

# Preface

Just what is it that makes Iceland's art of today so different, so appealing? Be it from a conceptual, experimental, or poetic angle, today's art in Iceland is what artists in other nations struggle to achieve: it is direct and genuine. It playfully oversteps the boundaries of other art forms. Interesting collaborations between artists, musicians, actors, designers, or authors are the norm. The art is fed by a strong, creative energy that practically makes each of the island's roughly 300,000 inhabitants into two things: culture recipients and culture creators. There is no gulf separating art and life but instead a thriving relationship. Creativity penetrates society. This in itself reveals one essential characteristic of Icelandic art and explains how such a small country can produce such a large number of interesting artists. Beyond the island's striking nature and the extremes of both landscape and climate, this creative environment is what draws international artists to Iceland—to visit the country and to work here. Many of them have left their traces on the island, either directly or indirectly, either by influencing young artists or by leaving works here. Dieter Roth is one artist whose impact can still be felt, not least through his son Björn. Matthew Barney has likewise influenced many young artists. Numerous others such as Richard Serra, Claudio Parmiggiani, Jason Rhoades, Paul McCarthy, or Yoko Ono retain a presence in Iceland through their works. For artists such as Roni Horn or Ólafur Eliasson, Iceland is an important source of inspiration. The latter undoubtedly enjoys a special status; having grown up in Iceland, his own experience of Iceland's landscape and its art scene made a big impression upon him. He himself also influenced the younger generation of Iceland's artists.

A glance over the country's history provides a further explanation for the distinctive character of Icelandic art. Although the island in the coarse and rugged North Atlantic was inhabited by settlers as early as the late ninth century, craftwork and art remained mostly undeveloped right into the late nineteenth century. The country was first under Norwegian, and since the late fourteenth century under Danish rule; its distance from Denmark meant there were no aristocratic courts, no universities or international trading centers at which art could have developed. Since the early Middle Ages the country's two dioceses had above all cultivated script while the rest of the population cultivated the land. The island's distinct language, the legends, sagas, and genealogies all form the foundation of its national consciousness. Iceland's culture is based

on oral history, the past not being manifested in architecture or pictures. The form of art that developed in the early twentieth century was obliged to—and was indeed able to—survive without its own art history as a fundament to be based upon. Stimulation was instead taken mostly from international contemporary art. Its influence together with the autonomy that comes from the country's history and geography continue to influence Icelandic art to this day; it is on eye level with international art while retaining a healthy distance to the bustle of the art business. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the artists' mobility and therefore their internationality is greater than ever before. Icelandic art today is at home in the world, although its home is on the island. When the country's economy began to prosper it was gradually able to open up culturally with neighboring Nordic countries. The economic crisis of 2008 threatens these accomplishments and will instigate a reorientation within art. This publication may therefore mark the end of one and the beginning of another period of Icelandic art history.

Many previous national and international catalogue projects have dealt with the phenomenon of Icelandic art; nonetheless there is a lack of publications providing an overview of the contemporary scene or even a thorough account of art history.<sup>1</sup> Aside from monographic publications, exhibition and catalogue projects of recent years have devoted themselves mostly to specific subject areas. Some of these can be summarized under the term Neo-Romanticism, which occurs between the points where nature is encountered and mystified. This publication differs notably in that it is not based on any specific theme. In fact, it provides a spectrum of current Icelandic art creation and thus bridges a gap. Its scope makes it unique. It provides a localization of the current art scene, although not all noteworthy stances on art could be included here. The artists presented were born between 1950 and 1980 and are preceded by an introduction that looks at art's development since the late 1960s. During this phase the Icelandic art scene received notable, international impulses whose impact can be felt to this day.

## Practical Notes

Although this publication is in English, we have decided to stay true to the Icelandic language in some aspects. Since Icelanders do not have family names in the true sense (their surnames state whose sons or daughters they are), the artists in the texts are listed by their first names. Accordingly, they appear alphabetically by their first names. Non-Icelanders are therefore also listed in the name index by their first names.

For names and places we likewise adhere to Icelandic spelling conventions. The Icelandic alphabet consists of 32 letters which mostly correspond to the Latin ones (there is no C, Q, W or Z). All vowels (including Y) exist in a second form with an acute accent, which affects only the pronunciation. In addition to the Latin letters there are the following letters 'Ð/ð' (like a vocal *th* in the word *this*), Þ/þ (this is nonvocal like the *th* in *thing*), Æ/æ (like the English 'i') and 'Ö/ö' (like the German Ö or rather like the English *ir* in *sir*). Note that the letters þ, æ, and ö are placed at the end of the alphabet after ý.

## Christian Schoen

---

1. The first art history material collection is in progress and is planned to appear in 2009, beginning in Iceland: Kvaran, Ólafur, ed., *Íslensk myndlist á tuttugustu öld*, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Forlagið, forthcoming). The only previous work is Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist á 19. og 20. öld: drög að sögulegu yfirliti*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1964–73).