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## **Contemporary Dance in Iceland**

*Identifying and locating contemporary dance as it takes place in Iceland in the present*

### **Acknowledgements**

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The history of dance as an art form in Iceland is young. It is highly influenced by the Western canonical history of dance but at the same time, that history cannot be considered the history of contemporary dance in Iceland. This paper is concerned with discussing the ambiguous relationship that exists between the Western canonical history of dance and the history and genealogy of contemporary dance in Iceland. However, it is debatable as to whether Icelandic contemporary dance has a history. Of course it has a past, but how much of it is known?

I will argue in this paper that the ambiguous relations Icelandic contemporary dance holds with its past is problematic in terms of how dance is made in Iceland and how it can be observed critically. When it comes to terminology within the local dance discourse this paper will highlight how this ambiguity can be seen to have created confusion in the way terminology has emerged in the Icelandic vocabulary. When one looks at the aesthetics of styles and genres of contemporary dance in Iceland, it is clear that the scene has not been created in a void. It has been formed from influences, genres and styles from Europe and North - America that have found their way on to the island. At the same time, the island is not intrinsically linked to either the scenes of Europe and North America.

In this thesis I intend to locate and identify contemporary dance as it takes place in Iceland presently. To do so I will attempt to give an account of the origins, traces and current discourses of the contemporary dance scene in Iceland. As such, this thesis can be understood and read as an attempt to critically locate, identify and map contemporary dance as it is understood and practiced in Iceland presently.

The sources for this dissertation are interviews with sixteen dancers, choreographers and dance historians that are all currently working professionally within in the

Icelandic dance scene. As a starting point for this thesis I set out to talk to as many independent choreographers, dancers and dance theoreticians as possible and available for my inquiry. I managed to interview sixteen. The sixteen that were interviewed for this thesis are the following;

Ásgeir Helgi Magnússon (1982). Ásgeir is a dancer with BA in Contemporary Dance from the University of the Arts, Iceland. He currently works with the Icelandic Dance Company as a dancer. He also performs and choreographs his own work.

Erna Ómarsdóttir (1972). Erna is an independent dancer and choreographer. Erna graduated from P.A.R.T.S. (Brussels) in 1998. She works independently as a choreographer and a dancer in Iceland and abroad.

Halla Ólafsdóttir (1978). Halla is an independent choreographer and performer. She graduated from the Swedish Ballet Academy in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2004 and from The University College of Dance in Stockholm with MA in choreography in 2011. She works internationally as a choreographer and a performer - and is the artistic director of Reykjavík Dance Festival 2012.

Hrafnhildur Einarsson (1983). Hrafnhildur is a dancer with BA in Dance Theatre from Laban in London, UK. She works independently as a dancer and choreographer in Iceland and abroad.

Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir (1942). Ingibjörg is a former dancer and choreographer and former principal of the National Ballet School. She has BA and MA in History from the University of Iceland. She is currently writing the history of dance as an art form in Iceland.

Karen María Jónsdóttir (1975). She has BA in dance from ArtEZ in Arnhem and BA in dramaturgy from the University of Amsterdam. She was the director of the Contemporary Dance Department at the University of the Arts, Iceland, from 2005 to 2011.

Katrín Gunnarsdóttir (1986). Katrín is a choreographer and a dancer with BA in choreography from ArtEZ in Arnhem, Netherlands and a diploma in Contemporary Dance from the University of the Arts, Iceland. She works independently as a dancer and choreographer in Iceland.

Margrét Bjarnadóttir (1981). Margrét has BA in choreography from ArtEZ, Netherlands. She currently works as a choreographer and a performer in Iceland.

Ólöf Ingólfssdóttir (1962). Ólöf studied at European Dance Development Center in Arnhem, Netherlands. She works as an independent choreographer and performer in Iceland.

Ragnheiður S. Bjarnarson (1986). Ragnheiður is a dancer, with BA in Contemporary dance from The University of the Arts, Iceland. She works as an independent choreographer and performer in Iceland and abroad.

Saga Sigurðardóttir (1982). Saga is an independent dancer and choreographer. She holds BA in choreography from ArtEZ Academy in Arnhem, Netherlands and works as a dancer and choreographer in Iceland.

Sesselja G. Magnúsdóttir (1966). Sesselja has BA in dance from Deakin University, Australia and currently studies MA in Dance theory at the University of Stockholm. She works as a dance history teacher at *Danslistaskóli JSB* and as an independent dance theorist in Iceland.

Sigríður Soffía Níelsdóttir (1985). Sigríður is an independent dancer and a choreographer. She has BA from the Contemporary Dance Department from The University of the Arts, Iceland. She works as a dancer and choreographer in Iceland and abroad.

Steinunn Ketilsdóttir (1977). Steinunn has BA in dance from Hunter College, New York. She works independently as a choreographer and dancer in Iceland and abroad.

Sveinbjörg Þórhallsdóttir (1972). She studied at Alvin Ailey in New York and has MA in choreography from *Fontys Dansacademie* in Tillburg, Netherlands. She has worked as a choreographer and dancer in Iceland and is currently the director of the Contemporary Dance Department at the University of the Arts, Iceland.

Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir (1978). Valgerður is an independent dancer and choreographer. She has a BA in dance from *Statens Balletthøgskole* in Oslo, Norway. She works in Iceland and abroad as a dancer and choreographer.

It is important to note that these sixteen are not the total sum of choreographers, dancers and dance theorists that currently work professionally in Iceland, but they do make up more than half of the professional independent choreographers, dancers and theoreticians in Iceland<sup>1</sup>. Since this research has never been conducted before in the country and nothing has been written on this topic, I have had to rely on original sources and an independent investigation. I conducted interviews, made use of documents from schools and dance centers where available and I have also made

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<sup>1</sup> The following individuals were not interviewed for this thesis for various reasons; Ásrún Magnúsdóttir dancer, Berglind Pétursdóttir dancer, Helena Jónsdóttir dance film maker, Inga Maren Rúnarsdóttir, dancer, Katrín Hall former director of the Icelandic Dance Company, Lára Stefánsdóttir director of the National Dance Company, Melkorka S Magnúsdóttir dancer, Snædís Lilja Ingadóttir dancer and Tinna Grétarsdóttir choreographer.

extensive use of magazine archives and websites that have published information about dance as an art form in Iceland.

In terms of structure, I will begin in the first chapter by setting out a number of concepts, which will provide a theoretical framework for the rest of the dissertation. I will start with Agamben's notion of what it means to be a contemporary, whereby I will *not* define what contemporary dance in Iceland is, but propose a method of critical approach based on Agamben's thesis. Continuing in this chapter, I will discuss two terms related to contemporary dance: "sam tímadans" and "nú tímadans". The two terms, together, provide the current vocabulary in Iceland for giving a name to contemporary dance discourses as it takes place nationally. I will argue that there is much confusion surrounding the use of these two terms, which stems from the ambiguous relation contemporary dance in Iceland has with its past. In the second chapter, I will address the reasons behind my claim, by giving an account of contemporary dance in Iceland, as both "official" and "unofficial" histories. The chapter will give an account of what history has been made published, and what histories have not, and discuss how the absence of a certain critical history may be contributing to the ambiguity of the current vocabulary available in Iceland, when it comes to discussing contemporary dance at a national level. To aid this discussion I will work with Foucault's notion that histories are constructed as means of linking together events that are considered by its author(s) important enough to remember. Building on this discussion I will investigate how the lack of an accessible or published local history of the genre can be seen to be affecting the way in which contemporary dance is being produced and critically observed. To deepen this discussion, I will introduce Friederich Nietzsche's notions of "unhistoricity" and

“monumental art” and attempt to draw links between this and the current situation that I observe in the contemporary dance scene of Iceland. In the third chapter I will look at how contemporary dance is being taught as training or a technique and how this is shaping the way in which dance students experience the idea of “the contemporary dance scene” taking place elsewhere. The chapter looks specifically at a certain “import-culture” and draws upon Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of “bricolage” and Ana Vujanović’s deconstruction of “second-hand knowledge”. The thesis continues along this line of questioning, and considers how this “import-culture” lends itself to a certain perception of contemporary dance in Iceland as a subordinate of Europe, its major style and technique “supplier”. Finally, I will consider the current aesthetics of contemporary dance in Iceland in relation to its local past and development and discuss how this can also be seen to be shaping the currently predominant contemporary discourses in Iceland.

