

Art as storytelling and the storytelling of art

Narration and metalinguistics in the work of Hreinn Friðfinnsson

The rediscovery of storytelling

Proclaiming the need for an autonomous art wholly internal to the logic and characteristics of its linguistic tools, modernist art refused all forms external to the character of the visual language it adopted. It therefore excluded all elements from the real world, including instances of narration, which was considered a plebeian, rhetorical and superficial linguistic form, a by-product of kitsch. The American art critic Clement Greenberg, modernism's principle theoretician, writes: 'The peasant is also pleased by the wealth of self-evident meanings which he finds in the picture: "it tells a story".'¹

In a process of critiquing and superseding Greenbergian theories, postmodernist movements like neo-Dada, Fluxus and Minimalism began slowly but surely to erode the self-sufficiency of modernism's structured visual language, to introduce life within the increasingly larger perimeter of the artwork. In this context, we could claim Conceptual art as pivotal in introducing a few timid and allusive forms of storytelling with which to surpass the pure opticality and silence of modernist ideology. Conceptual art initiated a broad use of written language with a variety of goals: as an attempt to dematerialise the art object, as an effort to reach a broader public, and to convey theoretical considerations on the linguistic and epistemological fundamentals of art. Since they are of interest to us here, one may mention two more possibilities of the written word by Conceptual artists. One uses writing towards a categorisation and ordering that is impersonal, archival and parascientific, often to call into question the criteria by which the world and its phenomena are classified. The second uses writing for its ability to name without showing, for its indirectness and imaginative punch, for the way it frees thought beyond the visual limits of the artwork, not to say beyond the limits of the visual realm. In other words, Conceptual art reworks the potential of pictures, texts, shapes and objects (even when they appear to possess a laconic aspect) to make them not only the vehicles of narrative and conversational forms, but actual devices by which to expand our imaginative capacities, even going as far as to give form to an object, concept or image by means of the allusion created by a textual element.

It would not be right to define Hreinn Friðfinnsson as a strictly Conceptual artist – so rich are the range of directions and types of expression explored in his practice. Indeed, if his work moves away from the more analytical forms adopted by certain Conceptualists (Art & Language and Joseph

Kosuth to name the two most representative), we could see it as belonging to a more lyrical line characterised by a romantic tendency that seeks the potency of imagination, often conveyed by relating to the natural landscape and its phenomena.² However, at least two typical characteristics of Conceptual art are found in his work: the use of the written word as a form of expression (either on its own or in relation to pictures); and a metalinguistic understanding of the figure of the artist, art and art history.

In line with a certain kind of Conceptual Art, Friðfinnsson uses the written word both for the categorisation and description of materials that are impalpable, mysterious and seemingly unclassifiable, as well as for its imaginative possibilities. While, as mentioned above, Conceptual art introduced condensed and elusive forms of storytelling, it is no small merit of Friðfinnsson's work to have brought a narrative quality to Postminimalist art in more explicit ways than most artists of his generation. Moreover, one might credit how he has made art history and the artist's craft recurrent subjects of his work, taking them as narrative material – not without a vein of humour alien to the majority of Conceptual artists.

In this sense, Friðfinnsson's art can be seen as part of a renewed self-reflecting irony regarding the craft of making art and the role of the artist, an element that emerged in the early 1990s. At the same time, constitutes an important precedent to the more recent attention to storytelling, narrative and oral forms of art that began in the context of our digital techno-society in the early 2000s, and that has also used art history as material and even legend.³

We might therefore be tempted to read the work of Friðfinnsson, a farmer's son from the Icelandic countryside,

1 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, 1935, <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/avant-garde-and-kitsch-clement-greenberg/> (accessed February 2019).

2 Although it has never been posited, Friðfinnsson's work could be included in what Jörg Heiser defines as 'romantic conceptualism' in his article 'Emotional Rescue' published in *Frieze* issue 71, November–December 2002, and in his exhibition 'Romantic Conceptualism/Romantischer Konzeptualismus' hosted at the Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Germany (10.5–17.7.2007) and at the Bewag Foundation in Vienna (14.9–1.12.2007).

