

Hans Ulrich Obrist interview with Hreinn Fridfinnsson

HUO I thought it would be good to start with your piece of 1974 about secrets, which has become a legendary work; it's influenced so many artists all over the world. Could you tell me how the piece came about?

HF It exists only as an advertisement in a periodical. In the 1970s, when a group of us were running a small exhibition space in Amsterdam called the In-Out Centre, there was a little publication with a limited print-run called *Fandangos* that was run by a young artist couple in Maastricht. I contributed to it on two or three occasions and one of these was this advertisement. I announced that I was a collector of secrets and asked people to contact me and give me their secrets. But perhaps understandably, I didn't get a single one.

HUO So it didn't lead to an archive of secrets. Was the idea of the archive behind it?

HF Yes, or the notion of collecting and collectables. I was hoping that somebody would make contact, but I knew it was highly unlikely. People don't normally entrust a stranger with their secrets. The work was playing with the nature of the secret – I, as a collector of secrets, would not want to trade or pass them around since then they would cease to exist.

HUO Somebody could still call you today with their secret.

HF Absolutely. It isn't a dead thing at all. I could still present it.

HUO In the 1960s and 70s, there was a tendency towards what Lucy Lippard called 'the dematerialisation of the object', and most of these dematerialised artworks were related to documents. Your project about secrets seems to have pushed that one step further: so many people have told me about this work that it almost functions like a rumour.

HF Yes, that's what people have told me. I don't remember being conscious of that aspect at the time.

HUO Another of your works that has been talked about a lot by young artists is your 'inside-out house', *House Project*, of 1974. Can you tell me about the genesis of this piece?

HF Again, it's mainly a text work: it's presented as the documentation of the event, as evidence that the house was built, and it belongs to a museum in Stockholm. The idea originated in an old Icelandic book from the early 20th century. A certain gentleman in a village – he was considered to be quite an eccentric – decided to build a new house for himself. He started in the traditional manner with a shell constructed from wood and corrugated iron. But instead of putting the iron on the outside, he put it on the inside. According to the story, it was a decorative purpose that lay behind this idea, because he wanted to use wallpaper, which was a novelty, and he thought it would make sense to put it on the outside where more people could enjoy it. This was for me just a fantastic thing: a house turned inside-out. Then I realised that it had a meaning. You could claim that such a house turns the world inside-out. So that was the drive to build a similar little house. I stumbled across an ideal site in a lava area not far from Reykjavik and we built it quickly. One of the basic factors of the project was that the building itself wasn't a sculpture for people to visit. The piece was presented as documentation.

HUO So it was more about the story-telling than about the actual experience?

HF Yes. It was never intended as a sculptural piece. And then it was just left where we built it. But an important part of it is that once in a while ramblers walking around in this area came across it. Little by little, I started hearing stories from people who'd come across this funny house in this area. That was the intention: that it shouldn't be advertised that there was an art piece there. This was exactly what I was after.

HUO Again, it's almost like a secret.

HF In a way, yes. And then the rumour spreads. It stayed there, I heard, in quite a reasonable condition for 20 years, and it's only in the last 10 years that it's deteriorated; there's nothing left of it now except some stuff lying around.

HUO You had discussions with Jessica Morgan at the Icelandic Festival about rebuilding it, didn't you?

HF She suggested I should rebuild it. At first I agreed, but then I realised that this was an exhibition project, and the duration would be only three

or four months. To rebuild this house and then to take it down would turn it into a theatre set of sorts. And there's something about it that you can't exactly repeat. So I don't think it will happen. But I would like to realise something on that same site one day.

HUO So you made something else for the Icelandic Art Festival. You did an installation in the north of Iceland.

HF I made an alternative suggestion that's based on the original house project and it's meant, in a way, as a kind of taking leave of it. Gallery Slunkariki, where Jessica finally decided to put my work, is a small gallery in the village of Isafjörður, which has been run very successfully for a great number of years. The feature of the Gallery that stuck in my mind was that in the floor is a trapdoor, which opened on a stairway to the basement. I wanted to lift this lid or do something with it. Last spring, the lid was opened and three more sides with mirrored surfaces were added, so that there was a mirror box with a stairway instead of a bottom. It opened the space up; it made it quite large. You could see into every corner of the basement, just from walking around this mirrored box. The opening of the stairway turned into a field or grid, which extended in all directions. On the walls of the gallery space upstairs I had some frottage drawings; I placed drawing paper directly on the wall and I rubbed over it with a pencil so that all the remains of whatever had been done to this wall came through. So upstairs it's a very clean, classical sort of a gallery space, but in the middle you have a basement that contains all kinds of stuff with all kinds of histories.

