

Rona Rangsch and *The Vinland Phenomenon* From Medieval to Modern

*When we left Antwerp in the dawn
I felt like an adventurer.*

Text by Valerie Legge
Visuals by Rona Rangsch

Rona Rangsch first sighted Newfoundland in 2007 from the deck of a container ship, the *Flottbek*, on route from Antwerp, Belgium to Quebec, Canada. From Montreal she boarded a plane to St. John's and from there a taxi to nearby Pouch Cove where she spent three months as artist in residence. When asked about her first impression of Newfoundland, she responded, "It was mid-April and, when the snow-covered cliffs of Cape Race appeared on the horizon beneath a leaden sky, it didn't look especially inviting."

Years later, Rangsch's experience of first seeing the 'Newfound Land' found its way into several artworks: a video in 2011 titled *terra nova* about the early immigrants from the British Isles to Newfoundland; a video installation in 2012 titled *face to face [across the sea]*; and a three-channel video in 2012 titled *fyrir hafvillu fram*, a Norse phrase meaning 'onwards, despite the risk of getting lost at sea'. According to Rangsch these projects, based on Newfoundland's unique geographical location and its wild authentic character, "share the bias of the connectedness of the so-called Old and New Worlds."

*The North is a place where
we find our idea of home.*

Sherill E. Grace,
Canada and the Idea of the North






Newfoundland has become my personal paradise, a place where I can forget about the rest of the world.

Early in her research, one of the Canadian novels that Rangsch read regarding the Norse explorations in North America was Joan Clark's *Eiriksdottir: A Tale of Dreams and Luck* (1994), a work which treats Vinland as both real and imaginary. When Rangsch returned to St John's in the winter of 2016, she met Clark to discuss their common interest in the Vikings with their historic and speculative presence in Newfoundland. While the particular subject of Rangsch's art project is the imaginative perception of Vinland as a mysterious and possibly utopian place, her deeper investigation, much like Clark's, is humanity's longing for some kind of Perfect or Promised Place.

Following her first stay in Newfoundland, Rangsch took up artist residencies in Canada, Japan, Ireland, Finland and Norway. In 2012 during a three-month residency in Bergen, Norway, she read and researched the medieval Icelandic sagas, learning about the Norse trans-Atlantic voyages and about Vinland, a legendary land where Leif Eiriksson and his crew first set foot on the American continent around the year 1000. In her Norwegian studio, "looking West over the bay and towards Greenland," Rangsch began to conceive of a new art project that she would come to call *The Vinland Phenomenon*.

*Newfoundland is still the Newfound Land.
Those who make the effort of coming here
will be rewarded by what they will discover.*





*At Künstlerhaus Dortmund
I first concretely reflected on
the overlap of arts
and physics.*


Born in Saarbrücken, Germany, Rangsch had studied physics at the University of Saarland and the University of Cologne, eventually taking a diploma in theoretical high energy physics and beginning a PhD program of study. After working for several years as a scientific assistant, she decided to leave academia and enter art school where she moved into studies in multi-media design. She spent her first year as a guest student at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf before landing a grant from the city of Oberhausen which allowed her opportunities for extensive artistic experimentation. From there Rangsch became a member of Künstlerhaus Dortmund, an ever-changing art collective

comprised of professionals from various fields; in Dortmund she co-curates exhibitions and maintains a permanent art studio.

When asked about the overlap of research-based art and science, Rangsch described the respective processes this way: “Observing a phenomenon, deriving an idea or theory, developing a concept, and doing accurate and dedicated research to feed the idea while allowing for deviations or modifications whenever new insights occur.” While the realization of an art project follows guidelines similar to scientific methodology, the artistic project differs in that “it allows for playful aspects” and it “always leaves space for viewer association and interpretation.”



