

# Power and Purity: Nature as Resource in a Troubled Society

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses representations of nature as brand and resource in current Icelandic society. This is done through an interdisciplinary approach consisting of concepts from the discipline of cultural geography and the analytical methodologies of visual cultural, imagology, discourse and brand analysis used to highlight key narratives in images and written sources. The article discusses how ideas of purity are used in branding strategies and what they mean in Iceland today e.g. as a part of the emerging regional consciousness of 'Arctic Iceland.' The current overlapping crises of the economy, the environment and the collective self-image in Iceland have fostered critical representations of the past, present and future of the relationship between humans and the environment. Thus utilitarian environmental policies and shallow ecology is treated critically in contemporary Icelandic art, as is the question of what constitutes pollution. Such internal conflicts of interest are analysed to show critical perspectives on the dominant narratives about Icelandic nature and society that are communicated to the outside world through nation branding.

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## The Crisis in Iceland and the Role of Nature

There are numerous examples that art and environmental theory can express and criticise dominant attitudes toward nature in a given cultural and political context. Artworks may even be viewed as laboratories for environmental theory. The canonical artwork *The Course of Empire* (1833-36) by the American artist Thomas Cole (1801-1848) presents a narrative of the destructive potential of civilization. The five paintings depict a development from a state of wilderness through a sequence of stages ending with the dramatic downfall of an empire. An implicit warning is expressed in the transition from a pastoral society in the second image to the rise and fall of a fully fledged empire in the two following images, ending with a final image of the primeval forest re-claiming the ivy-covered ruins. This depiction of the relationship between nature and civilization is an example of a *vanitas* allegory that exhibits the impermanence of cultural products on the grand scale of geological history. However, current theories and artworks are pointing out the blurred boundaries between fundamental natural processes and human activity as well as the importance of representation.

Currently pure nature is attributed considerable value, but there are conflicting ideas about the ideological framework that should define this concept. In Iceland, differing views about priorities and responsibility are spurring conflicts about the management of natural

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resources. The crisis following the economic collapse in 2008 has intensified the debate about natural resources, the intertwined nature of the local, regional, global and planetary geographical levels and the political strategies associated with them. In addition to the scholarly and literary debate, criticism of official environmental policies is found in artworks in the decade leading up to the collapse and in the years following. The crisis in Iceland has called the previously strong narrative of national unity into question when financial strain and uncertainty emphasizes conflicting interests.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the global climate change crisis and the Anthropocene<sup>2</sup> thesis that humanity has become a significant shaper of geological, atmospheric and biological processes are also reflected in various contemporary artistic representations of sites in Iceland. In these works, local, regional, global and planetary geographical levels—and related political agendas—are renegotiated. Two topics relating to issues of purity and the role of nature in visions of the nation's future are particularly high on the agenda: first, a new regional awareness in Icelandic politics that links Iceland to the Arctic<sup>3</sup> and, second, the management of Iceland's natural resources such as hydropower and popular tourist sites. In current representations of the Icelandic landscape in political rhetoric, branding and art, the concept of purity constitutes a battleground for renegotiations of geographical levels and the relationship between society and nature. The representations in question interpret these ideas from very different angles and come to opposite conclusions.

The economic collapse of 2008, recurring protest demonstrations, reinterpretations of the country's past, environmental debates, the Icesave conflict, allegations of political nepotism, and disagreements about where to place the responsibility for the economic crash are all factors that have contributed to cultural and social instability. Icelandic media, politics and art have been steeped in controversy over the future relationship between society and natural resources and over regional identification.<sup>4</sup> Since a new government took office in 2013, plans for EU membership have been put on hold,<sup>5</sup> and the Arctic region has been prioritised as an action area in a governmental statement that describes Iceland as a "leading power" (Icelandic:

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<sup>1</sup> Although nationalism provides a strong political rhetoric in Iceland after its fairly recent secession from the Kingdom of Denmark in 1944, there has been a tension between a desired national unity and the divisions experienced in Iceland for a long time, as the historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson pointed out before the collapse. Nevertheless, as Hálfðanarson states, nationalist rhetoric still pervades political discourse, keeping the myth of a unified nation with one interest and destiny alive. See Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Þingvellir: An Icelandic 'Lieu de Mémoire,'" *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 Spring/Summer (2000): 4-29.

<sup>2</sup> Introduced by atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize laureate Paul J. Crutzen.

<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the use of purity in the branding of Iceland as an Arctic nation, see "Icelandic Futures: Arctic Dreams and Geographies of Crisis," in *Critical Arctic Studies: Cultures, Environments, Politics, and Practices* ed. Stenport, Körber and MacKenzie (forthcoming, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Valur Ingimundarson, "Territorial Discourses and Identity Politics. Iceland's Role in the Arctic," in *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change*, ed. James Kraska (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 174-190.

<sup>5</sup> Stefnyfirlýsing ríkisstjórnar Framsóknarflokksins og Sjálfstæðisflokksins (governmental statement), 22 May 2013, accessed 25 August 2013, <http://www.stjornarrad.is/Stefnyfirlýsing/>.

*leiðandi afl*) in the region.<sup>6</sup> Influenced by this, for example, many contemporary Icelandic representations and statements about nature have become explicitly political. Policies and branding strategies emphasise the need to maintain a pure environment—because of its brand value, it seems. By contrast, (the threat of) damage to the environment is the focus of many artworks. Anthropocentrism and eco-centrism are, thus, central and competing value systems that affect dominant visions for the future relationship between society and nature in Iceland. Consistent with the Anthropocene thesis, the environmental philosopher Piers Stephens argues for a shift from a dualistic view of nature and the human(ised) as opposites to an ontological spectrum of more or less intertwined stages.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I discuss the representations of purity and naturalness and the potential that art holds in a dialogue with Stephens' proposition. I analyse representations of nature as brand and resource in current Icelandic society and discuss how ideas of purity and the unspoiled are used in branding strategies in the energy sector, official policies and the tourism industry as well as how these ideas are treated in a number of artworks that, similar to Cole's images, still function as laboratories for reflection on history and the development of environmental philosophy. With inspiration from the geographer Doreen Massey's critique of the naturalisation of neoliberal globalisation, one might say that Icelandic artists are questioning the dominant political framing of the industrial utilisation of natural resources as "pure," "natural" and "sustainable."

### **The Politics of the Natural and Pure**

In spite of differing interests, today's art, tourism, industrial branding and politics are intertwined—particularly when it comes to representations of the relationship between humans and natural resources. When brands and ideas represented in images and words (semiosis) are analysed in an approach inspired by iconology and visual rhetoric (semiotics), which highlights the relationship between communication, images and texts, they reveal certain narratives. This approach also draws on the analytical methodology of critical discourse analysis as described by Norman Fairclough (2001) and its preoccupation with the way semiosis constructs social realities and how systems of knowledge come to form truths, values and power. The definition of what is pure, clean or natural is a process that is connected to ideas about what belongs naturally in the "order of truth" that a discourse establishes.<sup>8</sup> And, in this context, representations of space—particularly, when it is imagined as natural—are political<sup>9</sup> and can be used to naturalise ideology. Iceland's recent efforts at nation-branding and the government's messages of progress and security for domestic consumption represent a renegotiation of the country's image after the economic collapse.

Discourses or systems of truth are often treated as values in themselves in the knowledge and experience economy. The branding strategies pursued by state-owned Icelandic energy companies and the tourism industry and statements from the new government are testimony to the great value attributed to a pure environment. On the website of Iceland's

<sup>6</sup> Stefnyfirlýsing ríkisstjórnar Framsóknarflokksins og Sjálfstæðisflokksins (governmental statement).

<sup>7</sup> Piers H. G. Stephens, "Nature, Purity, Ontology," *Environmental Values* 9 (2000): 267-94.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Douglas made the connection between definitions of purity and discursive systems clear when she famously defined dirt as matter out of place in *Purity and Danger* (1966).