## **1. The Contemporary**

### 1.1 Being in a state of contemporariness according to Agamben

To begin this paper, I would like to introduce a concept of the contemporary proffered by Giorgio Agamben in his essay; *What is the Contemporary?* What Agamben proposes in this article is a conceptual means of critically observing the present. In this essay, Agamben situates contemporariness not as a parallel to the present, but as a certain disconnection with it. He describes this disconnection, as a state of being contemporary, as a particular state of being in relations to one’s own time (40). As a result of this disconnection, he suggests that it’s not possible to coincide or adjust to the demands of the contemporary and consequently one is more capable of understanding their own time (40). Agamben states that being in a state of

contemporariness means being able to see, what he calls, “the darkness” of the time. He explains the darkness as being what one sees when the eyes are closed, or when a human is deprived of light. This darkness, he notes, is activated by a series of cells in the retina; a certain type of vision that is called darkness. Darkness for Agamben then, is not a singular idea or a consequence of non-vision, but rather it is the result of the activity of the cells in the retina. Seeing darkness and its obscurity, therefore, is not a passive act, but a conscious activity. By perceiving the darkness, the contemporary is a person who can see the obscurity of the time (44). However, one needs the lights also, in order to see the darkness. As Agamben states:

This ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not however, separable from those lights (45).

For Agamben, the one who is contemporary is not interested in the light of the century, but one that is interested and concerned by the darkness and its “light”:

... the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that more than any light turns directly and singularly towards him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time (45).

By being contemporary, there is a certain relationship that becomes established with the past. By being in the state of the contemporary, it is possible to refer to the past, and make moments from the past relevant again. It can tie together things that have been divided, and revitalize what has been declared dead. Being contemporary, therefore, not involves perceiving the darkness of the present, but linking that darkness and its lights with other times. A contemporary, in Agamben’s terms, is able in that way to read history in other ways than before (53). To identify events, styles, movements that have taken place in the local dance scene Iceland in the past that has not been paid any attention is thus an attempt to identify “the darkness” in the local

contemporary dance scene in Iceland. To bring forth events from the past that created the base for the local contemporary dance scene in the present.

The significance of Agamben's notion of the contemporary for this paper is that it addresses the problematic of a present that has no history. To look at contemporary dance in Iceland as a contemporary is to critically locate its current discourses in relation to its past. Agamben's notion of the contemporary allows for a viewpoint that is of the present, but at the same time is disconnected to it and objective. It creates a frame where the past can be referred to and made important again, a past that has become unknown. As I will show, the independent contemporary dance scene in Iceland is not in a state of contemporary, because of its unconscious relationship to the past. Becoming a contemporary in Agamben's terms, allows me to investigate the present in relation to its current state and its past. To identify what its lights are, in this case the discourse and the official history, to be able to see the hidden events; "the darkness", in Agamben's terms, of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland. "The darkness" being the hidden and unknown history, the traces and origins and the unconscious effects of it and then to be able to explain how the discourse of contemporary dance should aim to reach a contemporary state.

If, then, the independent contemporary dance scene is not in a state of contemporariness as it has been defined here above, in what state is it? I will now investigate the discourse and definitions of contemporary dance in Iceland, which is currently in a confusing state.

## 1.2 The (non)definition of modern dance and contemporary dance

The independent contemporary dance scene in Iceland, which this paper will focus on, has originated not only from the training and discourse of classical and modern dance as they are defined and understood within the canonical history of Western dance as an art form, but as well from techniques, styles and genres that have originated from the “Flemish Dance Wave” in Europe; as well as post-modern dance as defined by the canonical history of Western dance as an art form. Presently the dance discourses that have emerged from these origins are in a state of confusion about what terminology that should be used to refer to them. These terms, as has already been stated, are “samtímadans” and “núttímadans”. To understand the current state of contemporary dance in Iceland, it is necessary to address the genesis of these two terms, and the discourses that surround them.

The term “samtímadans” became official within the Icelandic dance discourse with the establishment of the Contemporary Dance Department within the University of the Arts in 2005. Karen María Jónsdóttir, the founder of the department, explains that the decision to call it a *contemporary* dance department was more to do with a certain ideology than a certain dance style;

We were occupied with an idea of the dance artist in the contemporary A dance artist that takes a stand and uses different techniques to support their creation ... but as a training we chose more techniques that originated from release-based techniques, rather than techniques that involved codified movements from modern or ballet (Jónsdóttir, Karen María).

Considering this idea of contemporary dance in Iceland, one can see that it has more to do with a certain idea of working than one special style. What is also worth pointing out is that ballet is not considered a main technique, but techniques that have emerged from post-modern dance, and not from codified movements such as ballet or modern dance. The first notion of the word in Iceland dates from a year earlier, in 2004. Miguel Gutierrez, a New York based teacher and choreographer is interviewed

in *Morgunblaðið*. In this interview he is advertising a workshop in Iceland, but he was a teacher of the choreographer Steinunn Ketilsdóttir in Hunter College in New York. When he is asked what types of dance he teaches, he answers; “I prefer to call the type of dance I teach “contemporary” (*samtímadans*) and I would never call it “modern dance” (*nútímadans*), because for me that describes a certain period in dance history that now is passed” (*Dansinn gerir kröfur til áhorfenda*).

As can be seen in Gutierrez answer, there is a clear narrative within the definition of genres in the canonical history of Western dance as an art form, a clear idea of what is categorized as modern and contemporary. But the same notion is not followed in the dance history in Iceland and its local discourse. Definitions are not the same when it comes to defining genres, styles and discourses related to contemporary dance in Iceland. Since it was only recently that the idea of “samtímadans” was established into the Icelandic contemporary dance discourse, the term “modern”, or “nútímadans” defined all dance techniques that were not ballet. This definition has been very strong within the Icelandic local dance discourse:

There is a confusion regarding the definitions of “nútímadans” and “samtímadans”. In the past, *nútímadans* was used over everything that was not ballet or jazz. It used to be defined from the classical ballet. What was ballet and what was not ballet. And even though the styles are many, they were all defined within that one word (Ingólfssdóttir, Ólöf).

The reason for it could be that the word “nútímadans” (modern dance) arrived much earlier into the Icelandic dance discourse. The first published use of *nútímadans* in Iceland was in 1946. Sigríður Ármann, dancer and choreographer performed *The Dancing Shadow*, which was advertised as a “modern dance piece” (*Sigríður Ármann heldur danssýningu næstkomandi þriðjudag*). Over time *nútímadans* came to refer dance techniques that were not classified as ballet. When investigating the use of *samtímadans* and *nútímadans* on television and in newspaper coverage one can detect a very open definition of term “nútímadans”, and often in relation to institutions and

choreographers that have already been defined within the canonical history of dance as working within the contemporary dance scene. This is especially clear in published material about the choreographer and dancer Erna Ómarsdóttir. In an interview with her in 2002, P.A.R.T.S. is referred to as one of the best schools in Europe in the field of *modern dance* (*Hver sýning er mér áskorun*). In another interview, on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2002, she states “I have been based in Brussels in Belgium for the past year, and for a modern dancer it is a good place, since it is the boiling pot for modern dance in Europe” (*Tímamót í Bolshoi*). She also describes modern dance in an interview in 2000:

There are many different ways of working in modern dance. In the whole, modern dance is a much more open form than classical ballet, because [in modern dance] everything is allowed. You use your imagination and your body in every way possible. Classical ballet follows a much more codified form of movements and ideas. There is usually a smaller gap between modern dance and daily life; surrealism and abstraction are not far away. Modern dance is a good place to do experiments, and in that way, to discover new things about yourself, others and the world (*Allt er leyfilegt*).

In 2004 she is also referred to as one of “the most interesting modern dancers in Europe” (*Blóð, sviti og hold*). The dancer Bára Magnúsdóttir also refers to P.A.R.T.S. as a modern dance school in an interview in 2009 (*Heilluð í inntökuprófunum*). Even though the idea of *samtímadans* entered into the Icelandic dance discourse officially in 2005, with the establishment of the Contemporary Dance Department at the University of the Arts, this open definition of the modern dance is still strong within the Icelandic media and dance discourse today. Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir, dancer and choreographer, referred to her work as modern dance, in an interview published on 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2011: “As is common in modern dance performances, the piece is created in a close relationship between the three of us, even though the idea originates from me” (*Þrjár konur á ferðalagi*). The national television station in Iceland, RÚV, broadcasted a television show in the spring of 2012 called *Tónspor*. In each episode,

one choreographer and one composer were documented while they created a new dance performance, which premiered at the Reykjavík Arts Festival of 2011. In the introduction to the show it was stated that in this program one would look into the world of modern dance and see how a dance performance is made (Sen, Jónas: 00:17). Sigríður Soffía Nielsdóttir, choreographer and dancer, describes in the first episode how modern dance is different from ballet; “it is more open to all kinds of body types, its starting point is movement and not a codified set of movements, everything can be movement. You are much freer to do whatever you want” (Sen, Jónas: 8:07 – 8:33). In the second episode a similar definition is given; “So what is modern dance? It is so many things. Everyday movement can be categorized as modern dance, if it is put in a certain context, maybe repeated and connected to music” (Sen, Jónas: b; 09:55 - 10:01)

As can be seen, these descriptions are similar to the definition Ómarsdóttir gave in 2002, where the importance is on different and more free movements and freedom from a set of codified movements, that can be found in ballet. In the media discourse, the use of *samtímadans* is not detected until the year 2007 in an interview with Erna Ómarsdóttir:

But where does Iceland stand in all of this and are we following the contemporary dance scene? It is all going the right way but we are not that advanced. We have to continue to train dancers, choreographers and audiences. There is now a dance department within the University of the Arts that focuses on contemporary dance (*Dansinn er lífæðin*).

