

Where am I?

Erla Haraldsdóttir interviewed by Dominic Eichler, Berlin, January 2006

Dominic Eichler: *Before we talk about your latest animation video for your forthcoming Künstlerhaus Bethanien exhibition, the one that doesn't have a name yet because you are in the middle of making it and titling can be like putting a lid on something that's hard to remove later, and because you were telling me that you don't have any 'distance' on this new work yet, which I can understand, especially because we're sitting in your studio in the middle of the production process—I want to go back to a key older work Here, There and Everywhere (2001). You made this series of digital collages in collaboration with artist Bo Melin. When I first saw them I thought they were ordinary snapshots of Scandinavian towns and cities that I've never been to. Then I thought: 'Shit, they look a little bit too much like Kreuzberg-Berlin'. I realized that I had mistakenly accepted them as documented 'normality', when actually, they are witty seamless digital collages. Everything looks to be in its place, but they are completely constructed. How did you decide which elements to add and what things to erase?*

Erla Haraldsdóttir: The idea for some of the works in this series was to fake a sort of multicultural neighbourhood. I once lived San Francisco for a year and walked through Chinatown every day. It struck me that just kind of loose elements that told you that it was Chinatown, not the architecture. It was just things like the storefront signage and banderols, things that you can just put up, that you don't have to build. Bo and I had the idea to do the same thing with images of a neighbourhood in Reykjavik. In one collage we transformed a main street into a kind of fictional Chinatown and another one into a kind of Kreuzberg. We showed the project at Galleri Hlemmur a small non-profit space in Reykjavik, and at Gerdarsafn, an Art museum in Kópavogur, a town close to Reykjavik. Amongst the museum visitors, some older people got upset and their reactions were like: 'Oh God, we hope that it is not going to be like this!' Reykjavik has a population of 160.000 people, and the whole of Iceland 290.000. Icelanders tend to be quite nationalistic and their immigration politics is conservative. Only 451 refugees have been allowed into the country since the 1950s, and there are some recently imported workers from Poland and Thailand (typically working in the fish factories and cleaning the houses). So in the future there will be a second generation of 'foreigners'. But the first work for this series was in the middle Sweden, at a very nice cosy little provincial town called Skogall, in the area of "Värmland" where Astrid Lindgren comes from. The Chilean artist and curator Alfredo Jaar built a paper Kunsthalle in a main square in Skoghall. First we took a panorama photograph of the neat square and transformed it in our collage into something like a trashy suburb. We just added elements that you can see in any bigger city. In these collages it wasn't about making it multiethnic, it was about chaos, adding rubbish, graffiti and skateboard ramps! We wanted to transform the square into a place where teenagers are like taking over.

DE: *So you pictured a kind of heterotopia, a place allowing a difference? How did the townspeople react to your vision of their square?*

EH: They were really curious but they didn't really like it. Your city is a part of yourself... it's funny with this project, people have the feeling that they can interact with it directly and not as a work of art. We were playing with the idea of parallel reality. Later we went to Akureyri, the second biggest city in the north of Iceland, a place where nobody is anonymous because of the smallness. It has about 16,000 inhabitants and we wanted to know what it could look like if there were 500,000 people living there. The city had built a new house for culture, a *Ketilshús*, and put a lot of money in the architecture but there is no money left for the art and exhibition activities. Artists are supposed to do everything from their own. So in our collage we transformed the culture house in to a McDonalds and their art museum into a movie theatre. Of course once again there was a lot of local critique.

DE: *Collages usually work because you see their elements visibly come from different sources. But in your digital collages you make the elements look like they belong together. You can't even tell that they are put together...*

EH: The idea was to make them look completely believable, like snapshots taken from a walker's point of view. The point of view is not from above... you are walking there. The idea was to manipulate the pictures so that you can't see it is manipulated. The collages were primarily made for the people who live in the places we worked with. First they recognize their city because there are no architectural changes. Then after a while they see all our small changes like graffiti, posters, skateboard ramp, or a fruit and vegetable stand or a woman on a bike... (Laughs) Women in Iceland all drive cars, and fruit and vegetables are extremely expensive, actually there is a monopoly in the fruit and vegetable business.

DE: *Do you think these pictures confront the townspeople with their ideas of norms and their prejudices?*

Are the collages proposals for public betterment, I mean could you imagine submitting your photographs to a town planner?

EH: Maybe. But it is not about being didactic. When we were making these collages we got more and more into the idea of randomness and chaos, things that are a little bit anarchistic or unstable and undefined that could function as a kind of manure or fertilizer for the subculture (for instance, like the squatters scene in Berlin after the fall of the wall). It's about adding things that communicate alternatives like posters and graffiti. In the Nordic countries there is a sort of a social stableness, the living standard is high and that shows in the cityscape where things are neat and tidy in the 'right place'. Stockholm is like an 'Open Air Museum', the complete opposite of Berlin with all its undefined non-places and former no mans land. I think that when you grow up in Scandinavia you long for to know how it is in the real big world, the one that you see in movies. You long for a certain amount of chaos quite simply so that you don't get depressed! I wasn't brought up with a hard background, like on what I heard described as Germany's 'poisoned soils'. I mean, I can say I come from a really 'nice' background and everything is in order and still I have a longing for chaos.

