Perspectives

At the Convergence of Art and Philosophy

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Foreword

This collection of curatorial contemplations for the exhibition *Perspectives: At the Borders of Art and Philosophy* is the culmination of a yearlong experimental project. The project is unusual in two ways. First, it is an experiment in curatorial collaboration, bringing together a group of eight curators to work together on every aspect of an exhibition. The group developed the exhibition concept in common, established an approach and criteria for the selection of works and collaborated on the exhibition design. Second, the project was conceived of as an experiment in philosophy, or, more precisely, as an attempt to address philosophical ideas through the art exhibition format.

The idea for the project developed out of a simple fact that concerned the Reykjavík art scene, which I found rather remarkable when I returned to Iceland six years ago after twenty-three years abroad. In the city's small, professional art community I found a prominent group of art workers – critics, curators, teachers and art writers – who approached contemporary art from a uniquely philosophical standpoint. With graduate educations in philosophy, they were not merely enhancing their writing with vague allusions to art theory but working with complex philosophical notions about art. This is not unique to Iceland, of course, but it seemed that this philosophical approach constituted an unusually large portion of the art discourse in Iceland. Moreover, this way of working had become established enough for members of this group to identify themselves professionally as "art philosophers" in much the same way as historians of art call themselves "art historians".

Having been educated at French, Italian, English and American universities, the group of eight curators – or art philosophers – brought their different backgrounds and ideas to bear on the *Perspectives* project. What unifies them, however, is a like-minded view of the role that philosophy can assume in the discussion of art. And this role is shaped extensively by the members' intimate knowledge of contemporary art practice. They have carried on extended dialogues with artists as curators and art writers and most of their writings have engaged with particular works of art. This is, of course, not unique to this particular group but it constitutes a certain departure from a long history of philosophical writing on art.

According to a traditional view, the philosophy of art is not concerned with specific artworks but with the nature of aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment, artistic value, expression, the ontological status of the art object and other such "underlying" notions of art and beauty. It is, according to this view, the province of art criticism to analyze and elucidate works of art, whether it is with the aim of evaluating or enhancing the appreciation and understanding of particular pieces. The task of art philosophy has, therefore, been clearly distinguished from art criticism, and philosophy has proceeded mostly in absence of and, all too often, in ignorance of the actual practice of art. The essays in this book proceed differently. They aim to analyze and elucidate works of art philosophically. They bring philosophical notions to the task of interpretation and in the process they aim to elucidate philosophical concepts of art.

Having studied philosophy before studying art history, I was thrilled to find such interest in the philosophy of art upon returning to Iceland. My own interest stems from my short but gratifying period of study with the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who has written extensively from a broad knowledge and experience about film, literature and music. In his work, Cavell has made the medium of modern art a significant concern for philosophy, and, at the same time, he has made modern philosophy a significant problem for aesthetics. It is a similar attempt to make art and philosophy each other's concerns that provides the impetus for the *Perspectives* project.

The group was particularly honored that the distinguished French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy was willing to collaborate on the project as a guest contributor, and he has generously produced a new text for this publication. There are few contemporary philosophers writing about the complex interrelationship between art and philosophy who are so acutely aware of the "the thought in art". His contribution is much appreciated. Many thanks also to all of the artists who lent works to the exhibition. Without their work this project would have been utterly meaningless and, in fact, impossible.

Hafþór Yngvason
Director, Reykjavík Art Museum

Jean-Luc Nancy

Possibility of Sense

1.

Regarding its sense, art is speechless. Science, religion or philosophy produce their sense or their truths along with their operations and discourses: without delay, they are necessarily reflective and explicit about their thinking, in one way or another. But art offers nothing of the kind. Rather, it folds its sense back onto the work, or immerses it within the work.

Speaking about art, or thinking art, always involves an attempt at talking about its sense, at least to some extent. It is an essay, or a trial-run [*un essai*][1], on the sense of art. But since this sense is not at all clarified by the work of art, this must be an attempt made by the sense of art: we have to attempt, or to put to the test, a statement likely to be that of art itself. We must make it say what it means. We must make it speak, or lend it its voice.

Right away this presupposes that art speaks in a certain manner. It supposes that art is "language," or that it exists in a certain determined or privileged relation with language: a relation of homology or analogy, a relation of imitation or intended aim. This presupposition on the subject of art is virtually canonical throughout the entire history of art (at least in the West and since the time of Christian art, though this would merit a more sustained examination and, besides, what is said here is being said by a Westerner). About art in general, it seems that we are again saying that "it only lacks speech." But this well-known expression has also been accurately shown to be an overworked cliché, used in relation to the subject of portraiture since the time of the Renaissance.

As opposed to this expression qualifying the excellence of a pictorial representation (and it is definitely an excellence since almost nothing is lacking, yet it is still questionable, since speech is lacking), opposed to and yet running parallel with it, one could put together an entire anthology of linguistic terms used about music: its *language*, its *phrasing*, its *vocabulary*, its *grammar*, and its *sense* (thus, for example, in this definition: "a musical phrase […] expresses an autonomous, complete and coherent

1 [Throughout the essay Nancy uses the term *l'essai*, the multiple senses of which can only be approximated in English. In French, it can mean "essay," "attempt" or "trial" (in the sense of a trial-run or an experiment) – Trans.]

sense through itself,"[2] where the word *sense* clearly does not refer to its linguistic meaning). But one could also try to talk about the one kind of expression together with the other kind – the one rooted in language with the other, stranger one – by saying along with van Gogh, "colour expresses something through itself."[3]

Since the periods in which metaphors of this kind were overly abundant, even excessive, right up to the identification of the different arts with language (this latter having most recently informed a discourse on the "language" or "writing" of cinematography), it has, by contrast, become common to object to this kind of assimilation and to insist on the gap between the arts and language. Thus, for example, it is no longer surprising to hear it asked whether poetry really is, or is solely, "the art of language."

But this restraint – which is consistent with a general schema of thought in which the order of sense must be submitted to interrogation, if not to suspicion – can no longer remain where it is. If all that is missing from art is speaking, this is not just because art remains outside of discourse, but also because it lies on its border. Setting aside the trivial motif of a desire for a complete reproduction (which would be a "living portrait"), we must recognize that the pronouncement of "something is lacking" also expresses the emergence or ascent of another kind of saying [*d'un dire*]. This saying of painting must lack speech for it to be what it is, but it must also not cease to appeal to or evoke speech in a "saying completely otherwise" to which, at the same time, art summons speech.

Thought is summoned. It is called upon to exert itself with regard to art, in two ways that follow one from the other. First, it is the work of art, speechless or at least without discourse (a poem), that asks to be thought ("What does it mean?"; "What does it want from us?"). Second, what immediately results from this is that "art" also asks about the sense proper to a thinking that claims merely to follow it.

The reality of art would be at stake here, as well as its name. When we say that the attempt to think (about) art is an essay on the sense of art, we must hear this in two connected registers: an essay on the sense of the

2 The entry "Phrase," *Dictionnaire de la musique*, Ed. Marc Vignal, Paris, Larousse-Bordas, 1996.

3 General correspondence, Paris, Bibos, 1990, II, p. 744–745, cited and commented upon by Jean-Clet Martin, *Van Gogh. L'œil des choses*, Paris, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Institut Synthélabo, 1998, p. 79.

thing and an essay on the sense of the name. Ever since there has been "art" in the modern sense of the term, it has been a question of precisely this sense. Consequently, ever since we have been thinking about art (that is, at the very same time), we have also been trying out a sense of the word *art*, whether we realize it or not. The attempt at thinking about art is always an attempt at thinking the word *art*, a way of putting to the test another writing of a word whose sense would seem to consist – or to resolve itself – in this perpetual repossession of the trial [*un essai*] of its name.

The name of art has not had a proper sense ever since it became detached from the *beaux arts*, ever since the *beau* disappeared to leave suspended the signification that used to be that of "art" as "technique" (*techné*, translated into Latin by *ars*). It is, therefore, a word with a referent – what's more, a referent that is itself multiple, made up of heterogeneous practices – but not a signification. In this situation, what arises out of this essay on art has to be stretched between two poles: it involves establishing a meaning of the word and thus unifying the referents under one signification, but at the same time, and in so doing, it also entails touching on the withdrawal of a sense that absents itself, both in that referential multiplicity and in the alterity or exteriority of the language proper to every form of art.

Thinking constitutes the test of this double postulation: it tries its hand at a dual posture where an articulation and a tension between the presence and absence of sense would be played out. Thinking pushes art further back into its retreat at the same time as it draws closer to it – or as it strives to draw closer to it – in signification.

But that is only possible because art itself is at stake in this outstretched articulation. Neither unnameable nor properly named, art is what articulates this oscillating possibility between the two poles. It articulates this possibility as a name always on a trial basis, as a language always to be revived and always in flight from a saying [*un dire*] that speaks beyond or below it. Thinking about art awakens this tension and this attempt – or this temptation – of a saying that does not say but that does not remain silent either. It is a saying that is intense but without intention, a syntax of forces without message, but regarding which it will nonetheless not be in vain to make an attempt at sense.

2

In a certain way, the attempt at thinking gives rise to this saying, which is nothing beyond its effect. But, in another way, thinking finds this saying in front of it, and finds in it a limit of its own saying. Thinking finds that art thinks, in front of it and before it. But at this limit, there is an encounter and a kind of commerce. Saying and saying otherwise, thinking and thinking otherwise, thinking and the trial of thinking all touch each other. According to the law of touching, there is contact and distance, access and withdrawal, interaction and spacing, infinitesimal distance and proximity. A properly infinite exchange is played out in this mutual putting to the test; what is more, this is why thinking about art can have the contrasting effects of revelation and of being a waste of time, of truth and of powerlessness.

If it is truly a matter of a contact, that is because it is truly a matter of saying, on both sides. In judging spontaneously that art "says something" (or that it "tells us something"), one is not entirely mistaken. Perhaps one also finds something of the saying that remains buried beneath the signifying saying, a saying that says a sense otherwise, a sense itself sensed otherwise.

When we are seized by the gaze and the lips of the Mona Lisa or of Titian's *The Young Englishman* (by their "expression," as they say, or even their "mystery"), when we hear in the first of the *Goldberg Variations* a kind of declaration or even conversation, light-hearted but thoughtful, we are not just using metaphors. We are also in the realm of a certain kind of metonymy: the signifiers that are busy in the linguistic sphere have points of contact with the arrangement of the strokes of painting or with that of the notes and bars.

It is indeed a matter of arrangement or lay-out, before any talk of sense can take place. What is saying, after all, if not first a showing, exposing something according to a scheme that is best suited to it [*son juste agencement*] (*dicere* comes from the Greek *deiknumi*, to show, of which *diké* or justice is the root)? It is the monstration (*index*, *indice*, and also the Greek *phrasis*: *ekphrasis*, or speech that is drawn out of a picture in order to hold onto it); it brings to light an arrangement or an articulation (a *harmonia* or again, a *melos*, both of which are terms related to articulation and tension, or *tonos*). Saying is thus more than signifying: saying makes sense not just from a distance, one that would be necessary for art to return in signification. Saying also makes sense

in close proximity to the thing shown, to the thing placed before us and exposed according to its order, in its appropriate measure, and even according to its *logos*.

3

In saying art, or in speaking about it, thinking comes into contact with this *logos*, with this other saying that is not the statement of a meaning but is the technique, the *ars* of an arrangement (*ars* meaning primarily "articulation"), a composition or an order. Between the one and the other saying, between the one and the other *logos* (or indeed between terms like *logos*, *melos*, *harmonia*, *muthos*, and *epos*), is offered an "interface" or rather a zone of contact, of a blow or of a brushing up, a space of touch and exchange which is that of a composition or assemblage, with its articulations and its tensions, with its arrangements of values, of its balances and its vanishing points.

This composition (an old term from a lexicon having mainly to do with the decorative arts) offers itself up on many registers: that of a particular art, that of a genre, a style or a manner, that of an artist or of a work. It comprises lines and colours, rhythms and tones, volumes and grains, movements and en-framings, depths and surfaces, speeds, lights, forces, moods, codes, gestures, strokes, etc. Perhaps it leads to the possibility of deciphering a sense, but what is certain is that it always proceeds out of a sense according to another value of the term: of the sense, precisely, of the composition, of a sense of relation, of contrast, of proportion, of difference, of compatibility, of reciprocal action, of the cut, of texture, of accord and discord.

If I speak about a "sense of relation" in this context (between colours, tones, scents, etc.), I am of course talking about a sense produced by a fixed relation, one that is already produced but that still has to be seized and revealed. At the same time, though, I am also talking about a "sense of relation" that the artist must have possessed for me to have the sense that such a sense is being offered. I am speaking here of his or her aptitude, of his or her capacity to reveal or to create such an arrangement, the internal connections of which make up a "composition."

One could with good reason designate this composition as the *symbolic* – despite the extreme wear and tear of the word – according to its most general meaning: the act of symbolizing with…(the putting

together, *syn-bolè*), the assemblage of elements, the convention, the code, the meeting, the appreciation just as much as the strangeness, the spacing, and the straining. Thinking about art touches on art whenever it considers this symbolicity on its own, independent of a return to signification of whatever sort. It is of the symbolic in the sense that its saying must withstand the test of a "saying otherwise." It must come to terms with, or *compose* with, such a saying otherwise; indeed, it is with it alone, finally, that it must come to terms, or symbolise. A saying about art that does not in some way hold to this saying otherwise would lose the sense of its object – to repeat, I am not referring to the signified sense here, but to the composition of technique and of address, of tact and of calculation, which allows for sense, that is, for a coming into contact. Between them, thinking and the art which thinking takes on symbolize – or, if one prefers, they *compose* – with each other. Together, the one against the other, they compose a figure that is neither the one nor the other…

Here, the attempt at thinking about art is bound to become in some way an attempt of art. Not that it sets about aping the manners of art. Quite to the contrary, this attempt at thinking about art must henceforth know that its object, "art," is already present in the discourse and in the saying, very much on this side of the level of signification, on this side of language as the larger register of a general symbolicity, one that makes language possible but does not get confused with its meaning [*vouloir-dire*]. Between language and art, there is an abyss separating intelligible sense from sensible sense, but at the same time, there is also a contact, that of the symbolic or of the composition. In the final analysis, these together constitute the higher meeting of intelligible sense and sensible sense. The meeting, for example, of thinking and a game of colours, or of thinking and a silence between two sounds.

4

One will want to know of what this symbolicity is the symbol. It is not a symbol of anything, for it does not refer to anything other than to its own possibility. The "symbolic" here refers to nothing and it represents nothing. It composes or puts together; it makes it such that there be an arrangement. What makes it possible is what frees in us something like thought or something like the *ars* of a world: thinking or *sense* – the sensibility and the site for the composition of a *cosmos*, for its *symbolon*

that would also be its *tonos* and its *melos*, its *pathos* and its *logos*. A cosmos is firstly nothing other than an arrangement, an ordering. Finally, an *art* is nothing other than a way of making a *cosmos* take hold in a work of art, as a work of art, in the time and space of that work. A cosmos nearby and brief, dazzling and elusive, furtive, but a cosmos nonetheless, that is, a possibility of sense.

This utterly singular "sense" is itself an attempt without end: it puts to the test the opening of a world or, if you like, the sending of a world, under conditions that are ceaselessly being displaced by the events of the world itself. And in particular, since there is no longer a creator God, it puts to the test what there is of the creation of the world.

There are no doubtful associations being made here, either regarding the divinity of the artist or regarding a religion of art. At stake, rather, is what would constitute a privileged symbolicity for our time, for ours is a time that explicitly refers, henceforth, to its own composition, or decomposition, of world. Our time symbolizes with a world at a loss, or at the moment of birth. Art is the technique of accessing the inaccessible composition of a world, and the ordeal of its opening – or of its being torn apart.

Thinking about art exposes this ordeal and this attempt. Whereas art used to be immediately woven into the symbolics and into the harmonic imaginations of mythologies and theologies, whereas sense was given in abundance and one could believe that art was only an ornament for these symbolisms, today we must be exposed to the trial of a symbolicity stripped bare, engaged in the always uncertain proceedings of signification and the imaginary. At this point, it is no longer possible simply to legislate art or to codify it. We must reach the point of touching the technique of a world – but where the symbolic, the mythology, and the figurability of the world are no longer given.

Thinking about art has thus become the very opposite of a treatise or theory, the opposite of anything that could offer an "art of art" (philosophy, canon, *ars poetica*), because the theory can henceforth no longer proceed out of a given order. On the contrary, it must make the experiment of a composition that is not only completely new, but is perhaps un-composeable. If one looks closely, moreover, that is exactly what had already started happening in Kant, like a living tremor at the very heart of the theory. Since Kant, there is no longer a normative philosophy of art. But there are the attempts at thinking or

writing about what straightaway puts into play an infinite extremity of sense, sense as infinite excess and as such, as non-composeable. Non-figurable, non-constructible and, moreover, demanding or reclaiming art, an art, its art.

Thinking about art thus does not simply open up the possibility of an explication or a signification of art. It opens onto its own condition of thinking in tension, in a tension and an attempt that we could call *cosmographical*, in the sense of the trace of what could make a world. Better still, it is the trace of what could make world*s,* in the plural, providing that it rests with us to receive what together our sciences and our existences offer to thinking as the plurality of universes, that is, as the non-unity and non-unicity of the world.

Perhaps the arts today have always already opened up the plurality of worlds, as the truth of the world.

Ólafur Gíslason

The Creation of the World and of the Worlds

Time has passed since one was able to represent the figure of a *cosmotheoros*, an observer of the world.

And if this time has passed, it is because the world is no longer conceived of as a representation.

A representation of the world, a worldview, means the assigning of a principle and an end to the world.

This amounts to saying that a worldview is indeed the end of the world as viewed, digested, absorbed, and dissolved in this vision.

– Jean-Luc Nancy

1.

What is it that happens when an artwork comes into being?

What is it that causes oil paint and canvas, stone or metal, material objects or energy in the form of light and colour to be transformed in such a way as to open up to us a new vision of the world?

Is there something that all branches of visual art have in common, that we can discover in their "essence" and that illuminates the creative process, this peculiar process by which "something comes into being and grows out of nothing" and this "something" opens up to us a new vision of the world?

These are questions too large to address in a brief essay, yet in searching toward an answer we will examine several artworks that differ in substance and formal presentation but share the property of opening up to us a new vision of the world.

2.

I would like to begin with Kjarval's *Mountain Milk* (*Fjallamjólk*), an oil painting that has perhaps done more than any other artwork to create an Icelandic national consciousness. This painting, like many other Kjarval landscapes, raises questions about the artist's relationship to Iceland, its countryside and people, and how he used art to nurture that relationship. How did Kjarval go about transforming the Icelandic countryside in such a way as to make it evoke something as far-removed from nature as a national consciousness? If what has been said in the past is correct, that through his landscape painting Kjarval played a major role in

shaping an Icelandic national consciousness and was, in this sense, a "political painter" (Danto, 2005, p. 541), what was it then that made his landscapes so political?

We see no outright political message in Kjarval's *Mountain Milk* or in his other landscapes. Abstract ideas of "nation," communal symbols such as national flags or historical motifs from the country's communal struggle and sacrifice are nowhere to be found in them. Then why is it possible to term this painting and other Kjarval landscapes "political art"? What is it that Kjarval invests his painting with, that makes it "national" or "political"?

What makes *Mountain Milk* and many comparable Kjarval paintings distinctive is that we all but feel the artist's physical presence in the picture. Within the work some magic has occurred that has the effect of making us cease to be able to distinguish the painter's presence in the work from what he saw before him and the vision that his being in the countryside stirred within him, apparent in his very brushstrokes, in forms and colours that have to do not with an imitation of nature but with some new visibility that has arisen on the canvas on almost corporal premises, a visual world that we easily feel at home in and identify with. Not having to do with an imitation of nature but with our relationship to it, our encounter with nature, in which the boundaries between the perceiver and the perceived dissolve.

Where does this image come from that fills the canvas and creates a new world there? If it does not consist of an imitation of nature then does it arise from the brain or heart? In truth we can discover no palpable images in our crania or hearts. The visibility that emerges on the canvas and transforms it into a new world is a temporal event occurring in the artist's relationship to his environment and subject matter. That relationship is simultaneously physical and mental.

In his brilliant 1964 essay on the eye and the mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that painting is as much a physical as a mental act, for clearly the mind cannot paint. This physical aspect of the art of painting involves not only our visual, tactile, and kinetic faculties but our entire being in the world. We both see and are seen; as part of the material world we are inseparably tied to what we see. Each movement of our bodies and eyes is charted on the map of the visible, so that we cannot fully discern the interchange occurring

between the seer and the seen. "I would be hard-pressed to say *where* the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 126)

This filigree of moss and lava field, this canyon cutting the land to the quick, this clear spring reflecting dim canyon walls and casting the shining-white light back toward its source, this naked ground covering the pictorial surface, the distant mountains under a slender rim of hazy sky, this peat-red glow with gashes and folds like a rune-carved visage becomes the artist's face and likewise our own, returning from immemorial depths of the Being that finds its root and origin there. Is this not our world?

We are not looking at a particular canyon, Flosagjá, as we "wander" within this painting as if in "the halos of Being;" indeed this painting teaches us nothing about the canyon. Yet nonetheless it tells us some truth that the place has evoked in the painter, in his intuition and motion, something that resounds in us as viewers, a sounding board for the immemorial, which is opening before our eyes like a miracle. It is not the national narrative that makes this painting resonate in the nation's consciousness but a communal immemorial Being possessing deeper and more succulent roots than any history can record or ethnology define.

Kjarval's painting confronts us with challenging questions concerning not only painting as such but also vision itself and its relation to our thoughts and acts. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

> …it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. It is, then, silent Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning. Herein lies the reason why the dilemma between figurative and nonfigurative art is wrongly posed; it is at once true and uncontradictory that no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and that no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being, that even Caravaggio's grape is the grape itself. This precession of what is upon what one sees and makes seen, of what one sees and makes seen upon what is – this is vision itself. And to give the ontological formula of painting

> we hardly need to force the painter's own words, Klee's words written at the age of thirty-seven and ultimately inscribed on his tomb: "I cannot be grasped in immanence." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 147–148)

In this view it is the paradoxes of vision that Kjarval reveals to us in his landscapes, paradoxes of the visual faculty that enables us to be simultaneously at Thingvellir, in Reykjavík or Rome, and also plunged in interiority:

> Through vision, then, the painter touches both extremities. In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs his body; everything he paints is in answer to this incitement, and his hand is "nothing but the instrument of a distant will." Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 147)

The fact that in the latter half of the twentieth century most Icelanders were able one way or another to feel at home in Kjarval's *Mountain Milk* (and his pictorial world as a whole) leads Danto to call this pictorial world a key of sorts to the Icelandic national consciousness and therefore also to "political" art. This may be, but Kjarval's art delves deeper; it delves to the roots of being and discloses to us a "crossroads" between the "immemorial depth of the visible" and the material being that our bodies share with the world.

We can also say that this painting is a "world" in which the Icelandic generation that experienced independence discovered its abode, its own reflection. The Icelandic word for 'world', 'heimur', corresponds to the English 'home' and implies a dwelling, domicile, or habitation, having to do with values that bring people together. A world is something that we feel at home in, not something that is outside or in front of us but something to which we materially pertain. A picture is thus a world solely for those who feel at home in it; it is a world made for and by those who inhabit it. A world that unites many worlds, a world in which many worlds find a (dwelling) place, where many worlds can unfold.

A world that has these properties is immediately and automatically laden with ethical values. It is like a sounding board for many worlds to echo on, constantly summoning new resonance, new worlds. This is the human world ('world' literally meaning 'the age of man'; cf. Latin 'vir', 'man', and Germanic 'old', 'era, age'), constantly recreating itself in myriad images, itself its own agent and subject.[1] It reveals to us the secrets of art and thus exceeds by far all national parameters and hence also the political premises that Danto saw in Kjarval's work.

In his well-known essay, "The Age of the World Picture," Martin Heidegger says that the chief characteristic of modernity is that mankind has transformed the world into a picture (Heidegger, 1938). He is referring to the scientific and technological image of the world, based on calculation and quantification, which gives man the possibility of totalitarian technological power over the earth, a totalitarian power which man indeed set out to achieve upon the rise of humanism, wherein man claims God's place, in a sense, as ruler of earth and director of historical fate. Heidegger's critique of the humanistic worldview is partly predicated on humanism having the property of nullifying and oblivionizing Being as well as a tendency toward a uniform totalitarianism such as we can see at present in the globalization of commerce and the market as the apex of technology, in which currency becomes the measure of all things.

Jean-Luc Nancy points out that Heidegger's critique reveals that his view toward Nazism was indeed critical, notwithstanding his verbal assent to it, since Nazi ideology and totalitarianism were indeed based on a fixed *Weltanschauung*. Nancy adds,

> A world "viewed," a represented world, is a world dependent on the gaze of a subject of the world [*sujet du monde*]. A subject of the world (that is to say as well as a subject of history) cannot itself be within the world [être *dans le monde*]. Even without a religious representation, such a subject, implicit or explicit, perpetuates the position of the creating, organizing, and addressing God (if not the addressee) of the world. (Nancy, 2002, p. 40)

1 'Subject', deriving from Latin *sub- (under) and iacere (to throw), has complex meanings, on the one hand the positive senses of actor, agent, main topic, and premise, and on the other hand the negative senses of sufferer, subjected, and subject to power.*

The worldview that Heidegger discusses and that is indeed Nancy's point of departure differs fundamentally from the "picture of the world" to be found in Kjarval's landscapes. Kjarval's subject matter is not a neutral image seen from outside or from a distance, as if by the God who created the world from nothing; rather Kjarval's image is a world in the sense of affinity, participation, and habitation. It is not a fixed view of nature but rather manifests the painter's physical and mental engagement with nature, an engagement finding its echo in the viewers' experience.