Considering this, it is clear that with the establishment of the Contemporary Dance Department the term ”contemporary dance” was established within the local dance discourse in Iceland. However, it does not seem to have had much of an effect on how dancers and choreographers talk about their work or their own local scene, since styles and genres are still referred to as *núttímadans* post-2005. It is therefore safe to say, that the duality of ballet and modern dance, modern dance being defined as

“dance techniques that are not ballet”, has a strong seat within the Icelandic dance discourse as well as in mass media coverage. *Samtímadans* became, with its advent 2005, a new option and idea of how one could speak about dance performances and styles located in Iceland. Furthermore it troubled the duality (that still exists) between ballet and *nútimadans*.

As can be seen, the discourse and terminology within the Icelandic dance scene is very fuzzy, unidentified and confusing. How has it come to be this way? From what does it emerge? To track down its causes, it is necessary to investigate the scene in its own terms and definitions in relation to its past, history and development.

## **2. The Past in the Present**

### 2.1 Dance history in Iceland 1907 – 2012 (The “official” documents)

The reason why the terminology and definitions are in such a confusing state can be said to be because the existing history does not reflect the past of contemporary dance in Iceland. So how has the Icelandic dance history been portrayed and published? Is there a sense of a shared idea or a common history? How well does the history represent the past?<sup>2</sup>

In his book, *Archeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault states that history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is incapable of disentangling it from one another. In other words, history in its traditional form takes it upon itself to memorize the monuments of the past, transform them into documents and thus give voice to those traces which in themselves are not verbal. Therefore history is the action of transforming documents into monuments (7).

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<sup>2</sup> To view a visual layout of the official and unofficial history of dance as an art form in Iceland, please see Appendix.

That is to say, history is a way of linking together events and creates ideas of events that human beings are “supposed” to remember as important.

By using Foucault’s notion of history, I will give an overview of the published documentation of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland by looking at what monuments of the past have been transformed into documents, to be able in the next chapter to cast a light on the omissions, breaks and the discontinuities of the narrative that these documents claim. As a consequence of shining a light on the breaks, the discontinuities and on monuments that have not been transformed into documents, it is possible to create new histories and challenge the idea of the “total history” as an idea of the only history (10).

It is important to be aware of the fact that the history of dance as an art form in Iceland has not yet been published. It is currently being written by Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir, dance theoretician. Nevertheless, information about Icelandic dance history has been published on certain websites and in reports. Now, I will briefly present the key events and figures from the “official” presentation of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, found on the following websites: *www.dance.is*, the website of The National Association of Dancers in Iceland and *www.leikminjasafn.is*, the website of the Theatre Museum of Iceland. The history of dance as an art form in Iceland was also published in *Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*<sup>3</sup> in 2010. It is important to note that there is no author assigned to these documents on the history of dance as an art form in Iceland and these documents are not in a state where they could be called “histories”. They could more be referred to as author – less summaries

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<sup>3</sup>The Dance Policy of the Association of Dancers in Iceland. The aim of the policy is to serve as a future vision and an action plan for dance in Iceland for the next ten years.

of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, summaries of events from the past that have been considered important.

The informal beginning (according to these three sources) of dance as an art form in Iceland is traced back to the arrival of the Danish king (and Iceland at that time) in 1907. Among his escorts was ballet dancer Georg Berthelsen, and actress Stefanía Guðmundsdóttir, who he had met in Denmark two years before. It was Guðmundsdóttir that convinced Bethelsen to come to Iceland to teach dance. That year, Bethelsen taught a style called *plastikk*<sup>4</sup> (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 15). Between 1914 and 1918, Guðmundsdóttir travelled to Copenhagen to study different dance styles, for example ballet and tango. When she came back home to Iceland, she started teaching in Reykjavík, as well as creating choreographies for the Reykjavík Theatre Company (*1947; Félag íslenskra listdansara stofnað*).

The next event to be considered worthy of inclusion by these summaries is a performance by one of Stefania's students, Ásta Norðmann, which took place at Iðnó on 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1922. She had been living and studying in Leipzig in Germany for a while and became familiar with trends and new movements within the field of dance<sup>5</sup> (*1947; Félag íslenskra listdansara stofnað*). Norðmann worked as a choreographer for the Reykjavík Theatre Company from 1924 and founded the first dance school in Iceland in 1929 (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 14). From

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<sup>4</sup>According to *Ordbog over det Danske sprog*, since 1936, *Plastikk* has the following definitions.

1. Manufacture of anything in three-dimensional
2. (Ability and Skill in) Execution of beautiful harmonic body movements,
3. (Ability to create) An input word forms (literary) production, which appears (as a picture) with the spatial reality of imprinting, with vivid clearness (980).

<sup>5</sup> According to the dance theoretician Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir, Ásta did not say much about the dances that she studied by the Opera in Leipzig. But judging from pictures it looks as if she studied both classical ballet and some sort of a free dance. Whether that was associated with Laban, Wigman or others, it is not known (Björnsdóttir Ingibjörg. Email interview).

1930 there was quite a lot of growth in dance teaching. At that time the schools taught a mix of dance styles, such as ballroom dances, ballet and children dances (1947; *Félag íslenskra listdansara stofnað*). Rigmor Hansen started a school in 1929, Helene Jonsson started a school in 1933 and in 1937 Ellen Kid started a school<sup>6</sup> (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 15). It is stated that around 1940, young dance students began to go abroad to educate themselves further in the art of dance. In 1943, Sif Þórs went to study in London and Sigríður Ármann to New York (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 15). The next historical event that is mentioned to be important in these official documents is the establishment of the National Association of Icelandic Dancers on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1947. It was founded at the home of Ásta Norðmann and she was the first chairwoman. Among other founders were Sigríður Ármann, Sif Þórz, Rigmor Hansen and Elly Þorláksson. They had all been studying dance abroad and had by this time began working in the Icelandic theatre scene. The first aim of the association was to get dance as an art form acknowledged as an independent and a significant art form, but the tendency was to categorize it as additional or supplementary to theatre (*Íslenskur listdans*). The next important event that is mentioned takes place in 1950, when the first Icelandic choreography was created. It was created by Sigridur Ármann and called *Eldur*. In 1952, the artistic director of the National Theatre established The Ballet School of the National Theatre. In 1967 the dancer Bára Magnúsdóttir established the first school that does not have ballet as its first technique, but the school had an emphasis on jazz dance training. In 1973 the director of the National Theatre established The Icelandic Dance Company. Its first artistic director was the British choreographer and ballet master Alan Carter. According to The Dance Policy, he staged the ballet *Coppelia* in 1975 (15). In 1980

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<sup>6</sup> According to Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir, their schools were called Dansskóli Ellen Kid who taught dance from 1937 – 1940, Dansskóli Rigmor Hanson 1929-1959 and Dansskóli Helene Jónsson 1933 – 1946. (Björnsdóttir, Ingibjörg. E-mail interview)

the dancer Nanna Gunnarsdóttir took over as the artistic director of the company, and the first whole evening of modern dance choreography was performed, a choreography by Jochen Ulrich<sup>7</sup>. She left in 1986. The first (and only) jazz dance company in Iceland was founded in 1987 by Bára Magnúsdóttir. The same year it is mentioned that the first independent dance company is founded, *Pars Pro Toto*, by the dancers Lára Stefánsdóttir and Katrín Hall, and the director Guðjón Pedersen. In 1990 the Icelandic Dance Company and the Ballet School of the National Theatre both move out of the National Theatre to a new space, and in 1991 they became two separate independent institutions. The Icelandic Dance Company had different directors until the year 1996, when Katrín Hall became its director and the company moved to the Reykjavík City Theatre. The same year the independent group *Dansleikhús með Ekka (Dance theatre with Ekka)* is founded by the dance and acting students Karen Maria Jónsdóttir, Erna Ómarsdóttir, Kolbrún Jónsdóttir and Aino Freyja Jarvela. In 1998 the Icelandic Dance Company performed *Stoolgame* by Jiri Kylian<sup>8</sup> and *Night* by Jorma Uotinen<sup>9</sup> (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 14). It is mentioned that in 2000 the dancer Erna Ómarsdóttir started to gain attention as a young and upcoming dancer and choreographer in Europe for her performance in the

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<sup>7</sup> Jochen Ulrich is a German choreographer, who began his career in 1967 as a dancer in the Cologne Opera, He is co-founder of dance-Forum Cologne, which was formed in 1971 as the first modern dance company in Germany at the Cologne Opera. Since 2006, he is the ballet director of the State Theatre in Linz (Jochen Ulrich).

