

Icelanders at the Venice Biennale

50 years of Icelandic art at the Venice Biennale provides the first opportunity to view the works of artists who have participated in the Biennale, gathered together in one place, and to evaluate the development and changes which have taken place since Icelanders first went to Venice. The exhibition does not include all the works shown by the artists, as many works were sold to foreign buyers, some proved untraceable, and others have not survived. Many people, no doubt, will ask on what grounds artists have been chosen to participate: is it simply a matter of the zeitgeist, or the dominant Icelandic trends of each time? Did selections reflect developments in the international art world? The answers to these questions are not simple, as many and complex factors are at work, as always when government bodies interact with the arts. But the crucial point is that the artist picked to represent Iceland at the Venice Biennale in the relevant year is above all a representative of the Icelandic nation, and that the Biennale is the only official presentation of Iceland art abroad. The sense of responsibility that is a consequence of being selected may play some part in the fact that many of the representatives work, consciously or unconsciously, with themes relating to the Icelandic heritage and nature, because the participation is also, of course, a matter of national pride, and competition for the Golden Lion prize.

The beginning

La Biennale di Venezia or the Venice Biennale is the oldest of the biennales, and one of the world's most important art events. The exhibition comprises shows in

national pavilions at the main Biennale site, the Giardini del Castello park, and in rented premises around the city, together with independent shows organised by Biennale management, which reflect the latest trends and movements in art. Each nation chooses a representative for its pavilion; while each Biennale has a certain theme, nations are free with regard to choice of artists and what they show. Those who are familiar with the Venice Biennale are well aware what an honour it is for an artist to be selected; and if anyone should be in doubt, it is enough to glance through the catalogues of past years, to see many of the biggest names in the art world brought together in Venice.

The history of the Biennale goes back as far as 1893, when a group of artists and city councillors met at the Café Florian on St. Mark's Square in Venice, and came up with the brilliant idea of holding an art show to mark the silver wedding anniversary of King Umberto and his wife Margherita of Savoy. The first exhibition was held in 1895; in the meantime, a decision had been made that the exhibition would be a major international show, to be held every other year. A pavilion was built for the event in the Giardini del Castello, and in due course it became the Italian pavilion, as it remains today. The title *Biennale* was invented for the exhibition, which was attended by over 200,000 people.¹

The early Biennales followed the model of the French *salons*. The majority of artists were Italian, along with some Hungarians and Austrians. As the years passed, works by such artists as Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), Jean-Baptiste Corot (1796-1875) and Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) were seen at the Biennale, and in 1920 a retrospective of the works of Paul Cézanne was held. In 1907 a decision was made to build pavilions in the park for individual nations, and seven

¹ "History of Biennale Art." The Origin. Accessed 20 November 2010: <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/origin.html?back=true>

were completed before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The first was the Belgian pavilion, followed by the British, German and Italian, and shortly afterwards the French and Swedish pavilions. The Swedish pavilion soon passed to the Netherlands; it was destroyed in 1954, and replaced by a new pavilion designed by Dutch architect Gerrit Thomas Rietveld (1888-1964). Two years later Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) designed a pavilion for Finland, which was transported in kit form from Helsinki and assembled in the park, as a temporary structure to be used until the Nordic pavilion should be ready. In 1962, a Swedish/Finnish/Norwegian pavilion, designed by Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn (1924- 2009) was opened; this is regarded by many as the most beautiful of the national pavilions, although it has often proved problematical for the artists exhibiting there.

Icelanders at the Biennale

Icelanders did not participate in the Biennale until 1960, when two highly-respected Icelandic artists, painter Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval (1885-1972) and sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson (1893-1982), were selected to represent their country at the thirtieth Biennale.

At that time participating countries numbered 33. As Iceland had no pavilion of its own, the artists were allocated an exhibition space 24 metres long, in gallery no. 42 of the Italian pavilion, between Portugal and Peru. According to a press release from the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture in May 1960, “at the request of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and after consultation with the Icelandic Education and Culture Board, the works to be exhibited have been chosen by Dr. Selma Jónsdóttir, director of the National Gallery of Iceland, and the board of FÍM (the Society of Icelandic Artists): artists Sigurður Sigurðsson (chairman), Hjörleifur Sigurðsson and Valtýr Pétursson. Alþingi [parliament] contributed funding for the

exhibition.”²

Ten paintings by Kjarval and three metal sculptures by Ásmundur Sveinsson were selected. Birgir Thorlacius, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Education and Culture, wrote the catalogue text; he had negotiated with Biennale management about Iceland’s possible participation.

It is easy to put oneself in the place of the selection committee who opted to send Kjarval and Ásmundur Sveinsson to Venice; both enjoyed great popularity in Iceland, and had been pioneers of Icelandic art. It is more difficult, however, to judge their place in an international context, and thus the question may be asked, whether selecting these two artists was an anachronism. At that time in Europe the focus was on *art informel*, as witness the prizes awarded to Jean Fautrier (1898-1964) and Hans Hartung (1904-89). In that year Pierre Alechinsky (1927-) showed his work in the Belgian pavilion. One wonders whether it would have been more appropriate to send abstract artists Svavar Guðnason (1909-88) and Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906-84), who did not in fact go to Venice until 1972.

