

About a Neighbourhood

The root of the problem has to do with technicism, specifically the acute emphasis on doing as much as possible in the shortest period of time in order to establish ourselves on the planet without paying any heed to various subjective and moral values. This extreme focus on utilising natural resources and speeding up production and consumption is a characteristic of modern society endangering our lives in the long run; and, what is worse, the whole construction frenzy destroys the value of the life we're living here and now.¹

This is an extract from the book *Umhverfing* by philosopher Páll Skúlason, which was published in 1998, ten years before the financial meltdown hit Iceland. In the autumn of 2008, in the middle of the crisis, photographer Pétur Thomsen stood in the hills of Ásfjall in the town of Hafnarfjörður photographing the products of the technicism addressed by Páll Skúlason above – a residential area rising from the ground with the velocity and vehemence of the last years of the economic boom, but still incomplete at the time of the crash. Today, the neighbourhood stands in the same place, only slightly changed. No less than during the solemn autumn of 2008, its existence and condition still pose urgent questions about Icelandic society. The photo series *Ásfjall* was made over a period of three years, from the spring of 2008 to the spring of 2011.

In the summer of 2008, the National Museum of Iceland commissioned a comprehensive photographic project that would shed light on contemporary society in Iceland. Pétur Thomsen was chosen from a group of applicants to work on the project *Ásfjall*, which he defined as follows:

Ásfjall in Hafnarfjörður is interesting for several reasons. For instance, it features one of the highest neighbourhoods with regard to altitude in the Greater Reykjavík Area, established neighbourhoods, recreational areas, protected areas, woods, and new neighbourhoods under construction. I will focus on this last point in this project. [...] What makes this area an interesting subject for a photographer is that it graphically portrays the situation in Icelandic society today, and the immense developments that took place all over the Reykjavík area during the past few years. A new neighbourhood is taking root in nature, right next to a nature reserve. But the downturn in the economy

¹ Páll Skúlason: *Umhverfing. Um siðfræði umhverfis og náttúru*. Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík, 1998, p. 95.

has slowed the development down. A lot of the property around there is now for sale, and many building foundations have been left untouched for some time.²

Thomsen's photographs of the Ásland neighbourhood and the Ásfjall area are a continuation of his former work, especially his series from Kárahnjúkar, *Imported Landscape* and *Umhverfing* (*Environmentalization*). In both of these series, Thomsen addresses the question of humankind's place in nature, and our way of transforming nature for our own purposes. Thomsen's art has a lot in common with Skúlason's philosophy, referred to above, and in his book, *Umhverfing*, Skúlason states that humankind's situation in nature is the result of our efforts to distinguish ourselves from nature. This distinction is most obvious in humankind's efforts to create surroundings that protect people from the forces of nature, thus making life safer and more successful.³ Whether humankind claims authority over nature to harness waterfalls and glacial rivers, or clears vegetation and bird life to build concrete blocks, its deeds always revolve, to some extent, around the will to shape nature in accordance to people's liking, to gain control over something that in fact stands beyond its authority, and to survive *in* and *with* nature, which inevitably shapes its life and existence.

According to the philosophical approach known as phenomenology, humankind's existence consists in the way in which we encounter reality. And reality – what is that other than everything that lives inside us on the one hand, and everything that is outside us on the other? The Danish philosopher Dan Zahavi describes it thus: “The subject is unthinkable without relations with the world, and we can only lend meaning to the world to the extent that it appears to the subject and the way in which it makes sense of the world.”⁴ In keeping with the spirit of phenomenology, Páll Skúlason defines nature as everything that is not created by human consciousness and points out that the only way for humans as conscious beings to discover themselves as creative individuals is to take on the independent reality that nature is which they, however, can never fully control. The subjective being sees nature as a creative force that he or she longs to harness (to conquer the fear it instigates in us, and the danger we sense from it) while simultaneously

² Pétur Thomsen's application to the National Museum of Iceland, dated 13. June 2008.

³ Páll Skúlason: *Umhverfing*, p. 35.

⁴ Dan Zahavi: *Fyrirbærafraði*. Björn Þorsteinsson transl. Heimspekistofnun – Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík, 2008, p. 20

realizing that it is only because she can define herself as separate from nature that she can define herself as an creative individual. This is where creation lies; the impulse that among other things instigates in us the need to shape and create an environment, to transform the existing surroundings to suit our needs. But in creation, there is also the possibility of our own destruction. Destruction is in the material itself, both in nature that stands outside of the consciousness of the individual and in nature that is a part of the individual, and in the creative gestures that he or she performs. Herein lies the contradiction that Thomsen's work reflects so well. In his series from Kárahnjúkar this contradiction is both striking and decisive, but in the series *Umhverfing* and *Ásfjall* it subtly and stealthily sneaks into the viewer's consciousness.

