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“Færøsk kunsthistorie i dag”

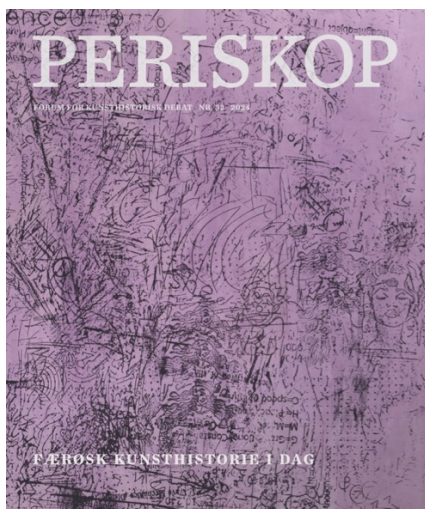
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## INTRODUCTION

# Faroese Art History Today

The Faroe Islands occupy a precarious place in Danish art history. Many Faroese artists have received their education at Danish institutions and established careers in Denmark. When World War II isolated the country from Denmark, Faroese art students established the Faroese Art Society (Listafelag Føroya) in Copenhagen in 1941, setting the stage for the establishment of permanent art institutions in postwar Tórshavn. Just as Faroese artists have come to continental Europe, so, too, have artists traveled to and created images of and from the Atlantic archipelago over the centuries. Despite this rich, entangled history of transnational exchange, Faroese art history must often combat outsider assumptions that frame the islands' geographical distance from Denmark as an indication of cultural marginality. With this special issue of *Periskop*, we wish to question the possibilities and limitations of the Faroe Islands as a site of critical art historical inquiry. We are, however, keenly aware that by dedicating a special issue of *Periskop* to Faroese art, we are complicit in a tradition of producing knowledge about Faroese art out of Copenhagen and out of Denmark. In what follows, we situate the special issue within – and against – existing scholarship on Faroese art history.

### **Faroese Art: A Brief Historiography**

What language do scholars use to describe Faroese art? In writings on Faroese art, certain tropes are reiterated time and again: Faroese nature is inextricable from Faroese art, and the Faroes are particularly “far away”. In the survey book *Century: One Hundred Years of Faroese Art*, the Danish art historian Mikael Wivel (2011, 375) invokes a stereotypical center-periphery narrative by presuming that the Faroe Islands are a periphery:

Although the Faroe Islands lie out in the North Atlantic and far from the great metropolises of the world, throughout the twentieth century they have maintained their connection with the artistic life of the Continent. Currents from the south have therefore left their mark. But clearly local traditions and a landscape of a rugged, absolute character have influenced Faroese art far more than all that comes from the outside, and have helped give it a characteristic lift in the direction of the expressive and the existential.

Although Wivel acknowledges the influence of “the Continent”, the one hundred years of Faroese art in Wivel’s book is assessed only by means of its similarity to or divergence from a putative center. At the same time, the visual production of the Faroe Islands cannot seem to escape the impact of local geography, and the “periphery” only generates significance through markers of cultural difference, what outsiders gloss as “exotic”.

The tropes are, however, not only reiterated by Danish art historians. Faroese writer and politician Karsten Hoydal (1976, n.p.) went so far as to speculate that “the Faroes have been so impoverished in the visual arts” due to the supposedly harsh climate and rugged nature of the country.<sup>1</sup> In other words, artists in the Faroes have not only struggled with nature as motif but also against nature as a force. His words come from the introduction to the 1976 exhibition of Faroese art in Copenhagen, arranged by the Faroese art association, Listafelag Føroya, and Dansk-Færøsk Kulturfond (the Danish-Faroese Cultural Foundation). Throughout Hoydal’s introductory article, it becomes clear that the exhibition – and catalog – is considered a stepping stone to support the future of Faroese art *in* the Faroes (and with public funds). This scope was also present in the first survey exhibition of Faroese art in Copenhagen in 1955 [1], also arranged by Listafelag Føroya. In lieu of a national school, the arts association chose to show works that depicted the Faroes (Heinesen 1955, 17). Scholars such as Danish art historian Nils Ohrt (2021, 8-9) have ascribed the idea that Faroese artists represent place to the fact that the first Faroese artists to receive an academic training in the arts began their production at a time of strong national sentiments, a moment to which the 1955 exhibition also belongs.

