

Halldór Björn Runólfsson: *Art to fight over*

Booklet text for Akureyri Art Museum

"Capital of the North" in Vestursalur 30.08.2003 – 2.11.2003

Since 2000 Erla S. Haraldsdóttir and Bo Melin have been manipulating photos with a view to altering their public's perception of its daily surroundings. Starting in Skoghall, a neat little town by Lake Wänern, in Värmland, the romantic heartland of Sweden, Erla and Bo created a striking drum, hanging from the ceiling, with a 450 cm. long panoramic photo for "Public Safety", an exhibition curated by Alfredo Jaar. The sober Art Hall and its vicinity had been transformed into a dilapidated city suburbs scrawled in graffiti and strewn with refuse from overflowed waste containers. The enthusiastic public, well acquainted with the actual townscape around the Art Hall, was invited to speculate on the changes, how Skoghall would look like, were it in the outskirts of Stockholm or Gothenburg, instead of the serene Värmland countryside.

A year later, Erla and Bo, mounted a series, at Gallery Hlemmur, called "Here, there and everywhere", based on altered scenes from downtown Reykjavik. In this panoramic series they went further in perturbing the public by integrating exotic, cosmopolitan elements into the conventional, uneventful cityscape. If it was relatively easy for the public in Skoghall to decide whether it was better to live there rather than in the suburbs of a large city, the public at Gallery Hlemmur had harder time determining whether a colourful, Oriental fruitstand at a busy downtown intersection, ruined the urbanistic harmony, or gave the pavement a gregarious bustling look, associated with an adventurous metropolitan atmosphere. In the context of the International House, which opened in downtown Reykjavik as a versatile information and cultural centre for immigrants, only a few months after the exhibition, these ambivalent works obviously addressed a society which oscillated between sincere hospitality and uncouth xenophobia.

There is in Erla's and Bo's procedure a striking critical potential which relies on desire for its subversive ends. We seem to be at a similar degree in the evolutionary spiral as the Romans when Bernini created his ambiguous scenographic masterpiece, the Ecstasy of St. Theresa, surrounded by the onlooking members of the Coronaro family, in S. Maria della Vittoria. Despite their plausibility the photos do not deceive us for long, certainly not if we are familiar with the actual view, but they manage to hit our subconscious with similar force as the illusionist works of the baroque era, and make their way to our perceptual sensibility. We are forced to respond, take sides, speculate about the scenes and question accordingly the reliability of our perceptual faculties.

No matter how hard-headed we may be, we are inclined to give in, at least momentarily, to the illusionary effect and indulge in the dreamlike reconstructions of familiar views, which are at the same time deconstructions of the actual environment, whereas they allow us to ponder upon exciting, sociological possibilities, which after all are not as far-fetched a may seem. Contrarily there are others among the general public who are certain to look upon Erla's and Bo's fictitious proposals with horror and who would not dream of changing an inch of the actual scenery for what they find alien and frightening in these unacceptable multicultural suggestions. Such opposed sentiments as the photo quartett "Here, there and everywhere" is bound to generate among its observers are synonymous with its aforementioned critical possibilities. Instead of getting a unanimous opinion after examining the series, as would be expected after a good Kantian discussion in front of an ordinary work of art, positions tend to stay divided because of the public's irreconcilable socio-political view.

The polemical nature of these photographic series which perhaps do not render themselves so easily to a dialogistic consensus as would older art, is in line with the evolutionary change which we have been witnessing in contemporary art during the last fifteen years. It is what the American critic Hal Foster referred to as The Return of the Real, and employed as a title to a collection of essays, published by The MIT Press in 1996. By addressing socio-political issues, or putting forth suggestions which force the public to take an extra-aesthetic position in front of the artwork, Erla S. Haraldsdóttir and Bo Melin carry their experiments to the utmost limits of art. And we can be sure that this addition, which may have exceeded the aesthetic part, is the guarantee for the work's continuous good health.

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