

Affect and Exhibitions

A Curatorial Seminar at Hrafnseyri, Westfjords of Iceland,
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From the town of Isafjörður, the road towards Hrafnseyri tunnels for seven kilometers through a mountain – a single-lane channel carved from crusty volcanic rock. A stately game of chicken ensues where outward bound drivers pull over in alcoves to wait for incoming traffic to pass. Tunnels in Iceland provide portals of passage and connection. Mountain roads close for the winter and render remote communities like Hrafnseyri inaccessible except by sea.¹ Past the town of Þingeri, the asphalt turns into a dirt road paved with salt water to retain its surface, which snakes over a mountain and around a sequence of hair-pin turns

in the clouds. As a passenger, I enter the Westfjords swept by a vertiginous sublime, at once expansive and perilous. Spectacular panoramic views expand beyond the road's edge which drops relentlessly hundreds of feet below. Particularly anxious moments are alleviated by the good humor and reassuring conversation of kind companionship.



Photo: Viktor Petur Hannesson



Photo: Valdimar J. Halldorsson

I arrive in Hrafnseyri to teach a seminar on *Affect and Exhibitions* at the invitation of Valdimar J. Halldorsson, curator-director of the museum complex that also serves as a satellite programming space for the University of Iceland.² Built on the site of an 800-year old farming homestead, the on-site case studies are exhibits that stem from this birthplace of two national heroes, Jon Sigurdsson (1811–1879) a proponent of Iceland’s peacefully achieved independence from Denmark, and Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (d. 1213), a Viking chieftain, seer and the country’s first physician.³ The seminar takes place across an array of contemporary structures and historical sites situated imposingly on a hill overlooking a fjord. A mid-century visitor center holds a commemorative museum, accommodations, and a flexible meeting room that also functions as a chapel. A period turf house encompasses a dining room, reading room, contemporary art gallery, and kitchen with sleeping lofts upstairs for residents. A nineteenth-century church on the property, administered by villagers nearby, has become a site for destination weddings. Its graveyard holds the oldest traces of habitation, including some timeworn headstones. The experience of the curatorial seminar extends throughout these spaces. Participants include curators, anthropologists, graduate students in museum studies, media and cultural studies, independent scholars, and artists. Impromptu conversations occur while walking between buildings, during meals and in dormitories before sleep. Activities peripheral to the class include investigating the material culture

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around the complex, playing music in the dining room after dinner, and for the most stalwart a dip in the chilly waters of the fjord. The stillness of the landscape and vast views provide an extraordinary impact on proprioception. On a quiet day, one can sense the atmosphere for miles around, a spaciousness that impels a kind of intuitive consciousness of being part of it all. The museum complex lent itself to exploring the empirical tangibility of affects embodied in moments of immersion, in bonding to the elemental forces of the terrain, and in tuning into the hauntings of history.

The curatorial seminar was grounded in dialogue with site research, explorations that sought to collectively delve into the affective resonances of the context. Taking the exhibition complex of Hrafseyri as case study, participants were invited to explore how the affects of the site extend beyond museum narratives (or the discrete meaning of autonomously displayed objects) to encompass broader sensory,



Photo: Jennifer Fisher

cognitive, and emotive contexts. Just as affect works to transmit the feeling and atmosphere of an exhibition, so does it play a dynamic role in feeling space and time. We investigated affect in ways that inform the kind of curatorial processes involved in a site visit where discerning context plays a crucial role in the preparation of an exhibition. I asked participants to identify the notable affects they

encountered. Some reflections are included here as parallel texts and photographs. The exercise was to open to ambience and lateral relationality to engage process-based intuitions familiar to curators and artists.

