

DIARY

## AMAZING RACE

May 25, 2008 • Reykjavik • Cathryn Drake

### Reykjavik



Left: Filmmaker Jonas Mekas (above) and artist Marina Abramovic. (Photo: Karl Petersson) Right: Artist Olafur Eliasson with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, codirector of exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery. (Photo: Cathryn Drake)

As people arrived from all over the world to attend the opening weekend of the Reykjavik Arts Festival and participate in Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Olafur Eliasson's "Experiment Marathon Reykjavik," the mood resembled a summer camp—albeit one attended by Björk, who was on my flight from London, and the country's president, Olafur Ragnar Grímsson. Festivities kicked off with receptions at both the president's residence and at Reykjavik city hall, where mayor Ólafur F. Magnússon spoke with guests. Iceland's intimate social landscape, along with its intimidating physical landscape, brought the eclectic crowd together, and it seemed that whenever someone was mentioned in conversation, they appeared just around the corner.

The marathon began Friday morning at the Reykjavik Art Museum–Hafnarhús and featured a diverse lineup including artificial-intelligence expert Luc Steels, physicist Thorsteinn

Sigfússon, artists Tomas Saraceno and Hreinn Fríðfinnsson, and architects Neri Oxman and David Adjaye. The most successful presentations were often the most straightforward. For example, Indian artist Abhishek Hazra plotted a sine curve by laughing and crying into crescendos of hysteria. Another highlight was the touching performance *Table Piece One*, in which filmmaker Jonas Mekas, his son, Sebastian, and actor-filmmaker Benn Northover ate lunch and made toasts to elves and trolls; the whole thing resembled a hall of mirrors as a giant video of Mekas shushing the audience was projected above while the performance was simulcast on a smaller screen to the side.



Left: Brian Eno. (Photo: Karl Petersson) Right: Dorrit Moussaieff with Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, president of Iceland. (Photo: Cathryn Drake)

That evening Frida Björk Ingvarsdóttir, culture editor of the daily *Morgunblaðið*, improvised a cozy last-minute dinner at her home, partly in honor of her daughter, Elín Hansdóttir, whose immersive, mazelike installation was featured in the exhibition “Art Against Architecture” opening later that night at the National Gallery of Iceland. Arriving with Obrist and Eliasson, our posse was soon followed by Rebecca Solnit, writer-in-residence at the Library of Water in Stykkishólmur, as well as marathon participants John Brockman, Marina Abramovic, and Carolee Schneemann. On hearing the song “*Sveitin Milli Sanda*” (The Land Between the Sands), performed by Ellý Vilhjálmss in the late 1950s, Abramovic proclaimed that she would use it in her performance the next day.

Later, at the National Gallery, guests lounged and swung on Monica Bonvicini’s leather and chain hammocks. Finnbogi Pétursson’s calming poetic installation used magnifiers to project quivering flames on four walls, while outside in the Tjörnin pond, the evocative *Atlantis*, a

sunken little red house by Tea Mäkipää and Halldór Úlfarsson, squared architecture against nature—and the winner seemed clear.

Afterward, collector Ingunn Wernersdóttir led us to the gritty Hressingarskálinn restaurant, where we were serenaded by a deadpan Icelandic duo's stiff renditions of classic rock tunes. Between bites of City's Best hot dogs, designer Gudrun Lilja Gunnlaugsdóttir informed me that in Reykjavik, it's not unusual to wander into places at random, following the common philosophy that "it is about the journey, not the destination." Putting that into practice, we later stumbled into a party sponsored by I8 gallery in honor of Ernesto Neto's exhibition, where we again spotted Björk and reeled to the live music while balancing bags of greasy fish and chips.



Left: Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades's Macy's. Right: Artist Carolee Schneemann and John Brockman. (Photos: Cathryn Drake)

On Saturday, our troupe flew northward by propeller plane to Akureyri (pop. 17,300), the country's second-largest city. President Grímsson sat in the first row reading his newspaper while his Israeli-born wife, Dorrit Moussaieff, recommended her favorite Icelandic fashion designers. Arriving in the city at midday, we visited the exhibition "Facing China" at the Akureyri Art Museum, then moved on to the lovely Safnasafnid folk-art museum, where contemporary installations by "outsider" artists were juxtaposed with traditional cultural artifacts. From there, we flew on to Egilsstaðir, making our way to the Eidar Art Center, where we were greeted by young dancers running about and posing in the grass, then hiked through the mud to Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades's 2004 installation of a Macy's in the middle of a field.



After a visit to the Slaughterhouse Culture Centre, we drove through the snow-covered peaks above Lake Lagarfljót, haunted by the legendary Worm monster, to Seydisfjörður, the small-town home of the Skaftfell Centre for Visual Art, founded in memory of former resident Dieter Roth. After being greeted at the door with handshakes and hugs from Gudni Gunnarsson and Lieven Dousselaere of the art collective Skyr Lee Bob, we gawked as dancer Erna Omarsdóttir growled, twitched, and scratched at the walls from within a glass room. Outside, Pétur Kristjánsson used his tractor to “Paint by Numbers,” lining up milk cartons containing various liquid foods on the pavement and running them over to create a splatter pattern, eventually moving on to crushing vacuum cleaners while children danced on the sidelines. “Welcome to Iceland,” a local resident commented.



Left: Artist Abhishek Hazra and Dr. Ruth. (Photo: Cathryn Drake) Right: Carolee Schneemann's performance. (Photo: Karl Petersson)

Bringing together art and science, the experiment marathon seemed like an inspirational DIY manual for life itself. Describing reality as a nonlinear process of input and output in which we ourselves are the instruments, Brockman noted, “You are not creating the world, you are inventing it.” In “Laughing at Leonardo,” filmmaker-composer Tony Conrad made a sort of Vitruvian Man joke using his own body as a stringed musical instrument. Brian Eno led the audience in a sing-along of “Can’t Help Falling in Love” and proposed choral singing as the key to civilization: “In a group you stop being me and start being us. I encourage you all to start your own a cappella group and change the world.” He added, “The three keys to happiness and a healthy old age are dancing, singing, and camping.”

In the end, the marathon also demonstrated that experiments can be most interesting when they fail, as when a curious collaboration between Abramovic and Dr. Ruth Westheimer was

canceled due to a blowout between the two personalities. After screening a video explaining how she had been rejected by the elderly sex adviser, Abramovic led the audience in breathing exercises, then instructed everyone to hug each other. Hugs may do it for some, but it wasn't until Sunday night's closing party at the Blue Lagoon that our group came upon the true secret to Iceland's famously high happiness rate: relaxing in a volcanic hot pool under the midnight sun.

— Cathryn Drake



Left: Dancer Erna Omarsdóttir. (Photo: Cecilia Alemani) Right: Sebastian Mekas, Jonas Mekas, and Benn Northover. (Photo: Cathryn Drake)



Left: Thorgerdur Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, Iceland's minister of culture, with the Sugarcubes's Einar Örn Benediktsson. Right: Dagur B. Eggertsson, former mayor of Reykjavík, with Ólafur F. Magnússon, mayor of Reykjavik. (Photos: Björn Blöndal)



Left: Artist Ernesto Neto, collector Francesca von Habsburg, and artist Monica Bonvicini. Right: Monica Bonvicini's installation at the National Gallery of Iceland. (Photos: Cathryn Drake)



Left: Artists Andrea Maack and Katrin Olina. Right: Amiina and friends perform onstage.

**ALL IMAGES**