

Hreinn's Transmutations

'Rutherford, this is transmutation.' 'For Mike's sake, Soddy,' his companion shot back, 'don't call it *transmutation*. They'll have our heads off as alchemists.'¹

This text is a blind date. I have never met Hreinn Friðfinnsson and I have only seen his work in exhibition catalogues and on my computer screen. Maybe it is because of this distance – and an aura is first and foremost an effect of distance² – that it feels almost a sacrilege to write about the work of an artist whose very name, Hreinn, denotes purity. Beyond these more or less circumstantial facts, however, there is in Friðfinnsson's pieces a certain suspension of narrative that makes any critical or art-historical perspective appear as verbiage, an insult, like building on enchanted land.³

The narrative suspension operates despite the fact that the works themselves often rely on stories told by others. Take, for example, the *I Collected Personal Secrets* project (1972–2015). The artist appeared here as the insurer of the lives of secrets, conferred to him by a few reluctant others who could no longer tend to those lives on their own. The material thus conferred (by means of written correspondence) was by definition narrative, a material shaped by a mixture of desire and dread, glee and shame. The work itself, however, consisted of suspending the narrative drive of this material, first by placing it in a bank vault, then by shredding it and encrypting it further in the form of a quasi-Abstract Expressionist painting, which was finally exhibited as a work of art. It can, of course, be said that the narrative suspension in this case was merely due to the fact that the work is about secrets, stories that may never be unravelled, but it seems to me that this principle is operative in all of Friðfinnsson's works. They derive from stories, but they themselves do not narrate; they are about time but they stop time; they use everyday objects but only to enchant them into art. Indeed, for Friðfinnsson, art seems to be first and foremost a process of enchantment, a kind of magic. It is thus not by accident that, on the rare occasions when the artist is represented in his work, he is shown as a magician, his hands busy with some improbable task: collecting light rays (*Untitled*, 1999–2000), bouncing an invisible ball (*Bouncing Ball Event*, 2002–03), or tinkering with modern art classics by means of a square-shaped glass and primary-coloured threads (*Tinkering (To Mondrian)*, 2011).

For this reason – this proclivity towards 'tinkering', or even magic – I have found the repeated descriptions of Friðfinnsson's work as 'Conceptual' ultimately confusing. True, his work is grounded in the dematerialisation of art, a negation of medium specificity, and the use of found objects, language and photographic documentation. These formal characteristics, however, do not include what seems to me the key tenet of Conceptual art, namely, a critical or simply sceptical concern with the very conditions that define the making and the circulation of art – a certain contract whereby



Tinkering (To Mondrian), 2011

art and artist stay together yet keep a safe distance. Despite his known reticence, Friðfinnsson does not take a position of distance towards art, nor does he aim to strip it of its aura by unveiling the behind-the-scenes of art making. At the same time, it would be wrong to say that he places art back on the pedestal. It is not art that once again achieves an auratic distance; rather, Friðfinnsson uses art as the very medium of distance, a medium that points to what is not immediately present and graspable, or as he himself put it, that which is 'elsewhere' (*Elsewhere*, 1998) or indefinable: 'I am trying to establish contact with underlying forces which I can't define. They link everything in a way which obliterates the frontiers between nature outside – the countryside – and the nature of the psyche, which goes on inside our heads.'⁴

1 Dialogue between chemist Frederick Soddy and physicist Ernest Rutherford, after they discovered the transformation of radioactive thorium into inert gas at McGill University in 1901. Cited in Mark S. Morrison, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.

2 As is argued in the famous essay by Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version', trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 19–55.

3 As in Friðfinnsson's, *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972).

4 Hreinn Friðfinnsson, 'Artist Statement', 1987, cited in *Hreinn Friðfinnsson*, exh. cat. (Grenoble: Magasin – Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, 1987), p. 14.

This certainly puts him on a par with those artists whose practice has been defined in oxymoronic terms, as lyrical, poetic, or romantic Conceptualism, albeit with some significant differences.⁵ We can take as an example Robert Barry, if only because he also made a work about secrets: in 1969 he instructed the students of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to come up with an idea that would be kept secret from anyone outside the group. The work would exist as long as the secret remained intact, but as soon as someone gave away the secret, the work would cease to exist. A comparison with Friðfinnsson's *I Collected Personal Secrets* reveals what separates the two artists: Barry is concerned with the conditions that define the existence of the work of art, and Friðfinnsson with the conditions that define the existence of secrets. Because of Barry's classically Conceptualist concern – which is also deeply modernist, and follows the Greenbergian-Kantian imperative of self-critique, whereby art probes the conditions of its own existence – he may as well be a Romantic Conceptualist, in which case Friðfinnsson would better be described as a Conceptual Romanticist.

