

**KEEP FROZEN:  
ART-PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH  
THE ARTIST'S VIEW**

**EDITED BY  
HULDA RÓS GUÐNADÓTTIR**





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## EDITORIAL NOTE

Hulda Rós Guðnadóttir

*Keep Frozen* is an ongoing art-practice-as-research project conceptualised by me – the artist and editor of this publication. The book is intended for other artists to use as a tool to reflect on their methods and practice in a call for a pluralistic view on the topic of what art-practice-as-research might be. It was a conceptual decision to assume the role of editor and to invite other artists as well as non-artists to share their points of view and have their writing edited by an artist. It is my hope that many such stories will be published, all surprising us in their different ways.

I'm not going to trace the thoughts of the different writers in this book, as is the custom of the editorial note; instead, I'm going to credit everyone that got involved in this project in one way or another. I call each one of them my collaborators in order to make a statement about the production of art works. The end result, or the many results, was influenced along the way by opportunities that arose, chances that were given, infrastructures that offered support, and by all the people who made it happen through their faith, through the experiences they shared, through hard work, ideas and the talent that they gave to the project.

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Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Kristín Guðnadóttir, Margrét Elísabet Ólafsdóttir, Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir, Hlynur Helgason, Halldór Ásgeirsson, Hulda Stefánsdóttir, Kristján Steingrímur Jónsson, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Sigurður Guðjónsson, Jonatan Habib-Engqvist, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir, Mark Wilson, Sigríður Melrós Ólafsdóttir, Skarphéðinn Guðmundsson, Anja Lutz, Michael Polacek, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, Claus Lehmann, Lisa Matthys, Maria Lind, Nina Möntmann, Tinna Grétarsdóttir, Olof Olsson, Dafna Maimon, Laila Hida, Allan Sekula, Sören Kjörup, Andrei Siclodi, the staff of Medienwerkstatt and Druckwerkstatt des bbk in Berlin Bethanien and storytellers at Sirkus bar, Reykjavík, in the 2000s.

# REPAIRING THE DISEMBODIED MIND: ART PRACTICE, RESEARCH AND NEW KNOWLEDGE

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir / Mark Wilson

Artistic research continues to be the subject of many extended and often somewhat affected debates. With such research having become almost commonplace over the last two decades, there has been no shortage of academics coming forward to assess and analyse artistic research-based practices, and attempt to re-frame and re-theorise art methods and production. Much of the discussion and debate has therefore taken place outside of the contemporary art world and involves specialists often not working in the field of art. Some of the commentary and reflection has come from specialists who are trained artists, or those with a background in the arts but who have moved sideways into other academic disciplines.

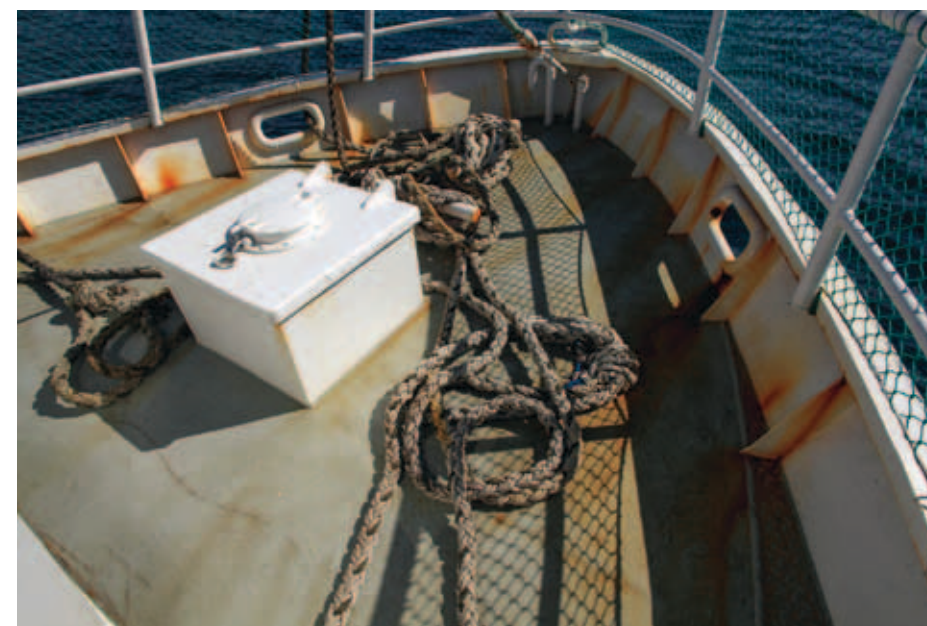
It is of course generally a good thing that the issue of artistic research receives respect and widespread interest, and that there are voices out there arguing in support of its contribution to knowledge and – perhaps equally as important – to the concept of knowledge itself. However, there are so many ways of being an artist in the western contemporary art world, and ideas about what constitutes art are as numerous and varied as the practices conducted. For artists to take ownership of art-as-research within the hierarchies of academic studies would require research-based art practitioners to contribute more frequently to analytical discourse. There are and have been numerous conferences that allow for the presentation of artistic research projects, but artists have been slow in analysing or publishing their own ideas about why or how they do what they do. This is, to some extent, understandable but also remarkable, given that documentation of artistic research projects abounds, and PhD theses are regularly awarded to artists for their research and artistic production.

As the research methods used in the preparation and production of art emerge out of the art practice itself, albeit often in a hybridised form, it is proposed that artistic processes engender a special kind of practice-based knowledge, embodied and to a greater or lesser extent, accessible in the finished artwork. The uniqueness of this model has yet to be convincingly proven or defined in ways that might be deemed satisfactory according to rigorous academic standards. Educational laws and regulations have of course been put in place to safeguard what are thought to be comparative academic standards, despite the fact that this phenomenon is clearly a thorny issue. These regulations, translated into syllabi for each institution, are consequently often open-ended and in turn invite a variety of interpretations. In the continued debate and discussion, it has been suggested that fixed research templates without

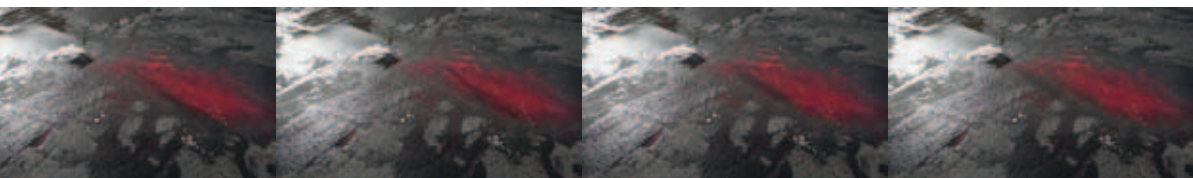
the sensitivity to register new kinds of knowledge, divert energy from the content and spirit of artworks, and indeed from what art in more general terms might be or become in future. In a situation where translation between languages or forms is clearly required, a perceived danger has been that the context of academia will prompt a particular kind of excessively textual and overly theoretical art, thereby filtering out many of the intrinsic qualities and value that art otherwise has to offer. Other critics point to the fact that 'art as research' is only the result of long-term developments within art practice itself – and as such is a further demonstration of the different and expanding roles art plays today.

In academia, there are essentially two schools of thought; one stresses the autonomy of art; the other is a hybrid form that seeks to draw in and embrace traditional academic ideals and indeed methods. The Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden and Norway here offer an interesting model in that they have placed emphasis on the artwork as a means of sensing and deploying knowledge, and so ways are sought to use artistic methods to demonstrate developments or processes in the production of knowledge. This 'experiment', as one might call it, has caused some friction within the academic system, and there are still many obstacles to overcome before we are able to envisage, never mind attain a satisfactory representation or model of the 'ideal' PhD in Art.

The biggest problem lies in the subjective nature of art and its innate resistance to uniformity as well as the external restrictions in its processes and outcome. Putting aside for a moment its basic and intrinsic dynamic of critique of contemporary or mainstream systems, art will always work with subjectivity, if not through its makers, then through its audience. Even the most apparently dry or intellectual conceptual art works will rely on the subjectivity of the audience for the reception and unfolding of meaning – where meaning is embodied in the experience of the 'other' – the audience. Irrespective of how presented work is situated, in or far beyond the body of the artist, the same problems (regarding evaluation) arise. The artwork can constitute and/or carry knowledge, but in order to demonstrate that knowledge has in fact been produced, and to what ends, some form of mapping is necessary, alongside an account of intentions, methods and impact – in the context of this discussion, the presence of such knowledge cannot and should not always simply be taken 'on trust'. When we work as artists, often on self-initiated but publicly exhibited or funded art projects, this kind or degree of accountability is not a necessity. In order for the



*Found composition / no. 1, Bildudalur, 2010*  
*Found sculpture / no. 1-2, Bildudalur, 2010*



Documentation of traces of labour / no. 1-2, Bildudalur, 2010  
Bloodpool / video clip / stills no. 1-4, Bildudalur, 2010

artist to receive funding for a project, or as a condition from a public institution for which the work is made, he or she is commonly asked to indicate a proposed outcome, together with a sense of its context. But in advance of the processes of research and production of the work itself, any associated or embedded knowledge to be produced by or through the work could only be implicit.

To the contemporary art scene, the actual notion that art produces knowledge by and of itself continues to be of little interest, and yet, paradoxically, analysis in critiques and reviews prompted by the production of art and by artists continue as ever. This suggests that the knowledge we are at pains here to defend or champion is an elephant in the room, conveniently left unacknowledged. This constitutes – paradox upon paradox – a tacit acceptance that, although art is important, there is still a contradictory avoidance of the question: how and why is this importance manifest in the world beyond the field of art itself? After dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, however, it is difficult to ignore the increased significance and acknowledgement of ‘art as research’. By critically implicating it in the framework of this internationally and highly regarded art event, it has undeniably been added to the contemporary art-historical canon. To its credit, debate in arts educational establishments has gone further, with the focus not so much on whether knowledge is produced but rather on the kind of knowledge that is produced, and the means by which this knowledge production should be recorded.

The research material associated with Hulda Rós Guðnadóttir’s *Keep Frozen* project – which uses autobiographical and personal material as a guide to an explorative journey, embodying the experience of being a labourer in the fishing industry today – clearly demonstrates the influence of the artist’s former academic training in anthropology. The study of people in fishing industry communities, and how labourers go about their work across a variety of cultures, is central. A hypothesis is presented in the contextualization of these observations within a wider picture of a society and/or societies. There are also what might be regarded as anthropological tropes, which the artist avails herself of in her reflective and sometimes analytical texts that explain the different components, processes, successes and failures of the development of this long-term project. What differs in the overall approach to her investigation, however, is the place she accords the subjective position and her own emotions by seeking orientation and looking for guidance within the autobiographical and family network. The direct introduction of her own body in the clothing and other

associative references of her subject are in turn transformed into photographic images for further scrutiny. It is a demonstration of candour and transparency, which reveals part of the processes involved in making an artwork. There is no question that this way of working intrinsically mobilises generosity as a means to connect with the audience. Its open-handedness makes it a social process: by allowing the methods of production to be incorporated into the work, the artist places emphasis on an approach and a way of thinking through the world rather than on a set of deductions or possible reductive solutions. Here, knowledge is to be extrapolated as a mechanism of enquiry, which resonates through individual audience members, all engaging through unique readings of its effect and impact on their own experience. This instrumentalising function and subsequent extrapolation of art essentially make it portable and transferable between individuals in relation to similar or implied contexts. We can see how art as a tool may therefore not be reliable in any absolute sense, but can nonetheless be an effective means of empowerment, unlocking the very idea of fixity of meaning and encouraging personal connectivity in thought, along with all the potential attendant social and ecological ramifications. Anna Línadal is a Reykjavík-based artist who uses personal material and memorabilia in her research-based art works. Anna is an active mountaineer, who – as an artist – has for many years joined the Icelandic Glaciological Society on their scientific excursions. During these trips, Anna conducts her own artistic research, collecting her own material, while at the same time observing scientific methods and the behavioural interactions of the team. In the context of the art gallery, Anna's own archive of samples from the many journeys and expeditions undertaken over the years prompts a relational meaning that weaves the autobiographical with reconfigured and non-linear time and space. In her artist talk, conducted as part of her exhibition at Harbinger Gallery in Reykjavík (2014), Anna revealed the alternative meanings embedded in many of her objects. This relational connection between the artist and the objects in the exhibition demonstrated an important aspect of Jane Bennett's theories revolving around the idea that 'everything' is alive, interconnected and in process. For Bennett, it is not just humans, animals and plants that are alive. Rocks, objects and air, by virtue of their unique existence and multiple interactions, all emit what she refers to as life. Infusing this sort of energy into (inanimate) objects can also be achieved by and through the objects themselves, as demonstrated by the artist Berglind Hlynisdóttir in *Gangverkið: Endurminningar Klukkunar á Lækjatorgi* (2014). This work features an old clock in the middle of

a public square in Reykjavík, which is endowed with the capacity to tell its own story through careful research and the structures of art, through history, politics, theory and writing.

Despite the debates surrounding research in the arts, there have been and always will be artists who engage in serious and sustained research to assist in the realisation of their ideas, regardless of how this might be interpreted by others. In theory, it is these individuals, i.e. those for whom this research-into-practice-into-action is simply a part of everyday production, who provide us with a template against which any notions of efficacy and unique insight might be gauged. This comment serves as a reminder that we are not in the business of inventing a new breed of artist – we are simply examining the methods by which we may come to understand what happens in art practices as a consequence of their respective research methodologies. A consensus on the instruments and means employed to conduct such assessments is as yet beyond our grasp. But despite the contradictions (perhaps we should even be galvanised by them) and the sense of productive uncertainty we sense they signal, it is important for art (and for research in the field of art) that there is a continued dialogue between contemporary art and the processes of research that lead to a university degree. That the dialogue should remain constant and subject to continued appraisal should not in itself be regarded as a problem – rather, it reflects increasingly the nature of art in all its mercurial manifestations. It would be a loss indeed if out of some misguided institutional imperative there developed practices that diverge fundamentally from the core and inter-reactive internal dynamics of fine art; those of thinking, making, feeling and yes, serial evaluation.

*Keep Frozen* is a research-based art project that draws on developments in rural Iceland, on the Moroccan coast as well as in capital cities such as Reykjavík and New York. There are, of course, different methods employed at different geographical locations, which are then drawn upon, together, to inform site-specific installations, each seeking to capture from different perspectives the particularities of a fading industry and culture. It thereby uses art and artistic methods to contribute to the thinking surrounding developments in our distributed societies and in relation to ideas of sustainable environments. Artistic research of this kind is often conducted in collaboration with other disciplines, including those in the sciences. In this fusion, alternative approaches to processes and interpretations of results are sought to reach new knowledge in ways neither



epistemologically nor even socially dissimilar from those of contemporary scientists. However, what is fundamentally different is the more open approach of art to subject matter, not least in that data and affect are allowed to coexist – a pairing that science disallows almost by default. Through art, fact and fiction, as well as data and affect, can be assembled in the same place. There is no other specialist forum that allows for this mix, and the importance of an imaginary state should not be scientifically underestimated or overlooked. It is built into our capacities as human beings to be able to handle and exploit ‘uncertainties’, and yet this is something we have through conventional knowledge acquisition come to reject as undesirable and necessarily to be avoided. Through art, there is the possibility to allow for recognition of the fact that we are fundamentally more than number and data-crunching beings, and not everything identifiable as knowledge is commensurate with the rational. The intention here is not to undermine or even to suggest a loss of faith in the sciences but to highlight what has clearly long been missing in its processes. Art’s capacities can draw from conditions of being that we have been taught to eschew and mistrust through, and in deference to, other learned, more traditional systems of knowledge production. We should be careful that the ripple effects of art are not undermined or undervalued in a new conception of knowledge acquisition, as the processes of art have the capacity to find their way through the fissures and crevasses of conventional understanding, and act as a catalyst for new connections as well as productive disruption. Seen in this way, it can be said that art recognises the human being as holistic, not exclusive in its approach but inclusive of what is otherwise unacceptable to the rational, scientific and often, let’s face it, disembodied mind.

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*Experimenting with intervention. Failed art-work, Bildudalur, 2010*

# THE STORY

Hulda Rós Guðnadóttir in collaboration with Berit Schuck

*Keep Frozen* began as a journey into the unknown. When I started working on this project, I did not know that it would become an ongoing research project about different harbour cities along the Atlantic coast, visual art as a medium and its relation to our society. Neither did I know I would begin the research in Bíldudalur, a small fishing village in the Westfjords of Iceland, and Reykjavík, and that I would later extend it to include Essaouira, an old harbour city on the West Coast of Morocco, and Red Hook, Brooklyn, New York City. Initially, I simply had the intuition that I should spend some time in an Icelandic fishing village in order to explore my idea of such a place and compare my childhood memories with the current situation. But why Iceland? What made me want to visit a fishing village? And why at this moment in my life?

