



2010

Þjóðarspejillinn

Let's make a toast to art!

A transnational economic paradigm

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Félags- og mannvísindadeild
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Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2010

Ritrynd grein

Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands

ISBN 978-9979-9956-6-1



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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The period from the early 1990s until the collapse of Iceland's economy in the fall of 2008 will be referred to in Iceland's future history books as the time of the "Icelandic conquest" or, in Icelandic, the era of *útrás* (conquest) (Jón Karl Helgason, 2006, p. 6-7). Governmental officials persistently and publicly reminded Icelanders that they needed to adjust to the new global economy, gain ground in the global community, and exploit the opportunities that lay ahead of them – or otherwise be left behind (Halldór Ásgrímsson, 2004). These transformations, along with a tidal wave of free trade, market rationality and expansions across national borders, called for corresponding changes in attitude. Rather than the state, it was the freedom of the market, depicted as increasingly global in scope, that could guarantee individual freedom and improve the well-being of the population (Arnar Árnason, Sigurjón B. Hafsteinsson, & Tinna Grétarsdóttir, 2007). This restructuring was manifested in the privatization programs and state deregulation according to neoliberal doctrines. Neoliberal regimes of rationality surfaced in a range of technologies, discourses and practices used to regulate and shape individual activities and to reform and direct individuals to be enterprising, empowered, and creative as appropriate to the neoliberal project (see Rose, 1999).

Significantly, however, Chris Shore & Susan Wright argue that "neoliberal reforms do not mean less government" (1997, p. 28-29). The state has only refigured its modus operandi by rendering its governing activities "more diffuse and less visible" (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 28-29). One manifestation of this restructuring is the mode of "resituating the management of the social squarely within civil society" (Yúdice, 1999, p. 24-25). This transformation does not exclude the art world, which has, much like other fields in the humanities and culture, "increasingly resorted to a pragmatic defence [and] become part of the social service rationale or of economic development plans for communities" (Yúdice, 1999, p. 24-25). In Iceland, both public and private institutions emphasized the instrumental value of the "creative industry," including art that is discussed mostly in relation to its social and economic contribution to the national economy, measured and presented in numbers, graphs and GDP's scales (see Ágúst Einarsson, 2004; Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2010; Icelandic Prime Minister Office, 2008). Artists, "the innovative class," are increasingly referred to (against the wishes of many of those in the fine arts), as cultural workers, part of the creative cultural industry (see Canclini 2007; Yúdice 1999; Wu 2002).

In this paper I address the ways in which artists and art work are used in the transnational art project *Núna* (in English, *Now*), held annually in Canada since 2007. I trace how the work of Canadian artists of Icelandic descent have managed to carve out transnational space, channel cultural and ethnic identities, and restructure social and economic development. I highlight the controversies over the ways in which art is legitimated and over the impulse to subordinate art practice's value as "art" by forcing it to comply with a pragmatic and utilitarian agenda, such as social engineering, ethnic networking, nation-branding and economic growth. I build my discussion on ethno-

graphic field research I conducted in Canada and Iceland periodically throughout 2004-2008.¹

In Iceland, creating opportunities for growth and expansion across national borders led to excessive expansion of the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, evident in the number of new embassies and offices abroad, including those in Canada. In the late 1990s, building and strengthening relations with Canada became a priority. In 1997 the Canada/Iceland EFTA free trade agreement was already in the pipelines. The Icelandic foreign ministry opened a Consulate General office in Winnipeg in 1999 and an Embassy in Ottawa in 2001. Beyond the tangible and concrete efforts to increase ties to Canada, Iceland urgently hoped to “wake the giant,” as one official at the Icelandic Foreign Ministry told me in an interview—wake the old Icelandic-Canadian community in order to tune them toward Icelandic culture, and to use them to further boost the Icelandic economy. The *Núna* art project complied with such an agenda. Today the largest population with Icelandic heritage outside Iceland is in North America.² The community of Icelandic-Canadians is viewed as a ready-made market and as a conduit by which Iceland may enter the North American market as a whole. Yet, the community is assimilated population of third, fourth, and fifth generation Canadians of Icelandic descent which has had few opportunities to renew its ties with the country of origin through new immigration from the original homeland since the large wave of emigration in late 19th/early 20th century.

