

IS (not)



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5 POLISH PHOTOGRAPHERS, 5 ICELANDIC WRITERS, 1 ISLAND

To understand another human being is to get a better understanding of oneself. On the Old Continent, the part of the Other has already been cast – it is played by a strange, small country halfway between Europe and America, inhabited by elves and EU opponents. To get to know this country, one must grapple with media clichés – those of a wealthy state, until recently, now plunged into financial crisis, or of the land of picturesque volcanoes, capable of paralyzing air traffic over half of Europe. The photographers of Sputnik Photos have decided to take on these clichés and capture the essence of Iceland, the essence of humanity.

Their point of departure was the island's pagan tradition – myths, legends and stories passed down through generations, whose presence can still be strongly felt in the lives of Icelanders.

The photographer Adam Pańczuk accompanied by the writer Sindri Freysson set out on a quest to uncover the building blocks of the islanders' mentality, basing their enquiry on Icelandic mythology. The ensuing photographs are a veritable "Check!" to the exported ontology, worked out for the needs of the external, tourist-oriented world.

For Michał Łuczak and Hermann Stefansson the journey towards an understanding of Iceland led from the logic of the supernatural to the often merciless laws of nature. The photographs of Michał Łuczak take one through birth and death; through life – with its loneliness, brotherhood, despair and wonder – stretched out between these two extremities. We are made to experience boundary situations accompanying the islanders' daily struggle with the wilderness. No place here for superfluous effort or any action beyond that necessary to survive. There is steadiness of breath, calm, and time for coffee served in chipped mugs.

The photographs of Jan Brykczyński portray a family in which animals occupy a place on par with humans. Watering horses or grazing sheep turns out to be as central as a daily shared meal. The life cycle depicted has been des-

cribed by the writer Kristín Heiða Kristinsdóttir. Everyday tasks come to be ritualized. Looking at the family and the herd Jan Brykczyński seems to ask – are we really that different from one another at the end of the day?

Agnieszka Rayss, together with the poet Sigurbjörg Prastardóttir, have positioned themselves on the shores of Icelandic lakes and at the edge of modern swimming pools. The authoresses have taken a look at natural water reservoirs, present in the lives of the islanders since time immemorial, as well as luxury tourism, which made an appearance in Iceland with the advent of new technologies. Water has proven to be Iceland's gold. Nature was domesticated, then sold.

Entering this named and seemingly safe space are the photographs of Rafał Milach. His hunger for experience and desire to touch everything he encounters during his voyage across the island, the need to peek into every corner, to write "I was here" all over every person met wreak havoc upon the order just established. Thousands of objects cry out for commentary, demand a justification of their presence. The people pictured do of course have names, but the photographs are more reminiscent of a botanist's notebook than of a family album. Do these people really exist? We have come full circle. Accompanying these photographic notes is the personal travel diary of Huldar Breiðfjörð.

To get to know the Other, to move from ignorance to understanding, the photographers traveled from the continent to the island. Having come from the outside, they discovered the country from the inside, from the perspective of the Icelandic writers they were accompanied by as well as people they met on the island. Coming to terms with stereotypes, they sought an individual experience. Yet the more they got to know Iceland, the more they realized how little about it they actually knew. Having come for answers, they left with questions. Questions about what the island was, and about who we are.



ARTISTS:

Adam Pańczuk, Agnieszka Rayss, Michał Łuczak, Rafał Milach, Jan Brykczyński, Hermann Stefánsson, Kristín Heiða Kristinsdóttir, Sindri Freysson, Sigurbjörg Prastardóttir, Huldar Breiðfjörð

CURATOR:

Andrzej Kramarz

EXIBITIONS:

ON ISLAND:

- 12.02 – Menningarhúsið Hof / Hof Cultural and Conference Center / Akureyri
- 12.03 – Menningarmiðstöðin Gerðuberg / Cultural Center of Gerðuberg / Reykjavik
- 12.03 – Listasafn Árnesinga / LA art museum in Hveragerði

IN POLAND:

- 16.02 – The National Museum in Gdańsk / Gdańsk
- 8.04 – B&B Gallery / Bielsko-Biała
- 20.06 – SKWER – Fabryka Trzciny Art Center / Warszawa

BOOK & MULTIMEDIA:

The project is followed by the book (240 pages, 238 photos and 5 texts) with DVD of 5 multimedia stories.

INTERNET:

WWW.ICELANDICTALES.SPUTNIKPHOTOS.COM

ORGANIZER:

SPUTNIK PHOTOS

PARTNERS:

CULTURAL CENTER GERÐUBERG IN REYKJAVIK (Menningarmiðstöðin Gerðuberg) MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN REYKJAVIK (Ljósmyndasafn Reykjavíkur)

NORDIC HOUSE (Reykjavik)

HONOURABLE PATRONAGE:

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THE (VERY) HIDDEN PEOPLE

Elves have left the building! was the first thing that crossed my mind when photographer Adam Panczuk suggested we investigate the hidden realms of Iceland. Part of me was taken aback. Not that fucking cliché with the elves again! I thought to myself.

But clichés aren't self-originated. And the more I thought about it the more interesting it seemed to me to dissect this – surprisingly alive and kicking – cliché. What would reveal it's ugly (or far from ugly) head when I cut it open?

And now we're speeding across an empty highway in June on a night draped in blue in the year 2010 A.D., looking for people who are in some way associated with elf lore in today's Iceland.

"We almost hit an elf back there," I say to Adam. He quickly glances at the rear-view mirror but then he shakes his head and smiles, even though he was fooled for a moment. "The hidden people are not outside now," he says. „They know we are looking for them.”

"Maybe," I admit. "They're clever bastards."