Of course, it also has a kind of architectural dimension to it. And another strand of the house project is that when I had a retrospective show at Domaine de Kerguéhennec centre d'art contemporain, I was invited to do something in the sculpture park. Again, what I put forward was based on this house, but it proposes another way to deal with it, and that's to turn it back into a normal house with things inside it, but it would be a closed house that you couldn't enter; you could only peep through the windows. That project is now in progress, and if all goes well it will be realised this year. And then I think the *House Project* will be finished.

HUO Many of your projects start with a text as the central element. To what extent is writing and story-telling important for you, particularly Icelandic sagas?

HF There are a lot of stories, narrative pieces often accompanied by photo presentations. My first solo show took place here in Amsterdam in 1971, and that was a group of 12 text photos with the title *Sacred and Enchanted Places*. I collected material about the places, and then I visited and photographed them. They were all special places in nature – a little piece of a stone or a part of a meadow or a hill – or buildings and farmhouses in the countryside. But they were all places that had spells on them. For example, you can't mow the grass or move the stone because then something bad will happen.

HUO And the form of the work is basically two photographs left and right and a text in the middle.

HF Yes. The reason for the two photographs is that one is taken from a distance so that one gets a sense of the surroundings; the other is a close-up of the spot that's had a spell cast on it. The stories and their sources are very varied; some were from books and publications, some given to me by people. I travelled around to collect stories about places of this sort. I found some places in Reykjavik through a specialist in these kinds of stories and myths and traditions.

HUO What was his name?

HF Arni Ola. He wrote some literature, but mainly he was a story collector and he was very precise, presenting these very old stories as a sort of history. I phoned him up and talked to him about a certain stone in Reykjavik, which is now quite close to the centre, but when these particular events took place, it was outside the city. So it was very good to learn about it from such a source. I took good care that the stories were as accurate as possible. And these narrative pieces are still going on. Story-telling is very important for me; it's just in my nature.

HUO You yourself have written beautiful texts, for example *Dream* from 1973. Is writing a daily practice? Have you ever written novels?

HF Not at all, no. I hardly write at all any more. I used to a bit. I tried writing some texts, but never anything approaching a book or a poem. *Dream* was simply written down. I've done two 'dreams' so far. There was another one some years later for a booklet published in conjunction with one of the Centre Pompidou's opening exhibitions, *Ca va? Ca va?*,

curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. There were four of us in the show, and a box of four small booklets was published instead of a catalogue. Then there were some more text works and stories in catalogues. There were also some stories from Icelandic folklore published in artists' magazines in the early 1970s.

HUO Like many other Icelandic artists, you went into exile; you went to Amsterdam. Could you talk a little bit about this notion of travel in relation to your work?

HF The term 'exile' is far too dramatic – I wasn't running away when I went abroad. I was just exploring what was beyond my immediate horizon. A youngster with a leaning towards art, who was born and raised in an isolated place, gets this idea of the world outside: whatever is outside is just attractive. This is the same theme that goes through the sagas. To go away is the thing, but not to escape; that's probably also there, but it's of much lesser weight than the simple desire to go to new places. It just happened and it was one coincidence after another. My first trip abroad was to London, in 1963. I spent some time there on and off throughout the 1960s. These trips were quite aimless; it was just, 'Why not go there?' And then in the late 1960s, I was in Rome. I was there in the historic year 1968. Then I just drifted to Holland because my then wife got a position here with a dance company. It's just life that brings one to the places where one sometimes spends an unbelievably long time. It wasn't my intention to stay in Holland forever.

HUO There's still quite a strong presence of Icelandic places in your work. It's a discussion we've been having with Olafur Eliasson, who said that even though he's been away from Iceland for many years, it's almost magnetic; he keeps coming back and the landscape of Iceland continues to nurture him. Is that also the case for you?

HF In the 1970s, I used all kinds of material of Icelandic origin, but that didn't have to do with being homesick or missing the place; I just found folklore fitting as material to be transformed into contemporary art. Lately, I've made some photographic works in Iceland, but the specific location didn't play a big role. I think this pull was stronger in the 1970s.