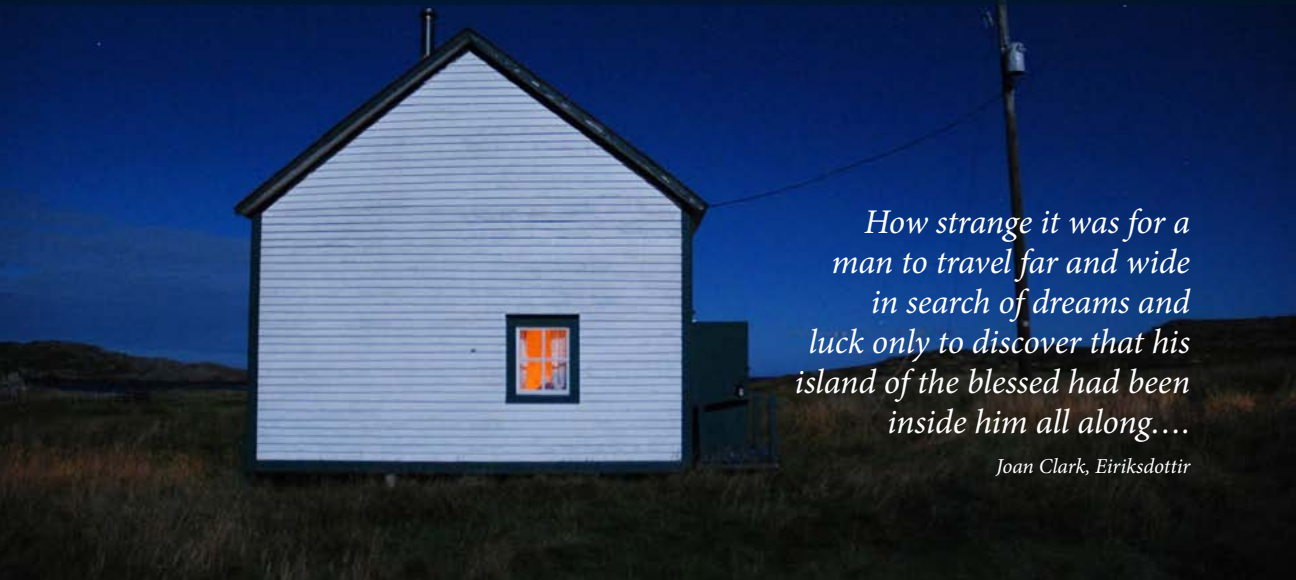
criticality

A gravel road leads from the foreground into the distance, flanked by rocky slopes and evergreen trees. In the background, a large body of water is visible under a sky filled with white, fluffy clouds.

During my fourth visit to the island in summer 2015 I felt like a discoverer myself.

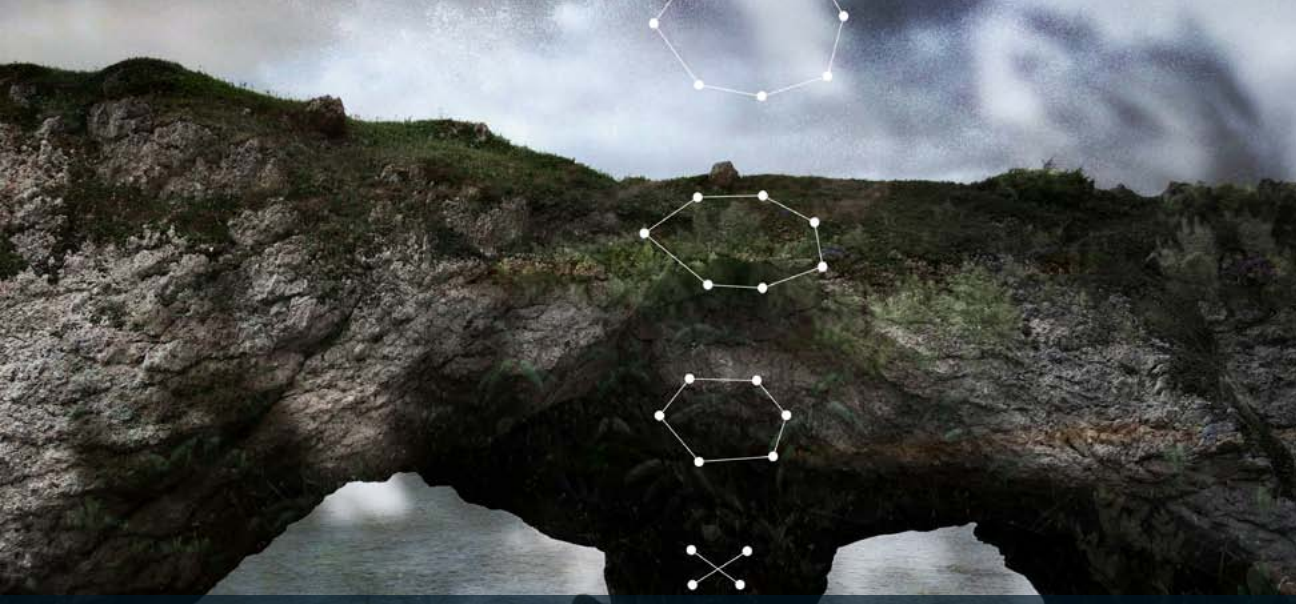
In the summer of 2015 Rangsach returned to Newfoundland to conduct extensive fieldwork for *The Vinland Phenomenon* project, interviewing people about Vinland and collecting photographs at probable/imagined Vinland sites. Arriving in Port aux Basques on the night ferry from North Sydney, she began her long road trip which first took her to Fogo Island at the edge of Notre Dame Bay, then back to the West, North and finally South of Newfoundland from there.