Actions that situated the body in the environment arose as a recurring theme. As an intervention in the seascape, Bjorg Stefansdottir and Viktor Hannesson took a bracing ‘mermaid’s swim’ at dawn with the temperature hovering around seven Celsius with cold rain. They returned with Icelandic sweaters, socks, and hats over their bathing suits, rosy and exhilarated for breakfast. The body in the landscape was likewise explored by Olof Sigfusdottir. Over several on-site residencies her investigations have engaged tangible affects to inform what she calls the “curatorial aspect of intellectual work”:



Photo: Olof Gerour Sigfusdottir

During my residencies at Hrafnseyri, I have consciously exercised heightened attention, sheer attunement, and careful activation of my bodily experiences during the intellectual working process by placing myself into the surrounding environment. I discovered my force-field in a hollow up on a hill situated in a subtle bend in the ground, just above the tree line of a small man-made wood that separates it from the residential area. It is framed by trees on one side, a bare hill on the other, and parallel to a big rock that must have fallen from the mountain above some hundreds or thousands of years ago. To lie in it became a ritualistic act. It was a welcoming gap for my body, creating a state of in-between-ness, some sort of a threshold between physical and intellectual practice. Its gravitational force was luring and I wanted myself to be permeated by it. I let it leak into me by reclining there with no clothes on. Having my body touch the ground, spiders and flies crawling on my skin, I felt grounded. This daily act of ‘earthing’ helped my task by creating an unexpected space for mental processing of the text I was dealing with. Seeing the pressed grass, the ambiguous imprint of my body on the ground created an after-effect that has resonated with me ever since.

Olof Gerour Sigfusdottir (2017)

Here Olof curates the conditions of intellectual work beyond configuring the writing context. By opening her senses to embody the surroundings, her affective adaption to the terrain energizes and creates a space for intellection as a receptive

counterpoint to the act of writing. Such a kinaesthetic attunement involves an energetic exchange with the landscape: just as her presence leaves an impression in the grass, the gravitational force of the ground is sustained in her awareness. This practice of incorporating the environment brings awareness into present time, a mode of perception continuous with that of the exhibition experience.

The fact is that very few authentic artifacts remain at Hrafnseyri. Yet, I would like to suggest that the persistence of ice, frost, rain, and wind permeate the terrain with a sentience born of the force of natural elements. Age and exposure accumulate like surface patina as the site is imbued with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “texxture,” the material evidence of use and history.⁴



Photo: Ragnhelour Kristin Palsdottir

Hrafnseyri is haunted. The resonance of historical events endures in the secluded beauty of the homestead site. Here the past inhabits the present, the historically imbued place releases its presences, sometimes through eerie modes of experience. At Hrafnseyri this summer, a ghost story related by Thora Vilhjalmsdottir Wright describes her auditory encounter with a troubled spirit the year before:

During 2016 I decided to stay in the turf house where I slept well with no disturbing dreams. On the last morning I woke up and heard the French girl sobbing in her bed. I turned and looked but she wasn't moving at all. She

was sound asleep! The sound of crying was coming from around her face. My mind struggled – this didn't make sense and there was no sense to find there! Then the sound started to move away from her, towards the door. I felt the presence of a young woman, blond and heartbroken, feeling very sad about something. The sound slowly faded as it moved and then it was gone. I felt this powerful connection with the place, like I had literally taken a peek into its history. I wasn't afraid. I felt her sadness but didn't know what had happened. I got dressed and went downstairs and asked the woman who was preparing breakfast in the kitchen if anyone had seen this woman in the house. She replied that she had been seen walking through the walls. When I left Hrafnseyri later that day I felt like I had somehow traveled through time. Getting to know someone's heartache like that leaves a deep connection, even if you don't meet in the 'real world.'

Thora Vihjalmsdottir Wright (2017)

Thora's visitation by the ghost happened in the loft space of the Turf House, a reconstruction of a settler inhabitation. The apparition impacted her perception through an affective register that was at once auditory and mobile, present and disappearing, providing a portal into the sadness of a woman resident from another time. This haunting emerged from the space as part of Thora's dialectical sensing of its history.



