



## WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

American artist Benjamin Crotty followed the yellow brick road from the esteemed art world of France to the cultural hinterlands of Iceland for a whirlwind day to rehearse a conceptual video project. As it turns out, his biggest concern is something beyond his control.

BY JONAS MOODY PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON

“When I told the funding committee I wanted to film the project in Iceland, they scoffed at me saying, ‘Well you might as well fly to the moon and film it there!’” Benjamin Crotty has landed, but only for one day.

The project is a nine-minute video reinterpreting the last scene of Sergio Leone’s first spaghetti western, *A Fistful of Dollars*, an American western based on a Japanese film, shot in Spain, with an Italian cast and crew, and Clint Eastwood. These so-called *spaghetti westerns* are often seen as early examples of multicultural filmmaking. “The reversal in this piece is between specificity and generality,” says Crotty of his Viking rendition of the classic showdown scene. “For this reason I wanted the most specific place possible, which Iceland is for me. It’s an island nation with such linguistic puritanism, and then there’s the genetic specificity of the Icelandic horse, which figures into the scene.”

His first order of business is to meet the band, a teenage rock group from the suburbs, who have adapted Ennio Morricone’s original score. Crotty bangs on the door of the Seltjarnarnes youth center until a peal of laughter comes from inside. A pack of giddy teenage girls dressed as Peter Pan and the Lost Boys answer with suckers hanging from their mouths. It’s Öskudagur, the nation’s Ash Wednesday-cum-Halloween celebration, which is somehow befitting of Crotty’s conceptual art piece. “This bodes very well,” he snickers as the girls invite him in.

While you might be quick to peg Crotty, 27, as a stylish tourist, with his backpack and gawk, upon closer inspection his very skinny jeans and critical expression suggest a tendency for artistic machinations. After a good look around the youth center he tells Peter Pan and the Lost Boys he’s here to meet BERTEL!, the band who will play live in his video. “Oh, they played music for our last video too,” the girls reply, as if to one-up him, “We’re in a video club.” Crotty, whose project is sponsored by the Le Fresnoy National Studio in France, takes this as a good endorsement. He’s not looking for professional; he’s looking for authentic.

The band arrives, though two members short to Crotty’s chagrin. He’s been working through e-mail until now, and has only one day to rehearse the entire group. The boys are apologetic, but pleasingly hip in all-over printed hoodies, worn-out sneakers, and floppy hair. This is his first time to meet the band in person, though he originally found them months ago on MySpace “I was interested in the band as a meta-representation of a Scandinavian, teen rock band, and they definitely satisfied my notions of what that should be – they’re very young, very groomed,” Crotty says.

An uninterested supervisor at the youth center unlocks a basement practice room and is quickly shooed away by the boys, not wanting to seem supervised. As Crotty explains the project to the boys he changes his tone, speaking slowly with exaggerated gestures, hesitating before words like ‘performative’ and ‘cultural specificity.’

Benjamin returns to Iceland come rain or shine at the end of March to shoot his video, *Hnefajfylli af þorski* (*Fistful of Cod*). The final piece will be shown as part of an exhibition called *Panorama 8* to be held at Le Fresnoy National Studio in Lille, France from June 2 to July 15.



His voice is reminiscent of an ESL instructor, which is exactly what Benjamin does for extra money back in France.

Slumped forward in his folding chair and cringing ever so slightly, Crotty seems a little apprehensive when the music gets off to a clumsy start. The boys pause to regroup, adjusting knobs on their synthesizers as screams from the girls in the rec room drift in and fill the awkward silence. Benjamin clears his throat. The moment seems to verge on fiasco. Before starting up again the band asks about infringing on copyrights of the original score. The question throws Benjamin for a loop, still reeling from their freshly fumbled attempt. “Uh, I don’t really know. I mean, Sergio Leone is dead...” Satisfied with this answer, the boys start into a riff from the film with a synthesized Mexican trumpet.

There’s a reversal of mood in the room as the music crescendos into full electronic swing. BERTEL! succeeds in conjuring up the mysterious bravado of Morricone’s original music right here in the basement of the Seltjarnarnes youth center. “This is very good,” Crotty comments. The boys know they’ve done well, nodding with wide, sheepish grins.

For the artist, working with Icelanders has been drastically different than his experience with the French. “France is a country with a lot of baggage,” Crotty explains, “socially, historically, culturally. It’s interesting; it’s just not my baggage. So I didn’t want to realize my project in that environment. People here are far more open-minded. Everyone has had a game attitude. They don’t ask *why* things are happening; they just want to know *what’s* happening.”

The action takes place at Árbær Museum in the suburbs of Reykjavík, a hodge-podge collection of conserved houses from sundry eras in Icelandic history—just about as pastiche as the conceptual art being played out on it. Benjamin scouted the location for its old, timber church, which will serve as a backdrop. After setting out a modest, albeit thoughtful, spread of coffee and cardamom crullers, he begins the rehearsal, running through the script with the actors and the musicians while the cameramen look on.

The all-male cast has been selected from the Student Theater, a young, amateur troupe known for its unconventional productions and diligent work ethic. “The actors were rather self-directed, which is good because I’m not a theatrical director,” Crotty says. “I was especially relieved to find Kolbeinn Arnbjörnsson to play the Clint Eastwood character. It requires a lot of charisma, good facial expressions, plus he’s photogenic and has no reservations about getting on a horse.”

Physically, the cast fits the bill with blonde hair and chiseled features, but it’s not until the men don their fur that they channel their Viking-cowboy personas. The ambient grunting and growling increases as they tap into their inner barbarians, barking Icelandic, which lends to their brutishness. Though Crotty doesn’t understand the language, he has the actors speak in their native tongue to further localize the scene. “I wanted dialogue very few could understand,” he says. “I like the idea of willfully choosing a language seldom spoken.”

After a period of disjointed progression with Crotty interjecting direction, the scene finally takes off as Kolbeinn guns down the villain and the music rises. The moment seems to gel, with slain Vikings strewn around the ground and the electronic march thundering from the band as the hero rides away. The band, the actors, the cameramen looking on, even Benjamin narrow their eyes and snarl their lips as the spirit of Sergio Leone serves up a heaping serving of spaghetti western in the last place one might expect: Iceland.

The rehearsal has gone relatively well, but his bigger worries lie ahead. “I have this lingering feeling of doom about the weather,” Crotty says. “Realizing this piece from a practical standpoint is going to be a quasi-miracle.” The scene will be fully wired with each actor wearing a mic, two wondering cameramen cabled to monitors, and of course all the band’s gadgetry. A downpour could bring the project to a screeching and indefinite halt. He confesses the idea of investing in a pair of ruby slippers and recruiting a good witch if the weather forecast looks grim. **IR**