Thus the difference between the world of Kjarval's landscapes and the "worldview" that Heidegger rebuts is that one world is something in which we feel at home whereas the other is something posed before our eyes, as an object[2] we can view from the outside, "objectively," as disinterested judges. But as Jean-Luc Nancy has pointed out, the world never stands opposite us, for if we see a world from the outside, it must be a world other than our own, the one in which we are at home. If we hear a phrase of music by Bach or Mozart or of poetry by Jónas Hallgrímsson or Steinn Steinarr or see a fragment of a line by Klee, Matisse, or Kjarval, these things direct us into a world that we already feel at home in and are, ourselves, part of. The worldview limned by statistics and the quantitative sciences is of another ilk, not a world in the sense of an abode, where one feels at home. To inhabit the world is thus fundamentally different from "observing" it and Nancy is framing precisely this question when he says that the import of the world is the experience it has of itself, an experience with no assigned beginning or definite end:

> Time has passed since one was able to represent the figure of a *cosmotheoros*, an observer of the world. And if this time has passed, it is because the world is no longer conceived of as a representation. A representation of the world, a worldview, means the assigning of a principle and an end to the world. This amounts to saying that a worldview is indeed the end of the world as viewed, digested, absorbed, and dissolved in this vision. (Nancy, 2002, p. 43)

2 'Object', deriving from the Latin *ob- (over against, in the way of, opposing) and iacere (to throw), can mean 'that which is placed before our eyes' and is thus an antonym for 'subject'.*

The world that will no longer let itself be represented is a Godless world, a world without that God who has the power to objectify his image of the world and assign it an end. As Nancy points out, a metaphysical God is already a God who has gradually disrobed himself of all signs of an independent and remote sacrality in order to clothe himself with the world and become part of it. We can discern a parallel development in art. Even in the most exacting mimesis, such as we see in Dutch still-lifes of the 17th century or an existentialist-realist painter such as Caravaggio, a painter never disrobes himself, stripping off the world in order to view it from the outside, because he knows that he himself and the paint and the canvas are part of the material world and will never be sundered from it. Thus Vermeer sees the art of painting via himself, from behind, in his *Allegory of Painting*. Here again the core question is the enigma of how new visibility originates.

3.

This may shed light on the premises of an artwork which I would like to derive on the basis of Kjarval's landscape painting, Italian artist Claudio Parmiggiani's year-2000 work, *The Lighthouse*, which stands, a burning light, in the landscape below a mountain that was one of Jóhannes Kjarval's favourite subjects to paint: Vífilsfell. Just as it is worth pondering the questions that Kjarval posed to the mountain in painting his pictures of Vífilsfell, it is legitimate to ask: What question did this Italian artist ask the Icelandic barrens in placing the blazing light of his lighthouse in their midst?

If Kjarval's question concerns the visible, the new visibility that arises upon dissolution of the boundaries between the seer and the seen, then it is evident from his 1940 *Moss at Vífilsfell* that in this new visible world a struggle is breaking out between light and darkness: light is pressing in upon this gloomy landscape under a dim winter sky and lending it form. This is precognitive light, coming from within, deriving from immemorial experience that abides more likely in the artist's hand or body than in any light source found in this black desert in louring winter.

Claudio Parmiggiani's year-2000 *Lighthouse* looms before us, a 14-meter tower of rust-red iron, from this self-same desert, illuminating its expanse with a constantly burning light. This bold

work is neither an imitation of nature nor a picture of a lighthouse but a thing in itself, made of iron and light, a thing that is the equivalent of an idea. The idea and the thing are, however, meaningless without the environment enveloping the lighthouse and receiving its light. The lighthouse has become part of its surroundings, as its surroundings are part of it.

In a text delivered in 2000 at the unveiling of his *Lighthouse* Parmiggiani stated,

> My task was never to locate a traditional sculpture in this landscape or anywhere else. On the contrary, my wish was to give life to a certain idea, in Iceland. A tower of iron and light, the one substance being material in the fullest sense and the other metaphysical in the fullest sense, metal born of fire, producing light… Iceland epitomizes light struggling against night, epitomizes the character of resistance. That's a lighthouse. That's why my only work in this country had to be a symbol, a lighthouse. (Parmiggiani, 2010, p. 39)

If Kjarval's encounter with Vífilsfell became his material for a struggle between light and darkness, we find the same thing happening in Parmiggiani's piece. The approach is utterly different but the core of the works, grounded in immemorial experience, is the same. In a 2003 interview with Sylvain Amic, Parmiggiani explains the distinction as follows:

> I consider myself a painter because what I do derives from a particular tradition, maintains and lives on in that tradition. Yet the urge has never been to paint within the frame, but within the living body of a space, within the anxiety and emotion of a space. To me, that is painting. (Parmiggiani, 2010, p. 96)

Artistic tradition is fundamental to Parmiggiani. Not that he wants to conform to it but because for him its core always remains the same, having to do with a poignant tragedy in which life appears in the light of death as shadow is "the blood of light," as Parmiggiani poetically puts it in one of his prose poems (Parmiggiani, 2010, p. 297).

In his interview with Amic, Parmiggiani cites the *Lighthouse* as the work his readership is least likely to have seen:

> This is a lighthouse without a sea, placed in a desert, a stack of cylinders of several diameters, the topmost made of luminescent glass with a constant and unwavering light – though it is almost pointless to talk about an artwork without seeing it. A lighthouse, like a light in its own night. A lamp placed on a rounded swelling of earth. A hidden lamp in a hidden place. Deliberately placed far from the courtyards and traffic arteries of art. This is a work made for the world, not the art world. Indeed, this piece wants to emphasize its remoteness from that world. Not a thing but an idea, a work that lives more in the mind than in the viewing, more in the distance than in plain view. A symbol of what I think.

This lighthouse below Vífilsfell addresses us through its moving silence, a silence embedded in the desert silence that preserves the work and the thought it stands for, resistance to the racket of the present time.

"What does 'resistance' mean? What can that concept mean to us today?" Amic asks, in interviewing Parmiggiani.

> Silence, for example. In our day 'silence' is a word that conveys resistance, because it opens up a meditative space to us. (Parmiggiani, 2010, p. 92)

The lighthouse is not a picture of the world; it is part of it, as shadow follows light and death follows life.

To bring Parmiggiani's *Lighthouse* into this exhibition I have selected two Parmiggiani works to be installed at Hafnarhús: *Spiritus* (2010) and *Untitled* (2008). The first is a battered old anvil on a wooden pediment, standing on the floor near a wall, a cloud of soot in the background as a sort of circumstantial evidence of the blacksmith. The second is a small piece that shows us a paintbrush in a glass jar brimming with blood-red paint. The jar stands atop a small panel; a red drip spills over the rim and down the surface below. These pieces echo each other and also the *Lighthouse*. In their simplicity they

belong to the imposing pictorial world that Parmiggiani's oeuvre comprises and which makes him one of Europe's more important contemporary artists.

Attempts to verbally explain or interpret Parmiggiani's work often prove futile. His works require no interpretation; on the contrary, their value lies in their summoning our silence, our silent meditation in the face of art's mystery. Yet for those unfamiliar with Parmiggiani's pictorial world it may be useful to know that in his quest to be a painter who paints not "within the frame, but within the living body of a space, within the anxiety and emotion of a space," Parmiggiani often uses pure paints, powdered pigment, not least soot and ash, as material for his work. The soot and ash on this anvil echo the light in the *Lighthouse* at Vífilsfell. We can use words from Parmiggiani's own smithy:

> I've almost always preferred black to other colours because black contains the core of all other colours and also because of my fondness for everything connected to the darkness of night. Whenever I come out of a paint store with a jar of black paint in hand I feel like it's my daily fix of despair, like I'm leaving the drug store with a fatal dose, coal-black and hopeless. (Parmiggiani, 2010, p. 362)

We need not analyze deeply to grasp that soot is what flame leaves behind when it dies. "Wherever there is light there is the sacrifice of something burned." Parmiggiani's works in soot are among his best-known, depicting in a kind of shadow-image burnt books, vases, statues, musical instruments, and clocks. The drawings that the fire has sketched with soot testify to vanished worlds, transience, and that void to which the core of existence summons us. Shadow is the blood of light, Parmiggiani says, and the blood we see in the paint jar full of blood-red colouring, here exhibited alongside the anvil that all the world's blacksmiths and artists have hammered on since before roads began. The world no longer allows itself to be represented, Jean-Luc Nancy says, yet the Claudio Parmiggiani pieces exhibited here nonetheless bear witness to the world in their screaming silence.

4.

The next artwork that I would like to bring into this meditation on thinking art is Helgi Thorgils Friðjónsson's *Clouds*, which he displayed on a cliff face in Stekkjar canyon at Thingvellir on the millennial anniversary, in 2000, of Iceland's conversion to Christianity. This work, situated by Friðjónsson in the cliff just north of the Öxará falls, within range of the waterfall's spray, is an oil painting on canvas, 400 × 417 cm in dimension, depicting white clouds on a blue background. This canyon wall was yet another beloved subject of Kjarval's. Like Parmiggiani's and Kjarval's works, this piece raises questions about the relationship between art and nature and the fate of a world that no longer allows itself to be represented in a credible way.

Unlike Parmiggiani, Friðjónsson stays within the frame of painting, yet the act of playing the painting off against nature, in effect, by hanging it on a cliff face rather than making do with a livingroom or museum wall, begs the question of the role and status of painting and art in this context. Friðjónsson has said that the intention of the work was to bring the dome of sky into the rock, thereby opening a way "into another world," as he put it, referring in part to the Icelandic folk belief about elves dwelling in cliffs as well as to the Christian idea of "heaven" as preserved in the words of ecclesiastic ritual even if the idea of "another world" can scarcely be established by borders other than those of death and dream.

This painting placed on a canyon wall as an "opening into another world" is not just an image of clouds, a picture showing us what clouds are like. To place the painting in this context is a bold act, a declaration of art's power to vanquish the material finitude that confronts us in a black canyon wall. The power to open a new world in the rock. Friðjónsson's statement that his deed relates to the virtues of religion adds weight to this. What is it that this painting opens up to us? As a thing among things, it is nothing but oil paint on canvas. Behind the colour of the clouds is canvas. This is a different kind of opening into the rock. The opening opened up to us by this act is of a spiritual kind, having to do with creation. This is a declaration of faith concerning the power of creation within the closed and finite world of matter.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once stated that the sense of the world must be external to it:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value.
>
> If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.
>
> What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.
>
> It must lie outside the world. (Wittgenstein, 1922, §6.41)

The opening that Helgi Thorgils Friðjónsson opens into the rock is the sacrality of the void in which all creation finds its nurture. It is the opening in which art, including this image of clouds, finds its nurture. It is a spiritual invocation of the meaning and value that Wittgenstein says must lie outside the finitude of the material world. In this sense we can draw a parallel between this work and Parmiggiani's *Lighthouse* below Vífilsfell: the light burning in the dark desert and the opening into the cliff face of finitude to which the material world confines human existence are both invocations of the void that marks the beginning and end of all human existence. Invocations summoning us to look into the void and thereby open new worlds, new visibilities, a new vision. We are still in Kjarval's territory, still in his footsteps, though the methods and forms differ. We are looking into the same opening as when we see Kjarval's light deflecting off the canyon depths of Flosagjá.

5.

If the opening in the cliff wall in Stekkjar canyon shows us a way into the void that is precedent to new creation, what then does Kristján Guðmundsson's piece *Triangle in a Square* (1971–72) show us? A floor piece, a dirt square, 400 × 400 cm, "a square of soil, a triangle of consecrated soil." Here we have come in out of the natural world, into the gallery, but only half-way: rather than being represented, earth has, incarnate, entered the gallery. Clad not only in her own topsoil but in the metaphysical garments of geometry and theology. Thus the work unites material and metaphysical reality much as does Parmiggiani's *Lighthouse* made of iron and light. The difference here

however is that we discern no distinction by looking: the square is identical in texture and colour to the consecrated churchyard soil forming a perfect triangle in the midst of the work. Here metaphysics has returned to the dust in a literal sense, leaving behind an open question. As Nancy puts it,

> A world outside of representation is above all a world without a God capable of being the subject of its representation (and thus of its fabrication, of its maintenance and destination). But already, as I indicated, the God of metaphysics merged into a world. (Nancy, 2002, pp. 44–45)

Are the abstract perfect forms of geometry invisible in the material world? Can we say the same of the theological premises of consecrated soil? Once again art has led us to the enigma of visibility. "There are indeed things that cannot be put into words," Wittgenstein says. "They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical." (Wittgenstein, 1922, § 6.522)

A Painting of the Specific Gravity of the Planet Earth (1972–73) is another Kristján Guðmundsson play on the abstract (metaphysical) concepts of quantification and their unquantifiability within the frame of the visible. An artwork illustrating the fundamental property of all art, the revelation of inarticulate secrets. Geophysics tells us that the specific gravity of Earth is 5.5 gr/cm^3. This means that the average gravitational mass of Earth compared to an equivalent volume of water is 5.5 to one. How has science expressed the weight of Earth? Where does the basic premise of such a measurement come from? Are these averages visible to the naked eye? We might initially conclude that they are not. An average is an abstract concept having no visible form, no more than the average height of mankind or the average volume of a river. Kristján Guðmundsson procured a metal plate that had the approximate weight and volume describing the specific gravity of Earth and then increased its weight and volume by applying green acrylic paint until the right ratio of weight to volume was achieved. The work manifests one of art's all-time mysteries: the manipulation of cosmic dimensions to make the invisible visible. Simultaneously, it raises questions about visibility and our visual faculty in confrontation with the worldview of quantitative science.



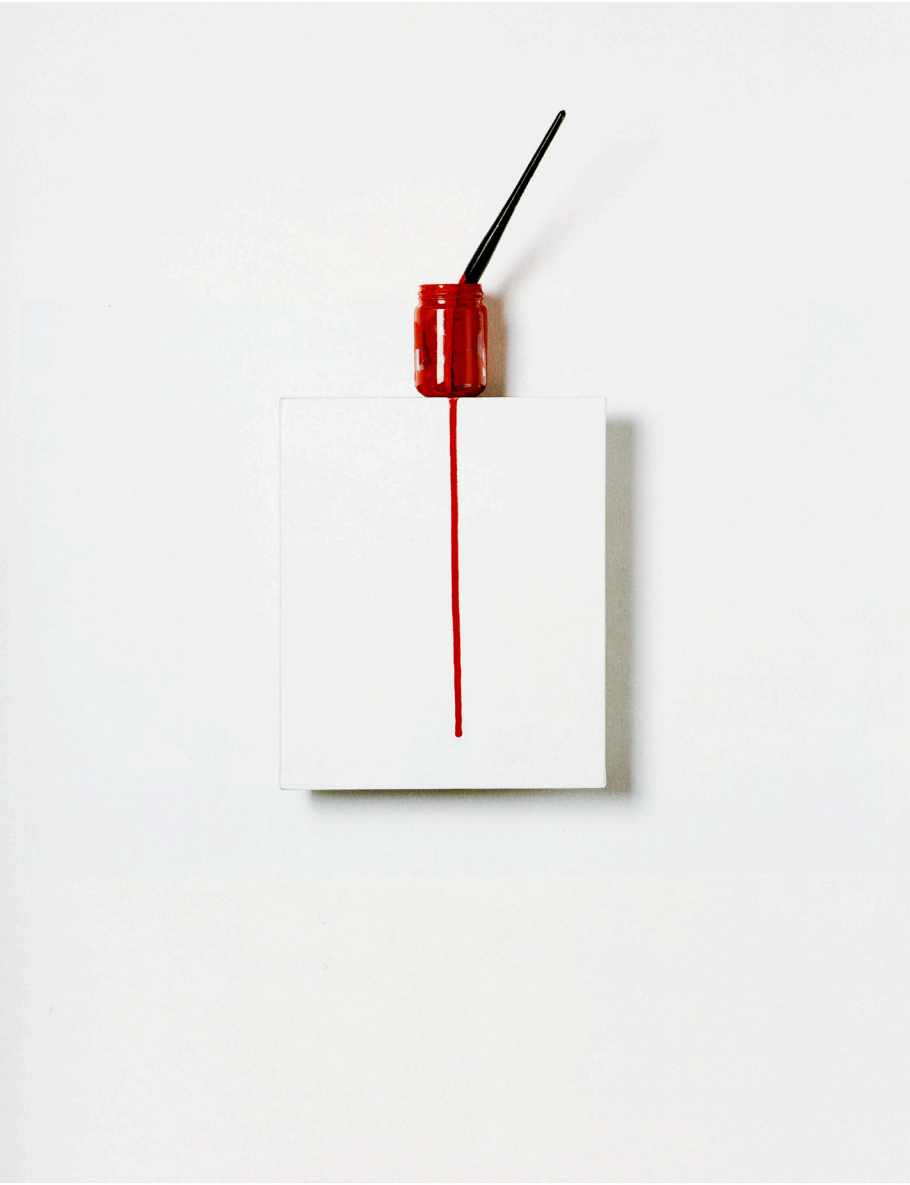
Jóhannes S. Kjarval 1885–1972, Mountain Milk, 1941

Oil on canvas, 110 x 145 cm
ASÍ Art Museum



Claudio Parmiggiani 1943, Spiritus, 2011

Found objects and soot



Claudio Parmiggiani 1943, Senza titolo, 2008

Found objects and paint, 51.5 x 25 x 6.5 cm



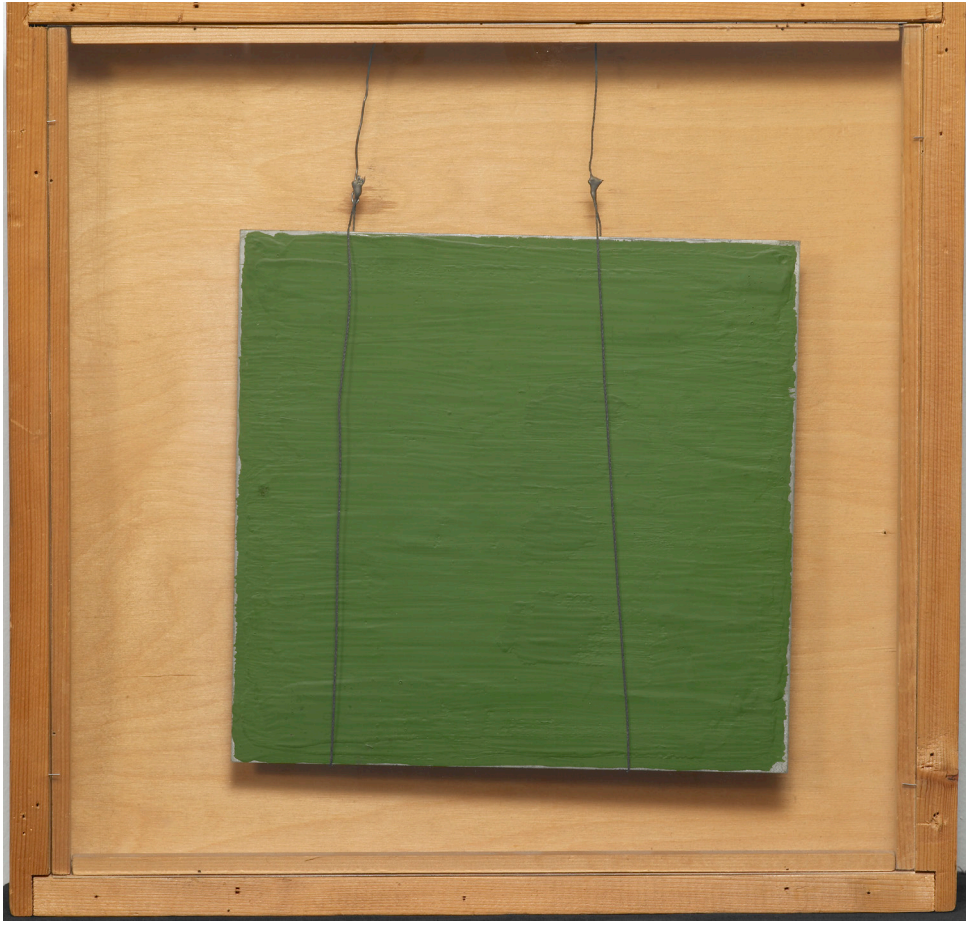
Claudio Parmaggiani 1943, Lighthouse (Il Faro d‘Islanda), 2000

Permanent installation at Sandskeið, Iceland
Corten steel, lamps, 1365 x 180 cm
Photograph: Guðmundur Ingólfsson



Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson 1953, Clouds, 2000

Oil on canvas, 400 x 417 cm



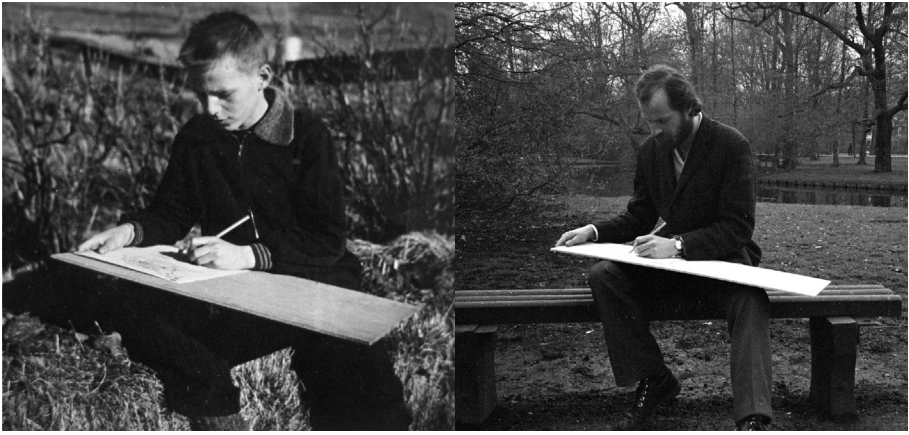
Kristján Guðmundsson 1941, A Painting of the Specific Gravity of the Planet Earth, 1972–1973

Acrylic on metal, 507.33 g / 91,763 mm^3
From the collection of Sólveigar Magnúsdóttur



Sigurður Guðmundsson 1942, Daydream, 1980

Color photograph, paint 110 x 130 cm
Reykjavík Art Museum



Hreinn Friðfinnsson 1943, Drawing a Tiger, 1971

Two photographs, each 57.7 x 51.7 cm



Kristinn E. Hrafnsson 1960, Incessant Doubt (handwriting of H.F.), 2005

Ash and Butternut, 35 x 44.5 cm
From the collection of Gunnars Dungal and Þórdísar A. Sigurðardóttur



Rúrí 1951, That Day…, 2001

Photographs and text



Birgir Andrésson 1955–2007, Strange People, 2001

Black and white photograph, 34.5 x 24.5 cm



W. G. Collingwood 1854–1932, Snartartunga at Bitra, 1897

Watercolors on paper, 20.5 x 30 cm



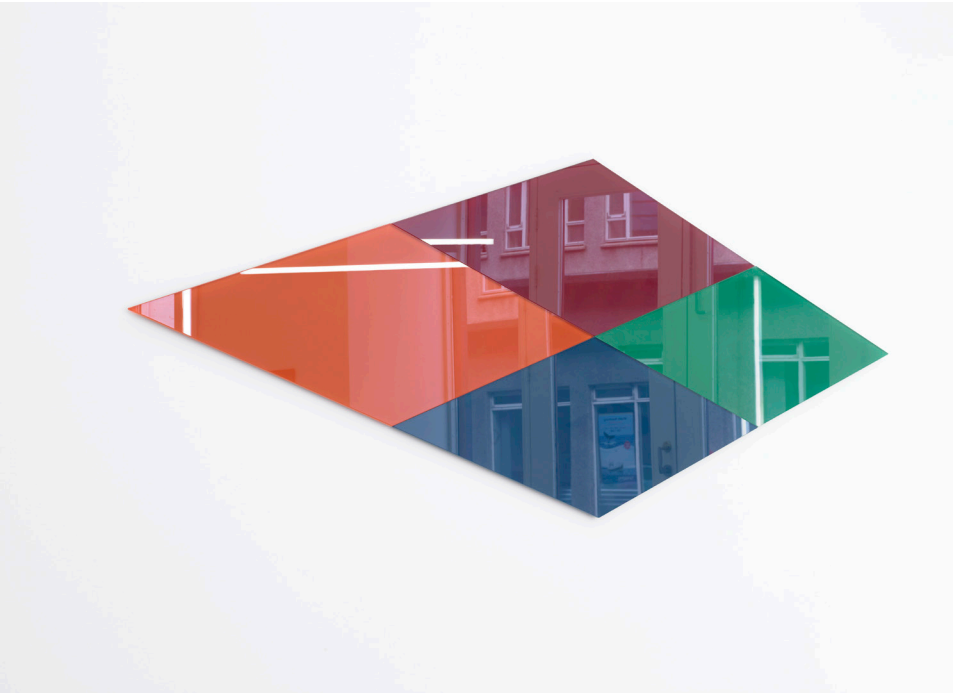
Einar Falur Ingólfsson 1966, Snartartunga at Bitra, 2010

Photograph



Svavar Guðnason 1909–1988, Architecture, 1960

Oil on canvas, 73 x 95 cm
Reykjavík Art Museum



Þór Vigfússon 1954, Untitled
(RAL 2001/3002/3004/6029/5020), 2010

Painted glass, 100 x 300 x 2.5 cm



Kristján Guðmundsson 1941, Triangle in a Square, 1972

A square of soil, a triangle of consecrated soil,
400 x 400 cm



Sigurður Árni Sigurðsson 1963, Morning After – Effects of the Night Before I, 2005

Oil on canvas, 200 x 220 cm



Inga Þórey Jóhannsdóttir 1966, Mattress and Pillow, 2005

Acrylic on canvas, sponge, Plexiglas and glass,
30.5 x 71.5 x 177 cm



Baldur Geir Bragason 1976, Rocking Chair, 2007

Pine, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 128 x 39.4 cm



Huginn Þór Arason 1976, Untitled, 2005

Hooks, hanger and painted clothes, various sizes



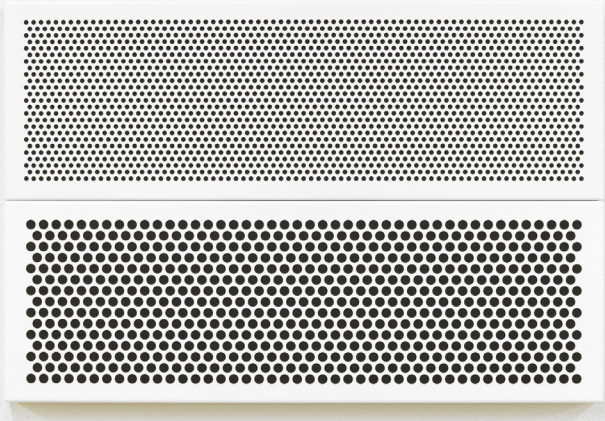
Einar Garibaldi 1964, #562, 2005

Found painting, 140 x 140 x 30 cm



Hildur Bjarnadóttir 1969, Gingham – Permanent Sap Green, 2005

Hand-woven linen, acrylic paint, 79 x 79 x 2 cm



Kristján Guðmundsson 1941, Black Painting in White Frame, 2009

Acrylic on canvas, painted steel, 40 x 60 x 4.5 cm



Sigurður Guðmundsson 1942, Eight Poems (installation), 1971/2011

Slippers, keychain, bread, hammer, pipe tobacco, vacuum cleaner, book and tricycle

6.
Daydream is the title of a 1980 photograph by Sigurður Guðmundsson depicting the artist, black-clad, sitting in a chair, holding a massive pale hunk of granite in his lap. The background is white and neutral and the camera lense looks straight into Guðmundsson's eyes, except that they cannot be seen; they have been painted over with a coarse blue brushstroke.