<sup>9</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (1<sup>st</sup> edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).

largest energy provider, Orkuveita Reykjavíkur, purity is a key implied value. Here, the company presents the short film *Pure Nature* (Icelandic: *Hrein náttúra*)<sup>10</sup> about its environmental policy. The official branding portal, Iceland Naturally, promotes a similar image. The statements and imagery reflect an anthropocentric value system inherent in these fields dominated by a concern for Iceland's image and a framing of nature as an energy resource. As part of the ongoing process of formulating national values, the new government, which took office in 2013, wrote in their first political programme (presented in May 2013) that "Nature is one of the country's main resources,"<sup>11</sup> and "pure renewable energy" will benefit both exports and "the strong image of the country."<sup>12</sup> The ideological view of nature is clearly reflected in the programme: "The government emphasises that nature conservation and efficiency go hand in hand."<sup>13</sup> Nation brand value also seems a key motivator in its statement about environmental politics: "Iceland has a unique position when it comes to environmental issues by virtue of its pristine nature and sustainable use of renewable resources. This image is a resource in itself."<sup>14</sup> This is also reflected in a statement in the programme that appears to reflect an anthropocentric view on natural resources with an emphasis on profit: "Pure renewable energy, farming in unpolluted nature and a sustainable fishing industry provide a major market opportunity that may serve as the basis of growth in exports and a stronger nation brand."<sup>15</sup> The statements express what Arne Næss has called "shallow ecology,"<sup>16</sup> a common element in official environmental policies. The essential message is that Icelandic society will base its environmental policy on a (continued) anthropocentric logic in which nature is valued as a material resource and a source of brand value.<sup>17</sup>

The Anthropocene theory positions humans as generators of elements of natural processes and, thus, blurs the clear divide between the cultural and the natural, between

<sup>10</sup> Orkuveita, *Environment-Pure Nature*, accessed 1 July 2013, <http://fraedsla.or.is/Umhverfid/Hreinnattura/>

<sup>11</sup> Stefnyfirlysing (governmental statement), "Náttúra landsins er ein helsta auðlind þess," (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, "Hrein endurnýjanleg orka, landbúnaður í ómengaðri náttúru og sjálfbær sjávarútvegur fela í sér mikil markaðstækifæri sem geta lagt grunn að auknum útflutningi og sterkri ímynd landsins," (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, "Ríkisstjórnin leggur áherslu á að náttúruvernd og náttúrunýting fari saman," (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> Stefnyfirlysing (governmental statement), "Ísland hefur sérstöðu í umhverfismálum í krafti ósnortinnar náttúru og sjálfbærrar nýtingar endurnýjanlegra auðlinda. Sú ímynd er auðlind í sjálfri sér," (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> Stefnyfirlysing (governmental statement), "Hrein endurnýjanleg orka, landbúnaður í ómengaðri náttúru og sjálfbær sjávarútvegur fela í sér mikil markaðstækifæri sem geta lagt grunn að auknum útflutningi og sterkri ímynd landsins," (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> Arne Næss "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* (1973).

<sup>17</sup> A similar view of nature is reflected in a new report commissioned, financed and published by the Nordic Council of Ministers from 2013, which attempts to outline the status of environmental challenges in the Nordic countries in a discourse that frames nature as "natural capital." In this way, nature's value is determined by the extent to which it can be transformed into benefits for humans and an economic value system. See Leonardo Mazza *et al.*, *Natural Capital in a Nordic Context. Status and Challenges in the Decade of Biodiversity*, (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2013).

human and nature. Piers Stephens has proposed an ontology of nature that views the natural as a tripartite spectrum rather than a binary division of the natural versus the cultural. He seeks to overcome the inherent paradox in deep ecology in which humans are seen as being both a part of and separate from nature.<sup>18</sup> Stephens bases his theory on the phenomenological assumption that experiences and notions of nature are mediated by our senses.<sup>19</sup> He maintains a distinction between natural human instincts and the capacities we develop through exposure to the symbolic order of society, which forms a spectrum (of inner nature) that lends itself as a framework for the ontology of external nature. Thus, one can avoid references to what Stephens calls a dangerous purity based on a strict distinction between natural and unnatural. Ideas of absolute purity are linked to a separation of the natural and the cultural that, according to Stephens, may lead to misanthropy and a fascist normativity that lashes out against presumed impure or unnatural life forms. Nature is a diffuse concept that is often infused with predisposed conceptions of history.<sup>20</sup> One of the incentives for this theory is to provide environmentalist discourse with a definition of the natural that is free of dangerous notions of purity. The proposed ontological spectrum of naturalness consists of three states: The first state of nature is that of wilderness; on the spectrum of inner nature, it is parallel to the primary level of immediate sensation. The second stage is derived from the analogy with the inner process of meeting raw emotional and sensory impressions with our system for symbolic meaning making. Borderlands where humanised nature meets raw nature that has maintained its own dynamics fall into this second category.<sup>21</sup> The third area is parallel to the mental level of inherited stocks of truths that categorise sensations and experiences. In the physical world, this includes, for example, instrumental artefacts and genetic manipulation.<sup>22</sup> Within this category, Stephens draws a distinction between two types of artefacts: "*Cultus* artifacts ... are generated and produced through processes which embodied the spirit of utilising and respecting nature's own dynamics and possession of some independence, incorporating the domain of emotive care in the human process of production; the artificial, by contrast, is informed by a rationale of separation, objectification and the subjugation of nature's dynamics by feelingless application of abstract techniques."<sup>23</sup> The basic phenomenological assumption is that consciousness is selective and influenced by ideologies that produce the values that govern our understandings of nature—and that we, thus, construct our reality according to interest.<sup>24</sup>

In Iceland, environmental politics are currently dominated by a value system based on material accumulation and consumption with its origins in the Enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> The theories of Descartes, Bacon and Locke promote the ideal of a utilitarian approach to natural resources carried out through privatisation. Within the alternative value system that is based on the ideal of *cultus*,<sup>26</sup> also known as eco-literacy, value is created when humans are integrated into

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<sup>18</sup> Stephens, "Nature, Purity, Ontology," 270.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

ecological processes without altering or instrumentalising the process; one of the results is a widening of human satisfaction. Stephens argues for an integrated notion of nature and human that seeks to avoid misanthropy by promoting an anthropocentrism “which thinks of the human agent as a many-sided agent rather than solely a consumer.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, he also modifies the Anthropocene thesis: the ecological challenge and responsibility apply especially to the wealthy North or First World.

### **The Pure North in History and Myth**

Many of the associations connected with current Icelandic narratives about purity are linked with stereotypical ideas about the North. The historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson has described how the North has come to be associated with purity in recent history. By tracing the deeper layers of meaning attached to the changing concept of ‘the North,’ he develops a more profound understanding of references in both texts and images. Ísleifsson identifies a number of dominant stereotypical ideas of the North that are still prevalent in the twenty-first century. Of these, the notions of ‘the utopian North,’ ‘the original North’ and ‘the wealthy North’ are the most common references in the artworks and texts analysed. Ísleifsson outlines a general development in recent centuries that positions the countries north of Scandinavia as ‘the far North.’<sup>28</sup> In the 1700s, the far North was drawn closer to what was perceived as the civilised centre, “if at the edges of it.”<sup>29</sup> Many Romantic writers and artists turned to the far North in their search for the pure and true and, later still, the association with a pan-Nordic or Germanic cultural heritage resulted in a division between, on the one hand, Iceland and the Faroe Islands as the Germanic far North and, on the other hand, the Greenlandic Inuit and the Sami as Indigenous peoples of the far North.<sup>30</sup> In her article “The North Begins Inside,” the historian Karen Oslund concurs with Ísleifsson: “North Atlantic nature is not understood from a transparent reading of a biological analysis of whale populations, but from a complex array of assumptions and expectations about the qualities of the place.”<sup>31</sup> In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, travel writing expressed ideas about a reciprocal formation of Icelandic landscape and literature by virtue of the landscape’s responsiveness.<sup>32</sup> These accounts also reflect the two dominant interpretations of Icelandic nature in European accounts: it is a variation of the familiar (the same as in Europe and, in some accounts, an inferior variant), and it is exotic or strange (different from the European norm).<sup>33</sup>

Historically, Iceland has moved from the position of developing country and Danish dependency in the twentieth century to a position as a business innovator around the

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<sup>27</sup> Stephens, “Nature, Purity, Ontology,” 287.

