

Storytelling, nature and art: an introduction to the world of Hreinn Friðfinnsson

The modernist avant-gardes are marked by a general form of narrative aphasia, a widespread lack of speech or, we might say, of "story". The self-sufficiency of the art object proclaimed by modernism, its ability to "self-define", make its forms fundamentally "mute". The "anti-modernist" avant-gardes (from Minimalism on, to put it simply), with their new focus on context and the conditions in which art is made, shown, observed and discussed, introduce the possibility that it can be accompanied by or constructed around a narrative dimension. Conceptual Art, above all, rethinks the possibility that images, texts and forms, even when they take on an apparently laconic appearance or are communicated through impersonal and/or scientific types of expression, can become the vehicles of a particular narrative, discursive capacity.

The nature of storytelling

The work of Hreinn Friðfinnsson (Baer Dalir, Iceland, 1943) is rooted in storytelling. Hailing from a region where the perception of majestic and mostly uncontaminated nature has influenced the birth and spread of sagas, fables and legends, Friðfinnsson carries these narrative forms in his personal cultural background. Of course text is one of the primary tools of this orientation, as is particularly evident in works from different periods. From *Hreinn Friðfinnsson Dream* (1973) to *Thorsteinn Surtr dreamed...* (2002) language takes written form to evoke dream moments, while *Untitled* (2006) consists of a quite laconic presentation: a fragment of a meteorite in a showcase comes together with a text that narrates how it was found in Siberia in 1947.

While in the latter case the borders between truth and fiction seem to be porous, a dialectic between narration and mystery, visible and invisible crosses one of them most peculiar projects of the artist. *House Project* (1974) transforms into praxis a story contained in an Icelandic book from the start of the 20th century: the construction of a small house where all the parts are assembled backwards. Curtains, wallpaper, photographs: everything we are used to seeing on the inside is positioned outside,

and vice versa. Installed in a remote place in the Icelandic countryside, this work seems to be addressed more to the passing, unintentional viewer, an explorer or nature lover, rather than to an art audience. Its enjoyment is above all for those who have happened upon it by chance, encountering a strange work of architecture. Its existence is originally known by word of mouth or spontaneous photographic documentation.

The dematerialization of the art object, pursued by much of Conceptual Art especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, uses evoking in the imagination, the oral dimension of the story and of word of mouth as one of the possible tools of this questioning of the work as self-sufficient material form. As in other conceptual projects – the area explored by Fridfinnsson's early works – *House Project* distances direct enjoyment of the image or the form, and thus increments to imaginative and narrative potential of the work itself, which no longer lies in the pure materiality of the object, but in its capacity to become a factor of lore and legend. From the story to the image and vice versa: with *House Project* Fridfinnsson takes a round trip on the trajectory between myth and reality.

As we have already seen in the previous examples, the relation to the narrative dimension of storytelling is, in Fridfinnsson's work, characterized by a radical restraint of means. As for other conceptual artists, there is a contrast between the imaginative potential of the matter and the way in which it is presented. *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972) is the result of investigation of Icelandic folklore, leading to a table that combines text and imagery, data and visual documentation. Like other artists of this period who use proto-scientific and apparently analytical tools (maps, charts, photographs, texts, etc) to convey content that challenges the divisions and classifications, or the very premises of scientific thought, Fridfinnsson approaches a rather mystical and spiritual subject with an analytical attitude. As in the case of the experiments of Robert Barry with inert gases (*Inert Gas Series*, 1969), or the infinite photographic series of Douglas Huebler (*Variable Pieces*, 1970-1997), or the ranking of the world's 1000 longest rivers by Alighiero Boetti (*Classifying the thousand longest rivers in the world*, 1970-77), here the artist applies a documentary language similar to scientific classification to measure material connected with aspects that are hard to record or to verify. There is something subtly paradoxical in this type of exercise, in what we might call an "anthropology of doubt". There is a contrast

between form and meaning in these works that behind their scientific look attempt to challenge precisely those ordering precepts that form the basis and the authority of positivist culture.