TO BE AN ISLAND

On isolation in Michał Łuczak's Iceland photographs

The Icelandic word *einangrun* consists of two stems. The first part of the word is *ein*, which means “1,” while the second part is *angrun*, which means “sadness” or “sorrow,” and it is related to words like *angurværð* (“melancholy”) and *angur* (“sorrow”). In other words, *einangrun* literally means the sadness or sorrow of being alone. Corresponding words in other languages are constructed differently. Many languages of the European continent, probably most of them, have concepts that derive from the Latin word *isola*, meaning “island”. “Isolation” means to be like an island in some sense.

Iceland is an island in the Atlantic Ocean, halfway between Europe and the Western hemisphere. I never tire of repeating this simple fact. It is obvious, but the obvious is easily forgotten. This is the best way to describe Iceland in a nutshell better, it's an island in the Atlantic Ocean. Islands are isolated, the word itself illustrates this fact.

But not the Icelandic word.

An islander does not need a word for something as natural as living on an island. Such a word would be too general and inaccurate. You might as well have a word for a human being that breathes oxygen or a word for the condition of being pulled to the ground by gravity. To live on an island is to be isolated. That does not necessarily mean being sad.

Łuczak and I traveled all around Iceland for this project, visiting people that live in remote locations, alone and isolated, close to the ocean and the country. I'd like to express my gratitude to all of these people for their singular hospitality and for letting us take pictures of them.













ICELAND, THE ICELANDIC SHEEP, ICELANDERS, AND THE FARMING COMMUNITY IN THE ÁRNES REGION IN STRANDIR

It is very appropriate that Iceland is shaped like a sheep, lying stoically in the field, minding her own business, because it has been remarked on numerous occasions that the Icelandic sheep has kept the country's nation alive throughout the centuries.

That this short footed animal is to thank for Icelanders surviving hardship and cold, hunger and misery, stuck on a rocky outcrop in the middle of an ocean in the middle of nowhere. The Icelandic sheep, this hardy beast, can endure freezing temperatures and long standing hunger. She's tougher and more stubborn than your average animal. Some say the Icelandic mentality is not that different from that of our sheep.

How do we define ourselves, we precious few individuals roaming our little island?

Yes, we are strong, up for anything, don't take no for an answer, we give in to no-one, as confident as anyone. The lack of size and numbers is what makes us large.

Iceland's head, the West Fjords, differ from other parts of the country in that the mountains are higher, the fjords deeper and some say the people are a strange breed, even having magical powers.

Where the wind stirs the woolly tuft at the back of Iceland's head, that's where you'll find the country's remotest dwellings, the Árnes region. There you'll find a small community of farmers who have chosen to farm sheep only. The people live off the land, as Icelanders have done for hundreds of years.

Far from bright lights and big cities, people in the Árnes region live surrounded by steep mountains and the waves crashing on the shore. In the Árnes region 38 people live in 15 homes all year round. In the whole area there are more than 2700 sheep. Life in the Árnes region is pretty set, every season has its tasks and chores. Everything runs on the everlasting circle of life.

In the spring there is lambing season, in summer, tourists and haymaking, autumn brings sheep gathering and slaughtering, and the sheep are locked up for the winter, the wool is sheared in November and mating season is around Christmas. From January till March the roads sometimes close for days or even weeks due to heavy snow. And clearing them is not considered necessary by the powers that be. A small plane lands at the airport in Gjógur twice a week, weather permitting.

Life sure slows down in the darkest months. Together they endure the winter, the people and sheep in the Árnes region. And then it is spring again.

The circle of life continues.













EARTH BLEEDS WATER

CAN YOU SWIM?

We know the water well.

We often cry.

We rested in the womb for months before we struggled out into life. It was warm.

We sniffle our snot back in.

Our water breaks, we sweat, we again break out in tears.

We aren't water, but the water is us.

THE HOT TUBS

Those who wish to meet strangers and exchange ideas with them visit a hot tub. Those who want to meet acquaintances and swap stories with them visit a hot tub. Those who are tired visit a hot tub. Those who are overworked visit a hot tub. Those who no longer work visit a hot tub. All we need is that each government take a trip to the hot tub, so it can hear how to run the country properly! Because, in the hot tubs, everything that ails society – and sometimes the entire world – is dissected to the bone and solved every day. All the quotidian polymaths frequent the hot tubs.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONUNDRUM FOR BATHROOMS

Do you sing different kind of song in the shower if the water comes from, say, the bowels of the earth, carrying a pungent smell of sulphur and containing sediments that clog the tap and stick in the cracks between the floor-tiles? The blues perhaps. Yes.

WATER LAW

Yes, I agree with my colleague, Arturas V, his name is indeed Arturas and as we know, everybody named Arthur is naturally brave and just, he lives by the Baltic Sea and

he said, I don't know if he's still willing to back it up, but he once said that we should never cry except when swimming.

FISHING TRIP

You cannot possibly fish for water.













TO DO THE RING

“To do the Ring” is an Icelandic expression that generally refers to travels on Route 1, the highway that encircles the country. To travel this road is something that most Icelanders do at some point in their lives and some even prefer to do it every summer. The reasons for going are of course different but many people probably set out with the idea that on the way they’ll learn more about their fellow Icelanders and native beliefs; that they’ll see more of their country. However, traveling on the Ring Road is a risky business. On the way you might learn something about yourself or your family, regardless of whether they live close to the highway or share the car with you. A lot of journeys on the Ring Road have ended in divorce but as a result of others, babies have been born. And there is no guarantee that you’ll learn more about Iceland on the way. When it comes to traveling (and photography?), what you see matters less than the way you look at it.

We did the Ring. In May of 2010, driving a green Opel Astra Station, 1994 model. And we were back on square one ten days and 1450 kilometers later.







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