A conversation between Hreinn Friðfinnsson, Andrea Bellini and Krist Gruijthuijsen

Andrea Bellini: I'd like to start with your relationship with Iceland. I have the feeling that this bond gives shape to your work and determines the atmosphere of your practice.

Hreinn Friðfinnsson: Well, I was born and brought up on a farm in the Icelandic countryside. That was indeed my world; the natural elements are a part of me and created a certain foundation for my work. Still, one must keep in mind that although one's formation is obviously shaped by one's surroundings and experiences, daydreaming is as important as one's day-to-day life. And it's my experience that a certain isolation tends to amplify daydreaming – for instance, thinking of faraway places and longing to get away and see the world.

AB: I remember you once told me that you used to walk alone for weeks with your sheep in the gorgeous Icelandic landscape. This must have marked your imagination forever.

HF: Yes, these long walks you're referring to were actually a job, which I had for two summers around 1966, in my mid-20s. The task consisted of working every second day in the mountains. There was a certain illness that the sheep could get, which happened now and then. This meant we had to fence off large areas, and by law, if there's a fence in the mountains there must also be a guard for it. So I had to walk the fences' distance every other day from the beginning of June to the end of September. It was quite a distance, approximately 50 km. I made a work about this a few years ago for an exhibition in London called *Frequent Long Walks* (2016). Of course, as a young boy I spent a lot of time outside, which happened quite naturally, being brought up on a farm. When inside, I was mostly practising my main interests, which were reading and drawing.

AB: Can you tell us about your early drawings?

HF: I started drawing at a very young age. I guess I was around three or four years old when I was given a pencil and paper. Art, at the time, only reached me through black and white photos in the newspaper and very occasionally via magazines brought to us by people from the city. One of these that particularly stood out was a parcel sent by my uncle consisting of all the editions of a magazine called *Líf og List* (Life and Art). Published from 1950 to 1953, it was the first magazine in Iceland that revolved around contemporary art and literature. Another example that was very influential for me was seeing images of abstract art in one of the national newspapers, which I became fascinated with. All of these had a great impact on me, since I didn't see a real painting until my first trip to Reykjavik when I was ten years old and visited the national museum. That was a fantastic experience, because in the valley where we lived there was only one painting, which was in the home of the vicar. It was a kitsch landscape oil painting and I enjoyed spending time with it as a child. I also clearly remember a visiting guest had with him a pamphlet in which one image was a composition by Mondrian. This was a game-changer for me.

Later, at the age of 15, I was admitted to the art school in Reykjavik, which I attended for a couple of months at a time, while for the rest of the year I lived and worked on the farm, as well as continuing with my regular education. It was the only art school in Iceland, and my teacher was a product of the Danish Academy, and therefore very traditional. The classes mostly consisted of drawing from the model, as well as painting still lifes.

Krist Gruijthuijsen: I'd like to make a jump to one of your first Conceptual works titled *Drawing a Tiger* (1971), which depicts you drawing a tiger as a boy, juxtaposed with a picture of you 20 years later mimicking the gestures of the boy. I found it curious that you were drawing a tiger, given the context you grew up in. Do you know if you were drawing from fantasy or from a book?

HF: It was a mixture of memory and fantasy. Of course, I had a notion of how a tiger looked, although not from one specific image or book. The fact that I was drawing a tiger was just a coincidence; I could just as well have been drawing a car, a man or anything else from the

jungle. This photograph happened to be in the family album. A relative who frequently visited us had a camera and made this snapshot of me when I was sitting in the garden drawing. He was very interested in this more or less constant activity of mine – drawing – whenever I had time for myself.

Once, when I was visiting my parents' home and looking through their photo album, I decided to take it with me. So this photo remained with me and somehow survived through time, and in 1971, when I'd just arrived here, I decided to make a piece out of it.

KG: Here in Amsterdam?

HF: Yes, it was in Amsterdam that I decided to repeat this act of drawing a tiger. This photo is the only visual document of me as a child working seriously on making a drawing, so it became obvious to revisit the gesture.

KG: I believe the work is about shifting consciousness, from intuition to rationality, so to speak, and marks a Conceptual approach in your practice.

AB: Would you say that *Drawing a Tiger* is your first Conceptual piece?