The influence of Listafelag Føroya on shaping the canon of Faroese art should not be underestimated, and when reading through these exhibition catalogs it becomes evident how their truths became precedence for writings on Faroese art today. The association was founded on March 23, 1941 by Faroese artists isolated in Nazi-occupied Denmark while the Faroe Islands were under British rule. That same year, the association organized its first exhibition of Faroese art in Janus

Kamban's studio on Nørrebrogade. The exhibiting artists were Gudmundur Hentze, Ingolf Jacobsen, Bodil Jensen, Sámal Joensen Mikines, Bergithe Johannessen, Janus Kamban, Elinborg Lützen, and Ruth Smith (Listafelag Føroya, n.d.). From the outset, the aim of the association was to establish a national collection to be permanently exhibited in Tórshavn – an aim finally realized in 1989 when their collection was merged with the Løgtingið art collection (Føroya Almenna Listasavn) to form Listasavn Føroya. Walking through the rooms of the museum today, it is evident how the canon of Faroese art was likewise manifested physically through the acquisition of works.

Mobilizations of tropes on Faroese art can, in other words, vary drastically. However, no matter the intentions behind these clichés, they remain something that is written with and against in Faroese art history: “We struggle ourselves to get rid of the clichés, but it is not easy when others prefer to keep us in a romanticized, nature-defined perspective,” as Faroese art critic and curator Kinna Poulsen (2011) pointedly wrote in a response to Wivel's *Century*.<sup>2</sup> And, whereas canonized Faroese artists such as Sámal Joensen Mikines, Ruth Smith, and Ingálvur av Reyni might have depicted the local (read as national) landscape and culture, the urge to see the Faroese landscape in the production of *all* Faroese artists is more problematic, to say the least.

However, as this short historiography also demonstrates, Danish dominance<sup>3</sup> in the writing and exhibiting of Faroese art history has not always been the case, and Faroese scholars obviously have also influenced the writing of Faroese art history. Bárður Jákupsson, the Faroese artist who served as the first director of Listasavn Føroya from its 1989 founding until 2003, penned the standard text



[1] *Færøsk Kunst* exhibition catalog, 1955.

*Myndlist i Føroyum* in 2000 with editions in Faroese and English. And Kinna Poulsen herself has, in recent years, been an important force in writing Faroese art history from Tórshavn with publications such as *LISTAMÁL – Tekstir úr tíggjunum um list og mentan* (2017) and the websites Listinblog (active 2010-14, with Inger Smærup Sørensen) and Listaportal. No less important is the production of Faroese art history out of Listasavn Føroya, as the bibliography of this introduction also testifies to.

### Conquering the Faroes

Inger Smærup Sørensen (2012) has pointed out how (Danish) tourists play a crucial part in nature's prevalence in Faroese art; it is simply a motif that sells. "And Danes love Faroese art, they almost can't get enough of it, and the more Faroese, the better. But what's the reason? Don't they have decent artists in Denmark?" Sørensen (2012) asks provocatively.<sup>4</sup> The same point is unfolded by Solveig Hanusardóttir Olsen (2019, 217), who writes that: "[...] when foreigners come to the Faroes, they want an authentic experience: puffins, the Vestmanna cliffs, Mykines, fish, turf roofs, sheep, and so on. The same applies to art and it preserves the *færø-kunst*."<sup>5</sup> *Færø-kunst*, or "Faroe-art", is a term that is tightly linked to the exhibition of Faroese art in Denmark, and – although it is still used today – dates back to the promotion of a Faroese national school in the 1920s, where Faroese artists began their education in Denmark. Olsen (2019, 211) writes:

This art includes figurative paintings of landscapes and nature, it can also be pictures of grind killings and Faroese dances. In recent times, it has also come to include semi-figurative landscape paintings. The landscapes are mostly depicting pure nature – none are about people, cars and ships.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, one reason for the frustrating endurance of this narrative of Faroese art as peripheral and bound to nature is that Faroese art is often introduced in survey shows or publications that risk reducing it to something consistent across time, constantly rediscovered and always approached at an introductory level.<sup>7</sup> Here, nature remains the primary mode of introduction and analysis. Despite the strong tendency to often consider Faroese art through the lens of the introductory survey, Faroese author and artist William Heinesen (1900-91), pointed out already in 1955 (17) the very impossibility of considering Faroese art as a collective whole: "One cannot speak of a national or local school of art, every bird sings its own song [...]."<sup>8</sup> Although one might argue that this special issue is, in fact, a kind of survey in itself, we have tried to counter the introductory level



engagements with Faroese art by inviting in-depth analysis of works, practices, and exhibitions. This aim is in alliance with recent artist monographs that are slowly building a different kind of narrative (see e.g. Ohrt 2019; Marnersdóttir 2010; Poulsen 2009; Warming 2007).