In contrast to such transient impressions, the exhibitionary affect of the Jon Sigurdsson display in the visitor center presents a more contained sector of sensations coexisting with the site as if frozen in time. Commissioned by Iceland's Prime Minister's office, this display marks the site within a national touristic semiotic. It is permanently fixed in the year 2010, the date of its installation. That Sigurdsson was a philologist engaged in the study of literary and historical writing may have impelled the preponderance of inscription adorning its undulating didactic panels. The display was designed by Basalt Architects, the firm who transformed Iceland's famous Blue Lagoon from a swampy geothermal puddle into a world-class spa. The blue-green translucency of the Plexiglas screened with text and photographs recalls the hues of ice, like walking through a wintery cave. While aspiring to invigorate a narrative of national heroism, its atmosphere is ultimately impenetrable and sustains the protective impulse of historical fortifications built on the site.⁵ While the Plexiglas deflects the museum problem of visitors' curious hands, its smooth coolness abstracts any feeling of period immersion.⁶ The few artifacts – a plaster bust, a desk strewn with papers, a wooden box and a cabinet – are not authentic to Sigurdsson's life. The only hint of warmth are several wooden mid-century chairs interspersed in the space that offer points of rest or invite engagement with touch screens relating to Sigurdsson's biography in Hrafnseyri and beyond. Devoid of the patina of textured authenticity of the other period buildings, the display presents a compressed and somewhat claustrophobic exhibition path that alienated seminar participants.⁷



Photo: Valdimar Halldorsson

The curatorial seminar takes place in the flexible space that also serves as a meeting room and chapel. In contrast with the coolness of the Jon Sigurdsson display, the earth tones and hand-woven Icelandic wool carpeting furnish warmth and foster relationality. Seating can be configured in a circle for discussion or facing the large screen for a series of Skype dialogues with invited guests. These include several curatorial studies theorists: Jenny Kidd, who discussed how affect is instrumentalized in museum on-line games; Helena Reckitt, who spoke about affective labour in contemporary feminist curating; Gabriel Levine, who considered “glorious obscurity” and other affects involving vernacular museums; and Jim Drobnick, who discussed curatorial interventions into affectively charged sites. All insightfully contributed to substantial discussions about affect and exhibitions.⁸

In this room, a stained glass window depicts Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, in his role as a healer, treating the reclining patient’s leg, the sole commemorative image of him in the museum complex. The glass tableau portrays him with the dove of spirit and medical caduceus emblematically bestowing his healing gifts. In the background of the composition a yellow-leafed tree serves to support the composition. When the sun shines, the window illuminates the room with a



Photo: Valdimar Halldorsson

welcoming glow. The fact that Hrafn's medical talents included not only the healing of bodies, but also of mental illness and souls,⁹ strikes me as intriguing in the context of affect and exhibitions because one of the etymological roots of the word 'curator' derives from the word 'curate,' or priest, who cares for the souls of a parish (see Weisgerber and Butler 2016). In the seminar we speculate about how the curative legacy of Hrafn might find a dialectic counterpart with curatorial projects in the Hrafnseyri complex.

The saga of Hrafn, as recounted by Anne Tjomslund (1951), describes his birth at Hrafnseyri, then a farm known as Eyri, to a family prominent in Westfjords. He travelled extensively in Scandinavia, England, France, and Spain and studied medicine at one of the earliest medical schools the Schola Medica Salernitana, in

Salarno, Italy. After his travels he settled into his role as Chieftan, or Godi, a role that involved legal negotiation and the settling of disputes. He practiced medicine at Hrafnseyri, for which he charged no fees. Healing arts in Iceland at that time involved using runes, chanting magic songs, attending to supernatural dreams, visions, and portents that signaled the intervention of fate or divine power. Hrafn worked with a combination of folk medicine, Christian faith healing, and his formal European medical training (Tjomslund

1951: xi, 1, 10). He gained renown for his work as a healer: he could cure patients whom others could not, and his capacity as a seer was well regarded. During a winter voyage to Scotland, when the ship encountered raging seas near the Hebrides, none of the crew knew how to navigate a safe passage. Because he was recognized as a "guide of men's souls" he was deemed the best suited to pilot the ship through turbulent and rocky seas to safe harbor. He steered in blind conditions and is credited in the saga with saving all aboard (Tjomslund 1951: 25-28). Hrafn's ability to navigate demonstrates acute intuitive alertness to the processes of knowing and feeling of one charged with the guiding of souls, the capacity of a curator in its originary sense.