CLOSE-UP ON A SHOP WINDOW THAT MIRRORS THE ARTIST'S FACE. SOMEWHERE IN BERLIN-MITTE. GREYISH LIGHT. STREET NOISE MIXES WITH THE SOUND OF THE COLD WINTER RAIN.

On April Fools' Day 2009, I moved to Berlin. I was a thirtysomething artist from Iceland who had completed her studies in anthropology, design and visual art, travelled the world and lived in many different cities. I had already spent a year in Berlin a few years previously, and was now interested in placing my work in the context of the Berlin art scene to develop my practice in dialogue with like-minded people. I had received an artist stipend, which allowed me to work on something new upon my arrival in the city, and I began to work on a site-specific installation about an abandoned amusement park in the east of the city, later titled *Hops Hopsi*. The park was eerie. So was my mood. What I had left behind was a homeland recently declared bankrupt. It was during this time that childhood memories of travelling between Icelandic fishing villages began to haunt me.

The memories that haunted me were from the days of travelling around Iceland with my parents, who were small industrialists producing plastic fish tubs<sup>1</sup>, the ones that you would find in any Icelandic harbour. I had spent vacations in the 1980s on the docks,

*Hops Hopsi* (2010), a mixed media, 10-channel video installation, was first exhibited at the project space PROGRAM (directors Carson Chan and Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga) in Berlin between 21 January – 20 February 2010 with a production grant from the Stiftung Kunstfonds. Lazaridou-Hatzigoga was both the curator and producer. *Hops Hopsi* was exhibited a second time as the 19th part of the D series at the Reykjavík Art Museum between 20 January – 27 February 2011, curated by Yean Fee Quay. The installation borrows its title (an idea that originated with curator Lazaridou-Hatzigoga) from the names of two clowns (Hops and Hopsi) who were once key characters at the amusement park, abandoned since the turn of the last century. In the work, the dream world of socialism's past became a distorted mirror held against the artist's native Iceland, which had gone bankrupt three years earlier. In the videos, a heroic character from an earlier artwork *Don't stop me now*. I'm having a good time (2007) reappears in the work to enforce the allegorical narrative. A catalogue about *Hops Hopsi* can be downloaded at [www.huldarosgudnadottir.is/downloaded-at/www.huldarosgudnadottir.is/www.programonline.de/hopshopsi.html](http://www.huldarosgudnadottir.is/downloaded-at/www.huldarosgudnadottir.is/www.programonline.de/hopshopsi.html) and [www.artmuseum.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2182/3368\\_read-1721/date-1623/](http://www.artmuseum.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2182/3368_read-1721/date-1623/).

observing people and their work, objects, colours, material, reflections and shapes that belonged to the harbour area. If people were categorising this reality as part of an irrelevant past, I was going to go there and see where it would lead me personally.

These memories were certainly evoked by my current situation, that of being an artist from Iceland trying to find her place in Berlin, while at the same time working on *Hops Hopsi* and therefore delving deep in research about the situation in the country I had left behind. By leaving, I had gained enough perspective on the day-to-day situation that I could view dispassionately what was being expressed in public discourse in Iceland. Moreover, I felt I was able to place my finger on what the problem was. I felt Iceland's crisis was not simply one of corrupt politicians and bad economic management, or even the failure of the global economic system, but also of the attitudes of the Icelandic people. It seemed to me that they were stuck in a stubborn denial of who they were at their very core, and were thus doomed to wander aimlessly around on Groundhog Day, repeating the same mistakes time and again. There was more. In addition to my research about the park in Berlin, I was also organising a residency programme called *Dionysia*,<sup>2</sup> which gathered international artists in different Icelandic villages. The renewed encounter with the Icelandic rural community helped inform my impression that the dilemma at home was also caused in part by the growing gap between urban residents and the villages from which they came (1st–3rd generation). I was frustrated to see what was going on in my homeland and developed the desire to look at the situation more closely. What if I returned to Iceland and experienced the people and places of my childhood memories as though I were one of the international artists for whom I was organising residencies in Icelandic villages? What if I returned to Iceland as an artist who was interested in meeting the locals for an exchange of informal knowledge and skills? What if I planned my next visit as if it were a research trip?

*Don't stop me now. I'm having a good time* (2007) is a sculptural piece whose title refers to a title of a TV advertisement made for the N1 gas station chain and that ran on Icelandic broadcasting channels throughout the year that the Icelandic state officially went bankrupt. In the advert, the song by the popular band Queen plays over a series of images of people having a good time (http://youtu.be/yND8Vcrw2by). What was particularly sarcastic about this advertisement was that at an earlier date, the managers of N1 had been found out to be involved in illegal price fraud. The sculpture was a monument to what was then the new Icelandic hero: the corporate manager. It was a figurative piece which depicted a young corporate Luke riding his metal horse in victory. For me, the owners and directors of the N1 company were the particular embodiment of the pre-bankruptcy moral of the financial and corporate sector, which spilled over into the values shown in that advertisement. A few months after the art piece was exhibited, the whole thing crumbled and Iceland was declared bankrupt. A surprise to the general public.



CLOSE-UP ON THE ARTIST'S CAMERA. THEN SLIGHTLY ZOOMING OUT AND PAN, FOLLOWING THE CAMERA UNTIL THERE IS A FULL STOP AT A MEDIUM



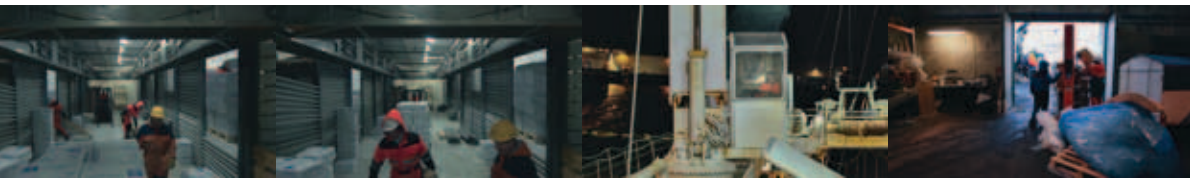
LONG SHOT. RACK FOCUS. BRIGHT COLOURED BUOYS EVERYWHERE, PLASTIC OBJECTS, NO FISH. MOTOR SOUNDS, SOMETIMES LOUDER, SOMETIMES FROM FAR AWAY. THE SKY IS BRIGHT, CRISP AND BLUE, AND THE STILLNESS IS INFINITE.

In April 2010, I flew to Iceland, and in May I was in Bíldudalur, a small fishing village of 166 inhabitants in the Westfjords of Iceland. Gilles Deleuze explains in his *L'Abécédaire* with Claire Parnet that 'desire' is never related to a specific object or place but rather to the relation between that object or place and oneself. When I arrived in Bíldudalur in May 2010 – echoing Deleuze – I was simply following my desire to see myself in an Icelandic fishing village. I wanted to interrupt the stream of ghostly flickering images that haunted me in Berlin, and create or recreate a relation between myself and Icelandic village culture.

In Bíldudalur, I initially ran around rather aimlessly and alone. I walked out of town and took some pictures of found objects, mostly hard, plastic buoys, and of the rocky beach and the fjord. I played with the items I found and made some still lifes of buoy combinations. I visited the deserted dock, and when the opportunity arose, I watched a small fishing boat arrive and two men unload some fish tubs filled with fresh fish. I shot some video clips and was fascinated by the red blood that came with the fresh fish and was running down the dock, and I realised only later on how difficult it was to capture these moments. The consumer image of food production does not allow for connections to be drawn to blood and guts. After the implemen-

tation of the Transferable Quota system in the late 1980s, and the subsequent sale of the larger fishing trawlers away from the village, the pier in the early 90s looked like it was almost never used. The village itself and the villagers seemed to be strangely disconnected from the dock, unlike what I experienced during my holidays in the pre-quota times, when the dock was clearly the beating heart of those fishing towns. The lonely dock worker was kind enough to cut me a fish fillet after I complained about the lack of fresh fish in the local grocery store. I had noticed that the only store in the village, called *Vegamót*<sup>3</sup> (or 'crossroads'),

The Individual Transferable Quota system or ITQ was implemented by the Icelandic government in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following a decline in fisheries. It changed access to fisheries, which went from being an open resource available to anyone to being restricted to the holders of ITQs, who could catch and transfer the privilege of catching a certain share. ITQs were allocated to boats based on their history of catches, and thus the access to fishing became private property that could be bought, sold and leased, even away from the community. The devastating results for Icelandic fishing villages can be compared to what happened to the UK's coal mining communities after privatisation, which also took place in the 1980s. Artist Jeremy Deller has done some interesting work on this issue. Professor Evelyn Pinkerton, a maritime anthropologist, stresses in her essay on the quota system – published in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's rise and fall in the global economy* (2015 ed. G. Pálsson and E.G. Durrenberger) – that the implementation of ITQs played a central part in the economic meltdown two decades later.



Documentation of Reykjavík unloading dock, Reykjavík, 2011  
 Reykjavík harbour unloading / research video clip / stills no. 1-4, Reykjavík, 2011 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)  
 Light study at Reykjavík harbour / video still, Reykjavík, 2011 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)

which was at once a restaurant, a grocery shop and a gas station, was unable to offer a single fresh fish. They only sold a few fresh fruits, huge amounts of canned and paper-wrapped consumer foods and a crazy selection of sweets. I also went to the local fish factory, which employed mostly migrant workers. There was a rather small conveyor belt on which the catch of the day was being cut into fillets. It looked very modern, clean and technologically advanced. I then noticed a large fish tub at the end of the belt, which was being filled with fish skeletons, heads attached, that had been removed while producing the fish fillets, fit for the market. All of a sudden, I had the idea to create a situation which would expose the relation of the villagers to the fishing trade. I exchanged the goods, placing the skeletons with the attached fish heads in the glass counter of the Vegamót shop, the cans and the paper packages on the conveyor belt in the fish factory, and I took photographs and shot a video clip.

MEDIUM LONG SHOT OF THE ARTIST ON THE DOCKS. A FISH TRAWLER FROM NORWAY APPROACHING THE DOCKS. THE SKY IS BRILLIANTLY PURPLE IN THE EARLY MORNING DARKNESS. SEAGULLS SCREAM IN CO-ORDINATION WITH THE RHYTHMIC SOUNDS OF STAPLE GUNS AND METAL RODS HITTING EACH OTHER.

I used the visit to Iceland in Spring 2010 to also initiate a site-specific project involving Reykjavík, the city my maternal grandmother had emigrated to after being raised in Bíldudalur. It was also the city in which my mother was born and gave birth to me in 1973. I was raised not so far from the midtown harbour whose

Bíldudalur, like most other fishing villages in Iceland, became a village around the turn of the twentieth century. With its natural harbour conditions and proximity to fishing grounds, Bíldudalur had been an important seasonal fishing centre for the farmers and a trade port, for both the monopoly of the Danish colonialists and – from the late eighteenth century onwards – an international and new class of local tradesmen of fish, especially for the export of salt fish to Spain. Icelanders were suspicious of living off the sea and lived mainly as poor peasants and homebound workers who were ‘owned’ by the small farmers they worked for. It was not until 1894 that a ban was lifted and the workers could decide where they lived. Many moved to the old trade and fishing ports. Bíldudalur grew fast, and with 20 ships, a newly-built harbour and a thriving salt fish and herring processing plant that provided work, it was already by 1901 a village of around 300 inhabitants. Fishing very quickly became the main source of income, and a new class of free fishermen and fish workers was born. Fish became the culture. Sundried and salted fish from Bíldudalur were a delicacy in more refined places in the world. Bíldudalur moved to the village my maternal grandmother moved to during WW1 at the age of 2. She was raised there before being moved to Reykjavík as an orphan at the age of 14. In 1936 the municipality built the first fish factory, followed two years later by another factory specialising in canned fish, shrimp and caviar for export. By the mid-twentieth century, the number of inhabitants had risen to 500.

In the 1960s the factory started to can green peas with labels designed by the Swiss/German artist Dieter Roth. Due to Icelanders’ odd love affair with canned green peas as part of their ‘traditional’ Sunday lamb roast meal and the symbolic value as an Icelandic staple, the peas and the town were immortalised in 1983, a decade after the factory was closed, when a pop song titled ‘Bíldudalur green peas’ became a hit on national radio. Around the time that the pop song hit the radio, the government, following a decline in fisheries, imposed the notorious system of privatised fishing quotas or Individual Transferable Quotas, and in 1992 the village’s three fishing vessels and the fishing quota bound to them were sold off. The next two decades were characterised by a struggle to keep the fish-processing factory open with the help of small-boat fishing. When I went there in 2010, the number of inhabitants had declined to 166 and the old can factory building had become a monster museum designed to attract tourists to Bíldudalur. In spring 2013 the fish factory was sold as a storage space to a locally-owned salmon aquaculture company. Once a year, the village celebrates its existence with a festival called ‘Bíldudalur green peas’, a patriotic reference to the canned peas.

existence had been instrumental in making Reykjavík the largest and wealthiest town in Iceland. The wealth created a generation of a large middle-class, which in the late 1960s, 70s and 80s gave birth to what has become a substantial creative class. It was in this very spring of 2010 that representatives of the creative generation won the Reykjavík city municipality election. These were the people who would decide over the destiny of the midtown harbour that had for some time experienced pressure to gentrify by real estate developers hungry for midtown land with views. I found it very interesting to have a functioning industrial harbour right in the centre of town, unfenced and open, and for some time I had wanted to make a film about it. The harbour played a peripheral role in my middle-class life; I knew little about the history of the town and the harbour, or what was really going on there. I found it beautiful with its exotic material qualities, and its position as an outsider made it even more desirable.

What had stopped me from making a film was what I perceived as a lack of focus if the film wasn’t just going to become some romantic collage. Then a vague idea started to develop. A few years earlier, while frequently spending time at the artist bar Sirkus in downtown Reykjavík, I had heard stories about the unbelievably difficult manual tasks carried out by workers at the harbour. They unloaded and loaded the large freezer trawlers that had taken over from fisheries as large fish factories at sea with giant freezer compartments kept at –35°C.<sup>4</sup> Many male artists seemed to occasionally work at the docks when

extra hands were needed. So I decided to check out the world of the dock workers. I already found it interesting during this initial stage that while the job of a fisherman had been idealised (in the pre-corporate times) in Icelandic culture – as evident in the many songs about the dangers of the northern seas – the job of the dock workers, who unloaded the ships under life-threatening circumstances, went unnoticed, and was even scorned. I found only one song about a dock worker. It tells of the retired sail-boat fisherman Gvendur, described as a somewhat odd figure who liked to wear himself out with work rather than enjoy the company of women and wine. In

Reykjavík began in the nineteenth century to develop from being a trading port with few fishermen and trading houses situated close to a natural harbour to becoming a small administrative town, with the first mayor of Reykjavík put in office in 1908, several decades before Iceland enjoyed independence from its colonial masters. The first task became the building of a harbour, located at the wooden piers and port houses. Reykjavík harbour was mostly complete in 1917, enabling large ships to moor in the middle of town. The existence of the harbour caused a fishing trawler revolution in Reykjavík, which, along with the massive construction work that accompanied the building of the harbour area throughout the middle of the twentieth century, supported substantial urban growth, making Reykjavík by far the largest town in Iceland and the centre of commerce. In the first decades, most people lived within walking distance of the harbour, which was the centre of life with most people having some daily errands to run in the area. With the arrival of cargo ships, the unloading of large freight vessels was moved to what was then (1968) the edge of town.

addition to living as a hermit and keeping sheep, Gvendur labours day and night every day of the week, unloading the ships when they come in. The song later relates how Gvendur's exhausted bones lie somewhere in a lost grave. He is certainly not a hip guy, not even a tacky old hero, so it's no wonder the whole aesthetic of the industrial harbour and manual labour was not something the new creative class felt any connection to.

To get an insider's view, I contacted an ex-employee of the Sirkus bar, Hinrik Thor Hinriksson, who also happened to have worked on the docks for sixteen years, of which five were full-time. He was about to quit dock work in order to become part of the creative class. Having recently enrolled at the Iceland Academy of the Arts to train in the art of performance, he was more than ready to develop a script for a documentary with me.