However, the eagerness to capture and collect Faroese nature is not new. Artists have long traveled to the Faroe Islands, and the presence of foreign or outsider artists has had a decisive impact on how Faroese first accessed the materials and methods of making visual arts. Danish art historian Henrik Bramsen

**[2]** Frederik Theodor Kloss: *Fuglefangsten under Store Dimon på Færøerne* (Bird catching at Stóra Dímun in the Faroe Islands), 1854. Jægerspris Slot, Kong Frederik den Syvendes Stiftelse.

[3] Sámal Joensen-Mikines:  
*Grindedrab (Grindadráp)*, 1942.  
Watercolor, pen, brown ink, 247  
x 318 mm. SMK – The National  
Gallery of Denmark.



(1955, 31-32) even talks about a *painterly conquest* (“malerisk erobring”) of the Faroes by Danish artists, surging with Niels Bjerre’s depictions of Faroese nature in the 1920s. The Faroe Islands as an art historical motif does, however, date earlier in the historical record. For example, the German-born artist Frederik Theodor Kloss followed Crown Prince Frederik (VII)’s 1844 travel to the Faroe Islands and produced five paintings depicting what would become stereotypical motifs of the country, such as a pilot whale killing and seabird catching [2]. Faroese scholar and poet Kim Simonsen (2012) argues that the material for a surging Faroese nationalism in the 19th century drew upon travel writings from and about the Faroes. Since Simonsen’s study focuses on literature, there has yet to be a similar in-depth study on the influences on the formation of a national visual art. One could, for example, point to the meeting between the American explorer, artist, and journalist Elizabeth Taylor, who lived with Danish artist Flora Heilmann during her stay in the Faroe Islands in 1900-05, and who is said to have inspired the Faroese artist Niels Kruse to become a landscape painter (Warming 2008, 13). As Bart Pushaw argues in his contribution to this special issue, even the earliest extant Faroese art in the nineteenth century was intimately intertwined with the wider world.

Despite this interest in the Faroe Islands (and Faroese art) from Danish art historians and artists as described in this introduction, it can be difficult to find in-depth engagement with art from the Faroe Islands or by Faroese artists in Denmark itself. At the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK), only 22 works by seven Faroese artists<sup>9</sup> are to be found, although the museum’s Danish name, Statens Museum for Kunst (The State’s Museum of Art) could suggest a responsibility for representing art from all of the Danish Realm (*Rigsfællesskabet*). Besides a self-portrait and a nude by Ruth Smith and abstractions by Ingálvur av Reyni, the remaining works at SMK all depict Faroese nature and motifs – such as villages, landscapes, and the seasonal killing of pilot whales (*grind*) [3] – thus neglecting a more nuanced representation of motifs and media. However, things might be changing at the SMK. In a recently drafted acquisition strategy, art from the Realm is specifically mentioned as something new: “The representation of the art of the Commonwealth – both historically and in the present – also appears as an ongoing part of the narrative of the nation state’s history and cultural identity, which is clearly a neglected area that requires special attention.”<sup>10</sup> Since then, the museum has acquired works by Hans Jákup Glerfoss, Ruth Smith, Zacharias Heinesen, and Ingálvur av Reyni, and in the year of publishing this special issue, works by Smith and Mikines were hung on the walls in the permanent collection.