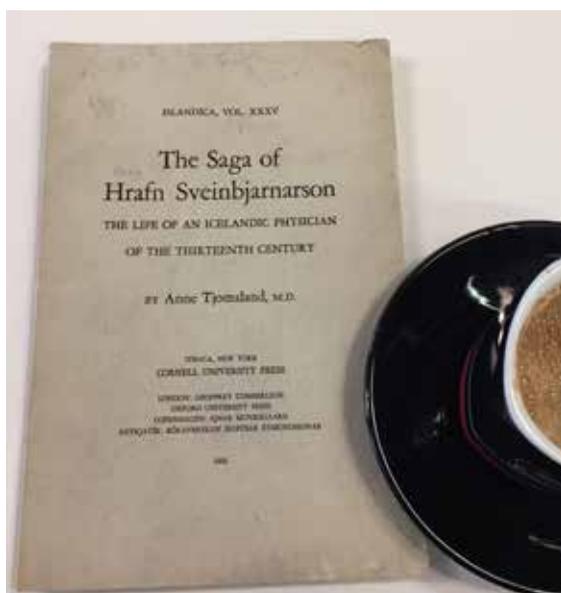


Photo: Jennifer Fisher

Hrafn was recognized as a popular chief. So the motive for his brutal murder by Thorvald Snorrason of Vatnsfjörður remains unclear, but it is likely related to the responsibility of settling disputes. Hrafn's rhetorical talents forestalled the homicidal Thorvald for some time, and he had built a fortification around the homestead in the effort to stave off attack. But Thorvald was not interested in reconciling. On New Year's Eve 1213, Thorvald's men jumped the wall. Hrafn offered himself up on the condition that the other residents of the homestead be left in peace. Thorvald agreed. After receiving confession, Hrafn went outside. Kneeling down on knees and elbows, his head on a piece of driftwood, he was slain.¹⁰ Hrafn's two sons escaped the burning homestead and eventually avenged his death in 1228.¹¹ A stone monument on the front lawn of the museum complex memorializes the place of Hrafn's martyrdom.

The Medieval period in Iceland was characterized by a ruthlessness that eventually led to the breakdown of the country and its submission to Norway. During Hrafn's lifetime, the political situation was not unlike the warlords of contemporary Afghanistan, with competing chiefs warring with each other, none with sufficient power to form a centralized government. This power dynamic is in



Photo: Björg Stefánsdóttir

some ways similar to the unregulated circumstances of the contemporary art market. With extremely wealthy collectors and oligarchs competing to dominate the art world with ostentatious bravado, the value of art has been thrown into question.¹² Outside the ferocity of market-driven art, there is a palpable fatigue with its neoliberalist commercial dominance. As an antidote, some curators such as Helena Reckitt are reviving the curatorial role in its ethical sense of ‘caring,’ both for others and oneself. Helena’s skype session during the seminar illuminated how the ‘support acts’ of caring can sustain the affective labor of feminist curatorial practice. This inspired much discussion amongst participants about how the retreat center at Hrafnseyri might extend its museum mandate beyond the paternalistic nationalism emblematic of the Jon Sigurdsson exhibition, to create a curatorial dialogue that draws from Hrafn’s legacy of visionary compassion and empathy.¹³