<sup>28</sup> Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Ísleifsson and Chartier (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Oslund, “‘The North Begins Inside’: Imagining Iceland as Wilderness and Homeland,” *GHI Bulletin* 36, (2005): 91–99, 98.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Oslund, “‘The North Begins Inside’: Imagining Iceland as Wilderness and Homeland,” *GHI Bulletin* 36, (2005): 93.

beginning of the twenty-first century before reaching its current position as economic pariah state. The quality of purity that has been associated with Iceland—especially since the time of European National Romanticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, supported by Icelandic nation-building efforts—has linked it with a utopian North (in balance with nature) and an original North (a living past and a shrine of Nordic cultural heritage). This is illustrated in a quote from the nineteenth century by the Danish politician Orla Lehmann: “But as though frozen between the distant icy mountains, where the storms of time never reached, it [ancient life] stayed in almost unaltered purity in Iceland, so that we can see there a living antiquity, a talking image of the life of the past—that is why the Icelandic people must be dear to any Scandinavian.”<sup>34</sup> Being associated with this kind of purity has historically positioned Iceland as a place favoured by other Nordic nations, albeit mainly associated with the past.<sup>35</sup> However, leading voices in the Icelandic independence movement reacted to the imperialist system, favouring progress and the supremacy of metropolitan cultures by highlighting ideas about a strong influence of the landscape on the people and their exclusive affiliation with the land. Through this twist, their association with the archaic and original was reframed as an advantage for Icelandic culture and a point of reference in the negotiations about becoming a self-governing nation. As a result of these representations, the landscape comes to support the narratives of nationalism and, in a case of metonymic slippage, nature becomes a guarantor of the naturalness or truth of the national project.

The original North is associated with a logic of history and identity formation based on a narrative of exclusive lineage, a logic that fostered very similar ideas about the cradles of civilisation being situated in Greece and Iceland, respectively. Ísleifsson’s category of the utopian North<sup>36</sup> captures the notions of a privileged place where people live in an Arcadian state, in balance with nature. In representations of a utopian North, nature becomes a contrast to modern civilisation—an idea that is in itself modern. In a time of environmental and geopolitical anxiety, images of the northern landscapes of the Arctic and the melting ice represent the ultimate pure and fragile wilderness. In a dualistic logic, the utopian Nordic landscape is used to illustrate the opposition between culture and nature. If we apply Stephens’ ontological spectrum, however, the utopian North may illustrate a harmonious integration of humans in nature and evoke a criticism of modernity’s extreme commodification and instrumentalisation of nature.

The third stereotypical idea as described by Ísleifsson—that of the wealthy North—identifies the North as a place rich in both cultural and natural resources. While the cultural riches were a focal point during the bloom of national Romanticism, the idea of abundant natural resources in the North has a longer history. Ísleifsson has identified such ideas in the

<sup>34</sup> Orla Lehmann, “Anmeldelse af *Om de danske Provindstalstænder med specielt hensyn paa Island* (B. Einarsson)” in *Maanedskrift for Litteratur* 7 (1832): 524-25: “Men ligesom indefrosset mellem hine fjerne Iisfjelde, hvorhen Tidens Storme ei Naaede, veligeholdt det sig i næsten uforandret Reenhed paa Island, saa at vi i det see en levende Oldtid, et Talende Billede af Fortidens Liv – Derfor maa det islandske Folk være hver Skandinaver kjært ...” (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> For further reading on Iceland’s role in this system as crypto-colony, see, e.g., Gremaud, “Iceland as Centre and Periphery. Post-colonial and Crypto-colonial Perspectives,” in *The Postcolonial North Atlantic. Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands*, ed. Lill-Ann Körber, Ebbe Volquardsen. (Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik, #20, October 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” 17.

writings of the chronicler Adam of Bremen (ca.1040-1081), who described a land in the North “where gold and gems were in abundance and where the inhabitants possessed only a rudimentary understanding of this wealth.”<sup>37</sup> This notion of the rich underground of the North is reflected in the optimism of Icelandic environmental policies and in the current hopes in the far North of large international investments in resource extraction.

### **Branding Iceland: Power and Purity**

Old ideas and myths are reactivated and negotiated as possible futures are discussed, as hopes associated with the wealthy North and the utopian North are projected into the changing land and seascape of the North. This illustrates the interface between imagined communities and imagined geographies proposed by the geographer Neil Smith: that nature is mediated through society and societies through representations of nature.<sup>38</sup> As images of melting ice are circulated around the globe, the region has become a symbol of the Anthropocene and a laboratory of geopolitical reactions and re-positionings in which Iceland, too, is a participant in the formation of the imagined geography by appropriating its mythical associations in a constant flux of narratives from commercials, political rhetoric, nation-branding strategies, etc. In the current age, characterised by growing global trade, tourism and, hence, the growing importance of branding, pure environments and green energy have become what we might, with inspiration from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, call image capital. A country’s image is a superbrand that rests largely on stereotypes. Although development is slow and not easily managed,<sup>39</sup> images or nation brands are subject to continuous negotiation.

Ísleifsson’s category of ‘the wealthy North’ is influencing the contemporary discourse of the far North as a place of great natural riches such as fish and energy. In addition, this notion seems to be impacting on current hopes connected to the possible riches of the Arctic underground.<sup>40</sup> The image of the wealthy and utopian North upholding the frail balance of the eco-system is a valuable reference point in Icelandic communication strategies aimed at claiming a place in the Arctic and attracting tourists. The Icelandic Government’s stated ambition of being a leading power in the Arctic region is an example of the efforts to make use of the region as a spatial framework for geopolitical positioning. As formulated by the geographers Baldwin, Cameron and Kobayashi: “the North draws together cultural value and identity to produce a metaphor of imperial grandeur, innocence and sovereignty.”<sup>41</sup> In 2007, the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs published a report from the conference *Breaking the Ice*. The front cover illustration alone, showing a Viking vessel transporting a group of Vikings

<sup>37</sup> Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” 13.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, “The Construction of Nature and the Nature of Construction: Analytical and Political Tools for Building Survivable Futures,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, ed. Braun and Castree (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge 1998), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Anholt, “Place Image as a Normative Construct; and Some New Ethical Considerations for the Field,” in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no.3 (2010): 177–181.

<sup>40</sup> Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” 18.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Baldwin, Laura Cameron and Audrey Kobayashi, “Introduction. Where is the Great White North? Spatializing History, Historizing Whiteness,” in *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness in Canada*, ed. Baldwin, Cameron and Kobayashi (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 2.



with raised weapons, reveals intertextual depths. This image evokes the Icelandic cultural narratives of *útrás* and *landnám*—expansion and conquest—by depicting Icelanders as active agents in the oceanic space that ties the region together. The Viking as symbol of Icelandic involvement is linked with the stereotype of the original North.

In 2005, President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson was one of the advocates of an explanation based on ethnicity for the apparently inexplicable Icelandic economic success story: “This [the heritage of discovery and exploration] is a tradition that gives honour to those who venture into unknown lands, who dare to journey to foreign fields, interpreting modern business ventures as an extension of the Viking spirit, applauding the successful entrepreneurs as heirs of this proud tradition.”<sup>42</sup> The President emphasised its strategic use: “Admiration for creative people has been transplanted from ancient times into the new global age, and originality has turned out to be a decisive resource in the global market.”<sup>43</sup> It is clear the magic didn’t last; but, in hindsight, this narrative carried the business venture astoundingly far. The stereotypes are strong and, even after the collapse, such old ideas about Iceland have been used to rebuild trust in the national brand.