While in the company of the dock workers that spring, it became ever more apparent how much the harbour had changed over the past years. I saw how the traditional row of bait sheds and buildings had been transformed into offices, trendy ice cream shops and cafés, restaurants, art galleries and studios, and designer shops. I learned that the craftspeople and small businesses servicing the fishing industry were being forced out by high rents following a lift on the ban on businesses outside the fish industry renting space in the harbour.<sup>5</sup> Later, I discovered that it was not only because of the higher rents but the complaints of the office workers who were having a hard time with the industrial sounds of staple guns from the industries below during their important meetings. For tourists longing to hear these sounds, an old administrative building in the harbour was being transformed into a tourist hotel, hunched over the shipyard for guests to view labour at close range while sipping cocktails. The pier next to it had been taken over by a row of newly-built sheds, with large advertising signs offering services to the tourists looking for some action. Whale-hunting vessels lay beside whale-watching vessels, while the products of the sea – presented in a hip and trendy way – attracted a curious urban middle-class nostalgic for fresh Icelandic seafood. The transformation of Reykjavík harbour was remarkable.

Looking back, I find it strange that I did not connect directly the experiences and observations I made in Reykjavík with the research I had started in Bíldudalur. What was going on in Reykjavík's mid-town harbour seemed to be happening on a different planet, or rather, I regarded what I was doing in Reykjavík as belonging to a





Close view of rope fragments, Essaouira, 2013  
Detail of Essaouira boats, Essaouira, 2013

completely different project. It was only later that I began to see the film and my project about harbour towns as being part of one large art research project.

THE CAMERA IS STATIC WITH A VIEWPOINT OVER THE SHOULDER OF THE ARTIST. THE ARTIST IS SITTING AT A DESK AT HER STUDIO IN BERLIN-PRENZLAUER BERG. A BRIGHT LIGHT FROM A COMPUTER SCREEN LIGHTS UP THE DESK. ON THE SCREEN WE SEE A PICTURE OF THE CONVEYOR-BELT PERFORMANCE. THE PHONE BEEPS.

In the autumn of 2010 I spent a long time in my studio in Berlin looking at the material I had collected in Bildudalur and reflecting on what it and my interventions represented in my artwork. It was during this time that I started to think of my research as a project in its own right. The video I shot at the fish factory and the photograph I shot in the shop in Bildudalur was especially interesting to me since it documented a stop on my journey. Until then, I had been exploring the relationship between my childhood memories and the fishing village through observations, self-reflection and walks, during which I took photographs and shot documentary videos. With the video at the fish factory I had done something different. I had realised an art work. I had taken the role of the 'artist as ethnographer'; but I had not only assumed it, I had played with it and turned it around. According to Hal Foster, who discusses the concept of the artist as ethnographer exhaustively in his book *The Return of the Real* (Foster, 1996), it is a common practice in contemporary art to draw upon the methods and methodologies of cultural anthropology and ethnography to conduct research that involves the 'other' (e.g. workers, villagers and so on) or to create a situation that can serve as a starting point for the exchange of knowledge and skills.<sup>6</sup> And that is how I started: I exchanged the fish in the factory with consumer goods and donned the dress of the local workers to create a performance. I assumed the role of the artist as ethnographer, visibly disturbed the situation I was supposed to document, and on top of it all, I presented it in the role of one of those intended to be the object of my research. At that time, I began a diary, writing down the names of the people I spoke to along with my observations.<sup>7</sup>

My contemplation was also influenced by my initial introduction to the discourse around art-practice-as-research. Earlier that year, I had attended an international conference on artistic research at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, organised by PhDarts (Leiden University Academy of Creative and Performing Arts and Royal

Academy of Art) in collaboration with the Institute for Practice-based Research in the Arts (lvOK) of the K.U. Leuven Association. I received my very first reading material on artistic research, and it was by listening to the discussion taking place that I realised it echoed the concerns around the topic of marginalisation that visual anthropology had been tackling in the 1990s when I was a student. The use of the visual as a tool of representation and as a tool of research within academia has a long history.<sup>8</sup> It seemed to me that many within the art field were unaware of this history, regarding academia primarily as a venue for text-based activities and struggling to imagine the role of art within that context. This observation sparked thoughts about my own practice, which would take time to develop until the autumn of 2012, when I reached some conclusion on the matter. I was interested in the idea of viewing my practice as research in its own right, I wished to examine the landscape of my childhood memories through the eyes of the artist, what meaning I ascribed to it and what the artist could do about it.

WIDE-ANGLED SHOT. CAMERA PANS AND WE SEE THE REYKJAVÍK ART MUSEUM. THE CAMERA STOPS. LIGHT BOUNCES AND REFLECTS OFF THE SNOW. THE WIND IS HOWLING AS IT FIERCELY BLOWS THE NEWLY-SETTLED DRY SNOW IN ALL DIRECTIONS.

In February 2011, I showed art works-in-progress based on my research in Stockholm at the Supermarket Art Fair, the first time I showed my research in public. I exhibited both the video clip shot at the fish factory in Bíldudalur and a large photo collage based on selected research photographs taken in the kitchen of the unloading company. These were snapshots of photographs depicting the scars and tattoos of the dock workers. Two weeks earlier, I had exhibited the *Hops Hopsi* installation at the Reykjavík Art Museum with a group of five installers and builders from Berlin. I had taken a huge financial risk to make the exhibition possible but was positive about receiving an artist salary stipend that would cover a part of the costs of the exhibition, the Supermarket participation, as well as other exhibitions that year. However, in Stockholm I received the news that my application had been unsuccessful, which was not only hugely disappointing, but left me in financial debt. I was forced to drop my participation in any other exhibitions that year and withdrew into my studio in Berlin to contemplate how I could continue.

As reflected in a grant application I sent to a local, privately-owned Icelandic fund, I now wanted to continue shooting videos in Bíldudalur and the neighbouring village of Thingeyri in order to create

several longer video works for a multi-channel video installation. I had received an invitation from the Kalmar Konstmuseum in Sweden for Spring 2012 where the videos were to form an integral part of a solo installation with the title *On Deck*. In the funding application, I described at length the longer video and presented my working methods. I never received an answer from the fund, but it was the first time I described what I was doing as art-practice-as-research. As documented in the texts that I wrote during that time, most of them written as part of funding applications, I also began to think about how to leave behind otherwise familiar settings, to de-familiarise the familiar, which is important if one wishes to create a space for critical thinking and questioning. Last but not least, I began to develop a theory of found objects, and how they would change or even create landscapes and situations, and I wanted to use them as catalysts in an enterprise whose goal it was to look at the past and the future of a place from a position that is clearly bound to, and influenced by, the present.

Reading through the application today, one can see clearly that at this moment I wasn't concerned with the transformation of an Icelandic fishing village alone, but rather with the transformation of Iceland as a society – and indeed, with every place in the world with a similar history of fishing – and even beyond, to the urban areas many had migrated to. As the maritime anthropologist Evelyn Pinkerton points out in her essay on the ITQ system in the 2015 publication *Gambling Debt. Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy* (eds. G. Palsson and E.P. Durrenberger), the impact of ITQ privatisation and subsequent loss of access to fishing by a large segment of the population was really an abandonment of the centuries-old social contract between the state and the fishing-dependent coastal communities throughout the world where ITQ was widely implemented in various forms. The two major elements of the radical transformation that Pinkerton describes are the loss of livelihoods and the loss of political power on behalf of the communities for self-organisation. In another study, Naomi Klein has considered this a form of theft.<sup>9</sup> I wished to access the phenomena of these transformations through intuition and my own practice, and reflect upon existing methods and methodologies as part of my research. Funding was necessary to take it a step further and put the plan into practice. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the local politics, my application was not accepted, and when the Icelandic Film Centre gave me a wild card to submit a financing pitch at the Nordisk Forum in Malmö in the autumn of 2011, the path was set. I put all my thoughts elicited by



the work in BÍldudalur aside and began to work on a film about the harbour in Reykjavík.

In the autumn of that year I gave birth to my daughter Zoé Sóllilja, and only six weeks later, I was back among the dock workers in Reykjavík harbour, carrying out research that would inform the script-writing process. I was using every opportunity to take the pulse on the narratives taking place around the harbour. I talked to everybody: the politicians making the decisions, friends and family members, acquaintances and random people I met on the streets or at their workplaces. I also followed closely the public discourse on a wider scale as reflected in mass and social media. I was particularly interested in how the people of Reykjavík perceived the work going on in the harbour, the workers, and the transformations affecting the place. It was during this time that I began questioning the dominant narratives, and I discovered that there was a very broad consensus among the urban residents that the transformation of Reykjavík harbour was necessary to 'bring the harbour to life', and even the language had been bent to this perception. The people of the city seemed to ignore that the harbour was not an abandoned place, akin to some industrial areas abroad that had been reanimated; on the contrary, it was functioning as the largest unloading harbour of fish in the entire country. When the rule that allowed only businesses that served the fishing industry to reside at the harbour ended – and the rental market of the harbour was opened up – small businesses were ejected to make place for tenants who could pay higher rents. City dwellers in general regarded these incidents as a desirable development (disregarding the ecosystem of industry and service, which worked as one organism), and the actions of the newcomers as simply taking over empty spaces or making the area more 'lively'. They seemed to have blinders on when it came to the labour being carried out in the harbour, especially the unloading of ships.

A little later, I stumbled over the book *Fish Story* by the artist and essayist Allan Sekula and found his writing extraordinary. It resonated with my thoughts. Sekula traces the transformation of the harbours and the disconnection of the middle class from the sea or dock life back to the containerisation of cargo, the result of a technical innovation pioneered in the USA in the late 1950s and which had exhilarating effects on a global scale. The sheer volume of cargo that could be shipped in a container was so much bigger that it changed consumer patterns and, what is more important, induced a more international approach in the search for cheap





labour. Land became as fluid as the sea, and the labour didn't derive from the close community but from international migrant labour. The connection was lost. It was this development that erased ports from the collective consciousness and thus changed the relationship between ports and the local communities. To have a harbour view became a privilege, while few actually knew anything about the harbour as a place of work, transportation and platform for the exchange between the classes. Allan Sekula's findings shed a light on what is going on in Reykjavík. During the winter of 2011/2012, when I performed research in the harbour and script work in my studio in Berlin, I felt even more strongly that I was documenting a hidden world. I realised that the fascination of the creative classes with the harbour – its architecture, the rust, the feeling of abandonment and decay that it evoked, the colourful objects visible all over the place, the feeling of visiting the past – only reflected their inability to see that it was the labour of the dock workers that defined the aesthetics of the harbour.

STATIC WIDE-ANGLE SHOT. WE SEE THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORK PROCESS OF UNLOADERS IN A FROZEN COMPARTMENT. HALF-DARK. THE IRRITATING SOUND OF A MOTOR RUNNING, INTERRUPTED ONLY BY THE THUD OF LANDING BOXES.

It was not until the autumn of 2012 that I revisited the research that I had been doing since Bíldudalur, and I soon realised that my focus had shifted. I had documented and exposed the ongoing transformation of an Icelandic fishing town using the methods of a visual artist, performer and ethnographer; I had also written about the ethics and aesthetics of dock work, collaborating with the dock workers, and now felt an urge to introduce the dock workers into the visual art context. Thus, I sat down and wrote a proposal for the Frieze Art Fair, explaining why I wanted to invite workers to mingle among their guests wearing full working outfits. I wanted to reverse the situation in the same way that I had reversed the situation in the fish factory in Bíldudalur, but have the dock workers do an artistic intervention. I wanted to show the tasks carried out by dock workers, their movements as they performed these tasks as a single unit and as fast as possible, akin to an oiled machine, while avoiding anyone being killed or seriously hurt. I had experienced their daily work in the docks as a choreographed performance and their harsh working environment and mundane communication as if it were a piece of poetry. For me, they were artists and I wanted them to take on the role of the artist as practitioner in a new setting, essentially replacing me.

STATIC MEDIUM LONG SHOT OF THE ARTIST IN HER STUDIO IN BERLIN-FRIEDRICHSHAIN. THE ARTIST IS SITTING AT HER LARGE WHITE DESK. THE LIGHT IS DULL AND EVEN. VOICE-OVER CUTTING THROUGH THE SILENCE OF THE ROOM.

Now, one could argue that the collision of my work on the documentary and my plan to collaborate with the dock workers in the art context was the result of a lack of funding. However, it was more than a practical solution since I was genuinely curious to know what would happen if I narrowed down elements from the film and showed them in a fine art context. Maybe I was seeking a way to exhibit the practices and movements I had experienced and observed on the docks; maybe I just wanted to play around with the material of my research. But I had definitely reached a point where I wanted to combine my work as an artist doing research and the documentary film as equal parts of one large art research project. In a text I wrote that year, I stated that from now on I would use every possible method to tell my story, be it performance art, video art, digital photography or sculpture making, and conduct further research on location and in my studio in Berlin. At the same time, I began to call this large art research project *Keep Frozen* after the instruction written on the fish boxes in the harbour of Reykjavík.<sup>10</sup> I was happy with this title since the two words had ambivalent references, resonated with the origin of my journey, and evoked the mechanism of memory, nostalgia and visual sceneries. In September, I sat down and developed a research plan for 2013.

HAND-HELD CAMERA. CLOSE-UP ON HANDS TWISTING A ROPE IN BRIGHT SUNLIGHT. THE WHISPERING NOISE OF BLOWING WIND.

After completing my research in the harbour of Reykjavík, shooting videos and taking photographs of the labour on the docks, spending time with the dock workers and observing the colourful leftovers of the fishing industry, I wanted to finish my film script and take up again my earlier research. But after Bíldudalur, I was aware that the transformation happening there was part of a global story. I therefore decided to spend the first two months of 2013 with my family in a different fishing town and travelled with them to Essaouira, a Moroccan town located on the North Atlantic coast of Africa.

Life in Essaouira was very much about taking care of my children and cooking, which turned out to be an advantage because my participation in the local lifestyle made me go to the same places

every day, buy the food the locals would buy, spend time with them, and overcome the otherwise problematic gap of languages and cultures. I went to the fish market every day, sometimes several times a day, to buy the typical ingredients for cooking: fresh fish, vegetables and spices. I learned that it takes four hours to prepare a Moroccan dish and accepted the challenge. After a few days, the only difference between me and the inhabitants of Essaouira was that I never stopped paying attention to their lifestyle. I continued to document my experiences at the fish market and in the harbour, taking notes, photographs and shooting video clips.

The harbour was filled with small fishing trawlers bringing in fresh fish that would be unloaded by the fishermen themselves, just like it used to be in Icelandic fishing villages. I could not only smell and see fresh fish here but also experience the unloading of the fish and everything that was connected with it. Once upon a time, Icelandic fishing villages had been like this: full of activity, colours and smells that make every village a vibrant place, business relations all around; people trading fish directly inside and around their boats and in the market; people making objects and tools for the fishermen, maintaining the boats, waiting for passengers and goods or just the mail. In the

harbour of Essaouira, the crafts related to fishing were performed publicly, they had not yet been tucked away in closed buildings, far away neighbourhoods or foreign countries. The performance of labour in the harbour was authentic, not staged for tourists. This is worth mentioning because there was also an expensive fish restaurant in the harbour, furnished in the maritime-themed decor familiar the world over and frequented by people who visited Essaouira for the day, walked around the harbour and had an expensive meal, just like the nautical-themed restaurants in Reykjavík frequented by tourists from around the world.