3 I have written extensively about these subjects: 'Nothing to See, Nothing to Hide', published in *The Weird But True Book* for the 2005 Baltic Triennial in Vilnius, Lithuania, and republished in a new version in *Uovo* issue 18, 2008; and 'The art of storytelling, the story(telling) of art', published in the catalogue to the exhibition 'Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art' held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne in 2011. These two articles contain references to Friðfinnsson. 'Storytelling, nature and art: an introduction to the world of Hreinn Friðfinnsson', was, in fact, the title of an essay I wrote for the catalogue of Friðfinnsson's solo show at Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm, 2012.

as an involuntary yet appropriate riposte to Greenberg's classist assertion. Without going so far, however, this text discusses the ways in which Friðfinnsson has used narrative constructs as a founding pillar of his visual language from the early 1970s to the present day. I will point out a double register through which his interest takes shape, generally corresponding to two chronologically distinct phases of his career. Although the two themes are present in his entire oeuvre and alternate in his work over decades, we can distinguish a first period running from his artistic beginnings up to the mid-1970s, and another running from the early 1990s to today.

In the first phase, the references to a narrative dimension are related to the imaginative possibilities provoked by the use of certain linguistic operations by the artist, and to Icelandic folk culture, whose rich tradition of sagas, fables and legends has greatly influenced both Icelandic society and Friðfinnsson's artistic endeavours. In the second phase, a substantial group of artworks is constructed around references to (and evocations of) art history, which he sometimes uses as material with a legendary, mythical and fabled character. To be concise, we could say that in an almost 50-year career, a certain narrative predisposition is present in Friðfinnsson's work in the following forms: 'art as storytelling' and 'the storytelling of art'.

The artist as a young man

As confirmed by the artist multiple times, his education and upbringing from infancy to adolescence played a decisive role in his relationship to the natural landscape of Iceland and his fondness for the twofold theme of storytelling and art history.⁴ Although his background might seem far removed from artistic influences, the young Friðfinnsson was very fond of drawing and art. His family considered such pastimes 'not very useful', but did not oppose them.⁵ The small amount of artistic information that it was possible to absorb came mostly from the pictures he saw in *Tíminn* (Time), a daily newspaper distributed in the region where he lived that published reviews of exhibitions taking place around Iceland. Another art-related experience was a visit to the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavik at age ten.⁶

Such scarcity of information on art history and its exponents began to subside in 1958, when the 15-year-old Friðfinnsson moved to Reykjavik to attend the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts. Although the school's approach was traditional, based on life drawing and still life, it introduced him to a broader source of artistic references and acquaintances: on the one hand, he gained access to a few bibliographies, and on the other, he met a teacher passionate about Paul Cézanne. Artists' names and ideas began to gain ground in the mind of the teenage student, along with a keen interest in abstract painting. Subsequent trips to London in 1963 included a memorable visit to the Tate Gallery. Back in Reykjavik, Friðfinnsson took to books to find out more; then he met Dieter Roth in Iceland and Bas Jan Ader in Amsterdam; learned of the existence of Marcel Duchamp's work; became familiar with the Conceptual art of Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Lawrence Weiner and Stanley Brouwn at the gallery Art & Project in Amsterdam;

and discovered the 'earth works' of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. All contributed to the maturing of his artistic language.⁷

A connection can certainly be found between Friðfinnsson's irregular and episodic artistic education, based more on reading and word-of-mouth than the direct experience of art, and how he incorporates art history and its exponents as fairy-tale material in his work, living as he did in a social context with a bent for mythological creation. Indeed, the way in which he treats art as the stuff of legends, storytelling material and narrative building blocks could have its origins in the fact that his family had no dearth of books on Icelandic sagas, myths and legends, which, along with novels and poetry, were a fundamental influence on his development.

The combination of an interest in storytelling, which he sometimes melded with mythical or autobiographical elements, and an attraction to his country's fables and legends, is an important specificity of Friðfinnsson's work. But before proceeding with an analysis of the two directions 'art as storytelling' and 'the storytelling of art', I will mention a couple of examples from the early years of his artistic endeavours where the two ambits overlap, almost in an announcement of developments to come.

Storytelling and art

Despite the fact that Friðfinnsson's work came to full development around 1971, it is surprising to note how at least one of his first works showed the emergence of a curious combination between 'art about art' and narrative allusions. *Dropping by at Jón Gunnar's* (originally made in 1964, but lost and then rebuilt in 1992) is a hybrid form originating in the removal of an object from its context. Here, the object was a door belonging to an artist who, like Friðfinnsson, was a member of the SUM group and happened to be replacing the doors of his house. After much thought, Friðfinnsson decided to forcefully kick the door and then apply the three primary colours on its damaged surface. In short, it was a kind of ready-made obtained through physical violence, where the application of paint to the torn wood seems to function as a healing salve, suggesting the possibility of speaking a new language. By conducting an operation that contains not only a Fluxus element of brute force, but also a reference to art and its history (the primary colours used by Mondrian), Friðfinnsson introduces a minimal personal and narrative element in the form of his reference to a fellow artist. We could even read the contrast between the destructive act of breaking the door and the application of an abstract swatch of paint – easily associated with a master of abstractionism – as a declaration of intent. The expressive action of breakage (which could symbolise the emphatic gestures of expressionist artists) is superseded by a new order, a new linguistic vocabulary with a 'colder' register.