HF: Yes, I think so. In 1963, I went together with a friend and colleague Sigurjón Jóhannsson to London to attend an art school. We didn't stay very long in the school, but that was the first visit abroad for me. There were many things going on in London, but I wasn't aware of the term Conceptual art at that time. I saw the collection of the Tate, for example, and the reframing of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* by Richard Hamilton, which was already familiar to me through books. Soon after we arrived in London, we saw a big exhibition at the Tate called *Dunn International* (1963). This was a mix of works, including the Surrealists, but the great impact of this exhibition was Pop art. This was probably the UK's first major introduction to the American artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein, as well as a few British artists.

AB: Like Richard Hamilton?

HF: Yes, Hamilton, absolutely. There was a bit of contact with Hamilton through my friend Dieter Roth. He and another Icelandic friend visited him, but I was too shy and my English was too bad so I didn't have the guts to go, which was a pity because he was of course a big hero and very important. He was excellent when he gave lectures on television, very clear and sharp. I always liked his work very much.

AB: I agree, he represents a very personal voice in the context of Pop art. I wonder if you can locate your first encounter with Conceptual art?

HF: I can't really recall when I heard or learned about the term Conceptual art. Perhaps it was in an art publication rather than an exhibition. You meet art movements in various ways. For example, Pop art comes at you as a flash, while Conceptual art is more subtle and slow, although I soon felt that it was an approach that I belonged to. The real encounter wasn't until I was in Amsterdam, especially through the gallery Art & Project, which basically showed everything that was considered Conceptual, from Robert Barry to Douglas Huebler and Lawrence Weiner, as well as the Land artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, whom I admired.

KG: After London, you went back to Reykjavik, and became one of the founding members of a group called SÚM. Could you talk a bit about its foundation and what brought you together?

HF: When we came back to Iceland from London, we had an idea, together with some other friends, to make an exhibition. This group consisted of Sigurjón Jóhannsson, Haukur Dór Sturluson, Jón Gunnar Árnason and myself. We found a venue that was available to us called Ásmundarsalur, in Reykjavik. There, the four of us opened an exhibition on 12 June 1965. This has since been called *SÚM I*, and marks the beginning of the so called SÚM group. The art scene at the time was dominated by figurative and abstract art. As we'd just returned from abroad, we weren't interested in that anymore. Soon, new members joined the group and we found a space that we could rent. It was given the name Gallerí SÚM and opened in February 1969.

AB: And then you went to Rome?

HF: Yes, that was in 1966–67, and I stayed there for about eight months.

AB: Did you meet any artists in Rome? There was a pretty interesting scene at that time.

HF: Well, I was staying with Róska, an old friend from the art school in Reykjavik. She'd already been living there for years, together with her Italian boyfriend. So naturally, the people around them became my acquaintances, with whom I spent a lot of time. These people were mostly of different nationalities and all connected to art in various ways. Some were painters, like my friend from Reykjavik, but many of these people were connected to filmmaking. Let's remember that at this time in Rome, film was a very dominant medium. When you refer to the art scene at that time, what do you have in mind?

AB: For example, there were galleries like L'Attico, where Fabio Sargentini was showing Pino Pascali, Jannis Kounellis and many other seminal Italian artists, but also international personalities like Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Charlemagne Palestine, La Monte Young, and dancers

and performers like Trisha Brown and Simone Forti. There were also a group of artists hanging out at Café Rosati in Piazza del Popolo, like Mario Schifano, Tano Festa, Franco Angeli, essentially the group that was showing at La Tartaruga gallery, run by Plinio De Martiis.

HF: It's impossible for me now to remember which galleries we visited and which exhibitions. There was also the problem of me not speaking the language, which made communication scarce. But I remember, for instance, seeing a Jannis Kounellis show at the Stedelijk a bit later, when I was in Amsterdam.

KG: And you moved to Amsterdam in 1971?

HF: In 1971 I arrived together with my wife. I'd been waiting for some money to arrive so that I could move on, which was always the plan. Then, finally in the spring, when I had the means to travel again, I left Rome and the destination was London. I could travel via Venice and Paris, so that was my first visit to both of those places before arriving in London. There I met the woman who later became my wife. She was studying at the Royal Ballet School. After her studies, she got a few offers, one of which was the National Ballet located in Amsterdam. She found that the most appealing, so automatically I went with her and we settled in Amsterdam.

AB: There must have been a strong and interesting community in Amsterdam. When you arrived, key Conceptual exhibitions such as *Op Losse Schroeven* had taken place a few years before.