Obviously, then, Faroese artists *do* exhibit in Denmark – and have done so historically. Bergithe Johannessen was the first Faroese artist to be educated at the art academy in Copenhagen with her enrollment in 1925. More recent examples of contemporary Faroese artists exhibiting in Denmark are Randi Samsonsen’s textile project *Things Matter* at Trapholt (2023) and Hansina Iversen’s exhibition *SÚGA* (2024) at the project space Bonne Esperance, run by Jóhan Martin Christiansen. Faroese artists have also had an impact on public spaces in Denmark, including Tróndur Patursson’s *Cosmic Room* (1997), Hans Pauli Olsen’s Christian IV monument (2019) and Hansina Iversen, Gudrun Hasle, and Jessie Klee-

[4] Jessie Kleemann, Gudrun Hasle, and Hansina Iversen: *Imaq, Havið, Havet*, 2024. Colored concrete, Faroese basalt stone, and Greenlandic marble. Nordatlantens Brygge, Copenhagen. © Jessie Kleemann, Gudrun Hasle, and Hansina Iversen. Photo: Torben Eskerod/Nordatlantens Brygge.





mann's joint public work *Imaq, Havið, Havet* (2024), commissioned for HM Queen Margrethe's 50th anniversary as regent [4]. The importance of cultural houses such as Nordatlantens Brygge in Copenhagen and Nordatlantisk Hus in Odense should also not be underestimated. The exhibition *Conversations on Fog* (Nordatlantens Brygge, 2020-21) was a crucial example of a survey show that tried to break away from restricted approaches to a definition of "Faroese".<sup>11</sup>

We mention these works and exhibitions here not to give an exhaustive list, but to point out the importance of (engaging with) artists from the Faroes in Denmark. Still, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the response from Danish academics and curators to our call to contribute to this special issue was extremely limited. This is a reminder of the marginal space that Faroese art holds within Danish academia, a critical lacuna with serious consequences given the fact that there are no advanced programs to study art history in the Faroe Islands. From our perspective, it seems that Faroese art history falls through the cracks, not only for institutional reasons in Denmark, but even in the Faroe Islands.

### **Towards Transnational Art Histories**

Artist Carola Grahn (2017) has noted that there is a "delicate difference between 'thinking at the edge of the world' and 'thinking about the edge of the world'". Her point of reference is the international art world's sudden interest in Sámi art and aesthetics, and although the same kind of attention is difficult to discern for Faroese art, the distinction between "at" and "about" still finds relevance. With this special issue of *Periskop*, we have tried to avoid a reductive approach to Faroese art by being in dialogue and collaborating with Faroese professionals, artists, and curators.

Furthermore, this special issue of *Periskop* is in dialogue with previous endeavors to situate Faroese art and art history within a transnational rather than national context. Such projects include *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition in Five Acts* (2006), which included exhibitions, workshops, and cultural event in Reykjavík (Iceland), Nuuk (Kalaallit Nunaat), Rovaniemi (Finnish Sápmi), Copenhagen, Helsinki (Finland), Oslo (Norway), and Stockholm (Sweden) – and Tórshavn. The Tórshavn "act" included an exhibition and film program at Listasavn Føroya and a spoken word/performance/music event at Norðurlandahúsið (the Nordic House). *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* included the Faroes in the transnational entanglements of the (former) Danish empire that are often overlooked (see also Körber and Volquardsen 2014; Thisted and Gremaud 2020). As anthropologist Firouz Gaini (2006, 6) wrote about the events in Tórshavn: "Usually, we are the periphery that is



[5] Laila Mote: poster for the seminar *Confronting Coloniality*, 2023. © Laila Mote.

invisible in the larger urbanised societies. This time the so-called periphery has been the context, the central arena, of an ambitious project of high priority.”

The urge to refuse the status of periphery and its demeaning cultural baggage and instead frame the Faroe Islands as one of many centers of cultural production was also the starting point for the seminar *Confronting Coloniality: Trans-Cultural Connections in the Faroe Islands and Beyond* [5] organized by editors of and contributors to this special issue.<sup>12</sup> The seminar took place at Norðurlandahúsið in March 2023 and invited speakers and participants to join a dialogue regarding the possibilities and limitations of the Faroe Islands as a starting point for questions around colonialism, coloniality, and the arts. In many ways, the seminar has shaped this special issue of *Periskop*.