<sup>8</sup> Jiří Kylián started his dance career at the age of nine, at the School of the National Ballet in Prague. He left Prague when he received a scholarship for the Royal Ballet School in London in 1967. After having made three ballets for NDT (*Viewers*, *Stoolgame* and *La Cathédrale Engloutie*), he became the company's artistic director, together with Hans Knill, in 1975 and holds that position still today (Jiri Kylian).

<sup>9</sup> Jorma Uotinen is a Finnish choreographer, dancer and artistic director. He studied at the Finnish National Ballet. He was the artistic director of the Kuopio Dance Festival and artistically directed the Finnish National Ballet 1992 – 2001. He has created several works for Finnish National Ballet, Helsinki City Theatre, and worked for Ballet and dance companies in Europe such as Royal Danish Ballet, Opera de Paris, Teatro La Scala and The Royal Swedish Ballet among others (Jorma Uotinen Bibliography).

piece *My Movements are Alone like Streetdogs* by Jan Fabre<sup>10</sup>. The same year the Icelandic Dance Company premiered *Baldr*, choreographed by Jorma Uotinen. In 2002 Reykjavík Dance Festival was founded. Its aim was to become a platform for independent choreographers in Iceland, which did not have an official platform before. In 2005 a Contemporary Dance Department was founded within the University of the Arts, and Karen Maria Jónsdóttir was hired as its director. In 2010, the Reykjavík Dance Atelier was opened (*Dansstefna Félags íslenskra listdansara*, 14), a workspace for independent choreographers (*Íslenskur listdans*).

As can be seen from this overview of the published history, there is an emphasis on the development and the establishment of the National Ballet School and the Icelandic Dance Company. Ballets that were staged are named as well as development and establishment of institutions. Performances by independent choreographers, the history of other dance centers or schools and documented returns of dance artists that left the country to study dance abroad have not been transformed into documents in these summaries and therefore been left to be forgotten from the local history of dance as an art form. As Foucault stated, it is important to remember that history is an action of transforming documents into monuments. A way of linking together events and create an idea of events that are “supposed” to be important. What is “supposed” to be important in this discourse and context of the dance history in Iceland is the import of ballet to the country, the establishment of The Icelandic Dance Company and The National Ballet School (former The National Theatre Ballet School). There are as well only mentioned performances that are choreographed by classically trained

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Fabre has over the past 30 years produced works as a visual artist, theatre director and author. Jan Fabre is renowned for expanding the horizons of every genre to which he applies his artistic vision (Theatre Maker).

choreographers, or work with the technique of classical ballet that are staged by the Icelandic Dance Company.

Thus, the official history and the narration that is created in these three author-less summaries is the history of the import of ballet and the institutions that teach ballet. To be able to investigate the origins of contemporary dance in Iceland it is clear that this history, that is at the moment the only history of dance as an art form in Iceland, does not lead to the origins or traces of contemporary dance in Iceland. Therefore, to be able to get a wider idea of those origins and traces, it is necessary to break up this narrative and find the blind spots in the past, where the development and past of contemporary dance in Iceland resides. And to be able to track down the discontinuities and the breaks that this published narrative postulates, an investigation into the unpublished past, “the off – center”, is necessary.

## 2.2 The undocumented story

In his book, *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault spots a problem presented by historical analyses. He asks how can there be continuity, one pattern for many minds, with only one horizon? He states that the problem is no longer about tradition or tracing a line. The histories of thought, knowledge, philosophy, and literature are discovering more and more discontinuities in their histories (5 - 6). He continues on the same topic in *Foucault, Live Interviews* and states that structure will never capture history in totality. Structure is a process, which is discontinuous by nature (48-49). Foucault critiques this modernist view of one continuity and states that to try to understand the society and civilization, it is also necessary to look at it in terms of what is excluded and rejected: to look at what it does not want, how it suppresses certain things and what it lets fall into forgetfulness (65). He continues on this

discourse in the essay *Return to History*, where he argues that history itself is a bourgeois invention; a narrative that is created and constructed, so as to present the domination of the higher classes as inevitable, and therefore to “prove” the impossibility of revolution. This dominant order seems to have appeared “naturally” and “organically” and is supposed to reflect the natural order of things. Consequently, he argues, the role of history must be reconsidered if history will ever be detached from the ideological system in which it originated and developed (423). To be able to grasp a better understanding of discourses, societies and ideologies, Foucault looks at the marginal or the minor histories. To be able to trace back the origins, traces and the discourse of the Icelandic contemporary dance scene, it is important to adopt Foucault’s method and look at the “forgotten” past of Icelandic dance as an art form and discuss why it was excluded from the official accounts.

When scanning the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, it is quite clear that ballet was the most common way of training to become a dancer in the country. It can be seen in the performances that are mentioned throughout the history. It can also be seen in selection of choreographers that came to work with the Icelandic Dance Company in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Jochen Ulrich, Jiri Kylian and Jorma Uotinen. From the official history it also appears as if the only school that educated artists working within the dance field for a very long time was The National Ballet School. A detail that is also true of the Icelandic Dance Company: a lot of focus was put on performing ballets from its beginning, with all the directors of the company coming from a ballet tradition. Thus, it can be said that ballet was the “right technique” if one wanted to be a professional dancer. Katrín Hall, who became the

director of The Icelandic Dance Company in 1996 stated in an interview in Morgunblaðið, on 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2000:

Modern dance is such a wide concept. I have chosen to try and use the technique and the ability of the dancers in the company. They all have very strong classical background. I also choose choreographers for the company that I believe fit the company the best (*Heimilið er heilagt*).

The choreographer Ólöf Ingólfssdóttir, and former director of the Contemporary Dance Department, Karen María Jónsdóttir, comment on how this idea created a prevalent discourse in the local dance scene:

The discourse was that one had to be technically very good, very young, and get a place at the Icelandic Dance Company. It was the only chance to be a professional dancer in Iceland (Ingólfssdóttir, Ólöf).

It was expected that one should try to get into the Icelandic Dance Company. If that did not work out, one was written off as a dancer...and it was very shocking at that time to express the opinion that you did not want to be in the company, but to make your own work (Jónsdóttir, Karen María).

Thus, certain continuity and one horizon were created, where ballet became the dominant dance form and the “right” one. The only one acceptable if one wanted to be a professional dancer. What the official history portrays and emphasizes is a certain creation of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, as if there was nothing else happening in the country. It is a history that seems to portray a “natural” order of things, some sort of organic development that implies no need for questions.

When I began examining the history that is available, as well as conducting interviews with individuals working in the local contemporary dance scene, the two did not seem to run parallel. The official story did not lead me where the interviews led me, and thus I started to find discontinuities in the small amount that exists in the history of dance as an art form in Iceland. Interviewees talked about another past than was to be found in the official history of dance as an art form in Iceland; other schools, teachers and performances that were not mentioned in the summaries.

Dance as an art form in Iceland has another past, that remains hidden and outside the official history. One aspect of this is the influence of dance centers that didn't teach ballet, but focused on other dance styles. To accentuate this point, it is worth mentioning, only three of the sixteen I interviewed studied *only* at the National Ballet School before starting a higher education. Majority of the dance artists studied at the National Ballet School for a period of time, but also gained education elsewhere. Two dance centers that need to be mentioned in the context of the history of contemporary dance in Iceland and its origins and traces, are *Kramhúsið* and *Dansstúdíó Sóleyjar*. It is highly important to look into the history of these centers and its teachers to see what influenced students and thus the development of the contemporary dance scene in Iceland.

I will now present these two dance centers from the “unofficial” history of dance as an art form in Iceland with the aim to shine a better light on the origins and traces of contemporary dance in Iceland. My focus will be on investigating their import of international teachers to the country and looking into what these teachers taught, in order to show that there were other influences, genres and styles than have been accounted for. I have gathered information about these dance centers through interviews with their founders that give details of the teachers and courses, through interviews with choreographers and dance artists that studied in these places and had impact on their careers and by investigating archives of publications from these dance centers.

In 1980, Sóley Jóhannsdóttir founded *Dansstúdíó Sóleyjar* (*Nýr djassballetskóli*). The school taught jazz, but according to advertisements from the school, they also taught ballet and modern dance. It is noticeable in the advertisements from the school in the

1980s and 1990s that when that they did not only have Icelandic teachers, but also brought in international teachers, mostly from America. Her aim was to run a school that was offering a different type of dance than the other schools were offering. The school offered classes in tap, jazz, modern, flamenco and disco dancing (Jóhannsdóttir, Sóley. Email interview). Among teachers were Cornelius Carter, who trained at the Alvin Ailey School, and Shirlene Blake (*Dansstúdíó Sóleyjar heldur sumarnámskeið, Íslendingar gætu orðið dansarar á heimsmælikvarða, Dansstúdíó Sóleyjar, Dansstúdíó Sóleyjar 10 ára*)<sup>11</sup>.