On her blog Rona described how driving almost 10,000 km around the island that summer and “tracing Vinland” gave her a very real sense of the island’s vastness, its beauty and diversity in terms of its geography and its people. Her interviews with the people encountered on her journey confirmed the notion that Vinland, like every utopia, is both everywhere and nowhere. It all depends on who you talk to.

A white wooden house with a dark roof and a single window is set against a clear blue sky. The house is situated in a grassy field with a utility pole nearby.

How strange it was for a man to travel far and wide in search of dreams and luck only to discover that his island of the blessed had been inside him all along....

Joan Clark, Eiriksdottir



Though Rangsch and I had met and communicated via e-mail two years earlier, we came “face to face” for the first time during the summer of 2015. It was July and I had just returned home after rambling around Ireland. Discovering that she was back on the island, I invited her to drop by my house for a glass of wine. She did and several hours later we knew that we wanted our conversation about Vinland, exploration, travel and art to continue.

Because she was busy packing to return to Europe, she agreed to an e-mail interview. Our trans-Atlantic interview, which began in the fall, continued until she returned to St John’s in the winter of 2016. At that time we sat down in her temporary residence on Poplar Ave. to catch up on her news and to decide where the conversation should go next. Impressed by the contents of *Riddle Fence*, we began to refer to our rather disjointed and eclectic conversation as the *Riddle Fence project*.



*Architecture has never been
idle – the human need for
shelter is lasting.*

Walter Benjamin, Illuminations

Today Rangsch and her partner (a carpenter and architect) are renovating a recently-purchased property located on Middle Battery Road looking down on St John's harbor. She calls this current renovation "yet another cross-Atlantic project". From their second-story window, when the project is completed, they will watch ships from far-flung regions of the world continuing the

centuries-old ritual of arrivals and departures that began when the Norsemen first sailed to these shores.

Here on the rim of the world Rangsch will realize new art projects as she contemplates how, like countless explorers before her, she has travelled far over vast expanses of sea to find shelter and a new vista.



Photo of Rona Rangsch by Bud Gaulton 2015; all other photographs by Rona Rangsch if not stated otherwise below.

p. 1, top: Going up the Schelde estuary towards the English Channel 2007; bottom: *face to face*, outdoor installation with two projections, Burgplatz Essen 2013 | p. 2, top: *fyrir hafvillu fram*, Künstlerhaus Dortmund 2013, photo by Jens Sundheim; bottom: Bergen, Norway seen from Mt. Fløyen | p. 3, top: Opening of the show *Voyage - seejourneys, island hopping and trans-oceanic concepts* at Künstlerhaus Dortmund 2013, photo by Hannes Woidich; bottom: *Criticality*, from the series *Nature's nature*, 2014/15 | p. 4, top: Coming from Conche 2015; bottom: *One Night in Sandy Cove*, Fogo Island 2012 | p. 5, top: *Vinland Arches* (detail) from the series *The Vinland Montages*, 2015/16; bottom: Temporary work station in Pouch Cove 2015 | p. 6, top: Stripping the house in Middle Battery Road 2016; bottom: Rock under the groundfloor, seen from the basement

rangsch.de/vinland.html | vimeo.com/rangsch | blog.igbk.de/author/rrangsch | rangsch.de/middle_battery.html