This is a simple image requiring no more explanation than any other good artwork; the pictorial language says what needs to be said and words would add little. Words, however, can help us grasp the act involved, for example, the fact that photography is an unconvincing medium insofar as it stops time, whereas in truth time is unstoppable. In this respect photography has been likened to execution and death and it is exactly this deceptive quality of photography that here gets unplugged by a brushstroke, which introduces time – the time inherent to the stroke itself – into the artwork. It is a mere instant but it changes everything. From this perspective this artwork combines the essences of photography and painting as media.

The title of the photograph, the blue colour, and our knowledge of the weight and mass of granite make up the rest. Blue is the colour of daydream, of the elusive and intangible thought that crops up in our minds, something growing unexpectedly out of emptiness. It is in daydream that creativity seeks its material, from the vacant thought in which "something comes into being out of nothing." This image opens up a vision to us, which we cannot articulate, of the relationship of matter to thought. Thereby it leads us to its own wellspring, suggesting that creativity in and of itself is a spontaneous act, almost unoccasioned.

7.
"Now's the Big Day…the crucial moment…yes…the point of no return:" thus begins Magnús Pálsson's video *Talk Preceding Eye Talk* (1986–87), the first part of his video trilogy *Eye Talk*. We look squarely into the face of a man who for almost half an hour speaks disjointed words and sentences conveying that every hour is the hour of destiny and every day is doom's day. Not that much is going on. On the contrary, nothing happens in this video; we just watch this

disjointed speech and the face of the speaker, who mists up a few times after taking snuff. The same image constantly for about thirty minutes.

The next piece, *Eye Talk* (1993), is roughly the same length and shows a speaker in profile, nose to neck, in the lower right corner of the frame. The background is a film of the London sewers, in which the camera lense is driven through the cylindrical urban sewer pipes, almost as if it were scoping the pupils of the city's eyes, or its intestines. Hence the title *Eye Talk*. The speaker talks flatly about the pleasures of tobacco, cigarette butts, car trips, armchairs, and travelling companions, his connection to all these things and people apparently contingent on tobacco use: "There are times when a guy wants a cigarette in the worst way. This was one of them. I finished two, three, four, five, threw the car in gear, and ploughed out…"

Eye Talk II (1988): the speaker´s face still looks right at us but now rests beside and slightly below a woman's bare breast, which stirs about on the right side of the screen while the speaker talks flatly and easily as if he neither sees nor senses the presence of the woman, who at first sighs, then sniffles and cries, during this emotionless tirade. Occasional sentences are heard from the woman, and in the latter half of the piece her sighs and sniffles change into easy giggles and laughter. Here again, the talk is more or less incoherent.

The question that arises from this is: what world are we encountering here? It is certainly not the received worldview of mythology and polytheism, with its creation story and eschatology. Nor are we situated in the mythological realm of Judaeo-Christian monotheism, in which the beginning, and thereby also the end, are defined. If we seek an ontological-theological understanding of creation, in the manner of Cabbalist Solomon Luria as interpreted by Jean-Luc Nancy in his book on the creation of the world, then what we have before us is the ontological void left when God withdrew into himself and also his creation, a void from which each new creation arises *ex nihilo*, in which nothing is received, since this world is only that which is, every hour, every day, every moment, here and now: "Now's the Big Day…the crucial moment…yes…the point of no return…" The Judgment Day of Christian myth is no longer in the eternal grace period of an undefined boundlessness; it is here and now like the void that calls out to be filled, for Being, the daily being that

contends with nothingness in the doomsday reality that goes along with all existence in the unfolding of each moment. What confronts us here is not a picture of the world but an opening up of the space and time entailed in Being itself, here and now. "The point of no return."

One property of video is that it treats time differently than photography, painting, or sculpture for example. Rodin famously remarked that sculpture was truer than photography because photography stops time but time never really stops. Though a work of painting or sculpture is motionless, time resides in the craft and movement of the artist or sculptor and in such work we sense the artist's time; but photography stops time like sudden death. Film and video introduce into visual art a new mode of time, in which time can be accelerated, slowed down, or built into an overarching temporal rhythm through editing and pacing, as in musical composition. These Magnús Pálsson videos don't show us time that way, from without, edited and preconstructed. All three videos are uncut and in real time. This is the real time of that Being that emerges from and withdraws into the void, as our existence turns constantly upon itself. In this understanding, each moment is simultaneously creation and doomsday: "Now's the Big Day…"

8.

The works I have discussed above differ in composition and form and are products of somewhat different eras. This was a deliberate choice. I wanted to try to find what they had in common despite different approaches, different techniques, different media, and different eras. After our attempt to remove all the packaging from the work, the theoretical and technical framework in which it has been wrapped (and all the discourse with which it has been laden), what remains?

The question of creation, the question we posed at the outset, of "how something comes into being out of nothing."

This is not an easy question: Taken broadly it can assume existential and religious or mystical import. It concerns not only the individual artwork and the world disclosed by it but also the world itself, its creation, and the worlds it continually and irrepressibly opens up through our mortal existence here on earth. Such questions can easily buckle your knees.

One contribution to this discussion that I have found important is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writing on vision and visual function as independent of verbal language. The phenomenology of perception was what opened my eyes to Kjarval's artistic significance beyond the mere premises of Icelandic nationalism, in a larger and more international context, due to the complex interplay between our visual and kinetic perception and our thinking and the entire natural, material world that Kjarval's work opens up to us.

Another bold assault on this question may be found in Martin Heidegger's complex essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Heidegger, 1935). Here Heidegger seeks to describe how an artwork opens up to us a new space or locus in which truth happens. Here Heidegger rejects all psychological and aesthetic analysis, instead specifying the artwork as the arena of the event, "when truth happens." Consequently the discussion of 'the artwork' shifted from the idea of the beautiful to existential questions of how we experience truth.

Heidegger's idea of "the opening up of new worlds" has been a kind of Ariadne's thread in my analysis of the artworks discussed above. The concept of "opening" also plays a key role in Jean-Luc Nancy's complex treatment of the discussion (Nancy, 2002), in which he more or less picks up the thread from Heidegger and ties it into a cosmological account of the world's creation as manifested to us by both the sciences and mythology, monotheism, and Judaeo-Christian mysticism – this world that we sense as experience, which "opens itself up" to each of us and thus becomes the wellspring of many worlds.

Nancy's essay raises many haunting questions and to me it is still largely unbroken ground; I have scarcely scratched the surface. Yet his elucidation of a deconstruction of Christianity through the creation story – in which God withdraws into his creation and merges with it, leaving behind a hypothetical void or opening which then becomes the wellspring of endless new worlds and new openings – is a fascinating metaphor that can deepen our understanding not only of the creation story but of the mystery of creation in general. Not premised on psychology or aesthetics but on the mystery of being, our mortal being rooted and ending in nothingness, our endless source of wonder at life's enigmas.

If the creation in an artwork has a source or prior condition, it is to be found in the world that we inhabit, for there is no "other world" under discussion, says Nancy:

> The eternity of matter only means that there is nothing outside the world, no other world, and no space-time that would not be that of "our" world. This eternity is the eternity of space-time, absolutely. Creation is the growth without reason of such a space-time. The two concepts correspond to each other at the exact limit of metaphysics and physics: and this limit is not one that separates two worlds, but one that shares out the indefiniteness of the universe (or the indefiniteness of its expansion, as contemporary cosmology has it) and the infinity of its meaning. (Nancy, 2002, pp. 51–52)

We cannot seek the logic of the world's creation or growth from beyond the world. The logic of the world's creation is therefore to be found in the world itself, in "the world's experience," so to speak. Or:

> The world is created from nothing: this does not mean fabricated with nothing by a particularly ingenious producer. It means instead that it is not fabricated, produced by no producer, and not even coming out of nothing (like a miraculous apparition), but in a quite strict manner and more challenging for thought: the nothing itself, if one can speak in this way, or rather *nothing* growing [*croissant*] as *something* (I say "growing" for it is the sense of *cresco* – to be born, to grow – from which comes *creo:* to make something merge and cultivate a growth). In creation, a growth grows from nothing, and this nothing takes care of itself, cultivates its growth.
>
> The *ex nihilo* is the genuine formulation of a radical materialism, that is to say, precisely, without roots. (Nancy, 2002, p. 51)

A conception of the world's creation can serve as a key to a conception of the creation of the world that each artwork entails.

Christian monotheism and its notions of the world's creation and end have shaped our ideas about all history and historical progression. At present it has ceased to be an article of religion and become a formality. The deconstruction of its story is instructive and has much to tell us about the nature of creation. I would like to end this epistle with the words of Jean-Luc Nancy:

> Creation forms, then, a nodal point in a "deconstruction of monotheism," insofar as such a deconstruction proceeds from monotheism itself, and perhaps is its most active resource. The unique God, whose unicity is the correlate of the creating act, cannot precede its creation any more that [sic] it can subsist above it or apart from it in some way. It merges with it: merging with it, it withdraws in it, and withdrawing there, it empties itself there, emptying itself it is nothing other than the opening of this void. Only the opening is divine, but the divine is nothing more than the opening.
>
> The opening is neither the foundation nor the origin. Nor is the opening any longer a sort of receptacle or an extension prior to things of the world. The opening of the world is what opens along such things and among them, that which separates them in their profuse singularity and which relates them to each other in their coexistence. The open or the "nothing" weaves the coappearance of existences without referring them to some other originary or foundational unity. As Gérard Granel writes, "The open needs the closed or even is a mode of the closed, a concrete expression of the essential finitude that any form of being modulates… it is at the Closed that the Open itself opens, wounds itself, and only in this way *is* open." [Granel, 1995: 126, 133] But the "finitude" in question here must, in the same movement, be understood as the end in which or toward which the open infinitely opens itself: an end indefinitely multiplied by and in every existing thing in the world. The "world" itself is only the unassignable totality of meaning of all these ends that are open between themselves and the infinite. (Nancy, 2002, pp. 70–71)

Gunnar J. Árnason

From Repetition to Exception

"To discover something that thought cannot think"
– Søren Kierkegaard

"Kings are the same no matter where you go. The fools are different, and people want to see them."
– Birgir Andrésson (Þröstur Helgason, 2010, p. 19)

1 Thinking on the carpet

By what right does philosophy intrude into our relationship with art? Is there a reason that philosophy assumes the role of go-between, mediator, educator, mentor, psychoanalyst, even judge? Do we not have art precisely to save us from philosophy, to rephrase Nietzsche's famous statement on the love of truth?[1]

In 2006, the Reykjavík Art Museum held an exhibition of a work by the American artist Joseph Kosuth entitled "Recognizable differences". Kosuth's work was in two parts: a massive carpet that covered almost the full length of the floor of the West Gallery at Kjarvalsstaðir and an installation of neon lights that hung on the walls of the central courtyard at Hafnarhúsið. Kosuth held a talk on his work in the West Gallery; the audience settled down literally *on* his work to listen to him discuss the background to the work and the ideas that led him to bring together the writings of two of 19th century Denmark's greatest creative minds, Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard. Woven into the carpet was the text of H. C. Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes", interspersed with short sentences taken from Kierkegaard's journals.

Looking back, I don't remember the talk itself clearly, but I do recall that in the discussion following the talk, Kosuth took Kierkegaard's words and applied them to the work of the artist – something to the effect that repetition was the source of the new. The reason that these specific words stand out so distinctly in my memory is that it struck me as a singularly paradoxical statement, not least of all because it was spoken by a man who has been viewed as one of the leading artists on the American avant-garde and conceptual art scene in the latter half of the 20th century, a symbol of new

1 "We possess art lest we perish of the truth." (Nietzsche, 1968, aphorism 822)

currents in modern art. The paradox in his statement is this: that which is repeated can never be new. Or is this not so? How, then, can repetition be a source of the new?

I bring up this exchange of views with Kosuth because it is a good example of the relationship between art and philosophy and gives us occasion to reflect on this relationship. Is philosophy justified in intruding into the relationship between art and its audience? If the answer is no, then it is presumably because philosophy draws our attention away from that which actually matters in the perception of the audience: Philosophical thought and aesthetic perception are like oil and water. If, on the other hand, the answer is that art and philosophy do indeed have something in common, then it seems appropriate that these reflections should be initiated by the artist, with words originating in a work of art and a philosophical enigma.

My recollection of Kosuth's words may not be accurate and I have since tried to find support for them in writings by Kierkegaard or Kosuth. The following quote of Kierkegaard's, woven into the carpet, is the closest thing I have found to the sentence I am here attributing to Kosuth (Kosuth, 2005, p. 44): "*Here we have at once the principle of limitation, the only saving principle in the world. The more you limit yourself, the more inventive you become.*" [2] The statement is typical for Kierkegaard, a strangely alluring riddle – it sounds like ancient wisdom, but when you dig deeper, an abyss opens up. The more limitations you place on yourself, he says, the more creative you become. And not only that, he claims that this rule, *the principle of limitation*, is the only salvation to be found in the world. A similar idea is clearly at issue here: the new will be found only where limitations of some kind are present.

One doesn't have to look far to find examples of artists who have imposed limitations on themselves in their work or made use of repetition. Warhol's obsessive repetition of media images is well known, and Joseph Albers comes to mind as an example of an artist who placed rigorous limitations on himself in his series *Homage to the Square*. Or On Kawara, who has painted dates in white on a monochrome background ever since the 1960s. Dieter Roth wasn't

2 *Her ligger strax det Begrændsnings Princip, som er det ene frelsende i Verden. Jo mere man begrænder sig selv, desto meer opfindsom bliver man.*

much for placing limitations on himself, but he could repeat the same routine again and again with a relentless fixation that his journals, artist's books and video diaries bear witness to. But one doesn't have to look so far afield for random examples from international art. Recent examples of Icelandic artists who work with repetition include Einar Falur Ingólfsson, who retraced the steps of British watercolour artist W. G. Collingwood, who travelled through Iceland in the late 19th century, and photographed the locations where Collingwood had painted his images a full century earlier. Þór Vigfússon has for many years – decades, even – restricted his work to monochromatic glass squares. It thus came as somewhat of a surprise when the monochromatic pieces of glass had become diamond-shaped in his latest exhibition last year.

The fact that one can point out artists who make use of repetition or impose limitations on their work, or employ such a method to search for the new, is interesting in and of itself, but it is by no means a given that individual examples have any general significance. Not unless one can find in them a key to what makes artists creative. We expect, perhaps, that artists feel a need to seek that which is unusual and different from that which they have worked with previously, rather than turn again and again to that which they have been working with until they discover something new. Perhaps Kosuth was attempting to put into words the view that those who are constantly looking for the new will end up repeating themselves, while those who place limitations on themselves will find the new.

This conflict between that which is repeated and the new is by no means tied to the work of individual artists. The modern art world as a whole can appear equally paradoxical. On the one hand, the limitless diversity of the art world is everywhere. Art forms, techniques, mediums have all become much more diverse, with accompanying overlap between related fields, such as photography and filmmaking. The boundaries between art and design have likewise grown less clear, which increases this diversity still more. There are more artists making art than ever before. Modern art is an international phenomenon, found in all reasonably developed countries, with an associated increase in modern art museums, exhibition halls, galleries and art festivals. Nations throughout the world seek recognition with high-profile international events. Visual arts festivals and

international visual arts fairs have become regular occurrences around the globe. Massive biennales with the leading stars of the day are everywhere, from Sao Paolo to Istanbul to Shanghai.

On the other hand, the globalisation of art and the lack of boundaries when it comes to artistic creation give one the uncomfortable feeling that the art world is inevitably moving in the direction of ever-increasing homogeneity. We can travel from Sao Paolo to Istanbul and from there to Shanghai and see everywhere the same diversity, the same frantic race for innovation. The more urgently artists, curators, art museums and patrons search for the messengers of new times, the more they all seem to look to each other for a frame of reference. For each time we claim to have discovered something utterly different from everything else we have ever seen before, an indication of a new era and a new *Zeitgeist*, there will always be someone who makes the counterclaim that something incredibly similar can be found one street over, that there are countless precedents in the history of art, that everything has been tried before and is being dressed up in an ever-so-slightly different guise. Baudrillard ignited these suspicions when he declared that art had nothing left to do but to imitate itself and that the spectre of the avant-garde was now haunting the length and breadth of Europe. Irony has taken over and the accusing voices that bode the eventual stagnation and degeneration of contemporary art are growing louder.

At the root of this strange state of the art world at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the dual role that art has to play: on the one hand, it functions as a channel for the new, of difference; on the other hand, it is a source of that which can unite people – the Masterpiece, the Symbol of National Unity, the Torchbearer of the Future, the Spirit of Resistance. These demands on art seem to be pulling in opposite directions. Each and every artist seeks to stand out from the crowd and confirm her or his uniqueness. At the same time, the artist also seeks recognition and general acclaim.

Icelandic artists are no strangers to these paradoxical demands. As a former colony, the Icelandic nation as a whole has wanted to prove its uniqueness while looking for recognition on an international level. Icelandic artists, just as artists from other nations in a similar position, have thus been very much preoccupied with their own self-image, their national identity, ever since the days when Sigurður

Guðmundsson designed the Icelandic national costume in the 19th century, the pioneers of Icelandic visual art created the Icelandic landscape and abstract art created a distinctive Icelandic sensibility for colour. At the same time, artists resent being pigeonholed as national.

In recent years, Icelandic artists have similarly been preoccupied with national identity and the country's image, but in a more critical way. One artist for whom Icelandic identity has been an important subject is Birgir Andrésson. Birgir's series of monochrome paintings in "Icelandic colours" opens up the question of where the uniqueness of Icelandic characteristics are to be found and what they consist of. One proposed characteristic of the national is Icelandic artists' distinct use of colour – that the colours in Icelandic landscape paintings are different from those seen elsewhere in Europe. But how is it possible to distinguish the Icelandic colours from the "international", from Danish colours or Polish? Birgir's series offers a seemingly simple solution by making use of a single colour, identified by a colour code number from the international Pantone Matching System, and declaring that the colour is Icelandic. But it is difficult to imagine an artist flipping through colour swatches and picking out the shades that are more Icelandic than others. Birgir would seem to be implying that the idea of an Icelandic Colour is an illusion: "As a writer, you decide whether the character says yes or no. As an artist, I decide whether one colour is more Icelandic than another. That's the joke, says Birgir and laughs" (Þröstur Helgason, 2010, p. 46). The joke is at the expense of Icelandic artists if their uniqueness amounts to little more than a delusion or fiction. Icelandic visual art is either a repetition of what comes from abroad – "Icelandic artists are no different from other artists" (Þröstur Helgason, 2010, p. 156) – or a repetition of misconceptions that come from somewhere else – "This little rock in the sea is crowded with misunderstanding and understanding of itself and what washes up on its beaches from distant continents. This concoction is the soup on which I feed and what I fill my stomach with as an artist" (Þröstur Helgason, 2010, p. 159).

It is thus clear that the interplay of repetition and the new is much more than a simple device employed by individual artists who choose to work with repetition or a method to pin down difference and tease

out nuances, nor is the tug-of-war between repetition and the new limited to the personal dramas of individual artists. It is omnipresent in the contemporary art world.

2 The dialectic of repetition

Let us turn again to Kosuth's words that repetition is the source of the new. It just so happens that they aren't entirely pulled from thin air. Kierkegaard wrote a book that he called *Repetition*, in which he expounds on what he terms the dialectic of repetition:

> The dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that it has been, *makes repetition something new*. When the Greeks said that all knowing was recollecting, they were also thus saying that all of existence, everything that is, has been. When one says that life is repetition, one also says that that which has existed now comes to be again. (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 19; emphasis mine)

Easy? There is absolutely nothing easy about this "dialectic of repetition". How on earth does the fact that the thing which is repeated has existed before make repetition new? One might begin to suspect that Kierkegaard is playing with us. Kierkegaard begins his book by explaining that repetition and recollection are both movements. Here, he starts out the verb *to be* – the tenses *will be* and *has been* involve changes over time. Changes over time involve movement; the particular movements in question are in opposite directions. Recollection is repetition of the past tense, while repetition is recollection of the future tense (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 3).

One can attempt to account for this dialectical knot by bringing to mind a piece by conceptual artist Hreinn Friðfinnsson: a work from 1971 entitled "Drawing a tiger". Hreinn's work is composed of two photographs. To the left is a photograph of Hreinn as a young boy sitting out in a garden in Iceland with a sketchpad on his knees, drawing. Below the photograph is the caption "Drawing a tiger in Iceland 1952". To the right is a second photograph of Hreinn as a young man sitting in a park in Amsterdam in the same position, with a paper in front of him, also drawing. The caption for this photograph is "Drawing a tiger in the Netherlands 1971".

If we employ the dialectic of repetition here, we can describe the relationship of the two images to each other as being one of either

recollection or repetition. If the relationship of the right-hand photograph to that on the left involves recollection, Hreinn could be saying something to the effect that: "As a young boy I liked drawing and dreamed of becoming an artist. Now I am an artist in the Netherlands and recollect these dreams. I have this young boy to thank for everything that I have become." If the relationship involves repetition, as Kierkegaard defines it, Hreinn could be saying: "Once I was a young boy who liked drawing and dreamed of becoming an artist. Now I find myself in this same position and am yet again attempting to be that which I have resolved to become."

What is the difference between these two versions? Kierkegaard has the answer. In the first version, Hreinn is unhappy; in the second, he is alive. Recollection makes a person unhappy because when one recollects what has been and examines one's own life in the light of the past, such a life is characterised by a sense of loss and regret. Repetition, on the other hand, gives a person hope, because the future brings with it that which already exists in some form. Thus, Hreinn in the Dutch park is faced with a choice between either the path of recollection – I am that which I have been – or the path of repetition – I am that which I am on my way to becoming.