Photo: Andrea Thormar

Participants warmly shared their observations of the support acts of Valdimar and his partner Ola that had contributed to preparing and supporting an inventive context for friendly intellectual and creative exploration. Here multisensorial affects were clearly evident in the daily cycle of

activities in the Turf House, which features the café, an archeological exhibit, a small gallery for temporary art exhibitions, a period kitchen exhibit contingent to an actual kitchen, a reading room, and the sleeping lofts. The low ceilings enhanced the intimacy and conviviality amongst seminar attendees during mealtime. Soups, grilled salmon, Thai noodles, roast lamb, breakfasts, and ‘happy marriage’ cake¹⁴ crafted by Ola – herself an artist – bolstered energies to sustain a demanding schedule of seminar presentations and discussions. We sat in congenial tables for breakfast and lunch, which were reconfigured into a banquet table for the sumptuous lamb dinner on the last evening. As an anthropologist living and working in the Westfjords, Valdimar’s organization of seminar excursions brought the group into the immediacy of his research of vernacular culture.¹⁵ An afternoon tour to the mechanical seminar museum at Pingeyri provided insights into the region’s industrial history, and how traditional economies are transforming amid ascendant tourism, and a twilight climb of the waterfall at Dynjadni alerted participants to the splendor of natural forces and the fragility of the ecosystem.

Another zone of affective encounter within the terrain arose from the immediacy of an actual excavation on the site. Archaeologist Margret Hronn Hallmundsdottir has recently unearthed evidence that proves aspects of the Hrafn saga that had been, to date, supported only in folklore. One evening at twilight she gave us an impromptu tour of the dig – a 13th century tunnel leading from the homestead site to the fjord – where, she explained, Hrafn’s two sons were said to have escaped after their home was torched. Margret’s research strategy has endeavored to substantiate knowledge of the tunnel’s existence sustained in local oral accounts. To walk the edges of this once subterranean passageway is to become oriented to a conduit to safety used some 800 years ago. Standing by the excavation one can trace the tunnel from the museum to the sea. Margret’s feminist conviction is remarkable in how it gives credence to living folkloric epistemology sustained through oral transmission. Equally important is her perseverance.

Archaeologist Margret Hallmundsdottir’s enthusiasm and extremely inspiring love for her work affected everyone very strongly. We were in awe of her persistence despite the lack of government funding (a very common problem of any researcher in Iceland), and pressure from her colleagues for scientific proof of her findings. We all believed that she is right.

Gudlaug Gunnarsdottir (2017)

While bits of wood emerged from Margret’s dig, few trees remain at Hrafnseyri. Most of the trees of Iceland were cut down centuries ago by the Vikings for boat building. Today mature trees grow in Reykjavik, in parks, in front lawns, in graveyards. Yet in retrospect, it is the trees of the museums that stand out in my recollections. Unremarkable to me at first glance (and throughout the entire seminar), the tree featured in Hrafn’s stained glass window now strikes me both in its supporting role in the composition and its emblematic force. The tree is depicted as the background for Hrafn’s act of healing, its sentient affect sustaining the curing transmission.

More commonly, the healing benefits of black birch leaf tea are well known in Iceland. My first evening in Reykjavik, my university hosts kindly serve me some after dinner, which was delicious. Later in Hrafnseyri, I notice a small copse growing beside the museum parking lot and harvest leaves and dry them on the radiator of my room. After I return to Toronto, I brew them into tea to serve to a friend with a broken heart.

The last afternoon of the seminar, after tours of Isafjörður museums with curators from the Museum of Everyday Life, the Cultural House Heritage Museum and the Marine Museum, all of whom had attended the seminar, Valdimar drives me to the airport. Flying out over the Atlantic, the Westfjords appear below. The unusual lateral relationality of the seminar at Hrafnseyri coheres into a feeling of emergent elation.

My experience at Hrafnseyri [was] a time outside of time and a place outside of space, imbued by the immediate environment with a meaning and character that was somehow, though never entirely articulated, co-created by all the participants. There was something like magic that bonded us, an eclectic group of strangers, and translated to a kind of close kinship.

Rana Campbell (2017)



Photo: Jennifer Fisher

The currents mysteriously energized by our collective stay in Hrafnseyri's remoteness were not contained by its structures of exhibition, but permeated by the rhythms of wind and rain, the climate of the season, the luminosity of day and night, the traces of sentient presence. Distinct from formalist approaches to narrative displays of history, the zone of the curatorial became a space to explore ways of navigating knowing and feeling modeled by Hrafn's marine voyage so long ago.

