceland. Characterized by home rule and autonomy, this was the most peaceful period in Iceland's past. As families began to settle and establish themselves in different regions of the country, the stories, myths and legends of the *Poetic Edda* and *Íseldinga sögur (Icelandic Family Sagas)* began to emerge. This time period is known as the Saga Age. Robert Kellogg expands on the importance of the Saga Age in his introduction to the Penguin Classic edition of *The Sagas of Icelanders*:

> In Iceland, the age of the Vikings is also called the Saga Age. About forty interesting and original works of medieval Icelandic literature are fictionalized accounts of events that took place in Iceland during the time of the Vikings from shortly before settlement of Iceland about 870 to somewhat after the conversion to Christianity in the year 1000. … [The Sagas] concern

characters and events in Iceland, and to some extent the larger Norse world, from three hundred years earlier.[4]

Concurrent to the Saga Age when the oral tradition was at its richest, the National Assembly or the *Alþingi* at Þingvellir was established, and Iceland became a Commonwealth. The *Alþingi* was Iceland's original parliament and represented the political epicentre of what could be termed the spirit of the nation. Not long after in 1000 AD, Christianity was adopted across the North. The arrival of the Church in Iceland brought the positive influence of education, most importantly the written word. This allowed for the poems, myths, legends and sagas of Iceland to be recorded in a more permanent fashion, a process which began between 1220 and 1264.

The *Poetic Edda* chronicles in poetic form the famous scenes from Old Norse myth and legend. These foundational stories, which document the exploits of the Norse gods such as Óðinn, Þór, Freyja and others, appear in the *Poetic Edda* in their oldest and most original form. The poems collected in this text are the inspiration for many sagas, most notably *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Carolyn Larrington takes note of the scope and mastery of verse in this series of eddic poems, which is comparable to such masterpieces as the Finnish *Kalevala* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[5] She observes that the stories in the *Poetic Edda* recorded in the form of poetry from comedy, satire, didactic verse, tragedy, high drama, and lament "... are the interpretive key not only to modern depictions of northern myth and legend, ... but also to the complex and highly sophisticated court poetry of medieval

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[4] Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." in *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Eds. Örnólfur Þorsson and Bernard Scudder. Trans. Katarina C. Attwood, et al. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. p. xviii.

[5] Larrington, Carolyn. "Introduction." *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. x.

Scandinavia, ..."[6] The scope of the manuscript confirms the prominent role it holds in Icelandic narrative heritage.

The Saga Age is a time period in Iceland also known as *Sturlungaöld* or the Age of Sturlungs. Marked by impressive literary advancement, the Saga Age or the Age of Sturlungs coincided with the arrival of the church. The technology of writing came to Iceland with the Church around the year 1000 AD, and it was during this prolific time that the *Íslendiga Sögur* and the *Poetic Edda,* literary works previously preserved solely through oral tradition, were recorded in writing.

Sturlungaöld or the Age of Sturlungs is named for the Sturlusons who were one of the five founding families of Iceland. The Age of Sturlungs was a particularly brilliant but tormented period in Icelandic history. The Sturlusons were descendants of Sturla Þórðarson, a chieftain of the middle decades of the twelfth century. One of Sturla's grandsons, Snorri Sturluson (1179 - 1241), was the man believed to have recorded, but not authored, what is known as *Snorra-Edda* or in English the *Prose Edda*, a textbook-like companion to the collection of skaldic poetry *Poetic Edda*.[7]

At the time of this literary movement, Icelanders were experiencing unprecedented violence and abuse of power which threatened their cultural heritage, history and political well-being. The power struggle was led by the Sturlusons and it eventually resulted in the collapse of the Icelandic Commonwealth, and the consequent foreign rule, first by Norway, followed by Denmark.[8] Snorri himself was a victim of the violence, being murdered in his home on 22 September 1241. Snorri's death may be considered an important historical marker, denoting a threatening and tumultuous moment in the narrative history of Iceland.

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[6] Kellogg, Robert. *op. cit.,* p. x.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. xlvii.

Íslendinga sögur or the Icelandic Family Sagas represent one of the strongest elements of Iceland's narrative past. Shared through oral tradition the *Sagas* combined both historical events and Nordic mythology. As Robert Kellogg notes: "The historical precision of the *Íslendinga sögur* is matched by the detail and accuracy of their geographical reference. The sagas tell of people and events that are primarily located in a specified district of Iceland."[9] These geographical references are so precise that contemporary Icelanders and tourists alike can return to the locations of occurrences depicted in the sagas and walk in the footsteps of their heroes[10].

Characteristic of the saga structure are the simple narratives that often open with an account of how Iceland came to be, creating a foundation for understanding Iceland's history: "Most of Iceland was settled in the days of Harald Fair-Hair. People would not endure his oppression and tyranny, ... Bjorn Gold-Bearer was one of these. He travelled from Orkadal to Iceland and settled South Reykjadal, ..."[11] reads the opening paragraph of *The Saga of Hord and the People of Holm.* Most of the Saga narratives pivot on the central landmark of the *Alþingi* at Þingvellir. *Njál's Saga*, one of the most beloved of the sagas, shifts focus frequently from the main setting in the West Fjords and Breiðafjorður to the *Alþingi,* and much of the action of the story unfolds there. When reading the sagas, the basic existential nature of the narratives emerges. Speaking to the ordinary lives of the original citizens of Iceland, these stories truly speak of the history of Iceland and Icelanders. The *Alþingi*'s

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[9] *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

[10] For example, "Gisli Surrsson's Saga," which took place between 940 and 980 AD and was recorded between 1270 and 1320 AD takes place in the West Fjords near the waterfall of Dynjandifoss, in the town now known as Hrafnseyri. It is possible to walk in Gísli's footsteps while reading the story, by retracing the locations of where the events took place. There have also been artefacts found that have origins in this particular saga. n.a. "Gisli Surrsson's Saga." *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Eds. Örnólfur Þorsson and Bernard Scudder. Trans. Martin S. Regal. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. p. 496

[11] *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.

central position in these stories is testament to the important place it has held in Icelandic society since settlement.

Many of the *Sagas* open with an account that centres on King Harald. He held an important role in the *Sagas* and in Nordic history despite his tyrannical rule over the Nordic regions. *The Saga of the People of Floi* opens with a genealogy of Harald's family which reveals a history that reaches back hundreds of years. "... his great-great-grandparents were Brynhildur and Sigurður the Volsungs, who slew the dragon Fafnir. They are central characters in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. ... Five generations back from Sigurður, according to the Saga, was Óðinn...,"[12] the All-Father and most important god in the Norse religion. The *Sagas of Icelanders* also exhibit, as Kellogg notes: "An element of movement – travel, discovery and exploration..."[13] Representing hundreds of years of Norse history, the *Sagas* are at their foundation nomadic, with the spirit of movement embedded as a subconscious undercurrent. These aspects, as well as the presence and belief in mythical or non-human activities, contributed then and continue to contribute now to the ever-evolving national consciousness of Icelanders.

1.2 Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Fjölnir* and the Romantic History of the Nation.

> Iceland, frost-silvered isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!
> Where are your fortune and fame, freedom and happiness now?
> All things on earth are transient: the days of your greatness and glory
> flicker like flames in the night, far in the depths of the past.
> Comely and fair was our country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
> azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
> Here came our famous forebears – those freedom-worshipping heroes –
> out of the East in their ships, eager to settle the land.
> Raising their families on farms in the flowering laps of the valleys,

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. xlix.

hearty and happy they lived, hugely content with their lot.
Up on the outcrops of lava where Axe River plummets forever
into the Almanna Gorge, Alþing would meet every year;
there lay old Þorgeir, thoughtfully charting our change of religion;
there strode Gissur and Geir, Gunnar and Héðinn and Njáll.
Heroes rode through the regions, while under the crags on the
coastline
floated their fabulous ships, ferrying goods from abroad.
Oh, it is bitter to stand here, stalled and penned in the present!
Men full of sloth and asleep simply drop out of the race.
How have we treated our treasure during these six hundred summers?
Have we walked promising paths, progress and virtue our goal?
Comely still is our country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
Ah! but up on the lava where Axe River plummets forever
into the Almanna Gorge, Alþing is vanished and gone.
Snorri's old shed is a sheep pen. The Law Rock is hidden in heather,
blue with the berries that yield boys and the ravens a feast.
O you children of Iceland, old men and young men together!
See how your forefathers' fame faltered and passed from the earth![14]

The poem *Íslands (Iceland)* was written by Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807 – 1845): Icelandic poet, natural scientist, and as he is known *ástmögur þjóðarinnar* – the darling of the nation.[15] Composed in 1835, the poem marked an intrinsic moment in Iceland's history: one which still resonates in the hearts of Icelanders today. The height of Romanticism was upon Western Europe, and with the publication of the poem, Iceland began to feel the reverberations of this cultural and philosophical movement.

Íslands was considered quite radical at the time it was published. It embraced the fragile quality at the heart of Icelandic national consciousness. Jónas waxed lyrical about the land so dear to Icelanders. Characters from the sagas and

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[14] Jónas Hallgrímsson."Iceland" (1835). Ringler, Dick. *The Bard of Iceland:Jónas Hallgrímsson, Poet and Scientist*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning and University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. p. 101.

[15] Ringler, Dick. *Bard of Iceland: Jónas Hallgrímsson, Poet and Scientist*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning and University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. p. 3.

Norse mythology also figured prominently. Most important of all, he spoke of the *Alþingi* at Þingvellir. He passed over this sacred place in the first section of the poem as if he wished only to recall it to the reader's mind. However, the tone changes in the second part where he became more critical: "...Alþing is vanished and gone. Snorri's old shed is a sheep pen. The Law Rock is hidden in heather, blue with the berries that yield boys and the ravens a feast."[16] Jónas did not hide his indignation about the state of the *Alþingi* in the 19th century. The poem questioned the authority of the colonial ruler and announced a political disenchantment that had been rumbling in the Icelandic soul for some time. As Dick Ringler notes in his book *The Bard of Iceland: Jónas Hallgrímsson, Poet and Scientist*: "The poem ... stated in poetic form the political agenda of Jónas and his colleagues: cultural and economic revival for Iceland based on a greater measure of political independence and restoration of the Alþingi at Þingvellir."[17]

1835 was a momentous time in Iceland's history both in the literary and political realms. This was the year the inaugural issue of the periodical *Fjölnir* was published by Jónas and his colleagues. The journal, whose title is one of the names for the Norse god Óðinn, was developed by a group of friends with shared interests and goals – namely, independence for Iceland. Carrying on the narrative lineage, the journal tied together key elements in politics and culture and acted as a platform for discussion on the country and its need for independence. Jónas had travelled abroad to Copenhagen to pursue an education, along with his friends Tómas Sæmundsson, Konráð Gíslason and Brynjólfur Pétursson. There they were introduced to an entirely different world. As Ringler notes, Copenhagen opened the eyes of Icelanders to a milieu they had not yet seen back on their home island. Until well into the 20th century, Iceland was a colony of Denmark, and it was ruled harshly. The Danes' colonial administration restricted trade, commerce and higher education,

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

ensuring Icelanders remained submissive under the Danish thumb. However, Jónas' generation was less willing to accept these conditions. The education they received in Copenhagen, the new world they were experiencing and the influence of the cultural and philosophical revolution of Romanticism whet their appetite for change and independence. This was the foundation their journal was built upon.

Fjölnir was revolutionary and radical at its core. Publishing works such as Jónas' poem *Íslands*, as well as editorials and essays by Tómas, Konráð and Brynjólfur among others, *Fjölnir* emphasized the elements of Icelandic culture and heritage that made them unique from the Danes while feeding the national spirit with a revolutionary flame that would help them attain independence in 1944. Among the components central to the struggle for independence were language, literature and the *Alþingi*. The works published in *Fjölnir* accentuated these elements as a means of exhibiting the unique identity of Iceland and its need to be an independent nation. The members of *Fjölnir* hoped that the journal "... would widen the cultural and literary horizons of their fellow Icelanders and would also (as they put it) 'break through the obstructions that dam the current of the nation's life, allowing it to flow freely."[18]

Icelandic history is a literary territory. Literal and metaphorical landmarks dot this landscape. The *Alþingi*, geographically precise locations visited by heroes of the *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda*, metaphoric landmarks of a narrative past, political rumblings and the emergence of a national identity unique to Iceland are all elements prescient in this territory. Travelling through the stories and over the land, revelling in the heroic past of the *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda* and the real lives of Icelanders, this is where the journey into the Icelandic national consciousness begins both literally and figuratively.

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

CHAPTER 2

ICELANDIC VISUAL ARTS

2.1 A Brief Sojourn into the History of Icelandic Art.

Art historian Auður Ólafsdóttir in her text "Visions of Nature in Icelandic Art" candidly touches upon the unique character of the history of art in Iceland: "Icelandic artists ... had no domestic visual art tradition to rebel against: on the contrary, they bore the responsibility and duty to lay the foundation for one."[19] Auður states that the rise of visual art in Iceland coincided with the national movement for independence which had been brewing in Iceland's existential stockpot since Jónas and *Fjölnirinn* appeared on the scene in the 19th century. The Icelandic history of art is young and even anachronistic in spirit, a notion that will continue to resurface throughout this discussion. This is due in part to the history of colonial rule and the lack of canonical texts which would aid in illustrating a chronological account of art history in this small nation.

Auður pinpoints the beginning of the modern art movement in Iceland: "Icelandic modern art began at the start of the 20th century with the first exhibition of art by a contemporary Icelander Þórarinn B. Þorláksson (1867 – 1924) in December 1900."[20] Comprised almost solely of landscape paintings, this exhibition brought the visual arts to the forefront of Icelandic culture while also setting the precedent of landscape as a national trope. Þórarinn's works such as *Þingvellir*

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[19] Auður Ólafsdóttir. "Visions of Nature in Icelandic Art." *Confronting Nature: Icelandic Art of the 20th Century*. Washington: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2001. p. 23.
[20] *Ibid.*

(1900) (Figure A.2) or *Mt. Hekla* (1924) were painted plein-air, often at Þingvellir National Park. These works exhibited inspiration from mid 19th century Romanticism, harking back to the great influence that the Romantic era held in Iceland's cultural history. Þórarinn and his contemporary, the modernist artist Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876 – 1958), are both considered pioneers of Icelandic art, and in particular the landscape tradition.[21] The paintings of these two "old masters" as they are referred are characterized by a wide horizon which created both distance and wide-open space, the ideal forum to capture the grandeur of the natural world.

Ásgrímur painted the landscape around him, but also created works based on Icelandic folktales, such as *Tröllin á Hellisheiði (The Trolls of Hellishdi)* (1948) (Figure A.3) which as Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir notes: "... [sought] to conjure up an aptly mystical atmosphere for his subjects."[22] While Ásgrímur's works based on the mythical beings of Iceland aimed at demonstrating the importance of myth and folktale in Icelandic culture and society, contemporary artists would turn to him for inspiration in critiquing these same aspects. Aside from his drawings of mythical creatures, interpreting the effect of light on the land, without using impressionistic techniques was a characteristic focus in Ásgrímur's paintings. This demonstrated a move away from an early 19th century aesthetic and is most notable in his work *Mt. Hekla* (1909) (Figure A.4). In reference to Ásgrímur and Þórarinn's *Mt. Hekla* paintings, philosopher Gunnar J. Árnarson has noted an impression of "divine higher nature." He observes:

> ... the spectator looks both down to the land and up to the heavens. Confronted with such a vision, one feels within oneself something higher, nobler and clearer ..., the divine brightness playing upon Hekla's ice-

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[22] Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir. "Ásgrímur Jónsson" *Confronting Nature: Icelandic Art of the 20th Century.* Washington: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2001. p. 60.

> covered peaks is the same illumination that plays upon the soul of someone who senses the presence of God.[23]

This divine vision of Iceland set the stage for the inauguration of landscape as the prominent genre for artistic expression. The founding artists in Iceland, working in this genre thus laid the groundwork by developing what came to be known as a national trope while also providing a platform for questioning its foundation and pioneering new artistic practices.

This period of art in Iceland is also marked by the impressive *oeuvre* of Jóhannes S. Kjarval (1885 – 1972), a modernist landscape painter and, as he is often considered, a "towering artistic genius."[24] Jóhannes, somewhat like his poet contemporary Jónas, has remained one of the most beloved Icelandic artists. In Reykjavík, an entire department of the Reykjavík art museum – *Kjarvalstaðir* or Kjarval's place – is dedicated solely to his work. Kjarval's paintings reflect a new way of looking at the landscape and on a deeper level, the nation. His work, like his predecessors Þórarinn and Ásgrímur among others, explored the magnificence of the Icelandic landscape, yet he sought to experience this genre in a much more profound and philosophical way.

Artist and art critic Ólafur Gíslason in his text "Creation of the World and of the Worlds" muses that Kjarval's pictorial imagery creates a new vocabulary for visibility, new tools with which to view the landscape and understand it. The painting *Fallamjólk* (*Mountain Milk)* (1941) (Figure A.5) is, as Ólafur states: "... an oil painting that has perhaps done more than any other artwork to create an Icelandic

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[23] Gunnar J. Árnason. "The World Without Man. Nature in Art and Art in Nature." *Náttúrusýn. Safn greina um sidfrædi og náttúru.* Reykjavík: University of Iceland, Institute of Ethical Studies, 1992. p. 238.

[24] Sawin, Martica. "Updating the Nordic Sublime." *Confronting Nature: Icelandic Art of the 20th Century.* Washington: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2001. p. 16.

national consciousness."[25] Ólafur asserts that it is not through the literalness or physicality of landscape *per se* where this sense of national consciousness originates, despite the fact that most of Kjarval's works are literally landscapes. It is more his ability to render the landscape completely visible in the most phenomenological manner that created the sensation of a national consciousness. The painting is "... not an imitation of nature but with some new visibility that has arisen on the canvas on almost corporeal premises, a visual work that we easily feel at home in and identify with."[26] Ólafur continues:

> It is not the national narrative that makes this painting resonate in the nation's consciousness but a communal immemorial Being possessing deeper and more succulent roots than any history can record or ethnology define.[27]

The philosophical journey below the surface of the land stems from this painting and the ideas presented. This message is embedded not only in the oil paints on the canvas of this work but in the reading of the work by the citizens of the nation.

A divergence towards more conceptual-based work occurred in Iceland in the 1960s and 1970s. At this point Icelandic artists began to rebel against the established tradition of landscape oil painting. Up until the 1960s Icelandic artists had been laying the groundwork for what could be called an "artistic tradition." Now the new generation of artists had the opportunity to start looking critically at what had been established, particularly the landscape and abstract oil paintings of their predecessors, or what these younger artists referred to as "living room wall decoration" and the "deadly seriousness of art."[28]

The 1960s was marked by what is referred to as the SÚM phenomenon. Founded by artists Jón Gunnar Árnason, Hreinn Friðfinnsson, Sigurjón Jóhannesson

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[25] Ólafur Gíslason. "The Creation of the World and of the Worlds." Trans. Sarah M. Brownsberger. *Perspectives: At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy*. Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2011. p. 20.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[28] Auður Ólafsdóttir. *op. cit.* p. 30.

and Haukur Dór Sturluson, this period is marked by a stark move away from the traditional forms of art established by these artists' predecessors. There has never been a complete consensus on what the acronym SÚM stands for. Some say it was an abbreviation of *Samband úngra myndlistarmanna (Association of Young Artists)*. Others understood it to be a reference to Descartes' famous Latin quotation "Cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am." Whatever brought the founding artists to use this name, their mission was clear: "... their reaction against the stagnant monopoly of *FÍM (Association of Icelandic Artists)*, which threatened to turn abstraction into the omega of art appreciation."[29] The beginning of this epoch was the first SÚM collective exhibition at Gallery Ásmundarsalur and at Café Mokka in Reykjavík on 12 June 1965. From that point onward, the SÚM collective continued to exhibit works that could be classified as Neo-Dada, New Realism and Pop Art. These trends in the work the artists in the SÚM collective were creating are evinced when considering the *oeuvres* of some of the most famous members including artists such as the founding members Jón Gunnar, Hreinn, Sigurjón and Haukar as well as other members including Kristján Guðmundsson (b. 1941), Ragnar Kjartansson (1922 – 1988), Róska Óskarsdóttir (1940 – 1996), Tryggvi Ólafsson (b. 1940) and Þórður Ben Sveinsson (b. 1945).[30]

The establishment of Gallery SÚM in 1969 was inaugurated with a solo exhibition of works by conceptual artist and SÚM member Sigurður Guðmundsson (1942). Sigurður, along with his brother Kristján Guðmundsson (1941) and fellow artist Hreinn Friðfinsson (1943), were creating works of art that have been termed poetic lyricism. Minimalist and conceptualist in nature, simple and poetic, pieces of this epoch demonstrate the conceptualist core which propelled the work of Icelandic

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[29] Halldór Björn Runólfsson. "Times of Continuous Transition: Icelandic Art from the 1960s to Today." *Icelandic Art Today.* Eds. Schoen, Christian and Halldór Björn Runólfsson. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009. p. 13.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

artists onward into the 21st century. These pieces exemplify the poetic lyrical quality that came to characterize this period of work in Icelandic visual arts.

House Project (1974) (Figure A.6) by Hreinn Friðfinsson is among the most iconic pieces of work from this period. Hreinn drew inspiration for this piece from the novel *Icelandic Nobility* written in 1938 by renowned writer Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888 – 1974). In the book Sólon Guðmundsson (1860 – 1931), an eccentric poet and worker, decides to decorate the exterior of his home in the small town of Ísafjörður in the West Fjords with the interior fixtures, so that passers by would have the opportunity to enjoy the beauty otherwise hidden from them.[31] Hreinn's replica of Sólon's little house was located in a lava field south of Reykjavík where it was unlikely many people would stumble across it. The piece was a poetic recontextualization of the same house offering a reverse view of the world. The inside out house was seen to contain the entire world except itself.[32] Art historian, writer and curator Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir notes of the piece in her text "On the Way Down: Fluttering Wings and Three-Dimensional Afterthoughts":

> … Hreinn's first *House* (1974) built inside-out to realize the dream of an hospitable old Icelandic farmer … without being presented in an art historical context of cause and effect: the works flow together but their temporal dimensions don't dissolve; each remains, in parallel, in a kind of symbiosis.[33]

Sigurður Guðmundsson's *Horizontal Thoughts* (1970 – 1971) (Figure A.7) was part of an "autobiographical" series of photographic works. This piece in particular was an ironic spinoff of *Monk by the Sea* (1809), a piece by 19th century German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774 - 1840). The series marked an evolution from Fluxus towards the poetic approach that characterizes this

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[31] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir. "On the Way Down: Fluttering Wings and Three-Dimensional Afterthoughts." Trans. Sarah M. Brownsberger. *Perspectives: At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy*. Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2011. p. 204.

period.[34] The connection to the philosophical concept of the sublime is unmistakable. British philosopher Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) cited the concept in his iconic work *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757):

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[35]

Playing equally off Friedrich's approach to the landscape as sublime, *Horizontal Thoughts* approaches such a landscape from an opposite point of view. The sublime is non-existent in this work, and the landscape becomes a playful site of inquiry and exploration. Sigurður's piece also positions itself in opposition to the landscape painting tradition established in the early 20th century, and, like his fellow SÚM members, advances both a critical and a playful look at this national trope.

Triangle in a Square (1972) (Figure A.8) by Kristján Guðmundsson also touches upon the controversial topic of landscape, looking at earth and land from a conceptual point of view. *Triangle in a Square* is an installation of a 4 x 4 square metre of ordinary earth in the gallery space – a triangle of consecrated soil from a churchyard concealed within this square.[36] Icelandic artist and critic Ólafur Gíslason notes in his text "The Creation of the World and of the Worlds" the peculiarities of this piece: "... rather than being represented, earth has, incarnate, entered the gallery. Clad not only in her own topsoil but in the metaphysical garments of geometry and theology. Thus the work unites material and metaphysical reality..."[37] The physical properties of the piece push the metaphysical and conceptual understandings of the work by underlining this presence at its core: "The difference

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[34] Halldór Björn Runólfsson. *op cit.*, p. 18.