Few Icelanders saw that first exhibition. No photographs are known to exist, and the artists’ work received no official back-up, as opera-singer Eggert Stefánsson wrote at the time: “It was at the opening of the exhibition that I first noticed that there was no Icelandic ambassador, consul or vice-consul present. All other countries have at least sent someone to represent their nation, and thus to honour the artists whose work is shown, and in that way to express their gratitude to Venice.”³

Kjarval’s ten paintings, from different periods of his career, gave a good overview

² Vísir 10 May 1960, Þjóðviljinn 14 May 1960, Tíminn 15 May 1960

³ Eggert Stefánsson “Biennale í Fenejum.” Vísir, July 1960.

of his oeuvre. They included impressive landscapes, *Fölnuð blóm/ Faded Flowers* (c.1955), *Það er gaman að lifa /Joie de Vivre* (1946) and wild fantasies such as *Fornar slóðir /Ancient Tracks* (1943) and *Íslandslag (Hvassárgljúfur)/Icelandic Melody* (1949-59), in which human figures or supernatural beings from folklore emerge from the picture plane, or blend into the landscape. Ásmundur Sveinsson, on the other hand, showed three recent iron sculptures: *Samhljómur hnattanna/The Music of the Spheres* (1959), *Þjóðlag/Folk Song* (1960) and *Þú gafst mér að drekka/You Gave Me Drink* (1960). He had started to work in iron some years earlier; the material played an important role in changes he made to his working methods, and his formal language evolved increasingly towards the abstract. In the works he showed in Venice, the emphasis was on geometrical forms, the line and its interaction with the space. He also made use of a variety of *objets trouvés*, such as bits of pipe and scrap metal, which he cut or sawed.

The year 1964 was a turning-point in the history of the Biennale, when American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) was awarded the Golden Lion for his work, displayed in the American pavilion. That decision of the international awards committee, after heated debate, caused a sensation. It was not only a question of granting recognition to a talented young artist; Europe was acknowledging the importance of American Pop art, and thus the focus of the art world shifted from Europe to the USA. In that same year gallerists Leo Castelli (1907-99) and Ileana Sonnabend (1914-2007) organised a fringe show at the Biennale of work by other leading Pop artists. This led to Pop art monopolising the attention of critics, leaving other Biennale events in the shade that year.

At the 1966 Biennale, kinetic art played a major role, along with all kinds of works with visual stimulus. Following the student unrest in Paris in the spring of 1968,

the Biennale that year was characterised by political actions and chaos: planned retrospectives, for instance, did not even open. Until that time the emphasis had been on established, recognised artists, but now a decision was made to abandon all one-man shows and “tribute” exhibitions; instead the emphasis would be on thematic shows which would focus on social issues. Awarding of prizes was also abandoned.

Not until 1972 was Iceland again represented in Venice. On this occasion the Ministry of Education and Culture selected two pioneers of the abstract, Svavar Guðnason (1909-88) and Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906-84).

Both artists were worthy representatives of abstract art, each in his own way. They had been influential trailblazers in contemporary Icelandic art. They had brought fresh new ideas into the art world of Reykjavík, both being of the first generation of Icelandic artist to be in step with European trends.

On this occasion the artists received rather more support than before. They were allocated a grant to travel to Venice to hang the exhibition and learn about Italian art. Sigurður Sigurðsson, then chair of FÍM (the Society of Icelandic Artists), accompanied them to Venice. They shared a pavilion with Norway and Sweden, where they showed seven paintings each.⁴ Svavar Guðnason showed mainly works from the 1940s: *Íslandslag /Iceland's Melody* (1944), *Ofstækismaðurinn/ The Fanatic* (1945), *Gullfjöll/ Golden Mountains* (1946), *Sól í hvirfli/Sun in a Vortex* (1946), *Stuðlaberg /Columnar Basalt* (1949). He also included one piece from the 1950s, *Hrímfugl/Frostbird* (1955-6), and just one new work, *Flambeau, Blys, Kyndill* (1967). Þorvaldur Skúlason, on the contrary, opted to show only new pieces from 1968-71, such as *Haustfugl/Autumn Bird* (1970) and *Bylgjur/Thawing*

⁴ Kristín G. Guðnadóttir “Svavar Guðnason” Reykjavík. Veröld, 2009 p. 295

(1969).

Although their work is so different, both artists have strong references to nature, which they reconfigure in the forms, colours or titles of their works. Þorvaldur Skúlason's approach to art was logical, as witness his works where floating triangular forms, pointed arrows and curved lines undulate over the picture plane, creating tension and awakening expectations of cosmic dimensions, rhythm and speed. Svavar Guðnason's approach was more emotional, emphasising feeling and expression, as the expressionists did, and displayed striking boldness in his palette. The pieces he took to the Biennale are among his best works; two of them had been shown at a groundbreaking show at *Listamannaskálinn* in Reykjavík in 1945.

Sigurður Guðmundsson invited to be part of international show 72-76

Iceland was absent from the Biennale for some years after 1972; it is not clear whether this was a function of the changes to the Biennale which had taken place in 1968, or other factors. The 1974 Biennale was deemed a failure, and a decision was made to make radical changes for the 1976 event, for instance by including more avant-garde work. It was at this point that Sigurður Guðmundsson (b. 1942) was invited to take part in an international exhibition, 72-76, one of the fringe events held in connection with the Biennale.⁵ Held on old industrial premises, *Cantieri Navali* on the island of Giudecca, 72-76 aimed to provide an insight into the diverse experimentation which had taken place in the international art world since 1972. The exhibition was curated by Olle Granath (b. 1940), art critic of the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, later director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Also on the selection committee was Swedish art historian Pontus Hultén (1924-2006),

⁵ The members of the selection committee were: Eduardo Arroyo, Enrico Crispolti, Raffaele De Grada, Pontus Hultén and Tommaso Trini

who had recently been appointed director of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. It is probable that Pontus Hultén first became acquainted with Sigurður Guðmundsson's work at the exhibition in Venice; this led to an invitation to Sigurður, along with three other Icelandic artists - Hreinn Friðfinnsson (b. 1943), Kristján Guðmundsson (b. 1941) and Þórður Ben Sveinsson (b. 1945) – to show their work at the Centre Georges Pompidou when it opened in January 1977. The exhibition, *ça va? ça va : 4 constats islandais*, played an important role in establishing these artists in mainland Europe.