Before we continue, it is hardly possible to avoid explaining what role is played by the Greeks, who, according to Kierkegaard, asserted that all knowledge is recollection. Here, he is referring to the Eleatic philosophers, a pre-Socratic school that included Parmenides and Zeno. As Kierkegaard sees it, these philosophers divided existence into that which is, on the one hand, and that which appears to be, on the other. That which *is* is eternal and unshakeable, while that which *appears to be* is at all times subject to our perception and perspectives. We live in the world of the becoming, characterised by our fragmentary, unstable knowledge and understanding. The person who discovers the truth discovers the true nature of existence. Everything that appears to exist in the present moment can thank that which has always been for this existence. Thence the idea of remembrance, or recollection: The person who discovers something about the world at this very instant, even if is for the first time in history, even if it is a stupendous scientific discovery, has come into contact with that which one has always carried inside oneself but has hitherto lain dormant, waiting

to be recalled. The wisdom of these particular Greeks is that nothing is new under the sun: everything that happens is a repetition of that which has already occurred, or put it more accurately, is not subject to the current of time. Kierkegaard distinguishes himself from the Greeks by turning this around. The past, that which has been, is time that has passed and no longer exists. He sees that which is, in the present, as movement towards the future that is on the brink of becoming reality. But exactly what it is that is about to *become* is impossible to predict.

A reporter once asked French philosopher Henri Bergson how he envisioned the literature of the future – he was a philosopher, after all, and more perceptive than most. What possibilities lay ahead for writers? Bergson replied bluntly that he had no idea how literature would develop in the future. One would have to wait and see what sort of works authors would create. Then and only then would it be possible to say whether the literature that was created *will have been possible* (cf. Bergson, 1946). No one can predict what literature is possible in the future – when this literature has become a reality, however, it will finally be possible to explain its existence in the light of that which made it possible in the past. Possibilities exist only in what grammarians call the *future perfect*. It may well be that there is a strong urge to regard the future as a reflection of the past – that the future is a linear history that has already been determined and waits only to become reality in the present before vanishing into the past along the same linear trail. Bergson is thus in agreement with Kierkegaard to the extent that the present is always running ahead of itself into the unforeseeable.

If Bergson's response is applied to Hreinn's work of art, one could interpret the piece as illustrating that when Hreinn was an artist in Amsterdam, it could then be said that Hreinn as a boy drawing a tiger *will have made it possible* for Hreinn to become an artist in Amsterdam. But it was just as impossible to predict Hreinn's prospects as an artist in Amsterdam as it was to predict whether Hreinn would become an artist when he was a boy drawing a tiger. Today, in 2011, when we look back at Hreinn's long and successful artistic career, we can say that the works he created in the early 1970s *will have made it possible* for him to become the great artist that we recognise today.

The dissymmetry between past and present at issue here is carved into a little wooden bench by Kristinn E. Hrafnsson, crafted in an old-fashioned Icelandic style, according to a familiar, tried-and-true handicraft tradition; on the seat are lettered the words "Stöðug óvissa" – constant uncertainty or suspense.[3] The bench is a resting place for a tired body and mind, just as tradition is the resting place of culture. But no matter where one tries to find a safe refuge, one cannot ignore the fact that when faced with that which is about to be, uncertainty is constant and repeated.

We may pause now to ask whether we are not tying ourselves in unnecessarily large knots. There is, perhaps, a simple solution to this problem of the relationship between repetition and the new – when it really comes down to it, there might not even have been a problem in the first place. Can we not argue that what we call the "new" is simply that which strikes us as *rather unusual and highly unexpected*? So long as an object takes us by surprise we call it a novelty; if we cannot spot a prototype or precedent for it we resort to saying that the thing is new. With this definition of the new, we can kill two birds with one stone. The person who claims to have made a new discovery and the person who claims that it is a repetition can both be correct. The philosopher can argue that nothing is new under the sun, the artist can continue to surprise and be praised for originality; art critics can maintain that nothing takes them by surprise anymore, while audiences are amazed.

The advantage of this idea is that it removes all sources of conflict between repetition and the new, all paradoxes of diversity and homogeneity, the unique and the universal. The new is, in fact, nothing but a departure from the rule. A work of art can be strange, atypical, unsuccessful, fantastic or outstanding. But if we look closely enough, it still falls under the general rule or standard that allows us to evaluate where on the spectrum of comparable things it lands.

The downside is that such a definition leaves the new half powerless, if not entirely meaningless. Something is new if somebody (or a large enough number of somebodies) deems it to be new. If we knew better, and there is always someone who knows better, it would not take us by surprise. The new is thus rooted in a simple lack of

3 The English title of the work is "Incessant doubt" (2005).

knowledge. As soon as the new becomes a habit, it ceases in our eyes to be new and is no longer different from any other repetition: the new is that which is on the brink of coming into fashion.

It is perhaps appealing to accept the flaws of this idea to avoid having to grapple with Kierkegaard's puzzles. But there is another reason that we should hesitate to accept such an easy way out. It cannot be ignored that the idea of the new and its struggle with repetition has been very influential within the sphere of Western culture – a deep-seated belief in the existence and possibility of the new in an absolute sense, not only conditional instances or rare deviations. The idea of the new is of the same fabric as other powerful concepts such as freedom and independence. We can hardly write off everything that has been done in the name of the new in the history of art as a whim of fashion, can we? What have artists not been willing to sacrifice in the interests of paving the way for the new, by removing roadblocks and imposing on themselves a lifetime of wandering through the deserts of incomprehension? It would hardly be asking too much to propose that we pay a little more attention to the new.

3 The origins of the unprecedented

Who better to instruct us in the mysteries of the new and modernity's obsession with it than the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, standard bearer of the Enlightenment, who above all others made art the subject of modern philosophical debate? The question that Kant tosses around (cf. Kant, 1952, § 46) is not so different from the one we brought up here earlier: what gives rule to art? Within the realm of the fine arts, diversity is infinite, but it still appears to be the case, at least from the perspective of the 18th century, that certain works have gained a special standing in the arts culture of the West – so-called masterpieces – and these works have spoken to audiences through the ages. For Kant and others of his day, the masterpieces of the golden age of Hellenistic culture were still the rule that art based itself on.

The meaning of the word *rule* is rather vague and open-ended in this context. Rule can mean many things: it can imply a kind of order or system, but it may also involve a use of certain techniques, an obedience of authority or the execution of orders. Habits, practices

and traditions are sometimes called rules. To be controlled by one's emotions, to follow the dictates of the heart, to listen to one's inner voice – one could even argue that rule is found here. Is not Freud's pleasure principle an example of just such a rule? In one way or another, all artists follow such rules: they learn techniques, obey commands and authority, compromise, are slaves of habit, perpetuate traditions, let themselves be controlled by their emotions. Indeed, this is true not only of artists but of each and every one of us in our own way.

With regards to rule in art, there are two basic options. Rule either comes from outside or from inside. When one speaks of outer rule, one may be referring to the social or economic forces that have a formative effect on the development of art, while inner rule refers that which may be discerned from the internal nature of the art form, like the evolution of styles or aesthetic ideals. In the end, it all amounts to the same thing. None of this is sufficient in Kant's view to explain the rule that is found in artistic creation – not even the inner voice of the artist, the artist's most personal emotion. The only thing that can give rule to art is the new. But the new in and of itself stoops to no rule. If something new happens it is pointless to look for an explanation, as the new can in no way be explained with reference to some rule.

Kant presents artistic creation as a human act that leads to a product. All rule within art may be traced back to such products or acts of production. And that which Kant is referring to when he talks of rule is simply that the act (in the form of the work of art) creates a precedent that others follow (Kant, 1952, § 47) – to speak of rule in art implies nothing more than that works come into being that then inspire others to take them as an example for their own acts of production; the more acts that follow a given work as a model, the more securely fixed this rule becomes. Whether the rule that is created may be described as a habit, practice, tradition, emotion or the dominant ideology within society is irrelevant.

Kant emphasises one thing, however, and that is that an artist who takes another artist or artistic work as a model must not appear to be applying a rule. He makes a clear distinction between following a model and imitating or copying it. An artist who imitates a work of art is not turning to it as a model for artistic creation. This is also

applicable where an artist is influenced by another artist – it makes all the difference whether the artist's works can be seen to copy those on which they are modelled or seek guidance from the works of another artist in order to learn from them and use them as an example for improvement. In this context, Kant condemns the uninspired imitation of Hellenistic masterpieces: if 18th century neoclassicism was of any value, it was because it attempted to follow in the footsteps of the masters of Antiquity and recreate the spirit of their work. It could never be an artistic goal in and of itself to imitate the works of bygone masters in a superficial manner. Neoclassicism originally sprung from a need to create a new precedent as a counterbalance to the superficiality and frivolity of the 18th century, although it would ultimately fall victim itself to superficiality and imitation. It is another question entirely whether the postmodernist classicism seen in the architecture of the 70s and 80s was guided by similar ideals or whether it was a merely surface-deep style. The jury is still out.

The repetition found in artistic creation does not involve an obedience of rule. No matter how limiting an artist's self-imposed restrictions are. Þór Vigfússon does not work with monochromatic glass quadrangles because he is governed by a rule that dictates that he must do so, some inner voice that orders him about. There is no voice that tells him to stick with his habits: *I've been doing squares for so long – an old dog won't be changing his ways now*. There is no voice that bids him follow where his emotions lead: *I'm big on equilateral quadrates, but I really can't stand rectangles*. Nor is he constrained by the rules of tradition: *The square is a more exalted form than the rectangle*. Each and every glass surface that Þór paints is a new glass surface, and there is nothing that precludes the next surface from being a diamond, circle or oval. A change in shape would in no way involve the violation of a rule or a mistake. Rules come into being after the fact, when works of art are examined in context: a rule is a description of what would seem to be a relationship between works of art, with one work able to serve as the model for another, or influence its creation, but no rule of this sort can predict with any certainty what the next work will be like.

No artistic creation is possible without precedent and example**.** The same is true for all human acts in most if not all circumstances. Kant argues, however, that there is a first time for everything. Some

precedents appear to us as if they were themselves unprecedented – they seem to have no clear explanation in that which has previously occurred. If such unique works, artistic acts or events in art history become precedents for other works, their importance at the same time increases. It is these works, acts or events that are the beginnings of something new. From this it can be seen that the precedents most worth following are those for which there is no clear explanation or those which themselves do not follow a clear precedent. All artistic creation can trace its origins back to the new, even if the route to some origins is longer than others.

One may at this point ask why anyone should take notice of something that cannot be understood. Isn't it a bit strange to demand that something be taken as a precedent that is incomprehensible, at odds with everything that one has learned before and pops up like a jack-in-the-box without warning and for no obvious reason? And even if it did occur to someone to do so, wouldn't it be up to each and every one of us to determine what is new? The question is a fair one, and Kant's aesthetics can give only a very vague reply. It can't be ignored that Kant dresses up the new in rather glorified colours that he calls *genius* (Kant, 1952, § 46). The genius is the master of the new, blessed with the talent of originality. According to Kant, the genius has Nature to thank for his originality – Nature acts through the genius. Nature in this context refers to that great unknown something that is behind everything but is a closed book to us; Nature uses the genius as a channel for its to send out its oracles, in the form of artistic ideas that inhabit the work of art. We should note that Nature is here something much deeper (and more capitalised) than a person's emotional life and the caprice of the individual. Emotions and sentiments are one channel through which Nature's will is done, through which a piece of art is given life and soul. Kant needed something truly magnificent to explain how individual works could achieve a timelessness that continued to speak to audiences through the ages. Kant called it "Nature". Hegel called it "Spirit". For Schopenhauer, it was "Will".

At this point in his argument, it is as if Kant wants to backtrack and place some limits on the new. We must be able to distinguish between true genius and pure nonsense or madness (Kant, 1952, § 47 and 48). The new must stoop to rule after all – it is impossible

to expect us to follow it blindly wherever it leads. Kant solves this problem by proposing that the nature that is the source of the new is at the same time the nature that distinguishes between genius and madness. We are of course speaking here of pure, Kantian *taste*. Kant was a rather conservative Prussian when it came to art, and he had no intentions of heralding in a radical revolution within the fine arts. The one thing Kant had in mind was to provide for the possibility that an artist could emerge who stood on an equal footing with the masters of the Hellenistic golden age without being an uninspired copycat who produced clever imitations. The idea was not to challenge art tradition, reject everything that suggested a prior order. The reality was, however, that Kant's writings triggered a wave that with time became unstoppable. Riding on its crest were the opponents of all repetitions, limits, restrictions, boundaries and borderlines, traditions and systems. The idea of nature as a kind of transcendental basis for artistic creation and appreciation was forgotten. In its place, we inherit from Romanticism the concept of the unique genius, creator of nature rather than her pawn, with all the associated hero-worshipping that followed in tow.

4 Similitude and dissimilitude

The Romantic concept of genius is a thing of the past and no longer necessary to understand the new. All the same, one may learn a thing or two from Kant's analysis without involving genius in the matter. We started out by considering the potential solution of defining the new as a deviation from the norm – that which we called the highly unexpected and rather unusual. But in Kant's eyes, there is a fundamental difference between the new and the deviation. The deviation is always explained with reference to a rule. All that fails to turn out, is atypical, unnatural, flawed and so on lands (along with that which turns out well, exceeds, distinguishes itself) somewhere within a norm determined by a rule. The new, on the other hand, is at odds with pre-existing rules and creates a new frame of reference. Thus, the idea proposed here as a simple solution to the tug-of-war between repetition and the new is of little service.

One consequence of this radical conception of the new is that it shakes the foundations of all existing frames of reference. It should thus not come as a surprise that it should meet with resistance. People

react to the new as a provocation, even a direct attack; it can appear to be ridiculous and indeed sheer nonsense. Precedents, traditions, customs have made so many good things possible, we could say – is there any reason to jeopardise all that we have gained through them? Why should we believe that what has made good things possible until now will not continue doing so in future? The advance of the new in contemporary art has been a hard battle, and not because of any denial of the new – on the contrary, modernity is hungry for the new, the original and the unexpected. The friction arises because the new creates uncertainty, upsets established order and gives no guarantee of advantage. As American philosopher Stanley Cavell puts it, all modern art is founded on the uncomfortable feeling that it might be *fraudulent* (Cavell, 1976, p. 188).

It is easy to confuse the new with the deviation, because it is natural to expect that the new will appear in an obvious and striking way – that everyone will immediately take notice when something new happens. This is why one often looks to those things that appear to be anomalous and different, unlike all that which has been witnessed before. It may well be that the new pops up in the form of something unexpected and different, but is this necessarily a given? Could it not indeed be that the new goes unrecognised when it first makes its entrance? Various events in contemporary art history appear to support the view that when there is a turning point in this history, it takes some time before anyone notices that something unusual and significant has taken place at all. There appears to be a distinct possibility that the new is not so different from that which has come before and may even be quite similar.

The most commonly given examples of the original, innovative and new in art history are almost invariably examples where there can be no doubt that something substantially different and unexpected has taken place – the cubist artwork of Picasso and Braque, Duchamp's urinal, Malevich's black square. The question is, can examples not also be found of events where the breakaway from that which has come before is not as clear? Let us consider a convenient example from modern Icelandic art history. In 1945, Svavar Guðnason held an exhibition of his works in Reykjavík that represented a turning point for Icelandic visual art – this was the first exhibition in Iceland entirely devoted to abstract paintings. Svavar had been painting abstract pieces for some time in Denmark, where he lived and worked for many

years. He had already participated in exhibitions in the 1930s and 1940s with a group of progressive artists. Icelandic artists were not discovering abstract art with Svavar's exhibition, and it is a matter of debate which Icelandic artist has the honour of being the country's first abstract artist: Svavar Guðnason, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Sigurjón Ólafsson, Nína Tryggvadóttir – even Finnur Jónsson or Jóhannes Kjarval. Icelandic artists kept up with what was happening on the visual arts scene in mainland Europe, but this does not alter the fact that this exhibition at the end of the Second World War was the event that marks the beginnings of abstract art in Iceland.

The question now is, how do we explain this event? Its significance for Icelandic visual artists was not that their eyes were opened to the existence of abstract art, which they were already familiar with, but rather that Icelandic abstract art would now *come into being*. In the eyes of Icelandic visual artists, Svavar had demonstrated that it was possible to paint abstractly without looking like an uninspired copycat of foreign trends in art, as certain critics of abstract art in Iceland had maintained. What happened after this exhibition was that Icelandic visual artists resolved to demonstrate that Svavar had produced something new that they could build upon and had no precedent in the history of Icelandic art.

Here, we are confronted by two conflicting ways of seeing the same event – as recollection and as repetition, to use Kierkegaard's words. If we describe the event from the perspective of *recollection*, we must understand Svavar's exhibition in light of that which made it possible in the Danish art of the 30s and 40s – the milieu in which Svavar lived and worked. Icelandic abstract art in the post-war years must also be examined in the light of that which had come before, of which it was more or less a repetition. If, on the other hand, we use the dialectic of repetition to describe the event, it must be seen in the light of that which Icelandic artists discovered with Svavar's exhibition, that is to say that Icelandic abstract art would now become a reality with their works. With Svavar, Icelandic artists were no longer comparing themselves to Danish artists – they had acquired their own frame of reference, their own precedent that could become the beginnings of a new movement within Icelandic art.

But can't we object to this description of the event on the grounds that the artwork that Svavar exhibited was too similar

to the works of Danish artists to be considered innovative? For the proposed description to hold water, shouldn't there be a clear-cut break that signals the switch from the Danish milieu to the Icelandic? Questions such as these are an eternal bone of contention within art history and art criticism. Do we not inevitably land in an infertile debate over whether something has been done before, who came first and who influenced whom? Rather than direct our discussion into these channels, it is not entirely out of order to play with a thought experiment found in a short story by the Argentinean author and poet Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (Borges, 1981, p. 96). Pierre Menard, an author in the early 20th century, resolves to write the story of Don Quixote – a story that is identical, word for word, to that written by Cervantes in the 17th century. Borges's short story takes the form of an academic essay by a literary critic who compares Cervantes's original text to Menard's. Though the quotations are identical to the letter, they have a profoundly different effect on the imagined author. The anonymous scholar comes to the conclusion that while Menard managed only to complete several fragments, despite thousands of pages of drafts, Menard's Quixote is a much deeper, more radical work of literature. The message of Borges's short story is worthy of consideration: he is not only pointing out that one may interpret two things differently even if they are so similar as to be indistinguishable from each other – this is hardly breaking news. His idea is even more radical. Could it be that a work that is identical to an older work can be an entirely new work in its own right all the same? It is as if Borges is turning the insistence on originality on its head: it is not due to the artist that the work is original but rather because of the reader.

Even if the argument is made that Svavar's paintings could in no way be considered sufficiently innovative because they were not different enough from the paintings of unspecified Danish artists, this does not change the fact that nothing that had come before could prepare Icelandic artists and viewers for Svavar's exhibition. After the exhibition had come into being, it had the effect of allowing artists to see Icelandic art in an entirely new way. And there was no turning back. In this respect, Svavar's exhibition – and not the Danish art of the 1940s – made possible the Icelandic abstract art of the 1950s.

5 Once more, from the top

Let us pause now and recap the situation. We began by recounting a comment that we attributed to Kosuth, that repetition is the source of the new. Our first reaction was to reject this notion as paradoxical – repetition and the new have nothing in common. Upon closer examination, however, various aspects of artists' work and the art world itself do point to a connection of some sort. Kierkegaard's distinction between repetition and recollection was discussed, which concerns various interpretations of that which is happening in the present. As a counterweight to the difficult dialectic of repetition, the relatively simple idea that the new could be defined as the unusual and unexpected was proposed. In light of how much significance the new has within contemporary art, we then turned to the origins, to Kant's ideas on rules and frames of reference within art. Rule in art was described as an artist's following of a precedent, where the act of production itself (i.e., the artwork) does not bear the markings of having obeyed a rule (i.e., it cannot be seen to have followed a habit, practice, tradition or compulsion or complied with predetermined instructions).

Kant's hypothesis or guiding idea is that actions must exist that are not rooted in or modelled on anything but themselves. Such an action appearing in the form of an unexpected event, inexplicable with reference to that which has come before, can become the beginnings of a new rule. To give this action a name, we may term it the *exception*. An exception is a repetition that creates a new precedent and leads to a new rule.

Where is the exception to be found, and what characterises it? Is anything more natural than to demand that the new, the exception, is in a radical sense different, unlike anything else? Even if the requirement seems at first glance to be a reasonable one, we discovered that while the exception may in some instances take the form of the unexpected and different, it is entirely possible for there to be no obvious difference between the exception and that which came before it – for the exception to strike one as a repetition. The new, the exception, can just as well be that which cannot be easily distinguished from that which has come before.

It now looks as if we are only a single step away from explaining repetition as the source of the new, which would clarify what

separates the exception from all other differences and deviations. As Kant would put it, how do we distinguish between genius and madness? The answer to this question is simple, as far as it goes. The nature of true exceptions is such that it may not be possible to distinguish between genius and madness at all, at least not straight off the bat. The event or action that we variously call the new or the exception is indeterminable and pregnant with uncertainty. It is a task in its own right to determine whether the exception involves something that one can have sufficient faith in to take it as a new precedent, a new rule in art. To name an oft-cited example, what significance did it have that Kassimir Malevich painted a black square on a white background in 1915? Or that Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal marked "Fountain, R. Mutt" as a work of art at an exhibition in New York in 1917? In a certain sense, it has taken the whole of art history ever since to gain an insight into the significance of these events. Repetition is the source of the new in the sense that it is only through repeated engagements with the exception, the original act, that its importance comes to light. It is therefore impossible to avoid discussing precedent, rule and repetition at the same time as one speaks of the new and the exception.

As mentioned earlier, Kant was of the opinion that by the miraculous, transcendental grace of Nature, we ought to be able to distinguish between genius and madness and remain in perfect agreement as to what is what for all of time. But the experience of modern art has shown us that this was all a fantasy. The sublime consensus of enlightened men of taste, which Kant and others put great faith in, has repeatedly been proven wrong. All modern art has been a tireless wrestle with the exceptions, the outcome of which match is subject to constant uncertainty. Uncertainty is not only a question of art history – *What will the literature of the future be like? Is the painting dead?* – it also surfaces in artists' personal struggles with their own work – *Will the next piece of glass be a square or a diamond?*

All this is hardly more than the outlines of an answer, but rather than continue in this vein, let us turn in closing to two works of art that may give an insight into what the idea of the exception might involve. The former is by Birgir Andrésson, the latter by Rúrí. Birgir's series "Different People" showcases photographs that he has collected of eccentrics and misfits from Iceland's past, "who, because

of their uniqueness, followed both figuratively and literally paths that were never found on the roadmap of the so-called ordinary man…" (Þröstur Helgason, 2010, p. 156, from the introduction to Nearness: Different People). They are remembered because people amused themselves by telling anecdotes about them and laughing at their exploits. In this series as in so many others, Birgir is searching for what is close to home for Icelanders. He does not find it in the everyday or that which we are taught to recognise as The Icelandic but – quite the reverse – in that which has been rejected, on the margins, even disowned.

It might occur to one that "Different People" could be viewed as Birgir's allegory for Icelandic art. To follow his train of thought, let us assume that Svavar Guðnason completely misunderstood abstract painting and that other Icelandic artists misunderstood Svavar in turn, resulting in a strange concoction of abstract art that washed up on the shores of Icelandic culture in the middle of the 20th century. The uniqueness of Icelandic visual art would then be comparable to the wanderings of a vagrant possessed by some eccentric fixation that deviates from proper behaviour. To whatever extent that Icelandic visual art has a unique position, this position is not going to be found on the roadmaps of the ordinary. There are no formulas or rules for the national any more than for the personal, and those who follow such a formula may go farther astray than those who seem to be off the map entirely.

The second piece I would like to bring up here is Rúrí's "That Day…", which is likewise composed of old photographs, with texts added. This work is dedicated to a single woman, Sigríður Tómasdóttir from Brattholt in Biskupstungur (1871–1957) and her battle to save the Icelandic waterfall Gullfoss from being exploited for a hydroelectric power station. As the story goes, a group of entrepreneurs visited her father Tómas and convinced him to lease them the water rights to Gullfoss, which was on his land, for the next 150 years. Sigríður was less than impressed by their plans and spent the next 19 years of her life in the Icelandic court system fighting to void the contract. The title of Rúrí's work is a reference to the vow that Sigríður is said to have made that the day that construction began at Gullfoss would be the day that she threw herself into the waterfall. She eventually prevailed and the contract was annulled, making her

known all across the country for her dedication to a waterfall that today ranks among Iceland's most beloved national treasures.

Today, Sigríður's battle is admired as an act of heroism, propelled by vision and resolve. But couldn't one look at things from the opposite perspective and see in her the same eccentric stubbornness as displayed by Birgir's vagrants? What was the sense in blocking the road for progress that could have increased the nation's well-being? What farmer refuses to make use of the perquisites that come with the land – particularly if they will provide the farm with a guaranteed income for generations to come? Who would sacrifice everything – even life itself – for a waterfall? It need not come as a surprise that Sigríður's behaviour was considered odd if not inexplicable at the time. The value of her action did not become fully apparent until much later; she ultimately became a model and an inspiration for those who are concerned about the threats facing natural treasures today. The parallels with art are obvious. The value of exceptions in art becomes apparent only with the repetition of those who believe in them and see in them something that can be learned from and built on. We spoke earlier of the chaos of modern art – the endless chasing after novelties and difference. It may be impossible to predict what will ultimately stand out and have a bearing on the path towards the future. It is in the hands of those who create the works of the future to reveal what significance the works of the present have, what pieces will have made the works of the future possible.