HF: Yes absolutely. There were still traces of the exhibition *Op Losse Schroeven* when I arrived here. The company I kept was very mixed. There were colleagues, theatre people, musicians, and of course people from the ballet world through my wife. It was quite international. There were also a lot of people coming through, artists dropping by and staying over for a night or more, since Amsterdam was very popular for many reasons in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a lively time – remember, the hippy era wasn't yet completely over.

AB: At that time, you started responding to the Conceptual climate of the 1970s, but with a very personal approach. The way you were using photos and text was pretty original in the context of Conceptual art. Once, in an interview with J H Martin, you said 'Photos tend to lead you more into playing with the intangible'. Through the use of photos and texts, you weren't simply trying to explore a 'concept', but the idea of the 'intangible', which is to say, the incorporeal, immaterial. It was in this sense an attempt to refer to the notion of mystery, a desire to refer to the unknown.

HF: I think it has to do with the general foundation one receives and through which one views the world. Iceland is rich in folklore and as a child this was my main reading material. When time passed and I found myself becoming an artist, this aspect of the culture almost immediately took a prominent role in my work and remains with me till this day.

AB: Do you mean the Icelandic sagas?

HF: The sagas are literature, part fiction and part folklore. Within the landscapes of Iceland there are living spirits. We call them the hidden people. *Huldufólk* is the Icelandic term. As a kid, I believed every word of it.

AB: When looking at your earlier Conceptual pieces such as the *Five Gates for the South Wind* (1971–72) or your attempt to collect people's secrets, it's evident that they're fuelled by storytelling. Again, it seems like an attempt to create a bridge with the indistinct, with an atmosphere of secrecy.

HF: My first solo exhibition was in Amsterdam in 1972. It consisted of 12 pieces, which I later called *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972). I presented photographs and stories of enchanted places in Iceland. A lot of these places were thought to be under a spell. There was a clairvoyant lady, who died not so long ago, who mapped where the *huldufólk* lived. She was in close contact with these elves, and the authorities would seek her help to negotiate with them when they were attempting to build on forbidden land. I met this lady a few times and that was a very inspiring and amusing experience.

AB: To what level is your imagination as an artist connected to this amazing cultural atmosphere? For example, I was thinking about the book *Icelandic Aristocrats*, published in 1938–39, which tells a story of a man called Sólon Guðmundsson, who was an eccentric and generous man, always inviting people into his home. When he got older, he decided to build a house that was inside out. Did this story inspire your work *House Project*? I have the feeling that this piece for you was not really meant to be a public sculpture. It's more about the storytelling, right?

HF: It was absolutely not meant as a public sculpture. The remoteness was essential. It had to be hidden in a place where one couldn't see any other man-made structures within miles from its location. I got a carpenter to help me when I decided to build this house with the idea of Sólon Guðmundsson – you're right – in the back of my mind. Sólon was a bit childlike; he liked to play with things. He made this wooden construction and started placing the corrugated iron, which was a common building material in Iceland at the time, on the inside of this construction. Then he was asked what he meant by this. He explained that he wanted to use wallpaper for the house and place it on the outside, since wallpaper is to please the eye. This was considered an odd gesture. With great difficulty, people persuaded him to retire to a care home, so he never managed to finish the house. What interests me is that when you build

such a construction, you claim that you turn the world inside out.

AB: And you managed to finish the job!

HF: Yes, I finished the job, but with this big claim that it harbours the whole world except for itself. When we built it, we locked the door. I invited one friend who was a writer 'to go outside', which meant into the space. He sat on a little chair and started composing a poem. There's a very nice picture of him. I sneaked up to the window. He was the first and only person ever to be completely alone outside – because everybody else was inside. The location was an ideal place we stumbled upon, because it wasn't so far from Reykjavik. The house stood there more or less intact for at least 20 years, but then vandalism started, of course. Some itinerant workers came across it, and that gave rise to a little note in the newspaper: 'There's a very strange house out in the lava'.

KG: I'd say your early works are about creating rumours, but it's not about the gesture of the rumour, it's actually about the act of creating a certain kind of presence. All the early works deal with the idea of presence/absence. Although you physically built that house, it's essentially operated through word of mouth, so the language part is very important. A lot of the early work is connected to Iceland, but you weren't living there anymore. Do you think that the perception of your own country changed by living abroad?