Projects such as *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* and *Confronting Coloniality* do, however, raise the delicate question of how to situate the Faroes within the

(post)colonial. As Vár Eydudóttir points out in her contribution to this issue, the country is often forgotten or overseen in discussions of Nordic colonialism because it neither has had the unambiguous status of colony or colonizer. As becomes evident from her article on the Colonial Exhibition in Copenhagen in 1905, the Faroes are not “outside” colonialism and coloniality. Although this special issue is not about colonialism or coloniality, the regard of imperial matters prompts us to consider transnational connections in the past, present and future. It is not a solution to the problem of an earlier nationalized discourse on Faroese art to consider Faroese art history (only) within a postcolonial framework. In fact, we might rephrase Carola Grahn’s (2017, 42) words and say: Not only should Faroese artists speak about Faroese matters, they ought to be addressing everything! Any future conception of a Faroese art history must be attentive to and representative of its full creative complexity. In other words, we must evaluate the artworks on their own terms.

### Contributions

As this introduction alludes to, colonial history is an important lens through which to consider Faroese art and visual culture. Drawing on photographs and other archival material related to the 1905 colonial exhibition in Tivoli, Copenhagen, **Vár Eydudóttir**’s article “Holding Hands at the Heart of Empire” analyzes complex proximities between exhibition “participants” from different parts of the Danish empire as indications of the Faroe Islands’ entanglement in coloniality. **Nívi Christensen** writes about the installation of Jóhan Martin Christiansen’s *DISH* (2017) at Nuuk Art Museum, which highlights the complex legacy of Faroese fishermen on Inuit lands at Kangerluarsoruseq, also named Færingehavn. In “Blue Puffins: *The Avian Aesthetics of Díðríkur á Skarvanesi*”, **Bart Pushaw** reads the motifs and materials in Díðríkur’s paintings through the context of the nineteenth-century trade in Faroese birds as scientific commodities and the Danish trade monopoly on the Faroe Islands.

This special issue presents critical readings of already canonized artists in Faroese art history. **Maxine Savage**’s essay “Landscapes Envisaged: Ruth Smith’s (Self)Portraiture” intervenes in the existing literature on Smith, proposing that her unique merging of portrait and landscape genres be read not as evidence of unfinishedness, but instead of artistic intentionality. **Isabelle Gapp**’s essay “Aquatic Art Histories of the North Atlantic: Frida Zachariassen and the Faroe Islands Fisheries” locates Zachariassen’s paintings from the 1950s of Faroese fisherwomen within transnational histories of industrialization, unionization, and gendered labor that have shaped “women-sea-fish

relationships”. **Jóhan Martin Christiansen** presents a selection of sculptures by Janus Kamban, delicately foregrounding previously overlooked aspects of Kamban’s life and practice and discovering an intergenerational queer allyship across Faroese art history. In her essay, “Krop og hjem: Forhandling af slægtskab i Astrid Andreasens *Babyboom*”, **Lotte Nishanthi Winther** reads the artist’s work *Babyboom* (1997) in the light of critical perspectives on transnational adoption. Winther asks how the fact that the Faroe Islands since the 1970s has had one of the highest numbers of transnational adoptees per capita affects our understanding of this work.

In his essay “Tita Vinther: Weaving the Monochrome”, **David W. Norman** engages a multitude of perspectives on Vinther’s wool and horsehair weavings, ranging from these works’ destabilization of the art-craft binary to their connection to feminist reworkings of minimalist seriality and the racialized underpinnings of the monochrome. **Anna Maria Dam Ziska**’s essay “Elinborg Lützen: Subsea dreamscapes” reevaluates Lützen’s linocuts, arguing that these surrealist prints forged a third path in Faroese art that is neither recognizable landscape nor full abstraction. Abstraction is also central to the work of **Hansina Iversen** and **Julie Sass**. Here, they present a curated selection of each other’s works, and as the introduction by **Anna Vestergaard Jørgensen** notes, Iversen and Sass share a commitment to building artistic and curatorial connections, both between and beyond their practices.

In the essay “Uden for rammerne”, **Kinna Poulsen** analyzes Randi Samsonsen’s sculpture series *When Will You Come To See You Like I Do?* The sculptures are formed as knitted and woolen figures that have been installed in public places such as the Miklagarður supermarket in Tórshavn, and in the essay, Poulsen contextualizes them within broader experimental developments in Faroese contemporary art. **Laila Mote** also works with creatures in her work, albeit with different means and aims. In her essay, she presents her approach to self-representation as a racially minoritized artist in the Faroe Islands through the “creatures” that populate her work, surrealism as a metaphor for alienation, and the strategic use of Faroese landscape imagery.