After more years of training, travels and encounters that culminated in his move to Amsterdam in 1971, Friðfinnsson's language moved closer to Conceptualism, while still included commentary on the making of art, which he would connect to a narrative and autobiographical instance. *Drawing a Tiger* (1971) is a diptych of two black and



Drawing a Tiger, 1971



white photographs. The one on the left shows Friðfinnsson as a nine-year-old drawing a tiger while sitting on a bale of hay in the Icelandic countryside. On the right, we see him 19 years later in the same pose, but bearded, drawing in a park in Amsterdam, having recently left France and moved to the Dutch capital to follow his wife's career, but presumably also with the ambition of becoming a professional artist. In *Drawing a Tiger*, the repeated act of drawing, of making art, seems to confer legitimacy to his artistic activity, becoming an affirmation of his early vocation. On the other hand, the dating of the two pictures, their temporal distance, accords a quality to the act of drawing that we could call foundational, which retrospectively gives new importance, a somewhat mythical dimension, to the older photo. Could it be the self-proclaimed legend, not without subtle humour, of the artist's own preordained destiny?

As is typical of a certain strand of Conceptual art, it is only thanks to language (the written words used in the work and the title) that the spectator can know what is happening in the two photographs. The words solicit our imaginative capacities in order to see in our minds something that is practically invisible to our eyes. The long-distance comparison could be read as a declaration of intent in which the romantic idea of the artist as an eternal child is layered with a linguistic form typical of Conceptual art, by which the medium used is not important, while the thought behind it gives meaning to the piece.

Storytelling as art

Emotional landscape

After cultivating his familiarity with Conceptual and Land art, Friðfinnsson began in the early 1970s to add to their visual languages a number of elements typical of Icelandic culture and nature. The landscape at those latitudes, and the sense of emptiness and distance (if not infinity) of a 'fundamentally prehuman physical world'⁸ that it transmits to those travelling through it and living within it, are indubitably the subject and inspiration of much of Friðfinnsson's work. The ways in which this happens, however, and the character of the legends and myths native to those surroundings, are where his artistic contribution becomes more personal. Seen in the context of the artistic developments of those years, some of his early works show links to Land art, which was being explored by American and European artists in the late 1960s, mostly in remote and deserted locales. Friðfinnsson was

particularly interested in the work produced by the British artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. We could claim that it was especially the relationship with the magical, apotropaic character of monuments from prehistoric civilisations as explored by Long that was of particular interest for the artist. In this regard, he brought to a local dimension of a culture particularly sensitive to a magical relation with nature, the anthropological interests evident in other Land artists like Robert Smithson. On the other hand, while the American Land artists carefully 're-designed' the deserted landscapes into spectacles for a future and much-desired audience, Friðfinnsson used the natural elements as forces destructive of his artistic operations, and the remoteness of the Icelandic landscape as a tool with which to experience them.

The Icelandic landscape, and the culture of beliefs and myths that run through it, is the subject of at least two early works. For *Five Gates for the South Wind* (1971–72) he crafted five large wooden gates and positioned them in the middle of a remote landscape in Iceland by the sea. As the title implies, the gates have the 'function' of allowing the warm southern wind to pass through, bringing this beneficial element to that strip of land. Although the formal aspect of the work is transmitted by means of documentary photographic recording, a typically Conceptual device, another layer of formal presence is given by abandoning the five enigmatic objects in a virtually uninhabited place and making them the subject of a story (or legend) for the few people who actually had the opportunity to encounter them. Never seen again by the artist after their placement, the doors remained exposed to the natural elements, and were almost entirely destroyed by the wind and sea. The photographic documentation taken at the time of placement and the narrative generated by the work are the only way to know of these presences.

Whereas *Five Gates* uses the remoteness of an object in an unusual context as a tool to activate a narrative process, *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972) is the first time the artist directly samples the legendary and narrative material of his homeland. Even more clearly than *Five Gates*, it adopts rigorous and impersonal photographic and textual recordings, which take the form of an anthropological study that is typical of some Conceptual art, and applies them to a number of sites in Iceland considered by folklore to have supernatural powers. This is rendered by presenting a series of cases meticulously selected, photographed and referenced by the artist, most of which relate to life and labour in the countryside.