The Frankfurt Book Fair in 2011 at which Iceland was guest of honour was used as a platform for negotiating Iceland’s image, as expressed on the official website for *Sagenhaftes Island*: “After the collapse of the Icelandic banking system, the Book Fair may make an important contribution to promoting a new image of Iceland.”<sup>44</sup> The Icelandic strategy played on the dynamic between two dominant interpretations of Icelandic nature in European accounts as pointed out by, for example, Oslund: exotification and identification.<sup>45</sup> The crisis had created an enforced incentive to communicate a positive and recognizable image. In Frankfurt, as is also the case in the tourism industry, external projections and exotification were promoted as self-image, carrying undertones of hyper-Nordic exceptionalism, and used strategically in a sales context. In general, the representations draw on the ancient tradition in European culture of viewing Iceland as a place associated with myths, saga literature and explosive forces of nature. One example is the logo of *Sagenhaftes Island*, showing a book merged with a waterfall. The association of Icelandic art with forces of nature reflects old vitalist notions of Iceland that are taken into favour and instrumentalised.<sup>46</sup> As often before, Iceland ends on the edge of the familiar as an alternative space. This strategy is familiar in Icelandic tourism campaigns aimed at foreign travellers. On the Tourist Board’s website at the time, there were several examples of Iceland being depicted as a heterotopian contrast to civilisation.<sup>47</sup> One example from the *New York Times* was the image of tourists in a glacial landscape shrouded in fog with the caption: “It’s an unearthly paradise in Iceland.” Here, the country is not only placed chronologically as a (pre-civilized) paradise but also as remote from

<sup>42</sup> Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson 2005, accessed 23 March 2014, <http://www.forseti.is/media/files/05.05.03.walbrook.club.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Grímsson 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Frankfurt Book Fair. “Fabulous Iceland,” accessed 8 January 2012, <http://www.sagenhaftes-island.is/en/iceland-in-frankfurt/statement/>.

<sup>45</sup> Karen Oslund, “The North Begins Inside,” 93.

<sup>46</sup> For further reading, see Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Jøklers Storm svalde den kulturtrætte Danmarks Pande. Um fyrstu viðtökur dansk-íslenskra bókmennta í Danmörku,” *Skírni*, Spring (2001).

<sup>47</sup> [www.icelandictouristboard.com](http://www.icelandictouristboard.com).

the world we know, by being “unearthly.” Today, the website has not moved far away from this image in its description of Iceland as “pure, unpolluted and truly magical.”<sup>48</sup> The notions of the original and utopian North may have drawn attention away from the aggressive Viking discourse, but it is clear that the image promoted of Iceland in Frankfurt as a place of strong forces of nature and otherness was hardly new.<sup>49</sup>

Before the collapse, the Icelandic Government had devised an official strategy for the management of Iceland’s image. The report *Iceland’s Image—Strength, Position and Policy* (*Ímynd Íslands— styrkur, staða og stefna*) (2008) was initiated by the Office of the Prime Minister in 2007 and refers to *Iceland Naturally*, the existing brand strategy for food producers and the tourism industry, which was launched in the United States in 1999 and in Europe in 2006.<sup>50</sup> Recurring themes in this strategy, which is also supported by The Iceland Travel Industry Association (SAF), are repeated in the report from 2008: purity, sustainability, nature and the unspoiled.<sup>51</sup> In an article about the strategy, the geographer Edward H. Huijbens points to the insensitivity of branding policies towards the heterogeneity of any place, nation and culture.<sup>52</sup> The 2008 report presents what is called “Kjarni Íslands” (English: the Icelandic core) as being centred on *power, freedom and peace*. The key theme of *power* is explicitly linked with the purity of nature in a way that is unsurprising: “Icelandic nature is uniquely powerful, and its purity is one of the most important aspects of Iceland’s image.”<sup>53</sup> This view was already dominant in the image strategy *Iceland Naturally*: “It [ice] represents the source of our pure water and symbolizes the purity of all Icelandic products. Indeed, nature is our brand and Iceland is dedicated to preserving this natural wealth through responsible conservation.”<sup>54</sup> With a website characterised by a strong focus on purity, *Iceland Naturally* conveys a message that differs from the new governmental statement about environmental issues: “The government will, as far as possible promote the utilisation of potential oil and gas deposits to begin as soon as possible, if they are found in extractable quantities.”<sup>55</sup> Both statements, however, place nature in a value system centred on economic profit and brand value and, together, the statements are parts of the discourse about extracting natural resources in a way that promotes an image of a pure energy industry.

<sup>48</sup> “Visit Iceland,” accessed 12 April 2014, [www.visiticeland.com/DiscoverIceland](http://www.visiticeland.com/DiscoverIceland).

<sup>49</sup> For a further elaboration, see Ann-Sofie Gremaud, “Iceland as Center and Periphery. Post-colonial and Crypto-colonial Perspectives.”

<sup>50</sup> Edward H. Huijbens, “Nation-Branding: A Critical Evaluation. Assessing the Image Building of Iceland,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði Ísleifsson and Daniel Chartier (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 553-582.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Branding Report, accessed 11 October 2013, [http://www.ferdamalastofa.is/static/files/upload/files/200848103017imynd\\_islands.pdf](http://www.ferdamalastofa.is/static/files/upload/files/200848103017imynd_islands.pdf), 25-26.

<sup>52</sup> See Huijbens, “Nation-Branding: A Critical Evaluation. Assessing the Image Building of Iceland,” 553.

<sup>53</sup> Branding Report (ímynd Íslands), 25: “Íslensk náttúra er einstaklega kraftmikil og hreinleiki hennar er einn mikilvægasti þátturinn í ímynd landsins.”

<sup>54</sup> “Iceland Naturally,” accessed 22 May 2013, <http://www.icelandnaturally.com/nature>.

<sup>55</sup> Stefnyfirlýsing ríkisstjórnar Framsóknarflokksins og Sjálfstæðisflokksins (governmental statement): “Ríkisstjórnin mun eins og kostur er stuðla að því að nýting hugsanlegra olíu- og gasauðlinda geti hafist sem fyrst, finnist þær í vinnanlegu magni,” (my translation).

These associations with purity, drawing on cultural narratives of the utopian and wealthy North, are not only used in image management for which environmental concerns can help build goodwill and brand value. The 2008 report also suggested initiatives to strengthen internal consensus: "It has to be a collective task of the nation to protect the image and bring forward the right message."<sup>56</sup> Huijbens mentions that a suggestion was made to engage artists in producing positive stories<sup>57</sup> in a manner that would position the artworks as illustrations in a marketing strategy. The ambition to promote a homogenous image in a unified voice that ties people and nature together was met with criticism from Icelandic historians, who claimed that the image is based on a forged nationalist and politicised history<sup>58</sup> that promotes a romanticised idea of the relationship between nature and humans. Huijbens concludes that "[p]ower and purity are suffusing landscape myths, transposed onto the inhabitants"<sup>59</sup> and that "a promoted brand can, at best, give insight into tension between socio-cultural reality and those ordering the brand."<sup>60</sup> He argues for a deconstruction of historical and landscape myths that are used to promote pure energy under false pretences and an active neglect of hardship and suffering. Huijbens presents a two-level critique of the nation-branding strategy. The first level of his critique is aimed at the attempt to dictate and homogenise national narratives. The second level is a deconstruction of historical and landscape myths that are based on neo-environmental determinism.

The role of art in this context is complex. The ambition of promoting and including art as a value in the experience economy, as expressed in *Iceland Naturally*, and the promotion of art as a natural force at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2011, are examples of a strong tendency to use art to support official discourses on environment and culture.<sup>61</sup> In an article that is critical of the commodification of art, the anthropologist Tinna Gretarsdottir and the architect Hulda Sverrisdottir argue for reclaiming art as representative of the critical national collective.<sup>62</sup> The authors point out the danger of the tendency to defend art on the terms of the market economy<sup>63</sup> and extend their critique to the artists themselves: "In their tumultuous dealings with the system, artists often consider themselves outsiders, thus failing to fully embrace, understand or advocate the quality and depth of their relevance to societal discourse"<sup>64</sup> — a conclusion that is of great relevance to environmentalism.

### Harmless Energy and Dirty Images

Official attitudes toward purity and the use of natural resources are expressed in the promotional material of the primary utility company, Orkuveita Reykjavíkur, which is owned

<sup>56</sup> Branding Report (ímynd Íslands), 14: "Það á að vera sameiginlegt verkefni allrar þjóðarinnar að standa vörð um ímynd landsins og koma réttum skilaboðum á framfæri," (my translation).