The view has been expressed that the 72-76 exhibition was a precursor of the *Aperto* show, which was to become one of the Biennale's most popular features.

Sigurður Guðmundsson showed nine photographs in 72-76, which he termed sculptures or *Situations*; they show the artist himself in a variety of amusing, witty or bizarre situations, often relating to everyday life. He may be seen walking along a pavement, hands in pockets, wearing a Pinocchio nose (*Untitled*, 1974); leaning at an angle parallel to a post stuck into ochre-coloured sand, with the horizon in the background (*Study for Horizon*, 1975), or kneeling on a damp pavement with his head under a paving-slab (*Event*, 1976). Sigurður continued to work on the *Situations* series until 1982, and few can doubt that these are among his most important works; and it is no coincidence that, at the time of writing, the works are listed in shows all around the world.

The Nordic countries invite Iceland in

Artists rarely show their work more than once at the Venice Biennale. But that is the case with Sigurður Guðmundsson, who was invited by the Nordic exhibition committee to show his work at the 1978 Biennale, along with Swedish and Finnish

artists, in the shared Norwegian/Swedish/Finnish pavilion. The exhibition received funding from the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture. Once again Sigurður showed photographs from the *Situations* series, such as *Rendez-vous* (1976), *Statement* (1977), *Bow* (1977), *Short Discovery* (1977) and more. After the 1979 Biennale, a travelling exhibition by the Nordic participants was organised with funding from the Nordic Culture Fund; it came to the Kjarvalsstaðir gallery in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1979.

In 1980 the first *Aperto* show was organised by Italian art historian Achille Bonito Oliva (b. 1939) and Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933- 2005) at the old salt warehouses, Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere. The objective was to showcase young avant-garde artists, new discoveries and experimental art. And for the first time in the history of the Biennale, architecture was granted separate status, under architect Paolo Portoghesi, who organised an architectural exhibition at Corderia dell’Arsenale.

Once again the Nordic countries selected an Icelandic participant, offering Magnús Pálsson (b. 1929) exhibition space in the Danish pavilion, which was one of the oldest. He showed his work alongside Danish artists Björn Nørgaard (b. 1947) and Per Kirkeby (b. 1938). Magnús was allocated a space intended for graphic art – a long, rather narrow space, with which he was not entirely happy. He felt sidelined.⁶

At that time Magnús Pálsson was working extensively in plaster of Paris. He often made plaster casts of immaterial phenomena or emotions, and all the works he took to Venice were three-dimensional pieces in plaster and epoxy resin. Most were inspired by the idea of opposites, and positive and negative reality: the artist saw each phenomenon as having a positive value vis-à-vis other phenomena and its

⁶ Author’s interview with Magnús Pálsson, 1 Sept. 2010

surroundings, which had a negative value. A good example of Magnus' approach to the opposite of material reality, space and time is his *Hvískur/Whisper* or *það sem Nefertiti hvíslaði að Alexander mikla/what Nefertiti whispered to Alexander the Great*. The work is a "cast" of the whisper, achieved by counterposing busts of these two famous personages, measuring out the space between Nefertiti's mouth and Alexander's ear, then putting into tangible form the space and sound between the whispering mouth and the listening ear.

Magnús Pálsson showed his works on a long table he had built for the purpose, with the exception of *Sekúndurnar þar til Sikorskyþyrlan lendir/The seconds before the Sikorsky helicopter lands* (1976), which was displayed on the lawn in front of the pavilion: it shows the gap between a runway and the undercarriage of an helicopter about to land on it. Together with students at the Iceland School of Arts and Crafts (now Iceland Academy of the Arts), Magnús prepared a book which was presented as a catalogue: *Bók um bók og fleira/A Book about a Book and other things*. Funding for Magnús' participation in the Biennale was contributed by the Culture and Education Board and the Ministry of Culture and Education.

Those who had invited Magnús Pálsson to the Biennale asked him to select the next Icelandic representative, and he nominated Jón Gunnar Árnason (1931-89) and Kristján Guðmundsson.

In a radio interview on 17 October 1980, shortly after the end of the Biennale, Magnus Pálsson clearly states his desire to see Iceland as a regular participant in the Biennale. And in a letter to Birgir Thorlacius, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Education and Culture, who was lobbying for Iceland to become a fully-fledged participant in the Biennale, instead of a guest of the other Nordic nations, he suggested the possibility of leasing the Finnish pavilion designed by

Alvar Aalto, no longer being used by Finland, which was leased to Portugal. He pointed out that it was unlikely that the pavilion could be leased before the 1982 Biennale, but that it should be available for 1984, and after that.⁷

As the pavilion was unavailable for 1982, on that occasion the Icelanders had to settle for a temporary pavilion at the Biennale, shared with artists from several other countries. The pavilion was not fully built when Jón Gunnar and Kristján arrived in Venice, and remained incomplete at the press opening; the artists thus missed an important opportunity for publicity.