4 This text is based on my ten-year acquaintance and several encounters with the artist, mostly at his homes in Amsterdam.

5 From a conversation with the author, 11.10.2018.

6 For more on his upbringing, see Friðfinnsson's conversation with Andrea Bellini and Krist Gruijthuijsen in this book, pp. 17–24.

7 Friðfinnsson's interest in storytelling was not only influenced by traditional Icelandic culture, but perhaps also by meeting Bas Jan Ader in Amsterdam. He attended Ader's live reading performance *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls* at Art & Project Gallery in Amsterdam in 1972, during which Ader sat in an armchair reading a true story from *Reader's Digest*. Subsequently, Friðfinnsson invited Ader to participate in an exhibition in Reykjavik.

In addition to the narrative dimension and self-mockery of the artist's status, the two have in common frequent references to the work of Mondrian.

8 Giorgio Manganelli, *L'isola pianeta e altri settentrioni* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006), p. 62.

Just like other Conceptual artists who in those years used para-scientific and seemingly analytical instruments such as maps, classification, lists, photography and text to call into question the divisions and categories into which the world is ordered, Friðfinnsson took on a subject (in his case involving superstition and myth) with an entirely taxonomic approach, generating a jump in logic similar to what we see in operations by Robert Barry (*Inert Gas Series*, 1969), Douglas Huebler (*Variable Pieces*, 1970–97) and Alighiero Boetti (*I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo*, 1970–77), for example.

I'll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours

While in the above-mentioned works writing is used in a documentary way to describe the subject matter, more specifically, narrative materials entered other pieces that Friðfinnsson made in the same years. He adopted writing to translate a number of oneiric instances into works with a strictly textual character. Well before the more recent and laconic wall text *Thorsteinn Surtr Dreamed (From The Book of the Icelanders, Ari the Learned, c. 1125)* from 2003,⁹ his work *Dream* from 1973 already included a brief text written in the first person describing a dream. Set on the farm where he was born, raised and did chores, the dream is about his father's unexpected disappearance and his magical, mysterious apparition ('but his shadow was left there with me'). On one hand, the framed hand-written text is surely a reference to a specific type of Conceptual art, but on the other, the openly narrative matrix was a novelty for art of the time, just as novel as its personal content and its mystical tone. The dream is, needless to say, yet another matter that is difficult to record, remember and describe.¹⁰

I dreamt that I was on the farm where I was born and raised. My father (who is dead) and I were working in the homefield, collecting hay. We had a horse and a cart, with which we were going to transport the hay to the barn. It was rather dark outside, but quite warm. When we had loaded the cart, my father disappeared, but his shadow was left there with me, and I knew that I should apply it to the wheels of the cart to make it run more smoothly. Then I had to connect the cart to the horse with strings made of light, which had shone down through the sea. After that I woke up.

Dream, 1973



Tungustapi, 1998

Places and legends

Friðfinnsson's fascination with physically and narratively impalpable material, and his attempt to give it some kind of visualisation through pictures and words, is not only present in his early works, but returns in later years as an interest in apparitions, folklore and mythology. As an ideal continuation of *Sacred and Enchanted Places* (1972), *Tungustapi* (1998), a photographic print of a hilly region in Iceland, represents one of the most sacred places of the *huldufólk* (hidden people). The work is accompanied by a long text about one particular story concerning the elves and fairies in Icelandic folk belief who populate the country's mythology and natural landscape in indelible ways.

In *The Fall* (2005), another text tells the story of a meteorite that fell to earth in Siberia in 1947 and how an artist witnessed the event and captured the scene right away, making a painting that was reproduced ten years later on a Soviet postage stamp. Next to this text, a fragment of the meteorite is on display under glass. The key ingredient here is the connection between a fascinating natural event, a kind of miraculous apparition, and the Russian artist's initiative to immortalise it. Several recurrent elements in Friðfinnsson's work are combined in *The Fall* – attraction to natural phenomena and a taste for storytelling that in turn is linked to art and its history – in a more extensively narrative way instead of being to all appearances only documentary.