One day we drove down the Moroccan coast south of Essaouira to look at the beaches, and I noticed they were all covered with plastic rubbish. I was particularly fascinated by the colourful leftovers

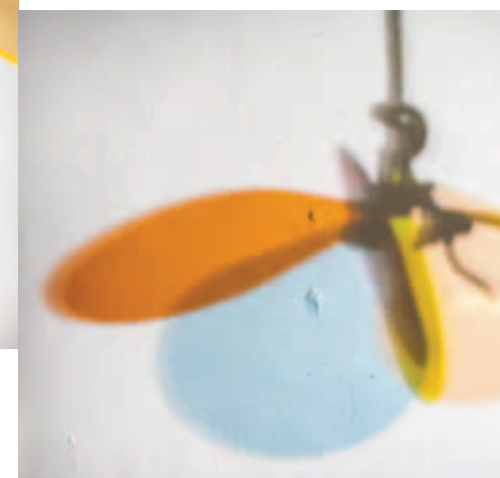
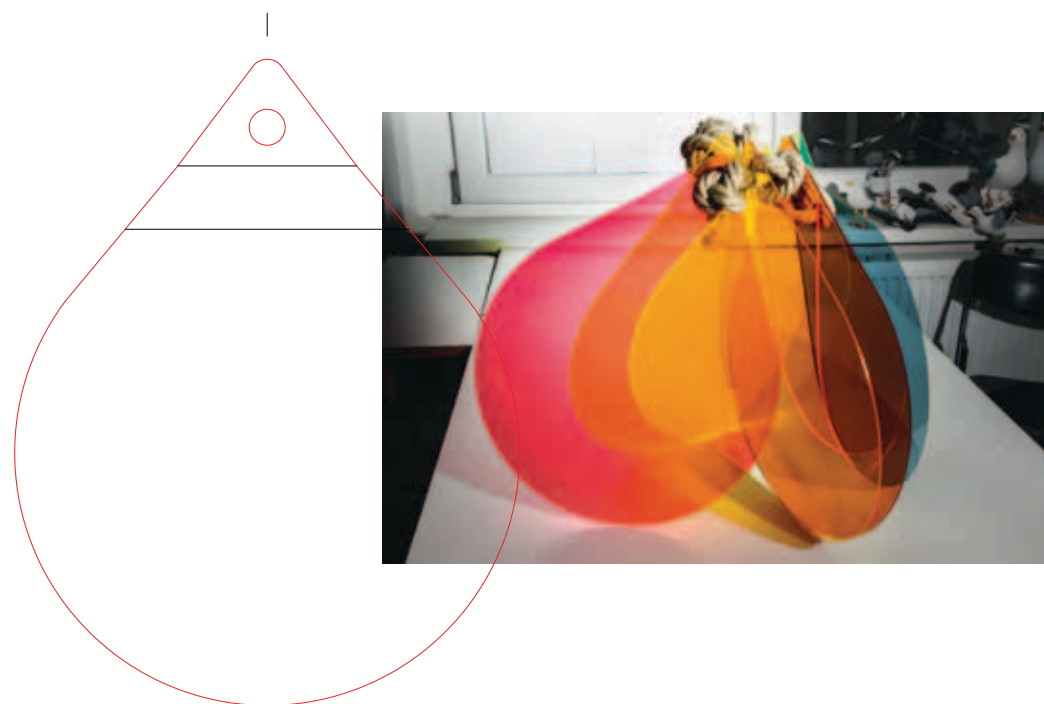
Essaouira is a fishing village on Morocco's Atlantic coast. Its roots as a trading settlement can be traced to the time of the Phoenicians, and it has throughout the centuries been an important international trading port with European countries fighting for the locality. The island Mogador, just outside the harbour, creates a shelter for the strong marine winds the town is known for, thus making for natural harbour conditions. Essaouira today is a mid-eighteenth-century fortified town and has a port that was built by Alawite Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Abdellah, who wanted to strengthen commercial relations with the outside world. A major part of the town plan was the four markets; fish, spices, grain and general goods. Essaouira also has an old slave market. The new port was called the 'Port of Timbuktu' since it was a key part in the trade route from Timbuktu to Europe and America, connecting Sub-Saharan Africa with the rest of the world. By the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth, Essaouira was Morocco's principal port and a major Atlantic commercial centre. The medina (old town) is a UNESCO world heritage site, and the fort and the medina served as a background for Orson Welles' 1952 film *Othello*. Indeed, the twentieth century saw Essaouira being a destination for the rich and famous of the European and American elites. By the 1960s, the hippies started to arrive, a move which has mutated into general tourism, with visitors on day trips from Marrakech.

of plastic polyester ropes that were strewn all over the beaches. They are nowadays a common material for ropes in the fishing industry, were easy to obtain and simply slipped from the boats or the docks into the sea after use to be washed ashore somewhere. I collected some fragments of these ropes for later use and took more photographs. My image archive was already huge but I continued to document everything I could see and experience, not only the objects related to the fishing, but also the people living in Essaouira and their daily activities.

STATIC CAMERA. MEDIUM-LONG SHOT OF CARDBOARD BOXES FILLED WITH PHOTO PRINT-OUTS AND PLASTIC OBJECTS. WARM AUTUMN LIGHT SQUEEZES THROUGH THE WINDOWS. THE VIBRANT SOUND OF A MOTOR ENGINE.

In 2013, things started to happen. I finished the script for my documentary and wrote a short treatment. Soon after, I began work on an exhibition of my research project following an invitation from Laura Arena (a former *Dionysia* resident, artist and graphic designer, and the founding director of the project space De-Construct [projects] in Brooklyn, New York) to show the project at her space. The exhibition was supposed to be the first public presentation of *Keep Frozen*. How to exhibit the complex reality of a fishing town like Essaouira, where the reality of the harbour seemed to co-exist with the reality of a tourist restaurant? How to exhibit the complex reality of harbour towns as such, which seemed to be defined by the labour of dock workers and fishermen but whose very labour was not visible to everyone, everywhere, to the same degree? How to exhibit the transformation of harbour towns? And how to exhibit an ongoing research project?

I looked at the photographs and videos that I brought back from my residencies and noticed a certain range of colours, shapes, movements and activities everywhere. There is an intense materiality about harbours, and I started a series of experiments to examine that materiality. I was especially interested in the colours: from the bright colours of industrial leftovers and the neon shades of warning signs, to the washed-out colours of old fishing boats, torn polyester ropes and rusty metal structures. The colours seemed to have the capacity to create all sorts of feelings: first of all, the feeling of 'coming home' and feeling at ease; then again, the feeling of disgust and shock. While the feeling of shock was probably connected to the fact that some colours were actually warning signs, the feeling of 'coming home' was more complicated. Initially, I thought it



Buoy design, New York, 2013 (Drawing: Ólafur Þórðarson)  
Documentation of buoy sculpture in studio, Berlin, 2013  
Study of buoy sculpture I no. 1-3, Berlin, 2013



Study of buoy sculpture / no. 4-6, Berlin, 2013

was provoked by the colours of the buoys that I had played with during my childhood, but there was more to it, and I came up with the idea that it was actually caused by something I would call 'recognition'. The colours of the buoys had the ability to make me travel back in time and remember how it was to walk around in the harbour because the buoys were still the same. They had survived. They were a direct link between the past and the present. To put it in other words and quote from the insightful article *457 Words on Colours* by Olafur Eliasson (Eliasson, 2001): "The experience of colour is a matter of cultivation. As much as the senses and perception are linked with memory and recognition, our relation to colour is closely derived from our cultural habitat."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to a great deal of contemplation during two months of intense work in my studio in Berlin, there was also a lot of practice-based research. In April I bought transparent Plexiglas in different colours and laser-cut them into the shape of a buoy with the support of an architect based in New York. The result was six buoy-shaped plates, 3 mm thick, tied together with a thick, twisted hemp rope to take on a three-dimensional buoy-shaped figure again. Then I played with it. I installed the object above a mirror and examined how the shapes and the colours collided on the ground. Then I hung the object up on a hook in the ceiling and shone a bright daylight lamp on it. The colours and shape were projected onto the white wall behind, creating temporary, washed-out coloured drawings – something I replicated in New York.

I worked intensely on editing the video clips I had shot in the harbour of Essaouira to create one more art work for the show in New York. The clips took me back to Essaouira and reminded me that there was a good reason why many called this town the 'Wind City of Africa', and why the area was popular among surfers. I was particularly fascinated by the images of blankets and plastic that were supposed to cover cargo on the docks but which were constantly on the verge of being blown away; of further interest were the images of little rope threads that were dancing in the wind. They inspired me to start an experiment with the torn polyester ropes I had collected on the beaches and brought back from Essaouira. I learned on the internet how toxic these leftovers were; that they eventually did not only pollute the harbours but also the fishing grounds. However, I was not interested in taking on the role of an activist but wanted to expose the materiality of the small ropes and how they influenced the perception of harbour towns and leave the rest to the audience. So I began to play with them, hammered nails into the wall of my studio, fastened every single fragment of them

onto the wall, turned on the wind-machine that I had in my studio and shot a number of video clips that I later integrated in the other video for my show at De-Construct.

It was at this point that I re-discovered the video I had shot as part of my research several years before, and realised that this video was actually the first work I had ever realised as part of my research. I decided to change its name from *Conveyor Belt to Keep Frozen part zero*. From now on, the focus of my research would be on producing works and exhibitions in order to begin a dialogue and share my research with the public. I sent out my first video as a response to a few open calls and packed for New York.

A SEQUENCE OF EYE-LEVEL LONG-SHOTS OF THE ARTIST DRESSED AS A DOCK WORKER. WHITE STUDIO BACKGROUND. LOW-KEY LIGHTING. CUT-IN. ICELANDIC MUSIC COMING FROM A RADIO.

I arrived in New York at the end of May with research material from my archive, the video about Essaouira, the colourful, buoy-shaped Plexiglas sculpture and plenty of ideas for a possible presentation of my project. The agreement between me and the director Laura Arena was to have a site-specific presentation that would integrate Red Hook into the project, which meant further research on location, and I was very excited.<sup>12</sup> I had never been to Red Hook before; the only thing I knew about the place was that it had been an important stop for trade ships from the 1840s onward, just like Essaouira; that it had become the largest unloading harbour in the world around 1910 and that it had undergone a massive transformation in the late 1950s, when the bigger container ships needed deeper water and moved to New Jersey. I had read somewhere that around the time the container ships moved to New Jersey, the widening of a street, which then became the Gowanus Expressway, and the building of diverse entrance ramps connecting the Expressway to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel finally left the neighbourhood completely isolated.

Walking around in Red Hook quickly convinced me that everything I had heard or read before was true. Separated from the rest of Brooklyn and Carroll Gardens, the neighbourhood was indeed remarkably isolated from busy New York and had definitely developed its own culture. In the 1950s Red Hook was still controlled by the Italian and Irish mafias, and in fact, the TV series *The Sopranos* was inspired by what was going on in Carroll Gardens. I heard that some of the dock workers from those days were still alive, as were some of their children, though it seemed impossible to meet any of

them. The neighbourhood seemed desolate, especially the vicinity around the project space where I was supposed to live and stage my exhibition. It was located only five steps away from the old warehouses, which had fallen into decay. To make matters worse, or more interesting, I discovered that the majority of Red Hook's inhabitants did not actually live near the harbour but in a cluster of blocks far away that had been built in the 1960s and was then the largest project building (for the urban poor) in Brooklyn.

I began to explore the streets near the old harbour and the main thoroughfare, Van Brunt Street, which had been the service street for the dock workers until the late 1950s. Some of the buildings there had been renovated, there were shops and bars but very little that had to do with the docks. I noticed that one of the old warehouses at the end of the street had been transformed into an apartment building with luxury flats and a supermarket on the ground floor. The supermarket (Sainsbury) seemed very popular among hip Brooklynites who came driving down Van Brunt from other parts of Brooklyn. I did not see any locals, except for the newcomers who were interested in moving into a loft with a view of Manhattan, the financial district and the front of the Statue of Liberty. Wandering off Van Brunt into the side streets nearer to the water, I ran into a small fenced off container terminal. Through the fence one could see a dock full of containers. When I tried to approach the guard he did not seem happy to see me. He barked at me and I was scared, especially when I noticed he was wearing a gun. What was inside the containers? It was impossible to find out. No smell; nothing to see.

I was still seeking information about the dock work and began to take pictures of the abandoned dock buildings and piers located between the main street and the

Red Hook is a neighbourhood of 11,000 inhabitants in the southernmost part of Brooklyn, New York. The village of Red Hook was settled by the Dutch as early as the seventeenth century, who gave the place its name Roodde Hoek. Even then, the NY port was important in the triangular trade between Africa, Britain, Europe and North America. As in Essaouira, a military fort was built there in the mid-eighteenth century. One hundred years later, in the 1840s, entrepreneurs were building ports in Red Hook, which became an 'offloading end' of the Erie Canal whose existence facilitated rapid growth: New York evolved from being partially farmland to the largest city and port on the East Coast of the USA. The canal opened up the interior of the continent, leading to trade and transportation development throughout the country and boosting industrialisation and manufacturing. By 1910, Red Hook was the busiest freight port in the world. It was the time of mass immigration of Italians, the Irish and Germans, who came to form a community and culture of longshoremen in Red Hook and along the larger New York port area. The era of strong unions and the mafia. Some advances were made as regards the rights and safety of longshoremen, but their communities continued to be poor. In the early 1950s, playwright Arthur Miller wrote a film script based on the community of Red Hook. When he refused to add so-called communists to the plot, he was sacked; with a new scriptwriter, the film developed into the legendary 1954 movie *On the Waterfront*, starring Marlon Brando. Due to the containerisation revolution from the late 1950s, the unloading moved there from Red Hook to New Jersey, where there were better conditions for a deep harbour and thus reception of larger ships. The Red Hook workers who belonged to the core group received a life-long pension thanks to the 'strong' unions. With nothing to do, the 'pensioners' now hung about in the neighbourhood bars on a full-time basis, instead of just part-time. The neighbourhood fell into decline, which resulted in its being called the crack capital of America by Life magazine in 1990. The remaining Red Hook container terminal is in operation to a limited extent, with the small area being strictly fenced off. It is only in most recent times that Red Hook has been experiencing the process of gentrification, misled by the attractiveness of the nineteenth-century warehouses and the views.

Upper Bay. I had the impression that life in Red Hook existed in a strange limbo, between being a half tucked-away storage ground for off-duty buses and abandoned vehicles, and being some kind of place for hip new restaurants and cafés. On the first day, I had taken a picture of a sign outside a bar that read ‘Veterans of Foreign Wars’ and discovered only later on that this was the place where I could actually meet locals. I had taken the sign very literally and thought it was a closed club for members only, but it was here that I finally arranged a video-interview with an elderly man, Salvatore Maglio, in the garden behind the Veteran bar. In the interview, he told me how family life had been back then and what it had been like growing up as the son of a longshoreman in the pre-1950s era of Red Hook. In the end, he said I should watch *On the Waterfront* with Marlon Brando, the movie that was supposedly based on life in Red Hook but was actually shot on location in New Jersey. I felt like I was interviewing a man who could have been the son of a young dock worker in Reykjavík if he had not been the age of a grandfather.

When I walked around Red Hook at night, I always felt like I was in a TV show or a novel. The neighbourhood looked a bit like an ageing ‘New World’, and I thought a lot about the immigrants who had come here a long time ago. The cars on the streets were remarkable. Big, old American cars like in the times of the mafia. I took pictures of them; just parked there on the side streets with the large Queen Mary passenger ferry in the background. It was a strange coincidence but two years earlier, I had been on the other side of the Atlantic where the Queen Mary docks in Hamburg, which is a container terminal still very much alive. Two old warehouses marked with big letters ‘New York Docks’ also caught my eyes. Magnificent buildings. One remained in a completely rotten state while the other was already being renovated for the yuppies. I took photos from both a land perspective and a river perspective, the latter from the vantage point of a water taxi that runs between Red Hook and Manhattan. One day, I found a building that was an old depot, full of ropes and objects that looked like they might belong to a dock. While I was very happy at first, I found out minutes later that it was the Universal Studios’ archive for props. It was hilarious. I felt relief when, a little later, I found a yellow, polyester plastic rope that had fallen off the pier, got stuck underneath it and was moving back and forth with the waves. I decided to shoot a video of that rope. A moment of recognition, maybe. Anyway, it resonated with my earlier research, and I picked up a similar rope lying on the dock for the upcoming presentation at De-Construkt.



Documentation of then, New York, 2013  
Documentation of now, New York, 2013  
Documentation of now and then, New York, 2013

WIDE-ANGLE SHOT OF AN EXHIBITION SPACE IN AN OLD WAREHOUSE. EXHIBITION GUESTS PERFORM THE TASKS OF A WORKER. DAYLIGHT RUSHES IN FROM THE HATCH ABOVE. PAN AND ZOOMING INTO A CLOSE-UP OF A VIDEO PROJECTION SHOWING THE DOCK WORKERS IN ESSAOUIRA.



How to exhibit the complex realities of a harbour town? How to exhibit harbour towns in general? In *Bíldudalur* I had explored the dock materials and objects that were dispersed around the fjord, the fresh fish and guts, and the running blood that caused intense smells. At that time I had focused on the economic situation of harbour towns. In *Reykjavík* my attention had shifted and I concentrated on the ethics and aesthetics of dock work, the labour that was going on in the harbour, the rhythms and the soundscape that accompanied it. *Red Hook* was the moment when I understood that the harbour towns I had visited so far were in fact all very different, each of them seemingly existing in its own time zone.<sup>13</sup> They had only one thing in common: all had been shaped and were still shaped by harbour labour, even if this very labour was not discernible everywhere to the same degree. I began to develop a genealogy. *Essaouira* and the Icelandic fishing villages of my childhood memories were my starting point, followed by *Bíldudalur* and *Reykjavík* as two places in the middle of transformation; *Red Hook* was the first and only harbour town on my journey so far in which the labour was not perceptible at all. The community seemed completely detached from the docks, and I decided to make these observations the theme of my show and create an event that could serve as a starting point for a dialogue with *Red Hook's* community about the (almost incredible) past and a possible future of their neighbourhood.

