

A Núna (now) diary

Day-by-day with the Icelandic-Canadian arts event

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This year's Núna (now) festival, the second annual convergence of Icelandic and Canadian art events, looked good on paper. (I had helped to curate and organize the festival, so I hoped it did, at least.) As the festival's first day drew near, I found myself quite natu-

rally wondering whether it would be quite as good in real life. Would the logistics all work out? Would the artists bring their A game? Would anybody come to see what we had put together?

Here, in diary form, are the answers, day by day and event by event. Hopefully it will give those who were unable to attend the events a good idea of what went on.

Tuesday, May 6

Tonight's performance is an exciting one: it's the North American premiere of *IBM 1401, A User's Manual*, a dance piece performed by Erna Omarsdóttir, with music by acclaimed composer Johann Johannson. The piece has been performed to rapturous applause all through Europe, and tonight it's being put up in the small Gas Station Theatre in Winnipeg's Osborne Village area.

The crowd is good, which is a relief to all the Núna organizers. Arne MacPherson, one of the curators, gives a small speech, and then we troop into the auditorium. The stage holds a Hammond B3 organ, a crazy spinning contraption and a pile of cables. Composer Johannson walks out on stage and begins pulling off the cables to reveal Erna, the dancer, who has evidently been sitting motionless, curled into a ball beneath all the wires. Johann goes back to sit behind the organ, and Erna begins her performance.

The dance is forty-five minutes long and quite entrancing. There are moments of great emotion, humour, strenuous physical activity and repose. Every now and again Erna seems to shut down, as if she has run out of energy, and when this happens Johann, nattily dressed in suit and tie, lumbers out from behind his organ and gives her a sound clap on the back. Thus revived, she continues her raw, astonishing performance.

The evening concludes with fine cuisine in the Icelandic style, and free-flowing spirits. Everyone knows they've seen something marvelous, and when an exhausted but happy-looking Erna appears in the Gas Station lobby for her own well-deserved glass of wine, there are many who want to shake her hand.



PHOTOS: LEIF NORMAN



Wednesday, May 7

Tonight's is a different sort of entertainment. The performer is a famous soprano singer, Thora Einarsdóttir, and, along with her accompanist, Alexander Schmalcz, she is performing at the Winnipeg Art Gallery's fabulous 70s-style Muriel Richardson Auditorium, with its famous swivel chairs.

Thora, a petite woman with a glowing smile, is greeted with great applause. Schmalcz and a page-turner sit at the piano, and soon the music begins. Thora's voice is indeed heavenly! She does numbers by Britten, Debussy and Rach-

maninoff, each sung flawlessly in the original language; and in the second half of the program she performs ten or eleven Icelandic songs from different composers, including Árni Thorsteinsson, Páll Ísólfsón and of course Sigvaldi S. Kaldalóns. The lyrics to all of these have been translated into English for the program by David Gislason, so that the non-Icelandic speakers in the audience can follow along.

At the end of the performance there is much applause, and the crowd rises to their feet as a body. This isn't something I'd likely have attended if I wasn't connected to it, so at this moment I'm very glad that being a part of Núna has given me the chance to enjoy such a voice.

Thursday, May 8

Today marks the opening of the Collage Party, an event concocted and hosted by the Winnipeg artist Paul Butler. Butler has held Collage Parties all over the world, and they are always memorable. Spread over several days, they involve an accumulation of visual materials – magazines, posters, books – and materials with which to transform them into collages. Artists and visitors work alone or in collaboration, first seeking inspiration from the mountains of media, then beginning to cut and tear them apart, reconfiguring them into works of art. The spirit of this event is very much in tune with that of Núna (Now), insofar as it too involves mixing disparate elements (Icelandic and Canadian art) and observing the synthesis that results.

