“A Furious Girl from Rome” – Róska and the Mythography of Avant-Garde Bohemianism

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Abstract

Róska was one of the key artists of the burgeoning neo-avant-garde in Reykjavík in the 1960s, which saw a radical transformation of the cultural field. Through her art works and her participation in revolutionary activities in Iceland and abroad, Róska came to serve as the embodiment of the revolutionary ideals of 1968, which are often shrouded in a spirit of nostalgia. The essay explores the mythology surrounding Róska's career, relating it to the tradition of bohemianism and the notion of an aesthetic avant-garde.

In the year 2000 the Mál og menning publishing house, in collaboration with the Living Art Museum (Nýlistasafnið) in Reykjavík, published a catalogue dedicated to the works and activities of Róska, or Ragnhildur Óskarsdóttur. The catalogue, edited by Hjálmar Sveinsson, presents a retrospective of the artist's career, including reproductions of a broad selection of her works as well as a number of short articles and statements by the artist's colleagues and contemporaries. The publication of this volume four years after Róska's death can be seen as an adequate epilogue to one of the most powerful myths of the Icelandic neo-avant-garde that led to important shifts in the cultural field in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of an active avant-garde scene closely related to the latest European currents. The aim of the publication is not only to document Róska's career and save her work from oblivion but also to strengthen her position as one of the key artists in Iceland in the twentieth century and a leading figure in the powerful countercultural scene in Reykjavík in the 1960s and 1970s.

In order to get a clearer picture of the iconic role assigned to Róska and her aesthetic, cultural and political legacy, it is useful to quote the description of her work in an English summary at the end of the discussed volume:

Róska [...] belonged to the generation of radical European artists who wished to expunge the boundaries between life and art, who fought against the artistic snobbery of the bourgeoisie, the political complacency of the masses, and the propaganda machinery of professional
politicians. Róska was a painter, a photographer, a film director and – above all – an insurrectionist; the theme of her life is “continual rebellion in living poetry and politics”, as she herself said in a 1978 article about surrealism. She lived in Rome for the majority of her life, but to Icelanders her life was cloaked in the robes of adventure, even legend, because of her personal charms, artistic talent, political radicalism and aura of things Southern. Nonetheless her life evolved into a tragedy due to the burden of chronic illness and her eventual downward spiral into the world of drugs.

SVEINSSON 2000A: 176

The core elements of the avant-garde icon presented in this description are worth noting. Róska appears as a versatile avant-garde artist and activist engaged in the project of “expunging the boundaries between life and art” in a perpetual revolt against the aesthetic institutions of bourgeois society. The description can thus be said to present the image of a fully fledged avant-gardeist, fitting Peter Bürger’s (1974) theoretical parameters defining the avant-garde. Somewhat more surprising is the insistence on Róska’s status as a “radical European artist” shrouded in an “aura of things Southern”, which underlines her role as a peculiarly appealing outsider and messenger of political radicalism in a stagnant, if not reactionary, cultural field on the geographical periphery. Finally the description refers to the tragedy of Róska’s life as she falls prey to the project of integrating her aesthetic principles into her own lifestyle in a society impregnated by ideological and social paradoxes.

In order to gain a closer understanding of Róska’s works and her role in Icelandic culture it is not only necessary to analyse her works and activities from a critical, historical or theoretical perspective. What is also needed is a critical approach to Róska as one of the founding myths of Icelandic bohemia in the 1960s and 1970s (along with figures such as the poet Dagur Sigurðarson and the musician-artist-poet Megas)2 and a historical approach to the origins of the bohemian myth. As the contributions included in the catalogue from 2000 underline, Róska serves as an icon of the avant-garde artist in “revolt against all forms of ‘authority’” (Guðmundsson et al. 2000: 170),

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1 The description in the English summary is concordant with Hjálmar Sveinsson’s description in a short text in Icelandic that serves as an introduction to the catalogue (Sveinsson 2000b: 7–8).

2 The volume on Róska was actually the first publication in a trilogy edited by Hjálmar Sveinsson, the other two volumes being devoted to Dagur and Megas (see Sveinsson and Svansson 2003; Svansson and Sveinsson 2001).