Jón Gunnar showed the works *Cosmos* and *Gravity*. The former is a mirror-piece on the floor, comprising 32 circular mirrors, and over each mirror, suspended on near-invisible thread, beach pebbles, each of which has a mirror recessed into it. The constant motion of the pebbles, and the reflection back and among the mirrors, lends the work cosmic dimensions, and widens the space. *Gravity* is a mural work of similar nature, in which the stones hang in front of wall-mounted steel mirrors, counterbalancing the floor-work. Kristján too showed works with implications of eternity and the cosmic, as they all addressed themes of time and opposites. He showed a series which he called *Lengsta nótt í Feneyjum/The Longest Night in Venice*, in which each line drawn is used as a unit of measurement, signifying one minute of the night. In *Lengsta nótt á Íslandi/The Longest Night in Iceland* he gives visible form to the time it takes for the night to pass, by establishing a certain unit of measurement for an hour of time, which is then multiplied until the correct length is achieved. The result is a dark piece nearly 11 metres in length, which grows lighter toward the end, as day dawns. Kristján's other works at the Biennale,

⁷ Letter dated 10 Feb. 1982

Lengsta nótt á Ítalíu/The Longest Night in Italy, *Stysti dagur á Íslandi/The Shortest Day in Iceland*, and *Stysti dagur á Ítalíu/The Shortest Day in Italy*, were all based on the same fundamental concept and form of expression. Kristján also showed *Mánaðarmót /Turn of the Month*, a short piece of 8mm film, showing the moment when the month of March became the month of April.

In that same year Dieter Roth (1930-1998) represented Switzerland, showing in the Swiss pavilion. Roth lived for some years in Iceland, and was influential in Icelandic art.

Iceland moves into the Alvar Aalto pavilion

In 1984 Iceland finally acquired its own pavilion at the Biennale, by an agreement with Finland to lease the little blue wooden pavilion designed by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. Although the pavilion was much criticised by artists, who regarded it as severely deficient and hardly usable as an exhibition space, it must be said that the excellent location of the pavilion, adjacent to the main entrance to the Biennale park, and near the Italian pavilion, means that this delightful little pavilion always attracts attention.

A year earlier the Ministry of Education and Culture had appointed an art board to prepare for participation in the Biennale and other international shows. The board comprised three artists: Einar Hákonarson (b.1945, chair), Jóhannes Jóhannesson (1921-98), and Magnús Pálsson. It fell to them to select the first formal representative of the country at the Biennale, to be presented in an Icelandic pavilion for the first time; they picked Kristján Davíðsson (b. 1917). Gunnar Kvaran (b.1955) was appointed to curate, and he went on to manage Icelandic participation in the following three Biennales.

The selection of Kristján Davíðsson, who was nearly 70 and one of Iceland's most respected artists, was no surprise. He was one of the pioneers who had opened up new depths in Icelandic painting, and one of the dominant exponents of *art informel*, which emphasised unrestrained expression and lyrical imagery. Kristján took nineteen paintings to Venice, but showed only thirteen, as the pavilion could not well accommodate more. The oldest piece was from 1968, and the latest were from 1983, most of them with clear references to nature, often the seashore, where the artist expresses the rhythm of colour and form with brushstrokes so pregnant with emotion, so powerful, that the observer all but hear the crashing of the waves at the foot of the cliffs. The paintings all had the same title: *Flæðarmál/Water's Edge*. Interspersed were paintings which verged on the abstract, such as *Kommóða í Halmstad/Chest of Drawers in Halmstad* (1971), *Tveir á ferð/Two Together* (1976) and *Morgunstund/Morning* (1977). Interestingly, Jean Dubuffet showed his work in the French pavilion that year; he had long been one of Kristján's favourite artists, and a powerful influence on him in the early years of his career.

But, although Kristján was one of Iceland's most important artists, and although the show was good, and it was received appropriately in every way, it was clear that more was needed, if Icelandic art was to attract attention in Venice. Gunnar Kvaran realised at once that networking with the international art world was a fundamental requirement, if the Icelandic pavilion was to receive the attention it deserved. Hence it was important to select artists who already had an international reputation. He proposed to the Biennale committee that Erró (b. 1932) should be selected for the next Biennale; he was known for his art in Europe, and without doubt the best-known of all Icelandic artists.⁸

⁸ Author's interview with Gunnar Kvaran, 23 October 2010. The selection committee comprised: Einar Hákonarson,

Erró proposed showing only paintings from the *scape* series, and he himself designed the catalogue, which included an essay by French art historian Jean Hubert Martin – who held the famous groundbreaking exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre/Magicians of Earth* in Paris three years later.

Erró had, in fact, been involved in the Biennale before, when he took part in the exhibition *Anti-Procès 3*, organised by Alain Jouffroy (b. 1928) and J. J. Lebel (b.1936) in Venice on 5-30 June 1961; in addition, at the 1962 Biennale he distributed a manifesto, *Mécanismo, mécanifeste*, in which he stated his personal interpretation of life- and art-forms vis-à-vis the mechanical.

Erró's *scape* paintings are among his best, and best-known. His show at the Biennale was well-received, and succeeded in establishing the Icelandic pavilion on the international map. The abundance which typifies most of Erró's works is nowhere better exemplified than in the *scape* pieces, in which the arrangement of diverse themes is always carefully considered, every detail matters, and the densely-packed forms seems to dissolve into the infinite. Erró showed seven *scapes*, painted between 1974 and 1986, including the famous *Fishscape* (1974), *Birdscape* (1979) and *Odelescape* (1982).

The Biennale committee had now decided to revive the Golden Lion, and prizes were awarded for the first time since 1968. Some maintained that the resurrection of the Golden Lion was a backward step, while others saw it as a sign of the strong position of the Biennale, which was establishing itself yet more firmly by this

means. A jury was appointed, and three prizes were awarded: the International Prize for the best artist; a prize for the best national participation; and a prize to the best young artist (under 40).