*Kramhúsið* was founded in 1983. In 1984 they had workshops in modern dance and dance improvisation with a Danish choreographer named Jytte Kjøbæk and a choreographer from The U.S, Betty Toman. (*Kramhúsið dans – og leiksmiðja; Vor og sumarnámskeið*). This is the first documentation I have found regarding dance improvisation being taught in Iceland and it seems to be the only place where dance students could attend classes in improvisation at this time. It also stands out that in 1988, Anna Haynes taught courses in choreography. Haynes came from the Laban Centre of Movement, in London (*Júni og júlínámskeið hjá Kramhúsinu, Sex gestakennarar í Kramhúsinu í sumar*). And again, this is the first notion of choreography being taught in Iceland. Also in 1988, Joao Da Silva taught dance improvisation, but he studied at the European Dance Development Center in Arnhem, Netherlands<sup>12</sup> (*Upplyfting og heilsubót hjá Kramhúsinu!*).

As can be seen from this very short summary of international dance teachers, it is clear that there were influences, styles and techniques being imported that have not

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<sup>11</sup> There are no official documents over international teachers from this period and my only available sources about the history of the dance center are newspaper archives and a personal interview with Sóley herself.

<sup>12</sup> My only available sources regarding the past of *Kramhúsið* have been advertisements and coverage in newspapers. I asked the founder, Hafðís Jónsdóttir, to send me documents regarding international teachers, but she did not do so in time for a final version of this thesis.

been accounted for in the official history. When the education of the dance makers and the choreographers that currently work professionally in Iceland is researched, it is clear that the majority of them searched for education elsewhere than within the institution of the National Ballet School, before heading abroad to further educate themselves at BA level.

Considering this, it is clear that these dance centers hold a great historical importance in the search for the origins and traces of the contemporary dance scene, since they imported new ideas, movement styles and influences to Iceland. This minoritarian history in the Icelandic context carries thus other ideas and discourses than those included in the official history of dance in Iceland. Then, one might wonder, from what perspective the Icelandic dance history has been constructed, how it is written and which schools and institutions are qualified to enter into its history. At the moment, the studios that are mentioned here get no coverage in the official dance history and searching for information about them requires a thorough ground research. It is therefore highly important to write these centers into the Icelandic dance history to be able to better understand the origins of contemporary dance in Iceland and its context. It is especially important for individuals working in the local contemporary dance scene today, to understand and become aware of the fact that there are other discourses and histories existing, than the one that the official local dance history portrays.

As was stated before, the history of dance as an art form in Iceland has not yet been published and is currently being written by Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir. Access to documents and visual material is almost non - existing. There is also very little consciousness of the past within the Icelandic dance scene. In Agamben's terms,

being contemporary creates a certain relationship with the past and makes moments from it relevant again. But if the history is as same as dead to the local contemporary dance scene, how is it then possible to make connections between the past and the contemporary, between traces and influences, when the past is not known within the scene? In what ways can the past influence the present, if there is no history?

### 2.3. Being “unhistorical”

The consequence of an unhistorical dance scene is that hardly any dance artists are aware of what has come before their own generation, in terms of local activity, discourses and events. What, then, does this mean, when it comes to attempts from those working in the scene attempting to critically locate, and observe, the current discourses of the scene?

In his essay, *The Use and Abuse of History for Life* from 1873, Friederich Nietzsche discusses the notion of unhistoricity. One of his concepts is the idea of the “unhistorical beast”, which he describes as a beast that goes into the present, without leaving any remainder of itself. It is at every moment just what it is. He uses the image of the herd as an explanation:

Consider the herds that are feeding yonder: they know not the meaning of yesterday or to-day; they graze and ruminate, move or rest, from morning to night, from day to day, taken up with their little loves and hates, at the mercy of the moment, feeling neither melancholy nor satiety (1).

Nietzsche believed that the human was the opposite of this idea of the beast. As its opposite, the human is always resisting the weight of the past, which presses it down. Therefore, the human carries this invisible burden of the past all the time, and it is a burden that he or she cannot deny (2).

What happens, however, when the past is not known? Is the Icelandic contemporary dance scene burdened with the past? The choreographer Saga Sigurðardóttir describes the scene as being very informal:

It's more like things just happen and "roll on". One thing comes out of another and you just have a certain feeling about what is going on (Sigurðardóttir, Saga).

Sesselja Guðmundsdóttir dance theorist mentions the non-existing relationship between the dance artists and the local past:

Each generation only seems to know its own life. The artists that are working today do not know dancers and choreographers that were working before 1980, or even 1990. That means that all those performances, plus the influences and movements that have gone through the country in the past have not continued consciously to a new generation. I believe that each generation is because of this state, quite busy with itself (Magnúsdóttir, Sesselja).

If this is the case, then the past cannot be considered a conscious burden on the artists working in the local contemporary dance scene. As Magnúsdóttir and Sigurðardóttir both mention, the scene seems to be busy with its own time, without a consciousness of any history or past.

Would it be fair to say, then, that the artists working in the contemporary dance scene at present are Nietzschean "unhistorical beasts"? A case could be made for it. They work in the present and are only conscious of movements, styles and genres that exist in their local present. Once their time has passed, because of lack of documentation, written and visual ones, there is not much remainder of their discourses. The new generations are consequently invited to ignore it and consequently a culture of ignorance, with absorption into one's own time, becomes commonplace. There is, as a result, a scene in action that is nearly entirely without events that carry any historical importance to give account of the scene's arrival into the present.

Nietzsche states that art becomes monumental when it has effect on all ages. Art in the contemporary is not in favor of historical authority and therefore cannot be

monumental. The monumental art will never be reproduced, and the weight of its authority is invoked from the past (6 -7). Since art in the present is not in favor of historical authority and since there is no consciousness of other things than what is happening in the dance scene at each period, there is not a space for monumental art to be created. The unconsciousness of the scene's local past creates a certain idea of freedom from the burden of monumental art:

We feel we can do so much here. There is more freedom and no institution like Rosas, for example. And I still do not know the Western dance history so well. So I have mostly worked from a feeling; what comes out of me. I believe that if you do not know anything, then you can do a lot (Ómarsdóttir, Erna).

However, stating that there is *no* idea of monumental art within the Icelandic contemporary dance scene is perhaps too simplistic. Ómarsdóttir claims the advantage of having some sort of erased “empty space” in Iceland, since it is free from history and thus in a way, of the notion of monumental art. But that is perhaps a too simplistic way to look at the situation. By stating that there is a feeling of no history hinders the a contemporary situation of the local dance scene in Iceland and keeps alive an idea of an empty space, which is of course, certainly not the case. Nietzsche states that the human is always the result of a previous generation, but at the same time resistant of their errors. Though we condemn the errors and think we have escaped them, we cannot escape the fact that that is where the present grows from. Thus, it is a conflict between the inherited nature and the knowledge, between a new discipline and an ancient tradition (8 – 9). Through accounting the local dance history, it is clear that ballet has been made the most important dance technique from the beginning. This has been discussed in the chapters above, in the discussion regarding the history and discourses of contemporary dance in Iceland. Through studying different dance techniques, and their codified movements, the bodies of professional contemporary dance artists in Iceland are informed by past dominant styles and an ideology of how

a dance body should be trained, in order to be qualified as a dancer. On the other hand, there are no dance institutions that fall under the category of “monumental art” in Nietzschean terms as Ómarsdóttir mentions. The only institutionalized dance company is the Icelandic Dance Company, but it cannot be defined as “monumental art”, since its repertoire has not been consistent throughout its history. It has not kept the same ideology or aesthetics and has been very diverse in choosing choreographers, despite being very ballet oriented in the beginning.

Even though the Icelandic contemporary dance scene has been described here as an unhistorical beast, there is of course a past that follows it. The local scene is “burdened with” for example forms of technique styles and codified movements from the dance education. What is missing within the local scene is awareness; an awareness of ones own past. Knowledge of how the scene has developed, and why it has developed that way is necessary for these individuals to realize, in order for them to make a choice about how they respond to this burden. It is necessary to know what ideologies you are working from, and from where these ideologies have been imported, if you want to situate yourself within the current local and global contemporary dance context.

Thus, the effect of not having a clear idea of the “monumental art” within contemporary dance scene in Iceland, an accessible dance history, or a visual archive of past performances has created some sort of “unhistorical scene”. Artists are only conscious of their own local time and era and not of the past, besides the old local discourse about the importance of ballet. Thus, the effect of only being in the now has formed a scene that has the feeling of something that “rolls around”. The contemporary dance scene is unaware of choreographers, performances,

developments, traces and origins of its own local scene through the years, especially the past that does not account for the history of the Icelandic Dance Company or the National Ballet School.

But since the context and the history of the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland is not well known, do dance artists in Iceland look elsewhere in the search for a context? Is it important for local dance artists to be able to situate themselves within a bigger context than their own generation, for example the canonical history of Western dance as an art form? What is the connection to the Western canonical history of dance and how does it relate to the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland?