I worked on the setting for the event during the entire week that I was in *Red Hook*, using the video and the buoy-shaped Plexiglas sculpture that I had brought along with me from Berlin, the tiny fragments of ropes that I had collected between *Essaouira* and *Agadir* (and also depicted in the video), the rope that I had found in *Red Hook*, bandanas that *Salvatore* had given to me and seagulls made of plastic.<sup>14</sup> The project space was located in an old and rather large (approx. 70 m<sup>2</sup>) warehouse space. When I had finished my work, it was filled with colours, small objects and large projections. I used a white-washed brick wall at one end of the space as a screen to project the video onto. The video was about the labour that defined *Essaouira*, showing the dock workers in the old harbour at work. A continuous and irritating noise of a running motor engine came to dominate the entire exhibition space.



I also displayed the rope fragments by fixing them to the walls, and casually placed the yellow rope from Red Hook on a rod sticking out of the wall, high up in the hatch opening at the centre of the space. The rope served as an invitation to the audience to do what dock workers do when they fix the anchor of their ship or pull a boat closer to the pier. Last but not least, I became part of the event insofar as I gave tours throughout the entire evening dressed as a dock worker, pointing to the fact that this was not an exhibition or event that would remain open for a couple of weeks. My idea was to invite each and everyone in the audience to experience the act of doing research themselves and to enjoy the intense materiality of a different harbour.<sup>15</sup>

WIDE-ANGLE SHOT. THREE ROLLS OF METAL CHAINS. AN UNUSUALLY LARGE PUFFIN HEAD TURNS UP BEHIND THEM. CLOUDS OVER REYKJAVÍK. PLAYFUL ELECTRONIC SOUNDS OF A COMPUTER GAME.

The event in Red Hook was the first public presentation of my project and the starting point for a different kind of research. My attention shifted to the issue of how to exhibit or present my research in public. Fortunately, I did not have to wait too long before I got the opportunity to deal with that question and work on a different presentation of *Keep Frozen*. Soon after my return to Berlin, I received an invitation from Thoka, a gallery in Reykjavík, to set up a *Keep Frozen* exhibition in the Spring of 2014 at their space in midtown Reykjavík. After several failed attempts<sup>16</sup> to present *Keep Frozen* I was of course very happy about the invitation, even more so when I learnt that the exhibition would be featured in the annual spring programme of the Reykjavík Art Festival which focused on artistic processes that year.

In late summer I received more good news from Iceland. The first-ever public art production grant fund, Icelandic Visual Arts Fund, had finally been founded and was now accepting applications. I seized the opportunity, was successful and received a grant for preparing a book publication based on the research. I had not kept a log book as I never thought it would come to this; the autumn thus became very hectic. For one and a half months I sat at my desk, searching and putting together information that I had stored on hard-discs, computers and in calendar books, to find a structure for the material I had been collecting, covering hundreds of objects, research notes, funding applications, video footage and research photographs. In November 2013 the Nordic Culture Point informed me it would eventually support the publication of the

book; in December the Icelandic Visual Arts Fund followed with a production grant. However, things were a bit more complicated because the question now was if I would receive an artist stipend from the Artist Salary Stipendium, which would cover my living expenses while working. I waited patiently for the answer, knowing that it was quite common to not receive an answer before January / February. This waiting time was to be expected and I had long intended to use those harsh winter months of November 2013 – March 2014 for shooting the documentary about dock work in Reykjavík. I was in the midst of shooting when I finally received a negative answer, which meant delaying publication of the book. I also had to find solutions for how to fund work for the Reykjavík Art Festival exhibition.

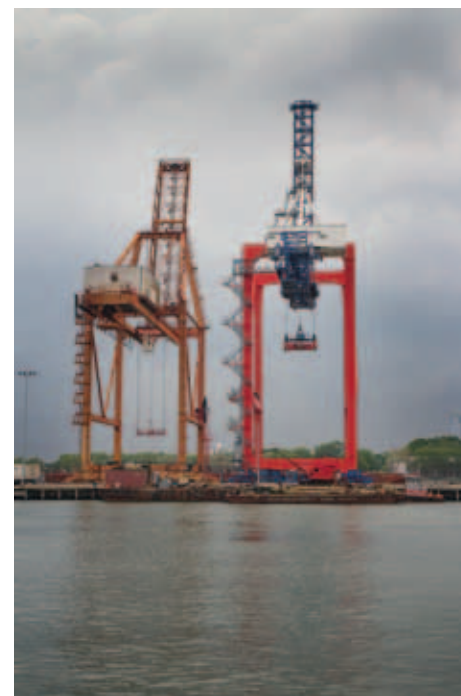
Working on the full-length documentary and my exhibition for the Reykjavík Art Festival at the same time was very challenging<sup>17</sup> but produced some interesting results. I had become aware that most of the dock workers perceived the specific materiality of a harbour, the ships and the wooden piers, the warehouses and the tools of dock work, as a part of their life. Conversely, the majority of visitors, mainly tourists and creative folks like me, would rather regard these as things from the past. Many viewed the harbour with a feeling of nostalgia. I wanted to address this issue in my exhibition. But how to expose the materiality of the harbour as experienced by the dock workers in a fine art context? Might the people react to a representation of the harbour and the piers, or even a found object, in the same way they usually react when they see the harbour itself? How to create a situation where the Reykjavík art audience would understand that it was a result of their way of looking at the harbour as though it were an abandoned place? It wasn't really a challenge to explore the harbour through their eyes; this was a way of seeing I had shared with them. Finally, I shot a video with myself in the role of the artist as a puffin,<sup>18</sup> an image loved by tourists in Reykjavík; the puffin, moving around in the harbour just like the tourists and creative folks I had observed before. But this was not the only art work I developed for the exhibition at Thoka gallery. I also borrowed brightly painted rusty iron segments that I had used as props in the video and decided to display them on the floor. Another new addition in this part two was three C-prints depicting me dressed as a dock worker, performing the movements typical of such a worker while exposing the fact that I am an artist, not one of them. The photos were taken in a photo studio in Berlin, inspired by photographs taken in the 1970s by the artist Sigurdur Gudmundsson.<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning here that I chose to display

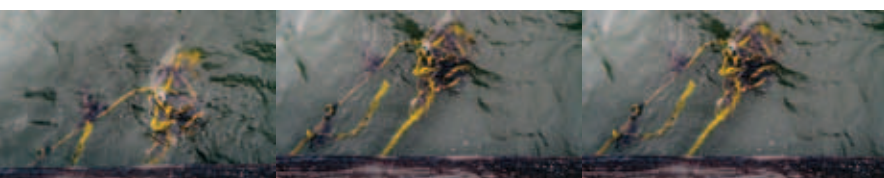
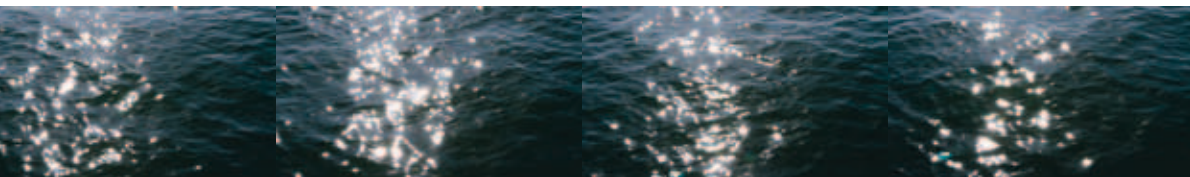
the photographs in very material frames made of used wood in an extremely deteriorated state; wood that had been used to build the harbour one hundred years previously and was then dismantled when part of the Reykjavik harbour was deconstructed.<sup>20</sup>

CLOSE-UP ON THE ARTIST GIVING A SPEECH. A DOCK WORKER IN HIS WORK OUTFIT STANDING IN THE BACKGROUND. UNDEFINABLE LIGHT. METAL RODS SLAMMING TOGETHER, SEAGULLS SCREAMING, POEMS ABOUT DOCK WORK BEING RECITED.

At the invitation of the Reykjavík Art Festival, I went ahead and realised one more art work. I seized the opportunity to realise my idea of a performance by and with dock workers who would appear live in front of an art audience. I asked Hinrik Thor Hinriksson (my co-script writer for the film), who had just graduated as a professional performance artist from the Art Academy, to collaborate with me on the realisation of my idea of having the dock workers attending the opening in their working clothes. I wanted Hinrik to add something else and respond to the theme of subverting roles, akin to what I had done in the C-prints that were part of the installation. So Hinrik, who is also an aspiring poet, developed the idea to have the crew read out poems which he had written about the everyday materiality and reality of the docks. I thought this was a clever way to confront the audience with the dock workers' perception of the harbour, an audience that would almost certainly mostly consist of the cultural elite visiting the opening of the art festival.

Looking back, the exhibition was an experience for those who showed up. But the question that still remains is: why does our generation find it so beautiful to visit industrial zones, which they declare abandoned, and then react to them with feelings of eerie loneliness, and even nostalgia. Even if something is not new, it does not mean it no longer exists or is not part of the here and now.<sup>21</sup> In the exhibition, I tried to show how alienated our generation actually is; how little we know about places that are central to the city, such as the harbour. The puffin in the video appears fascinated but constantly loses focus on the objects or structures that are being examined. Perhaps because the puffin doesn't understand its significance, it does not see the people, the work, the actions, only the architecture and the objects, the view, the rust, the colours. For the puffin, the area is first and foremost a playground, a beautiful location for its leisure. It plays around and finds outlets for its material fantasies. It is like porn.





*Not all that glistens is gold. The prince of Morocco makes his choice /*  
research video clip / stills no. 1-4, New York, 2013  
*Yellow rope dances /* research video clip / stills no. 1-3, New York, 2013

ZOOM OUT, FOLLOWED BY A SINGLE LONG SHOT OF THE ARTIST SITTING WITH HER COLLABORATOR IN A TINY BERLIN STUDIO APARTMENT. A TYPICAL GREY BERLIN WINTER SKY. THE SOUND OF TWO MOBILE PHONES RECEIVING MESSAGES AND EMERGENCY VEHICLES.

Judging from a study on the audience reception<sup>22</sup>, the dock workers' performance not only caused bewilderment among those who did not expect to meet such figures at an exhibition opening; it also confused those who thought a dock worker's perspective was of little relevance. Why listen to a dock worker presenting live what he thinks and feels about his work place at the opening of an art show? Very few actually understood that the performance was only half of the story; the other half was the gallery opening itself. When Hinrik and I conceived the dock worker's performance, I wanted it to take place at the beginning of my show to highlight that the gallery opening was no more real than the work going on at the harbour.

It was and still is part of my research to assume different roles and call into question traditional exhibition formats and art institutions. I embraced and turned around the role of the artist as ethnographer in two of my works, the performative video *Keep Frozen part zero* and the event *Keep Frozen part one*, posing in both as the artist-ethnographer and the object of my research, as the observer and the observed at the same time.<sup>23</sup> In Reykjavik I had reached the point at which I realised it was time to talk about the working conditions of artists and of creative labour in general, and about the artist as worker. Inspired by this thought, I had asked Hinrik to collaborate with me, knowing that most of the dock workers do not have contracts but are 'free', just like artists. However, dock workers at least knew about unions, while artists are only now beginning to discuss how unionising could actually help achieve better contracts with museums and art festivals, or help them become more respected by society.<sup>24</sup>

For me, the concept of the artist as worker seems to be a useful term, not so much because it describes the role an artist should or could adopt if he or she wants to take a position with regard to political and social developments. It seems the most fitting term to point out the fact that creative labour nowadays happens under similar conditions and is accompanied by similar ideologies as the hard physical labour of dock workers.

The transformation of harbour towns has to be considered a global phenomenon. I will continue to experiment with how to exhibit

*Keep Frozen* in such a way that the presentation speaks to both locals and a global audience. I intend to create an exhibition that can be realised in as many different places as possible, yet without losing its focus. I plan also to screen the documentary at international film festivals to reach an even wider audience. And finally I hope to find a wide readership that will read, rewrite, translate and perform this book in as many contexts as possible. Thanks for reading.

- 1 These fish tubs were used in 2014 for a Lawrence Weiner multiple in a work titled *Along the shore*, which highlights/addresses the importance of those fish tubs in the visual landscape of Iceland.
- 2 During my final semester at the Iceland Art Academy in 2007, I initiated the *Dionysia* residency and mobilised students in all five departments of the academy to work with me on developing it. The mission of the residencies was to encourage exchange of knowledge, skills and experience between international artists and locally-based, rural residents. After graduation, I ended up organising and curating the residency for a few years before it came to an end. By then, fourteen villages and hundreds of participants had taken part in the residency.
- 3 It is interesting to note that the Bildudalur grocery shop/gas-station/social venue Vegamót, although under the ownership of local people, labelled itself part of the N1 gas station chain. See the text on *Don't stop me now*.
- 4 This was a result of streamlining in fisheries after the ITQ system was implemented allowing for larger ships.
- 5 It is up to the city council together with harbour authorities to set rules on who can rent space in the harbour area. The right used to be reserved for businesses servicing the fishing industry.
- 6 According to Foster, this causes a dilemma insofar as the knowledge-exchange that is taking place is supposed to affect the people involved, change their perspective or even transform the socio-political framework of their work, while it remains art or wants to be considered as art. In short, the artist who takes the role of the artist as ethnographer may adopt the methods of ethnographic research but the outcome will still be art even if it expands the field of art practice or changes the rules of art making.
- 7 In Bildudalur I was the guest of Jon Thordarson, who would later become involved with the *Dionysia* residency as a host, and he put me in contact with a great number of the villagers.
- 8 In 1997 I graduated with a degree in Anthropology from the University of Iceland and together with my collaborator Tinna Gretarsdóttir, we were the first students to be allowed to graduate with a documentary as the main component of our final project instead of a written thesis. There was some confusion about the weighting of the documentary in relation to the written text that accompanied the documentary and the final mark. I was well aware of the struggle between text and the visual and other mediums as a tool within academia.
- 9 Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.
- 10 Helga Rakel, my co-script writer and producer, had spotted these two words in the research footage that I had shot on the docks documenting the unloading of boxes of frozen fish in the harbour of Reykjavík. It was her idea to use them as a title for the film.
- 11 Eliasson, O. (2001). 457 words on colour. In A. Miyake, H.U. Obrist & S. Olson (Eds.), *Bridge the gap?* (p. 76). Kitakyushu,

- Japan: Center for Contemporary Art, CCA Kitakyushu.
- 12 I knew from our earlier conversations that Laura was very focused on community issues in the area, which was also why she had opened a project space there.
  - 13 Essaouira is something that 'was before', life at the harbour and Bildudalur is the future with life cut off, maybe at the same point as Red Hook with a different history.
  - 14 Ever since finding the seagulls in early 2012 in a fishing village on the Baltic coast that had transformed into a tourist destination, they symbolise for me the replacement of dock workers by tourists and other people detached from harbour labour.
  - 15 In a lecture I gave on 16 / 17 May 2013 at the Hugarflug conference in Reykjavík, organised by the Iceland Academy of the Arts, I explained why writing about research projects and presenting them through texts and lectures was not enough; why artists should include the presentation of their research – the act of exhibiting – in their research projects. The manuscript of that lecture is still unpublished.
  - 16 I am referring to the years 2011/2012, the moment when I had to drop all my exhibitions owing to a lack of funding.
  - 17 The shooting itself did not only mean directing the film team and liaising with the producer. It had been an aesthetic decision to focus on shooting the unloading process of one ship, Vigur, which came in once a month for 48 hours. The plan of shots was thus very ambitious; we were not allowed to disturb the working men who were being paid according to how fast they unloaded. Organising a shooting plan with such limitations in such a limited timeframe was extremely tricky to say the least.
  - 18 A character from a previous work. See the text on the exhibition *Keep Frozen part two*.
  - 19 *Situations* are series of photographs shot throughout the 1970s and awoke my interest in contemporary art.
  - 20 The wood from the old harbour did not only find its way to me; many other artists also used it for their works around that time.
  - 21 See also the interview by Valur Antonsson in this book. Antonsson refers to the industrial spaces of Reykjavík as 'leftovers from a bygone era', a position rejected by the artist.
  - 22 See the Appendix to this book: Confusing the audience.
  - 23 One could argue that my position in the video was quite different from the position I took later where I created a situation that served as a starting point for audience participation, inviting members of the audience to join me in my efforts (do the same) but I would rather leave this discussion to the critics.
  - 24 In a neo-liberal society it has become quite common for politicians to speak about artists as though they were doing nothing and still getting paid, creating an atmosphere of hostility that affects significantly the labour conditions of artists and the ways in which their work is received by audiences.