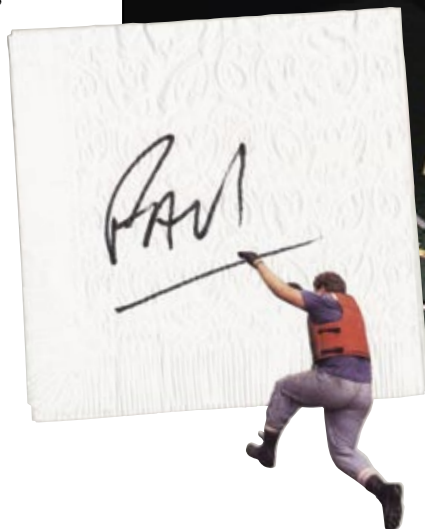
Tonight there are three events, but I can only attend two of them. Thora is singing again, but this time up in Gimli, and with her tenor-husband Björn Jónsson. But I am in Winnipeg, at the Globe Cinema, attending the screening of *Drawing Restraint 9*, a film by the famed artist Matthew Barney, featuring music by his wife, Björk. Yes, that Björk! She is also one of the stars of the film.

Once again we get a very respectable turnout. Winnipeg is not known for the intrepidity of its cultural consumers, and bringing in something as yet unknown, or something artistically challenging, is always a risk. And *Drawing Restraint 9* is nothing if not challenging. It's a huge, expensive, epic art film, visually stunning, narratively baffling and at times almost ridiculous in its determination to be peculiar. But it's like nothing I've ever seen before, and it would prove difficult to forget.

But directly after the movie is an event which, for a few hours, dispels the arty wizardry of *DR9*. At a small hostelry adjacent to the cinema, a raucous full house enjoys the musical stylings of several musicians and groups. First, Mackenzie Kristjón put on an energetic and eccentric performance with his band Deathstyle; following this came the crowd-pleasing songs of John K. Samson (who is also a member of the Núna Curatorial Committee). The final musical act of the evening was the great Icelandic performer Mugison, who with his all-star band sent audience members scattering like ten pins with his merciless six-string attack.



Thor Aikenhead hard at work on a collage.





Super-rocker Mugison unleashes his number-one Icelandic hit Mugiboogie! It's a tremendous tune.



Mackenzie Kristjón pulls out all the stops at the Lo Pub!

Left: John K. Samson, well-known for his sports column in *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, put on a solo performance of his amazing songcraft. Many present knew the words and happily sang along.

Friday, May 9

The Collage Party continues, and there is a pretty good turnout. A wonderful highpoint comes when Björk Bjarnadóttir, the *L-H* folklore columnist, appears with a small drum to play and sing Cree and Icelandic songs for the assembled



Lindy of Major Maker w/ percussion.

artists. It's a wonderful cultural moment, further underlining what the spirit of the festival is intended to be.

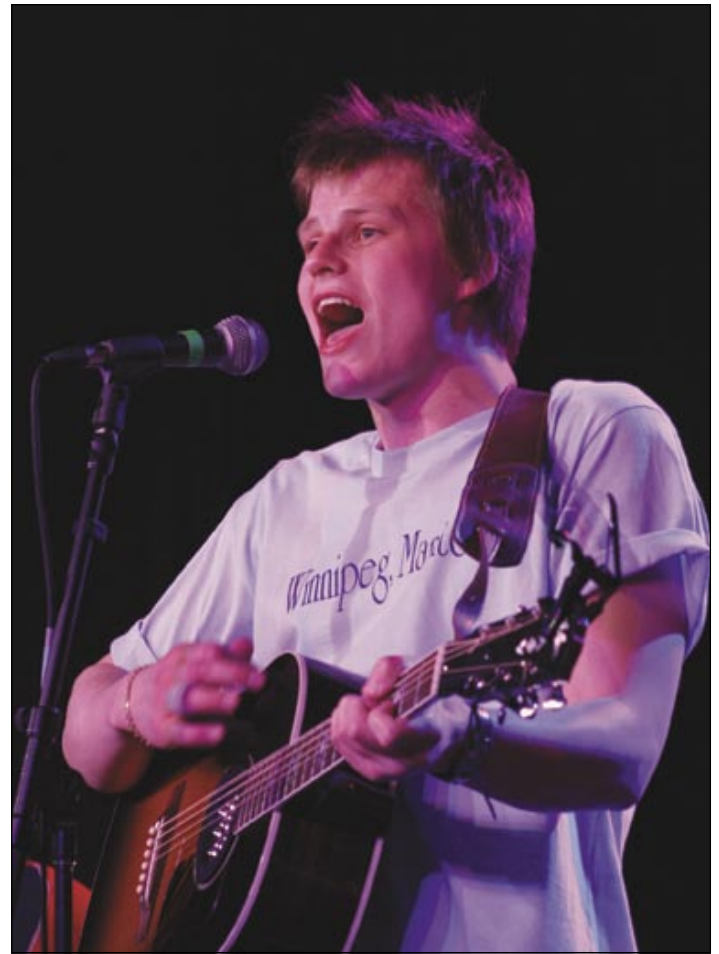
The evening brings a concert by Sprengjuhöllin, an extremely popular group in Iceland. And deservedly so! The show is awesome, and you can read more about it in the June 1 issue of *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, in Mykael Sopher's music column, where the energy and musicianship of this aggregation is perfectly described.