#### 2.4 The local dance scene and the context of the canonical history of Western dance

As was seen in Chapter 2.2, there exists a different discourse and terminology within the Icelandic contemporary dance scene, when it comes to the idea of what “modern dance” is. The usage and the discourse of the terms “núttímadańs” and “samttímadańs” do not follow the same terminology as “modern dance” and “contemporary dance” in the canonical history of Western dance as an art form. Considering this, how can the local contemporary scene in Iceland thus be “contemporary”, if the definitions are not following the same discourse as the context of Western dance? In her essay, *Performing the Other Body*, Bojana Kunst discusses the claim that the West has laid upon contemporary dance. She states that the Western body is trained and exploited with a number of techniques at its disposal. It is always giving information to us about its own physicality, which is somehow always present. She believes that it is very important for the Western institutionalization of contemporary dance that it is always

representative and exclusively in relation to the “present” (3). What, then, is the “present” in the Icelandic dance scene, and how does it compare to the canonical history? Do we consider ourselves to have the same right to “contemporaneity?” And how do we deal with our confusion over terminology and defining genres? When Icelandic dancers and choreographers are asked questions about terminology and what they consider modern dance and contemporary dance in Icelandic context and language, they have difficulties given straight answers:

When you say *nútimadans* and *samtímadans* in Icelandic, I do not relate it to the Western European description (Ólafsdóttir, Halla).

There is some dysfunction in the system and our scene is based on individuals who give off this dysfunction. None of the schools, except the university have identified themselves other than as ballet schools. And they do not seem ready to define what it is that they do. And if it is not clear for them, no wonder it is a confusion (Gunnarsdóttir, Katrín).

As was stated in Chapter 2.2 where the confusion in terminology within the discourse of Icelandic contemporary dance scene was discussed, it is clear that the Icelandic definition of modern dance (*nútimadans*) and contemporary (*samtímadans*) does not coincide with the canonical context of Western dance history. The scene has not followed the same development in the same time span, and one could wonder whether it should not find its own definition of these words, and thus free itself from the Western dance history’s understanding of them, or whether that is at all possible. One of the reasons for the different discourse could be explained by the way the scene has developed, which seems to be identified with big jumps, from one era to another.

In *Return to History*, Michel Foucault states that history is not only a single time span but rather a multiplicity of time spans that twist together and cover one another. He states that the old idea of time should be replaced by this idea of multiple time spans. Historical time is therefore not rooted in a biological evolution that carries all events.

There are multiple time spans, that each carries certain type of events that must also be multiplied, just as the time span must be multiplied (430).

If one was to parallel the time span of the canonical history of Western Dance with the time span of the local dance history in Iceland, it is clear that the time span is very different and there are big jumps between events that take place in the local history of dance in Iceland. During the era of modern dance in America and Europe 1890s – 1960s, Iceland only was introduced to dance in 1907, and the first dance performance in Iceland was in 1922, the first schools founded in the 1930s and the Ballet School of the National Theatre in 1952. During the era of post-modern dance in the USA and Tanztheater movement in Germany (1950s – 1980s), the Icelandic Dance Company was founded in 1973 and the main emphasis seems to have been on staging ballets such as *Coppelia*. From 1980s onwards, when the Flemish “new wave” appeared with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus and Jan Fabre among others, the first classes in improvisations, choreography and the first independent dance group was founded in 1987. What is clear from this short comparison is that the local scene in Iceland has not been following the time span of the movements and styles that have been going on in the continent of Europe. Movements, information on choreographers and techniques arrive to Iceland after they have been established elsewhere and are thus arriving years after they were developed and approved. That is clear when one looks again at the problematic of terminology.

In the present time in Iceland, local contemporary dance makers are aware of the definition of modern dance in the canonical history of Western dance and define modern dance as such. But they still use the word “núttímadans”, when it comes to define what they do publicly in the Icelandic context. The reason that is given for using the definition of “núttímadans” is often said to be that it is easier in the bigger

context, and people understand what kind of dance is being talked about, but this creates a dysfunction and confusion within the contemporary dance discourse in Iceland. It is not clear what genres and styles are being referred to, and in what context they are. Furthermore, while the scene itself holds on to the duality of ballet and “everything else”, when it refers to its own work it is clear that the discourse will not change. Therefore it is interesting to consider whether the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland wants to adjust to the definitions of the Western canonical dance history? Or should the scene settle on its own definitions of modern dance and ballet and continue with the duality that has firmly set ground in its discourse? And how does the Icelandic contemporary dance scene relate, then, to the claim of the West over “contemporary dance” as Bojana Kunst proposes? Can it call itself “modern”, but still be “contemporary”?

What the Icelandic contemporary dance scene can be defined as is a scene that is confused about what it is in relation to the canonical history of Western dance. It is in an unhistorical state, without a consciousness of its manifestations of monumental art. It contains individuals that have been trained in different styles and movements that carry different ideologies that do not know how to define themselves within the Icelandic context or how to appropriate the new styles within the local scene. It is a scene that uses words and definitions from the Western dance history and aims to be within the same contemporary discourse and time span as the dance world in Northern Europe, but because of its development and its periphery situation, it is stuck in some sort of unhistorical state of the “modern”. How does this situation affect its conception, the genre, its styles and the context of the local contemporary dance scene?

### 3. On the Periphery

Iceland is an island and is thus relatively remote. Influences do access the island, but not as easily as if it was situated within the mainland of Europe. Thus, one can ask, what is the conception of contemporary dance in Iceland? How has it formed?

#### 3.1 Conceptions of contemporary dance in Iceland

There are two points worth considering, when it comes to investigating the origins and traces of contemporary dance in Iceland. Firstly, the local dance artists that reside at the island and do not leave need to use “the tools” that they can find there. Secondly, learning from an “original” source in Iceland is hardly ever possible. As has been stated, dance artists commonly left the country to further educate themselves. At the same time, it is not very diverse where they went to study. The majority of dance artists in the recent years have headed to the Netherlands or Brussels, to what has been called the ‘centre of contemporary dance’ in Europe.

What influences their choice of destination? Many of the dancers that went abroad, went where their teachers were from, since that is where the flow of information came from, and they did not know what else was happening in other parts of the world. They had to use techniques and information that was (and is) at their disposal and that is what influenced them. They become “bricoleurs”.

In his book, *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi – Strauss defines the notion of the bricolage. A bricoleur is someone who has to use what is there whatever the task is ahead, since there is nothing else at its disposal (11). His or her universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his or her game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’. That is to say, with a set of tools and materials that are always finite and also heterogeneous, because what they contain bear no relation to the

current project, or indeed to any particular project. It is a result that has depended on all other events that there have been to renew or enrich the stock, or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions (12).

One could look at the situation in Iceland in this way. If a dance student studied at *Dansstúdió Sóleyjar* and had a teacher from New York, and another student in *Kramhúsið* had an improvisation teacher from the Netherlands, then it is clear that they received different education, influences and information about where to study and to further their education. The styles and movements that were current and available to them at certain times became the only tool for young dance makers to use in order to contextualize themselves within, but without a full knowledge of its specific history, origin or discourse in a local or global context. They looked towards where they were taught, since they did not know where else to look. When these dance artists then return back home, most often they start teaching the new generation what they have been taught, and in that way add to the movement vocabulary and style of the local dance scene. The students and local dance artists believed that what they were being taught, and what they saw being performed in pieces, was representative of the international contemporary dance scene, without having full context or background of where those styles come from or from where they originate. The influence that those artists bring, and brought back home with them, bear very little relation to where it comes from for the local dance artists and students, even though the returned artists bring with them, in their teaching techniques, and performing pieces, multiple relations to various origins of dance styles from “the contemporary scene” in Northern Europe. The local contemporary dance scene is unaware of those relations and the Icelandic dance students do not have a sense of origin and traces of these techniques. They appropriate its materialistic and physical

aspect, when they learn the specific contemporary dance styles. But is this a “bad way” of learning, on the basis that the students do not have a full context of what they learn or how they use it? Does that mean that they are less educated than students that study on the mainland? That leads to another important aspect of the conception of the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland, which is the notion and discourse of second hand knowledge.

In her essay, *Second Hand Knowledge*, Ana Vujanović states that the largest bulk of knowledge reaching the peripheries is second-hand knowledge. The peripheries are the regions with respect to the centers of the First World, Europe, in the political, economic, scholarly, artistic, or any other sense of the word (1). She explains second-hand knowledge as a mediated and unempirical type of knowledge that is gained without a direct insight into the subject. It arrives through intermediaries that had their insight into the events or the facts. First-hand knowledge is gained through experience. Second-hand knowledge is gained believing what someone else is telling us. Second-hand knowledge is often obtained in art, from so called acknowledged authorities, regardless of whether their authorization is official or not. It can be for example from theoreticians, critics, professors, or from someone who is trusted, such as peers or like-minded colleagues (2). An important aspect of second hand knowledge is that in everyday speech, it has negative connotations and meaning. It is viewed as a knowledge that has not been verified or that is not based on factual insight and thus lacks basic understanding of facts. Vujanovic believes that these negative connotations also indicate faith in the objective, positive knowledge that is gained in a direct, empirical way by factual insight, experience, and analysis. That means that first-hand knowledge stands for objectivity, neutrality, and positivity, and thus all interpretation is undesirable, since it distorts the “image of reality” as it really

is (3). What is crucial for Vujanovic in the social sense is that the hierarchical relationship between first-hand and second-hand knowledge symptomatically reflects the hierarchical order of centre and periphery in the global process of knowledge production and knowledge exchange. If we say that in a region a second-hand knowledge has always been the dominant form of knowledge, that statement has a negative connotation. Its aim is precisely to place the region in a subordinate position with respect to the centre. It is only in this way that the periphery is actually interpellated and becomes a periphery (4).