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# DISCOVERING THE REASONABLE BEAUTY OF THE WORLD

Artist and editor Hulda Rós Guðnadóttir interviewed by Valur Antonsson.

VALUR Hi Hulda. Shall we begin?

HULDA Yes, I am all yours.

VALUR First of all, I would like to situate ourselves both in space and time. Last time I interviewed you, I was living in Chinatown, Manhattan, and you were in Berlin. This time, I'm in Reykjavík and you're back in Berlin. In the meantime, we had the opportunity to meet in person and spent some time in the west of Iceland to discuss your current project, *Keep Frozen*.

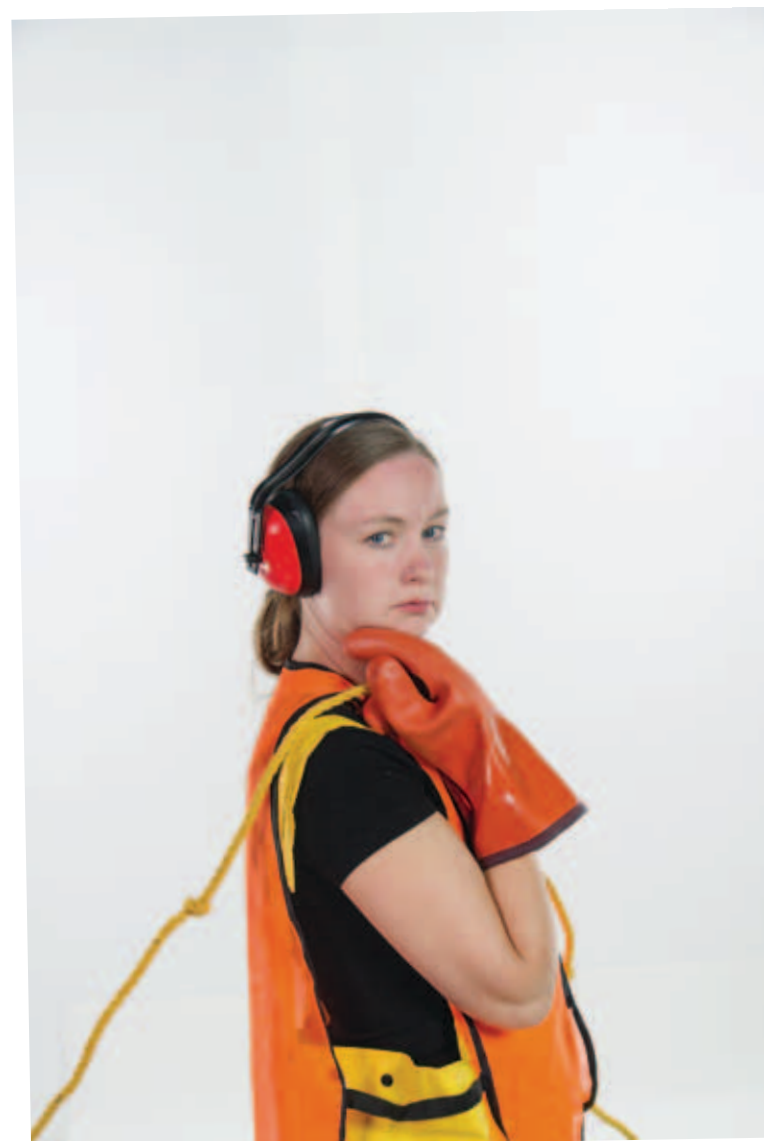
HULDA Yes, indeed. Like political leaders, we took a trip together to a secluded cabin to discuss and contemplate. Who knows? Perhaps we plotted our own little take-over and perhaps not.

VALUR In a recent interview, Ragnar Kjartansson, one of the best known Icelandic artists of our generation, commented regarding his exhibition in the Colony in MoMA's PS1 how the much advertised creativity of Icelandic artists could simply be a material fact of the close-knit community in Reykjavík. Since there are no unnecessary intermediaries, artists could engage each other much more readily than in larger cities. And, unlike other smaller cities, Reykjavík still claims to be a capital and therefore hosts a variety of international art exhibitions. To clarify, Kjartansson is a poster child for a generation of Icelandic artists who, at the beginning of the 21st century, emphasised romantic ideas about the artist; the dualism between reason and emotions; body and spirit; woman and man; the western technological society and oriental spiritual society. These are all ideas that divide the world into two opposites. It is akin to Romanticism as we know it from the end of the 19th century. The beauty of the world is something that belongs to the Romantic artist and is the opposite of the critical thinking and reason that characterise the sciences. In this regard, it came as no surprise that Kjartansson's exhibition was all about intimacy and childlike creativity, almost like a vaudeville show coming to town. In contrast, your project — from the outset — might be interpreted as a deconstruction of such ideas of the noble savage. You take the position that critical thinking is by no means the opposite of beauty, similar to the perception held by scientists about creativity not being the opposite of reason. It is a big part of the scientist's role to go out and discover the world and its beauty. In my opinion, that is how the job of the artist resembles that of the scientist. The artist is not only expressing him/herself or his/her emotions or making some object. He/she is going out into the world and discovering it in an

empiricist sort of way, without preconceived ideas. The very title, *Keep Frozen*, would of course mean that in some way, your project has to do with your personal relationship with Iceland; at the same time, you are dealing with a more ambiguous nature of that relationship. At least intimacy might not be as innocent a concept as expected. Your project deals with issues of labour relations, and how a new class of creative administrators might be obfuscating the true nature of such relations. Perhaps the fact that you are an expat, an artist living in Berlin, makes this particular project possible; that in fact, a certain distance is necessary to truly shed light on Iceland in a creative way?

HULDA Sure, that could be the case, but I think that before I moved away, I tended to take on more of an outsider role, while Ragnar Kjartansson takes the role of the affirmative insider. At this very moment as we are doing this interview, I'm editing a video in which I revisit a character from an art piece I did in 2006 – while still very much living in Iceland – that emerged in the atmosphere of the pre-breakdown Icelandic art scene.<sup>1</sup> It is the character of the Icelandic artist as puffin, a savage turned 'krutt' or 'cute' through the identification process of the 1990s and early 21st-century international music press.<sup>2</sup> Ragnar Kjartansson very much emerged out of that scene, while I always felt the whole thing was a bit twisted and kind of castrating for the complex narratives of Icelandic artists. Now, eight years later, I decided to place the artist puffin as a character in a video I shot in Reykjavík's harbour, the new centre of the emerging creative classes. Although the video has an obvious local reference to the touristic puffin soft-toy-shops taking over the landscape of midtown Reykjavík, the subject matter of the film is universal. I'm addressing this fascination of the creative classes with the rough industrial areas that seem abandoned to them. That is where my romantic nerve comes in. While I understand this fascination with what appears to be abandoned, I am also critical of it. In the video, the artist masked as a puffin is exploring his own fascination with the material reality of the harbour and the pervert tendency of wanting to change all that he is attracted to.

VALUR Well, even if the connection between puffins and politics might not strike the reader as an immediate one, I hope they will bear with us, because it is an apt symbol, if not an icon, of the ongoing changes in the harbour of Reykjavík. In *Keep Frozen* you revisit a space which we – towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st – had or have a tendency to regard as spaces belonging to a bygone era, to the time of industry, of transportation



*Reykjavík harbour unloading* / research video clip / stills no. 5–7, Reykjavík, 2013 (Photographer: Grímur Jón Sigurðsson)  
*Artist as Worker* / photoshoot image no. 1, Berlin, 2013 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)



Artist as Worker / photoshoot images no. 2-13, Berlin, 2013 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)



between countries in trucks, ships and containers with the help of heavy cranes. In the present time of the internet bubble, it's as though people in general don't imagine that people and goods are still transported via sea between countries; that nobody is making objects in factories. The reason you see beyond this more than your peers is precisely because you have travelled the path of research. You started out with a very personal interest and set out to discover. You observed that there was something strange about how our generation was touched by some morbid Romantic feeling when entering industrial areas with their rusty aesthetic. Why do we find it so beautiful to visit such places and claim that they are abandoned, and to be filled with eerie feelings of loneliness and even nostalgia? At least you discovered changes occurring in Reykjavík harbour that were invisible to me. I hadn't realised how much I'd also started to talk like everybody else: 'Yes, here is a dead industrial area that is being brought to life. Now it can finally flourish!' I didn't understand the arrogant position I was adopting by not even having gone there and looked at what is already there. And I'm not talking about abandoned buildings or rusty cranes, or some objects in the shipyard. I'm referring to the people who are there. And that is what you did!

Now, you're the daughter of a small industrialist who manufactures plastic tubs for the fishing industry. Since you were a child, you've witnessed the changes of the Icelandic harbour environment; from a crude industrial workplace to the ongoing reinvention of the harbour as a cosy creative spot in the urban area, where artisans and artists meet. It is in fact this personal dimension of your project – your relationship to the dockside, the harbours, the shipyards, the fish factories of this island country – that might hold an interest for a wider audience now, when economic issues should have become more relevant. By economic issues, I do not mean the simplistic language of politics that entered the jargon of the art world in the wake of the ongoing financial crises of 2008, but rather issues that relate to the 'economic' in a deeper sense; relations of labour, which ultimately is a question of human relations; of various techniques we employ to keep some people at a distance, and, as crude as it might sound, a technique that allows us to 'manage' relations, to manage intimacy with other people. 'Economy' in this wider sense, should encourage the artist not to mirror the simplistic language of politics, but to seek out invisible relations, to shed light on the various places where this struggle to keep a distance to something / to maintain intimacy with something, takes place. Money is merely one technique of many to manage relations; ideology – and all of its manifestations – is yet another. Tell me about these changes,



and how, in your project, you seek to show how this ideology on the part of the creative classes to occupy old industrial places and create thriving neighbourhoods is in fact obscuring labour relations, and keeping certain people invisible?

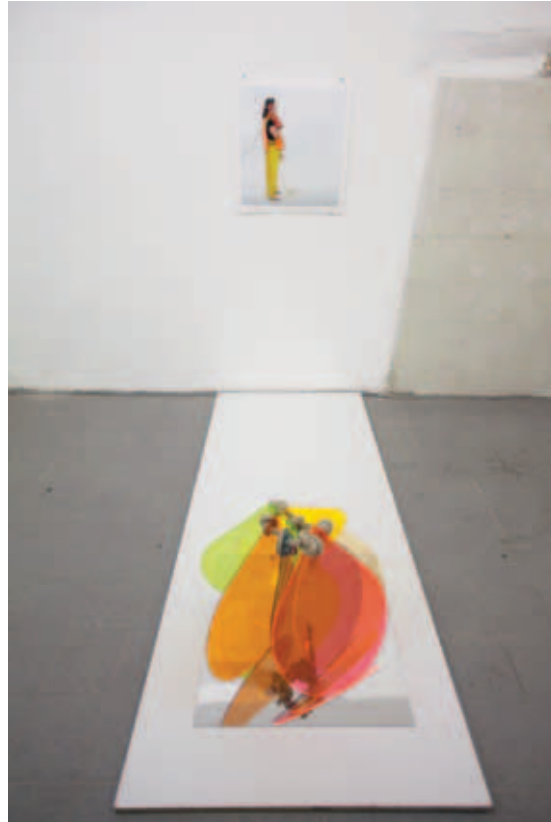
HULDA This is a very good question. This obscurity you talk about could be examined in the puffin video. There is obvious alienation. The puffin is fascinated but focuses on the objects or structures rather than relations between people. He doesn't really know what world he has landed in. He is blind to the actual work that is going on. Perhaps because he doesn't understand it, its significance, he doesn't see the people, the work, the actions, only the architecture and the objects, the view.<sup>3</sup> For him, the area is first and foremost a playground, a beautiful location for his leisure. He tries it all and plays around and finds outlets for his material fantasies. It is like porn. But back to the question of change. You don't belong there, so you want to make it your territory by putting a veil of your own aesthetics over it all. Perhaps it is the frontier now within the city limits, something to conquer and change, and perhaps the creative classes are simply being used as the very instruments of change. In the case of Reykjavík midtown harbour, the common word is that city authorities are injecting life into the harbour by encouraging the building of condos and the take-over of offices, design shops and tourist restaurants in the traditional harbour buildings. Meanwhile, the workers themselves are reminding me that the harbour is actually the largest fishing harbour in Iceland in terms of fish being landed, and that the small one-man service companies like baiting men are forced to leave the traditional baiting houses when they can't afford the rent anymore. What people in general noticed was when half of the shipyard was dismantled, as that issue keeps on being the only one that surfaces in the media. Manual labour doesn't seem to be considered part of 'life' anymore. It was especially interesting to me when I was listening to interview recordings my assistant did with a former dock worker (who ironically happens to have reinvented himself as a creative worker) and heard his point of view. He celebrated the 'life' being brought to the harbour with the restaurants, cafés and creative spaces. He celebrated that Reykjavík's midtown dock was becoming like all other midtown docks abroad ("í útlöndum"): a place to eat a lobster, not to transport one. This particular ex-dock worker echoes the dominant voices in the mainstream media, of politicians and high-ranking city officials. There are hardly any journalists getting different points of view even though the harbour is currently a battlefield. When the workers experience the constant

repetition of the ideology that is being thrust at them from every angle, they start to believe it themselves. It is a classic mechanism of an identification process. This transformation process has been and is still happening to fishing and industrial harbours worldwide. It is not only about real estate. It is also about a lack of connection. Perhaps the answer lies in an interview I did with an elderly man in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He was a son of a dock worker who lost his job in the late 1950s, just like everybody else there. He was flattered that I wanted to interview *him* and not the movie stars living on the top floors of the area's converted warehouse lofts. He mentioned that his grandson living in Manhattan also worked in film, and that it had proven to be the right decision, despite his grandfather's disbelief in the value of non-material training. "The descendants of labour workers want to become creatives today", he remarked. This resonated with my own experience of being the granddaughter of a fisherman (who, around the time my father was born, became a landlubber, making my own experience a 'word of mouth' tale like the grandson's, rather than a direct one). It would be simplest to blame this on the fact that dreams changed with more affluent middle-class lifestyles and education, but I would like to point out in this context what happened in the aftermath of the revolution of containerisation in the 1950s. The dock became a very obscure place when it lost its connection to the larger community, after the search for cheap labour changed the structure of the workforce. Instead of the workforce being recruited from the close community, the workers were recruited from an international migrant workforce. To shed light on this, I took my whole family and lived for a few months in a fishing town in Morocco, Essaouira, and thus integrated what I call participatory research. Large numbers of the inhabitants of that town have something to do with the fishing harbour, either as a boat owner, fisherman, net-maker, tea salesman, shipyard worker or buyer of fish that is being sold on the pier. Our days revolved around the tasks of buying fish and spending hours making authentic meals. The harbour is perceived very differently when it is part of everyday routine. In places like Reykjavík, the docks have become decentralised in people's minds, and the docks have become the arse of the city instead of being at the heart of everyday living. And you are right: as a result of the creatives' returning by occupying that space, the invisibility of the humans who are already there is being reinforced.