HF: I'm sure the physical absence of the place you come from amplifies your spiritual connection with it. You start discovering that your memories and all the material you've read and were surrounded by are potentials for artworks. When living in Iceland, I wasn't aware of this. It became much, much sharper after I moved away.

KG: Exactly.

HF: And it's still going on.

KG: So your relationship with Iceland has got stronger?

HF: Yes, in this respect.

KG: I don't want to generalise about art coming from Iceland, but there does seem to be a much stronger relationship to nature and its mythologies in comparison to other countries.

HF: When it comes to aspects like nature, Iceland, with its folklore and mythology, remains unique. I often reach back to the past in order to bring something to the present that I believe is relevant.

AB: Every work of yours is definitely 'open' – it stays on a level of storytelling in order to be able to move through time.

HF: Yes, it's a matter of playing with time. Through time passing, you have easy access to the past via the future. You have to create the future even though it's coming to you at all times. Nevertheless, the past often functions as a source of ideas.

AB: And this is what happened with the *House Project* (1974–ongoing).

HF: Yes, indeed! Frédéric Paul, director of the Domaine de Kerguéhennec, invited me to make an outdoor work, and I came up with two proposals, one of which was a continuation of the house project, titled *Second House* (1971–72). The idea was to turn the house back to 'normal'. The notion of 'inside out' has been a continuous element in my work. I also have a slight obsession with windows – what's happing outside and what's going on inside.

AB: Where do you think this obsession comes from?

HF: Windows are good in multiple ways.

AB: It reminds me of your work *Seven Times* from 1978, which depicts someone at a window behind a curtain, looking outside. It's an example of the binary in your work, like the invisible and visible, the inside and outside and the absence and the presence.

HF: This is a good example, because it's really about looking outside, at the world.

AB: And at the same time you are looking inside yourself.

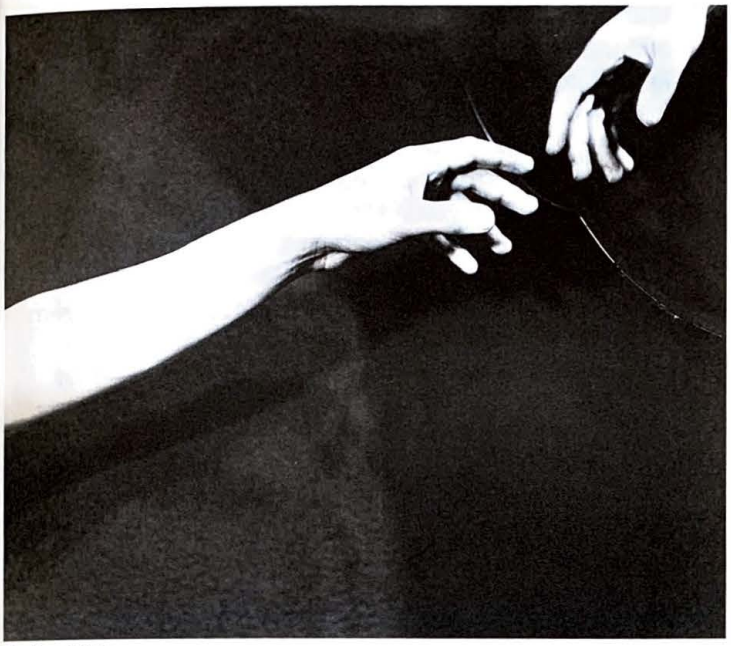
HF: Exactly.

KG: Is there any other work you revisited or keep returning to?