HUO What was your relation to the whole conceptual art movement during the 1960s and early 70s? Obviously, both London and Amsterdam

were central to that movement at the time. Were there any dialogues with other artists that were particularly important for you?

HF There were not that many in London. In Rome – strangely, because the art world there was quite dull in those days: it was all film, film, film – there were a few like-minded individuals and that was stimulating and inspiring; we had very good exchanges. But in Amsterdam, it was completely different. There weren't that many galleries, just a few memorable ones, like the tiny Art & Project, which was tremendously important. And the Stedelijk Museum was very lively, very active and a good cultural institute in the 1970s. And there were all the museums as well, of course. But there was a constant flow of people; much of the time we had people staying with us, sleeping on the floor. They came from all over the place. So the 1970s was a time when there was a lot of exchange, a lot of contact and movement and openness in this place.

HUO What about earlier influences? Another thread throughout your work is geometric abstraction, in terms of the way in which you arrange your photographs in geometric patterns, or the squares in a work like *Principle and Temptation*, 1998–91. Is that triggered by early-20th-century utopias?

HF *Principle and Temptation* is a photographic work that has the structure of a golden rectangle; when divided into progressively smaller squares, the resulting radii, the so-called golden spiral, appears, which corresponds to the Fibonacci sequence of numbers. This is not a geometric abstraction designed by me; it's an existing formula. I also added a colour range to the image. In one of the smaller squares, there's an inserted figurative image, a photo of a shadow play with hands creating an image of a bird. But geometric abstraction was my first big love in the 1950s, and I'm extremely fond of this kind of art. I guess there's an influence there.

HUO How did you come into contact with geometric abstraction at the time? There were geometric painters in Iceland in the 1950s like Karl Kvaran, the father of Gunnar Kvaran. Was this important?

HF Absolutely. Of course, for a kid, everything is important; everything is interesting and everything is instantly imitated. A lot of the Icelandic abstract artists came from, or had some connection with, the Parisian school and also painted figuratively. I came into contact with this art

through black and white images in the newspaper because I was living in the countryside. I didn't see a painting until I left. I saw images by people like Thorvaldur Skúlason, Karl Kvaran, Hördur Ágústsson and Svavar Gudnason. There were a lot of painters making Abstract Expressionist work in those days, but I was more drawn to the geometric side rather than Abstract Expressionism.

HUO Of which Kvaran was the great one.

HF Kvaran, yes, and all these slightly older artists. Some of his works were at that time important influences. And then, little by little, I came across other people through publications from Reykjavik. Quite some time before I went to art school in 1958, I'd seen radical, important works by Mondrian. This was a particular type of composition that I must admit I made hundreds of imitations of. 'This is the end-point in art', I thought to myself at the time, and I thought that nothing needed to be added to it. These were very great, enlightening moments, because life in the countryside was basically isolation from the visual arts; it simply wasn't there, except for the occasional photo in the newspaper. Malevich came later; I didn't see any works by Malevich, or the Russians, until I'd gone to the city. This was the dominating influence that shaped my way of looking at things in this early period.

HUO The object has always had a presence in your work, but at the same time, it's surrounded by doubt. If you think about the house, for example, it's not really about the object. In the 1980s, you started to do large works that were more object-orientated, but you soon dropped this idea. Your objects aren't monolithic, they're not heavy, they don't occupy space; many are more like triggers – they're more like what Michel Serre would call 'quasi-objects'.

HF I'm really at a loss as to what to say about objects. I can't remember the last time I constructed something. I don't feel attracted to making constructions. For example, I was one of several artists invited to make a proposal for a public artwork in a large new building for the water and energy companies, the height of which is almost 40 metres. Each artist was to choose a particular space in the building. In the search for an idea for this particular space, I began investigating, along with Kristinn E Hrafnsson, a friend and colleague who was helping me, the history of Foucault's Pendulum. I quickly saw that there was no way

that I could make any sculpture for this location that would be more interesting than Foucault's Pendulum. This is, of course, an object that belongs to the history of physics; in the end, it was built by a physicist and a team of people. I was very happy to be a part of this process, but I haven't constructed an object for a long time.

HUO You see no reason to add any more objects to the world?