[35] Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 36.

[36] Halldór Björn Runólfsson. *op. cit.*

[37] Ólafur Gíslason. *op. cit.*, p. 31.

here … is that we discern no distinction by looking: the square is identical in texture and colour to the consecrated churchyard soil forming a perfect triangle in the midst of the work."[38] Jón Proppé also remarks upon the metaphysical nature of the work and its overall impact: "The work[s] asserts something about itself which results in a sort of paradox involving our perception of the concrete things we see and the abstract artwork that we derive from them."[39]

A new generation of artists followed the SÚM movement carrying on the critical inquiry into the established visual tradition of their predecessors. Birgir Andrésson (1955 – 2007) is regarded as one of the most engaged, critical and sharpest contemporary artists in Iceland.[40] Birgir was chosen to represent Iceland at the Venice Biennale in 1995 where he exhibited a series of works that approached the question of national identity. As Halldór Björn notes: "Birgir was among the first Icelandic artists to seek out identity or cultural signs in Icelandic society …"[41] He incorporated craft, cultural symbols and national heritage into his work in an attempt to incorporate the important question of how Iceland represents itself and how this speaks to Icelandic national identity. His exhibition at the Venice Biennale included pieces that addressed these concerns, including a series of national flags knitted with natural, not dyed, Icelandic wool and a series of photorealistic drawings of archaeological sites from *Travel Journals* by Þorvaldur Thóroddsen, a nineteenth-century scientist.[42] Among his most famous pieces examining this theme of identity is his series of works entitled *Icelandic Colours* (2006) (Figure A.9). The series was composed of monochromatic paintings using colours that were said to be Icelandic colours, or colours that artists in Iceland were more inclined to use. Birgir oft used colours that seemed to depict a typical Icelandic landscape: blues, greys and greens,

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[38] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[39] Jón Proppé. "The Machine Inside the Artwork." Trans. Jón Proppé. *Perspectives: At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy*. Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2011. p. 95.

[40] Halldór Björn Runólfsson. *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

colours one would find in the sky lit by the midnight sun, the sea or the highlands strewn with petrified lava. Each was accompanied by a small text demonstrating the name of the colour and a lot number that distinguished it from other similar colours. The series is both poignant and absurd, demonstrating simultaneously the quality of Icelandic-ness while also revealing the danger of labelling something as uniquely "Icelandic."

Though brief and somewhat fragmented, landscape oil paintings and conceptual based works, especially installation represent the two largest movements contributing to what could be called a History of Icelandic Art. The fractured and anachronistic nature of this history contributes to the underlying construction of ideas of national consciousness that have surfaced in these works and the works of artists that have come after. Lyricism, philosophical in essence, is at the root of the Icelandic visual arts tradition. It was evident even in its earliest appearances in the paintings of Þórarinn and Kjarval, with clear manifestations exhibited through the conceptualist era of the 1960s and 1970s. The same philosophical undertone is perceptible in the evolving investigation of national consciousness in the work of contemporary Icelandic artists.

2.2 Collecting Specimens. The Work of Ólöf Nordal.

> Then Gangleri asked, 'Who owns this horse Sleipnir? What is there to tell about him?' High replied, 'You know little about Sleipnir and are ignorant of the events that led to his birth, ... It happened right at the beginning when the gods were settling. ... But Loki's relations with Svadilifari were such that a while later he gave birth to a colt. It was grey and had eight feet, and this is the best horse among gods and men.[43]

A version of the mythological beast Sleipnir (Figure B.1) appears as one of the specimens in Ólöf Nordal's work *Íslenskt dýrasafn (Icelandic Specimen Collection)*, a series of photographs of different animal specimens, including lambs, wolves, ravens and other birds, originally from the collection of a natural history museum in Iceland. This series, as with much of her other work, hinges on a perceived notion that exists between two areas of knowledge - science and narrative. The work questions origin and identity as well as the validity of stories built around ancient and urban myths. Taking inspiration from both Nordic mythology and urban happenstance, Ólöf's specimens speak to a space in knowledge that transgresses the boundaries of what is and is not, here and there, nowhere, in between and elsewhere. Through her combination of traditional myths and urban legends, Ólöf is able to demonstrate the liminal chracteristics of these two types of stories, and how they are able to each reside on both sides of consciousness and belief.

Paired with Sleipnir are Cyclopes (Figure B.2) and Janus (Figure B.3). All three are lambs born deformed and preserved by taxidermists during the last century.[44] Positioned in a mossy lava field south of Reykjavík, each lamb appears twice throughout the triptych while the horizon line typical of the rocky North Atlantic Island forms a continuum between all three photographs. The spatial continuity and sequential repetition acts to dislodge any narrative sequence that

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[43] Snorri Sturluson. *Prose Edda*. Trans. Jesse L. Byock. London: Penguin, 2005. p. 50-52.

[44] Heisler, Eva. "Iceland Specimens: On the Works of Ólöf Nordal." *Iceland Specimen Collection Ólöf Nordal*. Reykjavík: CIA, 2005. p. 18.

might have been read in the images, speaking to, yet creating distance between the work and its roots in mythology. Art historian Eva Heisler notes: "… there is spatial continuity but not sequential (or narrative) continuity. This creates the illusion of a logical impossibility; frozen time in a living space."[45]

Playing off this discontinuity, Ólöf's lamb specimens also speak to the absurd narrative they themselves create. The lambs are not mythical creatures, but deformed animals preserved as remnants, that signify ancient narrative-based histories. This series represents a peculiar dichotomy between a traditional narrative history and the preservation of false representations of such myths. The lambs simultaneously connect with and disengage from reality and narrative tradition. The selected names link them undeniably to a certain perception as represented in their namesakes respective myths, while they stand alone, lost, and out of place.

A second collection of photographs in the *Íslenskt dýrasafn* is made up of ten albino birds (Figures B.4 – B.6) including a raven, an arctic tern, a thrush, a puffin and a snipe among others. Photographed in a summer sky of clouds and sunshine, the birds appear to be in flight. Upon closer examination, the viewer will have noted that their eyes are closed and they are lifeless, preserved specimens similar to the deformed lambs of the previous collection.

There have been four recorded sightings of white ravens in Iceland. They were thought to be a mysterious and even ominous sign. Their rarity created a myth surrounding them. The last recorded sighting was in 1959 at which time science had proven that the white ravens were in fact merely albino birds, missing the pigmentation that normally renders them black. The raven is a significant symbol in Norse mythology, being the messengers of Óðinn. The birds did carry ominous meaning, for a sighting of Óðinn's ravens suggested the watchful eye of the god near by: "Hugin [thought] and Munin [memory] fly every day / over the wide world; / I

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[45] *Ibid.*

fear for Hugin that he will not come back, / yet I tremble more for Munin."[46] The revelation that the white birds are nothing more than a genetic mishap dispels their mysterious and mythical aura. Ólöf's white birds do not stand for Hugin or Munin but instead strip away the mystery leaving behind a rift between myth and reality in which the common elements central to Nordic mythology and their implications in Icelandic society can be investigated. The other birds in this series, which do not hold the same kind of significance in Nordic mythology, act to reinforce this stripping away of mythic meaning.

In relation to this series art historian Gunnar Harðarson notes: "... these images utilize the capability of the photograph to recover foregone time at the same time as it makes the viewer aware of the gap between the present and the time of the image, the past, ..."[47] Thus, these works play off both the discontinuity of time and space, narrative structure and the myths these characters were drawn from. Disrupting the seamless storyline while simultaneously reconstructing a narrative sequence, Ólöf questions the meaning these narratives hold in Icelandic society as well as the message the specimens carry concerning this meaning.

With these works, Ólöf is, in essence, reconstructing narrative space. Combining the past and the present, creating an ambiguous divide between animals and creatures in Nordic literature, the role they play in their surroundings, and staging preserved specimens in a natural setting all work to comment on a normative construction of Icelandic identity. As Icelandic medieval historian Gylfi Gunnlaugsson notes: "Unlike other nations, Icelanders had never lost their connection with Old Norse literature, and they could still read it in the original, ..."[48]

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[46] n.a. "Grimnir's Sayings" v.20. *The Poetic Edda.* Trans. Carolyne Larrington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 54.

[47] Gunnar Harðarson. "Thought at Work: Painting, Photography, Philosophy." Trans. Philip Roughton. *Perspectives: At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy.* Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2011. p. 182.

[48] Gylfi Gunnlaugsson. "Old Norse Poetry and New Beginnings in Late 18th and Early 19th Century Literature." Trans. Anna Yates. *Iceland and Images of the North.* Ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson. Québec City

Ólöf is pointing directly to the cultural importance of Icelandic poetry and literature, most notably the *Íslendinga sögur* and *Poetic Edda*, and how these works helped shape Icelanders' conception of themselves as individuals and as a nation. These works of literature have stood the test of time, remaining some of the most influential texts in the history of Icelandic literature and culture. Yet it is clear that Ólöf's series critiques this cultural inheritance.

Ólöf's work also comments on questions of Icelandic identity by uncovering and critiquing urban legends. *Geirfugl (Great Auk)* (Figure B.7) is an aluminium sculpture of a near life-sized bird. The bird stands out at sea along the rugged Reykjavík coastline. Seen from a distance, the sculpture appears relatively life-like but as one approaches it is clear that the penguin-like bird is built of metal. *Geirfugl* is an intriguing and critical piece that points to a staggeringly sad occurrence in Icelandic history. The story of the piece originates from events that resonate deeply within the consciousness of the nation, allowing an urban myth to emerge while acknowledging the reappropriation of a cultural inheritance.

The great auk was a bird species native to Iceland. Awkward and penguin-like, it had survived despite harsh conditions until the fateful day when the last known living pair were snuffed out by the Icelanders themselves:

> "... legend has it that the last living garefowl [great auk] was killed on Eldey [Island in Iceland] on June 3 1844 when three fishermen found a breeding pair with a single egg. Jón Brandsson and Sigurður Íslefsson strangled the birds and Ketil Ketilsson smashed the egg with his boot."[49]

Icelanders have felt particularly sensitive to the heartless and cruel actions of those three men back in 1844. The reason for this savage act of violence against the harmless birds was, in the end, monetary. At the time of the killing, an auction

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and Reykjavík: Presses de l'Université du Québec, "Droit au Pôle" series and Reykjavíkur Akademían, 2011. p. 117.

[49] Ellis, Richard. *No Turning Back: The Life and Death of Animal Species*. New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 2004. p. 160.

house was seeking a pair for its museum that would pay a hefty fee for a preserved set. Was the money worth the blood on their hands? Perhaps these three men believed so. However, contemporary perspectives on this event have changed. As Eva Heisler notes in her text "Iceland Specimens: On the works of Ólöf Nordal":

> ... in the early 1970s, there was a national campaign to raise money to purchase a stuffed great auk that was reputed to have been from Iceland. The art historian Auður Ólafsdóttir recounts the story of the nation's efforts to acquire the specimen from Sotheby's: "there was a general hue and cry, everyone contributed to the fund to bring home the great auk; children even emptied their piggy-banks, and at the end of the day there was money enough to buy the equivalent of a three room apartment.[50]

Heisler continues with Auður Ólafsdóttir's explanation: "... the attempt to bring the great auk home was a collective act of penance. It was the acquisition of a loss, a loss in the form of an object whose sole purpose was to display a loss."[51] This twist of irony plays a big part in Ólöf's piece. Cradled by the sea, *Geirfugl* represents another specimen: that of a lost species.

In the photographic series *Gull (Gold)* (2002) (Figures B.8 – B.10) man-made materials, namely children's toys are paired in disparate combinations with objects from the natural world to create hybrid creatures. These objects take on a grotesque air while also resembling the toys that were likely dearly loved. The toys range from what appears to be fingers bearing false metallic nails, *Fingurskjá (Fingers)* (Figure B.8), a bald Barbie-doll, *Hafmeyjaskjá (Mermaid)* (Figure B.9) to a small white bear, *Hvitabjörinnskjá (Polar bear)* (Figure B.10). Each of the natural objects resembles a sheep's horn though in each piece it has been manipulated in a different way thus changing the viewer's perception of what it might be. The combination of the sheep's horn with the toys is however quite striking and even troubling. The connection to Nordic myth is undeniable and certain stories and characters from the myths are instantly perceivable. Whether suggesting the

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[50] Heisler, Eva. *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[51] *Ibid.*

poisonous coils of the *Miðgarðsomr,* a shamanistic configuration of one of the many goddesses, *valkyries* or *norns*, or a beast such as Sleipnir, the creatures made in the series *Gull* reappropriate and destabilize the literary heritage they arise from.

The unique context behind the series *Gull* developed for Ólöf during her childhood. Every summer, Ólöf and her siblings would go up to the north of Iceland to stay on a farm. It was common practice for Icelandic children to go to the countryside in the summer to be closer to nature and to become more familiar with their land and heritage. During one particular summer at the age of seven or eight, Ólöf and her brother were introduced to the toys that rural Icelandic children played with. These were fragments of natural objects that the children made into toys – like the jaw of a cow, the leg bone of a lamb, a fragment of wood and a sheep's horn. These were made into toys and each came to symbolize an animal or object associated with the farm. Ólöf and her brother each had one object they found and played with during the summer. For Ólöf it was a sheep's horn which represented the sheep itself; for her brother, it was a triangular piece of wood which represented a tractor. During this summer they treasured these objects and when it came time to return to the city, their new toys came with them. When they showed them to their city friends however they were both met with laughter. Their city friends could not see any significance or symbolic value in these natural objects. To them, the toys were merely a piece of wood and a sheep's horn, and nothing else.[52]

Years later when creating the series *Gull*, Ólöf was reminded of this experience. She found a selection of plastic toys in her children's rooms. She combined these toys as well as other man made objects with a sheep's horn creating the hybrid figures seen in the series. Eerie and unnatural looking, Ólöf positions the objects in her series in a manner that questions the relation between beloved toys, natural objects and the creatures that inhabit the Nordic myths. The Icelandic word

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[52] Ólöf Nordal. Personal Interview. 27 June 2012.

Gull translates literally as gold, but may also refer to a toy. The word *barnagull,*[53] an Old Icelandic term still used today, means children's toys. The title of this work is significant, representing at once a traditional term associated with toys while also referring to a precious metal. The pieces assembled in *Gull* create a compelling dialogue for considering the fissure between man and nature; however, of more consequence is the intriguing recontextualization of mythological elements in contemporary culture.

Ólöf's most recent work *Musée Islandique* (2010) (Figures B.11 – B.18), like *Geirfugl* pivots on events that occurred during the mid-19th century. *Musée Islandique,* as its name suggests, takes its roots in a museological collection of specimens. A photographic series, the work documents a collection of plaster casts. Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir elaborates on the historical, political and colonial context of these casts in her text "The Attraction of Physical Anthropology in Ólöf Nordal's *Musée Islandique*":

> The French plaster casts date from the period when the industrial revolution was becoming established, and scientists believed that perfect methods and systems could explain the origins, nature and significance of all things. The casts were specimens, intended to give a comprehensive view of the primitive inhabitants of this island in the far north: in fact, they show only individual body parts, i.e. fragments of bodies.[54]

Consisting of twenty-two photographs of the collection of casts in various configurations, Ólöf's work documents these fragmented remains of Icelandic individuals from 1856. In her text, Æsa explains how the expedition to Iceland and the making of these casts occurred. It was a scientific endeavour and at the time there was little division between science and anthropology. The French were

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[53] "barangull." Ensk-Íslenzk Orðabók. Zoëga, G.T. Reykjavík: Bokaverzlun Sigurðar Kristjánssonar, 1954; Ólöf Nordal. *op. cit.*

[54] Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir. "The Attraction of physical anthropology in Ólöf Nordal's *Musée Islandique.* Trans. Annie Yates. *Musée Islandique Ólöf Nordal.* Ed. Halldór Björn Runólfsson. Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2012. p. 7.

interested in the possibility of establishing fish-processing bases in Iceland because they were fishing off the coast, and they used the opportunity to explore the little-known regions of the north. The expedition was led by Prince Jérôme Napoléon in 1856. The Prince was accompanied by scientists and artists who were employed to research and document the Icelandic people. As Æsa notes: "They [the plaster casts] are grounded in aesthetic standards which can be traced back to classical sculpture; artists, physicians and scientists used casts as photography was used, i.e. as a method of reproducing an exact copy of natural phenomena..."[55] The casts have been stored at the *Musée de l'homme* in Paris for some time now, forgotten and gathering dust. The collection has been brought to light through Ólöf's discovery of it and subsequent work on her series.

Ólöf uses the medium of photography to document the collection of casts while also as a means of weaving a story together. Seven busts, four sets of hands and five configurations of various body parts are documented. Each photograph includes information about the individual from whom the cast was taken: "Little is known of how the individual Icelandic subjects were selected ... Ólöf has traced their names and found that the individuals are clearly intended to represent different social strata: farmers, farm workers and intellectuals."[56] Of the seven busts only one has been prepared for display – that of Bjarni Jónsson (1809 – 1868) (Figure B.11), a renowned scholar and brilliant linguist who was considered by the members of the expedition to be the Nordic "exemplar." His plaster cast bust was coated in wax and painted giving it a more life-like appearance. The pale faces of Sigríður Bjarnadóttir, servant (Figure B.12), Skafti Skafteson, mechanic (Figure B.13) and Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir, servant (Figure B.14) among others stand in contrast to Bjarni. The casts recall the existence of Bjarni, Sigríður, Skafti and Ragneheiður and

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[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

create a space for reflection on their existence, never straying far from the colonial overtone of the entire collection.

Accompanying the busts are casts of hands truncated at the wrist. These elements of the overall collection lend a compelling perspective to the series. The hands of Skafti, the mechanic (Figure B.15) and Sigríður and her working companion Þórunn Árnardóttir, both servants (Figure B.16) are photographed on a bland background. The casts of the hands are completed, covered in wax and painted in a similar manner to that of the bust of Bjarni, but what is most striking about them is the poignant quality they reveal. Unidentifiable except for the names attached to them, the hands, more than the busts, act to distinguish the social rank these individuals held. Showing the marks of the labour and hardships they endured in their lifetime and strangely distanced from their identity and humanity, the hands appear both as objects and as testaments to the history of Icelanders.

The collection *Musée Islandique* also includes photographs of several configurations of body parts. These include feet, legs, arms, chests and even navels. The individuals Friðrika Guðmundsdóttir, listed as "Icelandic" (Figure B.17) and Pétur Þórðarson, fisherman (Figure B.18) are represented through these body parts. These objects that exist within the collection do not include a bust and thus remain unidentifiable except for the name that accompanies them. These photographs in particular comment on the aim of the expedition, to document a people in order to understand them both scientifically and anthropologically. Ólöf's reappropriation of the plaster casts acts to underline this:

> Ólöf uncovers the fragmentary and fragile state of the collection. It is exhausted, its content incoherent. Its scientific significance evaporated long ago, and hence the casts have become shadowy traces of individuals. Like all images, they entail disappearance, oblivion, along with the memory of what was, the presence of the individual.[57]

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

2.3 Steingrímur Eyfjörð's Contemporary Mythologies.

> When she was a child, there was a garden they were drawn to on the other side of town. The garden was shaped like an open air cave, made of lava, grass, stones, wild flowers and a few trees. There was a staircase made of stones, leading down to a pond in the middle of the garden. … In fact, the elves have been seen elsewhere. Their indisputable gift to perceive the ebb and flow of human existence, resulting in their striking awareness of both the comic and the tragic aspects of human life, … This, my friends, is the truth.[58]

The belief in the existence of elves or *húldufólk,*[59] as they are called in Iceland, is not merely a myth. It is, as Steingrímur Eyfjörð notes, a quality of life.[60] Hidden people possess, as the above citation from Birna Bjarnadóttir's book *a book of fragments* illuminates, a gift that many humans do not have – the ability to see the truly existential nature of humanity, the very depth and truth of the human soul. Icelanders not only believe in hidden people – they also respect their wishes and their space. Icelanders know the hidden people possess this gift and have experienced the repercussions that can occur if they have been shown any disrespect. Curator and art historian Hanna Styrmisdóttir notes: "The Icelandic Road Administration has a long history of negotiating with hidden people about the construction of roads through well-known elf areas. Roads throughout Iceland have been built around the mounds and hills believed to be inhabited by elves."[61] The local newspapers often report on construction coming to a halt as machinery breaks down and hidden people are suspected of the disruption.

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[58] Birna Bjarnadóttir. *a book of fragments*. Winnipeg: KIND publishing, 2010. p. 35.

[59] *Huldufólk* is an Icelandic word which roughly translates to hidden people or elves. These terms are interchangeable, however I will use hidden people throughout this thesis for continuity. The term elves will be used in the event it appears in the title of a work or a citation. Hidden people is a more direct translation for the term *huldufólk* and thus more closely represents what Steingrímur is investigating in his work.

[60] Hanna Styrmisdóttir. "Fantasy is a Quality of Life." *Steingrímur Eyfjörð: The Golden Plover has Arrived, La Biennale di Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition Icelandic Pavilion.* Eds. Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2008. p. 14.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Much of Steingrímur's work explores myth, folktales, the existence of hidden people and what constitutes the national consciousness in Iceland, in particular the works encompassing his exhibition *The Golden Plover has Arrived* at the 2007 Venice Biennale (Figure C.1). As Hanna notes: "Steingrímur's dialogue with the national self-image is shown in a straightforward and humorous way in those works concerning our relationship with the other inhabitants of the country: elves and Hidden People."[62] This series consists of thirteen pieces that were selected from forty different ideas Steingrímur had been working on for the Biennale.[63] The majority of the works were collaborations with a wide spectrum of members of the Icelandic arts community. This conscious choice to collaborate created a self-reflexive dynamic which reinforced Steingrímur's interest in analyzing Icelandic national identity.

Many pieces in the *Golden Plover* exhibition question the existence of hidden people living amongst Icelanders, while others look at political and economic concerns within the cultural sphere. Still other pieces incorporate important landmarks and national traditions in a critical and unexpected manner. All of the pieces in this project work together to examine playfully the differing ways in which the national spirit has been formed in various contexts: from settlement in the 9th century, during colonial rule and the period since independence. Using iconography long associated with the idea of Iceland, Steingrímur's *Golden Plover* exhibition critically examines preconceived understandings of Icelandic national identity while providing a means of critiquing the origin and meaning of this identity.

From the World of Elves (Figures C.2 – C.5) consists of six photographs that catalogue objects said to be from the collection of *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands (The*

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[62] Hanna Styrmisdóttir. "Steingrímur Eyfjörð interviewed by Hanna Styrmisdóttir." *Sjónlist 2008.* Akureyri: Íslensku Sjónlistaverðlanin Akureyrabær, 2008. p. 46.

[63] Steingrímur Eyfjörð. Personal Interview. 4 July 2012.

National Museum of Iceland), located in Reykjavík. The photographed objects include small fabric items, bowls and statues, all of which were reputedly given to humans by hidden people. These ordinary objects become specimens representing a bridge between the human and the invisible world of hidden people. Each piece is accompanied by a catalogue number and a statement describing the significance of the item. One piece is an object resembling a bowl with two handles and three feet. The statement describes it as: "A pot lost by an elf child." Another is a piece of fabric resembling a vestment of the Lutheran Church, with the emblem of the cross on the front. The description reads: "Used by an elf woman to wrap around a child she claimed to have had with a priest." The statements appear inconsequential, even humorous. Referring to a realm that Icelanders staunchly believe in yet have little contact with, *From the World of Elves* occupies an ambiguous divide between humour on the subject of hidden people, and a national belief. Allegedly taken from the collection of *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*, this piece draws on both history and mythology, linking it intrinsically to the most important historical collection in the country.