A more apt comparison can be made with 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism', a term that Boris Groys used in 1979 to identify not simply romanticism but also magic as a persisting condition of art in Russia: 'in Russia, art is still magic!'⁶ Unlike Western art, which aims to speak about the world, Russian art, 'from the age of icons to our time, seeks to speak of another world',⁷ an attitude for which he found evidence in the work of the Collective Actions group (founded in 1976), whose outdoor happenings often involved objects that the artists would leave for future viewers to encounter by chance: 'the artist, for example, may leave a ringing bell under the snow, or a painted tent in the wood'.⁸ Friðfinnsson, of course, did exactly that with *First House* (1974), an inside-out house built in the midst of a bare Icelandic landscape and left to surprise the rare visitors who happened upon it while walking out in the open – only to realise that they have been walking, and even living, inside an (inverted) house all along!⁹ Despite the fact that Groys links what he sees as the Moscow Conceptualist approach, which views art not as a separate social phenomenon but one invested in exploring the inexplicable, to the 'Russian soul', he ultimately implies that it is part of the common history of humanity:

There was a time when people believed to come time and again across inexplicable traces of some indefinite presence, signaling the existence of active and purposive forces that acted beyond the limits of commonsense explanations. These indications pointing to the presence of magic forces can be regarded as facts of art, as opposed to facts of reality – facts that cannot be explained but only interpreted. The artists of Collective Actions endeavor to involve the contemporary observer into such accidental encounters or discoveries, discoveries that will compel him to engage in the process of interpretation.¹⁰

It seems that Collective Actions, in Groys's interpretation, led the contemporary observer beyond the historical shift

represented by the Enlightenment, on which the Soviet revolutionary Communist project, with its reliance on the transformative potential of the human mind and body, was decidedly based. If the Soviet socialist city was the space where this project was exercised in practice, the trips outside the city and into the snowy woods enabled the artists and their audience to step beyond the planned and projected and into the improbable, where one could encounter the atavism of the inexplicable, of magic. A similar thing could be said of Friðfinnsson's work and his continually shifting positioning between the urban Amsterdam art scene and his rural and pagan Icelandic sources. Rather than fully joining the ranks of the Amsterdam art world – which in this case could be said to represent the 'West' and a bridge to the Anglo-American analytical-conceptualist tradition – Friðfinnsson has remained a 'part of' Iceland, as he stated while answering a question about superstition: '[Superstition is] an integral and very natural part of the Icelandic pagan culture. The question is not whether it's important to know if I believe in this. But I am part of it.'¹¹ For Friðfinnsson, to 'be part' is not a matter of choice; belonging is compulsive, irreversible and beyond one's will.

Friðfinnsson also often speaks about art-making as something compulsive and admits that he is not able to explain why he produces a work:

My works are not much thought out beforehand. They just happen, pretty much. [...] Thought can often be a hindrance, it can sometimes be in the way. When making an artwork I am in a sort of flow, which is just natural to me. And then I look behind and then I see, and all the connections become kind of obvious.¹²

The work process described here recalls a picture of an artist tuning in to the invisible forces that precede reflection, which is also what separates him from Moscow 'Romantic Conceptualists', who, despite their flirtation with magic, implemented very strict and quite bureaucratised protocols of planning, documenting and interpreting their work. It is not that Friðfinnsson does not also pay attention to these aspects of art-making, but he does not foreground them; they are not what ultimately matters. He is not interested in initiating a discursive field of collective discussion and interpretation – art simply is, whatever it may or may not be. All these must be what constitutes the 'romantic' character of his Conceptualism, and indeed, the artist is very much aware of his aberration from the norm, of which he was often accused for not conforming to 'rigid Conceptualism', whose subversive character he says he appreciated but which, due to his different cultural background, was not in his 'nature': 'You know I was often accused of Romanticism, which was really disliked, heavily disliked, it was forbidden stuff!'¹³ He may as well be accused of freely using the word 'natural' and 'nature', probably the most despised lexical entries in the entire Poststructuralist dictionary – and the deconstructive impetus of Poststructuralism has much in common with the reflexive distance of Conceptual art.