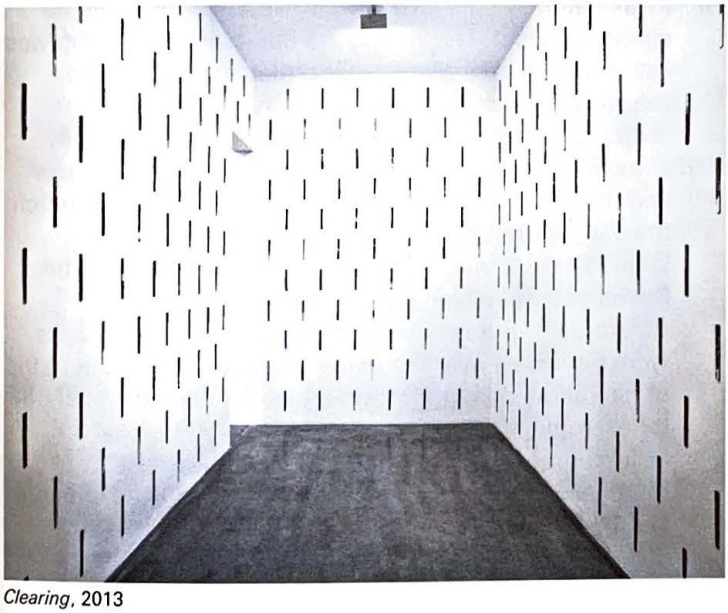
HF: There is a piece called *So Far* (1976), which is a photographic work depicting my hand reaching towards the sharp edge of a mirror. I made another one much, much later with a different surrounding. The photo was taken in an interior full of stuff, so it wasn't as clean and composed as the first one, but the principle is the same – pointing to the surface of a mirror.

KG: Andrea pointed out that you made a switch in your practice towards the Conceptual realm during the 1970s. Looking at the 1980s, your work made another shift. It resulted in a body of work that one is less familiar with. Could you talk a little bit about that?

HF: Yes, I wanted to distance myself from photographic text works and instead make sculptural installations with various materials and methods. I made works that required craftsmanship, which I could deal with up to a certain point, but some things were also made by a professional. Actually, the 1980s were problematic for



So Far, 1976



Clearing, 2013

me in many ways. I didn't like the artwork that was most visible or most typical of that time.

KG: Do you know why, exactly?

HF: It's very difficult to start finger-pointing, but these new wild paintings and sculptures didn't appeal to me. But this of course didn't influence what I was doing myself.

KG: So you had the urge to work with your hands, after a decade of working with your brain. Did you feel that if you'd continued the way you were, your work would no longer have been considered because it wasn't part of a certain trend?

HF: Not at all. It was simply for the time being.

AB: During this evident shift in the 1980s, you started using new materials, compositions and geometric forms, but for some strange reason, I don't think these works are really concerned with materials. In these objects, the content becomes the material. There are similarities between the works of the 1970s and those of the 1980s in the sense that you're still trying to catch something invisible. It's still there.

HF: I think that's correct. Many people have mentioned that there's a strong link between them, although they appear very different from each other. The feeling I had was that one work would lead to another and to another and so forth. I was going through this time and suddenly the 1990s appeared and everything changed. The 1980s are a little bit a part of what had come before and what came after.

AB: Of course, an artist breathes the atmosphere of the Zeitgeist. I don't see your work of the 1980s as separate from the 1970s or the 1990s. I see a path, a development of the work.

HF: I would put it exactly like that. There was something in the air, not directly an influence, that was generated by the art world at that time. It was the beginning of a necessity to build something, to make something, to use different materials. The materials could also function as the source of inspiration. I remember, around 1989 my work shifted back to stories, although with a certain new lightness regarding material and treatment of material and space. For example, the idea of the work *Summernights* (1990) came from a bar I frequently visited with friends. One of the regulars at the bar posed a question rather loudly: 'Do you know the shape of the night?' After ignoring a few obscene and nonsensical answers he told us himself: 'The shape of the night is a cone.' The shadow of the earth is of course a cone, but calling it 'the shape of the night' was, to me, a profound observation that stayed with me until, decades later, I made a piece based on this.

KG: Stories you heard on the radio or in this case in a bar almost function like an *objet trouvé*. They're intangible found objects.

HF: I very much like it when something comes your way by chance. A good example of this is the suspended stirring sticks, *Suspended* (1999–ongoing) and *Clearing* (2013). They're from a small family business in Amsterdam that makes paint and has always produced handmade samples. I've been collecting them for years and am always very excited when I receive new ones. Actually this story of the stirring sticks starts earlier. I came across three stirring sticks in my studio. I put them on a big wall and I saw that this was a work. So I brought them with me to Iceland and they became the second solo show in Gallery Corridor in Iceland. So this is given to me – I don't invent it. It would be pure

pollution if I added something to it with my own hand. I only suggest the arrangement in which it's mounted on the wall.

KG: There's a term that constantly arises when speaking about your work: 'lyrical Conceptualism'. Do you understand/feel affiliated with such a term?