The image of Nature and the nature of image

These first examples clearly show that Fridfinnsson's work has that narrative and romantic character that critics have only recently underlined in certain forms of conceptualism of the late 1960s and 1970s, and which is widespread in artistic expressions of recent years, which are ideally connected to this background¹. In the line of artists like Bas Jan Ader, Giovanni Anselmo and Robert Barry the relationship with nature, with the limits of its perception, becomes a way of testing the more general limits of man's speculative and imaginative capacities but also the possibility of osmosis of man into the natural world. This relationship of the individual with the natural element and the surrounding environment crosses works of different epochs and languages, taking on different shadings. A contrast between the violence of nature and the formal detachment with which it is expressed can be found in another photographic recording with a conceptual and documentary approach, namely *Five Gates for the South Wind* (1971-72), but also in a text work like *Substances* (1973). Here the lone phrase "I have looked at the sea through my tears" printed on a transparent sheet of glass might evoke the moment of an emotionally and technically

¹ This is a very wide area, hard to sum up in a few words. We can at least indicate the new interest in the work of Bas Jan Ader, Robert Barry and Ian Wilson among critics and the latest generations of artists. A narrative dimension and a component of oral transmission has been implicit since the early 1990s in the work of Maurizio Cattelan, Philippe Parreno and, more recently, Roberto Cuoghi, Simon Fujiwara, Tino Sehgal and Tris Vonna-Michell. Artists like Jason Dodge and Ryan Gander investigate the possibilities of mental and narrative activation of the art object, while others like Joachim Koester, Benoit Maire, Melvin Moti and Falke Pisano explore the very limits of the visual.

For a romantic interpretation of a number of conceptual artists, see: Jörg Heiser, "Emotional Rescue", *Frieze*, issue 71, November-December 2002 and *Romantic Conceptualism*, catalogue of the homonymous exhibition, Kunsthalle Nürnberg (10 May-17 July 2007) and BAWAG Foundation, Vienna (14 September-1 December 2007), Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld 2008. On the discursive and verbal drift of certain recent art: Dieter Roelstraete, "Word Play", *Frieze* issue 139, May 2011. On the relationship between storytelling and conceptual art, past and present, see my: "Nothing to See, Nothing to Hide", catalogue of the Baltic Triennial, 2005 (later republished in a new version in UOVO, 2008) and "The art of storytelling, the story(telling) of art", catalogue of the exhibition *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object of Art*, ACCA, Melbourne 2011.

disturbed sight, while more generally referring to the limits that accompany any perception of nature, and every act of observation. But another phrase, hand-written on the bottom of the sheet ("After a performance for one person and the sea") could lead the interpretation of the artwork and its title in a rather different direction. Since tears and sea-water are similar in character, the substances the title refers to are indeed those two. Therefore, looking at the sea through tears could stand for a less dramatic and emotional contrast; it could evoke a total correspondence of elements, the possibility of an immersion of man into nature.

As in the work of other artists in those years, in Fridfinnsson the action of seeing is often resolved in the attempt to evoke a primordial, founding dimension, as if the artist were trying to rediscover the purity of the gaze that has been denied us, at this point, in the civilization of images and widespread communication. Thus *Seven Times* (1972) once again makes use of a sequence with a minimal-conceptual character to document the gestures with which a man (the artist) opens a curtain to look out the window. Between repetition and difference, this gesture has something arcane about it, like the act of a renewed way of looking at the world. Twenty years later, Fridfinnsson returns to a similar motif when he has his nephew photograph a window of the house where the artist was born (*First Window*, 1992), and the Icelandic landscape seen through it: perhaps the very first thing Fridfinnsson ever saw. A reference to Duchamp's window and to his massive influence for the arts can be also read in the work and in its title. Autobiographical substance, an urge towards a "beyond", an abstract dimension of thought, and a meta-linguistic stance are inseparably joined here in the synthesis of a (re)found image.

In Fridfinnsson the act of seeing is often, in fact, connected with perception of nature, and the relationship with nature merges with the effort to perceive or even to imagine the elsewhere, the beyond, the infinite. This dialogue with a both physically and mentally distant dimension is already clear in the titles of certain works. The large photograph *Elsewhere* (1998-2000) documents a boundless Icelandic landscape, while in the photographic diptych *So Far* (1974-2002) a man (the artist, again) is shown as he touches a mirror with a finger. In these cases the image does not exist as a self-sufficient entity, in its aesthetic and formal qualities, but as an activator of imaginative potential, as the tool to go beyond its own representative limits. While the finger is actually very close to the mirror, the title suggests that the simple gesture

of touching, of doubling the finger's image, opens up a more complex, distant dimension of thought. The dialectic between the image and its double – also seen in other works like *Attending*, 1973; *Jars*, 2002; *Pair*, 2002-2004; *The Way We Were*, 2002 – is evidence of Fridfinnsson's desire to discuss the potential of the everyday useful object to construct an image, or of an image to convey metaphysical reflections.