If we look at these ideas in relation to the situation of the contemporary dance scene in Iceland, one can say that the education for dance artists that study in Iceland is formed by second-hand knowledge. Since in the beginning of development of dance as an art form in Iceland, dancers have gone abroad, studied dance and then returned to teach students, create pieces, and bring “home” new ideas about artists, styles and genres from their education. In that way, the teaching and the sharing reinforce a culture, in which the “center” is thought of as somewhere else. They have taught students styles and ideas about “contemporary dance”, and with their new knowledge these students have absorbed an idea regarding what contemporary dance is both ideologically and aesthetically.

Vujanovic emphasizes the point, however, that second-hand knowledge is not only about teaching. Artistic directors, those who decide which artists, teachers and performances to bring to Iceland, also carry a certain power of selection. A broad look at dance artists that have been imported to the country, since the 1990 are Merce Cunningham, Pina Bausch, Sascha Waltz and Henrietta Horn. Regular flow of international performances is not common, due to geographical and financial reasons. According to information found on the website of the University of the Arts, teachers

that have been imported to teach courses since the beginning of the Contemporary Dance Department are for example Thomas Lehmen, David Zambrano, Alix Eynudi and Rasmus Ölme (*Innranet Listaháskóla Íslands. Öll námskeið*). These artists were selected, because they are considered to be dance artists with an important knowledge of the international contemporary dance scene that can be valuable to the local contemporary dance scene:

We tried to create a context and find a common thread in the guest teachers that we brought to the country and were conscious of what knowledge we wanted to import, what ideology and systems. The aim was to inform our students and the nation what exists out there in the world (Jónsdóttir, Karen María).

Thus, this power of selection is also a form of second hand knowledge. It is not only apparent when it comes to face-to-face teaching, but also in artistic decisions about who is “worth” bringing to the country to perform or teach, and who not. So, as Vujanovic states, it is a form of second hand knowledge as well (4). The impact of those decisions is that it creates a certain idea of *the* international contemporary dance scene, and as well a certain idea of how the contemporary dance scene in Iceland should look at its own styles, movements and status in relation to it.

How, though, is its conception different from anywhere else in the Western world, one might ask? Is it not the case that all scenes develop in this way? In her article, Vujanovic deconstructs the hierarchical binary between first and second-hand knowledge, by illuminating the fact that second-hand knowledge has a negative connotation. She argues that it is this negative connotation that creates the notion of the subordinate position in respect to the centre, the idea of the periphery. Contemporary dance in Iceland has developed through processes of second-hand knowledge and bricolage, and I suggest that these processes have certainly contributed to a prevalent notion in Iceland that contemporary dance on the island is

peripheral and subordinate to a centre that is elsewhere. When those influences are imported, the contemporary dance community “adds them”, or “borrows them” into the existing scene, its discourses, movements, styles, to be able to become more “contemporary” according to the Western discourses of contemporary dance. Through this relationship, the local contemporary dance scene re-instates the idea of being “off – center” and not being a part of “the center”. Therefore what the local contemporary dance scene itself creates, is a scene that is constantly following an idea of what it means to be contemporary within the Western dance discourse. It does so at the expense of looking, as well, at its own local development and past, at its own definitions and contemporariness. Consequently, it never manages to understand itself before or beyond the idea of “center” and “off – center”.

It would be reasonable to consider, however, whether or not thinking before, or beyond, this hegemony, could ever be achievable, considering the fact that the local contemporary scene has been conceived and developed through this hegemonic paradigm. Can it be anything else than a scene that follows the Western discourses of “contemporary dance”?

### 3.2 “Icelandic” contemporary dance and the idea of the minor

I sometimes feel like it (the local contemporary dance scene) is the smaller sibling in a sibling relationship. It is trying to behave like the older one and looks up to the older sibling. And it is doing very well. It is just smaller, but very promising (Sigurðardóttir, Saga).

We love what is “new”. We are isolated and we are very scared of getting behind and I believe that is why we are always looking for the “new thing”. We want to be cool, be in the game, in the world (Ketilsdóttir, Steinunn).

We want to imitate a structure that exists somewhere else. We need a festival and a dance house and then we search to other countries and to things that have been institutionalized in other countries. We try to imitate the structure but we do not have the money to do it. We tend to think from the establishment and how “they” did it “over there”, when actually the contemporary discourse is trying to break this idea and trying to find ways how we can do things differently (Ólafsdóttir, Halla).

In *One Manifesto Less*, Gilles Deleuze explains the minor as someone who is “without future or past, she has only becoming, a middle, by which she communicates with other times, other spaces” (208). Deleuze states that minority designates a condition that is the situation of group that is excluded from the majority. The group can also be included, but as a subordinate fraction in relation to a standard of measure that makes the law and fixes the majority. He states that minority no longer designates a factual condition, but a becoming in which one is engaged. He says that minority designates the capacity for becoming, while majority designates the power of the state of situation (222).

If one was to look at the contemporary dance scene in Iceland in this perspective, it can be said that it is a minoritarian one, as it is geographically excluded from the majority, which is the western claim of the contemporary as explained by Bojana Kunst. It is unconscious of its local past, does not have its own written history, uncertain of its development in the future and is currently in the middle of realizing what it is and what identifies it aesthetically, ideologically and politically. It is trying to become its own scene, but does not understand its context, references or definitions to build on and refer to. It is therefore in a state of not knowing what it will become in the future or what it wants to become. There is no clear identity, definitions or discourse within it. It is as well a matter of becoming as well as being, between its future and its past. The local contemporary dance scene is in a constant process of becoming something, but it has no clear idea of what it is working towards. It is in a minoritarian unhistorical state of being where there is no representation of local monumental art, therefore, clinging to an idea of a peripheral situation as a consequence of how the scene has been conceived. The individuals within the local contemporary dance community situate themselves within the western canonical

dance history and its ideas, but are in truth, because of the conditions in Iceland and the development of the local contemporary dance scene, working within other definitions than those of the Western contemporary dance scene, and thus should not be interpellating the idea of the “center” and the idea that “contemporary dance” only comes from a certain place:

Regarding those who go abroad to Belgium, Netherlands and Germany, we often look at what they bring as a certain truth, and we forget that Belgium, Netherlands and Germany is such a small area in comparison to the world. Those people bring back certain knowledge and they go and teach this message, which is great, but it should not be as an idea of the “truth”. We have to remember where we come from, from where the information is coming from and be aware that there are totally other things going on (Ketilsdóttir, Steinunn).

However, since it is in a minor state that is trying to follow an idea of “the contemporary dance scene”, are the aesthetic identities of the local contemporary dance scene the same as what is considered contemporary dance in an international context?

### 3.3 Contemporary dance in Iceland – aesthetic identities

When asked what identifies the independent contemporary dance scene in Iceland, there appear to be very clear characteristics that the interviewees agree on. What is considered to identify the local scene is a strong connection to theatricality, expression and narration:

We are not very abstract. We are always on the verge of a story (Ingólfssdóttir, Ólöf).

The scene is very searching and we like innovations. But we do not dig deep into things. We do not take one thing and commit, we take a flavor from here and there. On the outside there is a very clear merge between theatre and dance. Expressive movements are more common than movement as form (Ketilsdóttir, Steinunn).

It is a mixture of a rough physical style and a very expressive one. Theatrical elements are prominent as well as big personalities and strong individuals. This is a bit of an individual country, this scene here (Gunnarsdóttir, Katrín).

I feel like everyone is trying to make the same piece, a dance-theater performance which is chaotic but with a distinct movement style (Bjarnarson, Ragnheiður).

Is it then possible to say that these identities, aesthetical connections to theatre, narration and specific forms of expressivity are unique to the contemporary dance scene in Iceland in the present?

The first independent dance company that was formed, Pars Pro Toto, in 1987, emphasized mixing together dance and theatre in their first production, *En andinn er veikur*:

We borrow texts from Heiner Muller and Georg Büchner's plays, and we also use the story of Woyzeck. We put different texts into our story and connect them. This piece is created first and foremost from a feeling and not from forms and movements as a traditional dance performance (...*en andinn er veikur*).

In this performance we tie together music, text and dance so it becomes one whole. The piece is about individuals that all have, each in their own way. The same strong need but lack courage to act on it. (*Pars pro toto: en andinn er veikur*).