Endnotes

1. With tourism ascendant in Iceland, another tunnel is being forged near Hrafnseyri by Romanians that won the tender to provide a year-round road to the museum and waterfall. They work continuous shifts, arriving and leaving by boat all year round. During the winter, the power station where they live is a contact zone should there be a problem with the museum, a power failure, a fire alarm going off.
2. My thanks go to Greg Seigworth for generously including my Skype participation in his 2016 workshop, and for introducing me to Valdimar Halldorsson.
3. The art of principled negotiation espoused by both Sigurdsson and Sveinbjarnarson underlies their stature as Icelandic heroes. The programming is inspired by this legacy, and includes courses, exhibitions, workshops, conferences, self-directed residencies, documentary film festivals, archaeological field schools, and retreats. Thematics that have been featured during workshops and conferences include nationalism and globalization, tourism and identity, museum education and exhibition design, workshops in renewable energy, international folklore and story-telling symposiums, a group reading of the saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, creation and rehearsal of theatrical projects, gender equity conferences and seminars on affect theory.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (after Renu Bora) distinguishes “textxture” from “texture.” Sedgwick states “textxture ... is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically and materially, it came into being,” whereas “texture ... invisibly blocks or refuses such information; there is texture, usually glossy ... that signifies the willed erasure of history” (2003: 14-15).
5. I acknowledge Viktor Hannesson’s insight here that the structure of the Sigurdsson display conveys an affect of protection.
6. Baudrillard’s idea of “the structure of atmosphere” is useful in understanding tangible affects of empirical exhibition contexts. He describes atmosphere as “the systematic cultural connotation at the level of object” where atmospheric values are conveyed through colour, materials, volume, space and seating. Baudrillard notes that glass is a material that solidifies, distances and abstracts atmosphere, that “glass is to matter what vacuum is to air” (1999 [1968]: 41-43).
7. See Vimeo walkthrough of the Jon Sigurdsson Museum by Valdimar J. Halldorsson <https://vimeo.com/251732586>
8. Jenny Kidd, Helena Reckitt, Gabriel Levine, and Jim Drobnick contributed to the “Museums and Affect” and “Affect and Relationality,” issues 4.3 and 5.1 of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* that comprised the workshop readings.
9. I am indebted to Olof Sigfusdottir for sharing this perception. On my last morning in Reykjavik she kindly gave me a vintage copy of Anne Tjomsland’s volume *The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* that informed this text.
10. Not surprisingly, Thorvald then robbed the house at Eyri of all valuables: weapons, clothing, furnishing, utensils, and food. Eventually, as was the law at the time, Thorvald was fined for slaying Hrafn (Tjomsland 1951, 43-55).
11. Hrafn’s sons were killed in retaliation shortly after that.
12. A Leonardo da Vinci painting sold at Christies, London, of uncertain authenticity, and fetched a record \$450,000,000 in November 2017.
13. Tjomsland underscores Hrafn’s unwavering ethics: “it seemed he was so humane that he would sooner die for the sake of a sworn truce than break faith” (1951: 41).
14. The recipe for Happy Marriage Cake *Hjonabandssaela* is as follows: 2 cups of quick oatmeal; 2 cups all-purpose flour; 1 cup white sugar; 1tsp baking soda; 1 cup butter (at room temperature); 1 egg; 1 tsp almond extract; ¾ cup rhubarb jam (or blend of rhubarb and prune jam). Mix oatmeal, flour, sugar, and baking soda in a bowl. Cut in the butter and knead the dough until well blended. Stir in the egg and

almond extract. Butter a cake pan or pie pan and press 2/3 of the dough into the bottom of the pan. Spread jam evenly over it and then crumble the remaining dough over the top of cake. Bake at 400 degrees for 20-25 minutes or until crust is golden brown (Bjarnadottir 2016).

15. Valdimar's fieldwork with local communities (particularly disenfranchised populations) draws from affect theory to develop a method of collaborative research qualified by empathy (Halldorsson 2017).

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