The narrative form is the departure point for another project which, like *Five Gates*, is ideated and presented in forms that turn it into the stuff of legend. I am referring to *House Project*, which began in 1974 and is still potentially open to additions. It is one of the artist's most famous works, consisting of different incarnations of an initial concept. As Friðfinnsson explains in the text accompanying the work, the idea for *First House* (the initial iteration of the project) comes from the book *Íslenskur aðall* (Icelandic Aristocracy) written in 1938 by Þórbergur Þórðarson, one of the most important Icelandic novelists of the twentieth century. The book celebrates the nomadic life and the habits of a number of homeless people whom the author considered the aristocracy of Iceland, a country without this social group in its history. The author tells the story of Sólon Guðmundsson,

an elderly eccentric. In addition to having constructed a number of curious objects devoid of practical function, and having written a personal form of poetry that he describes as 'light jokes', Guðmundsson imagines building a new house for himself by reversing all its elements, but he is unable to complete the work. Decades later, Friðfinnsson takes up the idea and substantiates the eccentric aesthete's vision. In a remote, practically uninhabited area of Iceland, he builds a small house with wallpaper and curtains on the outside, and a door mounted inside out. While Guðmundsson's desire was especially driven by the aesthetic desire to share the beauty of the wallpaper with passers-by, Friðfinnsson brings the idea to a more abstract and conceptual level.

The work offers a number of interpretative possibilities, where once again, storytelling and (indirect) references to making art and to art history are indissolubly combined. Firstly, the idea of the Icelandic 'aristocrat', shared by the young artist, has the potential to turn our perception of reality inside out by means of a simple gesture: making the entire world become the house's interior, an 'inhabitable landscape', one might say. Secondly, although the artist has never declared this as a reference, he seemingly reformulates Piero Manzoni's idea behind *Socle du Monde* (1961). In this work, the Italian artist (an eccentric aristocrat himself, but by blood), further developed the idea of his *Base magica* (1961), where every object placed on the pedestal becomes a work of art. Given that in *Socle du Monde* the caption he prints on the work is written upside down, the pedestal could be perceived as the base of the entire globe. Whereas Manzoni takes Duchamp's idea of the ready-made to an absurd extreme by turning the whole world into a work of art, with Friðfinnsson, the world, landscape and nature contained within the walls of the inside-out house become our home, our habitat, in an interesting reversal from art to life, in favour of life, which suggests an almost pantheistic openness toward the world.

Finally, *First House* can be read as an allusion to making art, and to the artist's identity and role. Could the eccentric 'aristocrat' be an artist in his own right, Friðfinnsson seems to ask, given his profoundly imaginative ideas and visions, even if they have no practical result? Is art not just an idea that, according to Conceptual artists, does not necessarily have to be turned into an object or shape? Does art not consist in the ability to push the boundaries of our imagination into unexplored mental (and natural, we might say in this case) terrain?

Although the idea for *First House* has narrative origins, it is thanks to the realisation and presentation of the work, and the context in which it was conceived and displayed, that it becomes material for a new narration. Almost impossible to visit because of its remote location (making those who see it more likely to be excursionists than typical art spectators), and subjected to decay by the natural elements, the house's existence can be relayed only thanks to photographic material or word of mouth, creating a form of legend. As in other examples of Conceptual art, the physical or mental distance is what activates new imaginative possibilities. Indeed, as Alighiero Boetti said, if things are not secret, they become diluted.

Art as a story

While the craft and history of art are, partially at least, materials that Friðfinnsson explored in early works such as *Dropping by at Jón Gunnar's*, *Drawing a Tiger* and to a certain extent *First House*, in the early 1990s, this interest assumes a more constant presence. This does not seem to be coincidental. Between the late 1970s and the end of the 1980s, contemporary art was once again traversed by neo-expressionist and historicist currents that were most often translated into pictorial forms celebrating the artist as a heroic and Promethean figure accessorised with worldliness and business savvy – very different from the artistic figure as interpreted by Friðfinnsson. Having passed through this phase, not without difficulty, by means of work that (despite certain formal differences) maintained general coherence and thematic continuity with his older works, he gives the impression of wanting to use art and its history as raw material. On the one hand, he looks at the craft of the artist, his tools and rituals, with new, profound irony and disillusionment, as if in answer to that decade of excess. On the other, he takes history and its protagonists as subjects of a series of works that contribute to reconstructing a pantheon of ideational references and turn these names and works into matters of legend.