Þjóðminjasafn Íslands plays an essential role in shaping what is perceived as a national identity in Iceland. Though its role in forming a vision of national identity is fundamental, it is also troubling. Through its permanent exhibition entitled "The Making of a Nation – Heritage and History in Iceland," the museum uses artefacts and information about Iceland's history so as to, "provide insight into the history of the Icelandic nation from the settlement to the present day" through the guiding question "what makes a nation?"[64] Simultaneously, the exhibition limits the space within which the idea of Iceland as a nation can be interpreted and understood, creating a troubling dichotomy for understanding Icelandic national identity. By virtue of it being a museum, *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands* stands at a crossroad between

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[64] Þjóðminjasafn Íslands [National Museum of Iceland]. "Permanent Exhibition / English." nd. 26 June 2012. Web. [http://www.thjodminjasafn.is/english/permanent-exhibition/].

preserving an image of the nation while also fabricating a more desirable one. This problematic duality is activated as a result of the pedagogical message the museum is producing through it's exhibitions as well as the moment an individual, Iceladnic and not, visits the permanent exhibition. The exhibition "The Making of a Nation – Heritage and History in Iceland" preserves a variety of artefacts ranging from the recreation of a typical *baðstofa,*[65] to carved wooden boxes, jewellery and tools. These objects were at one time the belongings of ordinary Icelanders. Over time as they have been stored, preserved and ultimately displayed these ordinary objects have become treasured artefacts. Through this process these mundane objects have developed an aura reflecting antiquity and reverence. The display of such objects is both essential and problematic. In the same vein as the casts of Icelanders in the collection of the *Musée de l'homme* in Paris, the objects in *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands* gloss over and displace the embedded meaning these same objects held for the individuals who owned them. The museum aims to humanize the individuals but in fact through the display of the objects as rare antiquities it is exoticizing them, distancing them from their existence as ordinary Icelanders.

Steingrímur was inspired to make *The Sheep Pen* for *húldukind* (2007) (Figure C.6) when he met a woman who lives in Breiðholt, a district of Reykjavík. She had arranged various rocks in her garden as a refuge for the local *húldufólk*. Her husband was a prominent contractor and was building houses which would inevitably displace the *húldufólk* from their homes.[66] The piece was a collaboration with the photographer Sigurþór Hallbjörnsson known as Spessi, aesthetic philosopher Aðalheiður Lilija Guðmundsdóttir and clairvoyant Þórunn Krístin Emilsdóttir. Steingrímur and his collaborators travelled to an area where *húldufólk* are known to have lived: "Near Hvítá (the river white) in the land of Kiðjaberg, is a

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[65] This is the traditional and central room of the old Icelandic turf house. It acted as the bedroom, living room and kitchen all in one and represents the heart of the house and family who lived there.
[66] Steingrímur Eyfjörð. *op. cit.*

húldufólk farm."[67] Here Þórunn was able to contact a hidden man and organize the purchase of a sheep:

> I contacted a hidden man through a medium and asked him to sell me a sheep; he wanted a whetstone in exchange. Then he described how the pen should be, and I went along with it and bought the sheep. … Then the hidden man said that s/he who had an open mind and was pure of heart might be allowed to see the sheep's hoof print. When the viewer approaches the pen he or she needs to be completely open and pure of heart; this is the message from the old hidden man.[68]

The Sheep Pen not only speculates on the presence of and the belief in hidden people, but it is also a subtle comment on capitalism. As Steingrímur and the hidden person arrange a transaction for a sheep, they are commenting on how the world functions in terms of trade, wealth and value. His piece demonstrates that the world of trade and commerce bridges the two societies in Iceland. While the industrial revolution changed the face of Icelandic culture, this piece notes how this revolution has touched a world beyond what we can normally see, revealing the true reach of consumerism.

In collaboration with artist Ólöf Aranalds, Steingrímur created the piece *We the Hidden Ones* (Figure C.7), a narrative of the history of the hidden people in Iceland. Through drawings of their voyages and adventures, the piece illustrates where the hidden people came from and how they came to exist in Iceland: "Uncertain it was whereto / the foaming sea / would take us. / A higher power bore us / unto a land of ice. / We took up farming, here and there, / we disappeared into the boulders."[69] Strange and somewhat cryptic pen and ink drawings accompany the poem, depicting figures navigating through a narrative sequence. This poem resembles the story of how the Norwegians came to find Iceland in the 9th century,

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[67] Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. Eds. *Steingrímur Eyfjörð: The Golden Plover has Arrived, La Biennale di Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition Icelandic Pavilion.* Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2008. p. 28.

[68] Hanna Styrmisdóttir. *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[69] Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. *op. cit.*, p. 38.

harking back to historical events as well as illustrating the importance that Nordic literature plays in contemporary Icelandic society. Simultaneously, it envisions another narrative – that of the arrival and settlement of the hidden people in Iceland.

With the preceding pieces Steingrímur created a space where the belief in hidden people can be explored as well as shared with people from outside of Iceland. The works can be seen as a celebration of a national tradition that distinguishes Iceland from other nations. As such, the works exploring this existence of *húldufólk* are both playful and serious, remarking on a cultural difference that is strange to outsiders yet intrinsic to Icelanders.

In his series *The Golden Plover Has Arrived*, Steingrímur remarks upon other elements of national heritage including important historical figures, landmarks and even bird species. The work *Beautiful Move* (Figure C.8) consists of several components including thirty-two red or white painted aluminium chess pieces (Figure C.9). Each one represents a given piece, be it queen, king, knight, bishop, rook or pawn. However the sculptures do not physically resemble the traditional chess pieces, but instead ogres, giants and trolls. Steingrímur assembled the pieces from *kynjamydir* – the semblances of visages that he saw emerging from rock formations that he photographed at Þingvellir (Figure C.10). Steingrímur collaborated with Icelandic chess champion Guðfíður Lilja Grétarsdóttir, who has studied what she describes as the aesthetics of chess. Steingrímur was interested in discovering whether there was a cultural style in chess akin to the movements in art history such as modernism, Dadaism and post-modernism. Through a discussion with Guðfríður, Steingrímur was able to discern an understanding of the aesthetics of chess and the presence of *kynjamyndir* in chess moves and configurations.[70]

Steingrímur appropriates the *kynjamyndir* from Þingvellir to create new formations for the chess pieces, and in this way reorganizes their implicit meaning.

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[70] *Ibid.*

Perhaps the pieces still slightly resemble queens, kings and the other members of a classic chess game; however, something has changed in their makeup. The game of chess in *Beautiful Move* is not so much about the game itself as about investigating what is imbedded in the movement of the pieces, the well-known chess patterns that chess players use and the new physical composition of the pieces. *Kynjamyndir*, as Steingrímur explained, are quite powerful.[71] As images that reside on the surface of an object – here rock formations at Þingvellir – *kynjamyndir* only become manifest when the eye of the beholder is able to discern them. The *kynjamyndir* that were photographed at Þingvellir emerged for the artist from the rocks of this historic place as apparitions from Nordic literary heritage. The chess pieces no longer hold their inherited definitive qualities. Now they have lost their normative features and here become open and non-subjectified. Likewise, the game of chess inherently changes and can no longer have the same configuration it once did, creating an alternative space for the game and the comprehension of this artwork.

Ásgrimur Jónsson, the pioneer Icelandic modernist artist, made the drawing *Tröllin á Hellisheiði (The Trolls of Hellishedi)* (Figure A.3) in 1948. It depicts his understanding of how the *Vestmannæyjar* or the archipelago of the Westman Islands off the south coast of Iceland were formed. His drawing portrays the creation of the *Vestmannæyjar* by ogres in the act of hurling rocks out into the ocean.[72] Steingrímur's work *Bones in a Landslide* (Figure C.11) speaks to this myth, and to the perception Icelanders hold on the phenomenon of rockslides:

> The inspiration behind that work is a newspaper photograph about a rockslide in Þvottaskriður. When I looked at the photograph I began to think about this precious phenomenon in our national identity, which is the Icelanders' experience of nature. It's normal for us to provide supernatural explanations for landslides and other natural catastrophes. In nature, where nothing is manmade, something quite different from humans is in charge.

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[71] Steingrímur Eyfjörð. Personal Interview. 4 July 2012.

[72] Halldór Björn Runólfsson. "Composed into Reality: On the Evolution of Steingrímur Eyfjörð's Art." *Steingrímur Eyfjörð: The Golden Plover has Arrived, La Biennale di Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition Icelandic Pavilion.* Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2008. p. 23.

> When you turn your thoughts there, you can't help imagining personifications of nature, and when the landslide falls there's a troll or dwarf in the mountains, responsible for the natural catastrophe. ... This work describes this aspect of the Icelandic national soul.[73]

Bones in a Landslide consists of sixteen aluminium painted sculptures (Figure C.12), designed in the same manner as the chess pieces in *Beautiful Move*, from *kynjamyndir* at Þingvellir (Figure C.13). Each piece is recognizably a figure, their expressions and bodily features emerging from the *kynjamyndir* from which they were made. Each figure, like the ogres in Ásgrimur's drawing, carries a rock or boulder. They stand in formation, behind scattered multi-coloured rocks and two road signs that warn of the possibility of rockslides ahead.

When considering the geography of Iceland, the scenario in *Bones in a Landslide* does not seem so hard to fathom. Imagining the perilous, unpaved roadways, hairpin turns cascading down mountainsides or enveloping blankets of mist common in the Fjords, one can begin to understand more completely the impressive power of the rockslide, what Steingrímur calls a "precious phenomenon." The museum in Halí dedicated to the author Þórbergur Þorðarson sits next to an impressive façade of craggy cliffs; locals recount tales of how children were told stories of trolls and hidden people holding the rocks in place. Looking up at mountains such as these, one could see a version of *kynjamyndir*, and the story of Audbjorg from *Gísla Saga Súrssonar (Gisli Sursson's Saga)* may come to mind:

> Old Audbjorg was so uneasy that she had no sleep that night. It was cold outside, but the air was still and the sky cloudless. She walked several times withershins around the outside of the house, sniffing in all directions. As she did this, the weather broke and a heavy blustering snowstorm started up. This was followed by a thaw in which a flood of water gushed down the

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[73] Haraldur Jónsson. "Interview taken by artist / writer Haraldur Jónsson with Steingrímur Eyfjörð at his studio in the Sculptor's society, Nýlendugata, Reykjavík, on February 14, 2006." *Steingrímur Eyfjörð*. Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2006. p. 17.

> hillside and sent an avalanche of snow crashing into Berg's farmhouse. It killed twelve men. The traces of the landslide can be seen to this day.[74]

With this piece Steingrímur shares the Icelandic myth of how landslides occur and the formative place this natural event holds in the Icelandic psyche. For Icelanders, the image of a landslide is powerful and as artist Haraldur Jónsson stated in an interview with Steingrímur: "The landslide has an allusion deep within the Icelandic soul, falling and causing damage when the nature spirits stir in the land. We live and move on the edge of the precipice between mountain and shore."[75] *Bones in a Landslide* is also an examination of the existence of otherworldly beings, and the power that they hold over the land. Like Mother Nature herself, these beings are a force not to be tampered with.

Steingrímur examined the concept of national consciousness in the sculpture of the legendary *Lóa* (*Golden Plover*) (Figure C.14). When the long, dark,Arctic winter is nearly at a close, the sign that spring has reached Iceland is the first sighting of a golden plover. The poet Páll Ólafsson (1827 – 1905) wrote these words regarding the bird and the prophecy she carries:

> The lóa [golden plover] has arrived to sing the snow away
> Sing away boredom, that she can do.
> She has told me that soon the spói [curlew] is coming
> Sunshine in valleys and flowers in fields.[76]

In the deep valleys of the fjords where many farmers live, the long winters sometimes bring hardly any sunlight. Children scatter up onto the hillsides in search of a tiny ray, a fragment of sun that might reach them in the north, only 100 km south of the Arctic Circle. The sighting of the golden plover means the sun will return; for those souls living in near perpetual darkness for so many months, this is a

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[74] n.a. "Gisli Surrsson's Saga." *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Eds. Örnólfur Þorsson and Bernard Scudder. Trans. Martin S. Regal. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. p. 525.

[75] Haraldur Jónsson. *op. cit.,* p. 17.

[76] Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. *op. cit.,* p. 40.

beautiful thing – an indication of hope and warmth, sun and summer just around the corner.

Each year the daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* publishes the first sighting of the bird. The headline reads *Lóan er kómin (The Golden Plover has Arrived)* with an accompanying picture of the beloved bird – a triumphant call for celebration. The sighting of the golden plover has become a national tradition. This little bird celebrates spring, the land and an Icelandic consciousness that is tuned to the movement of light. *Lóa* is central both to the exhibition at the Venice Biennale, being the piece that began the series and as a central motif within the series. Placing *Lóa* at the centre of this series of works in turn creates a forum for rejoicing in the elements that encompass the idea of national tradition, thus providing an opportunity for celebrating Icelandic nationhood.

A last piece of particular interest from this suite of works is *Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal* (2007) (Figure C.15). The piece is primarily a three-dimensional model of the Icelandic aesthetic philosopher Benedikt Gröndal's home at Vesturgata 16 in Reykjavík. The model stands on a small table with the words *EKKI GLEYMA BENEDIKT GRÖNDAL (1826 – 1907)* written across the bottom. Two texts accompany and are integral parts of the piece. The first is Benedikt Gröndal's text *Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic*. Written in 1853, *Some Fragments*, along with the work of Jónas Hallgrímsson and *Fjölnirinn* played a major role in the Romantic era in Iceland and the fight for independence. The second, a shorter text, is *Benedikt in Venice* by Dr. Birna Bjarnadóttir which explains the context and importance of Benedikt Gröndal and his text *Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic*.

Benedikt in Venice acts to open a path to understanding the context of Steingrímur's piece and where Benedikt Gröndal's work exists in the history and consciousness of Iceland. *Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic* crossed new

boundaries, being the first text on aesthetics to be written in Icelandic. The philosophy of aesthetics was sweeping across the intellectual landscape of mainland Europe at the height of the Romantic period, and artists and philosophers alike were breathing in the fragrant concepts of what beauty could be and how it could be read and understood.

Meanwhile, in Iceland, there were barely any works of art to speak of, leaving aesthetics as a thought that drifted to the background of the consciousness of that time. Benedikt saw things in a different light: "At the University of Copenhagen, he was introduced to other important elements of nineteenth-century aesthetics, such as contemporary literature, the natural sciences, philosophy and the state of theological studies."[77] Upon returning to Iceland, Benedikt carried with him the knowledge he had acquired in Copenhagen, inspiration which he diligently marked down on paper.

Benedikt's dedication to aesthetics and romanticism is demonstrated in his text *Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic* which was translated into English for the first time in 2007. *Some Fragments* demonstrated Benedikt's interpretation of the artist in poetic terms, perceiving them as those who can communicate the tender connection between beauty and the soul. When he used the term poetic, he understood this to mean all elements of life. The work unfolds effortlessly by providing an introduction to and elaborating on the key points of aesthetics. Having written the first text on aesthetics in Icelandic, he was opening up a new field of vision to his fellow Icelanders, gently tearing a hole in the film that was enshrouding the spirits of his people. This text, in the same manner as the journal *Fjölnir*, was breaking apart the aspects of the national psyche that had been occluding the people's ability to reach beyond their normative experience.

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[77] Birna Bjarnadóttir. "Benedikt in Venice." Trans. Gauti Kristmannsson. *Steingrímur Eyfjörð: The Golden Plover has Arrived, La Biennale di Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition Icelandic Pavilion.* Eds. Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, 2008. p. 73.

In 1906, many years after *Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic* was written, an interesting event occurred, which Dr. Birna Bjarnadóttir recounts:

> One autumn night in Reykjavík, college students were marching with torches to a house at Vesturgata sixteen. ... The man inside must have been a good judge of beauty. A few years after he purchased the house, he also acquired the garden in front. He did not want anything erected there that would block the sunlight. This was Benedikt Gröndal, who called himself a "philosophical aesthetician or an aesthetic philosopher," but that night the torches lit up the town was his eightieth birthday. A year later he died, a hundred years ago exactly [from 2007, the date this text was written]. The march with torches was extraordinary as he himself was. The man who wrote ... a world history in which blueberries from the Svarfaðadalur valley in the north of Iceland play as great a role as the military feats of Napoleon Bonaparte, was not held in great regard with his contemporaries.[78]

This citation suggests that the students were marching to celebrate Benedikt, as it was the eve of his 80th birthday. What is emphasized and most salient in Birna's text is the notion of how this simple event can be considered beautiful and further the possibility of the understanding of the beauty that Benedikt would have found in it, given his penchant for the consideration of life from this perspective. Benedikt dedicated his life at Vesturgata 16 and his writing to this simple notion of beauty.

Benedikt in Venice also situates Benedikt in his community and time, lending a glimpse of what his Reykjavík was like, and how his work was received then and now. After his death, a building was erected in front of his house and: "... his memory was concealed in shadow."[79] At the time Birna's text was written, there were plans to remove his house from the city, in this way silencing the memory of Benedikt and his influence completely. Birna continues: "Anyone who wishes to understand how it is that one of the nineteenth century's most profound aestheticians

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[78] *Ibid.*
[79] *Ibid.*

in Europe is still a blank slate in the world, will not necessarily have to search outside of Iceland for the answer."[80]

Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal speaks directly to this concern. It is a call to arms, gently proclaiming Benedikt's existence and the importance of his work within the nation's consciousness. As a reconstruction of Benedikt's house, the piece speaks out against the act of forgetting and the tendency to allow moments in history to fall to the wayside. Benedikt Gröndal is in a sense a national tradition. He represents an important aspect of Icelandic history and culture. He worked with dedication towards the enlightenment of the people of his nation, travelling to Copenhagen and back to share the knowledge he had gained. He, like Jónas, believed in his country and its people, and believed in their ideas and conceptions of who they were as individuals and collectively as a nation. It is because of individuals like Benedikt that the rich Icelandic literary history has continued to thrive.

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[80] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

3.1 "To See the World of Over-Lapping Circles":[81] Locating a Nomadic Consciousness.

> Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as the margin. We understood both…[82]

The concept of a nomadic consciousness comes together from several different branches of knowledge. It originates with the ancient tribes of nomadic peoples that journeyed across the continents, whose lives existed through a pattern of wandering. Studies of the Bedouin, the Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Mongols and the Aborigines of Australia all contributed to a growing anthropological approach that fostered the emergence of nomadism as a philosophical concept. Developed notably by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Rosi Braidotti, nomadism, as a contemporary theory, is seen as a form of social practice positioned on the margins of societal boundaries in politics, culture and visual art.[83]

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[81] Pratt, Minnie Bruce. "Identity: Skin Blood Heart." *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism.* Eds. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith. Brooklyn: Long Haul Press, 1984. p. 17.

[82] hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre.* Boston: South End Press, 1984. p. xvi.

[83] One example is the exhibition *Living as Form (The Nomadic Version),* "… the flexible, expanding iteration of *Living as Form*, a site-specific project presented by Creative Time in historica Essex Market in New York 24 September – 16 October 2011." Curated by Nato Thompson and co-organized with Independent Curators International and Creative Time, NY, the exhibition explores

In their 1987 book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explore the theory of nomadology. Their pursuit of this concept was based on an anthropological perspective. Being inspired by such studies, their research also acted to broaden the perspective into a profound philosophical theory. In the twelfth plateau, entitled "Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine", Deleuze and Guattari take a theoretical and political position towards developing a philosophical concept they termed nomadic thought. In this treatise they lay out an understanding of who nomads are, how they relate to space and what this concept can encompass as a philosophical theory.

The movement towards nomadic thought had been building in Deleuze's research for some time. Brian Massumi in his book *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* notes a kind of trajectory for nomadic thought: "Spinoza called nomad thought 'ethics.' Nietzsche called it 'gay science.' Artaud called it 'crowned anarchy.' To Maurice Blanchot, it is the 'space of literature.' To Foucault, 'outside thought.'"[84] All these philosophers, among whom "... there runs a secret link constituted by the critique of negativity, the cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the exteriority of force and relations, the denunciation of power"[85], were building upon a philosophy that lay outside the

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over 20 years of works of art that are critically engaged with the blending of everyday life and art. The works included emphasize in particular participation, dialogue and community engagement. A comprehensive book accompanies the exhibition published by MIT press and includes texts by curators at the forefront of socially engaged practice. The exhibition will tour to the following institutions 2012 to 2014 at time of writing: Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco, CA.; Bat-Yum Biennale of Landscape Urbanism, Bat-Yam, Israel; McDonough Museum of Art, Youngstown, OH.; Videotape, Hong Kong; University Art Gallery, UC San Diego, CA.; ARTifariti, Tifaiti, Western Sahara; The Galleries at Moore College of Design; Philadelphia, PA.; CCI Fabrika, Moscow, Russia; TheCube Project Space, Taipei, Taiwan; Richard E. Peeler Art Centre, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN.; Museo de Arte Sinaloa, Sinaloa, Mexico; Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Source: "Living as Form – the Nomadic Version" *Independent Curators Internationl – Exhibitions.* n.d. 15 June 2013. Web. [http://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/living_as_form_the_nomadic_version]

[84] Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992. p. 6.

[85] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

bounds of the State, outside the realm of power. Deleuze and Guattari carried on this philosophy "... Of a bastard line."[86], and it is in that philosophical divergence that nomadic thought takes root.

Deleuze and Guattari began their theoretical work from a juncture in philosophy that was highly influenced by psychoanalysis. For Deleuze and Guattari, the difference between masculine and feminine can essentially be abolished, replacing it with the affirmative, positive and inclusive perception where the sexes, in particular women, are liberated from the narrow understanding of difference and the other. This perspective is inherently rhizomatic in character, a notion central to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. The rhizomatic conception is opposed to the Western notion of the tree of knowledge – upright, branching and masculine in essence or based on a hierarchy of knowledge, what the authors refer to as arborescent. Brian Massumi explores their use of the term arborescent as an alternative way to look at the tree formation: "Deconstruction-influenced feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigary have attacked State philosophy under the name "phallogocentrism", "... Deleuze and Guattari describe it as the "arborescent" model of thought (the proudly erect tree under whose spreading boughs latter-day Platos discharge their function)."[87] The rhizome, on the other hand, functions in an entirely different manner.

Where the arborescent model, or tree formation, is based on a structured hierarchy, the rhizome moves laterally, horizontally across planes, branching out and multiplying. The rhizome is dialectical, opposed completely to an arborescent way of thinking. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: "The rhizome includes the best and the

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[86] Massumi, Brian. "Pleasures of Philosophy." *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. ix.

[87] Massumi, Brian. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

worst;..."[88] and as such offers this inclusive, open and radical space for knowledge. Within the rhizome theory are several principles which characterize this idea:

> Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. ... Principles of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity," that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, ... There are no points or positions in a rhizome... There are only lines. ... Principle of asignifying rupture: ... A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines."[89]

Together these principles outline the philosophical meaning of the rhizome. Nomadic thought is inherently linked to this concept because it too, is open, inclusive, fluid and radical, and opposed to the normative space of thinking that has been long established in and connected to Western thought.