HF: This term was used from very early on in reviews of my work. This is something that happened within me, rather than something I saw around me at the time. For example, a Conceptual artist I greatly admired at the time, and still do, is Stanley Brouwn, whom you'd hardly call a lyrical Conceptualist. Also, Icelandic poetry had a very strong influence on me when growing up.

KG: It's very important, the role of poetry in Iceland. Could you elaborate on this?

HF: The modern poetry from that time, when rhyme disappeared, was called in Icelandic 'Atom poems'. There's one poet in particular, Steinn Steinarr, who was a pioneer and had a huge influence on my way of thinking.

AB: And you used to learn his poems by heart?

HF: Some I learned by heart, especially when I was young. His poems had a huge influence on me.

KG: Which other artists in different periods in your life, your contemporaries, were you in dialogue with?

HF: In Iceland, it was multiple. When I was living there, I knew many artists of all ages and from different disciplines and this is of course still going on. These days, I'm mostly in dialogue with younger artists; I have very little contact with my own generation. When we first moved to the Netherlands, my wife and I lived in Haarlem, where we got acquainted with several of the local artists, one of whom was Douwe Jan Bakker. He was a very close friend of ours until he passed away.

KG: His work is having little revival right now. Douwe Jan Bakker is a very interesting artist.

HF: Yes, absolutely! He's fantastic. We were very close and he became an 'Iceland-ophile'. He went with us to Iceland many times. He was probably the first Dutch artist of our generation who became a close friend, although there were several others living in Haarlem and later in Amsterdam.

KG: And the Guðmundsson brothers?

HF: Sigurður was already living here, together with his Dutch wife, and his brother came to stay here as well shortly after we arrived. But I already knew them from before, in Reykjavik. I first met them in 1958, when I took the often-mentioned works that I won as prizes to a framer and that framer was the father of these two brothers. In the late 1960s, they'd joined the SÚM group in Reykjavik. Once the three of us were living in Amsterdam in 1971, we soon started exhibiting together, although we'd had some experience with that already from Gallerí SÚM. To name a few of these events, the three of us were invited to participate in the Biennale de Paris in 1973, together with Douwe Jan Bakker, in De Hallen Frans Hals Museum in 1974, the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1975 and *Ça va? Ça va*, at the Pompidou in 1977, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. Another Dutch artist I was close to was Pieter Laurens Mol. Then there was the In-Out Center, the first artist initiative in Amsterdam, which started in the early 1970s presenting artists of mixed nationalities. A Columbian artist, Michel Cardena, was the founder.

KG: That gives us a sense of the generation that you were connected with.

HF: I was naturally spending time with colleagues; people came and went. The gallery we had our first show in was called Gallery 845. With great difficulty, I persuaded the woman who ran it, Dolly Melchers, to take an exhibition from these three Icelandic guys, and finally she gave in and accepted. That was my first solo show and the people who came to the gallery were very much the people from the In-Out Center, for example Ulises Carrión, who initiated the artist bookshop Other Books and So, which was the first of its kind in Amsterdam. But for the social aspect, of course, there were parties all over the place. There was so much traffic of foreigners coming through, often staying with us – for example, the English artist, Michael Gibbs, or Felipe Ehrenberg, a Mexican artist. He was also a member of the In-Out Center, and then showed with our Galerie Fignal.

KG: Could you speak a bit about Galerie Fignal?

HF: It was a little corridor space in our flat. My wife and I decided to organise shows and events there. Galerie Fignal doesn't mean anything – someone just came up with the name. The house was located close to the Concertgebouw and we'd show the work of our friends, such as Pieter Laurens Mol, David Mayor and many of the Icelandic artists. David made a magazine with Michael Gibbs called *Smuch*. There was one issue for which I translated several elf stories. My wife did the illustrations.

KG: I'd love to see that!

HF: Then there was a magazine made Raúl Marroquin and his friends called *Fandangos*, but it was very short-lived.

KG: Three issues, right?

HF: Yes, something like that I think.

AB: This is where you advertised your project *I Collect Personal Secrets* of 1972.

HF: They'd asked me to contribute and that was the starting point: to collect personal secrets.

KG: You said that some of your work has so much background information that the only way to access it is by hearing you speak about it. You gave a great background story about *Summernights* (1990), for example, that I didn't know. Could you give us another example of a work that you feel can only exist with you speaking about it?