Following the success of the Icelandic pavilion at the 1986 Biennale, Gunnar Örn Gunnarsson (1946-2008) was selected to go the Biennale in 1988; this was partly due to the artist's recently-concluded contract with the Achim Möller Gallery in New York, which represented many well-known artist and had a strong position in the international art world. Einar Hákonarson withdrew from the Icelandic selection board, and Gunnar Kvaran took over as chair.⁹

When Gunnar Örn was selected for the Biennale, he was well-established in the Icelandic art world, and had been called “the new spark of hope for Icelandic art.”¹⁰ At an early stage of his career he opted for figurative imagery, and he was one of the advocates of the “New Painting” (Neo-Expressionism). Man is at the centre of all Gunnar's work, often in close conjunction with nature, and in many of his paintings transfigured beings are seen, male or female, with a human body and a snake-like head. The snake or serpent is a recurrent theme in his work at that time – whether reflecting the need to relate to ancient origins, or simply an expression of the bestial in human nature. Gunnar took four sculptures and 14 paintings to Venice, all from 1987-8. *Skáldið/The Poet* (1987) was purchased by Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

In 1990 Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson (b.1953) was selected.¹¹ He had a contract with an Italian gallery, was well connected in the Italian art world, and was a pioneer of the New Painting (Neo-Expressionism). At this point his imagery had evolved from

⁹ The selection committee comprised: Gunnar B. Kvaran, Ragna Róbertsdóttir and Bera Nordal

¹⁰ Íslensk list, sextán íslenskir myndlistarmenn, 1981, p. 99

¹¹ The selection committee comprised: Gunnar B. Kvaran, Bera Nordal and Ragna Róbertsdóttir.

the raw, funny, often absurd works of the early 1980s, into a more refined visual world imbued with mythology and symbolism, in which stately naked human figures, animals and fantastical beasts floated in a picture space which transcended all time, and was of another world. He showed ten paintings, all from 1989-90, which address the existential quandary of modern man and his complex relationship with nature.

The 1990 Biennale was not a success; some went so far as to call it “an utter fiasco.” Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva was brought in to run the 1993 Biennale, which was held over from 1992 so that the centenary of the Biennale could be marked in 1995.

Group exhibitions at the 1993 Biennale were based on the theme *Cardinal Points of the Arts*. Curator Achille Bonito Oliva wished in this way to draw attention to the international nature of art; he also asked the representatives of the participating countries to make their own contribution, by offering pavilion space to artists from countries which had no pavilion of their own. Some national curators complied with Oliva’s request, while others dismissed it as absurd. This was the first occasion when an attempt was made to change the national-pavilion arrangement.

After the 1990 Biennale, the National Gallery of Iceland was allocated to supervise Icelandic representation at the Biennale, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture. Bera Nordal, director of the Gallery at that time, chaired a committee to select the next Icelandic representative, and Hreinn Friðfinnsson and Jóhann Eyfells (b. 1923) were nominated.¹² Both had recently held retrospectives, and each had a long and distinguished career. They were both living abroad, Hreinn

¹² The selection committee comprised: Bera Nordal, Þorgeir Ólafsson and Hannes Lárusson. Curator Bera Nordal

in Amsterdam and Jóhann in the USA, but they maintained their connections with Icelandic art. Although Jóhann was producing works in the abstract-expressionist mode, he had ideological ties to the artists who established SÚM (Young Artists' Federation) in 1965. Hreinn Friðfinnsson was one of the founding members of SÚM. Outside the pavilion, Jóhann showed three sculptures comprising geometrical forms, which were based on his experimental work on the nature and qualities of materials. Using different metals – aluminium, iron, copper – which he melted or welded, he brought out diverse qualities in the metals. The rough surface of his sculptures was reminiscent of solidified lava, or stone cairns. At this time Jóhann had started using nature itself as a model for his works, which he permitted to be shaped by chance. In that context he developed a philosophical approach to art, via a theory he called *receptualism*, where the objective is to achieve a merging, where weightlessness, time and space are accepted, and all permanence and perfectionism are rejected.¹³

Time and chance, which are so central to Jóhann's art, are also to be found in Hreinn's works; yet these counterbalanced in a sense Jóhann's rough-hewn sculptures in Venice. Inside the pavilion Hreinn showed six works, all mixed-media, creating a lyrical, refined, almost fragile impression. The oldest work on display was *House Project* (1974), one of the artist's best-known works. The "house" of the project was built in the Kapelluhraun lava field, and dedicated to Sólón Guðmundsson (1860-1931) of Slúnkaríki, a renowned eccentric. It was a house turned inside-out: everything normally indoors was on the outside, while the interior was clad in corrugated iron, a traditional material for the exterior of wooden buildings. While the house was small in size, it reflected an ambitious idea: that the house encompassed the whole world, except for the few square metres

¹³ Jóhann Eyfells, catalogue, National Gallery of Iceland, 1992, Hannes Lárusson, interview with Jóhann Eyfells, p. 22.

within its walls. The house, gradually falling prey to the forces of nature, was photographed extensively; today sixteen photographs, and explanatory texts about the *House Project*, comprise the work of art that Hreinn exhibits. At the Biennale he also showed works made from *objets trouvés*, such as *Höll/Palace* (1990), made of scraps of chicken-wire mounted on the wall, *Griðarstaður/Sanctuary* (1989-92), a readymade cardboard box, and *Song* (1992-2000), a series of eight photographs where bright curved lines signify the rhythm of the music, against a dark-blue background.

In 1995 the Biennale celebrated its centenary, and on that occasion the first non-Italian was appointed to run the event: French art historian Jean Clair, who was known for his interest in Italian art and had a reputation for conservatism. He had not been impressed, for instance, by the *Aperto* shows of 1990 and 1993, and he decided not to include such an event in 1995. This caused offence, naturally enough, and Clair was severely criticised for his decision. Instead of *Aperto*, he held an ambitious retrospective which examined how the human body had been depicted through the diverse arts in the twentieth century.