DE: *I can understand that in this context small signs like flyers and rubbish represents a kind of mini-rebellion against the social order. But your studio is really very clean. It's all very ordered and regulated. There is a big window with a view, basic chairs, a table and a laptop. I think it's rather ironic how artist's studios look like writer's desks now (Laughs) ...maybe you could describe where you up to with your new work seeing your studio is it's your scenic point of departure.*

EH: I don't see much chaos, so the desire for disorder goes in my artwork, not into my life! The idea with my new animation video is to document my immediate surroundings. I am in my studio every day so I make a photo of it, then I make a drawing of the photo, then I video the drawing, and then I manipulate the footage frame by frame. I'm also working on a scene set on a canal in Berlin where I go jogging.

Dominic Eichler: In Walk in Progress(1), your latest video for the forthcoming show at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, you mix video footage with animated drawings. The image is in a constant state of flux between the "drawn" and the "videoed". Is reality invading the drawing or is the drawing replacing reality?

Erla Haraldsdóttir: Reality is invading my reality. To render my surrounding is the idea. I like the distance between the head and the hand. You have something in your mind and the question is how to get it on paper. There is this French writer Georges Perec – he was in the OuLiPo group and they came up with rules and restrictions in order to write. So he wrote a whole novel called *La Disparition*(2) without using the letter "e". It was partly about the process, not the result. The freedom of difficulty and the difficulty of freedom. If everything is allowed you don't know what to choose. When you put a frame around you as a filmmaker or writer it becomes easier. So he wrote about what was going on in a café for one hour. Somebody came in, somebody went away. He reflected on everything that happened during the same hour everyday.

– In your new video there are no characters. Is that because you want the viewer to be the main character? What role does narrative play in your new animation video? Can there be a narrative when there are no characters? It seems to me that film and video are classic mediums for the idea of putting yourself or your projections into a picture.

– The new work is partly inspired by the computer game called *Myst* that was created in 1994 and became a huge success. In the game the player walks around in an unpopulated virtual world looking for signs in order to solve riddles that leads you to the next virtual world. In my video the drawings start out as fairly exact representations of a particular surroundings. But it is also about when your surrounding dissolves, and then starts to reconstitute again. The video is a visualisation of a subjective mental image of surroundings. How you feel is in the image. It's an attempt, a work in progress...

– Or a "walk in progress" perhaps. (laughs) One critic wrote that your work radicalises the question of whether or not there is a difference to artistic rendering of real life and a non-artistic documentation. At the moment the video starts with a loop of the same pan across the studio. The view of the studio ends with the edge of the drawing—we see the grid and pencil marks in the margin, it's like a film end, it is a rupture in what normally would be a narrative build up starting with a "setting the scene shot". Still there is a journey from place to place in the video that suggests a narrative or at least a scenic development.

– There are scenes in the streets of Berlin, in Iceland and in the Icelandic wilderness. For the first time in a

long time I'm making a personal work. Personal in a sense that I'm using a certain feeling in my work that has to do with psychological disorientation, and how it (the feeling) reflects itself on the surrounding, simply a feeling or notion of being lost and weird... So I've chosen places that directly relate to me. I'm insecure. It's an experiment. I wonder if other people can relate to that? I want to go deeper into my own version of reality. But I'm struggling with this personal thing. It is expected of you as a female artist that you have to be rhetorically convincing especially when working with issues that are relating to feelings and intuition, which get directly associated to femininity. There is a struggle in me I guess.

– To an outsider though the drawings and un-narrated scenes in the video perhaps aren't so obviously personal. The drawing technique for instance, looks like the illustrations that real estate agents sometimes use to idealise a family house. There is not so much friction, little expressiveness. They don't look like you're struggling. They look cool and detached.

– I decided to use a special structure or process: the photograph, then the exact drawn copy etc. That makes them mechanical in a way but that's also where they become subjective. I like this American cartoonist/writer Harvey Pekar, who writes autobiographical stories about his everyday life in Cleveland. He uses his own life as footage for his cartoons.

– One of the scenes of the new work is the pedestrian tunnel beneath Alexanderplatz. What is it that attracts you to the tunnel or places like a path along a canal? In both of your drawings of these places you use a very basic perspective line that gives the idea of moving forward—is it because they are places of transition?

– Yes, in a way, like some sort of psychological non-places. In the tunnel people all move in the same way. But it still has something organic about it like how the graffiti is constantly changing. It's a passage. You're in that world for a while and then you're in another. In the video a waterfall appears. It is one of the tourist attractions on Iceland. It's very beautiful. But now there are signs all around it and you're not allowed to get too close. It was not like that in the past, it became an attraction, one waterfall even has a light show like the Eiffel tower.

– Beauty is a great rumour.

(1) working title

(2) Originally published in 1969, the translation into English is called *A Void*.(translators note)

Dominic Eichler, born 1966 is a Berlin based artist, writer and musician. He is also a regular contributor to Frieze magazine and last year was awarded the AdKV Art Critic prize.