We look at a concrete skeleton of a house; a thick and massive form resting on cold ground, almost like it's growing out of the rocky façade. The building seems to be simultaneously independent of time yet a spawn of the time from which it sprung, a symbol of the crash. Reality seems to hold its breath. There is neither past nor future here, just a moment that seems to have been ripped out of the fabric of time. Monday 6 October 2008 and the prime minister articulates "God bless Iceland". We look into a concrete skeleton and stare into the void, hear our footsteps echo as we step inside. What kind of place is this? Who was supposed to live here? Who was supposed to live in all these houses that rose in the hills of Ásfjall, in all these houses rising on vacant land in Reykjavík, Hafnarfjörður, Garðabær, Kópavogur, changing nature into environment at great speed? Did the inhabitants of the Greater Reykjavík Area need housing? What were they after?

The planning terms for the Ásland neighbourhood state:

The area lies in the hills of Ásfjall, between Kaldárselsvegur and a nature reserve. The nature reserve offers residents in this area a unique opportunity for outdoor activities. Within the boundaries lies a protected area around Ástjörn, according to Act No. 93/1996. It is a unique ecosystem in close proximity to an inhabited area, and it is also the only annual nesting site of the horned grebe in South West Iceland. [...] The area offers beautiful views to the north over Hafnarfjörður, Faxaflói and nearby neighbourhoods to the east and south. In the background, Mt Esja rises to the east,

while the mountains Búrfell and Helgafell can be seen in the foreground against a backdrop of a circle of more distant mountains...⁵

It's obvious that coincidence didn't determine where it was built. The relatively untouched nature and the existing surroundings in the area were very attractive to residents who wanted to create a suitable environment in tandem with the trends that were fashionable in society, and who at the same time wanted to enjoy all the best that Icelandic nature and the landscape had to offer. Whether the houses were drawn by architects with the needs of each and every family in mind, or mass produced on the drawing boards of engineers, they were intended to create a confined space for the residents where they could live safe from the forces of nature. There, they would have been able to take in the beauty of the mountains and the vegetation without soiling their shoes or suffering the harsh winds. I think back to the words of Páll Skúlason: "To sum up, humankind's status in nature seems to entail distinguishing ourselves from nature by creating environment that is supposed to protect us from its forces and make our lives safer and more successful."⁶ It was in fact the *possibility* of popping out for a walk, getting close to nature (and watching the dance of the horned grebe) without much effort that attracted many to the area and made it a popular place to live in the mind of the planning authorities.



⁵ Ásland, *Hafnarfirði. 3. Áfangi*. Deiliskipulagsskilmálar 02.05.2006. Útgáfa 0.1. Umhverfis- og tæknisvið Hafnarfjarðar p. 4.

⁶ Páll Skúlason: *Umhverfing*, p. 35.

Ásfjall is no longer a popular place for those who want to get in touch with nature. Traces of humans are everywhere. These *traces* are what Thomsen has sought to capture. His photographs have caught the transformation that has taken place when nature becomes an environment. Environment in this sense is defined as “a product of human creation that takes place when they try to change natural conditions and adapt them to their needs.”⁷ Thomsen’s photographs show us this environmentalization. They are however not only about this transformation but also about the society that has been developing over the past years, and the affect of time.

The photographs in the Ásfjall series are not only symbolic for the financial crash but also for the standstill that has taken hold in Icelandic society. It is as if the environment is holding its breath, waiting for industrious Icelanders to show up with bulldozers and concrete mixers, or waiting for nature to react with unexpected and unforeseen consequences. The environment is waiting for what lies ahead. It hardly seems to breathe. But still. If you look closely there are signs of life. In this systematic environment, one can sense a chaos; a painted, yellow piece of wood is out of step with the surroundings, a forlorn Christmas tree is blown about like tumbleweed, a red folder sits in a window. The colours and details play a significant role in Thomsen’s photographs. The photographs are grey; time and again we see the grey walls of buildings against a grey sky, but all this greyness is interrupted by objects in the surroundings, bringing colour.

Thomsen’s photographs from Ásfjall are very characteristic of his artistic work. The frame depicts how the systematic wrestles with chaos, how the manmade environment formed with mathematical precision wrestles with nature that is inherently chaotic. This conflict between the systematic and the chaotic has been distinctive in Thomsen’s work for a long time, and here, in this series, it is even more obvious. The aesthetics of his photographs lie in the conflict between the internal and the external, between what sizzles beneath and that which appears on the surface.

⁷ Páll Skúlason: *Umhverfing*, p. 35.



An aesthetic experience is not limited to experiencing the surface properties of a work of art, but also in how the viewer experiences and embraces what is laid out in art.⁸ The aesthetics are therefore inherent not only in the visual but also in the ideological and emotional reactions that the work evokes. Thomsen's work appeals to the viewer not only in a visual way; it doesn't move you just because of the ideas and situations with which it works with, but must also be seen as a whole, an outline around reality that the viewer meets in different arenas simultaneously; the visual, the ideological, and the emotional.

The man who walks between houses under construction, climbing over wood and rubble with the cold northern gales blowing in his face, even though it's early May, might have a sense of emptiness, perhaps even hopelessness, but also of wonder over his own work. He realises what he's capable of. And when he's standing at the very edge of the neighbourhood taking in the landscape spread out before him, hearing children's voices from afar and his own breathing, he knows what he can change.

⁸ Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir: „Fagurfræði náttúrunnar.“ *Hugur. Tímarit um heimspæki*. 22. ár. 2010, p. 32.