The only low point of the evening is the discovery of a large dent put in the side of the *L-H* Managing Editor's car by some maniacal hit-and-run driver. Well, thinks the Managing Editor, it's only a car.



A dazzling performance from the energetic lads of Major Maker.





Sprengjuhöllin put on an awesome show at the Garrick Theatre. There was strumming, singing in Icelandic and in English, and much energetic scampering about the stage. The band is just now embarking on their first tour of North America, and these ingratiating lads (note “Winnipeg, Manitoba” T-shirt!) deserve to become popular right along with their countrymate Mugison and his amazing band.



Saturday, May 10

The Collage Party proceeds apace, and is enlivened today by a wonderful panel discussion put together and moderated by Curatorial Committee member Erika MacPherson. Read more about this marvelous panel discussion on page

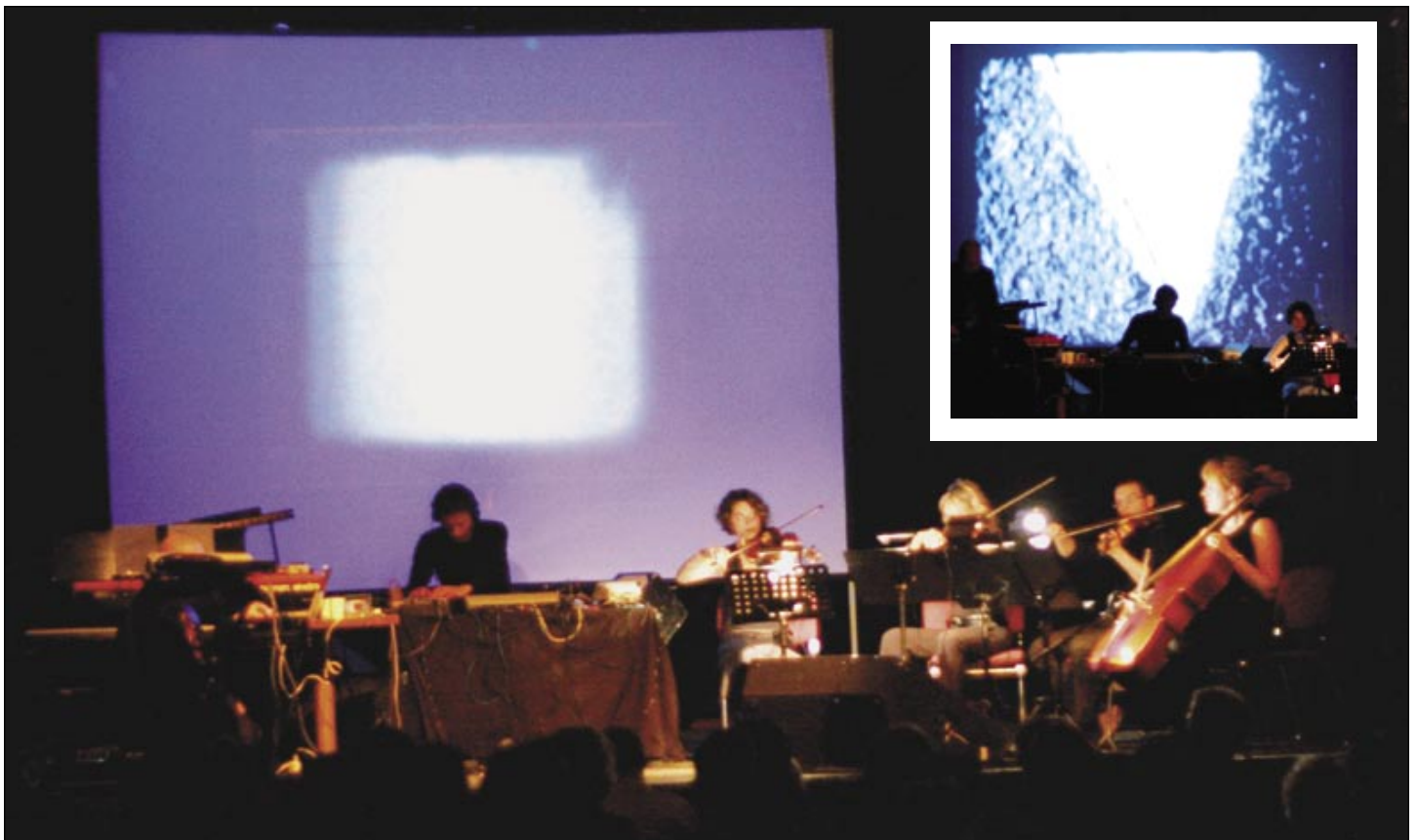
10 of Issue 11!