Thus, revitalizing the Icelandic community, renewing transnational relations, “updating” and modernizing the Icelandic-Canadian identity and, not least, reaching the younger generations for the sake of contemporary, commercial and corporate Iceland has been an ongoing agenda of the Icelandic government. Canadian artists of Icelandic descent who were asked by the Icelandic state to volunteer on the *Núna* curatorial committee dealt with, in addition to curatorial programming, the mandate to revitalize “Icelandicness” and build a modern cultural bridge between the communities through art. Through a focus on art, *Núna* also served as an instrument in the process of nation-branding – creating and marketing “Icelandicness.” The project reflects on the reality of artists, in particular the ways in which the artist’s assumed “spirit of revolt” manages to collaborate with neoliberal restructuring efforts. The project draws attention to the ways artists (members of the curatorial committee) work within the confines of the anticipated results and expectations inherent in contractual relationships. And it considers the discrepancies and the disharmony that arises when art is conflated with profitable commodities in a cultural industry, is regarded as a currency in the politics of nation-branding and is valued simply as “creative enterprise” for social engineering and economic developments. This is indeed in opposition to the Euro-American model for assessing artists and art based not only on aesthetic considerations but also on the ability of the work to break free of expectations and causal thinking, to break out of narrative and to propel us as an audience into an unpredictable, powerful aesthetic terrain. Therefore, within *Núna*, particularly for those on the curatorial committee who value the aesthetic, humanitarian, and progressive aspects of art, there arises a built-in paradox: how can

1 Informal and formal interviews were conducted with members of the Icelandic-Canadian community, including Icelandic Canadian artists. Interviews were also conducted with Icelandic artists, Icelandic diplomats, ambassadors and directors. The research also draws on archival materials, particularly from the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a large body of written and visual materials, such as artwork, television programs, newspaper articles, and formal speeches (see also Tinna Grétarsdóttir 2009, 2010)

2 It is suggested by Icelandic government officials that the number of people of either partly or completely Icelandic descent in North America is close to 200,000. This may not be a large number, but consider the fact that Iceland’s current population just exceeds 300,000.

such a project comply with the radical politics of art and at the same time promote cultural identity for the purposes of economic growth?

Translating the Value of Art

The complex relationship between art, state and private sponsorship has long sparked controversy. The art historian Chin-tao Wu (2002) maintains that the 1980s witnessed a drastic increase in corporate culture and power within the art scene in both Britain and the Americas. Corporations' cultural sponsorships, which were once perceived as philanthropy, are now contractual agreements for the purposes of marketing investments, identity enhancement and public relations (Rectanus, 2002; Wu, 2002). Yet, while the increasing corporate sponsorship to art has not gone unnoticed, the boundary between the public and private is not always clear, as is evident in the sponsorship of *Núna*, for which the state acted to fundraise and procure private capital. Thus, *Núna's* existence is bound up with "the ambiguous nature of being public and private at the same time" (Wu, 2002, p. 21). Building on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Wu stresses that agencies that fund the arts accumulate symbolic capital, which can be turned to economic and political advantage (2002, p. 269). The question remains: what are the ramifications of this shift in legitimating narratives of art? narratives that now revolve around prospective profits and financial investments? narratives that now must include the pursuit of art as an image-enhancing tool and instrument by which people's relations to art and to one another are engineered? Arguing that, as art is increasingly channeled to manage the social rather than to provide societal critique, George Yúdice raises the concern that this shift may "push society to a phantasmatic happy medium" (Yúdice, 1999, p. 31). Yúdice argues that the utilitarian perspective has "become hegemonic, so much so that even 'progressives' have found a way of making peace with it" (1999, p. 17).

In recent years, at the same time as it has maintained state endowments for the arts, the Icelandic government has encouraged arts-and-culture partnerships with corporate businesses that have increasingly integrated themselves into the support infrastructure of the art world. The presence of the private sector became pervasive in the cultural milieu of Iceland and across the borders of the *Núna* project.³ While society was "colonized" by the discourse of *enterprise culture* in an almost totalitarian fashion (where notions of enterprise, efficiency and performative actions are often measured using numbers and statistics), the discussion of art was increasingly presented in graphs, numbers, and grids, in expressions of networking, results and image making. The so-called "Image Report," officially compiled by the Public Image Committee for the Icelandic Prime Minister's Office in 2008, shows how artists are increasingly involved in the business of branding.⁴

Artists participate in the process of representing and redefining cultural and corporate images on the global scene. The artists' work, but also the artists themselves, come to represent the culture at large. In Iceland, this representation is of a progressive, even rebellious, culture that combines strong work in the arts with economic innovation—such an image is highly compatible with a partnership between

³ This "partnership" of art and corporate culture, generally addressed as corporate social responsibility (CSR), did not, in general, result in the establishment of autonomous non-profit art-supporting organizations run with a professional independent board. The partnership, instead, took a pragmatic direction in the sense that the private funds established to support contemporary art in Iceland were more or less directly linked to their donors, the corporations.