The plateau "Treatise on Nomadology" is divided into numbered axioms with accompanying propositions that investigate different aspects of the author's proposed perception of nomadology. This section opens with a discussion of the war machine, a complex idea that at first does not seem relevant to nomads: "AXIOM I. *The war machine is exterior to the State apparatus.*"[90] Using Georges Dumézil's analysis of Indo-European mythology, Deleuze and Guattari set up the opposition between the war machine and the state. Dumézil's analysis shows that "... political sovereignty, or domination, has two heads: the magician-king and the jurist-priest."[91] The two terms stand in opposition to each other and in fact represent the two poles being examined: the State and the nomads. It becomes apparent that Deleuze and Guattari equate the war machine with the warriors of the nomadic tribes and the division between the space that nomads and the state inhabit starts to emerge:

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[88] Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. 7.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 7-9.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 351.
[91] *Ibid.*

> It will be noted that war is not contained within this apparatus [the state]. *Either* the State has at its disposal a violence that is not channelled through war – either it uses police officers and jailers in place of warriors, has no arms and no need of them, operates immediate, magical capture, "seizes" and "binds," preventing all combat – *or*, the State acquires an army, but in a way that presupposes a juridical integration of war and the organization of a military function. As for the war machine in itself, it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere.[92]

This citation illustrates the difference between the State and the war machine or nomadic space. Deleuze and Guattari are proposing that the State appropriated the war machine from the nomads and thus from outside the State apparatus. The war machine represents an act of banding together that the nomads practiced. This banding together is how nomads moved through space and time. Through appropriating the nomadic structure of banding, the State then tames it and forms it into the conventional systems we know today, for example armies and police forces. As the authors state: "*The State has no war machine of its own.*"[93] The State merely appropriates an existing system and through the manipulation of it, changes it into a negative force.

It becomes evident that the war machine cannot and should not be mistaken for war itself: "To the extent that war (with or without the battle) aims for the annihilation or capitulation of enemy forces, the war machine does not necessarily have war as its object …"[94] It is when the war machine is adapted by the State, as in the examples of Attila the Hun or Genghis Khan, that the object changes. This is the moment when the machine changes hands and spaces and thus is transformed:

> … we have seen that the war machine was the invention of the nomad, because it is in its essence the constitutive element of smooth space, the occupation of this space, displacement within this space, and the corresponding composition of people: this is its sole and veritable positive

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[92] *Ibid.*, p. 352.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 353.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 417.

> object (*nomos*). Make the desert, the steppe, grow; ... If war necessarily results, it is because the war machine collides with States and cities, as forces (of striation) opposing its positive object: ... It is at this point that the war machine becomes war: annihilate the forces of the State, destroy the State-form. The Attila, or Genghis Khan, adventure clearly illustrates this progression from the positive object to the negative object.[95]

Influenced by historical periods when territories were governed by a monarchy, the nomad is opposed to the king or head of state, and as such nomadic thought becomes a kind of space, a "smooth space" while the king, head of state and, *ergo*, the State itself represents a "sedentary (or striated) space". Both spaces are designated by movement and force; however, it is how this movement occurs that characterizes their differences. One space, that of the State, presumes power as its antecedent. Massumi elaborates on the negative aspect of power by distinguishing the differences between the two: "Force is not to be confused with power. Power is the domestication of force. Force in its wild state arrives from outside to break constraints and open new vistas. Power builds walls."[96] While the State wields power, the nomadic or "smooth space" is characterized by force, which is affirmation, as opposed to the negative connotations of power.

At the very core of this concept is the distribution of space. *Nomad* originally meant the clan elder who allocated pastures to tribe members. The etymological root of the term nomad is the Greek *nomos*, meaning plot of land. Deleuze approaches this subject for the first time in his book *Difference and Repetition*, published in 1968:

> We must first of all distinguish a type of distribution which implies a dividing up of that which is distributed: ... principles of division which declare themselves *the best distributed.* ... Even among the gods, each has his domain, his category, his attributes, and all distribute limits ... then there is a completely other distribution which must be called nomadic, a nomad *nomos*, without property, enclosure or measure. Here, there is no longer

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[95] *Ibid.*

[96] Massumi, Brian. *op. cit.,* p. 6.

> division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute *themselves* in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits.[97]

Here the two spaces – striated or State and smooth or nomad – emerge. The first, striated or sedentary space, exhibits a delineated means of distributing space to the people existing within it. The second, the smooth space, demonstrates a distribution of space through other means: "...division among those who distribute *themselves*...."[98] The space is no longer divided by the people and given to the people but divided by the manner in which the people operate within the space. The smooth space is unmeasured, undivided in the linear and spatial senses, while the striated or sedentary is:

> ... the striated [space] is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favour of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal.[99]

Being continuous in form, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, the smooth or nomadic space is open to alternative understandings. This is an ideal place to create a space for identity politics, for inclusivity of difference. The nomadic or smooth space appears to act in the same fashion as the State or striated space, but this is not the case. As evidenced through the discussion of the war machine, it is clear that the State appropriated and changed the nomadic space to suit its needs. Thus, on the surface the spaces resemble each other; however, underneath the differences emerge. Massumi pinpoints the fundamental differences between the two spaces:

> The space of nomad thought is qualitatively different from State space... State space is "striated," or gridded. Movement in it is confined as by

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[97] Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition.* Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. p. 36.
[98] *Ibid.*
[99] Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *op. cit.*, p. 477.

> gravity to a horizontal plane,... Nomad space is "smooth," or open-ended. One can rise up at any point and move to any other space...[100]

Nomadic space is an alternative space. The means by which nomads move through space are entirely different than the way those who live in the state space do: "...even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfil the function of the sedentary road, which is to *parcel out a closed space to people*, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares."[101] If we think of our own roadways and paths in contemporary everyday life, the correlation is evident. State space and nomadic space function in entirely different manners, and the nomadic space is a space of radical movement, change, positive affirmation and difference. This is where the philosophical message of nomadic thought begins to emerge: "The nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it *distributes people (or animals) in an open space,* one that is indefinite and noncommunicating."[102]

The difference and mixture of the two spaces is paramount to a clear comprehension of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadology. What is most salient about nomadic space is that it offers an alternative means to dividing and distributing space. It appears that this extends to the distribution of place in society. As a radical space that is rhizomatic at its core, nomadic space is open, moving and positive. It allows for difference, which further extends the space to more radical manifestations of how a society can function. The theory stems from the movement of nomads across the land by way of passages they know but that are not confined by physical borders or demarcated boundaries. In essence, they move through space in an entirely different fashion than those who inhabit the State apparatus, where space is distributed according to certain rules such as class, age and race. In

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[100] Massumi, Brian. *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[101] Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *op. cit.*, p. 380.
[102] *Ibid.*

nomadic society and thus in the theory of nomadology, the war machine is a band of people working together through equality. As Deleuze and Guattari note:

> It is true that the nomads have no history; they only have a geography. And the defeat of the nomads was such, so complete, that history is one with the triumph of States. We have witnessed, as a result, a generalized critique dismissing the nomads as incapable of any innovation, whether technological or metallurgical, political or metaphysical."[103]

Rosi Braidotti, feminist theorist, influenced by Deleuze and Luce Irigary, has written extensively on what she terms a nomadic consciousness or nomadic subject. She has built upon Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadic thought in order to provide a post-modern formation of identity. As she puts it: "Nomadic consciousness is a form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary view of subjectivity."[104] Many theorists have criticized Deleuze and Guattari's vision of nomads as overly romanticized. However, Braidotti moves past this apparent romantic vision of the nomad below the surface of wandering to an existential perception of the nomadic subject:

> "It [Deleuze's scheme] entails a total dissolution of the notion of a centre and consequently or originary sites or authentic identities of *any* kind. ... Deleuze and Guattari warn us against the risk that postmodern systems, with their fragmentation and loss of unity, may reproduce power-relations globally on a small scale. They refer to this danger as "micro-fascism": smaller, more localized but equally exploitative power formations, ... The radical nomadic epistemology Deleuze and Guattari propose is a form of resistance to microfacism in that it focuses on the need for a qualitative shift away from hegemony, whatever its size and however "local" it may be.[105]

Braidotti's theory stems from the reality of nomadism and deepens the concept by elucidating upon what can be understood as nomadic. What her theory offers is a new form of subjectivity. Informing Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity is

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[103] *Ibid.*, p. 395-396.

[104] Braidotti, Rosi. "Introduction: By Way of Nomadism" in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. p. 23.

[105] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Deleuze's vision of "becoming woman". Braidotti notes how Deleuze's term "woman" does not necessarily designate the female sex as opposite and other to male. Instead: "...Deleuze corrodes the metaphysical certainty of the polarity between the sexes and aims at undoing the appeal of the authority of the experience founded on the regime of fixed and steady identities. ... Woman remains for Deleuze the sign of fluid boundaries."[106] This open understanding of the sexes, in particular women, is of the utmost importance, resonating throughout Bradiotti's formation of the nomadic consciousness.

Rooted in feminist theory, Braidotti speaks from the perspective of a woman, a feminist and a multilingual subject, and she uses her particular standpoint to translate her vision of this theory. Her overall aim with this theory is to offer an alternative figuration for understanding identity outside of established schemes of thought.[107] She states: "... the subject 'woman' is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, ..."[108] Under Deleuze and Guattari's arborescent model, man and woman were binary models of selfhood that remained singular and separate. In particular, woman was understood as essentially other and negative. Through the feminist movement, these negative connotations of inferiority have subsided but remain etched at the edges of societal thinking and models of being. Under Braidotti's lens of the nomadic subject, any identity resting on this exterior margin has the opportunity for inclusion through the nomadic figuration, an alternative to the arborescent model of thought and a postmodern and fluid approach of being in the world.

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[106] Braidotti, Rosi. "Nomadism with a difference: Deleuze's Legacy in a Feminist Perspective." *Man and World.* 29. (1996). p. 307.
[107] Braidotti, Rosi. *op. cit.,* p. 3.
[108] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The nomad moves from point to point as a way of moving through space on invisible lines that exist to be followed to reach a point and continue onwards: "... the nomad knows how to read invisible maps, or maps written in the wind, on the sands and stones, in the flora."[109] Through rhizomatic movement, a nomadic consciousness provides the opportunity for a free subjectivity: "Nomadic subjects are capable of freeing the activity of thinking from the hold of [phallogocentric] dogmatism, returning thought to its freedom, its liveliness, its beauty."[110]

There are certain categories used by individuals in defining their identity such as race, class, nationality, gender and sexual preference. Subjectivity is formed through the assembly of these categories. Foucault highlights this in his work on subjectivity. As Braidotti notes:

> ... one becomes a subject through a set of interdictions and permissions which inscribe one's subjectivity... The subject thus is a heap of fragmented parts held together by the symbolic glue that is the attachment to, or identification with, the phallogocentric symbolic.[111]

Nomadic subjectivity moves away from the normative model in order to allow for an inclusive form of understanding of what identity can mean. The subject as nomad is: "... a desire to suspend all attachment to established discourses."[112] Nomadic subjectivity involves mixing together the normative idea of identity as a set of identifying factors: "...the quest for sites of resistance."[113] The nomadic subject: "... has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity."[114] Nomadic consciousness is characterized by the choosing of the exterior, the edges and the margins of minority, and making it into a majority. Its form of inclusivity creates a

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[109] Braidotti, Rosi. *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[114] *Ibid.*

space where minority and majority no longer exist or matter. Perhaps existing at the margin, the nomad, as bell hooks notes of her identity as a black woman, sees from both inside out and outside in;[115] the margin thus provides the ideal location for forming such a subjectivity. Whereas the phallogocentric model that has been favoured in Western thought excludes any formation outside the norm, the nomadic figuration allows for subjectivity that moves in from the outside, and thus abolishes boundaries around fixed identities. Free and unconfined movement characterizes the nomadic subject's understanding of selfhood and identity. As Braidotti states: "... it is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self."[116] Instead of differentiating between identifying features, the nomadic subject is multiple, political and epistemological. The nomadic consciousness that Braidotti proposes in her theory offers a way to combine opposing features.

Above all, Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity offers the opportunity to refuse any kind of identity as permanent:

> The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport – or has too many of them.[117]

As an open way of understanding identity, nomadic thinking offers a way of naming and expressing different figurations of a decentred subject. Instead of needing to define oneself as any certain idea or ideal, nomadic subjectivity leaves room for movement, fluidity between defining notions. Further, as the nomadic subject is a minority position and takes its stance at the margin, this position no longer remains negative or sedentary. As nomadic it is fluid and moving and thus removes negative connotations from such a position through its active movement. As postmodern

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[115] hooks, bell. *op. cit.*

[116] Braidotti, Rosi. *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[117] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

subjects, nomadic subjectivity allows for change instead of fixity, providing a way to deal with societal constraints concerning identity. Nomadic subjectivity is a "transgressive identity."[118]

In the 21st century, a time of constant change, motion and sharing of information, nomadic subjectivity provides an ideal understanding of the postmodern self:

> ... the nomad is a postmetaphysical, intensive, multiple entity, functioning in a net of interconnections. S/he cannot be reduced to linear, teleological form of subjectivity but is rather the site of multiple connections. S/he is embodied, and therefore cultural; as an artefact, s/he is a technological compound of human and post-human; s/he is complex, endowed with multiple capacities for interconnectedness in the impersonal mode. S/he is a cyborg but equipped also with an unconscious. She is Irigary's "mucous", or "divined", but endowed with a multicultural perspective. S/he is abstract and perfectly, operationally real.[119]

With Deleuze's theory of "becoming woman" and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome at its foundation, nomadic subjectivity resists classification of the subject. As a feminist theory, it does relate to the female subject in particular but also offers an alternative to the masculine, Western, dominant or normative understanding. The nomadic subject displaces phallogocentrism. The anti-Oedipal subject abolishes the essential polarity between male and female, renouncing solidity and proclaiming the positive affirmation of difference and the other. With nomadic subjectivity there is no other, there is only myself with us all.

This position is the entry point into understanding what can constitute an Icelandic national identity. Providing an opening into understanding, nomadic subjectivity does not carve out a space, but instead blasts through the surface of society into the deepest chasms where the truth resides. Where Western philosophical and academic notions have closed formations and options for

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[118] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[119] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

understanding the self, nomadism re-opens the potential for positive renaming and creating new possibilities for life and thought.[120]

3.2 The Theory of Narrativity.

Narrative theory began to emerge as a theoretical discipline and area of academic knowledge in the 20th century when modernism began to elucidate the importance of narrative as a tool for understanding our experience of the world. Harbingers of this movement were writers such as Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. These writers began delving into the depths of what narrative could offer as an avenue towards enlightenment upon existence. By the 1950s and 1960s, dedicated work on a structuralist and semiotic approach to narrative, which became known as narratology, began to emerge in French academia. Narratology is positioned as predominantly a scientific theory and is characterized by an attention to the structural elements of narrative, examining its nature, form and function across literary genres and searching for the identifying features held in common with all narratives. Structuralist and semiotic at its core, narratology focuses on the elements necessary for the construction of a sound and well-written narrative. This investigation has focused primarily on written texts. Mieke Bal, who goes on after narratology, to study visual artworks, dedicated an entire book to the scientific study of narrative. *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* published in 1985, acts as a companion text to the continually evolving study of narrative while also providing the key definitions and structuralist components:

> This book presents an exposition of a coherent, systematic narratology and of the concepts pertaining to it. Readers are offered an instrument with which they can describe narrative text. This does not imply that the theory is some kind of machine into which one inserts a text at one end and expects an

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[120] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

> adequate description to roll out at the other. The concepts that are presented here must be regarded as tools. These tools are useful in that they enable us to formulate a textual description in such a way that it is accessible to others. Furthermore, discovering the characteristics of a text can also be facilitated by insight into the abstract narrative system.[121]

As a branch of semiotics, the analysis of narrative is achieved through identifying and reading a set of units and rules through signs. Within any given narrative, there lies a defined structure. Mieke Bal notes the necessary elements to complete a narrative text:

> A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates a narrative. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by acts. An event is the transition from one state to another state. Actors are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To act is defined here as to cause or to experience an event.[122]

By the end of the 1970s, theorists were beginning to move away from structuralism to a post-structuralist approach which enabled a more fluid and open inquiry into narrative theory. As a theory based on structure and form, narrativity must retain some of the structuralism inherent in any narrative. Narratvitiy comes to stand more for qualities inherent in a text than a theory in its own right. As such, narrativity is able to transcend the boundaries of literal structure, and therein lies the difference between narrativity and the science of narratology. In *The Narrative Reader* edited by Martin McQuillan, narrativity is defined as:

> (1) The orientation of a narrative which makes that narrative possible *qua* narrative … (2) The group of properties characteristic of narrative which distinguishes it from non-narrative. A narrative's 'narrative-ness.' (3) narrativity is commonly associated with the fluidity of structuration rather than structure.[123]

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[121] Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Trans. C. van Boheemen. London: University of Toronto Press, 1985. p. 4.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[123] McQuillan, Martin. Ed. *The Narrative Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000. p. 324.

Narrativity is able to function within the process of narrative structure, while encouraging experimentation and exploration. Narrativity as post-structuralist offers an approach that can be superimposed on other areas of culture, such as the visual arts. This provides an opportunity to understand how narrativity functions and contributes to the meaning within a given artwork. As Roland Barthes states in his book *Image, Music, Text*:

> Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula) stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation.[124]

Within the post-structuralist domain that emerged during the 1970s, narrativity was no longer bound to the standard construction of a narrative – words on a page. Post-structuralism allowed for margins to blur and for a traditionally text-based approach to be appropriated in order to offer an alternative method for analyzing works of art. Narrative has strong heritage-based ties in many different cultures, Icelandic being one example. Within the expanded understanding of narrativity, it becomes possible for works of art to utilize narrative as an avenue for questioning traditional notions.

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[124] Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill & Wang, 1977. p. 79.

3.3 In distance we have your tales: The Storyteller.

> My elders told stories that ranged from the political landscape they were involved with, to Iroquois legends, to scenes fro their everyday life, including gossip and funny stories. The hallmark of Iroquois storytelling was the way in which the storyteller created a space for listeners to find their own connection to the story – this meant that the past was not an isolated entity; it had social relevance for the listener.[125]

Beyond structuralist confines and residing in the margins is where the intersecting perceptions of what a narrative is and can be start to ebb outwards into an open understanding. In this alternative space one can start to analyse and examine aspects of narrativity outside the structuralist realm. In this outer sphere lies the storyteller.

In the 1955 publication (1968 English translation) *Illuminations*, a book of essays by Walter Benjamin, prefaced by Hannah Arendt, there exists a text on the storyteller, a lucid exploration of the essence of this character: "Familiar though his name may be to us..."[126] Somehow distant and unknown yet also present within every human soul the storyteller is both an ancient being and a contemporary presence. The storyteller has lived through centuries, reborn again after each passing presence. For the storyteller lives in citizens of the world and their most valued source is: "[...] Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth ..."[127] The storyteller's gift is that of marking down the experiences that come directly from the mouths of those who have lived it. Born from the realness of the world, the narrative the storyteller unravels exists in its purest form. The storyteller is more

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[125] Thomas, Jeff. "'Our' Artist." *Boreal Baroque: Mary Anne Barkhouse.* Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2007. p. 18.
[126] Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Illuminations.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. p. 83.
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

than narrator or narratee, which are both figments invented through the narrative process itself and exist only within its structure. The storyteller brings the story to the structure, full of life and the utter rawness of existence and truth.

Benjamin distinguishes between the author who writes the novel and the story that comes from the storyteller:

> The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of a novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself.[128]

This is where the wisdom Benjamin mentioned, the epic side of truth, resides. Benjamin reveals that the storyteller transcends the foundation of the novel and contemporary technology that seems to eclipse this ancient soul. The storyteller existed before the novel came to be and will exist long after the technologies of the book, the e-book and tablets have faded from consciousness. As Roland Barthes notes of the narrative into which the storyteller feeds his/her experience: "The narratives of the world are numberless. … narrative is present in almost every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative."[129]

The storyteller completes the narrative, for this presence is the one from whom the story in the narrative emerged. The narrative itself is a shell, a structure, like a house, in which the words fall into place, recreating on the page, in the mind,

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[128] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[129] Barthes, Roland. *op. cit.*, p. 79.

what the storyteller has woven from his experience, lived or heard. Storytelling is the most basic form of sharing. It links humans to each other through language and experience, remarking upon commonalities they themselves may not have realized they share. When humans feel disparate and can find no similarities in their interests, the truth of their nature is revealed in the stories where they find common ground.

John Berger touches on this in his text "The Storyteller", a compelling look at the sharing of happenings not quite discernable over difference and distance. He opens the text with a look at how he came to know that he shares this inexplicable, unannounced connection with a farmer in an unnamed peasant village:

> After working together each morning we used to drink coffee together and he would talk about his village. ... From time to time I caught an expression in his eyes, a certain look of complicity. ... About something we share despite the obvious differences. ... we are both historians of our time. We both see how events fit together. ... It was the look of one storyteller to another.[130]

He draws together this complicity through difference as an act of giving meaning to experience, of knowing how to draw experiences together into narratives and translating them again into writing. He relates stories back to villages which he states all tell their own stories:

> Stories of the past, even of the distant past. As I was walking in the mountains with another friend of seventy by the foot of a high cliff, he told me how a young girl had fallen to her death there, whilst hay-making on the alpage above. Was that before the war? I asked. In about 1800 (no misprint), he said.[131]

The stories fall into a space between myth and narrative and this is where true experience lies. They reveal the simple existential narrative of people in a similar manner to the stories found in the *Íslendiga sögur.*

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[130] Berger, John. "The Storyteller." *John Berger: Selected Essays.* Ed. Geoff Dyer. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001. p. 365-366.
[131] *Ibid.*, p. 366-367.

Iceland carries a long narrative history embedded in its culture from the days of settlement until the present. Nordic storytellers passed on their tales of victorious raids, pillages and conquest of the land and sea orally for centuries and these became the *Poetic Edda* and *Íslendiga Sögur*. The stories and myths formed the foundation of what could be called the spirit of the nation – an interpretation of a collective consciousness within which a continuity of understanding resides, in this case partly based on the influence of the Medieval myths and Sagas. Once they had been recorded, one member of a family who was literate would recount the tales to the other members by the light of an evening fire during the long dark winters. Today they are read in the schools, translated into different languages and analysed in universities.

The storytellers are at the root of these narratives and brought them to life. Remaining unauthored, these stories were borne from the spirit of a collective narrative consciousness. Scribes merely marked down the ageless tales in order to secure their safe passage through time. The narrative tradition is embedded in the history of the nation, yet it is the storyteller who lives on. The storyteller is one of many layers embedded in a given narrative, ebbing into the collective consciousness of a nation. Their essence remains intact in the stories of the nation, and their presence is felt through each reading. Here the subversive elements that often function only in non-traditional narrative forms find their discursive place. As the Icelandic nation grew into its own unique place in the world, narrative remained an integral part of society. The storyteller prevailed in Iceland, proving in the end to be more compelling than narrative itself as this figures offers both a traditional role as well as the opportunity for transgression from the confines of predetermined beliefs.

3.4 Telling Stories: Narrative, National Identity and the Icelandic *heim*.

> I walk with my back to the sea, horizons straight ahead
> Wave the sea away and back it comes,
> Step and I slip on it.
> Crawling in my journey's footsteps
> When I stand it fills my bones.[132]

In his text "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation" cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha speaks of the act of "writing the nation", the temporality and liminality at the base of nationhood. He contemplates the understanding of the construction of a nation, of a national identity and the place narrative holds in the building of such an understanding of national identity. His approach is post-colonial, retracing the impact of colonialism on the conception of nationhood. Similar to the text of Rosi Braidotti, Bhabha's text embraces the periphery of normative thought, allowing the margins to overturn traditional ways of thinking about the meaning of nationhood while investigating how the narrative of a nation is conceived, written and represented. Thus his text offers an alternative path for understanding national identity. His perspective is particularly salient when considering narrative history because he is preoccupied with the way the nation's story is recorded and retold.

Bhabha's text illuminates that it is the origin, the foundation of "nations," that is ambiguous and troublesome in the understanding of national identity. In fact the concept of nationalism, due to its own ambiguous and questionable nature, exists in a discursive and marginal space. As Bhabha notes:

> It is indeed only in the disjunctive time of the nation's modernity – as a knowledge disjunct between political rationality and its impasse, between the

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[132] From the film *Handsworth Songs*, Black Audio Collective, 1985.

> shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy – that questions of nation as narration come to be posed.[133]

The nation exists as a narrative because its story and its history are remembered, recorded and retold, comparable with the stories that have been woven by storytellers. Bhabha investigates an understanding of the way in which the narrative of the nation is constructed and shared. As he notes: "How do we plot the narrative of the nation that must mediate between the teleology of progress tipping over into the 'timeless' discourse of irrationality?"[134] Bhabha illustrates his point through several examples of what could constitute "national narratives", in the same way that the *Íslendiga sögur* or the novels of Icelandic novelist Halldór Kilijan Laxness act in Iceland's narrative heritage. Through an investigation of Goethe's *Italian Journey* he illustrates in particular the meticulous elements of "everyday life" that come to portray the characters in narratives but even more so the nation they represent:

> Goethe's realist narrative produces a national-historical time that makes visible a specifically Italian day in the detail of its passing time, ... For Bakhtin it is Goethe's vision of the microscopic, elementary, perhaps random tolling of everyday life in Italy that reveals the profound history of its locality (*Lokalität*), the spatialization of historical time, 'a creative humanization of this locality which transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people.'[135]

While the above citation cannot determine an exact replica of the experience of any given writer in any given country, it indicates an example of the kind of vision one may garner from a narrative that could be deemed "national. Goethe's "realist narrative" reveals what Bhabha terms a "national-historical time" that offers an opportunity for understanding the importance of the telling of everyday details that often come to represent a specific notion of identity and nation.

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[133] Bhabha, Homi, K. "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routeledge, 1990. p. 293.
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
[135] *Ibid.*, p. 294-295.

More than just the narratives of a nation's writers, a people and a nation are made in a sense through their language and the language that ties the narratives of that people together. Narrative and language, nation and people are all intertwined and in a mutual collaboration form a web of continuity. Each of these aspects supports and reinforces the other. Bhabha notes in particular the importance of metaphor and its link to communities – imagined or otherwise: "Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage', or the central European steppes, across those distances and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people."[136] Narrative symbolically bridges this divide, providing a forum for inclusion and reunion over time and space. In the narrative, in the act of writing the nation, the marginal and the median are bridged.

A core element of any narrative is the subject, the central character who lives out the simple tolling of everyday life of the realist novel or the exploits of revenge common to every Icelandic saga. The relationship between the subject and the narrative time he/she inhabits allows for a compelling understanding of where the narrative is in time and space: "The subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between 'here' and 'somewhere else', ..."[137] The subject of the narrative exists in the marginal space, and as can be read in Bhabha's text, in a nomadic place where time shifts between past and present and transcends the limits of boundaries. Bhabha's national narrative allows for this fluid construction and encourages this shifting away from solidity, from fixity and borders.

The discontinuity of time and the modern nation, and as Benedict Anderson suggests: "... the imaginary or mythical nature of the society of the nation"[138] is the most problematic aspect of the concept of nationhood. In his text "Narrating the

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[136] *Ibid.*, p. 291.
[137] *Ibid.*, p. 301.
[138] Anderson, Benedict. "Narrating the Nation." *Times Literary Supplement.* 13 June 1986. p. 659.

Nation" Anderson proposes a narrative time, what he calls *meanwhile*, which allows for: "... transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar."[139] Anderson's hypothesis is quite radical because it posits the imaginary status of a nation, something that peoples across the world have come to believe in. Bhabha reinforces this idea but however notes the problems involved in the notion of nation as imagined community: "... the narrative of the imagined community is constructed from two incommensurable temporalities of meaning that threaten its coherence."[140]

As untenable as it may seem, the disjuncture that Anderson has set up and that Bhabha deconstructs in the text "DissemiNation" opens up a dialogue for this notion of identity as nomadic. It allows for the narrative of the nation to exist in the margins and anti-narrative time to coexist with its own disjointed temporalities. It does not imply that chaos prevails but instead allows for discontinuity and for movement in the disjuncture between narrative and "nation time":

> At this point I must give way to the *vox populi*: to a relatively unspoken tradition of the people of the pagus – colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities – wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *Heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation.[141]

It is apropos that Bhabha cites the term *Heim* or even more intriguingly the *national Heim*, as the place of the wandering peoples who will not be contained. This idea marks the nomadic nature at the base of the Icelandic nation. For *heim* is the Icelandic word for home. *Heim* is also used as a synonym for Iceland itself. The boundaries of the national *heim* in Iceland are as such very fluid, and every individual arriving on the small Island nation is welcomed with the phrase *"Wilkommin heim"*: Welcome to Iceland but also literally Welcome Home. Iceland

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[139] *Ibid.*
[140] Bhabha, Homi K. *op. cit.*, p. 308.
[141] *Ibid.*, p. 315.

is both nation to the Icelandic people, home to the Icelandic people, but also home to the wandering soul who arrives on the island. In this way Iceland's boundaries are not limited by national identity. Iceland dislodges the problematic trope of nation as exclusive. This term, *heim*, acts to erode the inclusive notion of "home" and welcomes those who travel within Iceland's physical borders created by the sea.

CHAPTER 4

A VISION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ICELANDIC CONTEMPORARY ART

4.1 Icelandic Colours: Seeing National Identity.

Though landscape has often been seen as a conduit for the exploration of national identity in Iceland, Icelandic contemporary artists were investigating the notion more critically through the use of other themes. One such artist was Birgir Andrésson (1955 – 2007). His career spanned only three decades yet he was a prolific artist, holding dozens of one-man exhibitions and as Icelandic art historian and critic Jón Proppé states "... more group shows than probably he could remember."[142] What brings Birgir to this discussion is his attraction to: "... that peculiarly Icelandic manifestation that is gleaned primarily from oral transmission and enshrined in sayings, character descriptions, nicknames and linguistic trivia."[143] He, like Ólöf and Steingrímur, sought to question national identity in Iceland and used the means by which that identity had been constructed to do so.

Much of Birgir's work explores his quest for an understanding of the nature of Icelanders. In his text "From Repetition to Exception," art historian Gunnar J. Árnarson writes about the issue of Icelandic national identity and how Icelanders wanted to carve out recognition of their uniqueness on a global level. He speaks of Birgir's monochromatic painting series *Icelandic Colours* in this context:

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[142] Proppé, Jón. "Birgir Andrésson 1955 – 2007." *LIST 16: Icelandic Art News*. Dec/Jan. 2008. 30 October 2012. Web. [http://www.artnews.is/issue016/016_birgir.htm].
[143] *Ibid.*

> ... *Icelandic Colours* opens up the question of where the uniqueness of Icelandic characteristics are to be found and what they consist of. One proposed characteristic of the national is Icelandic artists' distinct use of colour – that the colours in Icelandic landscape paintings are different from those seen elsewhere in Europe. ... Birgir's series offers a seemingly simple solution by making use of a single colour, identified by a colour code number from the international Pantone Matching System, and declaring that the colour is Icelandic.[144]

What is ironic about this series and inherent in Birgir's approach is the absurd idea that there are certain colours that can represent what it means to be Icelandic and as such, the series reveals the stakes involved in the attempt to classify "Icelandic." The idea of Icelandic colours is both an illusion and a joke as well as a solemn revelation on the subject of national identity. As Birgir has said: "This little rock in the sea is crowded with misunderstanding and understanding of itself and what washes up on its beaches from distant continents. This concoction is the soup on which I feed and what I fill my stomach with as an artist."[145]

Another piece by Birgir, *Error-Corrections* (1993)[146] explores "Icelandic-ness" through the Icelandic alphabet. The piece demonstrates the problem of adapting the Icelandic language for a foreign reader. Eva Heisler in her text "Anticipations of Memory: Icelandic Artists and Storytelling" examines this piece:

> [Birgir] ...reproduces the Icelandic alphabet, replacing accented letters and those unique to Icelandic with vague alphabetic forms based on the floor plans of turf houses. Only someone familiar with the Icelandic language would recognize that, for example, floor plans are used in lieu of yfsilon y [ý], eth [ð] or thorn [þ]. If one reads Icelandic, the diagrams are errors; if one reads English, as I do, the diagrams "correct" the excesses of a foreign

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[144] Gunnar J. Árnason. "From Repetition to Exception." Trans. Katelin Parsons. *Perspectives: At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy*. Reykjavík: Reykjavík Art Museum, 2011. p. 68.
[145] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[146] No image of this work is available.

> alphabet. The Icelandic alphabet adapts itself to the foreigner – and so ruins itself – by displaying remains of the past.[147]

Error-Corrections, as with *Icelandic Colours*, used established iconography connected to the construction of national identity and exposed them as cliché and questionable. In the end: "... he dissolved the symbols that have been used to explain the Icelanders' national identity to themselves and found instead a method he could use to expand and deepen his own research."[148] Birgir's work erupted like a volcano to reveal the necessity of looking more critically at national identity.

Ólöf Nordal and Steingrímur Eyfjörð carry on this same consideration into the nature or identity of Icelanders through their work, though each approaches the question of identity from a different standpoint. For them narrative and myth both play salient roles in their explorations. They also use their investigations involving these fundamental aspects to destabilize normative understandings of how Icelandic narrative heritage contributes to the formation of the national identity. The presence of the storyteller emerges as the underlying movement that unites their work, while a nomadic version of identity threads its way through from piece to piece, creating a woven fabric from their stories.

As Birgir revealed a way of *seeing* national identity through his investigations of key visual iconography and invented symbols, Ólöf and Steingrímur too reveal a lens with which to see national identity. Their work exposes the foundational narrative heritage through their reinterpretation of myths and legends in adapting the role of contemporary storyteller. Through this role, Ólöf and Steingrímur weave the essence of the traditional *Sagas* and myths into their

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[147] Heisler, Eva, "Anticipations of Memory: Icelandic Artists and Storytelling", in *Art Papers*, Jan/Feb 2008. 14 November 2011. Web. [http://www.artpapers.org/feature_articles/feature1_2008_0102.htm].

[148] Proppé, Jón, *op. cit.*

work yet at the same time retell stories, inverting and integrating them into a new history.

4.2 The Storyteller in Icelandic Narrative History.

The individuals who recorded the *Sagas* and the *Poetic Edda* on vellum centuries ago carved a foothold in the narrative history of Iceland. Their work was the impetus for the preservation of an ancient, oral based, narrative history that would have faded into oblivion had these stories been lost. Those scribes also characterize the unique voice of the sagas. They are the storytellers who recount these stories yet remain anonymous.

Despite the absence of the author and the anonymity of the storyteller the weight of this role is clearly felt when reading the *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda*, perhaps, in some cases, more so than the characteristics of the narratives themselves. The ancient turfhouse where the stories were read beside the fire throughout the winter is embedded in these tales; the voices who read the stories aloud through the darkest days and nights of the cold season echo in the *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda* even today. Each individual who picks up a *Saga* and begins to read it steps into the role of the storyteller, carrying the words forward, cradling the experience of ancient men and women and ferrying it into the light of contemporary society. It is through these voices that the *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda* survive.

It is this heritage of the storyteller that is carried forward. Benjamin announced his fear of the novel being the demise of the story in his text "The Storyteller." Here he enunciates the differences between the story and the novel by highlighting the fact that the only way the novel can be disseminated is through the technology of printing: "What can be handed on orally, the wealth of epic, is of a

different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel." [149] He further reveals that the novel is different from all other prose literature due to its distance from oral tradition. Moreover, Benjamin distinguishes the solitude involved in not only the writing of a novel: "The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual,..."[150] but the reading of it:

> A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as the fire devours the logs in the fireplace. ... What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.[151]

An unauthored story cannot resemble the novel which Benjamin feared would be the death of the storyteller. The *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda* as they are remain the stories of experience. Here lies the truth of their existence. The *Sagas* and *Poetic Edda* were borne of stories shared between generations and, in essence, established the bedrock of the nation. They do not contain many of the qualities that novels possess, but because of this they are able to reveal more of the actual reality of life in Iceland between the 9th and 12th centuries. These stories now exist in the form the novel takes: that of the printed book, made accessible by the invention of printing. However, despite this fact, these stories have travelled on the breath of time and reached us as if they have only just been whispered directly to us from the original settlers of Iceland. This heritage that only the story can carry, having originated in oral tradition, is not diminished through translation of languages and translation from word of mouth to written word on a page. When reading the

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[149] Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Illuminations.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. p. 87.
[150] *Ibid.*
[151] *Ibid.*, p. 100-101.

Sagas and the *Poetic Edda*, the weight of their history and tradition sweep over the reader, as the waves of the Atlantic swept the settlers towards their new homeland over a thousand years ago.

This experience of the narrative surfaces in the *oeuvres* of Ólöf and Steingrímur. Their work conveys the essence of Icelandic narrative heritage in the only way an Icelander would experience it: in the spirit of a true storyteller. Ólöf and Steingrímur's work does not simply re-appropriate the salient characters, events and locations that are preserved in the foundational narratives of the *Sagas* and the *Poetic Edda*. Instead, they come to these narratives from a more critical stance.

Ólöf and Steingrímur do not only act as contemporary storytellers for the foundational myths and *Sagas* but also for another kind of national story: those that have happened in lived history. Their retelling also invokes, questions and subverts the national importance of key sites and moments in history such as the site of the national parliament at Þingvellir, stories of national deceit and tragedy such as the epic of the great auk and the history of the existence of hidden people. Many of these stories are intrinsic to the history of the Icelandic people. Yet others have never existed as histories as such, and therefore are being written, in a sense, for the first time with these works of art. All of these works have the subversive quality with which they approach these different narratives in common, whether they are rooted literally in the myths and *Sagas*, landmarks of history, or an existential narrative that has yet to be written.

4.3 The Ebb of Time: Nomadic Tendencies.

The Icelandic storytellers had their roots in the Nordic landscape of the 9th century. The foundational stories of the island travelled over the seas, borne on the waves of time, as the Norwegian seafarers made their way to the island they would come to settle. These stories would continue their journey, carried through the centuries from mouth to mouth. Yet the national narrative transcends these stories, though they remain intact as a vital part of the foundation of the nation's spirit. Through a tumultuous history, Icelanders have found a different comprehension of what identity can mean in their island nation. They have kept their beliefs intact, they have allowed for the heritage of their Nordic forefathers to carry on through the generations; their physical boundaries are fixed by contemporary notions and literally by the perilous waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

National identity is a complex multifaceted notion and there exists no singular definition that can succinctly encapsulate its essence. The nebulous aspect of the concept of nation is aptly put by Benedict Anderson in his statement that: "... [the nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[152] The borders that act to define and enclose nations are imaginary; lines that exist as invisible walls dividing spaces into separate communities. Being both limited by national and sovereign borders identifies a problematic state and itself restricts the discursive possibilities for an expansive understanding of national identity.

Writing about nationalism nearly 100 years earlier than Anderson, French theorist Ernest Renan was concerned with similar questions about nationhood. In attempting to illuminate the spirit of a nation, in his text "What is a Nation?" Renan

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[152] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Orgin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. p. 6.

put it quite simply: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle."[153] He continued by clarifying this rather radical and existential perspective:

> Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. ... The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifices and devotion. ... A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.[154]

Renan reached this point through several steps. He examined various factors believed to influence the structuring of a nation: race, language, religion and even geographic particularities, characteristics unique to each nation. However, Renan's hypothesis as seen in the simple statement above, suggests that the nation is something much more profound than these categories. He suggests in fact that the nation is as human as humanity itself; a modest thought and likely often overlooked. The nation is human because, simply, it is made up of humans. As he stated:
"..., nations participate in the common work of civilization; each sounds a note in the great concert of humanity, which, after all, is the highest ideal reality that we are capable of attaining."[155]

Renan's text, originally a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882, is quite celebrated. It opened the doors on the discussion of nation and nationalism, yet was not without fault, being criticized for ambiguous and sweeping assertions. Nonetheless, Renan advanced a radical approach to understanding the nation.

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[153] Renan, Ernest. "What is a nation?" *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routeledge, 1990. p. 19.
[154] *Ibid.*
[155] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Opening the mind to seeing the abstract idea of "nation" through the gentle lens of humanity offers an opportunity to see the vulnerable side of an established institution that seems unwavering. Coming to the idea of nationhood from this angle provides an ideal opportunity for broadening the perspective on how the people of a nation can see themselves. If the nation is humanity itself, certainly the citizens of a given nation are living it in the most existential sense. As the conviction of the nation as human and Anderson's observation of the nation as an imagined community collide, the aftershock of this impact reveals the advantage of approaching national identity from the margins, from the perspective of movement, change and fluidity.

Timothy Brennan, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Purdue University, outlines his observations on the marginal aspects of understanding the meaning of a nation in his text "The National Longing for Form": "As a term, [nation] refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the *'natio'* – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging."[156] This *natio*, denoting community and belonging, implies a less structured and dictated sense of nation than how it exists today. It links us to the places and people we are connected to in our community, suggesting further that if one was to become part of a community in a "nation" other than one's own, one would then be part of this new "nation." What characterizes the modern-day nation and how national identity is construed is a contemporary understanding of the division of space. This is the place where a nomadic version of national identity is found. Revisiting Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the division of space and their use of the term *nomos* to understand this use of space, it becomes clear that at a certain point in history, as noted above, nation-space was understood in a different context. The *natio* like the nomadic *nomos* entailed a consideration of individuals

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[156] Brennan, Timothy. "National Longing for Form." in *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routeledge, 1990. p. 45.

within a space rather than the more structured and limiting notions attached to contemporary understandings of the word "nation." Nations today are divided by borders which denote where one nation begins and another ends. Crossing these lines is regulated. Individuals no longer "distribute *themselves*" in these spaces, but are distributed by means of the appropriated war machine.

In order to overcome these strict and limiting understandings of nation and national identity, approaching the concept of national identity from the point of nomadic thought allows for the concept to open and move into marginal thinking. This perspective acts to free the restrictions placed on what can and cannot be understood as national identity away from normative manners of thinking and understanding. In translating their identity through their narrative heritage a nomadic version of Icelandic identity emerges. The smooth space of thinking where nomadic thought originates resembles the space of the State, but functions through totally different means and is more akin to the concept of *natio*. The State regulates movement through its space, whereas within a nomadic smooth space, movement is not confined and can change course at any moment. Applying this concept in regards to identity allows for an open formulation of what national identity means. Nomadic identity allows for the rising up and changing of what would normally be understood as national identity.

However, the nomadic tendencies that lend an alternative approach to national identity are not solely concerned with movement. Movement is integral to identity as nomadic, as nomadism finds its roots in nomadic peoples. What Deleuze, Guattari and Braidotti endeavour to do is free this concept from its own confines, enacting "nomadic-ness" from within and without the very concept that embodies it: "'Nomad thought' does not lodge itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides

difference."[157] Massumi conveys this "nomadic-ness" within the concept. Nomadic thought is active and willing, almost a living, breathing entity which continues to propose alterations to tradition. As he also states: "The modus operandi of nomad thought is affirmation, even when its apparent object is negative."[158] By dissolving the fundamental approaches to constructing an identity that have shaped Western thought, nomadism resolves the marginal position through the integration of equality between the polarities established by traditional categories of identity.

Ólöf and Streingrímur's work exists at the margins. Their work does not bend to the rhythm of normative Western thought. Instead, it moves along and under the surface, laterally expanding the edges of understanding and consciousness. They question the normative understanding of narrative heritage by subverting the role of the storyteller, the very meaning and heritage of the stories they inherited. Retelling is the key approach that they use in order to accomplish their peripheral understanding of Icelandic national identity.

4.4 Peripheral Way. The Work of Ólöf and Steingrímur.

The margins, the periphery exist along the edges of normative consciousness. This is the location where nomadic identity can flourish and the place where the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur can be seen from the most enlightened perspective. Their work moves over and laterally around established traditions, invoking the narrative heritage yet inscribing it with new meaning through their adaptation of traditional stories, urban myths and the exploration of historical sites and events. The works of Ólöf and Steingrímur approach narrative and national heritage from a

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[157] Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992. p. 5.
[158] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

subversive perspective, allowing for a nomadic intervention which in turn permits a re-evaluation of the established vision of identity. Their work steers the viewer directly away from the traditional and the normative towards a radical and open-ended position that furthers the dialogue around what identity in Iceland means. Though each artist approaches identity from a slightly different path, it is their integration of elements of narrative and their interpretation of the storyteller in a contemporary manner that draws their work together. It is thus important to re-examine each of their works in order to *see*, in the Birgir Andrésson sense, the emergence and intersecting paths of Ólöf and Steingrímur's works, where their role as storyteller and their vision of identity come together to interact, re-examine and subvert.

Two mythic characters in particular surface in Ólöf Nordal's *Íslenskt dýrasafn* that act to underline the narrative heritage she draws upon. The lamb named Sleipnir and the raven both carry particular significance as both are related to Óðinn, the most powerful of the Norse gods. In Norse myth, Sleipnir was so powerful that he was coveted by Óðinn who made the horse his own. Having eight legs, Sleipnir was the swiftest and most powerful horse in Nordic mythology. The eddic poem "Baldr's Dream" speaks of an occasion where Óðinn and Sleipnir rode together to Hel: "Up rose Óðinn, the sacrifice for men, / and on Sleipnir he laid a saddle; / down he rode to Mist-hell, / … Then Óðinn rode by the eastern doors, / where he knew the seeress's grave to be;."[159] Only a horse as mighty as Sleipnir would be fit to carry the All-Father to Hel and back again. The raven was the messenger of Óðinn: "Two ravens sit on Óðinn's shoulders, and into his ears they tell all the news they see or hear."[160] The god had two, named Hugin and Munin, meaning thought and memory, who travelled far and wide bringing back messages they overheard: "At sunrise he sends them off to fly throughout the whole world,

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[159] n.a. "Baldr's Dream" v.2 – 4. *The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Carolyne Larrington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 243.

[160] Snorri Sturluson. *Prose Edda*. Trans. Jesse L. Byock. London: Penguin, 2005. p. 47.

and they return in time for the first meal. Thus he gathers knowledge about many things that are happening, ..."[161] These two specimens carry implicit narrative meaning, being central to the story of Óðinn. This is where their significance lies, in terms of narrative heritage in Iceland, yet it is Ólöf's reappropriation of these characters which speaks more critically and eloquently to this heritage.

In the myths they were drawn from these creatures were powerful symbols often carrying ominous meaning. However, in *Íslenskt dýrasafn* Ólöf has reappropriated these significant symbols and subverted their meaning. The lamb named Sleipnir has three legs, a rarity like that of the mythic Sleipnir but not nearly as impressive. The lamb is pitiful, standing awkwardly and forelorn in its native habitat. He is accompanied by two other lambs, Cyclopes and Janus, who also exhibit strange deformities. Though neither Janus nor Cyclopes originate in Nordic mythology, they do carry the semblance of characters that appear in some form in the foundational myths and *Sagas.* Cyclopes, with one eye, speaks to the identity of Óðinn. How Óðinn lost one of his eyes is recounted in The Ash of Yggdrasil known as the World Tree in Norse myth:

> Then Gangleri said, 'Where is the central or holy place of the gods?' High answered, 'It is at the ash Yggdrasil. There each day the gods hold their courts.' Then Gangleri said, 'What is there to tell about this place?' Then Just-as-High said, 'the ash is the largest and the best of all trees. ... Three roots support the tree and they are spread very far apart. ... A second is among the frost giants where Ginnungagap once was. ... Under the root that goes to the frost giants is the Well of Mimir. Wisdom and intelligence are hidden there, and Mimir is the name of the well's owner. He is full of wisdom because he drinks of the well from the Gjallarhorn. All-Father went there and asked for one drink from the well, but he did not get this until he gave one of his eyes as a pledge.[162]

Cyclopes thus, standing next to Sleipnir amongst the lava and rocks, gazing towards the viewer with his one eye is a somber testament to the story of the All-Father

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[161] *Ibid.*

[162] *Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

giving his eye for a drink of wisdom and intelligence at the Well of Mimir. The lamb, a deformed animal, in a sense undermines the legacy of Óðinn through his piteous air. Janus, on the other hand, with his two heads looking forward and backward into time and space, draws the narrative discontinuity of the piece together while also recalling a story found in the *Vatnsdæla saga (The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal)* estimated to have occurred between 875 and 1000 AD and recorded between 1270 and 1320 AD:

> After that Ingimund went home. He built a splendid homestead and soon became a chieftain of the Vatnsdal people and of the adjoining areas. He owned a good many livestock, both cows and sheep and other beasts. That same autumn some sheep went astray and were found the following spring in the woods – this place is now called Saudadal (Sheep Valley). The excellence of the land at this time can be judged from the fact that all the sheep fed themselves out of doors.[163]

Now appearing in *Íslenskt dýrasafn*, Janus the two-headed sheep, perhaps a descendant of the sheep of Saudadal, looks back to his origins, and the story found in this saga, and forward to his reappropriated self as a two-headed lamb in Ólöf's specimen collection. Together these three specimens, recall, examine and subvert the characters for which they are named. Curiously enough, the sheep does not seem to be a significant animal in Norse mythology, appearing nowhere throughout the *Poetic Edda*. In Icelandic history however the sheep played an intrinsic role in the economy and ecology of the country. They were the staple animal on every farm, roam free among the hills and fjords providing food and wool. Sheep still today roam freely in flocks or are often found in pairs on the side of a high mountain. Ólöf's *Íslenskt dýrasafn* also makes note of the importance of the sheep historically and contemporaneously while also commenting on their absence in Norse myth. By framing sheep within principal myths where they normally would hold little to no significance, Ólöf repositions the inherent importance of sheep in other areas of

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[163] n.a. "The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal." *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Eds. Örnólfur Þorsson and Bernard Scudder. Eds. Trans. Andrew Wawn. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. p. 212.