But as well as straying from Conceptualism, Friðfinnsson's work is also missing a crucial element of

Romanticism: namely, the foregrounding of the figure of the artist. Despite the intimate references ingrained in many of his works, they are almost completely devoid of pathos and expression. They are also devoid of any kind of heroism, a trait that Peter Osborne rightly defined as the 'romantic' element in the work of Conceptual artists, in their rebellion against both art and society.¹⁴ *Drawing a Tiger* (1971), a diptych that shows the artist seated in a landscape and drawing, in 1951 as a boy, and in 1971, as a blossoming Conceptual artist, is less a commentary on the formation of artistic subjectivity, and more an identification of a not entirely understood correspondence, a halting of time: 20 years later, still drawing (a tiger), still looking for the alchemical secret of primary matter. Friðfinnsson's work, then, is adequately described neither as Romantic Conceptualism nor as Conceptual Romanticism, but more as a sort of conceptual magic, a forbidden art of alchemy in which the artist does not claim to know the ultimate trick of transmutation but keeps a window open in case the invited secret ever wishes to appear, just like in *After a While* (1976), in which his work desk remains prepared for a shadow of a flying bird that may pass across his hands at any moment, or at least, after a while.

Indeed, there are many elements of alchemy in Friðfinnsson's work – alchemy understood not simply as an experimental hunt for gold and the transformation of matter, but as a spiritual pursuit. His amateur interest in science, in geometry, form, materiality and, in particular, his emphasis on duality, mirroring, correspondences between the inside and outside, the microcosm and the macrocosm, are decidedly alchemical, even if he – unlike a number of early twentieth-century artists, in particular, Max Ernst¹⁵ – may not have been directly influenced by this occult tradition.



The Hour, 1980

Attending (1973), a photographic diptych in which an oval mirror is first held against the sky above to reflect the grass below, and then turned around against the grass to reflect the sky, is a striking example of Friðfinnsson's 'attending' to alchemical correspondences ('as above, so below'), tinkering with the existence of laws that connect one thing to another, and that are perhaps even able to reveal connections between all things. *The Hour* (1980) resembles a stage prepared for some kind of a séance, where a scientist-magician-artist is about to demonstrate hidden knowledge by means of a silver ball, a golden cone, some wood, tar and a silhouette of a flying bird. Objects of everyday, prosaic and even violent use – such as cardboard boxes, paint-shop stirring rods, chicken wire – use the exhibition space as a stage on which to transform themselves into captivating yet humble miracles. In extreme contrast to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1954), plain cardboard boxes open up with an iridescent and hypnotizing glow; randomly coloured wooden sticks, used in paint shops for stirring and testing wall paint, arrange themselves into aesthetic patterns that exude regularity and planning; and chicken wire becomes a 'castle' indexing a hexagonal structure of the crystal molecule and a pattern of the universe. At the same time, the fragility and ephemerality of the works prevent them from turning into instances of aestheticised – and anaesthetised – reality, of which any 'rigid Conceptual' artist or leftist critic would be wary. Rather, all these are subtle transformations, or even transmutations, of reality, which point to the existence of what is not evident and immediately graspable.

Does this alchemically artistic pursuit derive from Friðfinnsson's Icelandic background, from the fact that he is an 'Icelandic Conceptual artist'? Perhaps – or at least the artist himself implies as much by drawing upon tropes of Icelandic cultural identity, even if this places him in a position of self-exoticisation of the Icelandic 'we'. 'There is some kind of cosy relationship in our minds between the rational and the irrational, the natural and the supernatural', he responds to an interview question about the place of

5 See the discussion of this terminology in the interview with Friðfinnsson included in this catalogue, pp. 17–24.

6 Boris Groys, 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism', in *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 54.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

9 Fulfilling the unrealised plans of a hero of Þórbergur Þórðarson's novel *Icelandic Aristocracy* (1938), Friðfinnsson built a house whose interior was covered in sheets of corrugated iron, while wallpapers, curtains and framed photographs were placed on the façade. 'The existence of this house', writes Friðfinnsson, 'means that the "outside" has shrunk to the size of a closed space formed by the walls and the roof of the house. The rest has become "inside". The house harbours the whole world except its own "inside".' Friðfinnsson, cited in Hreinn Friðfinnsson, *First House, Second House, Third House* (Reykjavik: Hafnarfjörður Centre of Culture and Fine Arts, 2012), p. 11.