This special issue also includes three publication reviews that extend beyond the Faroese art context, but explore topics introduced in the main body of this publication. **Helene Birkeli** writes about Isabelle Gapp’s *A Circumpolar Landscape: Art and Environment in Scandinavia and North America, 1890-1930* (2024); **Pauline Koffi Vandet** reviews the catalog *Rise of the Sunken Sun* (2024) made for Inuuteq Storch’s exhibition at the Venice Biennial 2024; and **Adam Bencard** reviews the anthology *Altid forandret* on the works of Emil Westman Hertz.

Except for the reviews, all of the contributions to this special issue have been translated from the original Danish and English into Faroese. For this prodigious work, we cannot thank Faroese poet **Beinir Bergsson** enough. The translations will be available upon publication on the website [periskop-tidsskrift.dk](http://periskop-tidsskrift.dk). It is our hope that the availability of the texts in various languages will help strengthen the conversation on Faroese art history today and in the future.

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## NOTES

- 1 Original quote in Danish: “Færøerne har været så fattige på bildende kunst.”
- 2 Original quote in Danish: “Vi kæmper selv med at komme af med klichéerne, men det er ikke let, når andre foretrækker at beholde os i en romantiseret, naturdefineret optik.”
- 3 For nearly fifteen years, Listasavn Føroya has been under the directorship of two Danes, Nils Ohrt (2011-19) and subsequently Karina Lykke Grand (2019-24), and the two most recent and largest volumes on Faroese art are also penned by Danes (Ohrt 2021; Wivel 2011).
- 4 Original quote in Faroese: “Og danskarar elska føroyska list, teir kunnu næstan ikki fáa nóg mikið, og jú meira føroysk, jú betri. Men hví í grundini? Hava tey ikki ordilig listafólk í Danmark?”
- 5 Original quote in Faroese: “[...] tá útlendingar koma til Føroyar, vilja tey hava eina autentiska uppliving: lundar, Vestmannabjörgini, Mikines, fiskar, flagtak, seyðir, o.s.fr. Hetta er tað sama, ið ger seg galdandi í listini og er við til at upphalda *færø-kunst*.”
- 6 Original quote in Faroese: “Listin fevnir serliga um figurativar málningar av landslagi og náttúru, eisini kann tað vera lötumyndir av grindadrápi og føroyskum dansi. Í nýggjari tíð fevnir færø-kunst eisini um hálv-figurativar landslagsmálningar. Landsløgini eru oftast av reinari náttúru – eingin tekin eru um menniskju, bilar og skip.”
- 7 For examples of such exhibitions in the years 2003-17, see Olsen (2019, 213).
- 8 Original quote in Danish: “Om nogen national eller lokal skole er der ikke tale, hver fugl synger med sit næb [...]”
- 9 Elinborg Lützen; Ingálvur av Reyni; Ruth Smith; Sámal Joensen-Mikines; Torbjørn Olsen; Zacharias Heinesen; Hans Jákup Glerfoss.
- 10 Original quote in Danish: “Også repræsentationen af rigsfællesskabets kunst – både historisk og i nutiden – fremstår som en stadig pågående del af fortællingen om nationalstatens historie og kulturelle identitet, der vel at mærke er et forsømt område, som kræver særlig opmærksomhed.” “SMK acquisition strategy 2018–21”, draft (internal document).
- 11 This approach to contemporary Faroese art was mirrored in the later exhibition *BROT: Faroese Contemporary* (2022-23) at the Listasavn Føroya that both counterbalanced the traditional survey shows and the museum’s own more traditional hanging of the permanent collection in themes such as “Wool and knitting”, “Landscape”, and “Ocean”.
- 12 The seminar was organized by Vár Eydudóttir, Anna Vestergaard Jørgensen, and Bart Pushaw. Speakers included Nivi Christensen, Kalpana Vijayarathan, Bart Pushaw, Malan Marnersdóttir, Nina Cramer, Kim Simonsen, Aká Hansen, Jóhan Martin Christiansen, Kinna Poulsen, Laila Mote, Vár Eydudóttir, Anna Vestergaard Jørgensen, and Isabelle Gapp.