Icelandic culture and history while also positing the question of their relation to mythology and its place in Icelandic society.

The raven, left unnamed except for its species, is also no longer surrounded by the mythical aura normally attached to it. Dead, still and white – devoid of the pigmentation that normally gives this bird its alluring black colour the raven here is lacking any mythical meaning. The ominous message of the raven is lessened even further as it is paired with birds who carry little significance within the myths and merely exist as species native to Iceland. The raven no longer carries the words of Óðinn. Instead, it lays dead and white alongside its fellow albino birds, no longer flying through the majestic sky it has been photographed in.

In other works, Ólöf does not draw directly from established narratives, but instead from urban myths and stories that are passed down orally mimicking the origin of the *Sagas* and the *Poetic Edda*. These pieces reinforce the subversive quality of her approach, underlining the need to examine critically the narrative heritage present in Icelandic culture while taking a radical approach to reappropriating this same heritage. *Geirfugl* cements the fate of the great auk in a near life-sized statue of the bird. Stranded in the sea during the day, the bird appears homeless and lost. With the ebbing of the sea, the bird sits perched on a small rock, equally adrift and forsaken. In this manner, the extinct species has been resurrected yet its loss to the world and its state of being lost must be remarked upon over and over. Without permanent land to stand on *Geirfugl* takes on a nomadic sensibility. Lost in time and space, this vanished bird, rebuilt in aluminium, mourns a loss yet also marks it and in this way does not fully allow for a closed circuit experience of this loss.

Similarly, *Gull* is not inspired directly by any specific myth or foundational story yet draws from the *Sagas* and the *Poetic Edda* in a direct and unflinching manner. Resembling hybrid creatures, a cross between human, animal and mythical

beast, the pieces in *Gull* mimic characters of intrinsic consequence to the myths. For example, *Fingurskjá* resembles the coils of the *Miðgarðsomr*, another child of Loki: "... All-Father sent the gods to seize the children ... he threw the [*Miðgarðsomr*] serpent into the deep sea that surrounds all lands. But the serpent grew so large that now, out in the middle of the ocean, it lies coiled around all lands, biting its tail."[164] *Hafmeyjaskjá* on the other hand, could resemble any number of goddesses – Ran, Saga, Frigg or Hladgud, of even the daughter of Ægir who personifies the waves – or the swan-maidens from the eddic poem "The Lay of Volund":

> Early in the morning, they found three women on the shore, and they were spinning linen. Near them were their swan's garments; they were *valkeyries*. There were two daughters of King Hlodver – Hladgud the swan-white, and Hervor, the strange creature – the third was Olrun, the daughter of Kiar of Valland. ... They lived together seven winters. Then the women flew off to go to battle and did not come back.[165]

Though *Hafmeyjaskjá* does not have a cloak of feathers, she appears as a human figure who also possesses the features of an animal. As with the swan-maidens, *Hafmeyjaskjá* eludes a traditional human role. Carolyn Larrington notes that the swan-maidens in this poem have human names yet also possess: "... by-names which indicate their swan natures."[166] This suggests a duality to their existence, one human and one of a more supernatural leaning. Once the swan-maidens dawn their clocks of feathers, they have the ability to disguise their human selves and evade human roles, such as the domesticity involved in married life. It is tenable that *Hafmeyjaská,* as a human/animal hybrid, also possesses such abilities. *Hvitabjörinnskjá,* similar to Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse, and numerous other creatures found in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Sagas,* the pieces in the series *Gull* are half human, half animal, becoming monstrous creations. They do not accompany

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[164] Snorri Sturluson, *op. cit.* p. 39.

[165] n.a. "The Lay of Volund" prose. *The Poetic Edda. Ibid.,* p. 102.

[166] Larrington, Carolyn. *The Poetic Edda.* p. 277.

any particular story told in Iceland, yet when looking at the artworks, one has the distinct feeling of an underlying residual story being told. The elements that bring these pieces together are inherently narrative based, drawing fragments from poems of the *Poetic Edda* combined with unmistakable references to Nordic myth. These disparate figments are then woven together alluding to a story but evading any concrete narrative.

Ólöf's most recent series, *Musée Islandique*, draws directly from history and is inspired by the lives of Icelanders preserved through museological techniques. In this case, as a contemporary storyteller, Ólöf has woven together from the disparate pieces that remain of these individuals' lives, a retelling of their existence. Her compositions of busts and collected body parts present an ominous pastiche of Iceland's colonial history. Their story, however, does not stop there, and it is not only the narrative heritage of the storyteller that emerges at the core of this series. In *Musée Islandique* it is also the essential truth and everyday banality of the lives of regular Icelanders from 1856 that emerges.

Ólöf in her role as contemporary storyteller evinces the mythic and the mundane. Her works capture the underlying essence of foundational stories through her retelling of salient elements from these tales while also giving voice to stories found outside of the foundational narratives. Weaving these together, Ólöf captures facets of cultural heritage embedded in Icelandic society, traces of which have trickled into contemporary notions of Icelandic nationhood.

Steingrímur Eyfjörð's interest in *húldufólk* is the subject of many of his pieces and positions his work at a distinct vantage point for the observation, analysis and consequent destabilization of traditional understandings of national identity in Iceland. In *From the World of Elves*, Steingrímur gathered together a series of objects that supposedly belonged to hidden people. It is implied that these objects originated in the collection of *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.* Creating a bridge between the

metaphysical world of hidden people and the reality of the everyday lives of Icelanders, the objects in this series could have very well belonged to hidden people, or simply have belonged to humans. Yet, the piece allows for the imagining of their existence. The captions that accompany each piece act as a bridge between the unbelievable and the believable, as well as literally telling the story of each piece. Short and simple statements, the captions do not draw from the cornerstone tales, but instead re-fictionalize the story of an existing artefact. In this re-telling Steingrímur positions real objects originating from one of the most important museological collections in Iceland within the pretexts of a second, not entirely visible society existing in Iceland. In doing so, he creates the ideal forum for opening the dialogue onto the discussion in earnest of *húldufólk*. Equally, he repositions the existing narratives about *húldufólk*, allowing them to re-emerge in contemporary thought and society, therefore permitting a broader and alternative context for their re-telling.

The case is similar with *The Sheep Pen*. Here, an object is created using the specifications communicated by a hidden person and subsequently displayed in a museum. The piece functions on a level much deeper than merely the end object. It is the story surrounding the creation of the sheep pen for *húldukind* that captures the essence of Steingrímur's endeavour to explore the existence of the hidden people in Iceland. This piece re-instigates this conversation as Steingrímur invents a contemporary mythology on *húldufólk* by literally bridging the gap between two worlds: that of human and hidden people, but also that of belief and disbelief. By offering this bridge, Steingrímur gently nudges our thoughts further to the side of belief in hidden people, a spectrum of thought one would normally not encounter or perhaps even consider in the forum of contemporary visual arts.

We the Hidden Ones, made in collaboration with Ólöf Arnalds, draws direct inspiration from narrative heritage and especially the undeniable presence of poetry in Icelandic literary history. Short stanzas of poetry are paired with odd, whimsical pen and ink drawings, depicting a version of the foundational narrative for hidden

people. This story mimics that of the settlers of Iceland, their journey across the sea fleeing King Harald Fairhair until they reached an island of fire and ice. The drawings themselves are abstract and non-figurative, while the lines of poetry that accompany each drawing depict the *húldufólk* story. This piece adds an unwritten tale to the history of Iceland. Enveloping the "second society" in the history of the nation, the piece thus includes *húldufólk* among the citizens of Iceland by unveiling their presence in Iceland's history. Therefore, the piece also contemplates the assumed history of *húldufólk* within traditional folklore as well as contemporary culture and how this contributes to a sense of Icelandic national identity.

Within Steingrímur's work there also appears a dedicated exploration of one of the most important geographical sites in Iceland – Þingvellir. This site bridges two tectonic plates, the meeting place of continents. It was established as the location of the national parliament back in the 9th century when Iceland was first settled. It is the enduring locus of assembly and discussion throughout the *Sagas*, in Nordic mythology, and in contemporary literature and non-fiction. Now a UNESCO-protected national park, Þingvellir remains one of the most important places of national heritage in Iceland. Through its recurrent presence in literary sources as well as at the forefront of the national consciousness, Þingvellir represents a discursive place in Icelandic literature, history, culture and society. The laws of Iceland were founded there, and people from near and far still gather there to celebrate the national day of Independence. Þingvellir is more than a geographical site, a national park, or simply the location of the original parliament. It enfolds a realm beyond that of humans alone, and this is what Steingrímur's work seeks to explore.

The connection made between *Beautiful Move* and Þingvellir is drawn upon from the discursive and otherworldly aspect of the place. Steingrímur simultaneously deconstructs and reveals the imagery present below the surface at Þingvellir by making visible what he refers to as *kynjamyndir*. Steingrímur's ability

to uncover the otherwordly character at work at this national site is what is most compelling about this act of deconstruction. The piece unveils the quality of belief that resists normative thinking and exemplifies the nomadic thought at the centre of Icelandic consciousness. Equally this piece recalls narrative heritage not only through the basic fact of the importance of Þingvellir in the *Sagas*, myths and literature but more directly through the recreation and appropriation of imagery that stems from these stories. His *kynjamyndir* become figurative and from the rock formations emerge figures of trolls, giants and hidden people. It is no coincidence that the *kynjamyndir* Steingrímur has found emerged from rock façades where hidden people are known to live and play. Further, this piece literally plays into the notion of predictable and unpredictable movement as the figures Steingrímur creates from the *kynjamyndir* become chess pieces. Their movement across a chessboard creates a story of its own as their path is undetermined and their movements capricious.

Steingrímur evokes Iceland's narrative heritage in his work *Bones in a Landslide*. This piece is a retelling of a legend. It both adduces the story of the way the *Vestmannæyjar* were created – ogres throwing rocks into the ocean – and the mythic yet mundane understanding of landslides in Iceland. As artist Haraldur Jónsson and Steingrímur discussed in their interview, there is a mythical quality to the occurrence of a landslide for Icelanders, reminding them of the raw and awesome power of Mother Nature and the precarious position the inhabitants of the world hold in relation to her. The legend of the rockslide states that this natural and destructive happening is caused by ogres and trolls living in the mountains. The tender divide between humans and the mythic otherworldly is reinforced while drawing out the narrative heritage connection.

Steingrímur's *Golden Plover* recalls national heritage and history in a manner similar to Ólöf's *Geirfugl*, apart from the dire matter of extinction that haunts the latter. *Golden Plover* is like a song of praise, reiterating the bird's joyous

position in Icelandic consciousness. The statue acts to welcome spring all year round, recalling both the cyclical nature of the seasons and the movement of time, light and frost. The Golden Plover is written into the history of Iceland, characterized in literature and poetry and appearing every spring in the national paper, the bird's sweet song of spring translated into the national vernacular and affixed in the collective consciousness. However, unlike *Geirfugl*, *Golden Plover* rejoices in its position as a figure of national heritage.

The legacy of Benedikt Gröndal, the epic figure and Icelandic philosopher who brought the world of aesthetics to his home island, resounds in the last piece, *Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal.* His name echoes through the tiny corridors of the reconstruction of his house at 16 Vesturgata. This piece roots itself in the foreground of his fading shadow, quietly rumbling in disquiet at the absurd notion of his memory being forgotten. He, his text and his home have all been resurrected in this piece, a quiet revolution, disallowing the act of forgetting. Drawn from a corner of Iceland's vast literary heritage, this piece requires the active participation of continual remembrance. This reconstruction of Benedikt's home is in some manner similar to the *Sheep Pen* that proposed a structure for a *húldukind* to live in. All the magic of Benedikt's writing was created and borne into Icelandic history at 16 Vesturgata, yet it is merely a house. *Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal* speaks more to the remembrance of Benedikt as a man and as a writerly soul than to the object that has been created to represent him. It is in remarking upon his absence that Benedikt's memory is reconciled with the present, his writing making a reappearance to be reread or discovered anew.

What remains central to the pieces concerning the *húldufólk*, as well as those observing the inherited importance of national tradition, is the nebulous division

between the two societies residing in Iceland.[167] A division appears between two distinct worlds; the world of Icelanders, whose society for centuries has revolved around the magnetic transitory nature of Þingvellir; and the world visible to some of *húldufólk* and other mythical creatures, canonized in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Sagas* that continues to reside in the collective consciousness and reality of Iceland. This notion of two societies is explored by Kirsten Hastrup in her book *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World.* In this book Hastrup refers to there being two centres in Iceland: Þingvellir, the original site of the Alþingi and *Ódáðahraun.* This second location is in the highlands of Iceland – an elusive location, isolated, barren and rugged, where Icelanders believe outlaws and mythical beings hide. Hastraup points out that the centre of society for humans has been parliament – organized and safe. However, outside these bounds lies another kind of society.[168]

Not only do hidden people reside in the collective consciousness of the nation as an integral part of society, they also gather at a central place as intrinsic to their society as Þingvellir is to Icelanders. *Ódáðahraun* resembles the significance and foundational presence of Þingvellir in the realm of the *húldufólk.* This concept of a second centre links together the seemingly disparate approaches of Ólöf and Steingrímur. The second centre is itself a nomadic space, providing the marginal sphere for contemplating national identity in Icelandic culture. This space can encompass not only the "outlaws and mystical beings" but all those figures that have been explored in the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur: Benedikt Gröndal, the various bird species, and both Sleipnir's. Icelandic theorist Þórunn Erla Valdimarsdóttir describes this elusive understanding of *húldufólk*:

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[167] This idea of two societies – humans and *húlduffólk* – is explored in the film *Húldufólk 102*, directed by Nisha Inalsingh. Middle Link and Kisi Productions. 2005.

[168] Hastrup, Kirsten. *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World.* London: Oxford University Press, 1998.

> [...] in the old culture there had also been a horizontal model of belief in otherworldly entities, elves, trolls, and nothing could topple this sphere of ideas, it lived on through the centuries and thankfully still does.[169]

This horizontal model of belief recalls the nomadic thought explored by Deleuze and Guattari. Moving laterally, such a model does not build a hierarchy of members of society, mythical beings or otherwise, but instead positions them on a horizontal plane, and a model of equality becomes manifest.

In this subsequent retelling of the pieces of Ólöf and Steingrímur it is clear that the mere re-enactment of existing stories is not sufficient for a critical examination of the importance of narrative in Iceland. What becomes apparent through the action of retelling is their ability to reveal the nomadic character below the surface that contributes to a dynamic and marginal sense of identity. In assuming the role of contemporary storyteller, Ólöf and Steingrímur are afforded the responsibility of resolving some of the detrimental qualities attached to traditional understandings of narrative. Their retelling allows for an alternative perspective, one that provides a diverging path away from the centre, the normative, towards the marginal and the nomadic. The reappropriation of stories guides the viewer on this divergent path lending them the opportunity to uncloak the edges less visited. Through retelling stories, Ólöf and Steingrímur allow for discoveries, the re-mapping of existing territory through contemporary means. They inhabit the periphery of tradition, exposing the overused symbolism, the complacent consumption of regulatory ideas and offer an alternative path.

Reclaiming the role of contemporary storyteller allows for rejuvenation of the foundational *Sagas* and myths of the *Poetic Edda*, while also reorienting common understandings. It is not simply breaking traditional views but allowing for

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[169] Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Hanna Styrmisdóttir. Eds. *Steingrímur Eyfjörð: The Golden Plover Has Arrived, La Biennale de Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition Icelandic Pavillion.* Reykjavík: Reykjavík Art Museum, 2008. p. 107.

the divergence of those that speak to the nomadic sense of identity present in the work. Whereas often landscape has been seen as a trope for exploring identity in Iceland, here narrativity is the conduit. But simply applying narrative as a way of reading identity is not sufficient, for this would not allow for the multifaceted understanding that comes with a conception of national identity. Allowing the stories to unfold in a more critical manner, dismantling the commonalities and offering a channel for diverse readings that inhabit the margins allows for this critical vision of national identity in Iceland to emerge.

4.5 Fragmented Visionary: Coalescing Icelandic National Identity.

The nomadic understanding of identity allows for all the intrinsic aspects of Icelanders' cultural heritage to remain intact within Icelandic society and consciousness, yet it allows for an alternative, even radical, understanding of national identity. While a nomadic identity does not create a standard for understanding Iceland as a nation, it does not limit the people to a definition within certain parameters. Instead, post-colonial and contemporary thought can resist the norm and provide a means for the people to navigate an understanding of their own identity. This traverse is accomplished by travelling through the stories that have helped form what embodies Icelandic national identity: fluidity, movement, openness, existing in the margins as a subversive stance regarding what the margin typically means. Through this lens, Icelanders can dismantle the limited notion of nation and national identity by formulating one that exists outside of all the restricted parameters that have come to represent this concept.

Narrative is embedded in the nature of Icelandic culture, yet it is the energy of the storyteller that emerges in contemporary art. Narrativity grew out of a science, a branch of semiotics with a structuralist base that requires a certain formal

system to be followed. The storyteller is the thread that links traditional narratives such as the *Sagas*, with non-traditional narratives such as contemporary works of art. The storyteller weaves the disparate parts together, skilfully bringing them into unison to tell their tale. The storyteller, more than the structural foundation of narrative emerges in the works of Ólöf and Steingrímur. The essence of the storyteller allows the embedded narrativity to surface through the thoughtful art of the story.

Several threads tie the works of Ólöf and Steingrímur together. Ólöf and Steingrímur themselves carry on the tradition of the Nordic storyteller, weaving together elements from Nordic mythology and contemporary culture into complex works which not only reinstate the importance of narrative in Icelandic society but also interrogate the meaning behind this presence. This lends a subversive and radical character to their investigations of Icelandic national identity, and their exploration reveals a certain nomadic sensibility in their understanding of and consequently the figuration of national identity in Iceland. Their work sets the stage for exploring how identity can be understood in Iceland, and through this exploration, a nomadic formation of identity emerges.

CONCLUSION

A journey in search of Icelandic national identity will naturally involve following many paths. The voyager will encounter various interpretations and understandings. One such experience of this journey could be through a nomadic tendency: branches of information and ideas starting and stopping at random, inspiration coming from unlikely corners of consciousness, and thought becoming linked with previous knowledge and experiences.

With persistent and dedicated study of Ólöf Nordal and Steingrímur Eyfjörð's work, common tendencies and a distinctive leitmotif threading through each of their *oeuvres* surfaced. Through these observations it became apparent that their work is formally accomplished, conceptually profound and casts a critical gaze upon a contemporary perspective of Icelandic national identity. Glimmers of landscape appear at the edges of their work, yet it is the presence of the storyteller and the resonance of narrative heritage that is most profoundly manifest in their work. Through their retelling of traditional narratives and the rewriting of contemporary mythologies, Ólöf and Steingrímur accomplish a perspective that is as critical as it is poetic. Allowing the everyday poetry so inherent in contemporary Icelandic culture to ebb into their work is fundamental to their approach and their investigation of national identity.

The question at the centre of this exploration is a complex one, impacted by the delicate situation of not presuming to define a belief system as multifaceted as

national identity. Like the legend of the Gordian knot,[170] the approach towards interpreting something as personal as identity, whether it be felt by an individual or an entire community united by the concept of nation, warrants delicacy and radical understanding. Such a journey necessitated an alternative approach, one that could exist in the margins of normative thought, yet reach the centre to see the overarching comprehension of a national identity.

The works of Ólöf and Steingrímur seem to create an ideal space to open the dialogue beyond the national borders of Iceland and the common theme generally associated with Icelandic art. Their elegant and captivating yet curious observations of national monuments, the characters and creatures of the *Sagas* and myths, and the national belief in hidden people are an unexpected point of departure into the analysis of national identity. Equally, their subversive approach to narrative, through the adaptation of the role of contemporary storyteller, destabilizes a traditional approach to Icelandic narrative heritage. As a means to dismantle constructions of identity, their work seeks to portray an alternative perspective of Icelandic society through the most uncanny means. Scientific anomalies found in natural history collections, *kynjamyndir* found in the rock formations from a site of national and spiritual importance assembled into mythical creatures, the retelling of myths dating back to the foundational stories and those that originate in more modern time periods commingle and cross paths. Ólöf and Steingrímur have created works that cross the boundaries of the exterior margins of thought and resist the temptation to be defined in any particular and, more precisely, limiting terms. Through resisting the limits of traditional thought, this master's thesis attempted to open an alternative dialogue which could further create new associations between

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[170] The origin of the Gordian Knot is mid 16th century. The legend speaks of Gordius, king of Gordium, who tied an intricate knot and prophesied that whoever untied it would become ruler of Asia. It was cut through with the sword of Alexander the Great. As a noun, it refers to an extremely difficult or involved problem. Source: New Oxford American Dictionary.

the *oeuvres* of Ólöf and Steingrímur. This new dialogue could further provide an arena for the interpretation and critical understanding of narrative heritage.

The theoretical and philosophical concepts applied in this master's thesis aimed to enable a radically different understanding of the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur. The study of national identity as nomadic, inspired notably by the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Rosi Braidotti, attempted to facilitate the understanding of national identity discussed here. The narrative heritage, notably the poetic and political rumblings of the intellectual group *Fjölnirinn*, was imperative to the opening of this dialogue, because their approach to literature, Icelandic history, nationhood and the reinstatement of the Alþingi at Þingvellir was radical, intensely passionate and persuasive. Their literary legacy was vital in Iceland's political and intellectual history and offers an ideal entry point into a discussion of Icelandic national identity, especially as it relates to national heritage and literature. This discussion was led through critical readings of narrative theory that permitted an alternative approach to the legacy of Icelandic narratives, mainly through the dialogue on the storyteller elaborated by Walter Benjamin and John Berger.

The nomadic tendency, borne on the waves the Nordic seafarers travelled centuries ago, is embedded in Icelandic contemporary society, and emerges in the movement of ideas and inspiration in Icelandic culture. This trajectory became manifest through poetic diction, the legacy of poets like Jónas Hallgrímsson being carried on and finding transit in language that was most naturally fitting. This same nomadic tendency became apparent at the root of Ólöf and Steingrímur's practice, as did the influence of a theoretical understanding of the storyteller evinced at the core of their work. Their exploration of identity surfaced through their retelling of stories, both mythic, fictional and based on true events, while this line between the real and the unreal became blurred, contributing to the mounting discourse being elaborated upon in these pages. Their consistent articulation of questions concerning

Icelandic identity and nationhood are continually re-postulated. This was accomplished through the examination of traditional understandings of identity and the representation of the Icelandic nation through the use of narrative heritage and national and cultural icons.

