

A few notes on Icelandic contemporary photography

From around the world

Icelandic contemporary photography started with a few out of the ordinary exhibitions and publications. Jón Kaldal, the master of portraiture, exhibited works in Casa Nova in 1966, inspiring future generations. Leifur Þorsteinsson showed street photography at the National Museum of Iceland in 1968 naming his exhibition *Straight fótógrafa*, which was probably the first time that kind of photography received the honor of such an exhibition space. Þorsteinsson also had great influence on younger generations of photographers seeking inspiration from their predecessors. Things really began to develop when Icelanders started returning after having studied photography in universities around the world in the seventies and eighties. People sought education in photography all around the world and returned with knowledge, experience and fresh ideas which they introduced to the Icelandic scene.

Guðmundur Ingólfsson brought back the German way of photographing as he studied under Otto Steinert at Folkwangschule für Gestaltung in Essen. After returning to Iceland in the early 1970's he ran a successful photography studio for decades alongside Sigurgeir Sigurjónsson, as well as making art in his precisely executed manner. Sigurjónsson who studied both in Stockholm and California was also very influential and his landscape photography books have become best sellers. At the same time Sigurður Guðmundsson used photography extensively to produce his works of art rooted in conceptual art with a large impact on artists to come.

Ívar Brynjólfsson and Inga Sólveig Friðjónsdóttir both graduated from San Francisco Art Institute in the late eighties and showed fine art photography in galleries in Iceland after they returned. Brynjólfsson's exhibition in Djúpið, *Vondar myndir frá liðnu sumri* (Bad Photographs from Last Summer) was in retrospect a game changer for many since he was obviously by no means trying to achieve technical perfection, rather the concept was king; This was an art exhibition.

Bragi Þór Jósefsson studied at Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, and he too returned to Iceland with fresh ideas and aesthetics after his graduation in 1986. He has since worked extensively both as an editorial photographer and as an artist.

The work of Ragnar Axelsson, Páll Stefánsson and Jim Smart in the field of photojournalism and documentary photography was truly significant as their images reached a larger public but in our

opinion it would be strange to accredit press photography with fathering contemporary photography in Iceland since it does seem most people working as photographic artists looked for education and inspiration outside the country.

Other people could be mentioned here such as the artists Hrafnkell Sigurðsson, Svala Sigurleifsdóttir, Bára Kristinsdóttir, Rúrí, Roni Horn, Pétur Thomsen, Haraldur Jónsson and many more.

Books

Using publications or multiples as a medium for artwork has become increasingly important and common the past few years. Here in Iceland as far as we know the first books containing contemporary photography were published in the seventies. Although fine art photography book publishing did not really pick up until around the turn of the century. In 1975 Valdís Óskarsdóttir collaborated with writer Ólafur Haukur Símonarson on a book called *Rauði Svifnökkvinn* where she illustrated poems written by him with surreal photographic collages. The book *Ljósmyndir* with Jón Kaldal's portraiture work came out in 1982 and has been much treasured. However landscape photography has through the years been the main topic of photography book publishing in Iceland and aforementioned photographers Sigurjónsson, Stefánsson and Axelsson have been prolific in the field.

Since the turn of the century various books have been published both by large publishing houses, on the Icelandic scale, like Forlagið, and smaller companies such as the art book publisher Crymogeia and Útúrdúr. Accompanying his exhibition with the same title, Spessi released *Bensín* in 1999, which marked a change in the field since his work stems from conceptual art and up until then there had not been a lot of such work published in book form in Iceland. He has since then released the books *Location* in 2007 and *Kjúklingalund "fajitas" að hætti Google-manna, mexíkósk maíssúpa og súkkulaðiis* in 2008.

Einar Falur Ingólfsson has also chosen to put his art forth in book form with *Dagbók í myndum : A visual diary* in 2002, *Sögustaðir : í fótspor W. G. Collingwood* in 2010 where he traces the footsteps of Collingwood who in 1897 travelled around Iceland doing drawing and painting and thus documenting historical places. The book combines Collingwood's pictures and images Einar Falur makes in the same locations. and *Án vegabréfs : ferðasögur* in 2011.

In recent years Katrín Elvarsdóttir has also been prominent in the field, exhibiting her poetic and mysterious images around the world as well as presenting her work in book form. *Mórar – nærvídd* came out in 2005, *Equivocal* in 2011 and *Vanished Summer* in 2013, the latter two published by Crymogeia.

Here too many more artists could be mentioned and the next few years will without a doubt have

great things in store.

Recent developments

In 2008 the National Museum of Iceland published a book featuring works of FÍSL founders, *Reflection – Icelandic Contemporary Photography*, which included a philosophical text on the work and detailed interviews with the artists.

In 2012 the photography festival Ljósmyndadagar was held for the first time and is now a biannual event with exhibitions, lectures and portfolio reviews in which people from around the world come to take part.

FÍSL is currently working towards documenting and publishing the history of contemporary photography in Iceland in cooperation with the Reykjavik Museum of Photography, a much needed document, source of information and a basis for further writing on the subject. Our aim is to publish the book in 2016 alongside the opening of an exhibition featuring works that have played part in this history. In 2011, *Íslensk Listasaga : frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar* (Icelandic Art History : From the late 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century), a comprehensive book on the history of art in Iceland came out in five volumes. A conscious decision was made not to include photography although a few, mostly conceptual, artists using the medium were addressed. Nevertheless the history of our art in this country was left undealt with. For this reason, amongst others, we think it is time to make sure this history is documented.

Furthermore the translation of Roland Barth's *Camera Lucida* into Icelandic is under way.