HF Not at the moment. This view, of course, has undergone many changes throughout the time that I've been working as an artist. The disappearance, the absence of the object, came very naturally in the Conceptual era. It wasn't something that one had to work hard on. But still the object in my work never disappeared. An object can be a wonderful thing, and objects came back with force in the beginning of the 1980s; that was the spirit of the time. I think I'd just had enough of these immaterial ideas floating around. The constructions I made in the 1980s were the result of a strange kind of 'must'. You find yourself in a particular time and you have to work through it, and suddenly you're out of it and that's a great feeling. But there are a few of these object works that I can defend. They weren't all bad, I think.

HUO No, on the contrary, they're very important. Which would you single out in particular?

HF There was a work you might have seen in Reykjavik: *A Folded Star*. It was done for an exhibition in Gallerie Bama in 1983 or 84. But I think the idea had been with me for some time – it was just one of those things that's there, but there hadn't been any need to realise it until that time. It's a pentagram that when folded makes a pentagon.

HUO What would be other key object works for you?

HF In the 1980s, I worked very hard on a group of sculptural works and some of these survive, but quite a few never took off. I thought really hard about these pieces; there was a lot of logic to me in them. They're not really key works, but they're the only survivors from a period that wasn't very fruitful.

HUO This is interesting; you're basically saying that the period where you produced more has, paradoxically, been the least fruitful.

HF Yes. Most of the time, the things that turn out to have been of more substance, or have opened up possibilities, are the result of what you might call luck: they happen to you; you stumble onto them or they're accidents; things go wrong and then some part of it turns out to be exactly the right thing. But then, I'd never say that I'm against a certain form or I wouldn't want to make a massive work; it's nothing like that. It's not a decision. These things are never planned; they just happen to you. You travel back and forth and circle around things and you realise you're circling around a core of similar things.

HUO Very often you revisit previous images. How is this organised? Is it systematic, through an archive, or is it random?

HF It is absolutely not systematic: this return to older works is just something that happens. The process is like memory. I have something that's unfinished, a certain idea or piece from 20 or 30 years ago, and it invites me to take it one step further, or to add a little twist to it. I don't have an archive, I just have memories.

HUO And how do those memories pop up? For example with *Drawing a Tiger* of 1971, you revisited an old photograph of you as a child drawing a tiger and then sort of re-enacted it.

HF I wouldn't use the term 're-enacting'. It was just using an old image to make a work. I came across this old photo of me, taken in 1952, in the family album. I just got an idea to repeat that act in a new situation, in a new location, and after all that time had elapsed in between. What really sparked the work was that there was a photo of this kid sitting outside in the garden drawing something and it was very clear, very visible, what the kid was drawing. It was very inviting to draw it again. Reworking older works does take place now and then. For example, *So Far* of 1974 was remade in 2002. The story and the image are in the catalogue from Kerguéhennec.

HUO Also in the Kerguéhennec catalogue there's a series of photographs called *Sheep and Horses of my Nephew*, 2001. Is this another kind of archive?

HF I don't think it has anything to do with archive. It had often crossed my mind during my visits to the family farm to make a photo-work of

the sheep in the meadows, but I didn't want to make the photos myself, so I asked the farmer, my nephew, to do it. These are his photographs: the composition is made with his eye. There are these interesting formations of the movement of a flock of sheep, depending on the land's topography, but there's a big difference between my nephew's aesthetic sense and my own. A farmer looks at his sheep differently from the way I would, so that influences the composition of these photographs. There's also an earlier photo work that was taken by my nephew, called *First Window*, 1992, a photograph of a window in the house where I was born and raised, and this was given the subtitle *Homage to Marcel Duchamp*.

HUO You gave him instructions?

HF Yes, I just asked him to find the window and take a picture. The result was very good.

HUO This open instruction idea features in many of your works. You participated in the *Do It* book of artists' instructions and it's there in many of your text pieces and photographs. Could you talk a little bit about the role of the instruction?

HF It's about giving a very basic idea to somebody else and trusting the outcome. Your collaborator's occupation will influence the outcome. If that person happens to be an artist, then it would be a particular kind of work. An artist has a tendency to go towards a certain style or towards something that ties ideas down one way or another; but when the idea is given away to others – just a little spark will do – the results are often agreeable and have, at least in my mind, an airy quality.

HUO That's like what John Cage said when he talked about his chance music.

HF Yes. I've always found that approach attractive and rewarding.

HUO Would you refer to a work like *Sanctuary*, 1992, and some of the other pieces you've made with boxes, as 'altered readymades'?