Ólöf Ingólfssdóttir describes her performances through her career as “little stories” being told, and believes that her work is very narrative based:

Many of the things that I do can be categorized as dance-theatre and connected to the everyday. There is usually a narration, not that I want one, it just happens (Ingólfssdóttir, Ólöf).

In the 1990s Dansleikhús með Ekka unconsciously brought the idea and definition of “dansleikhús” i.e. dance theatre into the discourse of the local dance scene:

We started calling our work dance-theater, to try to identify what we were creating. We really had no idea what that concept meant, but half of us were acting students, and the other half dance students (Jónsdóttir, Karen María).

Considering this, there seems then to have been a certain aura of experimentation and newness around the idea of experimenting with theatrical elements within the dance form and a way of creating something “new” from the 1980s. However, as can be seen by going back into the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, it is clear that dance and theatre, as art forms and institutions, have been tightly linked together since dance as an art form was imported to the country. It was an actress that instigated the import of dance to Iceland. The National Ballet School and The Icelandic Dance Company were founded under the hat of the National Theatre by its artistic directors

and participated in plays and performances in the theatre while they resided within it. Thus, the local historical connection of dance and theatre in Iceland is more than only an aesthetic one. Dance has been intertwined with theatre and its institutions from its conception in Iceland and this relationship is not one of equals. As was stated in the short overview of the history of dance as an art form in Iceland, one of the main goals of the Icelandic Dance Association was to get dance as an art form acknowledged as an independent and a significant art form, as the tendency was to categorize it as additional or supplementary to theatre. Which in a way, it still is today.

The history of theatre in Iceland is older and more established than the history of dance. The beginning of theatre in Iceland is usually traced back to the performances that took place at the school in Hólavellir in the last decade of 17<sup>th</sup> century (1796; *Hrólfur eftir Sigurð Pétursson frumsýndur í Hólavallarskóla*). In 1894, the first official play was performed in Reykjavík, in 1897, the Reykjavík Theatre Company was established and in 1950 the National Theatre was opened (*Annáll íslenskrar leiklistarsögu*). The dance scene has been performing within theatres in Iceland from its conception, first in the theatre of the Reykjavík Theatre Company, then in The National theatre and with the Reykjavík City Theatre (former Reykjavík Theatre Company). Independent dance groups apply to the Theatre Board of Iceland once a year for funding for the creation of new productions. It was only in 2011 that the dance scene got a representative within the board (*Ársskýrsla 2011*). The Contemporary Dance Department within the University of the Arts falls under a department previously known as the Theater department, but currently holds the name “The Stage Arts Department”. Within that department there is also the Acting Department and Theatre Theory and Practice department. Currently there is one small independent dance institution in Iceland, The Reykjavík Dance Atelier that opened

one year ago. The Atelier is created specifically as a workspace for independent dancers and choreographers in Iceland and it is the only dance institution that has no connection to theatre institutions.

From these examples, it is clear that dance has been in a state of the minor in its relationship with theatre throughout its development, politically, historically and aesthetically. Just as Sigurðardóttir's metaphor of the local dance scene as a smaller sibling towards "the contemporary scene" in Europe, can also be applied to the relationship between theatre and dance. The local dance scene has had to rely on its institutions and funding for its artistic development since its conception until today. Theatre has thus been dominating in this relationship from the beginning. An interesting metaphor for the power relations between theater and dance in Iceland today and for the situation of dance as an art form in Iceland is that The Icelandic Dance Company is based in the basement of the City Theatre - underneath the world of theatre.

The reason why dance artists started looking towards theatrical elements to work with creatively and not towards other art forms such as visual arts could have been an unconscious way of trying to get out of the state of the minoritarian within the performing arts in Iceland by importing narration, expressivity and theatricality into the work of the local dance scene. However, by doing so, the local dance scene interpellated the idea of the minoritarian by working within the frame of the element that is at the same time relegating it to its minoritarian state. Thus, what seems to aesthetically identify the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland are elements that come from theatrical traditions, which have been linked to the history of dance in Iceland from the beginning in the form of institutions and within its aesthetics from

the 1980s - when independent dance groups and choreographers started creating performances. Working with theatrical traditions has an aura of being “different” and “current”, even though its past proves otherwise and by working with elements from theatre enforces its minor political status towards its institutions.

Thus, what is considered to be “new” within the local dance scene in Iceland cannot be said to be so. Theatrical aesthetics have entered the local contemporary scene because of its relationship with the Icelandic stage arts and have been around since the 1908s.

Even though the local contemporary dance scene tries to follow movements, styles and aesthetics of “the contemporary dance scene” in Europe, there are clearly certain local identities and discourses regarding what is considered current, experimental and contemporary in Iceland. The local contemporary dance scene in Iceland does “borrow” or appropriates styles and techniques from abroad, but then uses them within their own discourses and ideas that already exist and are regarded contemporary, even though they are not.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have investigated how it is possible to identify and locate contemporary dance as it takes place in Iceland in the present. I have explored its origins, traces and tried to locate its current discourses. I have discussed the ambiguous relationship that currently exists between the Western canonical history of dance and the history of contemporary dance in Iceland. As I have argued, this ambiguous relationship that Icelandic contemporary dance holds with its past has created problematic in how dance is observed, understood and developed critically.

To argue my case, I approached the investigation through Agamben's notion of being a contemporary as a way to approach the problem of defining contemporary dance. I explained the confusing state of terminology and definitions of the terms "samtímadans" and "núttímadans" within the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland. To explain how that confusing discourse has been created, I looked at the construction of the history of dance as an art form, which is at the moment authorless, in a form of three summaries that are missing out important events from the past, and are therefore not an accurate representation of the development of the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland. Since the past has not been retrieved through its reproduction as a history or collection of histories, there is not much awareness of its events. The effects are that it has created a scene that is unhistorical, and is only conscious of its own generation, and not of its local past. Being unhistorical in Nietzsche's terms, also creates a state where the local contemporary dance scene does not know how it relates to the canonical history of Western dance as an art form and the international contemporary dance scene. At the same time it strives to be within its discourse, but in truth, exists at its border because of its geographical situation. The local contemporary dance scene has been conceived through the notions of bricolage and second-hand knowledge since it has to make use of what techniques have been imported locally and learns new movements, styles and techniques from individuals that return back to the country with a new knowledge that is considered to be current, from the "centre" and thus interpellate an idea of the center being somewhere else than in Iceland. As a result of the ways in which knowledge is imported, how the local scene borrows techniques that are imported to the country and how it constructs the idea of the center being somewhere else, it situates itself as a minor. However,

even though it is in a minor state, trying to follow an idea of “the contemporary dance scene”, its aesthetics are not the same. The local scene is also influenced by its own ideas and discourses regarding what is considered experimental and “new”, which spring from its age-old relationship to the theatre institutions and its history in a political, economical and artistic way and cannot therefore be considered current or “new” in any sense.

I conclude that the contemporary dance scene in Iceland has not yet found a perspective to critically view its own scene, and consequently I want to propose a new way of looking at this situation that is influenced by Vujanovic’s deconstruction of second hand knowledge, Agamben’s state of contemporariness and the idea of the contemporary body as set forth by Bojana Kunst. As a way for the local scene to become conscious of its context, its development and style, it should become aware of its interpellation of the idea of itself operating in subordination to the “center”. It should critically look at its own identity, which has certain ideas and discourses that have not been identified. The local contemporary dance scene in Iceland should aim to erase its state of unconsciousness of its situation, past, origins, traces and discourses and doing so, stop believing the notion of the “right idea” of contemporary dance as it is happening somewhere else than “here”. What the local contemporary dance scene and its individuals should rather aim to do, is to look at what is contemporary dance in the context of Iceland in the present, not as a scene standing on an empty canvas or as a scene trying to imitate something happening “over there”, but in a relation to its past and own context, to be able to create a consciousness of its status and how it has come to be this way. Hopefully that could be a beginning of a conscious discourse that has a connection to “contemporary dance” outside of

Iceland, but at the same time is engaged with its own ideas, history, ideas, discourses and context.

What this conclusion will mean within the bigger context of the local contemporary dance scene in Iceland and the affects it will have, I do not know at this stage. But by investigating the state of the history writing, the conception of contemporary dance and its minor relationship towards the international scene, it is clear that it is vital to raise these issues and discuss them in a bigger context if the scene wants to be able to critically participate with any sort of consciousness within the bigger contemporary dance discourse. I acknowledge that this new state will not be reached in a short time. This is a long- term project within a scene that has few individuals. This thesis has been conceived in an attempt to map a problematic of contemporary dance in Iceland and thus offering a critical perspective at the local contemporary dance practice, hopefully as the first seed for its further development and process. I hope that in the future there will be a chance for me or someone else to research these topics that have been discussed here further, both theoretically and practically.

I hope that this paper will spark replies, debates, agreements and disagreements within its local contemporary dance scene in Iceland and as a consequence, that it will raise awareness within the scene and its individuals of its own discourse in a broader context, as contemporaries in the present time.

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