Once again, the National Gallery was responsible for choosing an artist and other matters concerning the Biennale. Birgir Andrésón (1955-2007) was selected to participate.¹⁴ His show was a logical continuation of work he had been doing since 1989 on the theme *Nálægð/Nearness*, in which he addressed issues of the origin, nationality, heritage and self-image of the Icelanders. Birgir showed twelve flags, hand-knitted in Icelandic *lopi* wool. They were a version of the Icelandic national flag, but instead of red-white-and-blue they were knitted in the natural muted hues

¹⁴ The selection committee comprised: Bera Nordal, Þorgeir Ólafsson, Hannes Lárússon and Halldór Ásgeirsson. Curator Bera Nordal

of the Icelandic sheep's coat. By presenting an Icelandic icon (the flag, indissolubly bound up with the Icelanders' campaign for independence, which culminated in the foundation of the republic in 1944), realised in a uniquely Icelandic material, homely *lopi* wool, Birgir confronted the self-image of the Icelandic nation in a highly visual, direct way, reflecting the Icelanders' own sense of the world. Since the economic crash of 2008, *lopi* wool has acquired a new national resonance, but back in 1995 it was far from cool, and it took a certain courage to venture to Venice with these national symbols. Together with the wool flags, Birgir displayed delicate pencil drawings of excavations of farmstead sites, drawn from photographs. Birgir called these "handmade nature." The drawings could also serve to point out that when the Venetians were building splendid palaces, the Icelanders lived in humble homes of turf and stone. Finally, the exhibition included passages describing Icelandic nature, from the travel book of geographer Þorvaldur Thoroddsen (1855-1921). These were displayed between the flags, which projected from the walls in groups of three.

In 1997 Iceland finally sent a woman to the Biennale: Steina Vasulka (Steinunn Bjarnadóttir b. 1940), who was also the first video artist to represent Iceland.¹⁵ Steina, who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was a pioneer of video art in the USA, together with her husband Woody Vasulka. She was one of the founders of the *Kitchen* in New York, a forum for electronic creativity in the early 1970s. Steina studied the violin as a girl, and music gives the undertone of all her works. She says: "for me, it is the sound that leads me into the image. Every image has its own sound and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living."¹⁶

Steina takes many photographs of nature on her visits to Iceland, and nature is her

¹⁵ Selection and supervision Bera Nordal. Curator Bera Nordal. Assistant curator Auður Ólafsdóttir

¹⁶ From Steina Vasulka's website http://www.vasulka.org/Steina/Steina_Orka/Orka.html

constant theme, as in the installation *Orka/Energy* she designed for the Alvar Aalto pavilion in the Giardini del Castello. She transformed the pavilion, which was painted black, with mirrors on the walls. Three projectors showed powerful images of nature onto three screens, which were reflected and multiplied in the mirrors. Six speakers magnified the sound. In this way she expanded the space in the little pavilion, and succeeded in giving the viewer a sense of the unique experience of the volatility of Icelandic nature, while also offering a share in her work of creation. The work, which has no beginning or end, lasts fifteen minutes and runs continuously.

The Biennales on either side of the turn of the new millennium, in 1999 and 2001, were run by well-known Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933-2005). From the outset he was determined to make radical changes, with the theme *d'Apertutto/Open Above All* for the 1999 Biennale. He wanted to facilitate the growth of the event by expanding the space available at the Arsenale, and eliminate all distinctions between artists of different ages, and between the famous and the unknown.

After some apparent lack of organisation, Sigurður Árni Sigurðsson (b. 1963) was selected to represent Iceland in 1999, at only three months' notice.¹⁷ Undeterred, he showed four brand-new paintings and three aluminium trees – two indoors and one outside the pavilion. Visitors to the Icelandic pavilion were not met by images of fiery lava and thundering cascades of water, as at the Biennale of 1997, but by man-made nature: trees were viewed from above, trimmed into circular forms on the picture plane, or transformed into aluminium trees. The tree is, in itself, fraught with meaning, signifying among other things life itself. Sigurður's aluminium trees,

¹⁷ Selection and supervision Ólafur Kvaran. Curator Auður Ólafsdóttir

on the other hand, are lifeless – and are in fact more of a reason to study forms, dimensions and shadows, just as the trees in the pictures he paints with tiny, delicate brushstrokes are a reason to explore the potential of the painting as a medium, and how far one can go in illusion, on a two-dimensional surface.

For 2001 Finnbogi Pétursson (b. 1959) was selected.¹⁸ This time it was ensured that he had more time to prepare, and thus Finnbogi was able to visit Venice and examine the facilities before he began his preparations. He has described in an interview how the idea of the installation sprung from his visit to the Giardini del Castello in Venice, when he looked into the Alvar Aalto pavilion, which stood open.¹⁹ The work he made for the Biennale, *Diabolus*, was an audio work which formed a sixteen-metre-long square tunnel that projected from the pavilion, narrowing towards the building. At the innermost end of the tunnel was an organ-pipe which emitted a tone of 44.8 Hz. Under it was a speaker which emitted the other tone of the work, 61.8 Hz. The interaction of the electronic tone and the organ tone gave rise to a 17 Hz vibration or *diabolus in musica*, on which the work was based. This musical interval, generally known as a tritone, has relevance to the old Icelandic tradition of quint song, in which two voices sing, a fifth apart. By means of the organ pipe Finnbogi created a link with the past, and referred to history and specifically to the middle ages, when the Catholic church banned the *diabolus in musica*. The interval was deemed dangerous, even diabolical, as witness its name, although it is not clear why. The artist found it amusing to bring this “forbidden” sound to a place which was one of the strongholds of the Catholic church. The tunnel was a simple structure of plywood sheets, to prevent the visitor straying from the sound that touched him/her as he/she progressed along the tunnel;

¹⁸ Selection and supervision Ólafur Kvaran and Hrafnhildur Schram. Curator Hrafnhildur Schram. Assistant curator Guðný Magnúsdóttir

¹⁹ Friða Björk Ingvarsdóttir “Munurinn á því að heyra og hlusta” Lesbók, Morgunblaðið 9 June 2001

ultimately coming so close to the organ-pipe that it stopped emitting its sound. The work was thus based on interaction with the observer.