⁴ The full title of the so-called "Image Report" is *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna. Skýrsla nefndar.*

artists and corporate patrons and appropriate in a context that sees art as valuable currency within a neoliberal marketplace.

The morality of the system is expressed by the trickle-down effects of capitalism's pyramid scheme, which is enterprise culture's version of egalitarianism (Heelas & Morris, 1992, p. 21). According to advocates of neoliberalism, everyone will benefit from "increasing the size of the pie." Thus, the neoliberal condition is often presented as a "win-win situation" despite evidence to the contrary (see Stefán Ólafsson, 2010). Needless to say, this win-win situation is a mantra often repeated in the art world. Artists are generally closer to the bottom of the pyramid. They are "cheap labor," although their wine glasses get refilled at the "up town" parties. This is reflected in the *Núna* project: artists are approached to form a curatorial committee on a voluntary basis with the exception of a small honorarium; yet, these artists "pull the wagon" of marketing "Icelandicness" in Canada for the future economic benefit of Iceland and its corporate world. In the *Núna* project, as in other forms of corporate/government/artist partnership, artists are in fact the "agents," or, in the language of neoliberalism, the "managerial class": they are the social engineers of cultural change, building a contemporary bridge between Canadians of Icelandic descent and the old homeland.

"Making Iceland cool and attractive to new generations"

In 2007, the Icelandic government initiated the *Núna* art convergence by mobilizing artists across the borders to form a curatorial committee and to put together an annual Icelandic/Icelandic-Canadian arts festival in Canada. The curatorial committee was comprised of six Canadians of Icelandic heritage from various art disciplines, each of whom were recruited by the director of the board, the Icelandic consul in Winnipeg. The arts festival was funded by the Icelandic state, which, in line with neoliberal governance, also acted as a fundraiser and therefore acted to recruit Icelandic corporations and, later, Canadians to sponsor the project. The curatorial committee received a small honorarium to build the program and to select the artists from Canada and Iceland. All its decisions, however, had to be approved by the Icelandic consul in Winnipeg (the director of the board of the festival) and at times the curatorial committee did not have the desired curatorial freedom.

The festival was designed around the theme of "Icelandicness." Explaining the core element of *Núna*, one of the members of the curatorial committee explained, "It has of course an Icelandic bias...both Icelandic proper and 'Western Icelandic' [Icelandic-Canadians] as well as incorporating artists who have only a very few drops of Icelandic blood in them, or are 'Icelandic by marriage' or in some cases who are Icelandophiles" (Fuller, 2007a, p. 10). Since 2007, for several days in late April and early May, *Núna* has displayed artwork from Iceland and Canada. Many individual talents and distinctive voices have contributed to the festival in various forms, including visual arts, performance, film and music.⁵

The name of the festival, *Núna* (Now), stresses the contemporary focus of the event. Moreover, as one member of the curatorial committee suggested to me, *Núna* is about "using the young generation—the exciting things—to build the bridge...and to promote Iceland." In general, the curatorial committee spoke of *Núna* as an opportunity to work with art and curatorial practices, to get people together, to create new connections and to become a contemporary voice of the Icelandic-Canadian community in opposition to the one that had already existed in Canada. According to

⁵ My discussion on *Núna* is limited to the first two years.

one of the curators, *Núna* provides a venue to explore one's heritage and to make new connections. She commented that "there is bit of an idea [that] what it is to be Icelandic in Canada is stuck in the past" and somewhat "inflexible." Thus, she explained that motivating young people, who are, in general, more interested in contemporary culture than they are in the past version of Icelandic-Canadian relations, allows *Núna* to "contemporize the relations" between the two countries. She continues, "I understand the desire to build this relationship, because the relationship that [has, up until now, existed] between the countries is more through *vinarterta* [a layered torte at the height of its popularity in late 19th century in Iceland] than [through] Sigur Rós [a contemporary Icelandic music band]." Another member of the committee, who had never before been involved in the community, added, "We want to make people realize that this festival isn't about the past... this festival is about creating new traditions" (Binning, 2007, p. 4-5).

