



UNNUR ANDREA

**Icelandic performance artist on the logical link between food, sex, death and social prostitution.
Interview by Deirdre Corley. Video still by Unnur Andrea**

The reaction is the same at every screening. Nervous laughter from the audience, followed by uncomfortable shifting in seats, looks of disbelief exchanged between neighbours. After a minute or so, they start to realize she's serious. Unnur Andrea, the pretty half-naked Icelandic girl on the screen before you, is, in fact, going to lick every last bit of whipped cream off that avocado-green toilet seat. The chocolate syrup, too.

Far from being a fetish flick, video artist Unnur Andrea Einarsdóttir's surreal, color-saturated short film *Toilet*—like many of her pieces—is a statement about the relationships we have with the food we eat, and how our feelings about food interconnect with other aspects of our lives, such as sex and social interactions. “In *Toilet*, we see things we don't really want to see being mixed. Shit and food are basically the same things, but after the food leaves your body, you want it out of your life forever. Shit and urine leave your body from the genital area—the same place where we take pleasure in sex, hence the sexual intensity of the woman licking the toilet. Eating and sex are two of our primal physical pleasures—and needs—so it's all connected, although it disgusts us to see the connection,” offers the artist when asked about the ideas she was trying to convey in the piece.

Unnur isn't the only one suffering for her art. Just ask her grandmother, who was cast as a sort of human smorgasbord in Unnur's film *Pastry*. Reclined in a chair, she is covered in all measure of baked goods, which her granddaughter's friends eat off her body, a testimony to the sacrifices families make for each other from one generation to the next. And then

there are the hapless diner patrons in the Matthew Barney-esque *Service*, who find themselves casually washing down their wretched tar-coated meals with hair-filled cups of coffee, served with pride by none other than the artist herself. “There is a lot of mystery involved in going to a restaurant and having someone serve you with a smile, not ever knowing what the person is really thinking,” says Unnur of her paranoid take on what could be going on behind the kitchen doors. “They might be contemplating how to kill themselves. Or kill you,” she adds. “It's understandable to pay for the food, but it's scary how you pay for a friendly face. To exaggerate it, it's kind of like social prostitution.”

Anyone who has ever tried traditional Icelandic food wouldn't be terribly surprised that the kids have food hang-ups. “Most Icelandic cuisine is disgusting. The fermented shark, goat's head, sheep balls and all that crap comes from a period when Icelanders were very poor and had to use every part of the animal in order to survive,” says Unnur, echoing the sentiment of many young Icelanders who reject the notion that burying something in the backyard for a few weeks counts as cooking. Instead, readily available fresh seafood and delicious lamb hot dogs smothered in remoulade sauce are turning into the country's culinary calling cards, while the more “exotic” dishes of old are relegated to nursing homes and tourist traps.

Beyond the absorption of food and what it represents, a closely related theme in Unnur's work is the absorption of music and how it affects the listener. “Music is a very physical thing. Basically, it is vibrations running through your body and your body literally absorbs it.

Very often when I hear music, I want it to be even more physical, even so physical that I can touch it or even eat it,” she says. She composes much of the music that underscores her work, and is also a singer in an electro band that she and her bandmates appropriately dubbed *Cocktail Vomit*.

While her creative output is remarkable, as an Icelander, Unnur's occupation isn't particularly extraordinary. A quick survey of the under-30 set in Reykjavik reveals an overwhelming amount of art schoolers and band members. As to why Iceland is such an explosively creative place, she remarks, “I think the strongest factor is the energy here. There is so much energy in Iceland. It affects not only artists but everyone; people here seem to work nonstop and possess some kind of strange drive.”

With musicians such as Sigur Rós, Múm and Björk and visual artists like Ólafur Elíasson and Gabriela Fríðriksdóttir breaking out and attracting audiences all over the world, Iceland's tiny population of just under 300,000 people would appear to have a disproportionate number of highly successful creatives. Unnur credits that very success to their small numbers. “All you have to do is send in an announcement of your concert or exhibition or whatever to the newspaper and everyone in the country will know about it. People here are more likely to work together than to compete; maybe it's because they all know each other. Since people are not fighting over money and are not shackled with conventions, they have nothing to lose when they are making art or music. This fuels them to experiment as much as they want.”