In the beginning of this article, questions were raised as to philosophy's connection to art, its position in the relationship between art and the audience and whether it is an unwelcome guest in our dialogue with art. We began by quoting Kierkegaard, and it is thus fitting to give him the final word on the relation of philosophy to art, on the artist who creates repetitions in the form of artwork and the philosopher who considers the universal concept – Man, Existence, Art or the Beautiful. Instead of directing our attention to how the philosopher attempts to subsume the exception into the universal, sit in the teacher's chair or that of the judge, he sees how the exception "grasps the universal to the extent that it thoroughly grasps itself" (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 78):

> Over time, one tires of the interminable chatter about the universal and the universal, which is repeated until it becomes boring and vapid. There are exceptions. If one cannot explain them, then neither can one explain the universal. One generally fails to notice this, because one does not normally grasp the universal passionately, but only superficially. The exception, on the other hand, grasps the universal with intense passion. (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 78)

As is his way, Kierkegaard has laid out traps and riddles for us. In this little pageant of Kierkegaard's, the interplay between art and philosophy takes centre stage. Philosophy, in the guise of the universal, tries to avoid paying attention to the exception. Ultimately, however, it cannot be helped, for how can we possibly be sure that we understand the universal if we do not trust ourselves to bring the exception into the picture? The initial description of interactions between philosophy and art as philosophy's attempt to force itself into art's relationship with the viewer and butt in against the wishes of both is a misunderstanding. It is in fact philosophy that displays a resistance to art and dislikes how the exception grasps the universal with more passion than philosophy thinks proper. In the end, philosophy must face up to and accept the fact that the exception exists and has both been keeping the universal alive and keeping philosophical thought from falling prey to complacent superficiality.

Jón Proppé

The Machine Inside the Artwork

1 The Problem of Definition

Philosophers have encountered some difficulties in discussing contemporary art. We do not even have a clear philosophical argument to show whether or why much of what contemporary artists do should be considered art in the first place. When the philosophy of art emerged – more than two centuries ago – art had fairly well-established traditions and categories. Sculptures were, for example, easily distinguished from implements such as ploughs, and paintings from windowpanes. Now we can no longer be so certain of things: The plough may turn out to be a sculpture by Hallsteinn Sigurðsson and the pane of glass a painting by Thór Vigfússon.

To many it can seem as though contemporary art admits of no rules whatsoever – that one can exhibit anything at all and call it art. This is true insofar as we cannot in advance discount anything from being admissible as art or as a valid medium or subject matter for art. All attempts to narrow down the field and define what may or may not be counted as art are doomed to failure: As soon as we manage to cobble together a decent definition, some artist will come along and create an artwork that renders it inadequate. This resistance to definition dates back, at the very least, to the Dadaists, who preached anti-art in the 1910s, and it may now be considered one of the primary characteristics of contemporary art.

In this same period the visual arts have grown remarkably in scope and importance: There are more working artists than ever before as well as more museums, galleries, art academies, art historians and art dealers. In addition, art has to some extent incorporated other fields of cultural production. Visual art can now appear as film, text, photography, performance, music, etc. – as well as in its more traditional forms. Some artists work on the boundaries of art and science, some concentrate on social issues, some focus primarily on urban issues and yet others on environmental problems. There seems to be no limit to the subjects that visual art can tackle, nor to the methods and media that artists can use in their research and finished works. Contemporary visual art must be seen as eminently successful in that it enjoys great respect, and attracts both talented practitioners and eager audiences. This success has apparently in no way been hampered by the fact that philosophers have trouble figuring it out. On the contrary, it can sometimes seem as if contemporary art feeds

on this problem of definition – that resistance to definition is not only a characteristic of contemporary art but perhaps one of its primary motive forces.

This relates to the demand for originality, which has grown more insistent in the last century or so. Each artist must develop something totally new and redefine all that has come before – and he should preferably do this every time he exhibits. Art does not excite us unless it reveals something new – in some way twisting or reframing our understanding and the definitions we have become used to. Some people may see this simply as a fad or novelty – akin to fashion – but it cannot be denied that the formula is successful and art grows and prospers.

Those who are dismayed by the demand for originality – or novelty – must remember that, despite everything, we also seek out the same artworks again and again. Some works of art are such that we can spend a lot of time with them and always find in them something new, a new experience or some new understanding. These are the ones we call good art and perhaps this definition is as good as any for distinguishing between good and bad art. Good art is not exhausted by a first viewing; we can return to it again and again to find something new to look at and think about. Such works can even continue to seem fresh and interesting long after the artist is dead. All this would indicate that the demand for originality turns on more than mere novelty or fashion.

The success and popularity of art should indicate that there is something there worth seeking out, that it provides experiences or an understanding that is interesting enough to attract people to exhibitions and even to bring them in time and again to look at the same artwork. The artist's conscious revolt against definitions – Dada-style – is thus only one aspect of the problem of definition and not even the most interesting one from the point of view of philosophy. Artists continue to produce works of art regardless of definitions and so, perhaps, we should turn a critical eye to our own approach in defining art. If art seems to continually evade our definitions, then this should be seen as an indication of what sort of thing we are dealing with. Instead of asking simply what art is, we might ask what kind of thing it is that can forever evade our attempts at definition but still seems to carry meaning and stimulate

thought. Another clue might be what was mentioned before, that good artworks can be viewed again and again. We can even study them in depth and produce shelves full of conflicting scholarly interpretations without getting bored with them.

Now we could ask if these two clues might not be part of the same question: Might the difficulty we have in defining art be related to the fact that we can examine and interpret it again and again?

2 The Artwork and Ontology

Ontology is the study of what there is and how it is. One of the first things we notice when we start to ask such questions is that there seem to be different answers for different things; the same understanding cannot be applied to all. When it comes to art, one of the primary problems theorists have encountered is that although artworks always have some physical presence (a painting is paint on canvas, an installation is objects in a space, etc.), such definitions obviously do not suffice to explain just what it is that makes artworks special and interesting. There is something else that makes something a work of art, some element above and beyond the physical presence of the object. The American philosopher Arthur Danto said, roughly, that the artwork was what was left over when one had subtracted the physical object. The artwork is therefore in some sense more akin to a thought or an idea, in which case its physical form is like the scaffolding or support to which the "real" artwork is somehow attached. It seems, however, certain that if it were not for this physical form the artwork would not exist at all, so such an approach does not solve the problem.

Most philosophers have for a long time agreed to distinguish two main classes of objects – ontologically speaking: On the one hand there are concrete or physical objects and, on the other hand, abstract objects. The latter are things that we feel compelled to consider as real even though they do not have physical form at all, e.g. facts, words, propositions and numbers. The problem with artworks is that they seem to mix the two categories: They seem to be at the same time physical and abstract, to have a physical form while being essentially something else (what Danto says is left over – the "artness" in the artwork). Yet it is difficult to deny the fact that artworks exist, and so people have put together various hypotheses on where we may locate this elusive object.

One fairly widespread view is that artworks should really be considered as actions or as the physical manifestations of the artist's work. This is obviously correct in some instances in which the artwork is conceived and presented as the documentation of an action or as a memento of an event. This would include the photographic works of Sigurður Guðmundsson from the 1970s and much of the work of Joseph Beuys, for example. It is, however, unclear how much this adds to our understanding of these or other kinds of artworks. Would this view claim, for example, that we cannot appreciate a painting without knowing something of the artist's circumstances and intentions when he painted it? Placing too much emphasis on the creation of the artwork can be risky, precisely because the viewer only has limited access to the information. He generally has access only to what can be seen in the work itself. The most important objection to such a view is, however, that it only displaces the problem; it does not solve it. Instead of having to resolve the connection between the concrete and abstract aspects of the artwork we would have to consider how those two relate to a third, namely the artist's actions.

Some writers, e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre, have argued that the artwork should be explained in terms of imagination – that the artwork comes into being through an act of imagination on the part of the viewer, in which the physically present object serves as a kind of stimulus. Here it is not only the artist's actions that matter but also those of the viewer who in effect recreates the artwork though his own efforts. The explanation has the advantage of placing the viewer on more or less equal footing when it comes to understanding and interpreting the artwork; both parties would seem to have equal access. This theory is primarily a description of how we perceive and interpret artworks, and it is presented as part of a phenomenological inquiry. It does not, however, solve the ontological conundrum. The concrete object is here presented as a basis or stimulus for the "real" or abstract artwork which must nonetheless refer back to it in some sense that we have still to understand.

3 Where is the Artwork?

It is difficult to position artworks generally in an ontological context but when we look at the works of contemporary artists the problem

often seems even more complicated. This is particularly, but not exclusively, true of conceptual artworks of various kinds: How do we, for example, comprehend an artwork that only consists of instructions to the audience?

An example of such a work is an artists' book from the early 1980s by Icelandic artists Finnbogi Pétursson and Helgi Thorgils Friðjónsson, consisting of various instructions on how the reader can transform the book into an audio piece, e.g. by tearing out pages and crumpling them up or by shaking the book while holding it close to one's ear. The book is in some sense a complete work of art and, indeed, a copy is held in the collection of the Living Art Museum in Reykjavík. However, it is also tempting to say that the real artwork only comes into being when the reader follows the instructions. In that case we would still have to decide whether the artwork is to be located in the sound produced or in the actions performed – and let us not forget that the physical object, the book, would be destroyed in the process. Perhaps we could say that the artwork is really just the concept or what we might imagine would happen if we followed the instructions to the letter.

This artwork seems to present several possible solutions but of course we can only reasonably conclude that the work is in some sense all of this at once. Finnbogi and Helgi Thorgils have found a clear and ingenious way to combine three or four different art forms into a single work that stimulates the viewer to think about the relationship of things and sounds, and about the nature of books and art itself. The artists do not have to answer for any difficulties in finding the proper place for their work in our taxonomic or ontological systems – philosophers, however, should find it troubling if their theories and methods are not adequate to the analysis of such a brilliant work of art.

Artworks that incorporate found objects throw more light on the problem. Such works have become common since Marcel Duchamp introduced his ready-mades. An especially tricky example is to be found in the exhibition in 1998 of a series of works entitled *Landscape* by Einar Garibaldi Eiríksson. Einar exhibited several signs that had been used to mark interesting features of the landscape in various spots in Iceland. The signs are all alike, exhibiting the same fourfold loop that generically signifies a stop

on the tourist trail. Although they do display different degrees of wear, we would not have known much more about them if Einar had not labelled them with the appropriate place names. This changes everything. In some sense, the sign marked "Herðubreið" comes to have reference to the mountain of the same name, just as the name has reference to it. One signing system is simply replaced by another that becomes equivalent to the first. The signs that Einar has selected come from the very places where the early Icelandic landscape painters found the subjects for their best-loved works, so Einar's artwork also has reference to art history and the role that landscape painting has had in shaping our perception of our surroundings. This may easily lead to discussions on the nature of representation, art's engagement with political or ecological issues, or the logic of signs and what they signify.

We do not think of calling these signs art when we encounter them along the road in our travels but here they have become artworks because Einar Garibaldi has gathered them and changed the context in which we interpret them. If so, then the artwork can be said to lie in the idea of the exhibition and the reading that the artist invites, rather than in the object itself. Still, the object is an irreducible part of the artwork and its only perceptible manifestation. Einar himself has called them "found paintings", which complicates the matter even further.

In 2010, Einar exhibited a second series of found paintings, this time signs that he had found in Italy. The image on these signs is a broad paintbrush and they are used to mark newly-paved roads where the lines to indicate lanes, turns, etc. are yet to be marked. The signs were taken from various of the most popular tourist sites in Italy – stops on the well-known "Grand Tour", which was the title of the exhibition.

In this example we can hardly say that the physical presence of the work is sufficient to prompt our understanding. We have to consider the systems of signification that the artist evokes. On the one hand, we might relate the pieces to the places in Italy from where they were taken; on the other, we could read them as a reference to art history and the Wonders of Italy. Either way, without this abstract and fairly complicated chain of interpretation, the work might not come to much. The artist triggers the chain by naming the exhibition

and naming the place of origin of each sign. In this way, Einar's exhibitions parallel Pétursson and Friðjónsson's artists' book, though they call for different actions on the part of the viewer.

What these artworks have in common is that they twist our normal perspective on the world and, especially, on the role that artworks can take in our world. The artists' book turns out to be a sound piece and old road signs turn out to be paintings. In both cases it is difficult to decide exactly what makes these works art, though it is obvious to everyone that they are well thought-out and executed artworks.

In 1971, Sigurður Guðmundsson exhibited in Amsterdam. The title of the exhibition was *8 Poems* and in the exhibition space were eight objects lined up against the wall: A tricycle, a hammer, a loaf of bread, a pair of slippers, etc. This piece twists things along the same lines as those already discussed, but its method is easier to unravel. Found, common objects are presented as art and we are told that we should read them as poems.

Sigurður's method is to use the title of the work to disrupt our habitual perspective on common things, on where they belong in our world and on how we should read them. The title tells us that what we see is in fact something else. This method was much-used in conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s, for example in the well-known piece by Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree*, which consists of a half-full glass of water sitting on a shelf. The title of the work and the accompanying text explains why this is, in fact, an oak tree. There are older instances in which this method has been used, certainly going back to Dada and the Surrealists, and probably much further.

Conceptual works of art do not need to rely on textual puns or disrupting references to achieve a similar effect. This can be done simply by directing the viewer's attention to something he doesn't notice or know about the work he is looking at. Kristján Guðmundsson did this in a memorable work from 1972, *Triangle in a Square*. All we see is a large square of soil on the floor of the exhibition space, accompanied by the information that there is a triangle of soil from consecrated ground within the surrounding square of merely normal soil – though there is no way to tell the difference. If we believe what we are told, the work is altered and all sorts of new questions must be asked. How is the soil different after it has been consecrated? How does the meaning of the symbolic

gestures we perform – such as religious rites – relate to reality? We might even ask if we should not see the piece as a geometric abstraction, akin to the paintings produced by Hörður Ágústsson, Eiríkur Smith and others in the early 1950s.

We have discussed pieces and exhibitions by Finnbogi Pétursson, Helgi Thorgils Friðjónsson, Einar Garibaldi Eiríksson and the brothers Kristján Guðmundsson and Sigurður Guðmundsson. These artworks not only exhibit the kind of ontological prevarication mentioned earlier but seem to highlight and exaggerate it. One might even say that it is the premise on which they build and that they work because they refer back and forth to these different perspectives: The works assert something about themselves which results in a sort of paradox involving our perception of the concrete things we see and the abstract artwork that we derive from them.

4 Self-Reference and Paradox

Paradoxes resulting from self-reference are well-known in philosophy and have vexed philosophers. A simple demonstration of the problem is given in the statement: "This sentence is untrue." If we believe what the sentence says, that it is untrue, it turns out to be true which makes it untrue, etc. Such paradoxes were known to the ancient philosophers but the problem became acute around the turn of the twentieth century when it became clear that it was not confined to odd exceptions such as the above sentence but also affected the basics of logic, such as set theory. This is what Bertrand Russell pointed out when he realised that the following proposition led to a paradox: "X is the set of all sets that are not members of themselves." If X is a member of itself the proposition stipulates that it is not and vice versa. The result is a paradoxical loop from which we cannot escape. Such paradoxes are known as reflexive and result directly from the self-reference in the statement. If instead of "This sentence is untrue" we say "X's statement is untrue" there is no paradox, whether the statement is true or not. The only solution found by logicians is to ban propositions of this kind which considerably weakens the syntax but is unavoidable since logic – and, by extension mathematics, etc. – cannot be based on paradox.

An artwork is not exactly a proposition and, anyway, no one is particularly rattled if an artist makes paradoxical propositions. The

problem we have traced in the last few paragraphs – the paradox-like prevarication that seems to haunt our attempts to fix the ontological status of at least some artworks – is not a problem to the artist, only to the philosopher. We can, however, come nearer an understanding by looking at the problem in more detail.

Artworks are physical things and they appear alongside other things in the world of things we inhabit; they can be bought and sold and placed in museums. Still we feel that the artwork is somehow more than that and this applies not only to clever works of conceptual art but also to more traditional representative art. A painting of the mountain Herðubreið is not just a multicoloured piece of cloth. It is also in some sense a manifestation of the mountain and if the painting is decently done it will be clear that it is a painting of Herðubreið and not Mt. Hekla. This has been under discussion for centuries: How can one thing stand for or pretend to be another? The painting seems to somehow be two things at once: on the one hand merely a multicoloured cloth and, on the other hand, a picture of Herðubreið. If we were talking about a bust we might say that it was on the one hand a clump of metal or stone and, on the other hand, the image of the person represented. This double character of the artwork – its dual nature – has not only caused much philosophical speculation, it has also turned some people against art. It is, for example, at the root of Plato's condemnation of the visual arts as dangerous and misleading.

When artists started to develop non-representational or abstract art around 1910 one might have thought this problem would soon be done away with. At any rate there is much to indicate that some of the leading artists involved hoped it would be. The Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky wrote an essay in 1911 titled *On the Spiritual in Art,* in which he explains how it is possible to paint without representation and without relying on anything but the perceptual effects of colours, lines and forms. He, and many others, thought that in this way the visual arts could attain a status similar to music and would need no longer rely on any reference to the world outside the artwork itself; art would free itself from the world of things. The same hopes were expressed in Iceland when abstraction finally arrived here with Svavar Guðnason's seminal exhibition in 1945. The scientist Björn Franzson wrote a short text for the exhibition catalogue,

presenting the unfamiliar paintings and advising the viewer to "try to look at them as though he were listening to music".

Even though art can rid itself of representation it can not, however, escape the problem of its dual nature. If anything, the problem becomes even more vexing in the case of purely abstract art. A painting of Herðubreið can at least be explained by saying that it shows the mountain and we can use it to recall or explore the natural landscape it pictures. A painting that shows only, e.g., a black field does not benefit from any such explanation. In the discourse of the early abstract painters one of the demands made was that we should stop seeking such explanations; abstract artworks didn't need them, being sufficient explanation in themselves. Yet the black painting claims to be more than just an ordinary black object – such as a wall, a piece of flint, or coffee. Even though it is not a picture "of" anything, it is – unlike ordinary things – "about" something. At least it claims to be different from such ordinary things, even though a coldly realistic appraisal might not discern much of a difference. This already complicates matters to the degree where we can no longer see the painting as just another thing among things. We might even say that it still has reference to something, even if it does not represent anything. That "something" is what is left when we have subtracted the merely physical or concrete thing. It refers to that other painting – the abstract object or the "artness" that remains.

Of course this "refers to" is not the same as when we say that the painting of Herðubreið refers to the mountain, but as we have already seen, the connection between a work of art and what it represents is far from straightforward. A painting of a mountain is not, on the one hand, colours on a canvas and, on the other hand, the mountain it represents. It is rather, on the one hand, colours on a canvas and, on the other hand, a "picture of" the mountain. The picture, in this case, is not a concrete thing but an abstract one, akin to a statement, word or fact. If we keep this in mind, the difference between the two paintings is no longer so great.

5 Art and Meaning

It does not make much difference whether we analyse the problem from an ontological perspective – using terms such as concrete and abstract – or from some different perspective. We might, for example, take this to be a problem of interpretation.

Visual art, like literature, can be analysed and interpreted. We might even say that it calls for interpretation and that to enjoy and appreciate art always involves an interpretation of some sort. We come to some kind of an understanding of the artwork. Artworks and works of literature are, however, different from ordinary things in that we can never interpret them once and for all. It is always possible to find a different perspective and a different interpretation of art, whereas with ordinary things a fairly simple interpretation is sufficient to gain us a fairly complete understanding of the thing: "This is a hammer; it can be used to drive in nails." No such statement about a work of art can ever be completely sufficient. There is always something left over, something that the statement does not completely address, and this is what we find so fascinating about artworks and works of literature. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur said: "… literature is that use of discourse where several things are specified at the same time and where the reader is not required to choose among them. It is the positive and productive use of ambiguity." (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 47)

Metaphors present one of the most fascinating examples of the strange ambiguity of literature and art and also the clearest instance of it. A metaphor is when one thing is made to stand for another: We say that no man is an "island", that the prime minister is at the helm of the "ship of state", or that a trustworthy man is a "rock". Words have double meanings – or even many – but the metaphor takes all these different meanings as equal: Understanding a metaphor does not involve "solving" the puzzle in some sense but, rather, accepting its ambiguity. The metaphor is not invalid, even though its ambiguity cannot be resolved. The ambiguity itself provides us with new information and gives rise to a new understanding.

The attentive reader's mind will no doubt have been cast back to the artworks we discussed before. Craig-Martin's *Oak Tree*, for example, would appear to turn on some sort of metaphor: A glass of water on a shelf, claiming to be an oak tree. Perhaps we should read Einar Garibaldi's signs as metaphors for the places where they stood and all the paintings that have been painted there. Something similar is certainly going on, for we can say without hesitation that these works make "positive and productive use of ambiguity" and, also, that it would be a misunderstanding to try to unravel their ambiguity.

The difference is that the artworks we have discussed achieve their ambiguity through self-reference, not only though making one thing stand for another. Metaphors are common in the visual arts but they tend to deal with something in the picture, not with the picture itself. The works of the symbolist sculptor Einar Jónsson are almost all based on some kind of metaphor where, e.g., a wave is made to signify history. Einar Garibaldi's signs are not metaphors in this sense. The fourfold loop painted on each sign is not in any sense a metaphor – nor a simile, nor even a symbol – for the mountain or waterfall the sign was originally set up to point to. The brush in Einar's Italian "paintings" has no symbolic reference to Venice or Florence. The signboards themselves have no reference to mountains or waterfalls or Renaissance cities. If these artworks seem to function somehow like metaphors, we must seek another explanation.

We may well see this as a problem of interpretation, but of interpretation that is not limited to the content of image or text, which is traditionally its scope. In the artworks we have discussed, it is not the content that gives rise to ambiguity but the work itself. By asserting something about itself, the artwork sets off a process of interpretation that is not about references and similes but about what the work itself is and what its place might be in the world of things.

The interpretation of visual artworks is a tricky project. In the case of representational paintings, we can sometimes get away with just analysing the content: This is Hekla in springtime, seen from Ásólfsstaðir or This is a painting of the Crucifixion". But this is only scratching the surface. What, e.g., distinguishes this particular painting of Hekla from other paintings of the mountain or from a photograph? To answer such questions we must look at the painting from a different perspective. We must examine the style, the use of materials, perspective, depth and structure – all sorts of factors that are properties of the painting itself, not of the mountain it represents. It would be inappropriate if we were to list the eruptions that have taken place in Hekla in order to explain the painting. Even figurative paintings, in the end, are more about themselves than the thing they represent.

The premises for the interpretation of works of visual art are different from those that apply in the case of literature. When I was a student in the United States, the philosopher and novelist William

Gass came to visit our philosophy department. After his lecture he came to the staff room for an informal chat with some faculty members and graduate students. He told us about a strange book he dreamed of writing. It was to be a novel where the book itself was an inseparable part of the story so that it would matter, e.g., where on the page each word appeared, what type was used and how ample or narrow the margins were – all this would form part of the narrative.

Gass never wrote that book and perhaps it is an impossible project, however fascinating we may find the idea to be. There is, however, one branch of literature that has developed in this direction, namely concrete poetry, in which the look of the words, the type and placement of the letters on the page form part of the poem – even its most significant aspect. Concrete poems sit somewhere on the border of literature and the visual arts, often much closer to the latter. The visual arts differ from literature in that we must always take the thing itself into consideration, the thing and its place in the world of things. No interpretation of an artwork can be considered adequate if it only takes into account the mental or abstract aspects of the work, that which it represents or the feelings and emotions it evokes.

6 The Machine within the Work of Art

An artwork generates interpretation and we may call that its function – how it goes about calling for an interpretation or for several different interpretations. Analysing a work of art is not just about interpreting its meaning and its content, but also, and perhaps primarily, about describing this function – describing the interpretative machine at work within the artwork. Works of visual art are also complicated in that they always refer back to themselves, making the task of interpretation even more difficult.

This difficulty is reflected in our attitude toward works of art, whether we are artists or simply aficionados, and in our apparently irreconcilable demands that artworks be completely self-sufficient and yet somehow relevant. One of the most controversial works of recent times, *Piss Christ* (1987) by Andres Serrano, is an example of this. It is a photograph of a small crucifix immersed in a jar of urine. The very religious are profoundly offended by this artwork though the artist himself claimed it was produced with purely aesthetic intentions. Of course we cannot overlook the fact that the image

shows Christ dipped in piss and that the religious response is in some way understandable, but it is still a misunderstanding to focus only on that aspect of the work. The work is also something else – an object that follows its own internal, aesthetic logic, just as Serrano has stated.

The machine within the artwork runs on such paradoxes and the power of artworks consists in always being able to show another side of themselves when someone claims to have interpreted them once and for all. The artworks we have discussed here all play on this paradox and their function – the mechanics of our metaphorical machine, if you will – lie in continually referring beyond themselves and back to themselves.

It takes very little to set this machine in motion, as we have seen in works that use just a bit of soil on the floor, a few ordinary objects, or mass-produced signs and a few words of text. The history of art in the twentieth century and even from the beginning charts the invention of new devices that artists have used to bring about this function as simply and elegantly as they could. It was, e.g., a great moment when Marcel Duchamp discovered that he could do this simply by taking a mass-produced item and presenting it as art without any further explanation. With conceptual art, a similar result was obtained simply by inking up words and pictures or concepts and things. The discovery made here lies in the realisation that art does not necessarily need its traditional media and methods. He who understands how art functions can make art out of almost anything.