Shortly after the Venice Biennale opened in 2001, an article by journalist Fríða Björk Ingvarsdóttir was published in daily *Morgunblaðið* about Iceland's public participation in the Biennale. In her very informative article, she is severely critical of the Ministry of Education and Culture's role and procedure in preparations for the Biennale, and points out various mistakes in Iceland's participation: preparatory work was inadequate; publicity work was chaotic; the artist was not paid his fee until after the event; his assistants were largely unpaid for their contribution; and the opening of the exhibition was a disaster.²⁰ Fríða's article sparked a huge response: many artists voiced their agreement with her criticisms and put forward their views in the press, and the suggestion was made that a promotional centre for Icelandic artists should be established. Minister of Education and Culture Björn Bjarnason responded to the criticism of the ministry on his website and in daily *Morgunblaðið*: he described the ministry's role in the Biennale preparations, and declared that he was ready to "examine all the procedure with respect to the Venice Biennale, and put right the organisation of Iceland's participation."²¹ It is fair to say that Fríða's article opened up a necessary debate on the promotion of Icelandic art abroad.

No doubt it was no coincidence that the Ministry of Education art committee chose a woman to represent Iceland at the 2003 Biennale: Rúrí (b.1951).²² As the undersigned was curator of Rúrí's exhibition, that Biennale cannot be discussed with the same objectivity as the others: but it is true to say that Rúrí and I were both

²⁰ Fríða Björk Ingvarsdóttir, "Í orði en ekki á borði" *Morgunblaðið* 17 June 2001

²¹ Björn Bjarnason "Ríkið ekki að skreyta sig með fjöðrum" *Morgunblaðið* 3 July 2001

²² The selection committee comprised: Hrafnhildur Schram and Ólafur Kvaran. Curator Laufey Helgadóttir

aware that, if the exhibition was to be a success, certain changes must be made in the preparatory process, and lessons must be learned from the criticism which had been published in the press.

Rúrí was already established as a leading Icelandic artist, and well known for works which expressed her political consciousness and environmental views. In her show *Þann dag/That Day ...* in 1999, she articulated her opposition to hydro-electric power plants, and that paved the way for her *Archive – endangered waters*, created for the Venice Biennale. The work is an interactive multimedia installation – a data bank of kinds, comprising 52 photographs and sounds of waterfalls in the highland interior of Iceland, some of which have been eliminated by hydro power developments, while others are at risk. Water became a symbol of nature, while the power plants stand for all actions that disrupt the balance of nature. Thus we may say that the work not only reflected the transience of existence, but was also an ode to nature in general and a meditation on its value in the modern world.

It would be excessive to list here all the many improvements achieved with respect to participation in the Biennale on that occasion; but, in brief, most of the aspects which had been criticised with regard to the 2001 Biennale were rectified.

Nonetheless, there was still plenty of room for improvement. For the first time since Icelanders started showing at the Biennale, there was official representation at the opening at the Icelandic pavilion: Minister of Education and Culture Tómas Ingi Olrich attended, along with permanent secretary Guðmundur Árnason and ambassador to Italy Sigríður Snævarr. The Minister gave an address and opened the exhibition, and in the evening the ambassador hosted a dinner in honour of the Icelandic artist.

Before the end of the 2003 Biennale, the next Icelandic artist had been chosen, thus providing the opportunity to visit the Biennale and see the pavilion and other facilities. Once again a woman was chosen: *Gabríela Friðriksdóttir* (b. 1971), the youngest artist to go to the Biennale.²³ *Gabríela* transformed the pavilion into a “body,” where the observer entered the artist’s cosmos, where most of the subjects and media she had worked with were crystallised: painting, drawing, sculpture, music and video. The title *Versations/Tetralogy* is an allusion to the illogical Icelandic traditions of discourse, and the four videos which she called by the names of the cardinal points: south, west, north, east. Each video is its own world, combining surrealistic happenings, mystical creatures, the symbolism of the Tarot, and a range of inventions created by *Gabríela* in collaboration with a number of talented artists, each of whom made his or her unique contribution. In *Versations/Tetralogy* *Gabríela* examines the dark niches of the human mind, explores the limits of emotion, deals with rebirth and death, and succeeds in conjuring up beauty from ugliness.

Icelandic Art Centre takes over Biennale organisation

Finland reclaims the Alvar Aalto pavilion

At the opening of the 2005 Biennale it was rumoured that Finland did not intend to extend Iceland’s lease on the Alvar Aalto pavilion. Although the pavilion had been widely criticised by Icelandic artists over the years, some resented the decision, as it meant that Iceland would have to find rented premises if it planned to continue participating in the Biennale. Others saw this as a favourable option, and an opportunity for a new start.