Many of the younger generation of Icelandic descent in Canada consider *Núna* to be the only Icelandic public event of relevance. Many who attend *Núna* are meeting people from Iceland for the first time—and many from Iceland are visiting and learning about the Icelandic-Canadian community for the first time. Gabriela Jonson, a Canadian of Icelandic descent, states that, for many, *Núna* is a wake-up call "highlighting assimilatedness rather than our 'Icelandicness'" and, significantly, she not only finds "less friction connecting" with people than usual but also more meaningful representations of the Icelandic identity (personal letter to author, April 9, 2008). In contrast, some voices express concern that there is "something unsettlingly white about *Núna*"; and an artist from Winnipeg criticises, although in a joking manner, that he finds his colleagues of Icelandic ancestry overly obsessed with their heritage. Overall, however, the *Núna* festival has garnered positive feedback and has been crucial in reinvigorating interest towards Iceland and Icelandic heritage among younger generations of the Icelandic-Canadian community.

The inaugural *Núna* in 2007 was "a whirlwind of events" (Fuller, 2007b, p. 7). It was not only the multidisciplinary arts events that drew attention to Iceland but also the "Taste of Iceland" days organized by the branding program Iceland Naturally. Sponsored by Iceland Naturally, *Núna* was incorporated into "Taste of Iceland" days. The goal that first year was to create a level of interest in Iceland as a desirable destination by promoting Icelandic products, its geothermal energy and its businesses. According to my respondents at Icelandic Naturally these methods, of using art events to attract media attention and create level of interest in Iceland have worked extremely well, even better than paid advertisements in print and television media.

The inaugural year of *Núna* was a whirlwind in many ways: the President of Iceland was visiting; the annual convention of the Icelandic National League of North America was being held; Icelandic Landsbanki bank, one of the main sponsors of *Núna* 2007, officially opened in Winnipeg; and contemporary Icelandic cuisine was available at specific restaurants. The Icelandic president, a vocal advocate of neoliberal politics and a tireless promoter of Icelandic businesses and banks abroad, drew the media's attention as he promoted the "Icelandic creativity" evident in the *Núna* festival and in Icelandic businesses, which he promoted at a special luncheon hosted by the Winnipeg chamber of commerce (Cash 2007, p 28). Speaking on behalf of both communities, the president referred to Icelanders at home and abroad as a daring and innovative, not just in the sphere of art, but also in the "art of businesses."

Content with the results of the events, the Icelandic consul in Winnipeg stated, "It was not possible [during those] two weeks to move around in Winnipeg without hearing people talking about Iceland. We saturated the city as we were on radio, television and in the newspaper. The city was ours." Despite the media attention and public forums held in relation to *Núna*, such as the panel "What is Icelandic about

that?” there was a limited discussion about the art and artistic projects for the sake of the art itself. The generated formal discourses of the art projects had little to do with aesthetic values or ideals, and the curatorial committee was not able to make public critical assessments of the thematic, conceptual and formal approaches to the artworks they chose to include. Commenting on this lack, one committee member stated, “So what happened was because Iceland Naturally was marketing it we got some good coverage but not the kind of coverage that we needed.” He continued, “The consulate would argue that we got huge coverage”; however, as he explained, the coverage was on Iceland and not on art. *Núna* also received attention in the Icelandic media. There, the media introduced *Núna* to its readers/viewers the same way as Manitoba’s media had, by focusing on “Icelandicness” and how the arts events fuelled people’s interest in their Icelandic heritage; the media concentrated on promotional themes and relations across the communities (Arnar Eggert Thoroddsen 2009, p. 59; Steinþór Guðbjartsson, 2009, p. 34-35).

Two years into *Núna*, one of the curators voiced the importance “of taking responsibility for what we are doing and how we are doing it.” The curator emphasized the importance of making a *Núna* catalogue, as well as asserting their agency in their relationships with the old homeland and the Icelandic consulate in order to explain their association with “corporate Iceland interests.” Expressing unease about the framework of *Núna* and the fact that there was a “little bit of paternalistic relationship going on” because the festival was designed to use art to open up contemporary and corporate relations between Canada and Iceland, she stated that “while others on the committee have tried to assure me that [*Núna*] is about the artists and it is about the art...I am not completely sure why we exist.” She expressed further concerns about the committee’s roles and responsibilities by asking questions such as, “Are we going to be perceived as agents of commerce coming to extract cultural capital?” And then insisting, “I don’t want to be perceived that way, that is not what I am doing, but people’s perception could easily be that.”

A specific aspect of the dilemma that the curatorial committee faced was that they were expected to include nation-branding trademark clichés and images on their posters and sites. Some of the curators felt that they were “holding hands with somebody whose hands [they] did not want to hold.” Others of the curatorial committee were less concerned with existential questions. They embraced the fact that the arts were receiving funding: “It is nice to see that when there is a little bit of extra money at the end of the day that it is used to support art”; “I think there are different people that have different ideas [about *Núna*] but not ideas that contradict each other.” During my field research, I learned that some members of the committee questioned the intentions behind *Núna* at the same time that they regarded *Núna* as a great opportunity, stressing that “we have to take those opportunities.” Although the board of *Núna* did not provide them salaries for their work, excepting a small honorarium, they got to travel back and forth between Iceland and Canada and *Núna* provided them curatorial experience as well as it served as a venue for their own art works.