<sup>57</sup> Huijbens, "Nation-Branding: A Critical Evaluation. Assessing the Image Building of Iceland," 564.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 575.

<sup>61</sup> See Ann-Sofie Gremaud, "Ísland sem rými annarleikans. Myndir frá Bókasýningunni í Frankfurt árið 2011 í ljósi kenninga um dul-lendur og heterótópíur," *Ritið* 1 (2012): 7-29.

<sup>62</sup> Tinna Gretarsdottir and Hulda Sverrisdottir, "(I)ndependence and a State of the Art: The Agonism of Collaboration," in *In Dependence* (2013), 98.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

by the City of Reykjavík and two other municipalities. The promotion video *Pure Energy* (in Icelandic: *Hrein orka*) shows Icelandic nature represented by glacial ice and a waterfall—recognisable symbols of pure water. In a graphical chart, 75 percent of the country's energy is categorised as “pure” and 25 per cent as “foreign.” The concluding scenes of the video, which show Chinese businessmen visiting Orkuveita Reykjavíkur, underpin Iceland's privileged position as a voice-over highlights Icelandic knowledge of pure energy.<sup>65</sup> Another video on the website is *The Environment* (Icelandic: *Umhverfið*), which presents the company's environmental policy.<sup>66</sup> The viewer flies over Icelandic landscapes and, thus, sees the Orkuveita Reykjavíkur buildings from a bird's eye view. The video cuts between images of pipelines and office buildings, which appear tiny in the vast landscape, and close-up images of rivers, birds, flowers and a glass of drinking water. The voice-over concludes, “Orkuveita in Reykjavik has placed environmental issues as a top priority. The company works with determination to increase the use of green energy. Especially in areas where fuel is used today.”<sup>67</sup> This message differs from the explicitly anthropocentric message of the governmental statement and follows the same path as *Iceland Naturally* in forming a trinity of purity, (harmless) energy production and the national image.<sup>68</sup>

Although Gretarsdóttir and Sverrisdóttir rightly point to problems in the structures framing artistic practice, there are examples of artworks from the past ten years that are critical of and, in some cases, suggest alternatives to, the official value system. In this sense, art not only represents a value that can be interpreted in various frameworks, it also suggests values, in many cases, that constitute a powerful potential in a time of controversy about environmental strategies. One Icelandic artist who has presented works critical of the dominant corporate narratives and, thus, offers at least a first-level critique (according to Huijbens' definition) is Rúrí (b. 1951). Several of her works are in dialogue with the representations of water usage in Iceland as seen in the Orkuveita Reykjavíkur material. Media installations such as *Archive Endangered Waters* (2003) and the series *Elimination II* (2006) show photos of Icelandic waterfalls that have been affected or eliminated as a result of dam building. These works combine the archival methodology of documentation and file storage with the emotional aspect of mourning lost places. In a sense, they propose a transcendence of the modern opposition of emotion and reason that is criticised in Stephens' new ontology of nature.<sup>69</sup> In *Elimination II*, the waterfalls are depicted in an anthropomorphic representation evoking the memorial walls for victims of atrocities. This approach represents a radically different form of anthropomorphism to that of Baconian philosophy, where nature is conceptualised as a

<sup>65</sup> Orkuveita, “Electricity,” accessed 16 May 2013, <http://fraedsla.or.is/Raforka/Hreinorka/>.

<sup>66</sup> Orkuveita, “Environment,” accessed 16 May 2013, <http://fraedsla.or.is/Umhverfid/>.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, “Orkuveita Reykjavíkur hefur sett umhverfismál í öndvegi. Orkuveitan vinnur markvisst að aukinni notkun af vistvæna orku. Ekki sist á sviðum þar sem eldsneyt er brennt í dag.”

<sup>68</sup> In his article “Icelandic Road Map to a Clean Energy Future” (2008), the President also framed Iceland as a country leading the way for developing countries: “I am also convinced that our experience in harnessing our natural resources in an intelligent way provides important lessons for many developing countries,” <http://www.iceida.is/english/about-iceida/news/nr/2225>, accessed 1 April 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Stephens, “Nature, Purity, Ontology,” 274

harlot.<sup>70</sup> The Icelandic artist Ósk Vilhjálmsdóttir (b. 1962) also produces eco-critical artworks that have served as input for general discussions about environmental policies. The mural *Scheissland* (2005) addresses the messy reality of the country's most controversial hydropower plant, Kárahnjúkar, and the idealisation of pure Icelandic nature. The mural, which was exhibited in Germany, consisted of a sarcastic text in German in which *Scheisse* (English: *filth/shit*) was used as prefix to many of the words associated with positive nation-branding and the promotion of Iceland as an environmental haven. Thus, the work poses a pungent critique of the message conveyed by official strategies and points to the concrete disruption of pristine nature with a text that is loaded with filth. Vilhjálmsdóttir challenges the image of hydropower as environmentally friendly and clean while also sending the unpopular message that the idea of the utopian North is not an innocent fantasy.

The company Landsvirkjun, which owns Kárahnjúkar, is owned by the Icelandic state. There are two images of power plants on the company's website. The first image is small<sup>71</sup> and shows the site as seen from above and integrated into the mossy landscape. The second image shows a colourful indoor shot of the construction. The Alcoa aluminium smelter is supplied with energy from Kárahnjúkar and promotes the notion of pure energy in Iceland: "Designed to comply with Iceland's stringent environmental standards, Fjarðaál uses advanced technologies and processes to set new standards for sustainable aluminium production in a clean-air, clean-water environment. ... Process materials are managed so as to minimize impact on Iceland's fragile and pristine ecosystem."<sup>72</sup> The official imagery and slogans promote an image of purity and sustainability. On Alcoa's Icelandic website, pictures of reindeer, blue skies, snow-covered mountains and fjords are on all six tabs related to environmental issues, thus avoiding any direct or indirect references to the many images circulated by artists and activists of the flooding of the Fljótsdalur area.

Several artworks have addressed issues concerning the energy and aluminium industry. The sculpture *The Great Auk* (1998) by the Icelandic artist Ólöf Nordal can be interpreted as a monument of infamy to economic speculation in natural resources and specifically to the sacrifice of the now extinct bird, the great auk. The last two great auks were killed in Iceland in 1844 to be stuffed and sold. They were brought back in 1971 after a national collection to provide the money needed. The sculpture can be interpreted as a comment on the danger that immediate economic interests and multinational industries can pose to the flora and fauna of the far North. The fact that the sculpture is made of aluminium is, thus, a tacit criticism of the utilitarian attitude towards the environment and a reference to the aluminium industry that has had a significant impact on the Icelandic landscape. Making the bird reappear in aluminium raises questions about sustainable resource extraction and the value system that enabled the sale of the last great auk.

<sup>70</sup> Stephens, "Nature, Purity, Ontology," 274.

<sup>71</sup> "Landsvirkjun," accessed 21 May 2013,

<http://www.landsvirkjun.com/Company/PowerStations/FljotsdalurPowerStation/>

<sup>72</sup> "Alcoa," accessed 30 July 2013, [http://www.alcoa.com/locations/iceland\\_reydarfjordur/en/home.asp](http://www.alcoa.com/locations/iceland_reydarfjordur/en/home.asp).



**Figure 1** *Geirfugl / Great Auk*, sculpture in aluminium by Ólöf Nordal 1998.  
(Photo: © Vigfús Birgisson, published with kind permission of Ólöf Nordal).