10 Groys, p. 51.

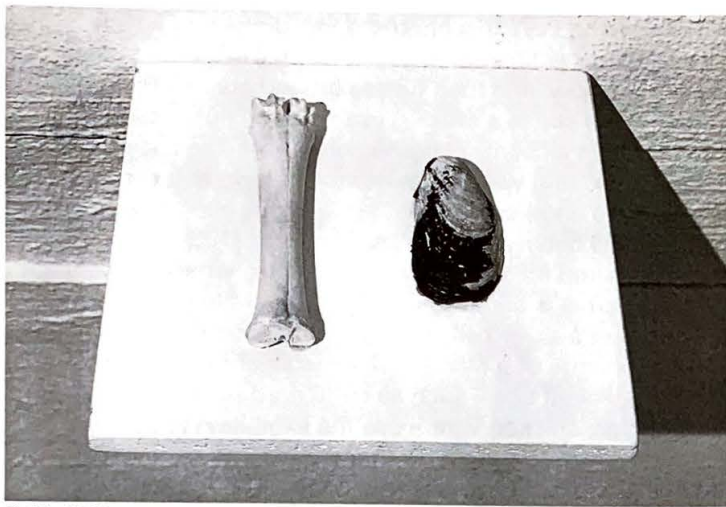
11 Hreinn Friðfinnsson, cited in Frédéric Paul, 'Remembered and Invented Tales and Tall Stories, or: an Epitome of Anti-Mythology', in *Hreinn Friðfinnsson* (Bignan: Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Centre d'art contemporain, 2002), p. 66.

12 Friðfinnsson, cited in Katharina Wendler, *Notions of Time. The Visualisation of Time within the Work of Hreinn Friðfinnsson*, MA thesis (Berlin: Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2015), vol. 2, p. 18.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14 Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and John Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 51.

15 See M.E. Wrlrick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2001).



Golds, 1999

superstition in his work.¹⁶ 'Unfortunately I have never seen a spirit, [an] elf or a ghost. But I know some very sane and sober persons who have.'¹⁷ The artist's regret about not experiencing an otherworldly encounter – rather than an 'enlightened' rejection of the very idea – only proves that his art is precisely a sane and sober pursuit of such an encounter with that which, due to lack of 'scientific' explanations, has been relegated to the scandalous realm of magic because it could be encompassed neither by scientific nor by religious dogmas. Iceland, in this case, is a geopolitical location that, for one reason or another, is particularly conducive to such an alchemical pursuit of heresy in the face of the grand narratives of both Enlightenment and Christianity: after all, it is there where children's toys, a shell and a bone, have been known to transmute into gold (*Golds*, 1999).

Such a conclusion makes me both happy and unhappy. On the one hand, it feels true to the long-distance interpretive relationship I have managed to establish with Friðfinnsson's work. On the other, it makes me feel as if I cannot view this work beyond the exotic stereotype of Iceland and, more generally, of the 'Nordic miracle'. This trope appeared in contemporary art at about the same time as the fascination with the one that has claimed my own cultural belonging, the 'Balkan baroque', whose embodiment of 'blood and honey' stood at the very opposite extreme of the ethereal North. This (in)felicitous conclusion, then, points to a much broader question, namely that of the relationship between (contemporary) art and its various regional, national and many other inflections, currently most pronounced in the definitions and proclamations of the numerous 'modernities' and 'modernisms' that appear almost daily with ever new predicates (alternative, parallel, fugitive, perverse etc.), all defined in contrast to a presumed, if vaguely understood, norm. In the case of Romantic, Icelandic, Moscow, etc. Conceptualism, a difference is similarly always defined in relation to a persisting norm, regardless of how much one tries to 'provincialise' it, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has done to Europe.¹⁸ Can Friðfinnsson's art only be understood, or rather, communicated, in terms of Conceptualism, as some kind of magic Conceptualism or conceptual magic, as an alternative to the 'Romantic' inflection of the Conceptual?

Could one invent a completely new name, or is the currency of the Conceptual the only one that guarantees global epistemological and aesthetic exchange?

We could also perform an alchemical trick and use Friðfinnsson's work and its Icelandic anchorage as a reverse mirror that would not simply enlarge its presumed cultural otherness, embodied in the idea of magic and alchemy, the rejection of which was a precondition for the consolidation of the enlightened, (self-)critical sphere of Art, whose most radical expression was 'rigid Conceptualism', and to which Friðfinnsson's work was unable and unwilling to conform. Instead, it would enable us to recognise magic as in fact an integral part of 'rigid Conceptualism' and its reliance on the transformative and performative power of language and utterance, which are after all the key tools of a magician, just as they are the primary tools of the magic of cognitive capitalism of which the 'rigid-Conceptualist' turn in art has stood as a major sign. But this would be a whole other story.

¹⁶ Friðfinnsson, cited in Paul, 'Remembered and Invented Tales and Tall Stories,' p. 66.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).