HF I use both readymades and prefabricated materials. The idea is to alter them slightly to achieve a transformation of the material into a work. It's a minimal interference. The boxes could be called altered

readymades because sheets of fluorescent paper were inserted inside in order to change the tint of the light coming from the outside. One box was mounted on the wall; with the bottom slightly open, you could see that it had a bluish tint on the inside that was different from the light inside the box and on the wall around it. *A Palace*, 1990, is a good example of my use of the readymade: this piece is made of chicken wire that was cut down into sections. It grows on the wall by adding up squared numbers from 1 to 12.

HUO It's systematic?

HF That one is systematic and in a way a little architectural.

HUO In terms of the readymade, I was also wondering about your very early piece called *Dropping by Jon Gunnar's* from 1965.

HF This piece, made from a door, was done for the 1965 exhibition in Reykjavik that later became known as *SÚM 1*. I got the door from Jón Gunnar Árnason, a friend and colleague who was also participating in the show. He was rebuilding his home, and this door was lying around and I asked him if I could take it home. I simply found it a beautiful object. I took it to the studio where I lived. I looked at it for many, many weeks, because I had no idea what to do with it. Then, in a fit of doubt, I broke it and painted the pieces, which in a way is a violent act, but there was no violence involved in getting it from my friend. Some people asked, 'Did you break in to Jón Gunnar's house and was that the reason for this piece?' But in fact the process was peaceful.

HUO This notion of the found object interests me in terms of your sonic work, because you also use found sounds. For example, *Movement/ Déplacement* from 1999 uses the sound of cars passing by.

HF The 'sounds' in *Movement* are not actually sounds that I experienced. They're described in the novel *Drei Kameraden* (*Three Comrades*) by the German writer Erich Maria Remarque. The book, in Icelandic translation, had been given to my father. It was a favourite of mine when I was a kid. I had it in my studio, which was totally clogged up after almost 10 years of working there. In about 2000, when I had to leave the studio, I had a photo taken of myself there, reading the book. I read a page where a character describes the sound of a car passing. I stopped in

the middle of the page, and then I moved to a new studio (which was completely empty) and finished the page there. There's no symbolic meaning about moving from one studio to another. I just wanted to make a work out of the experience, and the book happened to be there. I hadn't opened it since I was a kid.

HUO And what about *Song/Chanson*, 1992–2000?

HF The *Song* pieces are made by photographing the screen of an oscilloscope, which is activated by singing. It was made in stereo, so I got a loop that twists and dances around. I wanted an image made as directly as possible with sound. I knew that incredible things can be done with technology today, but this was probably the most primitive form of an image made by sound.

HUO It's almost like a machine for images.

HF Yes. It's a machine for images. There's a relationship between this work and a work I made around the same time with images from a kaleidoscope, where the multitude of images indicates the potential for going on and on, and the impossibility of the same image ever being repeated.

HUO Which brings us to the question of time. In the late 1980s, early 1990s, your work was very influential, because of the way it emphasised time, which was a rarely used medium in art history – works like *Seven Times*, 1972, and *After a While*, 1976, for example. Could one say that time is your medium?

HF It's something that recurs a lot in various ways – sometimes in a very straightforward sense and sometimes in a more complex form. Time, or notions of time, are always compelling. I read what comes my way about physics and mathematics, but I read as one who's uninitiated. It's very difficult to get your mind around these concepts, but it is possible to read about them with fascination. My interest in the essence of time is serious, but my dealing with time is not knowledge-based; it's more exploratory and feeling-based.

HUO What about *After a While*? In that work the idea of time is particularly strong.

HF It's a diptych. On the left is a photo of my work table on which lies a piece of paper with something written on it. The image on the right is a small piece of paper with a sentence written on it; it's the paper itself, transported out of the photographic image. It's a movement/time work.

HUO And you've recently been involved in an exhibition about time.

HF In 2005 a gallery in Brussels requested work with a time theme. I made an installation consisting of a huge Möbius strip and two digital codes from a round-trip baggage-claim ticket. I chose them because I find them visually pleasing, and, of course, they're loaded with information. In addition, there's a little meteorite and one tiny curl of pencil shaving, each on a pedestal. These details were picked from the planned house project in France.

HUO So appropriately, we finish by returning full circle to the inside-out house. Many thanks Hreinn for the interview.