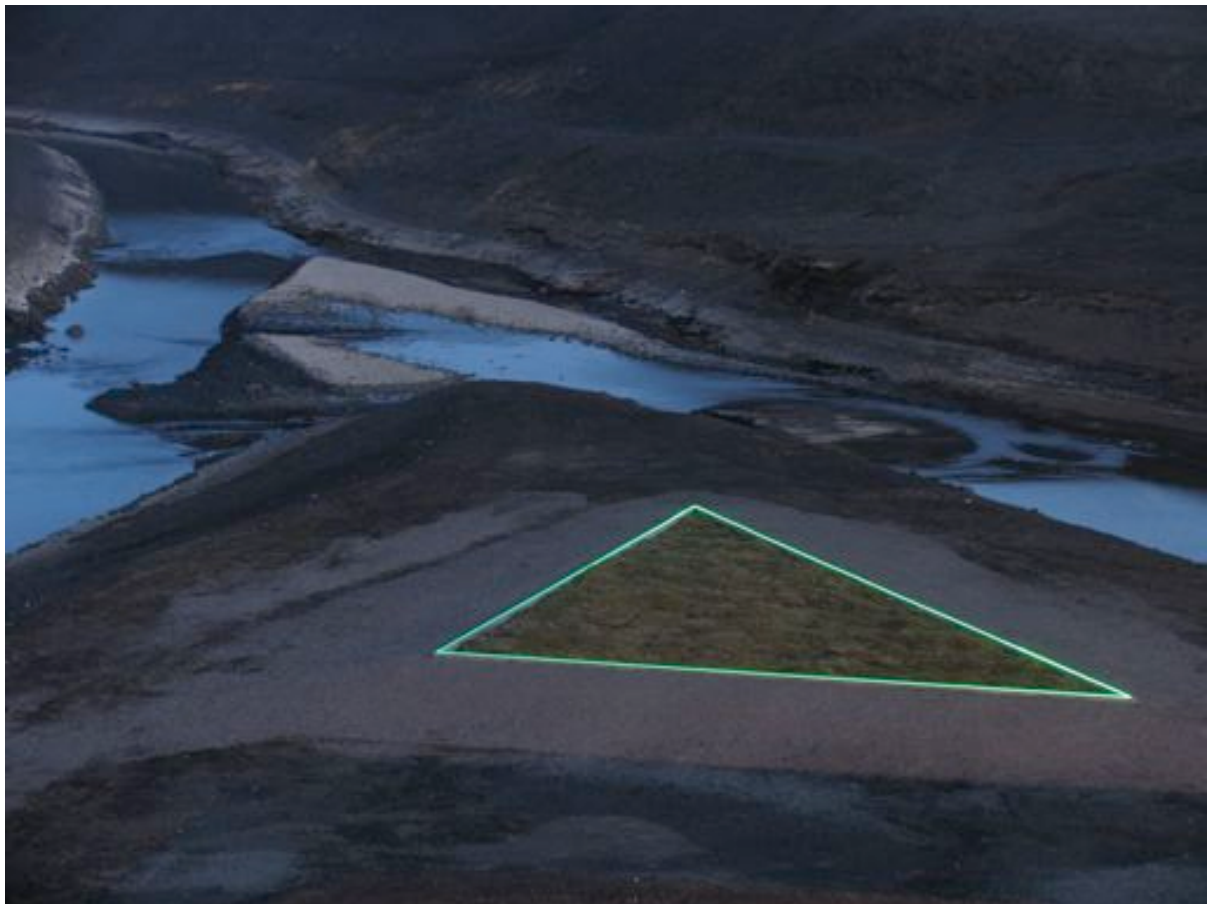
The Icelandic artist and politician Hlynur Hallsson (b. 1968) also produces artworks that challenge industrial narratives of purity. In contrast to Alcoa's promoted brand as an environmentally friendly corporation, his artwork *Drulla-Scheisse-Mud* (2007), a mural in the town of Akureyri, reads: "Takk fyrir allt álid/vielen dank für das ganze aluminium/thanks for all the aluminium." The piece is similar to Vilhjálmssdóttir's work—and, to some degree, Nordal's—in its association of the aluminium industry with sludge (Icelandic: *drulla*) or mud, characterising it as a dirty industry using the medium of the mural—a popular means of expressing resistance and discontent.<sup>73</sup> Hallsson's work became a part of the public space at the height of the Icelandic spending spree and, with its ironic tone, it mocks Iceland's role as host country for the industry. In his art, Hallsson does the opposite of what the government called for from Icelandic artists in the previously mentioned report and insists on letting art partake in first- and second-level critiques. The art installation *Hello Akureyri* (2004) by the Icelandic artist Anna Línadal (b. 1957) includes the video *In the Backyard* (2003) displayed on a large screen and showing the construction work at Karahnjúkar accompanied by loud machinery noise. A camper with her back to the scenery is absorbed in listening to the radio, reading and eating. The site forms a little world of consumption cut off from the landscape that surrounds it, thus aptly symbolising the barrier between the (agendas of the) private sphere and

<sup>73</sup> The threefold title in Icelandic (the national language), German (a central European language), and the global language of English is typical of Hallsson's work. Often, the three statements are not in agreement, which may spark thoughts about internal differences and inconsistencies in, for example, environmental policies.



the changing environment. The work is a comment on responsibility in the debate about environmental policies. It also illustrates the selective approach to what constitutes nature for different agents: the individual seeking a holiday experience, the nation, the energy industry, and the tourist industry.

The artists group Icelandic Love Corporation (ILC) did a project the following year entitled *Mother Earth* (2005), which incorporated the hydroelectric power station of Vatnsfell run by Landsvirkjun. The group's land art is documented in a series of photos showing their construction of a large 'play' button on the ground. The button glows in the dark by virtue of the electric energy supplied by nature and transformed by the power station, thus providing the green field inside with the conditions for thriving. The work illustrates Stephens' thesis of hybrid forms of culture-nature with a focus on broadening the contextual perspective of human creation. The anthropomorphisation of nature in the title adds a twofold reference to the artistic statement: a reference to nature as an active partner in human endeavours and a reference to a pre-modern attitude to nature that highlights the condition of human subjection to the vagaries of nature. In this way, the work refers to the geographic level of the planet but shifts its focus away from the importance of human actions and positions forces of nature at the heart of human achievements.



**Figure 2** *Mother Earth*. Landart by the Icelandic Love Corporation (ILC), 2005.  
(Photo: © ILC, published with the kind permission of the artists).

Hallsson, Nordal and Vilhjálmsdóttir<sup>74</sup> present a first- and second-level critique of the narratives of purity that place nature in a value system based on utilisation. By placing nature at the heart of human creativity, ILC point to hybrid features of these categories. The group has also contributed a representation of the role of the far North as dreamscape. The artwork *Dynasty* (2007) (video and photographs) shows a performance taking place near the triangular space of *Mother Earth*. The video features three women dressed in furs and jewellery carrying out various activities in the snowy landscape, including hunting, fishing and guitar playing. Here, the far North becomes a place for imagining a future without electricity and an engagement with nature that is reminiscent of a primitive camping holiday. This is a kind of tourism determined by climate change, which also marks the end of excessive material luxury, symbolised by the women burying their jewellery and mobile phones. With a thoughtful mixture of humour and earnestness, ILC envision a future world in which the Nordic landscape has become an exclusively refreshing location.

The far North is a dreamscape for negotiations of planetary and national issues, but the main framework for the concepts of nature in official Icelandic discourse remains focused on utilisation.<sup>75</sup> With this in mind, I humbly question Næss' conclusion in his theory of deep ecology that the nation-state is the best platform for environmental responsibility,<sup>76</sup> as economic interest in the utility of nature is closely linked with the competition of nation-states in the international market. In a government statement issued at the beginning of the term,<sup>77</sup> environmental concerns are addressed in the chapter on the national environmental policy; here, it is concluded that environmental protection and utilisation are two sides of the same coin.<sup>78</sup> In the final chapter, the issue of sustainability in the utilisation of natural resources is mentioned with reference to the international community.<sup>79</sup> Such a distinction: that resources appear to be national, while environmental responsibility is seen as an international issue, was also reflected in a statement by the Prime Minister Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson about the implicit opportunities of global warming: "There is a lack of water; energy becomes more expensive; there is a lack of land; so, it is assumed that food prices will go up in the foreseeable future, while there is an increasing need for food production because demand is increasing. So, there are unquestionably great opportunities for Iceland. We are looking into this."<sup>80</sup> From a global or planetary point of view, there are ethical problems in the opportunism

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<sup>74</sup> Many readers will think of the numerous other artists I could have included here—not to mention writers.