Those first two years, the curatorial committee did not provide a catalogue nor provide any public aesthetic contextualization for the work included, other than to simply present the art works as Icelandic/Icelandic-Canadian, as mandated by the Icelandic state. The framework of *Núna* and the conflation of art/ethnicity/country was not considered problematic for the majority of the Canadian participants. Yet there were voices that resisted the idea that art be framed by ethnicity. Criticism was in particular raised by Icelandic participants during the panel discussion “What is Icelandic about that?” which undeniably directed participants to situate the discussion within an ethnic framework with few exceptions. While the panel discussion on “What is Icelandic about that?” revolved mainly around how people addressed their

“Icelandicness” some of the Icelandic participants attempted to disrupt the whole framework by raising provocative thoughts about transporting ethnic schemata “to practices where they might not be the most applicable or relevant” (Wineger, 2005, p. 12). One Icelander attempted to change the direction of the panel discussion from the ethnic origin of the elements to broader themes of art, aesthetics, and the human experience. Another Icelandic curator and artist highlighted the cultural politics and the disharmonious relations in *Núna* by stating,

One of the problems with the relationship between Canada and Iceland is that it has been extremely structured and channeled over the years...let's put it this way, that Canadians and Icelanders have not been communicating—or they have been communicating under supervision—it has been supervised communication...[tied to] the mix of nationalism, commercialism and politics (Hannes Lárússon, 2008).

He also expressed his concerns about approaching art based on ethnicity/nationality, stating the necessity of abandoning the ethnic framework and addressing art primarily from a place of aesthetic ideals, “because when you cut through the idea of ‘Icelandicness’ you are dealing with quality of art and if you do that you are not thinking about it as Canadian or Icelandic” (Hannes Lárússon, 2008).

Despite the resistance of many Icelandic artists, equating Icelandic contemporary art with ethnicity/country/nature is a recurrent practice in Iceland where contemporary art, business and tourism are often presented in a joint nation-branding programme. Equating Icelandic art with ethnicity/country, as evident in *Núna*, has become an established “theme” in discourses of Icelandic contemporary art in various venues (see Artslant worldwide, 2008; Kelly, 2005; Rosenberg, 2008; Volk, 2000). Despite the fact that progressive Icelandic art has always been influenced by international art movements, and that artists often seek their education abroad, the portrayal of Icelandic artists is very much associated with a homogenous “Icelandic style” and stereotypes that depict artists (as well as Icelanders) as spellbound by country/nature “whether it is conspicuous or not” (Chilling with Icelandic Art... at the Scandinavian House, 2008). Icelandic artists and arts seem to be, to some extent, tied down, and some might want to say haunted, by clichés of “Icelandicness,” as is evidenced in one artist’s answer when she was asked, in a panel, to comment on what is Icelandic about her art: “Obviously when I am referring to my art I can’t say that it is specifically Icelandic—then I would just suffocate because this is art. Art has to have its own life, it is not about countries, it is about communication...you really have to get this oxygen, you have to allow the work to breathe” (Margrét Blöndal, 2005).

Conclusion

The *Núna* project is not merely a tool to aid in the transnational endeavor to create and promote contemporary and corporate Iceland and the Icelandic presence in Canada, but, more significantly, is a participant in directly influencing the Icelandic-Canadian artistic community in terms of art practices and conversations about art—at the same time as it renews identities and relations of power that operate beyond the state. Although there is nothing historically new about the use of art by powerful agents (see Wu, 2002), the ways in which art and art projects have been incorporated into a “way to channel, conduct and enable action” (Yúdice, 1999, p. 18) across national borders is an example of emerging ways in which neoliberal authorities practice their power. Transnational art projects have become part of the expanded role of culture as a problem-solver for national and corporate issues, have become

part of the management role in terms of social and cultural engineering, and have become part of the move toward reducing direct subvention by the state while maintaining a level of state intervention. Arts festivals such as *Núna* play an important role in constructing “governable subjects” (Rose, 1999) across national borders who can be organized and regulated through the creation of an arts festival; a process that contributes to and consequently appears to be merely based upon humanistic values, heritage, kinship and celebration of creativity. Thus, as I’ve demonstrated in *Núna*’s case, the arts take on a controversial and complex role in the neoliberal marketplace.

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