This same examination focused on the process by which traditional representations of national and cultural iconography became normative practices in Iceland. Through underlining the foundational place in society held by this iconography, Ólöf and Steingrímur overturn this same meaning and importance. Through this action they illuminate the subversive undercurrent around these traditional notions. Such a subversive character has always existed in the minority positions of thought, yet it was not highlighted. As such, the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur underlines that such an understanding of national identity has resisted being marginalized in society and has indeed comingled with normative western notions in Hegemonic thought.

The unique position that Iceland holds geographically, politically and economically,[171] all contribute to the ability to move in a nomadic fashion across smooth space. The concept of nomadic thought formulated by Deleuze and Guattari and elaborated upon by Braidotti offers the most apt approach towards an understanding of Icelandic national identity. It is not the fact that nomadic thought is marginal but that it offers an alternative understanding of the margin and how to move through this peripheral space that allows it to adapt so fittingly to conceptions of identity. The ideal access point for mobilizing this understanding within this study was through the reinterpretation of Icelandic narrative heritage. Ólöf and

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[171] For example, during WWII Iceland was a neutral zone and many people sought asylum there. The US army set up a base in Iceland (what is now Keflavík International Airport) in order to remain in a position to fight in the war yet not be at risk. Economically speaking, Iceland experienced harsh colonial rule which held control over the movement of goods and services for centuries, yet for a time after independence Iceland saw huge economic gain. During the crash of 2008 Iceland sought to bail out the people as opposed to the banks, a position that stands in opposition to that of many other countries around the world.

Steingrímur's work in subverting these same traditions offered the exemplary position for deconstructing the very traditions that the cornerstone of society had been built upon.

Through following this subversive and atypical path, this thesis presents an alternative vision of Icelandic national identity as nomadic – moving, fluid, rising up and changing, but also affirmative and peripheral. This identity manifests itself most distinctly in the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur through the retelling of traditional stories, stories that bore the history of Icelanders for centuries. This retelling does not demean or devalue the stories but instead allows a re-invigoration of the perception of these stories. No longer being strictly tied to a characteristic version of Icelandic history, these retellings allow for reinterpretation and dynamism in the face of adverse recollections of a painful and dark history. This is not to lessen the impact of that history. Rather, this reinterpretation of the foundational stories and traditions allows for the movement and affirmation that is characteristic of nomadic thought. Through adapting nomadism as an approach to identity, a dynamic and open perspective can be applied.

Critical, engaged and attentive, the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur approach national identity through the basics of everyday life. Initially completely objective, their stance reveals their analytical eye which in turn unveils the rigorous standpoint they adapt in their investigation. At first glance it seems their work merely appropriates salient myths and characters, applying a gentle version of reading narrative history. Upon deeper reflection the artist's work uncovers their profound examination of Icelandic identity, culture and nationhood. Poetry, the lifeblood of Icelandic culture, is the underlying characteristic that carries through from the foundation to the surface of their work.

As the work of Ólöf and Steingrímur came together under the lens of nomadic thought and the contemporary storyteller, a new path was revealed for the

journey into Icelandic national identity. This divergent path permitted disparate notions to converge allowing communication between contrasting practices and modes of thought. The characteristic of narrative is a concurrent theme, emerging alongside the national trope of landscape. Through their subversive approach to narrative, Ólöf and Steingrímur are able to offer an alternative avenue for reading works. Their work eclipses traditional notions of Icelandic identity, transcending the normative approach and providing an alternative. As a dialogue, this master's thesis aims to offer a glimpse at the work of two Icelandic contemporary artists into a milieu where their work is underrepresented. The implications of the research compiled here cannot be applied to or characterize the work of all Icelandic contemporary artists, of which there are many. However, it can provide the opportunity to widen the discourse outside of Iceland and in the English language. This master's thesis can also aspire to allow for further investigations of Icelandic contemporary artists through this initial research.

AFTERWARD

MEETING JÓNAS AT ÞINGVELLIR

Image: Guy Maddin. [172]

We, the Icelandic Field School 2011, were standing by a row of houses in Þingvellir National Park, the site of the Icelandic parliament, which Jónas and *Fjölnirinn* fought to restore. There was a grave where we were standing and upon it was written the name Jónas Hallgrímsson. At the time I did not yet realize who this great man was. As we stood around looking down at this etched stone, the voice of a wise Icelandic woman, Birna Bjarnadóttir, emerged from the silence, reciting a poem: "*Ísland, farsældafrón og hagsælda, hrímvíta móðir!*" she said. Another voice, that of PJ Buchan, joined in unison: "*Hvar er þín fornaldarfrægð, frelsið og*

[172] Birna Bjarnadóttir. *a book of fragments*. Winnipeg: KIND publishing, 2010. p. 29.

mannadáðin bezt?" and they laughed. I listened as I looked around at the surrounding landscape, sun high in the sky, otherworldly rock formations towering in the background. The moment rested upon me, sinking into my consciousness. "*Stelpur*, this man, Jónas, is very important in Iceland. "the bridge" is a good fragment for you to read here, today," she said, and I reached into my bag to find my copy of *a book of fragments.* As we walked to the cars that would carry us back into civilization, I let the weight of this historic place rest upon me, settling into my mind in a part where I had made space for this place and time in particular. As we walked, our footsteps marking our passage through history and time, I read:

> Jónas Hallgrímsson ... the nineteenth century farmboy from a northern valley, who later in life, and shortly before his death in Copenhagen, composed – in the minds of some – the most beautiful poem ever written in Icelandic. There, we have flower elves weeping. But why? "[T]hey knew we would need to part."
>
> "We thought it was drops
> of dew and kissed
> cold tears from the crossgrass."[173]

It was not until several months later that I re-read "the bridge" after long hours of reading Jónas' poems collected in *The Bard of Iceland.* The meaning of that moment, the epic truth and wisdom of it, standing at Jónas' graveside, in that mysterious and majestic place, became clearer with the breath of time on my side. And I realized, I was crossing my own sort of bridge:

> But a passage into the world is a bridge crossing oceans. Well versed in their own literary heritage as well as in the Greco-Roman one, Jónas and his friends dived into modern times resulting in a singular moment that can only be compared with Iceland's golden age, a moment when a bridge could be perceived between Iceland and foreign lands. The "Fjölnismenn" (the men of Fjölnir) came perhaps closest to what might be called a group of romantics among Icelandic poets of the nineteenth century.[174]

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[173] *Ibid.*, p. 35
[174] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The law was founded on the sacred land at Þingvellir. However, there is something more to this place than merely the foundation of laws and parliament. Þingvellir lies literally on the chasm of two tectonic plates, where Eurasia and the Americas meet. As the tectonic plates of the earth shift, Þingvellir enfolds this energy and movement, shifting and ungrounded, as the two continents that it straddles slide and turn. Thus, literally, at the very centre of Icelandic society lies this ever moving, shifting and changing place.

It is not upon first reflection that the truth at the depth of this place will be perceived.

Yet it is there.

And as it reveals itself, in the secret and magical way of the hidden people, those who come to Þingvellir, visiting all the landmarks and finding respite for a moment by that row of houses and Jónas' eternal resting place, they too cross the bridge into the world.

That day in Þingvellir, the soft Nordic breeze kissed my cheeks welcoming me as I crossed the bridge, with Jónas by my side.

ANNEX A

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ICELANDIC ART

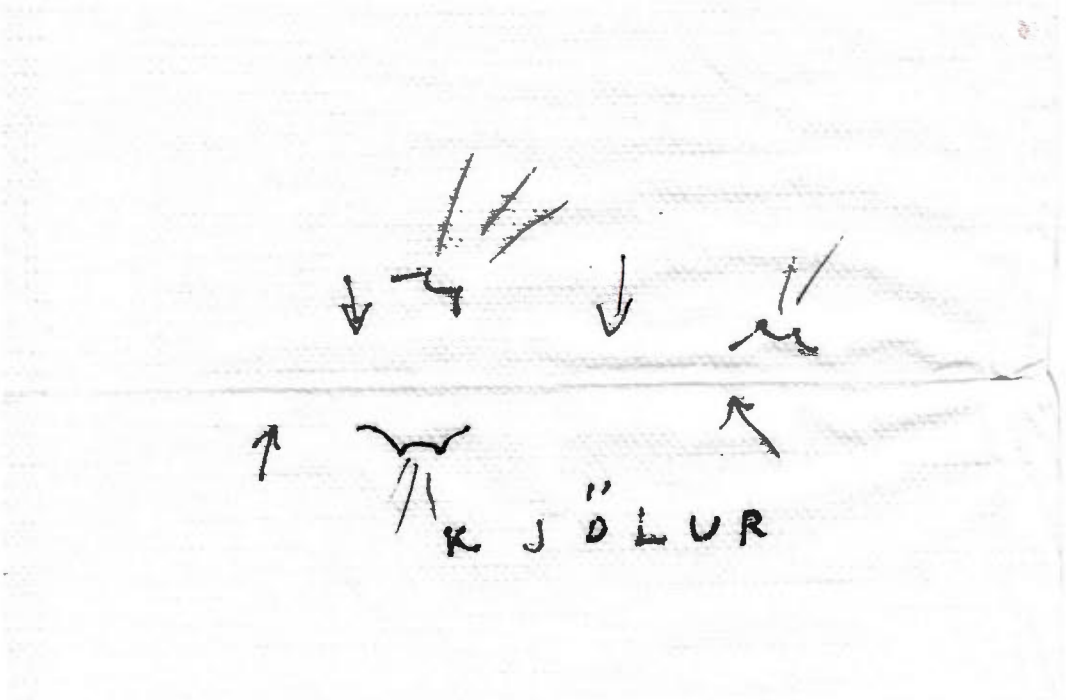

Figure A.1
Haraldur Jónsson
Kjölur
2011
Pen and ink drawing
16 x 22 cm
Gift of the artist

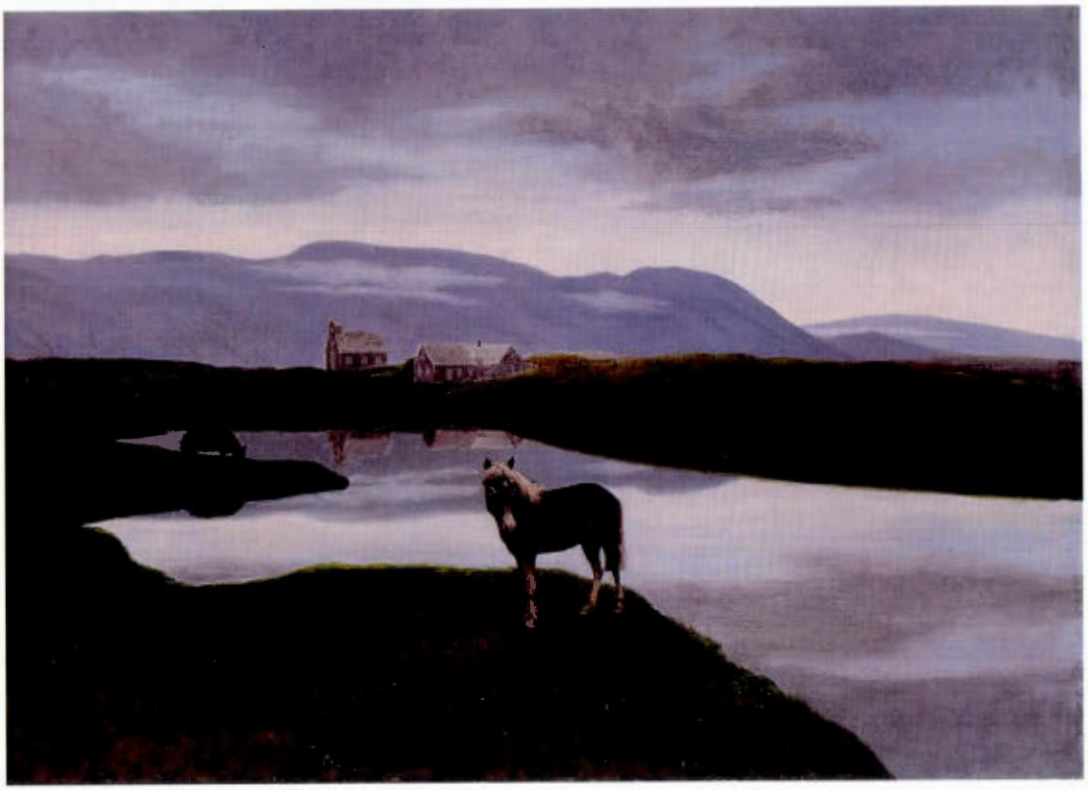

Figure A.2
Þórarinn B. Þorláksson
Þingvellir
1900
Oil on canvas
57.5 x 81.5 cm
National Gallery of Iceland

Figure A.3
Ásgrímur Jónsson
Tröllin á Hellisheiði (Trolls of Hellisheidi)
1948
Pen and ink drawing
45 x 60 cm
National Gallery of Iceland

Figure A.4
Ásgrímur Jónsson
Mt. Hekla
1909
Oil on canvas
151 x 290 cm
National Gallery of Iceland

Figure A.5
Jóhannes S. Kjarval
Fallamjólk (Mountain Milk)
1941
Oil on canvas
106 x 150 cm
National Gallery of Iceland

Figure A.6
Hreinn Friðfinnsson
House Project
1974
Colour photograph
33 x 40 cm

Figure A.7
Sigurður Guðmundsson
Horizontal Thoughts
1970 – 71
Photo, text
93.5 x 101 cm
Rijkscollectie, The Netherlands

Figure A.8
Kristján Guðmundsson
Triangle in a Square
1972
A square of soil, a triangle of consecrated soil
400 x 400 cm

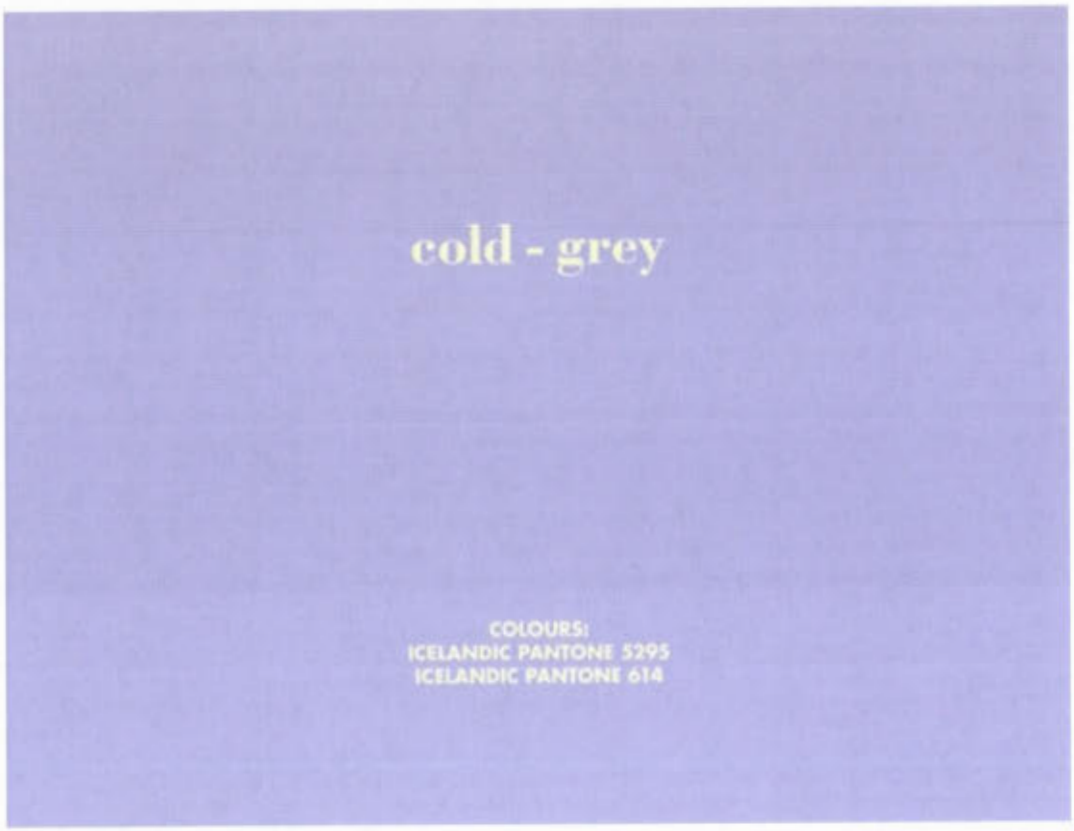

Figure A.9
Birgir Andrésson
Grey Colours in the Work of William Morris from the series *Icelandic Colours*
2006
Giclée print on Epson Fiber Paper
60 x 80 cm
The Estate of Birgir Andrésson and i8 Gallery, Reykjavík

ANNEX B

ÓLÖF NORDAL

Figure B.1
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Sleipnir (Icelandic Specimen Collection – Sleipnir)
2003
Diasec, triptych, 80 x 480 cm

Figure B.2
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Kýklópi (Icelandic Specimen Collection – Cyclopes)
2003
Diasec, triptych, 80 x 480 cm

Figure B.3
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Jánus (Icelandic Specimen Collection – Janus)
2003
Diasec, triptych
80 x 480 cm

Figure B.4
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Hrafn (Iceland Specimen Collection – Raven)
2005
Diasec
60 x 90 cm

Figure B.5
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Lundi, (Iceland Specimen Collection – Puffin)
2005
Diasec
60 x 90 cm

Figure B.6
Ólöf Nordal
Íslenskt dýrasafn – Álka (Iceland Specimen Collection – Auk)
2005
Diasec
60 x 90 cm

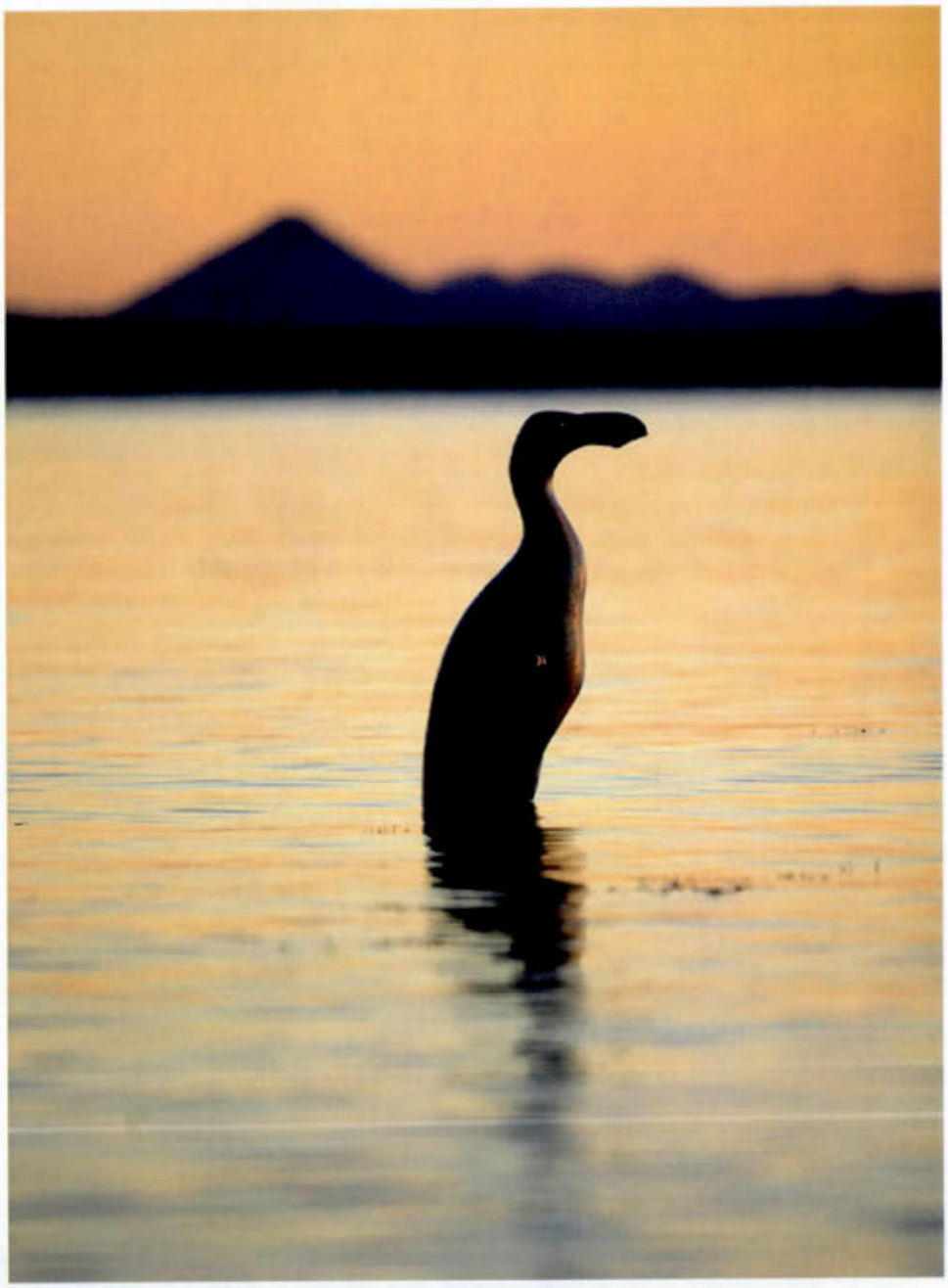

Figure B.7
Ólöf Nordal
Geirfugl (Great Auk)
1998
Aluminum
120 x 40 x 40 cm
Reykjavík Art Museum

Figure B.8
Ólöf Nordal
Gull – Fingurskjá (Gold – Fingers)
2002
C-print
Various dimensions

Figure B.9
Ólöf Nordal
Gull – Hafmeyjaskjá (Gold – Mermaid)
2002
C-print
Various dimensions

Figure B.10
Ólöf Nordal
Gull –Hvitabjörinnskjá (Gold – Polar bear)
2002
C-print
Various dimensions

Figure B.11
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Íslandique – Plaster bust of Bjarni Jónsson, an Icelander, cast by Mr. Stahl from a life model, painted by Mr. Froment, 1855
2010
Photograph
90 x 90 cm.