VALUR I like that image you've evoked: "The artist masked as a puffin exploring his own fascination with the material reality of the harbour." I can't help but laugh, but in fact you've also forestalled a

critical argument I considered along the lines of this alienation, which, in the case of the artist, can become quite comical. Perhaps it's necessary, these days, to emphasise that this was not always the case; that the term 'relations of labour' would immediately be interpreted as a question of class relations. It seems to be ancient history that such a term would have been interpreted in the post-structuralist language of identity politics, in the non-Marxist sense, as a question of ethics, say, between gender and race, or simply as an irrelevant question, a curiosity harking back to some early modernist age. Yet, I would like to present a few ideas simultaneously in order to triangulate your approach before I continue with the interview, bearing in mind both the personal dimension of this project and these more general questions relating to 'economy', which coincide in a symbol, perhaps only visible to the artist in the classical sense, where the symbol materialises something very mundane – objects we might call 'icons of change'. So why not? Instead of the lobster, let's consider the puffin. One prime symptom of capitalist labour relations is the tendency to be fascinated by the object, and what can be exchanged for that object, and to simply forget the maker of said object, the relationship between makers, i.e. the relations between us humans. One might be led to assume that in such a system, people would at all costs want to avoid seeing other people working. However, in line of this argument, ideology is not invented to keep people blind to other people's menial labour, but to keep people under the illusion that they are actually seeing everything there is to see. Therefore, labour, and in particular manufacturing labour, must be part of the worldview, which satisfies the need of the socially and environmentally-conscious middle class in order for people – in this managerial class, this class of idea-exchangers – to feel as though they have a complete picture of the world. Labour must be exhibited. In order to keep our conscience guilty, so to speak, such that we try to rid ourselves of those images, rather than keep on seeking a clearer view of what might yet be invisible to us. In other words, we're blinded, not by an absence of displayed objects of labour relations, but by an illusion that said objects give a complete view. This state of affairs makes it all the more difficult for the artist – or the thinker, the poet, the scientist – to enlighten, to bring something new to light, because he or she must first undertake the task of dispelling people's notion that nothing remains to be seen; nothing remains to be discovered or disclosed – the artist needs to dispel this notion that all there remains to be done ... is to act! This constant demand for action is, paradoxically, precisely what pacifies people in an ever-descending spiral of feeling inadequate. How do we then go about





evoking the simple need for curiosity? Especially about something that is as politically saturated as people's work? In this context, it is also important to consider the problem of 'authenticity'. You mention somewhere that dock workers are forced to entertain the idea of what the 'original' dock worker looks like, often as mere entertainment for cultural tourists. Authentic work, one might be led to assume, takes place without the idea of a spectator. Slavoj Žižek is of course no stranger to these lines of thought; however, after his Lenin-ian turn, his constant obsession on the question What Needs to Be Done? has waylaid him from considerations that are more pertinent to the artist or the scientist. But he warrants a mention here before I turn back to your project. He likes to relate a story on the subject of interpretation, which is no different from Susan Sontag's clear message on why we should not interpret. He tells the story of when he first saw the Wachowski Brothers' blockbuster *The Matrix* in 1999 in some theatre in his hometown Ljubljana, Slovenia. At the very moment the main character Neo swallows the pills and enters the Matrix, a person sitting behind Žižek in the theatre blurts out: "My God! It's all an illusion!" And Žižek proceeds to say that this stupid person's shock is precisely the ethos or attitude the rest of us should embrace. However – and remember, he is mainly speaking to an audience of twenty-something radical students – we have so many clever ways to avoid this moment of shock, preferably by 'engaging with the issues'. Which brings us – naturally, I dare say tongue-in-cheek – to Santiago Sierra and the municipal politics of Iceland's capital, Reykjavík. Sierra is well known for exhibitions that include day labourers putting on display empty frames, etc.; all the while, the spectators have already arrived, not knowing (or knowing) that the labour itself – not by artists, but by day labourers – is what is being put on display. In a recent exhibition in the Reykjavík Municipal Art Museum, Santiago Sierra provoked an angry response from a prominent Icelandic politician on the left, Sóley Tómasdóttir, who accused Sierra of being no different from the great industrial capitalist in how he might be exploiting cheap labour for his own benefit. Leftist artists responded to this uproar, saying that the politician didn't understand the art work; if anything, the uproar should have been coming from the right.

Back to you. What initially attracted my interest was how you tackle the conceptual challenges of your work from different fronts, the language of which is distinctly different one to the other. Clearly, in your project, you're touching upon the question of the division of labour in society – all relating to a specific place, the harbour, which has a personal connection to your own biography. You engage in work as the conceptual creator: the witness, the journalist, the

entertainer and also as a researcher; the scholar, the scientist and the inventor. All of these roles are of course highly engaging and yield full agency to the worker in question, i.e. you, the artist. However, they are also enviable roles to a large majority of the workforce in society who are, more often than not, alienated from these aspects of the objects they work on. They often do not have any role as a pioneer, story-teller or researcher. You mentioned the puffin in this regard: "The artist masked as a puffin exploring his own fascination with the material reality of the harbour." I wonder how innocent this fascination is. And then the works of Santiago Sierra come to mind. What are your thoughts on this relationship? Between someone like yourself – who has access to these three empowering dimensions of creative work – and to your subject matter at hand: the coastline, the sea, the harbours, the objects found therein, and, perhaps most importantly, the workers?

HULDA I don't think it is necessarily inherent in manual labour that it is unsatisfactory, or that you have no agency. After all, dock workers have been the initiators of great revolutions, both in Poland – which lead to the collapse of Communism – and elsewhere. It is more a question of who is the storyteller. Who defines what tasks are worth occupying yourself with, and yes, what is considered agency? I think artists and creatives are kept under the illusion that they are the great keepers of agency. A factory worker can easily have the view that office clerks have a monotonous job, while in general the opposite is considered to be the case. To the spectator, it looks like the worker is repeating the same movements, and he assumes that must mean his job is monotonous. He has no agency. But that is just a superficial appearance. Artists and creatives are masters of keeping up appearances. They have to guard their image after all to survive. What is demeaning about moving a rock? I just ask. It has to be moved. It's useful for society. It seems to make much more sense and could be much more satisfactory in many ways than, for example, writing a grant application for an art project. Or does it only become demeaning when it is no longer invisible? Why doesn't the journalist ask the rock mover directly how it was and why he is doing it, instead of asking someone from the office? I think the perspective of the mover could be much more revealing to the whole situation. The problem is much more the attitudes of the holders of that defining power towards labour. Menial labour is not seen as a dignifying pursuit in our society today. We don't value our labourers. Why do we take for granted that one cannot be satisfied by the accomplishment of moving a rock? Why is telling the story dignifying but not *being* the story? Why is it more

dignifying to sit and write on a Mac than moving a rock outside the café where I am sitting? It's not because the former is better paid; it's not. But it is because the society we live in celebrates the former but not the latter. It wasn't always like that when you look at other cultures than the dominant one today. We can look both horizontally and vertically into history for examples. In former East Germany, one's biggest asset was the ability to do something manually, the knowledge of how to install a toilet, or fix a roof or plant a seed. This knowledge had exchange value, which meant one could exchange one's know-how, one's labour skills, thereby increasing the quality of life for one's family. The labour, the use of one's body, was valued and more visible in the mainstream. The workers had a voice, they were not hidden and neither was their work. They were actually the proud symbol of the country. The problem was that they lacked individuality, but that is another issue. It is, after all, not all about money, much more about being heard, respected, being able to define the world. It can be done in various ways, through actions, words, art. And it is ridiculous to maintain that manual labour doesn't require any learning, skills, creativity or agency. It's just that people don't see it anymore. It is not celebrated in the media and in culture in general. The reactions of Tómasdóttir are just a verification of the attitudes on behalf of the politician who doesn't consider workers to be doing something dignifying. Sierra might be an expert in conceptual thinking, something we value, but we overlook that there is nothing undignified about moving a rock. It takes skill and thinking, planning and contemplation.

VALUR To be fair, I believe Sóley Tómasdóttir, representing the Left-Green Party in Reykjavík, did mention something to the effect that contemporary art should be appreciated in how it brings socio-political issues to the forefront within the cultural sphere. She did, however, find the very act of displaying the workers, for the sole and simple task of being put on display – as she interpreted it – all for the benefit of Sierra's artistic authorship, to be demeaning. However, as you point out, what she overlooks might be that her very reaction is precisely the conceptual thrust intended by Sierra's work. The exhibition was quite simple and minimal in its conceptual scheme, but these reactions bring to the forefront our ambiguous relationship with, and attitudes towards, menial labour. But while Sierra might not be interested in the inherent value of labour (say, the craftsmanship or skills), but rather in displaying or exposing how labour is made invisible in the art world (and, consequently, our hypocritical attitude towards the exchange of labour under the Iron Law of Wages), you have a more substantial point to make

when it comes to these issues. At least you're not dealing with any old form of labour, but rather with dockside work, in the harbours and shipyard. Do you see your work as an opportunity to redeem this inherent value for these workers; that their work is put on display, not the objects of their work but the process itself — that this should not be regarded as something demeaning, not reduced to a simple question of wages and exploitation, but rather an opportunity to bring to light something empowering in the very work itself; something that yields the worker some agency and freedom in his or her life? You speak somewhat to that effect, and this might put you at odds with Sierra, at least in this regard.

HULDA Certainly. One cannot forget that the attitudes of the culture around you, or how others identify you, affect you in the end. You end up not understanding your own agency; you start to regard your work as something shameful, something that is not good enough. You should be doing something else. Artists greatly identify with this process, especially in the provincial context of Iceland, where artists are generally despised as vultures on society, scapegoats for spoiled politicians. Perhaps it can become empowering when a storyteller such as myself is catalysing and pointing out one's value, one's worth. In *Keep Frozen part two* at the Reykjavík Arts Festival<sup>4</sup> I will be focusing partly on labour by playing with warping the roles. In the photographs, the artist tries on the outfit and movements of the worker. In a performance during the exhibition opening, the workers will in turn take on the role of the artist by reciting poems written by one of them, with elements of their own work as the subject matter. Why not write a beautiful and witty poem about plastic straps when you can do the same about moss? But I also see some dark sides to engaging in role play between dock workers and artists. Dock workers and artists have in common that they are non-contractual labour that is being exploited while slaving under the illusion of freedom inherent in their life's task. The illusion of freedom makes them both collude in their own exploitation. It is the genius mechanism of neo-liberal capitalism. It is only the context and methods that are different. And yes, of course, the audience.

1 Comment by the editor/artist: This video was later shown at the exhibition *Keep Frozen part two* at Thoka gallery in Reykjavik during the Reykjavik Art Festival May/June 2014.  
 2 Comment by the editor/artist: Please refer to the text about *Keep Frozen part two* for a more detailed explanation of the puffin character developed for my 2006 art piece *Don't feed them after midnight. The cult of the cute puffin gremlin*.  
 3 Comment by the editor/artist: In this context, it is interesting to note that during the *Keep Frozen part two* exhibition in Reykjavik, systematic audience reception research was carried out. An article about this research appears in this book but some things are worth mentioning here. At the opening, a special performance in collaboration with artist and ex-dock

worker Hinrik Thor Svavarsson took place in which a few dock workers read original poems written by Svavarsson wearing their workers' uniform. They thus took on the role of the artist. Many in the audience felt confusion at the appearance of the dock workers in the gallery space. One guest working in the cultural sector was perplexed that the workers were 'only' focusing on their own job in the lyrics of the poems but not on the gentrification process taking place in the harbour, as she might have expected. She couldn't understand an approach that differed to her own analytical one and therefore perceived what they did as meaningless and in conflict with the art work's underlying meaning.

4 The interview was conducted in April 2014.



Documentation of the artist in her studio, Berlin 2014 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)  
 Documentation of the wood material for frames, Berlin 2014 (Photographer: Dennis Helm)

# SOMETHING FISHY

Jonatan Habib-Engqvist

Rather than expressing something about what *Keep Frozen* is about, this text will deal mainly with what it is not about. The purpose of this approach is twofold. First of all, there is a practical reason: some parts of the work that I would like to talk about have not yet taken place. Even if these parts never happen, they seem important in order to appreciate the aspirations of this particular project. Secondly, there is an annoying and recurring problem when it comes to the reception of certain kinds of artworks, which often takes place in their absence, and to which this undertaking undoubtedly can be tied. The problem is mainly of a discursive and moral nature and often tinges works that have been categorised as collective, research-based or political; it is especially pertinent if the artwork requires a number of non-artists in order to take place. Moreover, this seems to be a difficulty or phenomenon that to a certain extent is created by the art world itself. Oftentimes the construct in turn permeates the non-art understanding of it. So the text might also deal in some measure with the art world.

The irritating thing is that in art discourse and in public discussion certain works are received, evaluated and interpreted in moral or ethical terms instead of political ones. Often this happens because the internal logic of the work in question is not placed first. They are, in other words, not (primarily) understood in their capacity as artworks. When understood politically, for instance, it is not the politics of the *work* but the politics that it superficially seems to *represent* that are debated. This leads to reviews and discussions of the artist's, institutions' or artworks' *broader intent* and *moral status* (two positions, incidentally, that also tend to be confused quite frequently). In turn, this prompts a discussion that precipitously abandons the situation that triggered the discussion in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In short, the artwork becomes a representation of something else, and it is the something else that becomes the conversation topic. This instrumentalising or sometimes even self-instrumentalising tendency is, in my view, not helping many works of art and can even impede the ambivalent, open-ended power and political potential specific to visual art. The contradiction of uncertainty is oftentimes the *political of art*, or at least the *political in art*. For this reason, and as a means of example, I imagine that it might be meaningful to state the evident: *Keep Frozen* does not represent a political position.

So what politics are at play in *Keep Frozen*? On a general level, we might say that in this specific project, and in Hulda Rós Gudnadóttir's practice in general, there is an attempt to articulate

her actions from inside her process. From a so-called Duchampian point of view, one could say that the work does not exist until a viewer perceives it. When an artwork is stored, it is not an artwork. It is simply potential. However, when looking more closely at the structure of the orchestrated working situations in many of Guðnadóttir's works, this is not a sufficient model for understanding what is going on. The role of the audience, co-creators, actors, non-actors or other participants is beyond that of mere perception and participation. Rather than witnessing a downright performance, it would seem that everyone becomes part of an event. When using this unfortunate vocabulary, it seems necessary to make distinctions: The *performance* is here understood as a staged or choreographed event which an audience completes through perception and experience, whereas an *event* is something that is impossible to have oversight of. It can only be experienced from 'within', as a powerless singular perception that simultaneously is constitutive for the situation as it unfolds. The event is experienced primarily as a temporal unfolding and as such, a space within which the unexpected can happen. While we are at it, I would also add that *Keep Frozen* obviously does not represent labour. It might well *be* labour, and one could ask if it is relevant to question whether it is labour as art or art as labour. This is beyond my task here, so I will keep it brief. The representation of labour in art has of course been a recurring topic in recent decades, so there is quite a lot of material around. In order to not entangle myself in the discourse on art and labour, I would somewhat crudely propose that the current state of affairs could be divided into questions concerning the representation of labour vis-à-vis labour itself. This is in itself quite interesting, as contemporary art otherwise spends quite a lot of energy on positioning itself as something that primarily does not deal with representation (since not representing something else is what makes it an artwork rather than something else), except perhaps for the odd representations of non-art as art. One of the non-representational positions is somewhat ironically the idea that contemporary art should primarily be understood (or justified) as knowledge production. The kind of knowledge that is produced, and for whom it is produced, appears to be of secondary importance. Lately, there has also been a new wave of discussions about how to even talk about the ways in which precarious workers ought to be represented in an art context without imposing some kind of unjustifiable filter, or simply exploiting people twice over.

It might in other words seem that the prevailing discourse is mostly interested in itself (*sic!*). That it is engrossed in exploiting the bad





conscience evoked by the sensation of exploiting someone else (seldom is it taken into account that A: the 'precarious worker' might very well understand the artwork; or B: the main target audience is in fact often the educated, predominately white middle-class museum visitor – who, incidentally, seems to enjoy feeling guilty about being just that). Likewise, the question of the precariousness of the art-labourer is habitually used as a model to understand the mechanisms of neo-liberal capitalism (e.g. how the dream of 'making it' can perpetuate underpaid or unpaid work; how this relates to gentrification and how difficult it is to do anything about it). In short, the idea is that in Western society, the artist has become a role model for contemporary work (flexible, cheap, creative, self-sustaining, etc.). A quick analysis would be to state that *Keep Frozen* places itself at the centre of these questions: it is an art project about the transformation of harbours, the creative industries and the self-exploitation mechanisms of a globalised post-crisis Icelandic community; the project has then been expanded to include the ports of Essaouira (the location of Orson Welles' famous film version of Shakespeare's *Othello*), and in the docks of New York. On top of that, the artist engages a number of Icelandic dockworkers to perform something that resembles the tasks of their daily labour in the exhibition space. Indeed, the arguments sketched out above have all been present in various ways in the reception of, and understanding surrounding, the *Keep Frozen* project, not least in the summary of audience reception published in this book.<sup>2</sup>

However pertinent these questions are, we can safely say that the actual (art) work rapidly seems to become of secondary importance to the demands of symbolic representation or morality when discussed according to these terms. To phrase it a bit more harshly: the current moral or representational aspects induced by our individual projections onto the work would seem to become the measure with which it can and should be judged. This does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. But firstly, we should be aware of these mechanisms and secondly, there are a number of underlying postulations in these discussions that one could find problematic. First of all, there is the assumption that art is produced to communicate, and moreover, that it communicates differently to laymen or to professionals. I would prefer to think of those who are invested and those who are not. The unique thing about art is that the audience cannot be understood as either professional or non-professional, but as attentive and concerned, or not. Also, the analysis is empirically incorrect. For instance, the workers in the



performance receive the same salary as they would for the corresponding amount of labour in the harbour, which means that at least the Icelandic workers are the most well paid people in the entire exhibition production. We should be clear in distinguishing between art world problems and real world problems. Art is fully capable of dealing with both, and it often manages to approach one through the other. But it is good to know at what point we are talking about which particular issue.

