

Opening speech Hans Ulrich Obrist for Hreinn Fridfinnsson's installation 'By the Ocean', March 3, 2018

Hreinn Fridfinnsson is one of Iceland's leading artists. Often celebrated for its lyricism and stark poetry, his work which encompasses drawing, photography and installation, appropriates commonplace subjects and materials in order to highlight invisible yet potent spaces of communication and the flexible nature of human memory.

While landscape and the natural world are ongoing touchstones for Fridfinnsson, he is noted for his diverse and curious approach to subject matter, with works that are embedded with a common sensibility and lightness of touch.

As Olafur Eliasson says, 'He gives the subtleties of live a language'. It was Olafur Eliasson, co-designer of the 2007 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, who initiated the exhibition of Fridfinnsson that took place at the Gallery that same year. As the first presentation of the artist's work in the UK, the exhibition brought together a wide breadth of works from a career spanning four decades. I have been fortunate to have had an extended dialogue with Hreinn since the early 1980s. One of my first encounters with his work was his legendary piece from 1974 about secrets, a piece that has since influenced countless contemporary artists.

The secret of Hreinn Fridfinnsson has now come to an end. In the early 1970s, the Icelandic artist placed an advert in a Dutch art magazine asking people to send him their secrets. Forty years later, Fridfinnsson will conclude his 'secrets project' for an exhibition at Kunstverein in 2015. At the time of its initial publication, Fridfinnsson's request for secrets produced no results. This non-event, with its ephemeral and temporal brevity, has somehow survived in the memory of some people, and as a rumor. In 2007, Fridfinnsson's advert was reprinted in Point D'Ironie (agnès b), immediately making it accessible with a hundred thousand copies that would lead to an accelerated set of responses and secrets being sent to the artist.

In a discussion about the original printing of the advert in the 1970s, Fridfinnsson told me that 'if you acquire somebody else's secret, you must keep it as long as you live. You cannot pass it around, because then it is, of course, destroyed. That was the main point of the work: the very nature of a personal secret. That probably explains this absence of reactions.'

This focus on a process-based approach to collecting is important to Fridfinnsson who once told me: 'an archive I don't have. I just have memories. This privileging of memory over the physical process of categorising and organising an archive demonstrates Fridfinnsson's interest in using memory as a fluid, flexible material.'

Over the forty years of refraining to reveal any underlying reason for his artistic endeavour, Fridfinnsson engenders rumour and fabrication out of what is essentially an open system. A double archive is created: Fridfinnsson's archive of collected secrets and the immaterial memories of them and the rumours that continue to surround the piece. Through hindsight the project reveals the logic of its own internal disclosure: the secret, Fridfinnsson is telling us, is that there isn't one rumour. Fridfinnsson's fluid approach to making is evident in other works, such as the 'inside-out' House Project, also from 1974. The work is presented as the documentation of an event, as evidence of a house that was built. In a previous conversation Fridfinnsson recounted the story behind this work: 'The house was inspired by an old Icelandic book from the early twentieth century in which an eccentric old man in a village decided to build himself a new house, using the traditional manner with a shell constructed from wood and corrugated iron. But instead of putting the iron on the outside, he put it on the inside. According to the story, it was a decorative purpose that lay behind this idea, because he wanted to use wallpaper, which was a

novelty, and he thought it would make sense to put it on the outside where more people could enjoy it... I realised that it [this story] had meaning. You could claim that such a house turns the world inside-out. So that was the drive to build a similar little house. I stumbled across an ideal site in a lava area not far from Reykjavik and we built it quickly...the building itself wasn't a sculpture for people to visit. The piece was presented as documentation'.

What emerges from Fridfinnsson's description of this work is the significance of storytelling. As the artist said later in our conversation: 'Storytelling is very important for me; it's just in my nature'. This is not only related to the content of the work itself, that is the story of the old man from which the work was inspired, but also in the ways through which his works are circulated, understood and interpreted. By privileging documentation of the thing rather than the thing itself, the inside-out house, like the secrets project, renders conversation, rumour and speculation as the resonating power that is left behind.

Alongside the works that focus on immaterial structures of communication, Fridfinnsson has continued to make object-based works and installations throughout his career, which brings me to this new work presented within the programme of EENWERK, titled *By the Ocean*. The work comprises a single geological specimen – a stromatolite – that has been sourced from an iron mine in Minnesota. Stromatolites are layered bio-chemical accretionary structures formed in shallow water by the trapping, binding and cementation of sedimentary grains. Fossilised stromatolites therefore provide ancient records of life on Earth; the passing of time and the accretion of memory is literally embedded within their very form. Forming part of Fridfinnsson's installation are two crystal balls and a single framed photograph depicting two boys standing on the shore of a calm seascape.

Objects have also had a presence within Fridfinnsson's work, but his use of them is resolutely non-monolithic; rather, they act like triggers – they're more like what Michel Serres would call 'quasi-objects'. What is so particular about Serres 'quasi-objects' is its reliance on a living subject in order to activate it. He gives the example of the ball, whose significance lies in the fact that it is fundamentally a relational object, as oppose to having its own distinct ontological status: 'Around the ball, the team fluctuates quick as a flame, around it, through it, it keeps a nucleus of organisation. The ball is the sun of the system and the force passing among its elements, it is a centre that is off-centred, off-side, outstripped'.

The key to the quasi-object, then, is the relational network that constellates around it; around the material fact of the ball dances an ever expanding network of social relations, exchanges, signs and symbols'. Serres picturing of quasi-objects is, I would propose, in line with Fridfinnsson's approach to objects, and this is very much the case with his new work.

By placing together the stromatolite – an object of accretion that is activated by external forces – and the photograph of the two boys, Fridfinnsson suggests a rich and immaterial network of exchange and dynamic partnerships that are constantly occurring between lifeforms and objects. While this work may say something lasting about the fact of time's forward motion, the artist's approach focuses more on the sense-based texture of this passing.

As Fridfinnsson says: 'My interest in the essence of time is serious, but my dealing with time is not knowledge-based; it's more exploratory and feeling-based'.