In the work of the Icelandic artist the reference to nature also takes form in sculpture, installations and environments, through pithy use of abstract forms (*Landscape*, 1990, *11 Drops*, 2004, *World*, 1990-2007). But in other cases the relationship with the minimal language takes on greater atmospheric quality, a sense of immersion, of osmosis between man and space, man and environment. Thus in *For Light, Shadow and Dust* (1994- ongoing) the sculptural element, which consists of wall shelves covered with gold leaf, is deprived of an practical efficacy, becoming instead and above all a surface that fills the surrounding environment with reflections. In *Floor Piece* (1992-ongoing), on the other hand, the interior of an ordinary cardboard box is covered with fluorescent paper that seems to give new life to that material, referencing a different spatial and mental dimension. Though they apply antithetical procedures and materials (the preciousness of the former and the poorness of the latter), these are further examples of the poetic attitude of an artist who uses minimal interventions to play with the usage value of materials, to find unexpected purposes, bringing out sensual and imaginative potential.

Finally, the dialectic between the romantic osmosis of man into nature and the understanding of nature's functioning is expressed by Fridfinnsson in a more recent work. *Untitled* (2000) consists of a large photograph that documents the artist occupied with a simple gesture. As if to re-stage Isaac Newton's famous experiments using prisms to analyze the nature of light (published in 1672), this image captures the moment when sunlight is broken into its constituent spectral colors and is reflected into the palms of the artist's hands. While early photographic works had a detached relation to nature and subsequent sculptural pieces evoked nature through the use of different materials, here Fridfinnsson rethinks the possibility of nature "in the laboratory", recreating the natural effect of rainbow "in captivity", challenging our perception of it.

The nature of art

As is made clear by the many above examples, for Fridfinnsson the image is undoubtedly a mental issue. But if it is an act of thought, it is not severed from an at times ironic levity that avoids any intellectual or formulated drifts, also through the use of banal everyday materials. A biographical and sentimental dimension is evident in certain works like *Drawing a Tiger* (1971), where the artist has reconstructed an image of his youth, twenty years later, and in *Sheep and Horses of my Nephew* (2001), where once again he has asked his young nephew to take photographs, this time of farm animals. Chance and time enter these images, which seem to assert the idea of the creative act as an amateur, "involuntary" gesture, distant from any repetition, any craft.

As this latest example demonstrates, in Fridfinnsson's work the factor of chance is often involved, or a process in which aesthetic choices are delegated to others, or entrusted to an automatic procedure or a rule. By doing this, he drastically revises the importance of the subjectivity of the artist, the space left to his conscious choices in the making of the work. Fridfinnsson's relationship with painting — a very rare one, it must be said — is also filled with the same "amateur", poetic lightness, a widespread sense of anti-rhetoric. In *Dropping by Jon Gunnar's* (1965-1992), *Suspended* (2000) and *Placement* (1999-2007) the use of pictorial material is reduced to the minimum expressive and emotional terms of any possible artistic mythology. In all these cases the pictorial material comes into play in absolute silence, as a minimum (*Placement*), random (*Suspended*) or "repairing" (*Dropping*) gesture. Painting is here, above all, the almost parodic expression of its present status and its glorious history.

It should be clear by now that the charm of the work of Hreinn Fridfinnsson does not lie in the application of an expressive formula through the "vertical" exploration of a technique or a craft. On the contrary, it is pervaded by an ongoing reluctance to produce objects, to compose new images, to invent new forms. Most of his works are based on simple additions and changes to given elements, combinations of already existing materials and objects. These additions, changes and combinations are the tools used by the artist to reveal and put into action their poetic and conceptual potential.

His work does not consist in the repetitive application of an aesthetic formula, but in the horizontal character of a path entered from multiple accesses, expressed through an absolute versatility of tools and languages, apparently still open to new directions. The diversity of the forms utilized does not disrupt a strict internal consistency that is manifested in a dense network of correspondences we have attempted to map, however briefly.

An uncompromising "amateur", constantly open to new expressive means, Fridfinnsson has followed an idea of art as qualitative potential applied to the world of objects and phenomena, with a persistent character of anti-rethoric. With Fridfinnsson the artist's gesture is not the imposition of new signs on the world, the repeated accumulation of products and forms; on the contrary it is a vehicle of imaginative re-creation, identifying the poetic component of what already exists.

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