Iceland is dependent on the fishing industry. It constitutes the foundations of Icelandic culture and identity. But being a far-from-glamorous assembly line process, the fishing industry has received little recognition from Icelandic cultural workers beyond the documentary. I recall a conversation with the Icelandic artist Magnus Sigurdarsson who moved to the US some twenty years ago. When asked about the specificity of Icelandic art and how Icelandic culture determined his artistic expressions, he responded: "I am here because of the fish." What I believe the artist was pointing out is how important the influence and economy of the fishing industry is for Icelandic cultural identity, while also being disregarded. At the same time, he also pinpoints the denial of what constitutes the very core of this society. It would seem that *Keep Frozen* also investigates the pathology of an attitude which Guðnadóttir describes as "not wanting to smell your own society." The investigation does not operate through what the work is, represents, or communicates – but through what it generates – what it *does*. When staging an everyday situation in a non-everyday context, it is an acknowledgement of precarious routine work – and of the supporting structures constituted by the globalised Icelandic fishing industry. Through a conscious approach towards the specific rather than the generic, the support structures are furthermore disclosed as the architecture that houses and shapes our apriori perception of certain artefacts and activities. It becomes clear that the assembly lines and structures of the fishing industry not only feed the artists; as such, they immanently reflect the predicaments of the art world and the aforementioned timely discourse on contemporary artists as role models for workers at large (creative, flexible and inexpensive). But instead of expressing this through analogy or representation, it is part of the work of the work itself. Admittedly, I am fairly sure that *Keep Frozen* is an artwork, and that it therefore harbours a number of political properties; or at least that seeing it and engaging with it as an artwork is an efficient way of understanding several layers of what is going on. The polyphonic expressions in the power of the structuralist film captions, compositions and broken narratives,

together create a specific ambivalence (understood as art) that allows *Keep Frozen* to make both the art world and the non-art world more complicated. Whether something is art or not is not primarily an ontological question, but something that can be determined by the very efficiency of the work. Most of the time, it does not really matter what we call it. In some cases one might choose not to call it art, or to say that sometimes it is art, and sometimes it is not. In some cases no one would take it seriously if we called it art – and it would simply be taken as a prank. In other cases no one would take the time required if we did not call it art. We are, however, definitely facing a problem today when it comes to dealing with 'socially engaged', research-based, political and activist art as it surfaces in *Keep Frozen*, which demands a confrontation with the definitions of what art is. As long as artworks are received, evaluated and interpreted in moral or ethical terms instead of political ones, or read from an entirely aesthetic horizon, the reception and interpretation of them will remain posturing. If we do not grasp the politics at the core of these processes, we cannot even begin to reflect on their significance as art. It will take more to solve this problem than a short text reflecting on a singular project's position in this mess, but let us start by treating *Keep Frozen* as a work that does not represent anything, and see what it *does*.

1 As the reader hopefully will understand, this is very different from following how a specific artwork can point out a specific 'real world' situation outside the work that affects how we perceive things.

2 This problem can also be found in similar projects. One such example is the Chinese artist Li Xiaofei's *Assembly Line*, where all filmic connotations, subtle cuts and choreographic studies give way to a questioning as to why the work lacks the highly Eurocentric discourse about outsourced labour, not least when it was shown in the context of the Berlin Biennale 2014.

## APPENDIX

*Keep Frozen part two* was exhibited as a mixed-media installation at POKA gallery (Thoka) in Reykjavík between 31 May – 29 June 2014 as part of the international Reykjavík Arts Festival directed by Hanna Styrnisdóttir.

There exists comparatively little research into audience perceptions in relation to (art) exhibitions; the same applies to the relevance of the exhibition visit for the viewer within a larger context. My intention when presenting art work to the public is to prompt the audience to ask their own questions on the subject matter rather than delivering clear answers or conclusions. I'm keen to share the responsibility of the creation of meaning with her audience, while considering the discursive space around the art work an important part of the art-practice-as-research process. I therefore commissioned Sigríður Melrós Ólafsdóttir (MA Art Education) to conduct research into the audience's reception of this second part of the *Keep Frozen* series.

Please see the text about the *Keep Frozen part two* installation in this book for a more precise survey of the art work.

POKA gallery was a small private gallery, established in the spring of 2012 by art historian Aldis Snorraddottir, who also curated the exhibitions. It was located in the centre of Reykjavík, in the city's museum and gallery district. POKA's mission was to retain the identity of the project space and allow for the freedom to take risks with art that is experimental and innovative. In early 2015, POKA merged with the commercial gallery Hverfisgalleri, also situated in the heart of the gallery district.  
[www.thoka.is](http://www.thoka.is) and [www.hverfisgalleri.is](http://www.hverfisgalleri.is)

# CONFUSING THE AUDIENCE

Sigríður Melrós Ólafsdóttir

This appendix builds on the research that was carried out using both qualitative research methods, in which visitors were interviewed, and theories and writings about the role of the observer in art exhibitions, and what exactly it is that visitors seek. Those theories derive mainly from the field of museum education. In the five interviews conducted, the researcher sought answers pertaining to visitors' reactions to the exhibition; how they used it; what they gained from the experience; and how they perceived and understood it in general.

## RESEARCH SUBJECT 1: THE YOUNG COLLEGE-COUPLE

A young, college-aged couple expressed their wish for something new and exciting when they attended an art exhibition: something that would surprise them. They were, however, disappointed when they arrived at the POKA gallery and stood among the artwork. They felt confused. The space was small, and upon their arrival at the exhibition they were forced to pause; they were unable to go any further but instead had to search within themselves. When the couple began to reflect on the exhibition, the girl said that it was as though "the artist was acting as if she were inside the work," that is, portraying the fisherman or the fish-processing workers in the photographs. She had the impression that the images were not of real working people. The boy felt the video contained an element of weirdness; that there was, in his own words: "something creepy about it." He assumed that it was most likely the dress or the puffin head that made it strange, and likened the experience to "passing out somewhere and waking up on some boat."

The young couple was determined to extract meaning (their own) from the show without assistance. Both watched the video and felt it to be "random". The shots were beautiful but not easily understood, and they would have rather sensed the emotion, which the boy likened to being on acid "or being inside the head of someone on acid." Both of them agreed that they failed to understand the sentiment. They believed the artist was doing something unconventional to encourage people to think, but did not satisfy on this front, because "you did not really know what it was that you were supposed to be thinking ... you have to struggle to do so. A lot of it is a question mark." After their first impression of disappointment and hesitation they went on to enjoy the exhibition and did not impose the need for understanding. According to them, this work was simply very "random", and they entered the experience with the intention of being surprised, and to feel something without its being specified.

## RESEARCH SUBJECT 2: THE MALE STUDENT

Another visitor, a student approximately thirty years of age, said he arrived with few assumptions but admits that the show confounded his expectations. The student is not a frequent visitor of art exhibitions and said he avoids the public, seeks solitude, and he liked the gallery because he was the only visitor. He experienced what Carol Duncan, who in the 1990s became known for comparing the properties of museum experiences to those of visiting a church or other religious temples, has described as the evolution of the public art space. Here, the guest chooses to forget time and place, finds him/herself in a state of stillness, and the exhibition serves as a form of shelter, suitable for meditation (Duncan, 1995). The student entered the exhibition with an open mind. When he arrived, he did not fully understand what was going on but he was unconcerned. Questions did arise, however; mainly in relation to the iron piece on the floor which had caught his attention. "I did not understand what it was doing there," he said, laughing. "Everything started to revolve around it. I tried to think about the work according to that." Later, he said: "I then got the feeling that I was up in the air." He even experienced the sensation of being underwater and connected to the iron piece, which to him resembled an anchor, although it was not attached to anything. He did not want to read about the exhibition, but preferred to interpret it himself, and the iron piece served as a starting point. He experienced the exhibition for himself, with few or no thoughts about the artist. This seems to be a conscious decision and a means of perceiving and understanding. "I often like it when something confuses me and I do not understand what is going on; it is similar to enjoying the feeling of being lost in a big city." The student is prepared to be led into unknown territory, the purpose of which, in his opinion, is that: "you begin to think about things in a different way. It is unbelievable how that can change the way you think, at least for a little while." He believes it helps him to develop new ideas and visions. He did not seek any instruction and information, moved away from an intellectual understanding and let his thoughts roam free, therefore adding his own perspective to the exhibition. He was absorbed into the physical and emotional experience, which offered other dimensions not easily described in words. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, a British Professor of Museum Studies, has researched museums and exhibition audiences with emphasis placed on education and the visitor experience. According to her, visitors become participants in exhibitions and art events when they use their own criteria for developing and understanding

what they observe. The process involves body, mind and emotion working together in a dynamic way, and meaning is created unintentionally (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

## RESEARCH SUBJECT 3: THE RETIREE

The individual most reflective about the exhibition was a retired woman who had worked and lived in the city centre for many years, although she grew up in a fishing village in the countryside and recalls different times. She enjoys going to exhibitions and regularly stops off at the artists' spaces that the city has to offer, but has never been to Þoka. The woman stated that she went there "completely empty. Yes, I just went," but she spent a lot of time with the exhibition and in fact returned twice, determined to find the "solution" she believed had to be in there somewhere. Gradually, the woman acknowledged that there was no solution, no right answer hidden and waiting to be found. However, her thought processes caused her to ponder herself, her youth and present times, how things were and how they are today, without explicitly criticising them. What had provoked her thoughts first and foremost were familiar elements in the work such as the puffin head, but she did not fully understand the context, and her imagination attempted to identify numerous different connections. The association most deeply rooted in her own mind was the puffin's connection with tourism, rather than the puffin as a seabird. She lives in central Reykjavík and associates the puffin with so-called puffin stores, or souvenir shops. Thus, she started to develop her own awareness, her own narrative. For a long time, she struggled to understand the artist's intention, or the artworks. She tried to envision where else in the country this could possibly relate to, concluding that it had to involve Reykjavík, "and maybe how the citizens of Reykjavík are distanced from the fishing industry." Here, she began to see a relationship between her own background and Reykjavík as a fishing harbour, though few people think about it in these terms. "When you come from a fishing village, you are closer to understanding it," the woman stated, though she purported to know almost nothing about it. This subsequently led her to consider issues pertaining to the shipyard, to the idea of tearing it down, but that perhaps it was still in place because the tourists wanted it to be. Further, this induced her to think about the shipyard's value, that some people would want to demolish it and build hotels and exclusive restaurants. These are issues she knows well as a result of having lived and worked in the city centre for decades. "I sometimes do not know where I live because the voices around me mainly speak

a foreign language." "This is a pretty exhibition" she says, "but is hiding something."

#### RESEARCH SUBJECT 4: THE PROFESSIONAL WOMAN

A young woman working in the cultural sector attended the opening; she is a frequent visitor of exhibitions and had been to POKA on several occasions. She arrived with few expectations; she was attending several openings at the art festival and this opening suited her schedule. Later, it became evident that certain elements of the exhibition were perceived as confusing; she had assumed that the show would examine the topic of gentrification, "how the hipsters and later, the contract workers and the businessmen took over these industrial areas ..." The rationale for her initial feelings of ambivalence at the opening, during which an unexpected event took place – in this case, it was a performance by dockworkers from the harbour who read poems out loud – later became apparent. She felt that this experience was very affecting and charming, but it disoriented her because she had arrived with certain expectations about the exhibition. However, the dockworkers "were not referencing those things [gentrification] in these poems, they were just speaking about their work [...] I felt that there was a little bit of conflict, so I did not really understand where the artist was going with this." About the exhibition in general, she said: "This was of course a beautiful exhibition, but I did not understand the video." Her experience of the video was comparable to that of the young couple and the older woman in that it provoked more questions than were answered and left them searching for explanations. She also had difficulties connecting the opening performance with the exhibition, felt conflicted about her perceptions of the performers, and the fact that they were dockworkers, not poets. Her reaction was similar to another guest who remarked: "what are they doing here? They are certainly not artists; they are just some dudes!" The dockworkers were perceived as a type of foreign object; in an analogous manner, the artist inhabited the position of the outsider in the world of the harbour and the fishing industry. Like the young man who described this aspect as "random", the older woman also regarded it as arbitrary. The exhibition prompted her to think about the area surrounding the shipyard affected by transformation, and she formed her own opinion on the matter. She thought that the men performing the poems were simply speaking about their work – unlike the artist, whose exhibition was felt by the woman to contain strong undertones.

#### THE RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

Once the interviews and the visitor experiences had been analysed, the researcher thought it important to examine visitor expectations for the exhibition. Did they anticipate anything in particular? What had they hoped in their hearts to find? Past research indicates that visitor experience varies according to expectations and the experience of those who are questioned (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). The answers provided revealed that viewers most often expected *something* but did not always know exactly what; they were unaware of their own expectations. In the interviews conducted as part of this project it became apparent that the individuals' respective expectations coloured their experience. One might surmise that the unconscious expectations of the viewers are connected to a romantic desire for enlightenment that still lingers on in the minds of the public audience. When something to the contrary occurs, as in the examples given above, it was common for visitors to "struggle" to establish connections and make sense of what they were seeing. As a result of the confusion they started to generate their own stories.

The context of the exhibition as well as its meaning varied in the minds of the visitors, and they interpreted it by different means. Some visitors informed themselves about the exhibition and about other works by the artist while others did not; however, all assigned their own value or significance to the exhibition.

The young couple had in common with the student that they did not want to read or inform themselves about the show. They wanted to develop their own interpretation. The woman from the cultural sector thought she knew what the exhibition was about but later had her expectations subverted. The older woman made great attempts to understand the artist but was not entirely convinced that she had succeeded. However, all interviewees found some element that held significance for them.

The young woman from the cultural sector – like the young couple – thought that the artist's message was incomprehensible, which caused her to construct her own meaning. She had some prior knowledge of the exhibition and of the video before she attended; her experience, however, did not correspond with her expectations. She was charmed by the performance that took place during the opening but was taken aback by it, and new insights emerged from that discord.

The young couple and the older woman expressly emphasised their inability to understand the artist's intention. They felt as though they were failing her. However, the older woman recognised that

neither the exhibition nor the artist intended to be understood and that she had to pursue the answers herself. The other two visitors realised that their own emotions and imaginations were key factors in creating meaning.

The older woman spent a long time with the video work. The scene in which a girl is shown fondling one of the iron parts captivated her, the same part lying on the floor in the exhibition. She attempted to determine where and how the piece was supposed to tighten and asked “is there any solution for this?” The woman sought an explanation and felt to some extent that the artist left her hanging. She searched for meaning beyond what is visible on the surface. In sum, she felt that the artist had something particular in mind, that there was “something that you are supposed to try to understand or perceive.” Similar feelings were expressed by the young couple and the thirty-year-old student, according to whom there was nothing obvious in the artist’s intention; nothing aided their understanding and experience.

The Danish museum scholar Helen Illeris has examined the power structure of the museum (both in the museum and gallery), which casts contributors in roles according to their involvement. Visitors are assigned one role, the exhibition space a second, and the artwork itself is assigned a third role. The exhibition space and the staff carry the powerful first person pronoun “I”, the visitor takes the second person “you”, and the artwork is cast in a third-person role, as “it, she or he” (Illeris, 2009, p. 20). Through active engagement in the gallery, all roles – I, you and it – can influence the course of events, and everything has the potential to shift, as roles are switched or changed (Illeris, 2009). Here, the roles shift, which according to Illeris is a frequent occurrence. In the action taking place within the exhibition space, all roles – the “I”, “you” and “it” – can influence the course of events. This is interesting in light of Hulda Rós’ understanding that exhibition visitors at the moment of reception are active in the creation of meaning and content in her art work, just like everybody else involved with the work prior to its being shown. Everyone participating in the process influences the product, whether it relates to form, to the artwork itself, or the discursive space in which it exists; assistants, contractors, viewers, artists, curators (along with others) affect the significance and understanding of the subject that is being researched and how it is presented. This transcends the theories proposed by Illeris as regards the changing roles in the field of exhibitions. Her arguments limit themselves to visitor experience and perception. However, the instance discussed above is suggestive of something different: the fate of Hulda Rós’ creation – her artwork – is determined

by discussion, conversation or reaction to the work during all stages of the process. It can be seen as sharing the responsibility with the audience. Jonatan Habib-Engqvist underlines this in his article *Something Fishy*, noting that the role of audiences and other participants is beyond perception. They become part of the event by experiencing it ‘within’, and complete it on their own terms by means of perception and experience (Habib-Engqvist, 2015). Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson propose something similar when they point to the subjective nature of art; that it relies on the subjectivity of the audience for the reception and unfolding of meaning (see Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *Repairing the Disembodied Mind: Art practice, research and new knowledge*).

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KEEP FROZEN: ART-PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH  
THE ARTIST'S VIEW

Edited by Hulda Rós Guðnadóttir

Contributions by Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir/Mark Wilson,  
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