<sup>75</sup> The same view was implicitly expressed when the government (2013-) decided to appoint the same person Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources and for Fisheries and Agriculture (part of the Ministry of Industries and Innovation). This means that the minister has to reconcile what might be viewed as conflicting interests.

<sup>76</sup> Arne Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," 98.

<sup>77</sup> Stefnyufirlýsing ríkisstjórnar Framsóknarflokksins og Sjálfstæðisflokksins, (governmental statement).

<sup>78</sup> Stefnyufirlýsing ríkisstjórnar Framsóknarflokksins og Sjálfstæðisflokksins, (governmental statement).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> "Það skortir vatn, orkan verður dýrari, það skortir landrymi, þannig að menn gera ráð fyrir því að matvælavæð muni fara hækkandi um fjórsjónlega framtíð á sama tíma og það er sífellt meiri þörf fyrir matvælaframleiðslu vegna þess að eftirspurning er að aukast. Þannig að í þessu liggja tvímælalaust



expressed here that overshadow any glimpse of optimism. Thus, business opportunity is identified on the basis of a strictly national and economic outlook that politicians rarely express openly.

### Art between Deep Ecology and *Nature-Vandalism*

There is a leitmotif running through landscape depictions: images of nature without any apparent human life or influence. The untouched wilderness has been a favoured motif associated with national pride and sentiment for at least 150 years, linking ideas of pure nature with the national, as reflected, for example, in the Orkuveita Reykjavíkur video. Icelandic art, media and political statements promote images of pure nature, and the destruction or pollution of wild nature is widely condemned—in principle, at least. However, one can observe varying definitions of destruction. The artworks above have shown a more or less unanimous view of the hydroelectric and aluminium industries as examples of primary destroyers of wild Icelandic nature. Icelandic artists have been calling attention to the destructive aspects of a proprietary attitude towards the environment. In some cases, the landscapes depicted have been anthropomorphised to clarify the tragedy of the destruction and to evoke empathy. That is the case in Ruri's *Elimination II* and the pictures from Vilhjálmsdóttir's *Karahnjúkar Project* (2002-2006) in which she kisses a large face-shaped rock goodbye before the valley is flooded by a dam. ILC, on the other hand, show a complex partnership and emphasise the agency of natural forces in their anthropomorphised *Mother Earth*. However, a recent incident ignited a debate in Icelandic media about artistic practice and, specifically, land art as a destruction of nature.

The debated works are attributed to German artist Julius von Bismarck (b.1983), who has exhibited photos of the artworks, although their origin has not been conclusively determined. Bismarck photographically documented a number of natural sites in Iceland in which words such as 'crater' and 'lava' are sprayed on the ground. The aesthetic mode of the works is known from land art—a movement that was strong in the 1960s and '70s with Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) and Robert Smithson (1938-73) as leading figures. Land art is site-specific and generally highlights the relationship between nature and human creativity in a manner that supports Stephens' idea of spectrum rather than a binary understanding. The works often focus on the role of perception and concept formation as the basis of our ideological orientation in the world. In an article on the artworks in the newspaper *Akureyri Vikublað* from June 2013, artwork is written with quotation marks ("In this 'artwork'..."),<sup>81</sup> which marks a disassociation from the work and a sense of scepticism in relation to its status as art. The text continues, "Here the moss has been attacked by the art."<sup>82</sup> The phenomena are described as nature vandalism (Icelandic: *náttúruspjöll*), and the creator as *níðingur*—a villain.

A discourse of nature terrorism (Icelandic: *náttúruterrorismi*) is also introduced in a reference to a statement by The Environment Agency of Iceland.<sup>83</sup> The online newspaper *Visir*

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mikil tækifæri fyrir Ísland. Við erum að kortleggja þetta," (my translation), the Prime Minister on climate change, accessed 6 April 2014, [www.ruv.is/frett/breytingarnar-skapi-taekifaeri-fyrir-island](http://www.ruv.is/frett/breytingarnar-skapi-taekifaeri-fyrir-island).

<sup>81</sup> *Akureyri vikublad*, "Natturunidingur Fundinn," (Icelandic: "Á þessu 'listaverki'...")

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, "Hér hefur mosinn orðið fyrir barðinu á listinni," (my translation).

<sup>83</sup> *Visir*, "Telur sig hafa fundid natturunidinginn," accessed 6 June 2013, <http://www.visir.is/telur-sig-hafa-fundid-natturunidinginn/article/2013130609490>.

featured an edited version of the *Akureyri Vikublað* article on 6 June 2013<sup>84</sup> featuring a large montage in which one of the works is merged with a photo of Bismarck wearing a dark hat and holding a camera as though it were a pistol. The criticism expresses respect for nature's inherent worth and a moral code that precludes this form of hybrid nature, marking the creative (if also illegal) mixed form as an unwanted version of nature. The question of underlying value systems is addressed on Facebook by the author and illustrator Thorarinn Leifsson in reference to criticism of the plans of the agrarian centre-right Progressive Party (Icelandic: *Framsóknarflokkurinn*) to build more power plants: "You voted B. I vote for Bismarck. Goodnight :)." <sup>85</sup> Here, B refers to the Progressive Party, which is currently in government in a coalition with the Independence Party. There is a tendency in the legal system<sup>86</sup> and, in most reactions expressed in the papers, to favour tampering with nature that serves an economic purpose. The *Akureyri Vikublað* highlights the costs (in time and money) involved in the clean up.<sup>87</sup> Another point of view from the art world proposed a criticism beyond the anthropocentric agenda: Hlynur Hallsson, who came across the images assigned to Bismarck at a gallery, refers to the works as vandalism but then compares the artistic vandalism to that of official initiatives: "I find that works that disrupt nature are not good; it does not matter whether it is done in the interest of art or alleged profitable activities."<sup>88</sup> This statement removes the focus of the matter from a question of art versus industry to the issue of defining *disruption*.

### A Battle of Images

As reflected in the material presented here, the political and cultural history of Iceland and the immediate region surrounding it have laid the foundation for two primary temporal axes at play in dominant national narratives: a vertical ethnocentric axis of originality and a horizontal axis related to progress. In the continued negotiation of the brands of national corporations and of the nation itself, these axes and stereotypical notions can be seen to affect discourses about natural resources and political dispositions. Only in very recent times have the dominant views about nature been increasingly influenced by Anthropocene theories, spurring an inevitable conflict about priorities and responsibility. In his theory of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough encourages the analyst to look for whether "the resolution of the problem entails a radical restructuring of the social order."<sup>89</sup> In Iceland, conflicts about the use of natural resources are primarily related to the national sphere; and, lately, it has been suggested that old structures from the time of Danish rule still influence the power structures, leading to nepotism

<sup>84</sup> Visir, "Telur sig hafa fundid nattuuninginn."

<sup>85</sup> Facebook, Thorarinn Leifsson, accessed 5 June 2013,

[https://www.facebook.com/totil?hc\\_location=stream](https://www.facebook.com/totil?hc_location=stream): "Þið kusuð B. Ég kys Bismarck. Góða nótt," (my translation).

<sup>86</sup> Altingi, "Law on Environmental Protection," accessed 21 September 2013,

<http://www.althingi.is/altxt/stjt/2013.060.html>, XII.69-71.

<sup>87</sup> *Akureyri vikublad*, "nattuuningur fundinn."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, "Mér finnst verk sem skemma náttúruna ekki góð, það skiptir mig ekki máli hvort það sé í þágu myndlistar eða meintrar gróðastarfsemi," (my translation).

<sup>89</sup> Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *How to Analyze Talk in Institutional Settings: A Casebook of Methods*, ed. Alec McHoul and Mark Raple (London/NY: Continuum, 2001), 33.

and public distrust.<sup>90</sup> Thus, further studies of these elements could be made, pursuing Fairclough's statement in an Icelandic context.

