

ICELANDIC PAVILION OPENS
THAT'S A VERY LARGE NUMBER – A COMMERZBAU
BY HILDIGUNNUR BIRGISDÓTTIR

AT THE 60TH INTERNATIONAL ART
EXHIBITION – LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024



La Biennale di Venezia

60. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

**THAT'S A VERY
LARGE NUMBER**
A COMMERZBAU

BY

**HILDIGUNNUR
BIRGISDÓTTIR**

VENUE – ARTIGLIERIE, ARSENALE, VENICE, ITALY

CURATOR – DAN BYERS

COMMISSIONER – AUÐUR JÖRUNDSDÓTTIR, ICELANDIC ART CENTER

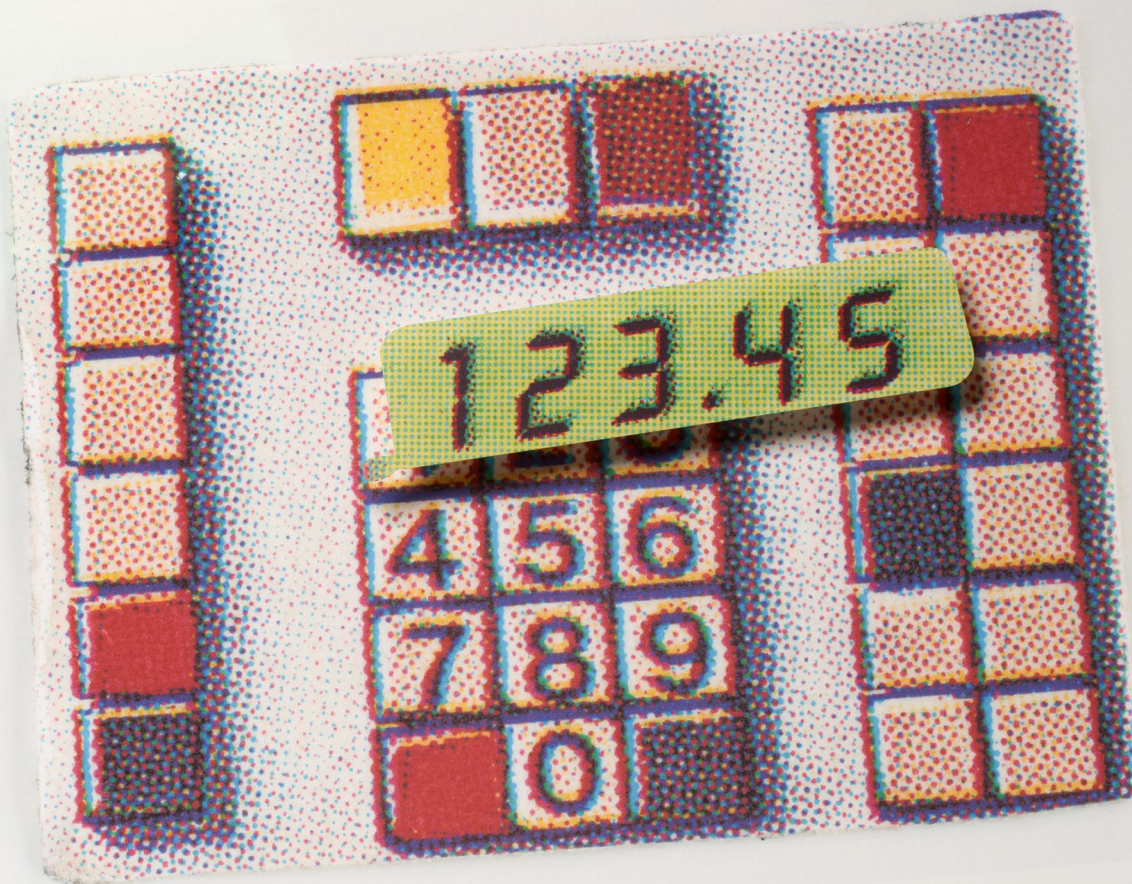
DATES – 20 APRIL – 24 NOVEMBER 2024

The Icelandic Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia opens to the public this week, presenting ***That's a Very Large Number – A Commerzbau*** by **Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir**. This uncanny exhibition, curated by American curator **Dan Byers**, features an intriguing selection of new sculptures and installations, which animate the strange relationships formed between us and our world of mass-produced objects.

Reykjavík-based visual artist **Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir** is known for her nuanced practice, which critically examines the global systems of production and distribution and the bizarre lives of the products they create. Her work calls attention to the objects that exist at the periphery of our vision, often the throwaway accessories of material culture: packing materials, price tags, signage and systems of display. She looks for the beauty inherent in these objects, which have been shaped through countless aesthetic decisions, material limitations, production conditions, moral

codes, deals, desires and mistakes. Birgisdóttir uses these human systems and interactions to create her artworks, harnessing the cultures and capabilities of manufacturers, fabricators and commercial firms as part of her artistic process.

Birgisdóttir's presentation ***That's a Very Large Number – A Commerzbau***, fills the gallery space with the artist's appropriations of the materials, products and language of mass production. She creates an immersive environment, inspired by the tradition of the 'Merzbau', pioneered by German dada artist **Kurt Schwitters**, which involved a walk-in, abstract collage made from scavenged materials and objects. Schwitters began using the term 'Merz' in his work, after discovering a fragment of newspaper printed with the end of the word 'Commerz'. Birgisdóttir reintroduces the 'com', creating a 'commerzbau' from commercial fabrications and castaways of commerce, tailored to the architecture of the pavilion.



Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir, *Very Large Number*, archival pigment print on cotton paper and sticker, 2024, courtesy of artist and the Icelandic Pavilion, photo by Vigfús Birgisson

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Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir says: *I'm truly so excited to present my notions to the visitors of the Venice Biennale. Dealing with an International art exhibition has been a pleasure and I hope people will take a moment to enjoy the pleasures and pain in this show, what this place in time has to offer.*

Dan Byers says: *It's a pleasure to finally be able to share Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir's beautifully perplexing exhibition. 'That's a Very Large Number - A Commerzbau' is full of modest gestures which initially charm and delight. Then they make you reconsider everything. This project and its artworks live between these two poles, posing questions of aesthetics and social conditioning, abstraction and capitalism, wonder and the dark abyss of overlapping planetary catastrophes. All of these complicated ideas and feelings are evoked with a precise and destabilising sense of humor. I know visitors will find the exhibition a pleasingly quiet yet startling experience.*

Birgisdóttir playfully subverts expectations of beauty, value and utility within the framework of an international art exhibition. Entering the pavilion, visitors encounter what appears to be a 'white cube' gallery space, however, the walls which should be pristine, cold white are instead painted in the same shade of faded 'white' as old plastic light switches and electrical cables. A large wall installation, made from a recycled floor panel from the Biennale Architettura 2023, has also been adorned with logos of the firms, foundations, corporations, and vendors whose products and services made the pavilion possible, making clear the hidden commercial systems involved in exhibiting at a global art event. The artist emphasises this point further, as the surface of the installation features holograms printed by a firm that specialises in holographic printing for banknotes, making the wall twinkle with over 100 logos as visitors walk through the pavilion.

Offering an experience that explores how objects bond to us and communicate with us, two small plastic sculptures made from the control panels of a home printer and a refrigerator blink incessantly, going in and out of sync with each other. The blinking that signals a paper jam or that you have left the refrigerator door open, with each sculpture unexpectedly producing the recognisable hum-rattle of a cell phone vibration, triggering the modern-day human instinct to instantly reach for your phone. Through the window of the pavilion, which had been covered until this year, visitors may be distracted from the new view of the canal by an outdoor LED screen, live broadcasting the changing advertising content from a small part of a highway-side screen on the outskirts of Reykjavík.

Small plastic toys made for dollhouses: a pizza, a steak, a dentist tool, have been scanned, brought to human scale, and reproduced by a German firm. The sculptures capture the toys' strangely smooth surfaces and simplified forms,

designed to only communicate as much information as needed to make their function clear. The sculptures are accompanied by a pigment print adorned with a sticker, depicting a very large number captured from the screen and keyboard of a toy cash register which inspired the title of the exhibition. The artworks invite viewers to consider why these mundane, everyday objects are reproduced as teaching instruments for children, instilling consumer desire from a young age.

Large relief sculptures embellish the pavilion walls, made from the latest developments in sustainable fabrication. Produced by a Dutch firm, one sculpture is made from recycled jute coffee bags, the other from recycled denim, which has been moulded into shapes of the small, cheap packaging, that are found protecting the products that we intend to purchase. The artist's work reflects the tension between the personal pleasure to be found in our world of material objects, but also the consequences of a world full of these objects.

Iceland has exhibited at the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia since the 1960s and has presented its national pavilion since 1984. Previous presentations have recently included Sigurður Guðjónsson's atmospheric audio-visual sculpture *Perceptual Motion* in 2022, Shoplifter's neon, hypernatural hair installation *Chromo Sapiens* in 2019 and Egill Sæbjörnsson's trolls in *Out of Control in Venice* in 2017. The Icelandic Pavilion is commissioned by the Icelandic Art Center, which promotes and supports Icelandic contemporary art internationally through grants, collaborations and projects.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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PRESS KIT

Please find a link to the press kit [here](#).
or scan the QR code:



HILDIGUNNUR BIRGISDÓTTIR

Hildigunnur Birgisdóttir (b. 1980, Reykjavík) lives and works in Reykjavík. In 2021, she was included in shows at Iceland's Reykjavík Art Museum; the GES-2 House of Culture, Moscow, Russia; the V-A-C Foundation, Moscow, Russia and H2H, Athens, Greece. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Iceland, the Reykjavík Art Museum, and The Living Art Museum in Reykjavík among others. Birgisdóttir graduated from the Iceland Academy of the Arts in 2003. Birgisdóttir is represented by [i8 Gallery](#) in Reykjavík.

DAN BYERS

Dan Byers is the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University. Recent projects include exhibitions with Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork, Pope.L, B. Ingrid Olson, Candice Lin, Tony Cokes, Jonathan Berger, Liz Magor, and Renée Green. Previously, he was Mannion Family Senior Curator at the ICA/Boston and Richard Armstrong Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Carnegie Museum of Art, where he was co-curator, with Daniel Baumann and Tina Kukielski, of the 2013 Carnegie International.

ICELANDIC ART CENTER

Based in Reykjavík, the Icelandic Arts Center (IAC) is dedicated to promoting Icelandic visual arts internationally. Affiliated with Iceland's Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs, the IAC strengthens networks between the visual arts scene in Iceland and the global cultural sphere. Through funding and logistical assistance, the IAC assists Icelandic artists and arts professionals in producing projects abroad and facilitates cooperation with public and private associations, organisations, and enterprises worldwide. The Icelandic Art Center (IAC) is commissioner of the Pavilion of Iceland at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia on behalf of the Icelandic Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs and has been commissioner since 2007. More information is available on [the Icelandic Art Center's website](#).