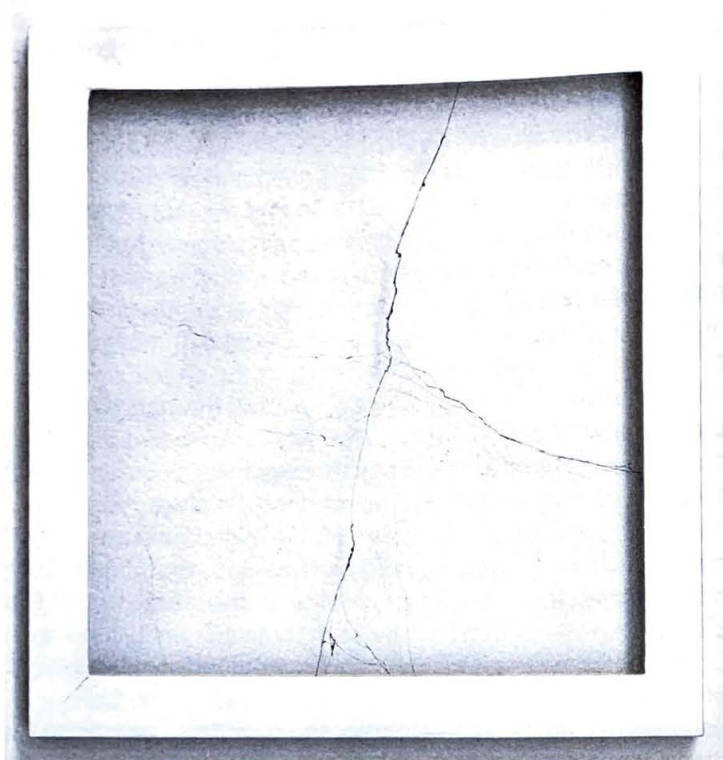
The death (or at least illness) of the author

In line with a long history of calling into question the authority of the artist or author as creator, the photo series *Sheep and Horses of My Nephew* (2001) is made up of seemingly insignificant photographs of the Icelandic landscape. What is not insignificant is the fact that Friðfinnsson entrusted their making to his nephew, a total amateur in photography, and that they represent the environs of the farm where Friðfinnsson grew up and where his nephew was now the farmer. With this decision, he reconstructs the possibility of seeing what he saw many years ago. It is a sort of time travel in which he is replaced by his nephew as the viewer, suggesting the possibility of spontaneous vision devoid of cultural and professional superstructure.

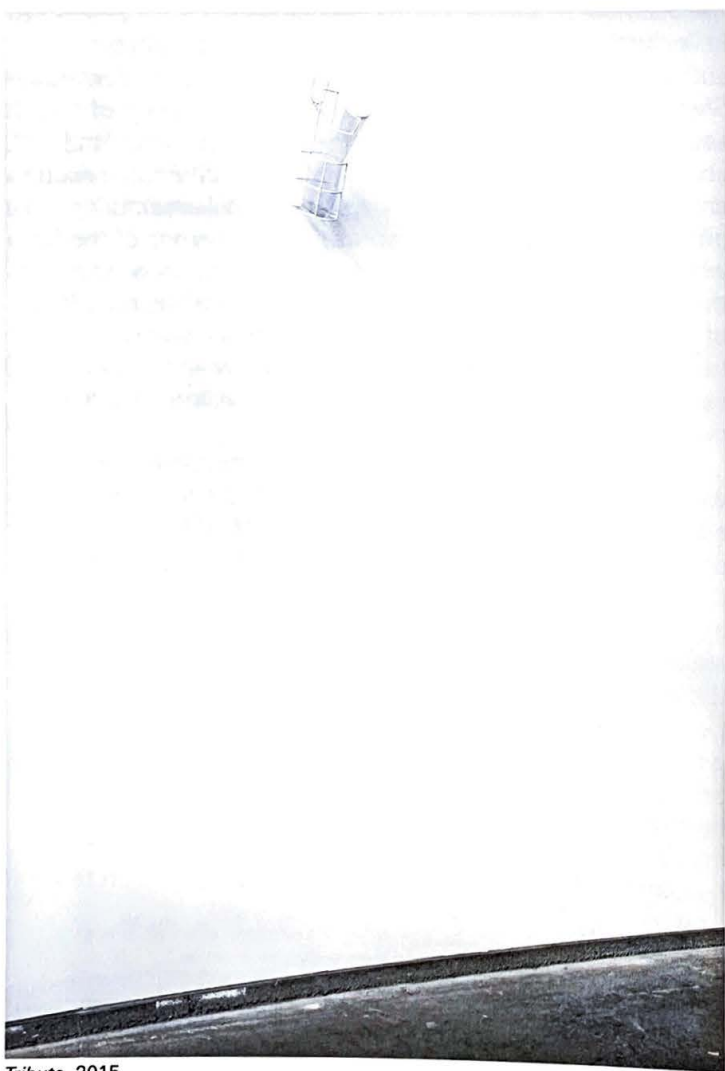
Even more extreme is the process behind the series of works *Atelier Sketch*. From 1990 to 2014, the artist occupied a studio inside an old school in Amsterdam. If his practice does not usually require a production inside the premises of the studio, after a while Friðfinnsson realised that, even so, a lot of activity was going on there night and day and especially in his absence: spiders were weaving their webs in the corners of the room. Struck by these presences, he collected their webs, framing them under glass as if they were ready-mades or, rather, sketches, drawings and artists' notes, as the title suggests. While the ephemeral beauty of the spiders' webs is another sign of the artist's interest in evanescent material and matter, *Atelier Sketch* can be read in different ways. If it is an ironic comment on the