HF: Well for instance, *One of Four Corners of Infinity* (2010) is a piece where each corner is an independent entity. I had all four pieces made by a carpenter in Reykjavik and some time later I went to visit his workshop. While we were chatting, I looked around and saw one of these corners on his work bench. I asked him what it was, and he answered: 'Oh, I made one test before making the other four'. I asked if I could buy it and he said: 'Please take it. I'd throw it away otherwise.' So I got the fifth corner. This was literally given to me. I'm afraid I wouldn't have invented it myself. But I was very pleased with it, and it was very welcome. Since then, each corner has been suspended from the ceiling from three strings, with one exception, which is slightly elevated from the floor and that work gets the title *One of Four Corners of Infinity and the Fifth Corner* (2010–11).

AB: The notion of the Golden Section has often appeared in your work since the 1990s.

HF: This fascination originates from childhood, when reading a book on ancient Greece. Also, when I attended the art school in Reykjavik, we were taught about the Golden Section in art-history lessons. This simply stayed with me, and I've used it in my works from early on and still do when it's appropriate.

AB: Maybe the Golden Section is a way for you to be more ontological in a certain sense. It's a way to speak about the universe.

KG: Speaking of universality, I remain baffled and confused about when certain works were produced – whether it was in the 1990s or last year – since they speak the same language. There's a form of timelessness in the work, not only conceptually but also aesthetically. More recently, you started making video work, which is a very different dimension – namely that of the fourth. I'm curious about your decision to start making video and film.

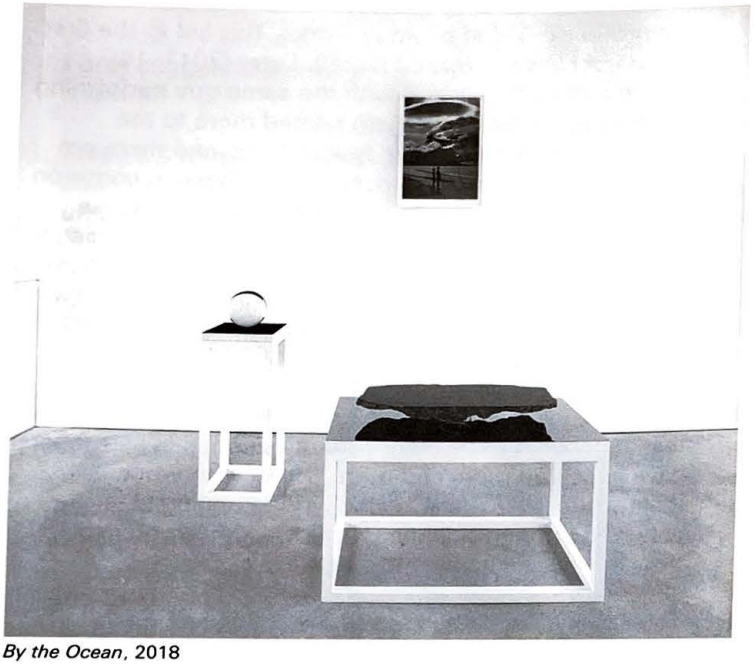
HF: I think I was tempted by it now and then, but the starting point was simply, like so often, an invitation to participate in a group exhibition of video works. This led to the first version of *Untitled (Books)* (2009). Later (2011–14), I made four or five videos with the same guy performing different tasks. Some of them related more to the playground like swings and trampolines, and there are other activities, but what most of them have in common is various circular movements. Giving this a title was impossible, so I asked my friend, who was a physicist, to look at the videos and describe them in the language of mathematics. 'This is easy', was his reaction, and he sent me a bunch of beautiful equations, which serve as titles for each of the videos.

KG: Phenomenology has always been a key within your thinking, but in more recent years scientific constructions have appeared more and more within your work. It almost feels as if the 'magic' you're aiming at is achieved through scientific research. Could you explain how this fascination came into play?

HF: This fascination dates back to my childhood. For example, someone gave me a book when I was a child; its title would translate as *Why? Because*, and it was written to explain some of the everyday phenomena one might take for granted. Consequently, my first scientific venture was when I invented a perpetual motion machine, and I was convinced for a long time – in fact much longer than I want to admit here in this interview – that it would work. But I was unable to build it due to technical obstacles. I have to emphasise that my interest in physic and scientific phenomena is entirely an amateur's interest, as I have no education in this field, nor in mathematics. Although this interest can be seen in my work, it's never truly scientific, or at least not so far.