Global anxiety still leaks into the local agendas, and vice versa. Both at the national level and at the global level, Icelanders are faced with questions about sustainability and solutions for the future intensified by the crisis. This challenge has sparked at least two reactions, which, in simplified terms, are based on anthropocentric and eco-centric values, respectively. The clash of these value systems is reflected in the artworks, and the two agendas relate to geographical levels in different ways. In the landscape depictions, many artists depict national sites with a focus on an environmental and thus a planetary agenda. The official and corporate statements refer to natural resources, the Arctic and the environment; but, due to the underlying value system, the actual actions benefit the arena of national economy and multinational corporations. In 2006, at the height of the Icelandic investment adventure, Ósk Vilhjálmisdóttir published the following statement about Kárahnjúkar: "Vast areas of untouched nature—the last remaining wildernesses of Europe—was [sic] drowned September 2006. It was a sacrifice the government decided to make for the American aluminium smelter company, Alcoa ... The Icelandic government has defined the country as a heavy industry zone, a neo-colony for huge aluminium smelters."<sup>91</sup> Here, Vilhjálmisdóttir links her statement from the work *Scheissland* (2005) with a thesis about Iceland's economic and political position as a site for unsustainable exploitation of resources.

After months of discussion over budget cuts in art funding and the emergence of the discourse of "nature-terrorism," the then mayor of Reykjavík, Jón Gnarr, advocated for an alternative official Icelandic discourse via Facebook: "It [nationalism] is mostly grounded on a combination of ignorance and arrogance and it feels like xenophobia is growing and many people using terms like 'Icelandic national culture' and 'Pure Icelandic' something ... There is no 'purity' in our history, genetically or culturally. Nothing was invented here. (Fermenting fish is an Asian tradition). All our customs and traditions originate from Europe. The only thing you can say is truly Icelandic is the nature and the Icelandic Sagas. Nature and art. That's Iceland."<sup>92</sup> The statement taps into the value-based dispute over the utilitarian approach to nature combined with the promotion of ideas of pure, pristine nature in branding and nationalist discourse.<sup>93</sup> The statements and artworks clearly illustrate that purity is a relative concept that represents value in different value systems. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas points to how external pressure on the boundaries of cultural categories help shape the ever-changing ideas about purity within a culture: "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience."<sup>94</sup> Concordantly, art historian W.J.T. Mitchell famously stated that

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Íris Erlingsdóttir, "Changing Iceland's Culture," *Iceland Review* 47, no. 4 Winter (2009); Stefán Jón Hafstein, "Rányrkjubú," *Tímarit Máls og Menningar* 72, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>91</sup> Ósk Vilhjálmisdóttir, accessed 19 September 2013, <http://osk.this.is/page40/page31/page32/page32.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Jón Gnarr, 12 November 2013, accessed 12 November 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jón-Gnarr/244993732224805?fref=ts>.

<sup>93</sup> The tendency to favour tampering with nature that serves an economic purpose is also reflected in the legal system. See Altingi, "Environmental Protection Act."

<sup>94</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4.

landscape is “a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and a simulacrum.”<sup>95</sup> The analyses in this article support Mitchell’s statement and have sought to demonstrate that natural resources are not only physical. It is clear that corporations, the nation-branding taskforce and most artists have purity as a goal. The fundamental disagreement is about the ideal human action: expansion and utilisation versus restraint and long-term strategies. Gísli Pálsson’s appeal to transform syndromes of anxiety to cultures of sustainability<sup>96</sup> is not easily realisable as long as anxiety keeps society in a deadlock when it comes to ambitious environmental policies. But, unlike political discourse, art has the ability to linger on questions and to open unique spaces of subversive potential.

### Art as Laboratory

As has been the case since long before Thomas Cole’s monumental work was created, images reflect and help shape our cultural norms and values, and art is still a laboratory of environmental theory. Mitchell’s statement—as well as Stephen’s theory—also implies that representation and nature are not easily separated. In the Icelandic case, the result is an image of an ecological haven, which, in fact, pursues a policy of the ‘pseudo-pure’ based on an instrumental value system and, thus, in Næss’ terms, a shallow ecology. In his alternative ontology, Stephens states that the influence of capitalism (and, one might add, nationalism) on concepts of purity shifted the focus to immigrants and ‘non-native’ species as corrupting elements<sup>97</sup> rather than the “overweight businessman who keeps eating more than his equal share of the provisions.”<sup>98</sup> The motif from Cole’s artworks from the mid-1800s, the punishment of human pride and excess, as it is also known from the story about the Tower of Babel, was evoked in an Icelandic context by Ásmundur Ásmundsson (b.1971). His work *Into the Firmament* (2005), an installation of oil barrels and cement forming a tower, was briefly exhibited in public in 2005 at the peak of economic optimism in Iceland. The barrels, overflowing with cement, suggested that a limit had been reached. Ásmundsson’s installation does not propose what will be the consequence of the perceived hubris, but the symbolism with its allusions to the biblical story is ominous and judgemental in a manner similar to Cole’s.

In a context in which humans are most often imagined as consumers, it is not surprising that artists engage in criticism. Yet, while many artists work within the boundaries they criticise, as Sverrisdóttir and Erlingsdóttir have pointed out, some take additional steps in imagining alternatives. The artist Goddur (b. 1955), who has created works that refer to the land as a spiritual site, is engaged in the construction of ceremonial saunas—an activity that marks a turn towards a practice of Indigenous peoples worldwide. In the text *Veröld sem var* (English: *A Past*

<sup>95</sup> Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Pálsson, *et al.*, “Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities in Global Environmental Change Research,” in *Environmental Science & Policy* April (2013), 11.

<sup>97</sup> Also reflected in the law on environmental protection (Altingi, “Environmental Protection Act.”)

<sup>98</sup> Stephens, “Nature, Purity, Ontology,” 272. This criticism was humorously raised by ILC in their work *Invasion Expansion* (2005) in which businessmen are compared to the “unattractive and unyielding seagull.”

*World*), Goddur describes how nature was framed and used to support nationalism and its literary understanding of old symbols.<sup>99</sup> The search for cultural identity is linked with a non-exploitative and spiritual co-existence in Goddur's works, which favour a circular connection between nature, geography and culture as opposed to the ideal of optimisation inherent in industrialisation and the market economy. Thus, Goddur's *oeuvre* supports a practice that falls within the framework of Stephens' thesis of sustainable human creativity.

Stephens' ontological spectrum is not only reflected in artistic representations. Many official institutions promote optimistic representations of the integration of nature and society—also with regard to instrumentalisation and radical modification. In an economy that rewards images associated with the pristine through the cash flow of tourism and exports on the basis of brand value while also rewarding activities that alter increasingly large areas of wild nature, (official) Iceland benefits economically from its unique image. The powerful and widespread stereotypes of the North and the centuries-long tradition of associating Iceland with pristine wilderness have the potential to act as a smokescreen that hides exploitative practices. The crisis in Iceland is both the motor and the barrier for dealing with the Anthropocene condition, as it has been tempting to turn to the short-term solution of industrial build-up in the hopes of generating growth based on the utilisation of natural resources. Because of the unique cultural history of the Icelandic image, the build-up of these industries will presumably only be reduced if a new economic depression spurs the people to look to alternative value systems. Nationalism and continued nation building in Iceland<sup>100</sup> has upheld a teleology with the inherent goal of the sovereign nation-state as a persistent narrative in foreign and domestic politics. The shaping of nature through the optics of national culture creates the ideas of purity that Stephens, for various reasons, calls dangerous. When we leave nature/culture dualism, we can view Icelandic nature as the cultural product it is by virtue of the country's crypto-colonial position as a place for projections of fantasies about the original and utopian North. Through criticism of discourses of purity and the natural that are based on national economic goals and values, some artworks offer practices for moving beyond this framework that may open up broader understandings of nature liberated from notions of saleability. The language of visual art is subversive and politically potent because it comes close to the language of nation-branding and commercial narratives without being limited to the same goals. If the wish to pursue new directions and to live up to the slogans about pure nature and sustainable environmental policies grows stronger, art offers a space in which such new paths can be imagined.

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<sup>99</sup> Goddur, "Veröld sem var," accessed 13 February 2012, [http://www.goddur.com/?page\\_id=192](http://www.goddur.com/?page_id=192).

<sup>100</sup> See Eiríkur Bergmann, "Iceland: A Postimperial Sovereignty Project," in *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 1 (2014): 33–54, 36.

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