The final major event of Núna 2008 comes that evening at the West End Cultural Centre in Winnipeg's West End. Kyrie Kristmanson, a folk singer from Ottawa, opens the show with her quirky strumming and singing, and the main event comes after in the form of Icelan-

dic composer Johann Johannson, who performs in concert with an electronica musician, a string quartet and an abstract projectionist. The show is nothing short of awesome, and again you may read further about it in the June 1 issue of *Lögberg-Heimskringla*.



Kyrie Kristmanson, along with her bass player Martín, put on a charming and ingratiating performance.



The performance by Johann Johannson and crew was like a strange form of alien magic.

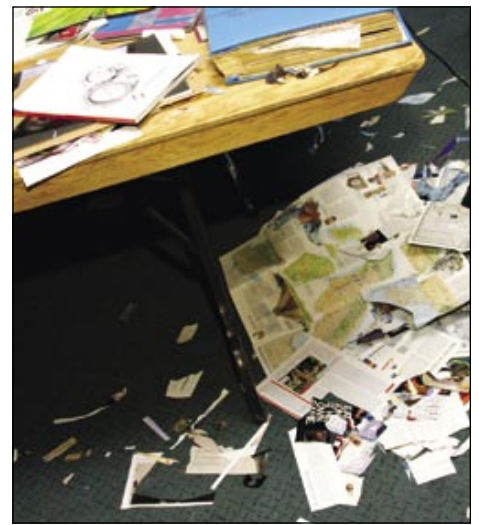
Sunday, May 11

The last day of Núna (now) 2008 is all about collage. You can feast your eyes on some of the results on the *L-H* website.

The Collage Party winds down slowly over the day, and soon it's time to clean up the many tiny scraps of paper all over the floor of the Press Club. But this is a good opportunity to dream of what might come next year for the third annual Núna (Now) Icelandic-Canadian cultural festival! We'll see you there.



The “What’s Icelandic About That?” panel discussion, held in the basement of Winnipeg’s Marlborough Hotel, captivated all spectators.



This is just a bit of the debris left by the Collage Party.



The panel (L-R): Freya Olafson, Hannes Lárusson, Erika MacPherson, Ryan Eyford (recently married - congratulations!) and Laurie Bertram.