9 'Thorsteinn Surtr dreamed he was awake but everyone else was asleep: then he dreamed he fell asleep and everybody else woke up.'

10 The subject of his work *I Collected Personal Secrets* (1972–2015) is once again undisclosed material, difficult to discover and share. Friðfinnsson placed a classified ad in the Dutch art magazine *Fandagos* asking readers to send him their personal secrets, saying he would preserve them carefully ('je les garderai précieusement').



Atelier Sketch, 1990–ongoing



Tribute, 2015

artist's status and creativity, on the unproductivity or the uselessness of study for an artist with a typically 'post-study' production mode, a further reading of the work might derive from the fact that the manual execution of work is often entrusted to others. Here, the production is wrought by creatures that were neither instructed by the artist nor paid for their work. Long before Bruce Nauman's video installation *Mapping the Studio* (2001), Friðfinnsson registered the activity in his studio – a place animated by a presence that is non-human, but that nonetheless suggests the absence of the artist/creator – to craft an ironic comment on the rites and modes of making art.

The installation *Fruits of Labour* (2004) might represent a simultaneous continuation of and counterbalance to the preceding series. Where *Atelier Sketch* drew attention to the unproductivity of the artist through the work of other living beings, *Fruits of Labour* places emphasis precisely on the effort needed to patiently execute an elementary job, where work as a manual activity is identified with the work of art.¹¹

Forming something of a quadrilogy with *Atelier Sketch* and *Fruits of Labour* are the installations titled *Suspended* (1999–ongoing) and *Clearing* (2013), which represent further comments on the artist's production modes and the instruments of his craft. At the same time, they might refer to a specific mode of expression and perhaps even a specific phase of art that Friðfinnsson had just witnessed as an uninterested spectator. Both works are made up of a number of wooden sticks (the type used to stir paint in cans) hung on the wall at equal distances to form a kind of environment. The resulting composition might bring to mind action painting, *informel* art or gestural abstraction, which enjoyed a comeback in the late 1970s, only to be superseded by a new artistic and cultural climate in the days of the making of this work. Seen from this point of view, these works seem to find humour in the mythological and heroic dimension of gestural abstraction by underlining the prosaic nature of an act that exposes one of the tools used to produce a painting (in the sense of an artwork) while literally putting paint on display (in the sense of the material). Passing from drawing to painting, these works give shape to a thought similar to the one found in *Fruits of Labour*. Showing the instrument and not the transformation of the material by means of the instrument, Friðfinnsson seems to suggest two possibilities, the first of which gives our imagination the capacity to complete the many pictorial works that might have been prepared with those paints and that the spectator does not see. The other is related to his own practice: the proclamation of his radical abstinence from making paintings.

They can be heroes

Indeed, Friðfinnsson's work is traversed by a pantheon of references that are entirely different from forms of pictorial expressionism, populated by figures such as Paul Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian, the heroes of his rather late, incomplete and episodic acquaintance with art history. His renewed interest in several legendary figures in art history returns in parallel with a new metalinguistic attention to the tools and forms of art. This is seen in a number of works made from the early 1990s to recent years. Here, episodes

and artwork from the past are treated as legends, often overlapping with Friðfinnsson's own biography and artistic training, which create a linguistic short circuit that oscillates between memory and irony. In this way, *First Window (Homage to Marcel Duchamp)* (1992) is not only a photo of a window in the house in which he grew up, but is also a clear reference to the work *Fresh Widow* (1920), in which Duchamp changes a few letters to transform 'French window' into wordplay. By going back to see that window many years after his childhood, Friðfinnsson seems to want to superimpose two temporally and qualitatively different views by means of an elementary photographic image. The first way of looking at the window as a child is now joined (in 1992) by the possibility of seeing it in a perhaps more profound way through the eyes and example of the French artist, to whom Friðfinnsson has openly dedicated the work. Once more art and life are superimposed, in the same gaze.