This is no doubt part of the reason why the visual arts have been so successful in the last century and why they have expanded so in scope and presentation. The methodology is simple and can be easily adapted to incorporate new fields, new subjects and new media.

7 Things, Space, and Perspectives

Artworks are things and we always encounter them in some particular space and see them from some particular perspective. Some works have only a loose connection to the space they are in – are framed by their own spatial world – while others are made especially to engage with some particular space. All artworks, however, contain their own space and in some way direct the viewer's gaze and control his perspective. In figurative painting and sculpture this is fairly obvious and the craft involved has been well understood since the early Renaissance. The

relationship between contemporary artworks and the spaces they define is not as easy to analyse.

Sigurður Árni's work has long explored the inner space of the painting and, early on, he discovered a way to highlight this space by making "holes" in his paintings where one can see the bare canvas behind the layer of paint. He even shaded these holes to create the illusion that there was some distance between the paint and the canvas – a hidden space within the painting. To heighten the effect he sometimes paints the holes in perspective, so that the field of the painting seems to lie horizontally though the painting itself is mounted vertically on the wall. The perspective he creates confuses the obvious and objective situation (that the painting is a layer of paint on a piece of canvas hung on a wall), and also the artificially-created inner space of the painting. In these works, as in the painted shadows, Sigurður Árni makes use of the inescapable fact that in order to view a painting we hang it on a wall in some space and then go and stand in front of it. This simple circumstance in fact creates a complicated relationship between the viewer, the painting and the space a relationship that Sigurður Árni then sets out to explore. Our understanding of the space which these paintings outline is stretched out between different potential perspectives which we cannot choose between.

A perspective can also become an artwork in its own right. In 1964 the British artists Joan Hills and Mark Boyle invited people to an art opening in Pottery Lane in London. They led the guests through a back door in an alley and down a darkened hallway to a room where a few chairs were placed before a large curtain. After a while, the curtain was drawn aside and the audience could see the street outside through a large window. The artwork showed nothing except the normal, everyday activities in the street; yet it revealed the context, which turned it into an artwork of some kind. Mark Boyle once said the easiest way to change the world was to change one's perspective on it. As his and Joan Hills's action in Pottery Lane proved, a change of perspective can be enough to turn everyday life into art.

Space cannot be understood only on the basis of geometry. It is also about our experience and our understanding of it. The same space – the same reality – can appear radically different if we

understand it differently or see it from a different perspective. The artwork involves a kind of intervention into the very space in which we encounter it – an intervention that focuses primarily on us and our understanding. It can happen that a work of art teaches us to see the world in a different way, but all works of art at least show us that the world is not singular: it can be viewed from different angles. Of course, this is not always as apparent as in the paintings of Sigurður Árni or the action by Mark Boyle and Joan Hills. Works of art position themselves in the world and thus direct our understanding and our perspective.

What, then, does it take to understand the function of an artwork? What is the methodology that allows artists to create art out of nothing? These questions cannot be answered with a simple formula but they echo the concerns we set out with at the beginning of this essay: Why is it so difficult to define art and why can art always generate new and repeated interpretations of itself? The answer is to be found somewhere in the ambiguity and paradox that we have described from various angles. As Ricoeur said, ambiguity can be positive and productive and artworks use this ambiguity by highlighting it and referring to it without demanding that the viewer choose between the possible readings. In this way, the viewer himself becomes a cog in the wheel of the artwork's inner machine, a participant in the process of interpretation that the artwork calls for. The machine is only set in motion, however, because the artwork has, so to say, an opinion about itself and defines its own place in the world.

Hafþór Yngvason

The Mere Object of Art

1.

Think of Kristján Guðmundsson's artworks "as creations that draw attention to the nature of art and our assumptions about what it should be". A painting by Inga Þórey Jóhannsdóttir addresses "a defining characteristic of painting as medium". Hildur Bjarnadóttir "utilizes weaving and handicraft methods to comment on painting". The limits that Einar Garibaldi establishes for himself "show the 'nature' of the artwork better than 'free expression' could have done". "Baldur Geir Bragason's ambiguous visual world most often revolves around itself." And Huginn Þór Arason's clothes-paintings offer an extended notion of painting.[1]

The above quotes come from reviews and catalogue essays written over the last few years. The artists mentioned are of three generations, with Kristján Guðmundsson starting his career in the mid-1960s and Huginn Þór and Baldur Geir almost four decades later. In one way or another, the artworks referred to reflect upon their own existence, either through the acknowledgment of the means of their production or through certain peculiarities of construction. It is an incongruent group of works but they are connected by a strong current of conceptualism that runs through Icelandic art and which Kristján had a large role in putting into motion. But self-reflexivity is not limited to conceptual art nor is it an idiosyncratic concern of Iceland's small art community. It is a concern of all art that does not endorse (and is not endorsed by) established practice and, as such, a particular concern of modern art. As Stanley Cavell has argued, "[in] the modernist predicament in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history" artists are "compelled to find unheard-of structures that define themselves and their history against one another". Such inventions are not gratuitous experiments but necessary responses to radical changes in art. "When in such a state an art explores its medium, it is exploring the conditions of its existence; it is asking exactly whether, and under what conditions it can survive." (Cavell, 1979a, p. 72)

The predicament that Cavell refers to was brought about in the visual arts by the shift that took place around the turn of the twentieth century away from traditional forms of depiction. As opposed to a

1 The quotes are from reviews and catalogue essays by, respectively, Robert L. Pincus (2010), Eva Heisler (2005), Margrét E. Ólafsdóttir (2006), Hlynur Helgason (2003) and Markús Þór Andrésson (2008).

smooth transition from one style to another, this shift took the form of a transformation (or conversion), with the artists' self-righteous and self-effacing acknowledgments of their transgressions self-reflexively declared (or confessed). If representational artists had sought to disguise the means of execution in order to produce an illusion of reality, the offenders acknowledged the material basis of their art openly. Cézanne is one example. Not only do the modified perspective, the distorted shapes and shifting viewpoints in his paintings violate established conventions of representation, he also made the physical reality of his work explicit with perceptible brushstrokes and spots of bare canvas. This was carried further in Cubism, as the art historian Robert Rosenblum has noted. Following in Cézanne's footsteps, Picasso and Braque "destroy that sense of transparency whereby …a painting deceives its public into forgetting that the work of art has an artistic reality of its own". (Rosenblum, p. 68) Beyond pushing the distortions further than Cézanne had dreamed of, they started incorporating extraneous materials into their paintings, such as wallpaper simulating the grain of wood and, most famously, a piece of oil cloth with the pattern of chair caning printed on it. It was a radical move that set the stage for Dada experiments, such as Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades", Constructivists' "counter-reliefs" and the Surrealists' *objets trouvés*.

With this radical examination of the aesthetic substance itself, according to Rosenblum, the emphasis was on the artworks' autonomy: "In a sense, what Picasso and Braque discovered was the independent reality of the pictorial means by which nature is transformed into art upon the flat surface of a canvas." (p. 66) Put differently, by dispensing with the established conventions of representation, Cézanne and the Cubists freed or (depending on one's outlook) deprived art of a common grammar and a shared reference to the world, thereby necessitating art's reliance on its own internal resources. The achievement of autonomy necessarily became "the artistic problem" of modernism, as Cavell has argued. (Cavell, 1976, p. 187)

It is against this history that the paintings of the six artists listed at the top of this essay define themselves. They continue the modernist tradition of self-conscious reflections on the characteristics of painting, while at the same time, I will argue, they question the emphasis on the independence of artistic reality, which Rosenblum makes so

much of. As proclaimed by the early champions of modernism, that independence took the form of exclusiveness, as if the process of self-authorization demanded that art separate itself not only from depicted reality but from anything external – the external world altogether. Writing about Rodin in 1903, for instance, Rilke stated: "That which gave distinction to a plastic work of art was its complete self absorption. It must not demand or expect aught from outside; it should refer to nothing that lay beyond it, see nothing that was not within itself; its environment must lie within its own boundaries." (Rilke, pp. 120–21) Adolf Hildebrand had struck a similar note a few years earlier: "The true object of art is a unity complete in itself. It is an object independent of the remaining world. The spectator must have the experience of pure perception devoid of all consciousness of end served and practical usefulness." (Hildebrand, p. 255) And what Wilhelm Worringer called "the urge to abstraction", in his influential book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), was an urge "to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life". (p. 17) Thus conceived, art is a special sphere removed from the rest of life – cut off from everything that lay beyond it, including its natural context and practical usefulness. From this exclusiveness followed a sense of exclusion that became more and more pronounced in the course of the twentieth century, to a point where the uncompromising independence of modernist art had turned into a solitary confinement, with a sense of a loss of connection and a consequent lack of significance.

In this paper, I will explore the responses to this isolation that the six artists present in their work. Their self-critical approaches consist mostly of identifying their works as painting and then by giving the paintings new and unexpected identity as ordinary objects. I will examine the status of these objects, or how they work, through comparisons with the artistic strategies of Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, as well as through the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, Arthur Danto and Stanley Cavell.

2.

The way the six artists raise the question of shared reference and common grammar is, as I see it, by presenting common objects

for consideration: sound-insulation panels, a bed, dish towels, a transportation crate, a rocking chair, and clothing. These are objects of the same variety as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, which consist of a urinal, a snow shovel, a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool, a comb, a coat hanger and a typewriter cover. They are ordinary articles of life (as Duchamp's friend Beatrice Wood referred to the generic objects of his choosing but the six paintings are not ready-mades. In all cases, the pieces are fabricated as artworks. More specifically, they are paintings and identified as such through references to traditional painting materials and handling (such as the stretching, framing and painting of canvas). Kristján Guðmundsson's series *Black and White Paintings in Grey and White Frames* (2008–) consists of perforated metal frames (manufactured to hold soundproofing materials in place) with monochrome black-and-white-painted canvas showing through the holes. Inga Þórey Jóhannsdóttir's floor piece *Mattress and Pillow* (2005) is the exact size of a twin-size mattress, covered with canvas and hand-painted with stripes. Hildur Bjarnadóttir's four paintings called *Gingham* (2005) look like store-bought dish towels or tablecloth made of checkered cotton (gingham), which have been stretched and framed like paintings. Einar Garibaldi Eiríksson's *Piece nr. 626* (2000) consists of a regular shipping crate made for transporting art, with an unnamed painting from the permanent collection of the Living Art Museum in Reykjavík inside (the title of the work is the painting's accession number in the museum's registry). Baldur Geir Bragason's *Rocking Chair* (2007) is made of a clear-cut wood structure with the back and seat made of a painted, stretched and framed canvas and, paradoxically, angular runners. And Huginn Þór Arason's clothes are exact replicas of his rather unremarkable wardrobe, made of cotton (which he has cut and sown himself) and painted with acrylics to make wearable paintings.

In some instances, the fabrication is substantial. Baldur Geir makes his *Rocking Chairs* himself and Huginn Þór, who has experimented with labor in installations (such as hiring tailors to custom-make garments for museum guests), cut, sewed and painted his own clothes-paintings. Hildur, who usually produces her work from scratch (starting by gathering plants to make dye and then hand-coloring and spinning the yarn and finally weaving, knitting or crocheting the final product), spent countless hours hand-coloring and weaving the cloth

for *Gingham,* from the kind of linen thread that is commonly used for painters' canvas, rather than purchasing indistinguishable material from a department store. Einar Garibaldi's crate is the only found object here but, unlike Duchamp's ready-mades, it reveals the means of its production, transparently acknowledging that it has been made by human hands. (Einar Garibaldi requested that a new crate be constructed to store his crate safely.)

As paintings that have been fabricated, these objects may have more in common with Claes Oldenburg's carefully constructed object sculptures (a clothespin, a baseball bat, a flashlight, a split button, shuttlecocks, a trowel, a garden hose and a handsaw, to mention only a few of his large-scale public sculptures) than with Duchamp's ready-mades. But, as *objects,* the six paintings share certain characteristics that are helpful to compare with Duchamp's ready-mades as well as the kinds of objects that Oldenburg has worked with. First, the objects stand alone, self-sufficient and self-contained (not as parts of larger ensembles or compositions), and second, although in some instances they seem to cancel their function, the objects insist on their identity through their functionality. These characteristics have conflicting implications that I will explore further in the last section.

To begin with the first characteristic, the six paintings are not collages (or assemblages). They are independent objects. Each of them is, as the art critic Barbara Rose has emphasized in the case of Oldenburg's objects, "a gestalt, a single image that must be seen as a whole unit and not as made up of discrete parts". (Rose, p. 127) What the innocent-looking wording "a single image" refers to is a hugely important formal revelation made by Jasper Johns in his simple paintings of flags from the mid-1950s.

> What was radical about these flags was not, as some have held, their self-proclaimed flatness, but rather their identification of the image with the field, with no space left over, either behind or around the image, to function as background. It is this change from depiction, in which shapes are isolated against a negative background, to literal presentation, in which the image or shape is coextensive with the whole field. (Rose, p. 128–30)

By making the depicted contour and the real contour of an image congruent, Johns activated a double relation between the painting and its surroundings and between the flag and the rest of the world. The act of removing the background from within the painting was extremely consequential, as the artist Robert Morris has pointed out:

> The background became the wall. What was previously neutral became actual, while what was previously an image became a thing. (Morris, p. 51)

And this thing was a part of the actual world, with a relationship to an actual wall. The double relation of the single image is a revelation that still reverberates in art practice almost a half-century later.

We will come back to the significance of these relationships for understanding the mechanism at work in the six paintings after considering the second characteristic, which is that the six paintings insist on their identity through their functionality. This seems to go against the fact that some of the objects conspicuously cancel their function, as is frequently suggested in articles about them:

> "While [Baldur Geir's] sculptures are reminiscent of rocking chairs, it is obvious that they cannot function as such." (Markús Þór Andrésson); "[Inga Þórey's] painting is a bed on which it would be impossible to lie, with a pillow that would shatter beneath one's head." (Eva Heisler); "The outcome of [Hildur's] time-consuming and carefully executed work has no practical use." (Margrét E. Ólafsdóttir)

By rejecting any use of the objects, the writers seem to want to establish the paintings' art-world status as genuine articles of art history and theory, where purposelessness has been considered a defining characteristic of art. Since Immanuel Kant claimed in his *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 that beauty is an object's form of "*purposiveness without a purpose*" (Kant, § 10), this definition has been taken as a rigid formula in art criticism. Beauty, as such, may not be in question in contemporary art, but then purposelessness has been converted to a definition of art, along with Kant's claim that the appreciation of beauty (read "art") is *disinterested*. The two definitions go together. If

art has a purpose (if it is *good for* something), then it is not appreciated on its own terms. It is only taken as a *means* to achieve something of interest, hence it is not "disinterested". A rocking chair is good for rocking, a bed for sleeping on, a dish towel for drying dishes. And if we think of the form of the object with reference to the goal that determined the object's design (e.g. the best form of runners to rock on, the best surface to sleep on, the best material to dry with), then we approach the object from the concept of the good rather than through aesthetic contemplation. But if we appreciate the form without any reference to purpose, our appreciation is disinterested and free. Such appreciation "[considers] the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure". (Kant, § 5) This is in tune with the modernist emphasis on the independence of artistic reality. The autonomy of the artwork depends on the exclusion of any external concerns, and this is, indeed, the way some authors want to see Duchamp's ready-mades, Oldenburg's sculptures, and the six paintings.

Sam Hunter has compared Oldenburg's early soft sculptures (made of painted sailcloth stuffed with foam rubber) to a deflated football, noting that

> they are objects without a function. By taking them through such a poetic metamorphosis and thus making them useless, Oldenburg associates his telephones, typewriters, and appliances with the art object, which is by definition gratuitous. (Hunter, p. 35)

And, as Beatrice Wood wrote about *Fountain,* Duchamp "took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view". (Wood, p. 6) And Duchamp himself stated: "Functionalism was…obliterated by the fact that I took [the object] out of the earth and onto the planet of aesthetics." Taken at their face value, such statements may, indeed, suggest a formalist notion of "aesthetic disinterest". Thus, William Tucker has observed that "their detachment from the original context…makes [the ready-mades] virtually unrecognizable *except as sculpture,* i.e. in terms of their abstract properties – image, proportion, structure and use of materials". (Tucker, p. 120) Likewise, George Dickie has noted that "*Fountain* has many qualities which can be

appreciated – its gleaming white surface, for example", which Dickie goes on to compare to the fluidly contoured forms of Henry Moore's bronzes. (Dickie, p. 199). And William A. Camfield has compared "the sleek formal properties" of *Fountain* to Brancusi's abstract sculptures of the same period. Similarly, Oldenburg's soft sculptures could be appreciated for the expressive qualities of their rippling volumes and Johns's *Flag* for its variegated collaged and painted surface rather than its reference to the wall. Hildur's checkered canvas and Inga Þórey's stripe paintings may be appreciated as geometric abstractions and Baldur Geir's *Rocking Chair* for its laconic vocabulary, its light and open construction and its clear-cut rectilinear forms.

Besides the uncomfortable fit of these comparisons, the reduction of artworks to purely formal features has rarely seemed so out of place and as misleading as in the case of the *Fountain*. It is misplaced because no one can ignore the fact that the gleaming white surface is that of a urinal and it is misleading because it encourages the viewer to look past this obvious fact. It is as if Tucker, Dickie and Camfield want to strip a purposive form (*forma finalis*) of its purpose to get to a pure form that can be appreciated in a disinterested fashion. But it is clear that the object is made to fulfill some function and that alone is enough to prevent the beholder from experiencing it them disinterestedly. Johns's *Flag* is always a flag, Inga Þórey's *Mattress and Pillow* is always a bed, and Baldur Geir's *Rocking Chair* a rocking chair. These are objects with purpose and this would be true even if it were not known what exactly the purpose was, because they are clearly made for *some* function.

The significance of this is most forcefully brought home by Kant himself. He takes an example of "the stone utensils sometimes excavated from ancient burial mounds, which are provided with a hole as if for a handle". (Kant, § 17) We are compelled to acknowledge these implements as artifacts, and that acknowledgment, Kant points out, "already forces us to admit that we are referring their shape to some intention or other and to some determinate purpose". (ibid) (As Jacques Derrida puts it in an essay on the paragon, the disused utensils leave a *trace* of their finalized functioning. [Derrida, 1987, p. 89]) Sam Hunter's comment on Oldenburg's sculptures is, therefore, also true of Duchamp' ready-mades and the objects presented by the six Icelandic artists: "They…can never quite slip their utilitarian identity, and this fine nuance is their whole point." (Hunter, p. 35)

Hunter's observation uncovers the second characteristic mentioned above, namely that the objects under discussion insist on their identity through their functionality. They look what they are. The use that goes with a rocking chair is that which makes it a rocking chair. The same can be said of Kristján's soundproofing panels, Inga Þórey's bed, Hildur's tablecloth, Huginn Þór's clothes and Einar Garibaldi's crate. Contrary to formalist works, they flaunt their functionality at the same time as they renounce it. Why then this conspicuous suspension of usability? Does the fact that the objects are out of function simply mean that they are defunct, unusable, or are there further implications that explain why it is so important to some of the artists under discussion to render their objects useless?

In *Being and Time,* Heidegger observes that "when an assignment has been disturbed – when something is unusable for some purpose – then the assignment becomes explicit". (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 74–75) If this possibly applies to art objects then the implication goes right against Kantian "disinterest". Heidegger takes a hammer as an example. While working on a project, a carpenter does not regard his hammer as merely an object. It is a piece of equipment. The hammer is there, "ready-to-hand" (*Zuhanden*), to drive nails into wood or to shape metal. The hammer is a part of what Heidegger calls a totality of equipment (*Zeugganzes*), which is basically a nexus of equipment with which the hammer has a related function. Each piece of equipment is defined in relation to other equipment. "Thus the hammer refers to the nail and the nail to the board and the board to the saw and the adze – and these to the whetstone" (to use an example from Danto, 1992, p. 106). The user does not really notice the hammer or pay attention to it, but if it is broken, the hammer becomes an object of a different concern. It becomes what Heidegger calls "present-at-hand" (*Vorhanden*) and, as such, it is something that can be studied through disengaged observation. The carpenter becomes aware of the physical and formal properties of the hammer but, more importantly, the totality of equipment comes into focus.

> When an assignment to some particular 'towards-this' has been thus circumspectively aroused, we catch sight of the 'towards-this' itself, and along with it everything connected with the work – the whole 'workshop' – as that wherein

> concern always dwells. The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself. (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 74–75)

A porcelain urinal that is placed on its side atop a pedestal will bring attention to the object itself, but it will also light up its context and use. With *Fountain,* two totalities light up at once. The new context of the exhibition space, signified by the pedestal, lights up what Danto has called "artworld", i.e. the art-historical and cultural context of Duchamp's action (including an atmosphere of artistic theory in which such an action is meaningful [Danto, 1964]). But the urinal is also a "plain piece of plumbing", as Duchamp called it, and as such it is equipment in Heidegger's terminology and a part of a totality of tools (*Zeugganzes*). This is the grounds for Duchamp's explanation of why he presented the urinal as an artwork, namely that "the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges". (1917) The point, I take it, was not to reject the achievements of American artists but to reject the (European) art tradition altogether. (The belief that America had not become entrenched in that tradition may have been applauded by Duchamp but to those who worked to establish the hold of the tradition in the New World, the presentation of the urinal was all the more disturbing.) It is an important aspect of Duchamp's bold act that he allowed the urinal to maintain the appearance of industrial production – he transferred the ready-made object without transforming it – and thereby he problematized the relationship between the art object and the objects of industry. By placing the urinal on a pedestal, Duchamp did not *erase* all connection to its function; he *disturbed* that connection in order to bring out the relationship between the art object and such things as plumbing and bridges. In the only existing photograph of the original urinal, where it is shown carefully posed in perfect frontalness, the gaping hole left by the missing pipe stares the beholder in the face, underscoring the rupture. And through that hole the beholder becomes aware of the context from which the urinal was removed (including the plumbing store where it was bought). It may be said, therefore, that Duchamp, like Johns, activated a double relation between the artwork and its surroundings and between the utilitarian object and the rest of the world.

3.

The thoroughgoing interrelatedness of equipment offers a contrast to the confinement of the autonomous artwork, which so many artists of the last half-century have sought to overcome. But this connection to the world of objects continues to be rejected as irrelevant to art. Thus Danto has stated that even if artworks have a use and a place in people's practical lives, "it would not be the *kind* of place they have in the *Zeugganzes* in their dimensions as tools in a system of tools". (Danto, 1992, p. 107) In some societies an object may have a double identity as both an artwork and equipment, but the two identities are, Danto insists, always separable and belong to mutually exclusive contexts. Equipment is ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*) and belongs to a "system of means" whereas artworks are present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*) and belong to a "system of meanings". (Danto, 1992, p. 154)

> The important point is that the whole practical life of those societies could go forward if the society in fact had no works of art. That is what Hegel meant in saying that, as art, an object is not part of the Prose of the World but belongs instead to the realm of Absolute Spirit. (Danto, 1992, p. 107)

Danto's argument is important in our context because his main example looks very much like the objects that we have been discussing, i.e. a single-image painting (or an object sculpture), with the depicted contour and the real contour of the image congruent. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (first shown in 1964) are visually indistinguishable from regular boxes of Brillo pads that are sold in supermarkets and, as such, they look like equipment in Heidegger's sense. But Danto draws a sharp line between the two sets if boxes. In Heidegger's ontology, equipment is halfway between artworks and mere things, but in Danto's ontology, equipmentality drops out, vanishing without a trace. Warhol's boxes are an artwork and the other boxes "mere real things". It is as if the use had been an added feature of the object that Warhol simply stripped off, leaving the thing denuded. (Heidegger's comment is relevant to Danto: "The 'mere,' after all, means the removal of the character of usefulness and being made." [Heidgger, 1927, 30])

With the artwork and reality on either side of a clear-cut, Danto sees the *Brillo Boxes,* and art in general, as representational painting, of a

sort. The structure of art, he insists, always takes the form of a metaphor (to "understand the artwork is to grasp the metaphor that is…always there" [Danto, 1981, p. 172]); accordingly, art criticism should consist of interpreting, or "unpacking", the metaphor. And, like Aristotle, Danto sees metaphors as elliptical or truncated similes, so every metaphor is grounded in likeness and analogy. Picasso's sculptures provide perfect examples. He was

> famous for transfigurations of the commonplace. He had made the head of a chimpanzee out of a child's toy; a goat's thorax out of an old wicker basket; a bull's head out of bicycle parts; a Venus out of a gasjet – and so why not the ultimate transfiguration, an artwork out of a thing? (Danto, 1981, p. 46)

Here Danto is true to Picasso's almost magical ability to elevate lowly objects to an exalted status. And in Picasso's works the metaphor is clear. The shape of the handlebars is similar to bull's horns, so when the handlebars and the bicycle seat are placed in a certain configuration, they can be seen *as* a bull's head. We are back to the grammar of imitation, where *a* is shown under the attributes of *b.* But single-image paintings and object sculptures do not work this way. It may be strange to say that Venus is a gasjet or that the boxes in the art gallery *are* the boxes of Brillo pads in the store – they are different objects in different places – but in the case of *Fountain* there is only one object. Duchamp bought a urinal at a plumbing store and brought it to an art exhibition. Johns painted a flag, Baldur Geir made a chair, Inga Þórey made a bed, etc. These are not metaphors of real things; these are real things. *Flag* is not shown under the attributes of flags nor *Fountain* under the attributes of urinals any more than a circle is shown under the attributes of a plain curve.