²³ The selection committee comprised: *Hrafnhildur Schram*, *Ólafur Kvaran* and *Jóhann L. Torfason*. Curator *Laufey Helgadóttir*

A decision had been made to transfer all organisation of Iceland's involvement in the Biennale from the Ministry of Education and Culture to the newly-founded Icelandic Art Centre, whose director, Christian Schoen (b. 1970), would deal with the next Biennales. A three-person expert board was appointed, comprising Schoen and two members of the Centre's board. Two outside experts were invited to take part in the selection of the next representative.²⁴ Thus this important arts event was, at last, being handled in the manner the Icelandic arts world had so long been waiting for. But it must be admitted that this advance was achieved as a result of the debate that arose from the 2001 Biennale, and the unstinting efforts of so many people at previous Biennales, often for no material reward.

The Icelandic Art Centre's five-person selection board picked Steingrímur Eyfjörð (b. 1954) for the next Biennale. He was the first Icelandic artist to show his work outside the principal exhibition site in the Giardini del Castello, and the first to benefit from the professional organisation provided by the Art Centre.

The pavilion rented by the Icelandic Art Centre was a space of just under 200m² in the Palazzo Michiel dal Brusà, a 14th-century palazzo by the Grand Canal and the Strada Nova, one of Venice's main shopping streets. So the Icelandic pavilion was easy to find, and the exhibition could be promoted by means of banners on the outside of the building, where it would catch the eye of everyone passing along the Grand Canal. The exhibition space in the old building was, however, not ideal, and it was deemed necessary to erect a framework inside it, so that Steingrímur's work would make the desired impression in the rough-textured space.

²⁴ Icelandic Art Centre selection committee. Expert board: Christian Schoen, Ólafur Kvaran and Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson. Outside experts: Eva Heisler and Halldór Björn Runólfsson. Commissioner Christian Schoen. Curator Hanna Styrmissdóttir. Assistant commissioner Rebekka Silvía Ragnarsdóttir

The tone of the show was given by its title *Lóan er komin/The Golden Plover has Arrived*, a reference to the bird cherished in Iceland as the harbinger of spring, with resonances of the Icelanders' special bond with nature.

While Steingrímur started at an early stage to work on principles of conceptual art, he has also always had a tendency towards emotional expression. Like Birgir Andrússon [Biennale 1995], he often address the intangible and local in the Icelandic national consciousness.

His show in Venice comprised fourteen autonomous pieces in diverse media, each of which addressed in own way or another the national identity, its roots, and cultural heritage. A golden plover cast in bronze; an invisible sheep (belonging to the parallel elven world of folklore) in a pen; a model of the home of 19th-century author Benedikt Gröndal; a *camera obscura* made of cereal packets; photographs taken at the national shrine of Þingvellir; troll-like creatures; traffic signs; and sweet music by Ólöf Arnalds on video.

Many of the pieces had developed from discussion with various people; and Steingrímur has often stated how important it is for him that the creative process itself should provide artistic material for his work. Underneath the Icelandic national motifs lies another layer of significance, referring to the Western view of the world, and a challenge to globalisation.

Just before the end of the exhibition, the Art Centre's selection board picked the next artist: Ragnar Kjartansson (b.1976).²⁵ Though young – the youngest artist yet – he had a varied career in the arts, and was known for performance art and work in

²⁵ Icelandic Art Centre selection committee. Expert board: Christian Schoen, Hafþór Yngvason and Rúrí. Outside experts: Kristján Steingrímur Jónsson and Halldór Björn Runólfsson. Commissioner Christian Schoen. Curators Dorothee Kirch and Markús Þór Andrússon. Assistant commissioner Rebekka Silvía Ragnarsdóttir

various media; music, video, painting and sculpture. He had shown his work in many countries, and had established the international links which are so vital for artists at the Biennale. He received more funding and support than any previous Icelandic artist at the Biennale.

Ragnar's work, *The End*, comprised two parts. He has explained how the idea for the work came up at the same time as the economic crash that convulsed Iceland in late September 2008.²⁶ One part of the work was an ambitious video installation, in which Ragnar and Davíð Þór Jónsson played country music in a breathtaking setting in the Rocky Mountains in Canada. The other component was an open studio, in which Ragnar painted the same model day after day for the duration of the Biennale, i.e. nearly six months. The model was artist Páll Haukur Björnsson, a friend of Ragnar's. Páll's role was to pose wearing black *Speedo* swimming trunks with a yellow stripe, while smoking and drinking beer. Like his predecessors Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Gabriela Friðriksdóttir, Ragnar places great importance on the creative process in itself, and he took huge risks and jumped in at the deep end, without deciding where he was heading.

The theatrical posing of painter and model against the background of the Grand Canal, the contrast between the snow-capped Rockies and the Venetian gondolas, the time that passed in the rhythm of draining beer bottles, and paintings stacking up in the ancient, rough-hewn space: all this was conducive to creating in the Icelandic pavilion an ambience which was strange yet familiar, like walking into a painting from the Romantic era. Ragnar plays with the role and image of the artists, his relationship with the work of art, and with the observer. Whether *The End* means the end of the boom that Iceland experienced before the Crash, the end of a certain mindset, or some other end, it does not mark the end of Icelandic

²⁶ Pétur Blöndal "Hversdagslífið er svo furðulegt í Feneyjum" Morgunblaðið 8 Nov. 2009

participation in the Venice Biennale. The Iceland Art Centre has selected Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson to represent Iceland in Venice in 2011.²⁷

²⁷ Icelandic Art Centre selection committee. Expert board: Christian Shoen, Halldór Björn Runólfsson and Rúrí. Outside experts: Gunnar J. Árnason and Birta Guðjónsdóttir. Commissioner Dorothee Kirch. Curator Ellen Blumenstein