Much more recently, Friðfinnsson turns a plastic chamber pot hung high in the exhibition space into a ready-made whose title (*Tribute*, 2015) makes it another evident homage to Duchamp and his urinal (*Fountain*, 1917). By shifting the work physically and semantically, Friðfinnsson translates to the letter the intention of the Duchampian



From Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1998

revolution, 'elevating' an object that is low in all senses (normally kept underneath the bed) and that is part of the artist's daily life. As in the preceding case, an episode found in art history is humanised and acquires a narrative character by bearing a private reference to the life of another artist.

Subjects represented in the work of artists become the subjects of tributes by Friðfinnsson. For example, the mountains seen in paintings by Cézanne are "portrayed" by Friðfinnsson by means of frottage in a literal, physical adhesion to the object of the work by the French master. In *From Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1998), Friðfinnsson responds to the almost sculptural, three-dimensional character that Cézanne introduced into his painting – paving the road to the Cubist revolution – with a frottage on paper that appears like a flat relief, as if the rubbing had been taken on the surface of the famous mountain itself.

Finally, another hero populating Friðfinnsson's pantheon makes his comeback some decades after his first appearance. The primary colours used by Mondrian, discussed above in the work *Dropping by at Jón Gunnar's*, reappear over 40 years later in *Placement* (1999–ongoing). While in the former they were used to 'heal' the results of an over-excited gesture, in the latter, the minimal pictorial act consists of the placement of three coloured fingerprints (one red, one yellow and one blue) on a square pane of glass. Another act of healing?

The young artist seen in old age

In at least two other examples, Friðfinnsson has translated this metalinguistic interest of his into more ambitious forms, and with these we shall close our discussion. Two works that are virtually exhibitions – the installations *Around an Apple* (2004) and *All the Prizes and Then Some More* (2006) – bring the mix of references to art history, autobiography and storytelling that we have observed as being constant presences throughout Friðfinnsson's career to an increased level of formal complexity and a more ramified form of storytelling.

Around an Apple is literally built around a real apple placed on a pedestal, while textual and iconographic references to apples found in art history are presented on the wall. Friðfinnsson builds a converging and humorous itinerary leading from the apple of original sin to his own life, when he used to attend the painting class taught by Sigurður Sigurðsson (a painter of mildly Post-impressionist still lifes) at the academy in Reykjavik. In the short story that is part of the installation, Friðfinnsson – with pointed witticism and the support of an Albrecht Dürer engraving – connects the occasional theft of fruit from the composition painstakingly prepared by the teacher to the theft of the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden. In both instances, women were the first to be suspected of having committed the 'original' sin, driven by an insatiable appetite for fruit, which in Iceland was not easy to come by at that time (1958). Yet again, the female is accused of having broken the perfect equilibrium created by the god/master/artist.

11 Questioned by the author, Friðfinnsson denies any reference to the work by Félix González-Torres consisting of mounds of candy and chocolates heaped in the corners of rooms, saying he has no knowledge of them.



Around an Apple, 2004



All the Prizes and Then Some More, 2006

All the Prizes and Then Some More reaches back yet further into Friðfinnsson's life to tell, many years later, another story in which art history and personal history overlap. In 1958, the Icelandic publisher Helgafell premiered a series of reproductions of paintings by the country's best artists. To advertise the quality of the prints, the company organised a competition and an exhibition with the aim of awarding ten prizes to the first ten visitors able to distinguish the reproductions from the originals. Of the 100 visitors who took part, only one was able to identify the lot: a young man from Dölum in West Iceland. As the accounts reported at the time, 'A student from the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts, the young Hreinn Friðfinnsson from Bær, Miðdölum, received all the prizes – all ten reproductions.' Some 35 years after *Drawing a Tiger*, with which we opened this text and with which Friðfinnsson practically commenced his mature work, the artist revisited yet another episode from his introduction to art. In this case, he is no longer the emerging artist that he was in 1971, at which point he was already mythologising his childhood. As a fully-fledged, recognised professional, a sort of tutelary deity to contemporary Icelandic art, Friðfinnsson again toys with a foundational moment in his career by commenting on the seemingly predestined route that begins in humble, provincial origins and arrives at the

art world's recognition of his official standing. With the same human sensitivity and jocosity that run through all of his work, *All the Prizes* restages that personal history and that art history. This new portrait of the artist as a young man seems to advance the hypothesis that those reproductions now adorning the walls of a museum not only demonstrate the capability of the artist still in his prime, but also testify – now that the reproductions themselves have become a work of art – to his entrance as a mature artist into the restricted hall of fame that is Icelandic art history. And surely, we might add, not only there.