In a discussion of a representational painting by Van Gogh, Heidegger goes in the opposite direction to Danto and treats the object depicted not as imitation but as equipment, as if the painting and the object were a single image. In his 1935 essay *The Origin of the Work of Art,* where he brings his analysis of equipment to bear on art, Heidegger asks the reader to think of "a common piece of equipment – a pair of farmer's shoes", (1935, 32) which Van Gogh painted at different times. Heidegger's aim is not "to revive the fortunately

obsolete view that art is an imitation and depiction of reality". (Heidegger, 1936, p.36) Rather, he goes on to give a phenomenological description of the shoes as equipment – how they are used. The identity of the object retains its equipment-being and, importantly, its equipmental relations, which Heidegger insists is essential for an artwork. Just as Tucker, Dickie and Camfield stripped *Fountain* of any reference to the urinal, so Danto carefully and thoroughly stripped *Brillo Boxes* of any relationship to the world of objects and equipment, but, in a striking contrast, Van Gogh's paintings, according to Heidegger, do not withdraw from their world; they illuminate the equipmental context of the shoes.

This does not necessarily mean that the shoes illuminate the cobbler's workshop. The question "in what relations it stands" is of essence. (Heidegger, 1935, p.41) Heidegger asks, "Where does a work belong?" and his answer is that "the work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself". (1935, 41) The realm that the painting opens up is the realm of its equipmental relations. "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth." (36) The realm that the beholder is referred to is the field where the peasant woman works, but it's not because the shoes are depicted in the field. They're not. "From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand." (Heidegger, 1935, p.33) It is, rather, because "this [equipment] emerges into the unconcealedness of its being". (Heidegger, 1935, p.36)

> From the dark opening of the worn inside of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spread and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness of the soil. Under the soles slide the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth.…This equipment belongs to the *earth*. (1935, 34)

In his analysis of *Brillo Boxes,* Danto does not follow the artwork to a realm that has to do with the equipmental totality of the object. As he notes, the design of the original boxes of Brillo pads reflect "the value of speed, cleanliness, and the relentless advantages of the new and

gigantical". (Danto, 1994, p. 386) This is a fair description of Warhol's stylistic references to advertising, branding and consumer products and applies as much to *Brillo Boxes* as it does to his paintings of other trademarked consumer items, such as Campbell's soup cans and Coke bottles. But to Danto, *Brillo Boxes* can only be "about art or, if you like, about the differences between high art and commercial culture". (Danto, 1994, p. 386) They cannot be art about commercial culture, self-reflexively posing as consumer items among other such items, in a critique or affirmation of such culture. According to this logic, a *Zeugganzes* that includes a table is irrelevant to Hildur's tablecloth as is a *Zeugganzes* that includes a loom, warps, wefts and bobbins or knitting, needlework and crocheting. Her work could not be about the painter's canvas as a woven cloth, steeped in a history of handicraft, and the denial of these connections in the tradition of painting. Nor could Einar Garibaldi's transportation crate have anything to do with an institutional critique of the art industry, the museum as storage, or the portability and packaging of art. Not that that is all these artworks are about, but these equipmental contexts do play into everything that they may be said to be about.

4.

Danto's approach to art lacks a full appreciation of the ordinary reality of contemporary art. Behind the radical notion of the ordinary, which has affected so much art since the late-1950s and 1960s, lies a strong artistic conviction that has been expressed at once in critical and affirmative terms. On one hand, art has displayed a distinct anti-establishment or anti-institutional sentiment, and on the other, it has been consistently affirmative of everyday life – common and ordinary. As Sam Hunter observed in 1966, "the intensified use of sub-aesthetic materials called into question the hierarchy of distinctions between the fine arts and extra-artistic materials drawn from the urban refuse heap". (Hunter, pp. 29–30) Danto's proposal that to consider something as art *elevates* it over "ontologically degraded objects", as he puts it, goes directly against both of these notions. The artwork and the object of use belong, according to Danto, to different orders of being. In his analysis he agrees, indeed, not only with Hegel but with the early supporters of modernism. "Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation," Clive Bell wrote

in 1913. "For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life." (Bell, p. 27) Art is like religion in this respect: "The kingdom of neither is of this world." (Bell, p. 63)

The commitment to the ordinary, the common and the low in contemporary art is closer to the philosophy of Cavell (despite Cavell's expressed worries that the place of art was pervasively threatened by the new developments of the 1960s. [Cavell, 1976, p. 333]) Cavell does not discuss Heidegger's notion of equipmental totality (*Zeugganzes*) in relation to art but in his discussion of Wittgenstein's notions of "criterion", "grammar" and "forms of life" we find an explication of how words relate to words and how objects relate to objects (and words) and how words and objects relate to human life. Cavell talks about the "forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of the world". (Cavell, 1979b, p. 178) It is this *gathering* that I want to connect to Heidegger's notion of *Zeugganzes* as the gathering around equipment. Equipment is a thing and, as Heidegger points out, "the Old High German word thing means a gathering". (Heidegger, 1951, p. 174) Equipment gathers, as in the context of "the bridge which gathers the earth as landscape around the stream". (Heidegger, 1951, p. 152) The context of the river is lit up by the bridge; "The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream." (Heidgger, 1954, p. 152)

If we look more carefully at Duchamp's ready-mades, Johns's single-image painting, Oldenburg's object sculptures and the paintings of the six Icelandic artists and ask how we know what we know about them, then their functioning as gatherings (as "*þing*") begins to emerge. They are all, to begin with, what Cavell calls "generic objects". Examples of what Cavell means by this term are

> bits of wax, tables, chairs, houses, men, envelopes, bells, sheets of paper, tomatoes, blackboards, pencils, etc. (In Indian philosophy, I'm told, you often find a stick which, for all you know then and there, may be a snake.) (Cavell, 1979b, p. 52)

These are objects of the same variety as the ones we have been discussing: a baseball bat, a bed, a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, clothing, a clothespin, a coat hanger, a comb, dishtowels, a flag, a

flashlight, a garden hose, a handsaw, a rocking chair, a shirt button, shoes, shuttlecocks, a snow shovel, sound-insulation panels, a transportation crate, a tablecloth, a typewriter cover, a urinal, a trowel. (Robert Watts's wax tomatoes may be added as well). These are ordinary objects, about which people are not likely to be mistaken. As Cavell says,

> There is something common among [these] objects: they are ones specifically about which there just is no problem of recognition or identification or description. (Cavell, 1979b, p. 52)

The question of how you know that something is a coat hanger or a handsaw or a bed or clothing does not arise naturally. As Heidegger says of the shoes that he discusses, "Everyone is acquainted with them." (Heidegger, 1960, p. 33) The question is different from that of telling an elk from a deer (or a moose from a caribou), which is a question of being able to recognize certain marks and features (large palmate antlers or branched antlers). The latter question comes up in art history, for instance, in relation to Albrecht Dürer's *The Fall of Man* from 1504 – if the animal next to Adam is a deer, it may stand for sexual prowess, but if it is an elk it is more likely to stand for gloomy apathy (Panofsky, 1955, p. 289, n. 137). A handbook in iconography might be of help but there is no handbook or training needed to recognize a handsaw, shoes or a rocking chair (unless you want to know whether it is a special kind of shoe or chair).

> There are technical handbooks which give us the features of various types and periods of furniture (what a Louis XIII dining chair is, how to recognize a Louis XIV chaise, etc.) but none which teach us what a chair is and what sitting on a chair is. (Cavell, 1979b, p. 73)

Another way to put this is that "*no one's position,* with respect to identifying [generic objects], is *better than anyone else's*." (Cavell, 1979b, p. 56) All that such objects call for is our common, unspecialized knowledge. As such, they constitute what Cavell calls a "best" case for knowing, namely

> a case in which factors of personal training and care of judgment, and in which contextual matters and conditions, are irrelevant: all you have to know, to achieve knowledge in the ["best"] case, is, one could say, how to talk. (Cavell, 1979b, pp. 133–34)

Cavell is not referring to the knowledge of some specialized language of industry or art theory but to the ordinary language of native speakers of any language. It is the language you know, if you know how to talk at all. It is the mutuality that reveals itself in common language that provides the only context needed for generic objects to function as gatherings. But before exploring the theme of gathering further, we need to better understand how the six paintings present themselves as generic objects.

One thing that the artists under discussion may be said to be addressing in their selection of objects is what Cavell calls the "phenomenology of materiality". They are not interested in what sets their objects apart from other objects (it is a part of their anti-institutionalism to render special features irrelevant, thereby rejecting the traditional notion that precious materials, craftsmanship, and skillful composition set art apart from other objects). To the contrary, the artist, like the epistemologist that Cavell speaks of,

> would rather, so to speak, have an unrecognizable *something* there if he could, an anything, a thatness. What comes to him is an island, a body surrounded by air, a tiny earth. What is at stake for him in the object is materiality as such, externality altogether. (Cavell, 1979b, p. 53)

What is at stake in externality – whether you call it "thatness" or "objecthood" – is the reemergence of nature as independent reality. This independence presents itself in the objects' freedom from us, the beholders. By making the objects so perfectly unremarkable that no marks or features are relevant to knowing them, *our* specialized abilities become irrelevant. There is nothing about the objects that requires *our* criteria. Their status is not contingent on *our* training. They are independent of *us,* on their own.

Such characterization of the six paintings as complete without *us* is best explored in conjunction with Cavell's discussion of paintings from the 1970s. However different the six paintings may be from the late modernist abstractions that Cavell has in mind (such as Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings), his characterization of the latter's approach to nature applies to the former also. He notes that the paintings "imitate not the *look* of nature, but its conditions, the possibilities of knowing nature at all and of locating ourselves in the world". (Cavell, 1979a, p. 113) And he goes on to conclude that "this is not a return *to* nature but the return *of* it, as of the repressed. It is the release of nature from our private hold". (1979a, pp. 113–14) Although the six paintings do not, technically, *imitate* the conditions of nature – they are what they are – the conditions present themselves in them, as in the paintings that Cavell discusses, "as nature's autonomy, self-sufficiency, law unto themselves." (1979a, pp. 113) It is *their* conditions that are revealed, through the removal of the beholder, as pure externality – as total thereness. That is, they reveal themselves as objects and, since these are generic objects, what they reveal is their condition (in the singular, as in *the* human condition) as objects *überhaupt,* i.e. as representatives of world or matter or "thing" as such. The "there" quality of such objects as these paintings are makes them already fully known, so that questioning our knowledge of them feels like rejecting the world.

The six paintings are in many respects different from the paintings discussed by Cavell, but, as Cavell notes,

> There may be any number of ways of acknowledging the condition of painting as total thereness – which is perhaps to say that there are any number of ways in which that condition can present itself, many different significances it may develop. For example, a painting may acknowledge its frontedness, or its finitude, or its specific thereness – that is, its presentness and your accepting it will accordingly mean acknowledging your frontedness, or directionality, or verticality toward its world, or any world – or your presentness, in its aspect of absolute hereness or nowness. (Cavell, 1979a, p. 110)

The form in which presentness presents itself in Pollock's paintings, for instance, is their flatness (a notion that Cavell adopted from the critic Clement Greenberg via Michael Fried).

> One fact of painting [that Pollock] discovered is as primitive as any: not exactly that a painting is flat, but that its flatness, together with its being of a limited extent, means that it is *totally there,* wholly open to you, absolutely in front of your senses, of your eyes, as no other form of art is. (Cavell, 1979a. p. 109)

The form in which presentness presents itself in the six paintings is through uncompromising ordinariness. They have no marks or features that set them apart as special kinds of objects – they are pretty much something as anything is something (to adopt a phrase from Donald Judd). They are totally there, absolutely in front of your eyes in the sense that they confront you with all you need to see what they are. There is no better position. They represent materiality in general, materiality as such. But at the same time, it is characteristic of all of the six paintings that they suggest action, such as sitting, lying down, or dressing.

This brings us back to the conflict between the two characteristics that were discussed earlier. On one hand, the paintings stand alone, self-sufficient and self-contained, which means that they are complete without *us* (the beholders), and on the other hand, they insist on their functionality. They present themselves as equipment (just like hammers, shoes and urinals), which means that they imply action, and, as an action implies an agent, so the beholder is implicated by the paintings. To appreciate this turn, we must consider it as a response to the isolation of autonomous art. If, in the absence of a common grammar and a shared reference to the world, art necessarily relies on its internal resources, then the six paintings (and object sculpture and single-image painting in general) respond with objects whose internal resources refer beyond themselves. By acknowledging their internal structure, the paintings acknowledge their equipmentality and, in the process, the vocabulary of formalism is transformed (without an ontological elevation). The notion of "flatness", which is inseparable from the notion of art as a special sphere that is first

and foremost concerned with its own characteristics and its own internal laws, is transformed into a support for the body. "Ironically", Eva Heisler notes about Inga Þórey's bed, "it is through the use of three-dimensional structure that the artist addresses the flatness that is considered a defining characteristic of painting as a medium." Laid out on the floor, "the mattress itself is not flat but is composed of units of differing sizes and heights", which makes it clear to the viewer that it is almost impossible to lie on it. In Baldur Geir's *Rocking Chair,* on the other hand, the flat support (the seat and back made of stretched canvas, framed as a painting) responds to the body of the beholder. And if the unwrinkled cotton in Huginn Þór's wearable clothes-paintings refers to flatness, it is also in terms of its relation to the human body (when the clothes-paintings were first shown, they were worn by actors at the vernissage and then, later, by museum guards watching over an exhibition). Hildur's dish towels have been stretched flat and framed and Einar Garibaldi's transportation crate responds perfectly to the flat canvas inside, but here the action has to do with fabrication rather than with the body, referring the beholder beyond the painting "itself" to the "extraneous" process of making it.[2]

As interactive artworks, the paintings exemplify the insistence on experience that is characteristic of object sculpture, as Rose has pointed out:

> The demand for greater and greater involvement and immediacy – by which I mean something much more serious than works that ask the viewer to "participate" in some superficial and gimmicky manner – has culminated today in the new object sculpture which makes self-referential involvement, awareness of the act of perception, and immediacy of impact absolute and central, as opposed to relative and peripheral, values. (Rose, p. 8)

2 Kristján's paintings may not address flatness or highlight fabrication but they refer to the formalist insistence that artists "safeguard their domain", to quote Greenberg, so that "the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other activity", such as music. (Greenberg, p. 101).

It is in this way that I suggest we understand the interaction with the six paintings. At the same time as they present themselves through "phenomenology of materiality", they explore phenomenology of experience. The viewer is not advised to lie down on the bed, sit in the rocking chair or to put on the clothes-paintings. Nor is the beholder offered the opportunity to weave a piece of canvas or to construct a crate. He or she is asked to *imagine* these actions – to project themselves into certain situations. (The unevenness of the bed and the angularity of the rocking-chair runners have as much to do with such experiments as with the cancellation of the objects' use. One can imagine the discomfort of the bed and the danger of rocking on those runners.)

Here we come back to Cavell, for the actions that the viewer is asked to imagine are as common and ordinary as the objects themselves. They are, in this respect, like the actions, or concepts, of thinking, believing, hoping, informing.

> Such "objects" and concepts seem quite unspecial; they are, we might say, just ordinary objects and concept of the world. If these concepts require special criteria for their application, then any concept we use in speaking about anything at all will call for criteria. (Cavell, 1979b, p. 14)

If asked to imagine "sitting" in a chair, "lying" on a bed or "wearing" clothes, you don't need to investigate to be able to respond. As opposed to planimeters and slipsticks or, to take more common equipment, an automobile, which require special training to use, all you need to do is to *recollect* how you sit, lie down or dress. The same is true of the concept of "constructing a crate" or "weaving a cloth". You may not be trained in fine carpentry or weaving but all you are asked to do is to imagine that these objects were "made". These works – Einar Garibaldi's transportation crate and Hildur's tablecloth – are not about technique but about the human ability to make something, or anything. We can compare the actions that the artists ask us to imagine to the sport of diving. It is not as if the standards for evaluating success are more stringent in diving; there are simply no comparable standards for sitting or lying – not because sitting or lying have not evolved into Olympic sports but because these are not

activities that offer themselves for evaluation of success. There is no need for special training to tell whether a person is sitting, or a manual to decide whether the person's position should rather be called lying. (It is a bit like having a toothache; you don't look in a mirror, see that you have a red patch on your cheek, look it up in a manual – as you might do to identify a deer – and infer that you do, indeed, have a toothache.)

The actions that the six paintings indicate are as common and ordinary as the objects themselves because they are the actions that the objects are made to serve, i.e. to serve the actions is, strictly, the objects' assignment. The objects and the actions develop together and it follows that to tell whether something is a chair it has to be related to human use. A bed is for lying on, a chair for sitting, clothes for wearing, urinals for urinating (if you can do it you know how). What makes a bed a bed, a chair a chair, a flag a flag, etc. is the way these objects are used. A person can sit on a bed, of course, and lie on a table but that does not make the bed a chair or the table a bed. As Cavell puts it,

> It is part of the grammar of the word "chair" that this is what we call "to sit on a chair"… That you use this object that way, sit on it that way, is our criterion for calling it a chair. You can sit on a cigarette, or a thumb tack, or on a flag pole, but not in that way… The force of such remarks is something like: If you don't know all this, and more, you don't know what a chair is; what "chair" means; what we call a chair; what it is you would be certain of (or almost certain of, or doubt very much) if you were certain (or almost certain, or doubt very much) that something is a chair. (Cavell, 1979b, p. 71)

5.

The relation of object sculptures and single-image paintings to their surroundings is always contiguous. The flag painting refers to the wall and the wall refers to the room, to the door and to the window; and the painting, the door, and the window refer to my standing (to my verticality) and looking at the painting or out the window or walking through the door. In the room are chairs and a table. I pull up a chair and sit down at the table. ("Our criteria for a thing's being a table –

part of the grammar of the word 'table' – is that *this* is what we call 'to sit at a table.' " [Cavell, 1990, p.93]) There are three of us around the table, playing cards and talking. This is our lives with objects. Objects *gather* us and they hold us apart, as Hannah Arendt wrote.

> To live together in a world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (Arendt, 1958, p.52)

How do Duchamp's ready-mades, Johns's single-image painting, Oldenburg's object sculptures and the paintings of the six Icelandic artists gather us and hold us apart? It is their nature as "generic objects" that gathers. In our agreement in the judgment that "this (object) is a chair" and "this (action) is to sit on a chair" we are gathered, and we are separated at the same time by the possibility that this might not be so. If I say this is a chair, I do not do it as an expert but as a member of "the human group as such, the human being generally". (Cavell, 1979b, p. 18) I take myself to do so "as a representative human". There is no authority but I, myself, needed. That this is a chair is not stated out of arrogance but in the spirit of humility – "at least I know this; I am human after all". In the absence of a common grammar of representation, this is the extent of what the six paintings can claim. It is not much but it is not trivial either. Behind such claims is a call to community that seemed lost. All the paintings have to do is to offer themselves as representatives for the whole world, speaking for humankind, if only on such issues as what is called sitting on a chair, lying on a bed, wearing clothes. They speak of life beyond the frame.

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Margrét Elísabet Ólafsdóttir

From Object to Unobject

The question of the connection between art and the technical[1] is not a simple one, not least because there are some who believe that it is more or less misconceived. The domains of art and the technical, it may be thought, are simply different. Nevertheless, we will here ask how the interaction between the art and the technical affects the realization of artworks and our understanding of the concept of art. The realization of art in artworks was long thought to be limited to sculpture and painting. Paintings and sculptures are immobile, tangible things, formed out of solid materials and unchanging, save over a very long period. But contemporary artworks do not necessarily take the form of sculptures or paintings. They can take the form of happenings, installations or virtual art. This means that artworks can be immaterial, intangible, discontinuous, ephemeral and plastic, the realization of the work being temporary and the work itself mutable. Artists are no longer specialists in sculpture or painting but make use of various objects, tools and equipment. Even "paintings" are no longer paintings but rather installations or animations that are not merely visual but also auditory. We can of course simply take this as a fact and can view these works without wondering about how this transformation in the nature of artworks became possible. We can decide simply to point to the history of art and trace its forward development. We can decide simply to accept or reject installations, videos and virtual works, but in doing so we would lose sight of that which has affected, and still affects, the changes we have mentioned.

Tumi Magnússon and Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir have in common that they began their artistic careers as painters; but in later years

1 Translator's note: As the author later points out, the Icelandic word *tækni*, translated here as "the technical", does not correspond in meaning to either "technique" or "technology" as those words are used in English. She goes on to discuss Heidegger's account of *Teknik* (translated into Icelandic as *tækni*) which is commonly translated into English as "technology". But this common translation is itself misleading, given what Heidegger has in mind in speaking of *Teknik*. In order to render the author's discussion of *tækni* into English in a way that makes sense, and to link that intelligibly to her discussion og *Teknik* in Heidegger (for which the same word, *tækni*, is used), the unusual translation strategy of speaking of "the technical" in English has been adopted.

photography and videos have played a wider role in their work. For both of them, the change has been gradual, a kind of slow evolution, which appears self-evident, even while it provokes questions. A painting is an object, but as soon as it stops being an object it becomes intangible and plastic. The work, *Puddles*, by Tumi Magnússon, is an immaterial, digital work which is about the materiality of the painting and shows paint falling onto a surface that is already covered with paint splashes. In *Weather Song*, by Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir, it is loose patches of enigmatic origin which appear to spring out from the corner of the wall onto which they are projected and then fade away, like currents in water. These works are stored on video disks and as software, where they can be updated; and they are also dynamic and plastic in the sense that they can adjust themselves both to wall and screen. The pictures themselves cannot be viewed without the proper equipment, unlike traditional paintings, which, as objects, are stable presences. Sound tracks play important roles in both works, although *Weather Song* does not need to be accompanied by sound. In *Puddles*, sound plays a crucial role, since the pictures appear on multiple screens that are connected together by sounds that move through space and challenge the idea of the spacial boundaries of the picture and frame.

Spatial boundaries are left aside in *On Everything* by Páll Thayer, a work originally created for the Internet and intended to be viewed by means of a web browser. There, each picture appears only once as a modification of pictorial material that users have entered into an open database on flickr.com. The work itself is stored on a web server and can appear simultaneously on many screens, whatever their location. The existence of the work is thus diffuse, in the sense that the same material is simultaneously accessible in many different places. Exactly the opposite is the case with *Rearview Mirror v. 2.0 (for Walter Disney and Martin Heidegger*, by Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson, who records pictures right in the exhibition hall itself. The pictures are stored in computer memory until they are retrieved and projected onto the wall. The recordings made at each exhibition are stored only for the duration of that exhibition, so that the work is always new each time that it is set up, unlike *Petsound*, which retains recordings from all of the places where it has been exhibited. We maintain here that these works *are* works although their realization is not steadily "at work"

(Agamben, 1996), but discontinuous, and the work itself preserved in the form of digital information. They have in common that they are dependent upon technical equipment that is used only to present the work and provide the setting for their appearance. These works are presented by artists as art; and if the artist is the one who defines art, then we must ask whether art is, after all, not dependent upon the technical, which has been thought of as its opposite. If the technical is thought to be opposed to art, it is easy to push it aside and treat it as irrelevant; but if its role in art is recognized, then a door opens for understanding the connections between the technical, art and works of art. The technical as such is the domain of the engineer, but that does not mean that only engineers can understand it. Ignorance leads only to emnity, and there is a big difference between raising questions and remaining under the sway of admiration or antipathy.

1 Art and the technical

The Icelandic word for the technical, *tækni*, exists only in the singular. *Tæknifræði*, a word corresponding to the English term *technology*, has not come into common usage as a way of distinguishing between the new and the old, as it has in a number of other languages. But that is not the main point, and indeed it is unclear how that would add to our understanding of the connection between the word and what it signifies. The word *tækni* has existed in Icelandic since the Middle Ages but did not come into common use before the beginning of the 20th century (Ritmálasafn Orðabókar Háskólans). In everyday use the word has various connotations and thus lacks a clear meaning. *Tækni* can refer to tools and equipment, hardware and software and is also used to refer to organized methods, systems and frameworks. Under the heading of *tækni* we find tools and known methods for their use, but also administrative rules and institutions that are thought to be essential while at the same time being criticized for assuming a life of their own. (Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2010, pp. 23–25). These various meanings are familiar to speakers of Icelandic and thus most of them think that they understand what is being talked about when *tækni* is spoken of. It can thus appear to be unnecessary to return to ancient Greece in order to understand the notion of *tækni* in contemporary language. But the origin of the word in Indo-European languages can be traced to the Greek work *technê*, which can mean

both art and the technical. The common root of these two notions indicates that they were at one time conceptually one and were later distinguished, although this is uncertain. *Technê* became *ars* in Latin, whence we get the word *art*, which is *list* in Icelandic. In Plato and Aristotle, *technê* designates craft and skill, whether in ironworking, healing or sculpture. We may thus be tempted to conclude that art and the technical are in reality one and the same, but if that is the case, then perhaps the same could be said of healing and ironworking.