Figure B.12
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Plaster bust of Sigríður Bjarnadóttir, aged 24 born in Reykjavík, maidservant, Icelandic.
2010
Photograph
90 x 90 cm

Figure B.13
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Plaster bust of Skafti Skaftason, born in Reykjavík July 2nd 1805, mechanic, Icelandic
2010
Photograph
90 x 90 cm

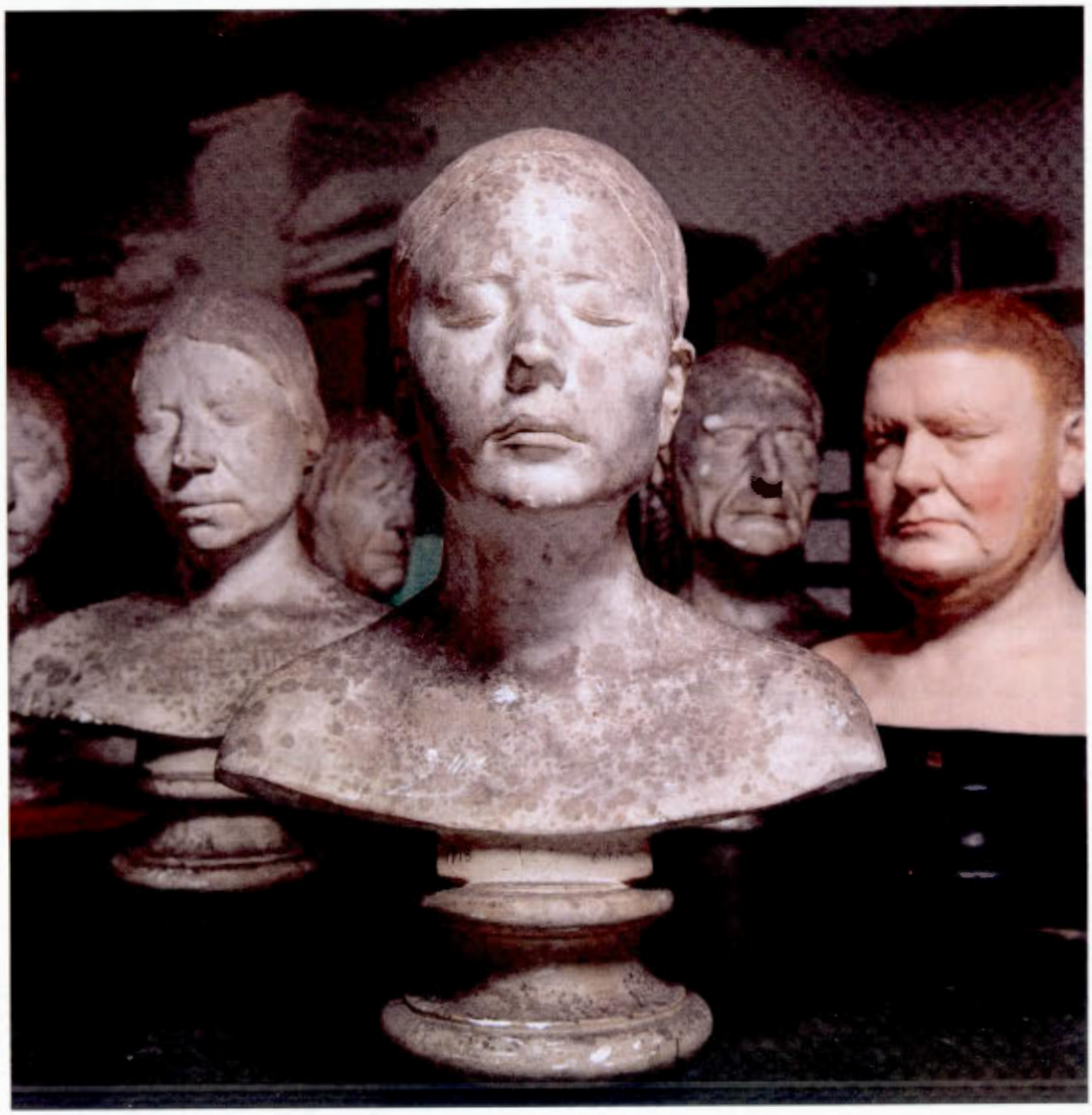

Figure B.14
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Plaster bust of Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir, born February 5th 1838 at Álftanes, Gullbringusýsla, maidservant, Icelandic.
2010
Photogarph
90 x 90 cm

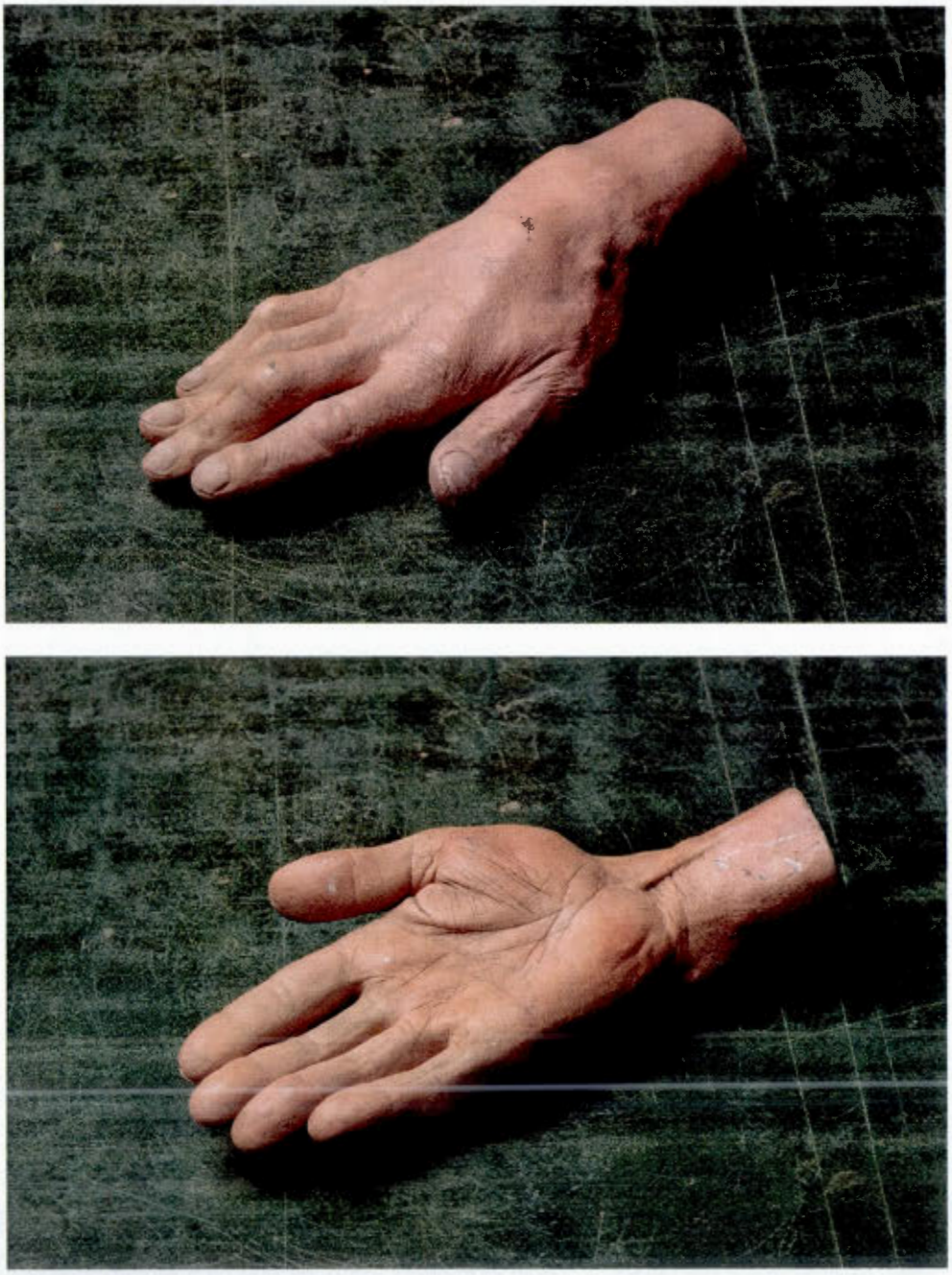

Figure B.15
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Cast of the right hand of Skafti Skaftason, born in Reykjavík July 2nd 1805, mechanic.
2010
Photograph
35 x 50 cm

Figure B.16
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – The left hand of Sigríður Bjanradóttir and Þórunn Árnardóttir, Icelandic maidservant
2010
Photograph
35 x 50 cm

Figure B.17
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Front of torso, cast of left arm, cast of left leg of Friðrika Guðmundóttir, born in Reykjavík January 28th 1819, Icelandic
2010
Photograph
70 x 90 cm

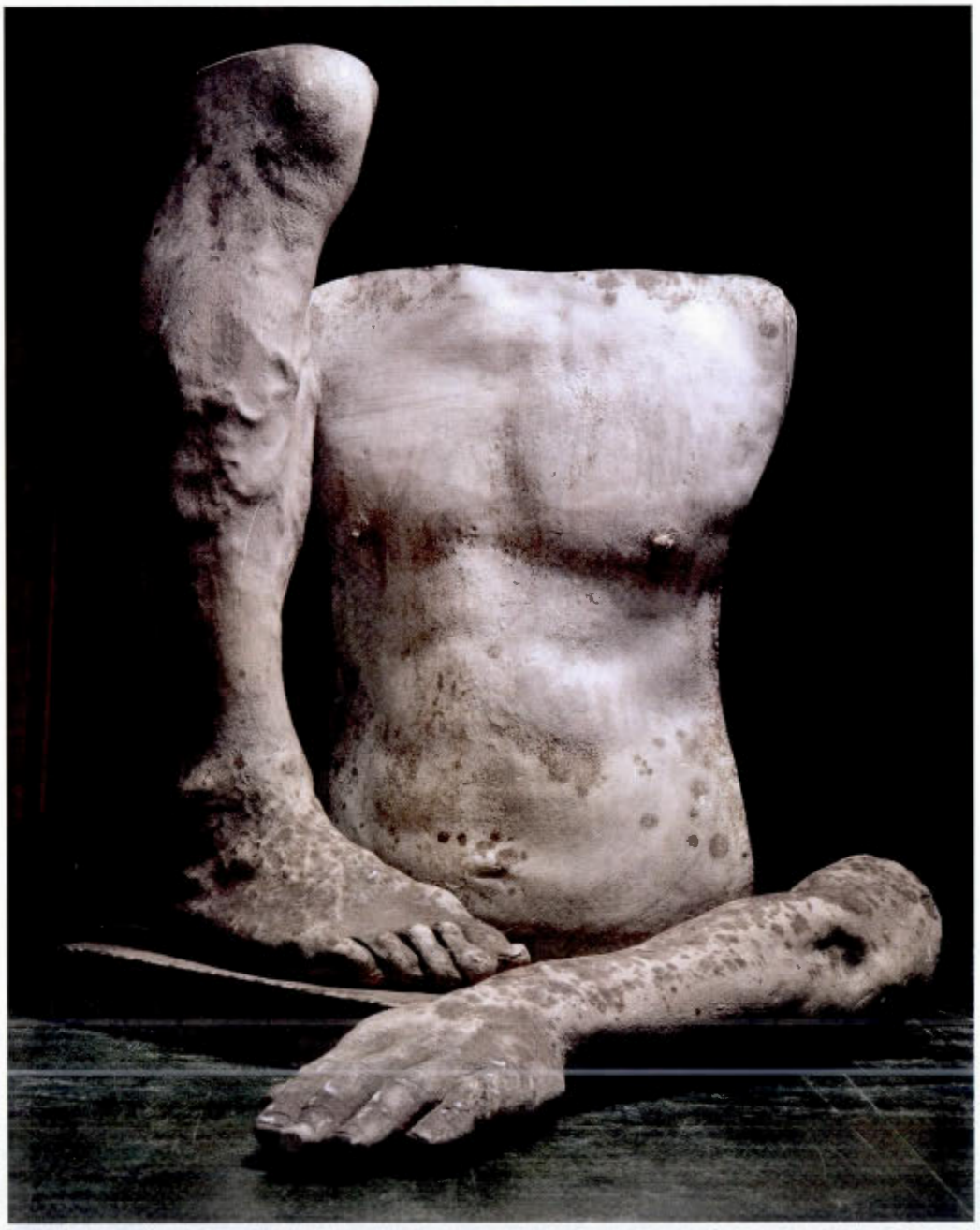

Figure B.18
Ólöf Nordal
Musée Islandique – Front of torso, cast of left arm, cast of right leg of Pétur Þóðarson, aged 28, born in Reykjavík, Icelandic fisherman
2010
Photograph
115 x 90 cm

ANNEX III

STEINGRÍMUR EYFJÖRÐ

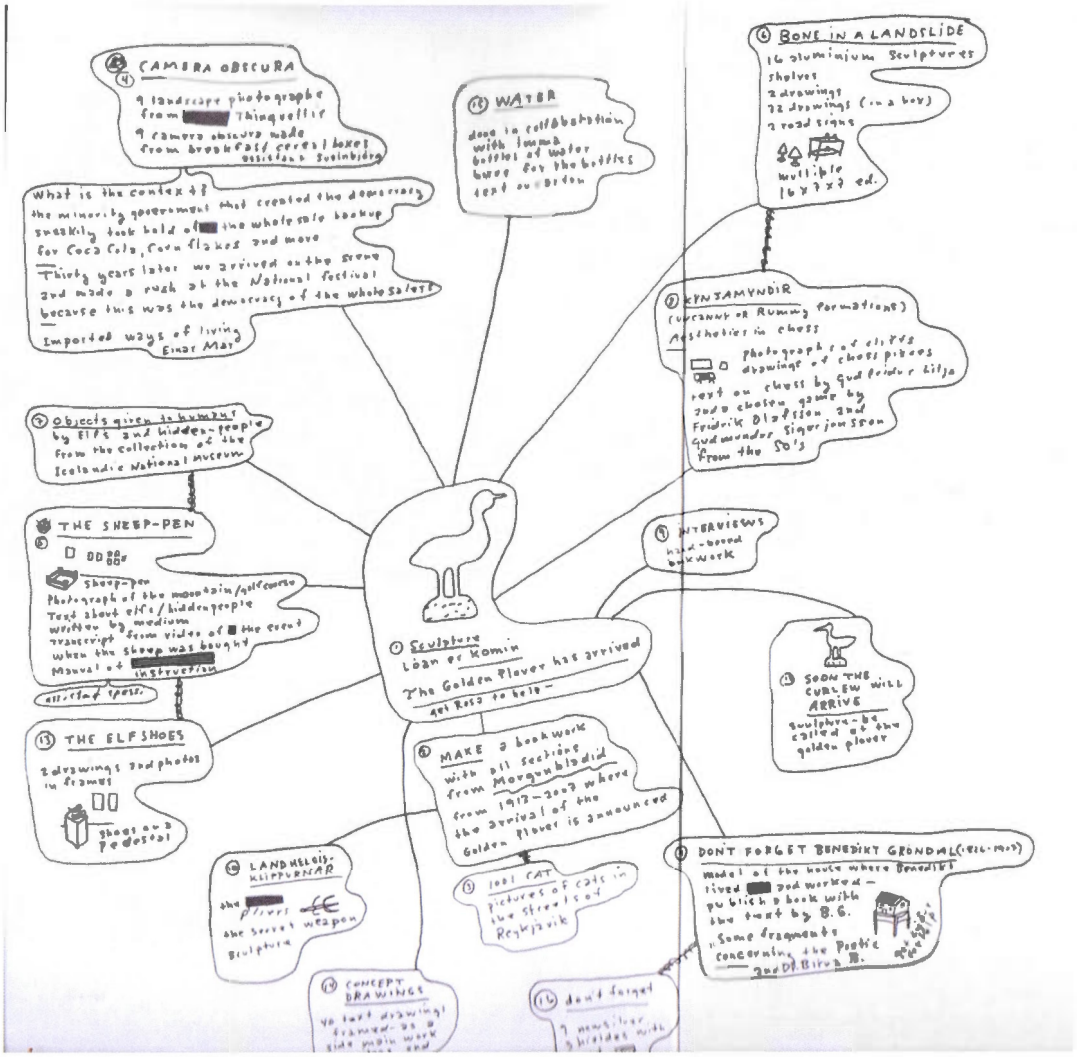

Figure C.1
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Sketches for Lóan er kómin (Golden Plover has Arrived)
2007

National Museum of Iceland
Item 2050

A pot lost by an elf child

Figure C.2
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
From the World of Elves
2007
Lamenated digital print, collage in wood frame
50 x 50 cm

National Museum of Iceland
Item 3465

Present to a woman who helped an elf woman to give birth

Figure C.3
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
From the World of Elves
2007
Lamenated digital print, collage in wood frame
50 x 50 cm

National Museum of Iceland
Item 3915

Tombstone
Úlfheiður
Álfheiður

Figure C.4
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
From the World of Elves
2007
Lamenated digital print, collage in wood frame
50 x 50 cm

National Museum of Iceland
Item 2061

Used by an elf woman to wrap around a child she claimed she had with a priest

Figure C.5
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
From the World of Elves
2007
Lamenated digital print, collage in wood frame
50 x 50 cm

Figure C.6
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
The Sheep Pen
2007
Wood, hay, salt, water
150 x 150 x 67 cm
Laminated digital print in wood frame
128.8 x 128 cm,

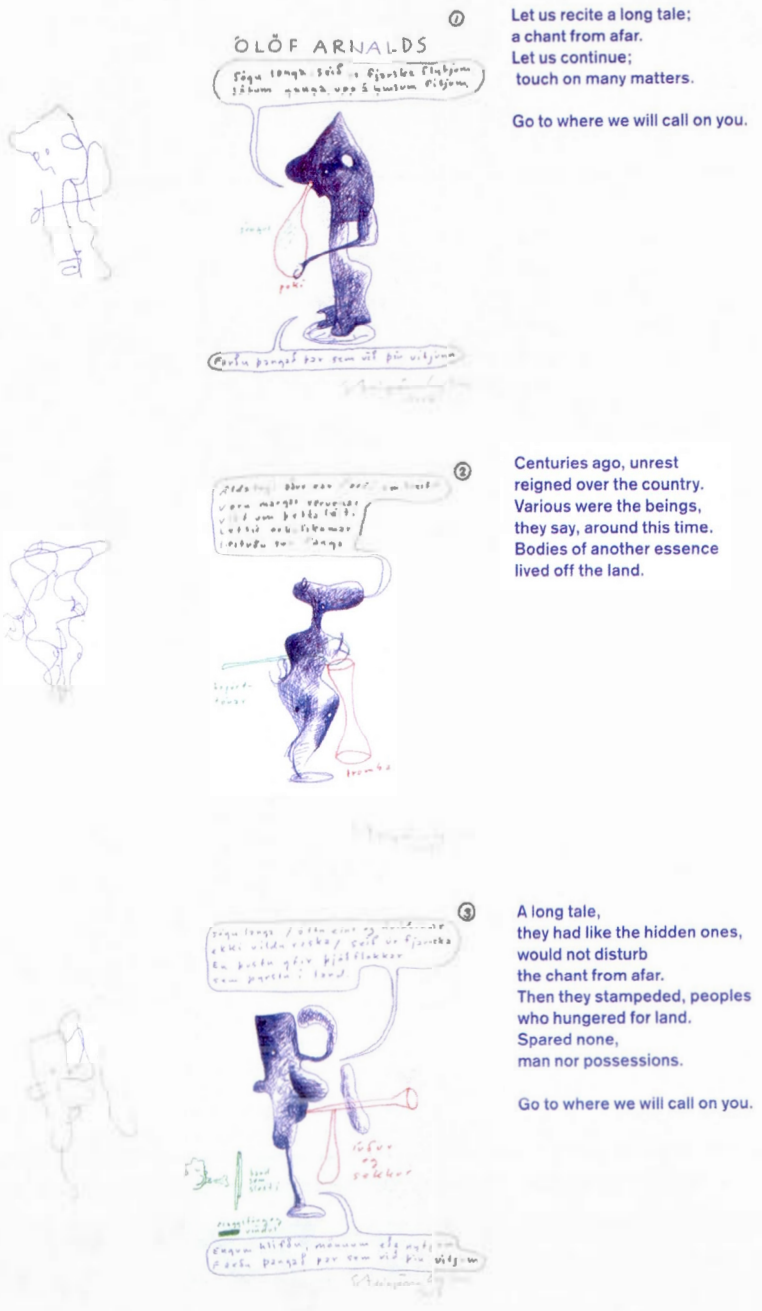

Figure C.7
Steingrímur Eyfjörð in collaboration with Ólöf Arnalds
We the Hidden Ones
2007
9 drawings: pen, pencil on cardboard in wood frames
32 x 41.8 cm each.

Figure C.8
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Beautiful Move
2007
32 chess pieces: painted aluminum,
Dimensions variable
Chess table: Wood
180 x 122 x 64.5 cm
Laminated digital print in wood frame
107.9 x 110.6 cm
Laminated digital print in wood frame
106.6 x 110.6 cm

Figure C.9
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Beautiful Move, detail
2007
32 chess pieces: painted aluminum,
Dimensions variable

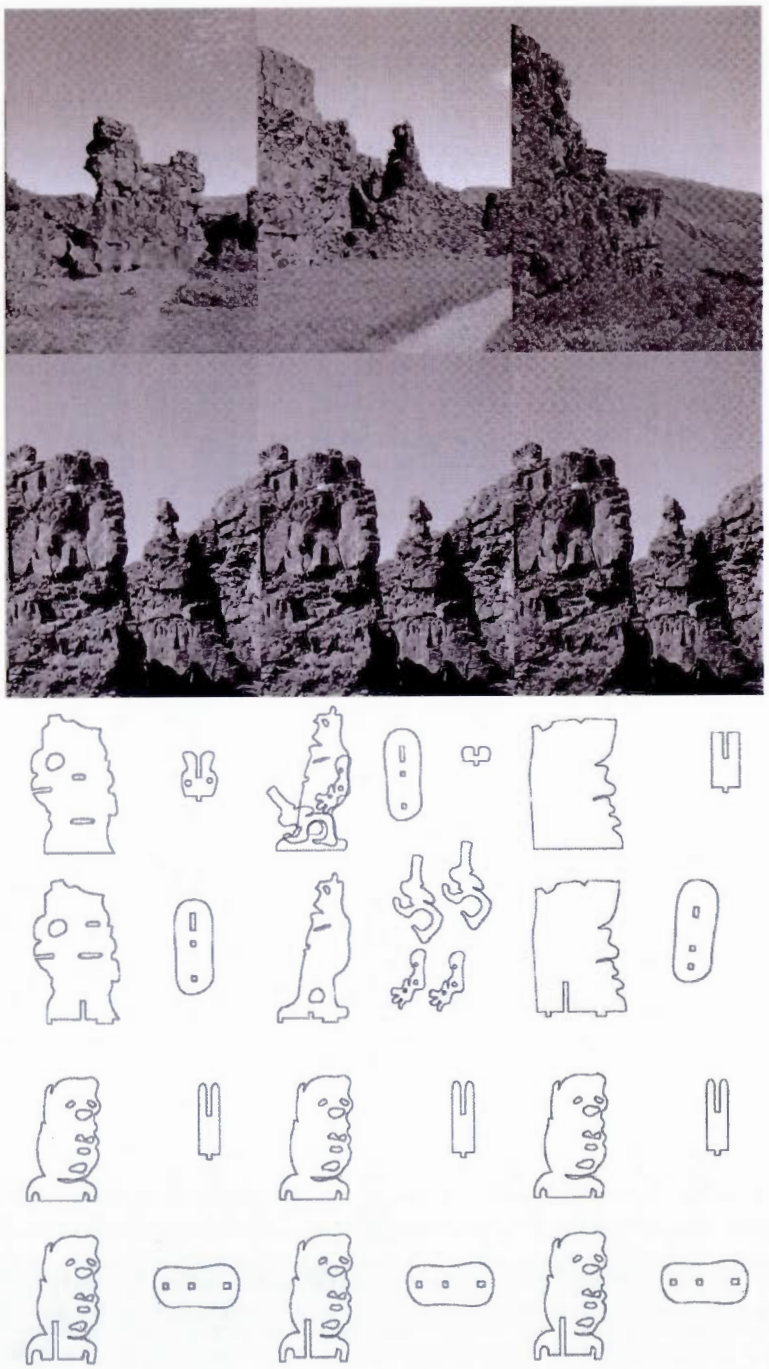

Figure C.10
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Beautiful Move, detail
2007
Laminated digital print in wood frame
107.9 x 110.6 cm

Figure C.11
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Bones in a Landslide
2005
Painted aluminum, coloured stones,
traffic signs
Dimensions variable.

Figure C.12
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Bones in a Landslide, detail
2005
Painted aluminum
Dimensions variable.

Figure C.13
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Bones in a Landslide, detail
2005
32 works on paper in a box,
96 x 64 cm

Figure C.14
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
The Golden Plover
2007
Painted bronze
43 x 95.3 x 75 cm

Figure C.15
Steingrímur Eyfjörð
Don't Forget Benedikt Gröndal
2007
MDF, plastic, plexi-glass, polyester resin, paint, glue
101.5 x 148 x 100 cm

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