AB: We briefly evoked some of your works whose making is delegated to someone else. I'm thinking about *One of Four Corners of Infinity and the Fifth Corner*, the stirring sticks pieces, *Suspended* and *Clearing*. Another work with this characteristic would be *First Window* (1992), a photograph of a window in the house where you were born. This photo was taken by your nephew, the same person whom, ten years later, you asked to make some other photos for the work *Sheep and Horses of my Nephew* (2001). What was the idea behind this? Were you hoping your nephew would add something personal and different to the work? Were you attracted by the idea that you couldn't control the final result?

HF: With *First Window*, I simply needed someone to take the photograph and it didn't need to be of very high quality. My nephew had a simple camera with him, and he took the photo of the window as I asked him to. There were no other reasons or motivations for that work. He was the one with the camera, who happened to be there. It was slightly different with *Sheep and Horses of my Nephew*, because in that case he had a different relationship with the farm and, therefore, a different point of view. He selected the motifs in his



By the Ocean, 2018

way, being the farmer and the owner of these animals. If I'd done it, I would have tried to interact with these animals as they were roaming free. I thought this was the most direct way to get images of the animals, which were suitable for the work.

AB: We spoke a little bit about how your work changes between the 1970s and the 1980s, but I have the feeling your work also kept moving in different directions later on. For example, another work that intrigues me is *Movement* from 1999. Essentially you started reading the page of a book (*Drei Kameraden* by Erich Maria Remarque) in a former studio of yours and you ended up reading the rest of the page in a new studio to which you moved later on. This work seems to be more performative than others, in the sense that your interest now seems focused on the experience of you moving from one place to another. Can you tell us about this piece?

HF: The novel takes place shortly after the end of the First World War. It was given to my father on his 50th birthday in 1950 by a close relative and good friend. In Icelandic the title was translated as *Three Comrades*. I guess the title was the reason for our relative to select this book as a present for my father, as well as its appealing thickness.

At home, I don't think anyone read the book, except for me. I read it often when I was young and was very impressed by it. Later, it became the only book from my childhood home that I took with me when I moved away. I asked my mother if I could take it with me, she agreed and I've kept it ever since. It's followed me for most of my life.

I hadn't read the book in its entirety since puberty until I thought of it when I started moving from one studio space to another. In the place from which I was leaving, I dipped into it at random and read the first part of a paragraph. When I entered the new place, the book was the first thing I took with me, and there I finished what was left of the paragraph. I've done this the past three times I've moved studios in the last two decades.

AB: I like the fact that you're answering me simply through the description of the actions. To close this interview, I'd like to talk about a series of very recent works in which you use 'out of this world' materials, like meteorites. I'm thinking about the works *Something Black, Something White, Something Neither Black nor White* (2001); *Composition with Meteorites, Magnets and Threads* (2016) and *By the Ocean* (2018). In those pieces, you also use stromatolite fossils, and – in the case of the work *Etrangeresse (Stranger)* (1990) – fish fossils. Those very recent works make me think about Ivana Bago's very insightful essay published in this catalogue. She states that your work is something that can be defined as 'magic conceptualism or conceptual magic', as an alternative to a 'romantic' designation. And what if this is something true and false at the same time? Your work has of course something we can define as romantic or magic, but both options might miss the point. Looking at your latest works, I have the feeling that your practice takes into account – and has done from the very beginning – an ontological perspective, a real interest in the unknown.

HF: Fossils are for me always very interesting because they tell a story reaching far into the past, and this story, although it starts a long time ago, we can still read today. But when it comes to using meteorites, they have a different role in each work. So let's take an example. *The Fall* (2005) was the first work in which I used a meteorite. The work is about the Sikhote-Alin meteorite, which fell in Siberia in 1947. I selected this event because it was well documented due to the many witnesses and its relatively recent history. The next example is in *Second House* (2007–08). It takes with it a few items that signify something that has happened in the past, like its own history (from the first house) and then the fact that the meteorite suspended inside the house is a stranger from faraway, originating from the creation of our galaxy, and upon it is the next step of the house project: namely, a maquette of the third house. In the work *By the Ocean*, each element revolves around life on planet earth in one way or another.

Regarding these terms defining my work, both in Ivana's essay and in this conversation, they're not definitions I have in mind when making the works, but to me these observations are very welcome, since I see them much more as openings than as conclusions.