In earlier times, "artists" were those who possessed practical knowledge in a particular craft-domain. The craft might be a kind of handwork, and the works of handworkers–whether artists or blacksmiths–were judged by one and the same standard: a work was deemed good if it performed its proper function well. That meant that attention was focused upon the work itself rather than upon the person who made it, although craftsmen were certainly recognized to be better or worse. Within what we now call the arts, handwork and practical skill retained their status while other crafts became mechanized, although mechanization influenced both production methods and practical skills even in the arts. It is well known that various other social factors affected the development of the arts, but what is most important for us the present context is that the belief in the individual grew (Zilzel, 1992), and the artwork achieved the special status of an individually authored creation. Greek philosophy distinguished between theoretical knowledge and practical skill; the latter has as its object the production of some work. Although the ancient Greeks did not confuse artworks with other kinds of objects, the status of artworks was influenced in later times by industrialization. The change did not take place all at once, but Kant's theories had an important impact. Kant defines the artwork in terms of its aesthetic function and status and at the same time makes a clear distinction between the skills of the artist and those of the craftsman. Crafts are based upon transmissible rules, but although both artists and craftsmen employ such rules, there is a basic difference between them, according to Kant. The artist works freely, in contrast to the craftsman, who works mechanically and produces merchandise for the marketplace. The work of the craftsman can, indeed, represent art, but never fine art. The fine arts, unlike the crafts, are not dependent upon practical skills that are governed by rules. Fine arts, such as

painting and sculpture, are built upon innate talents that the artist develops through a long period of study and training. The artist develops his *craft*, but the principles of his *art* inhere in him and in his special talents that render him capable of creating works of transcendent value. Such works appear to be natural as they seem to be produced effortlessly. Effort is characteristic of work, but art is the product of pleasure and the source of pleasure in the viewer. Those artists whose talents allow them to create "effortless" works are called, by Kant, "geniuses". Kant does not maintain that such geniuses need not acquire the principles of their craft but rather insists that these principles of genius are not transmissible. Genius is bound to the individual; it is unique, and thus the works of the genius must necessarily be unique. Thus does Kant free the artist from unconditional subjection to the skills of his craft and at the same time creates the historical split between the artistic and the technical (Kant, § 43–46). The genius must certainly make use of the technical, but he also possesses gifts that are unique to him. Thus the genius's possession of the technical is thus only in part the result of learning. What distinguishes the artistic genius from other artists, and makes him unique, are his talents, which are innate and imbue his work with the appearance of natural spontaneity. The artist who is original is true to himself, and thus originality is made a standard of art. What Kant failed to realize was that standard that he sets marks the limit of all standards, because the demand for originality means that each artist has to redefine art from the ground up, on his own terms. All aesthetic judgments contribute to this redefinition, and thus the viewer becomes a participant in the creation of the work of art.

Kant did not underestimate the extent to which artists needed to acquire practical skills that could be transmitted, but he did emphasize the idea that the unique talents of the genius were not transmissible. Kant did not invent the idea of genius (Zilsel, 1992), but as this idea acquired more weight attention was drawn from the work of art to the artist. The genius is not only talented, but the work should spring from his inner self, his inspiration and passion. Such characteristics were thought to be antithetical to art in the time of the ancient Greeks, who thought of the knowledge and skill that they called *technê* as the essence of art. *Technê* was, in other words, a particular kind of knowledge, built upon experience that could

be taught and transmitted, and was peculiar to the production of a certain kind of object. Those who possessed *technê* not only knew how things were made but were able also to make them (Feenberg, 2003). The Greeks could therefore not conceive of *technê* apart from production, which they called *poiesis*. The latter word is closely related to *poesia*, which means literary fabrication, whether of poetry or of lies. This ambiguity is an interesting subject in itself but will not be further discussed here. We will instead look at the ancient Greek distinction between two sorts of production: on the one hand, the production of things that produce themselves and on the other hand, human production. Self-production is what occurs in nature, while the productions of man are the result of artifice. By attributing natural characteristics to artworks and distinguishing them from objects, their status is rendered different from all other things. One might think that the special status of artworks is thereby insured, but in fact the opposite is true.

2 Heidegger's question

The question is what this special status has to do with the technical. If the technical consists first and foremost in transmissible knowledge, while the work of art unique and bound to its author, do not the paths of the artistic and the technical go in different directions? If so, could that not lead us into a dilemma in trying to bring them together, following the lead of Heidegger, who raised the question of the technical while speculating upon the role of art in the technical age? (Séris, 2000, p. 284). Heidegger asks whether we can be certain of a correct correspondence between reality and the meaning that we give to "the technical" *(Teknik)* in common speech. In other words, he distinguishes between reality and appearance and is not prepared to accept the idea that the technical is to be defined solely in terms of tools. That would lead only to an historical explanation, which he considers not to be wrong, but incomplete, for such an explanation would not enable us to understand the nature of the technical as it presently exists. Heidegger chooses rather to ignore the development of the technical, directing his attention instead to its reality in the historical present (Modernity), especially in the form of telecommunications and cybernetics, which have made possible automated machines and interactive communication

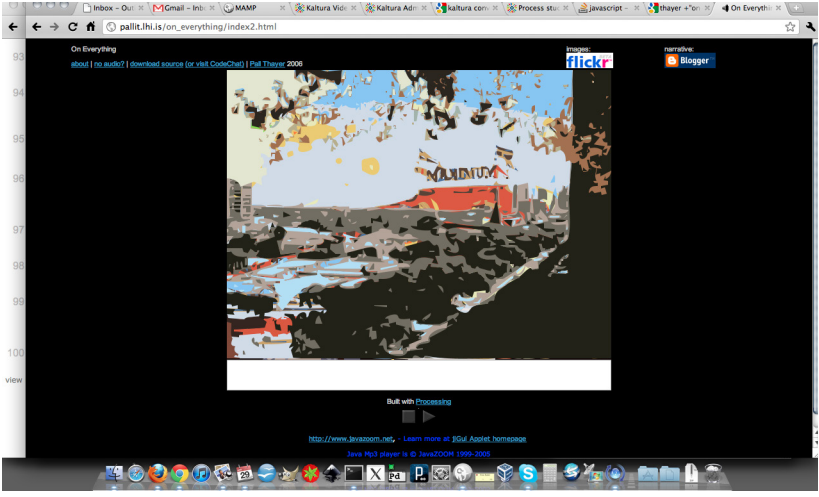
systems. According to Heidegger, giving an account of the historical development from the tool in the hand to the computer program in virtual reality would not be enough to explain the difference between a paintbrush and a computer painting program. He thinks that although there is a fundamental difference between the brush and the program, that difference would not be revealed by merely examining these tools. He focuses his attention upon the nature of the technical, which has no relation to the technical itself, by which he means that the technical is not the tool, although it is *also* a tool. Here Heidegger returns to the Greek word *technê* and says that the kind of theoretical knowledge that Plato wanted to distinguish from practical knowledge is present in the technical as it is in our time. In Plato's view, only philosophical discursive thinking was capable of discovering reality, which meant that only such thinking could approach the truth. Heidegger, on the other hand, maintains that it is possible to find the truth in things and that, therefore, knowledge is a part of *technê*, which makes possible the unveiling of truth. *Unveiling* or *disclosure* is an important concept for Heidegger since it relates to a truth that is hidden from us but is nevertheless discoverable in things. This idea opposes the Platonic idea that all appearance is deceiving. To make his point, Heidegger refers back the theory of the four causes that participate in the make-up of things: matter, form, "maker" and purpose. These causes are interdependent, but Heidegger says is that what matters most is the purpose for which the object is made. What he means is that it is not until the work is completed and the object taken into use that it begins to make a difference. He takes the example of a silver chalice and says that it is neither the silver nor the form that is the chalice, nor is it the silversmith who matters, but is rather the fact that the chalice is used in religious ceremonies. The knowledge resides in the chalice and thus the disclosure is the premise of the thing that lifts the veil from the truth. The truth is that which is; and thus the truth that opens to us in the thing can tell us about our being in the world.

The example of the chalice is important if we want to understand the change that Heidegger thinks has come about with the advent of the technical as it presently exists and why he doubts that it is capable of unveiling the truth and throwing light on reality. After reconnecting theoretical knowledge with the production of objects,



Tumi Magnússon 1957, Puddles, 2006

Video and sound installation



Páll Thayer 1968, On Everything, 2006

Internet art project



Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir 1950, Weather Song, 2011

Video and sound installation



Haraldur Jónsson 1961, TSOYL2367, 2005

C-print, 25 x 38 cm



Þóra Sigurðardóttir 1954, Fly, 2006

Digital photograph, 80 x 60 cm







Ólöf Nordal 1961, Iceland Specimen Collection – Sleipnir, Cyclope, Janus, 2003

Diasec, triptych, 80 x 480 cm



Pétur Thomsen 1973, Imported Landscape, 2005

Laserchrome print, diasec, 110 x 134 cm



Hrafnkell Sigurðsson 1963, Building 11, 2003

Photograph, 120 x 140 cm



Bragi Þór Jósefsson 1961, Discotheque Top of the Rock, 2006

Photograph



Sigurður Guðjónsson 1975, Insight, 2011

Video (still)



Matthew Barney 1967, Drawing Restraint 18, 2010

Documentary Photograph
Photo: Chris Seguine



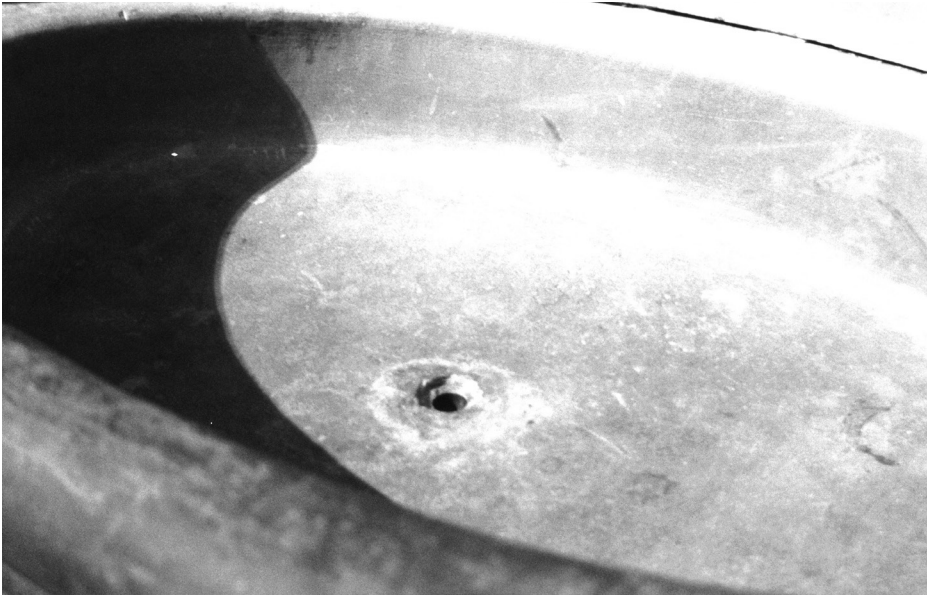
Karen Agnete Þorarinsson 1903–1992, Ólafur liljurós, 1941

Oil on wood panel



Halldór Ásgeirsson 1956, Installation, Reykjavík Art Museum, 2011

Flags on poles.



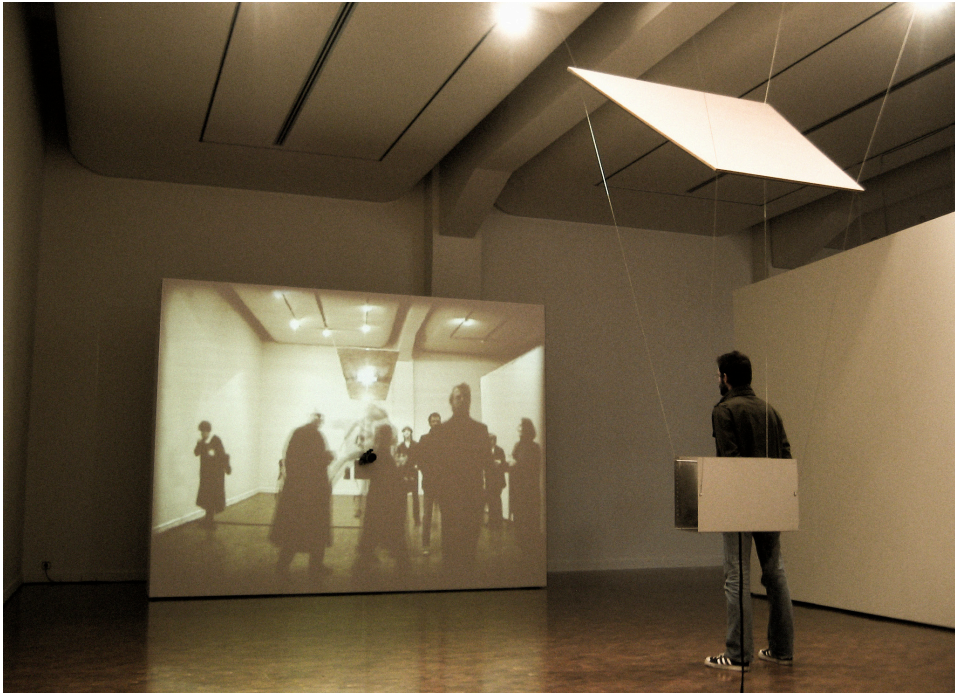
Hulda Stefánsdóttir 1972, A Hole in Your Time, 2005

Detail of an installation, Brooklyn, N.Y.



Elías B. Halldórsson 1930–2007, Under the Cross, 1990

Woodcut, 25 x 24.5 cm



Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson 1971, Rearview Mirror v. 2.0 (for Walter Disney and Martin Heidegger), 2005

Video installation

Heidegger can claim that they are both parts of the nature of the technical that disclose the truth. This, he feels, makes it possible for us to understand the nature of the technical, which in our time is integrated with scientific knowledge. Modern science does not satisfy itself with reliance upon theoretical hypotheses but seeks proven truths. The natural sciences provide an example of this, recognizing only knowledge that is demonstrable through calculation. Calculation provides information concerning the resources to be found in nature. Knowledge of these resources renders them available for use, like any other instrument. That which is available asks to be used, and it is therefore important to utilize natural resources. However, the technical has not only to do with utilization, but its possibilities also have an impact upon the application of science. This means that knowledge belongs to the technical, and it also tells us that we live in a world that accepts only the sort of knowledge that can be demonstrated by means of measurements. This entails that we have an interest only in the sort of knowledge that can be demonstrated by means of calculation. When it comes to the connection between the knowledge and the technical, the technical of our times is capable only of disclosing that knowledge that is already present. This means that what opens is already available to us, and Heidegger therefore concludes that the technical as it presently exists brings out only that which is not hidden. This renders man uncertain about his place in the world, the opposite of what might have been expected if it is thought that numerical facts provide certainty. This uncertainty arises because in the world of *technical science* a complex system of combined factors (*Ge-stell*) is generated that no individual can comprehend, never mind control. Thus, one can take the view that *technical science* controls man rather than man controlling it. Heidgger is not the only one to have noticed this, but his analysis raises questions about our attitude toward the concept of truth and our connection with the world. This is where art enters the picture as the final stronghold of truth. Heidegger thinks that the technical of the present day, which we have called *technical science*, prevents man from understanding his being in the world, because he has lost his connection with the form of the technical that allowed him that understanding, namely craft skills. In the world of technical science, it is not only that the material world has become all powerful, but that objects lose their purpose once their

connection with the pro-duction of truth is broken. Not only do we no longer know how objects are made, but they have no other purpose than to be available. This means that all objects are ready to be used and that using them becomes an end in itself.

3 The purpose of the object

It is a limitation upon art that technical science has such a grip on mankind that we seem compelled to bend to its will. The effect of this is that we feel powerless and thus that we need not bear any responsibilities. If this is correct, it seems that Heidgger has pushed us up against a wall by representing our situation as hopeless. But he does not actually give up all hope, for he points out that only through realizing what our situation really is does it become possible for us to react to it. (Heidegger, 1958, p. 48) He believes that art makes this possible, but at the same time requires art to possess the beauty that appears when truth is revealed. Here, Heidegger creates a new problem, for according to his definition of the technical of the present, the art of transmission, communication and information cannot be the art of the beautiful, being incapable of bringing forth the truth. Thus, to a certain extent he doubts the possibility of art in our time and does not suppose that the art of technical science can disclose knowledge and truth–not only because knowledge is already present but because it is under constant re-examination and therefore unstable. This means that we human beings live in a world that has distanced itself from Truth with a capital "T"; but it is not certain that it is this ultimate truth that we seek. It is, however, clear that the technical and the scientific of our time have played their part in creating the world of the available, which calculates the value of everything on the basis of those resources that they supply into the economy. Such calculations are also made about art, without asking whether, or in what way, art participates in shaping our world view and that world in which we live. The content of art is thought to be irrelevant and it is even doubted whether art has any content (Ellul, 1980; Agamben, 1996). Thus, the question we must ask is not whether there is a connection between art and the technical, but whether we can conceive of a technical world without art.

All things change and decay and are in that sense unstable, like life itself, which has a beginning and an end. Nevertheless, things, with

their purposes and aims, can provide us with certainty, according to Heidegger. Artworks lack utility and are thus best suited to this, since they are not destroyed by use. The work of art is "at work", or active, in the sense that it is continually stable in its presence (Agamben, 1996, p. 87). Mass-produced objects are available and can therefore not provide us with certainty in the same manner as artworks, which bring forth the truth. But, if art is to disclose the truth, must it not be "at work"; and does that not mean that the work of art must be continually present? The answer to this question is not simple, and there is thus ample reason to wonder whether art can survive in the world of technical science as anything but a vanished memory.

Agamben thinks that with automated machinery man has lost his status as a producer (cf. *poiesis*) and has begun instead to define himself on the basis of utility (*praxis*). (Agamben, 1996, pp. 91–92) Both *poiesis and praxis* are forms of action, but they differ in their purposes and aims. *Poiesis* produces knowledge and truth and is therefore the pro-duction of presence, but *praxis* is driven by the will to action, in the sense of work and activity. While pro-duction discloses the truth, utility is connected with work that is an end in itself, its role being to preserve life by fulfilling our most urgent needs. To be able to pursue other projects, either leisure time or slaves are needed. The artist, who produces works that have no utility and do not fulfill our urgent needs is, in that sense, free of work. In Modernity, men are defined in terms of their work, and that makes the artist an outlaw from society. Calculating the value of the artist's work in economic terms gives him a new access to society, but at the same time affects the status of his works of art. Although it would be interesting to consider these matters further, we will here keep to Agamben's discussion, in which he maintains, like Heidegger, that pro-duction provides man with freedom and certainty. When pro-duction is lost, we cease to ask *what is?* but ask rather *how is that done?* The emphasis moves from the work to the process, from the artwork to the artist, and thus to how he expresses his uniqueness by means of the artistic creative process, which takes the place of pro-duction. The actions of the artist take on independent significance, and the significance of these actions appears clearly in the artist, who is driven onward by the will and yearning that characterize life. Actions that are characterized by the will to live, and by the creative

force that resembles natural creation, have no other purpose than to sustain themselves.

4 The process

When we turn our attention to the creative process itself, the work – and whether it is a stable and completed object – appears less important. But we can also think about whether a work of art which is "continually stable in its presence" would have to be an object that is stable in the sense of being stationary. Here we could talk about artistic disciplines other than painting, but we will not consider them here. Instead, we will ask whether stationary works may possibly belong to other times that built their world views upon the idea of stability, like the world view of the ancient Greeks (Berger, 1988, p. 107). It is sometimes said that it is best to let the past remain in the past, as it is not considered wholesome to dwell upon the past; but we should keep in mind that the past is part of the present, as a memory of what has gone by. In that way, the vanished world of ideas of the ancient Greeks can continue to influence our understanding of the world, and our expectations of it, although our world view is totally unlike theirs. The past disappears but continues nevertheless to be a part of us, because we analyze the past in the present without necessarily distinguishing between them. The question of being and time is basic in Heidegger's philosophy. But it is also the subject of the work *Rearview Mirror* by Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson. If time is a part of us, then we can only perceive it by stepping outside of it. But that is in fact impossible without abandoning time, and with it, being. The only way to perceive time without abandoning it is to identify changes in the form of remnants and traces of the past. The artwork is in its way a sign of what was, and still is, and can thus connect the past with the present. Whether it is necessary for a work to be continually «at work» in order to give man an understanding of his status as a being in time is the question projected by *Rearview Mirror,* which shows us the past in the present.

But before we go further into *Rearview Mirror*, we must pause to consider the crucial creative process that directs attention to the author and his efforts. It is not enough to know how the work is made once the creative process has become visible and has even become a work in itself. A photograph by Hans Namuth shows the way in

which Jackson Pollock let paint drip onto a canvas lying on the floor of his studio. It documents an event that has already passed, but it also makes the creative process a part of the photographic work. A similar process becomes part of the experience of the works of Georges Mathieu and Yves Klein, which made exhibits of the creative process. Although Mathieu used a theater and Klein a traditional gallery, the making of the final painting becomes an action that is carried out in front of the viewers. The paintings, *Les Capétiers partout* (1954) and *Antropométrie* (1960), are in this sense signs of events that have occurred; but they are at the same time "active" as paintings. They thereby differ from a documentary film of an event where it is possible to "re-live" what has happened as if one had been present originally, for there the medium forceably reminds the viewer that it is transmitting something that he has missed out upon. The event itself appears like a rupture in mundane experience and writes itself into the pages of history as an anomaly that acquires meaning through the impact that it has upon the future.

When the artist performs before viewers, the creative process becomes the center of gravity of the work, and the need for the object disappears, according to Jack Burnham. He thought that signs that the need for the object was disappearing were already present in the ready-mades of Duchamp, which were not tied to any single object, and the paintings of Moholy-Nagy, which he ordered by telephone from a factory (Burnham, 1968). The object itself has not disappeared, but it may be exchanged for a similar object. It has become part of an environment in which particular objects become less important than the relationship that they have to their surroundings. The work itself is an environment that can include manufactured objects, but its meaning derives from their internal inter-relationships. It makes less difference who makes the objects than the way in which they are put together. The space into which the work is set also becomes a part of the work and influences the inter-relationship among the objects. Burnham maintained that in such environmental works, which we may also call "installations", the artist's decisions made more of a difference than the composite objects. This may be true of the installations of Margrét H. Blöndal, in which the position of objects in space and the connections among them are no less important than the objects that are present.

Burnham interpreted this change in the presentation of artworks as a shift away from an object-centered culture in the direction of a system-centered culture, that takes biological systems as its model. Such systems are shaped by the interconnections and interactions that are internal to them. The stability of the system depends upon the system's the ways in which it responds to new situations. Individual objects in such system-works need not be artificial, since the system can also contain human beings and natural things, as in *The Interactive Plant Growing,* by Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, or in *Genesis*, by Eduardo Kac. The manifest form of the system is ephemeral but the decisions concerning its mode of exhibition can influence the extent to which it is dependent upon a particular space. The artist can decide set up the work in such a way that it is so completely bound to a specific space so that it can be difficult to set it up again without reforming it completely. *Setpiece*, by Sirra Sigrún Sigurðardóttir was originally made for the gallery Torstrasse 111 in Berlín, and it shows a video that is projected into the space where it was recorded. The video recording is of the space itself, but the picture has been subjected to changes prior to being projected on the wall. The muted colors could be from old paint on the walls and steps, although we can see that they have been added to the recording. Within the projection is a picture of the shadow of a pillar, that is both present in front of the projection and in the picture "as itself" and as a shadow of itself. *Setpiece* is bound to this particular space, but is at the same time a multi-layered space that erases the distinctions between the real space and the picture, the present and the past, and renders the boundary between object and object indefinite. We may think that Sirra Sigrún wants above all to confuse us by getting us to doubt our ability to perceive space, but in fact her main interest is in the status of art and artworks, which it is not possible to measure within the space of knowledge.

Once the work of art begins to build upon a system of relationships, the role of the viewer becomes more important than the object. This means that the role of the viewer is no longer to judge the work from without but rather his participation in the creation of the work becomes a part of its activity. One might say that he is no longer able to judge the work, at least as long as he remains a part of it. Equipment that can do everything at once–record, produce and

show pictures–allows the artist to integrate the viewer unwittingly into the work (Duguet, 2002). *Setpiece* is a recording in space, but the picture is recorded before the work is displayed and thereafter is projected onto the wall, with the viewer standing at a distance but at the same time immediately aware of its position in space. Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson goes even further in *Rearview Mirror*, where the work is completely dependent upon equipment that constructs the framework for the work and for the presence of the viewer in space. The work itself is plastic, in the sense that it will come into being wherever the equipment is set up and can easily adapt itself to a new space. The work is not physical, with the exception of the system equipment, which consists of a camcorder, computer equipment and a projector. One might say that the work is empty to begin with but comes to life as soon as it senses the presence of a viewer in its space. The camcorder detects the viewer and projects a picture of him onto the wall, but not until a minute after the recording begins. Thus, the viewer has to pause by the work in order to realize that it has information about his presence on site. But *Rearview Mirror* does more than to show the viewer a picture of himself and make him aware of his own being. It also shows pictures of people who do not share the real space occupied by the viewer but only the space of the picture, which is, however, a picture of the very space where the viewer is located. The pictures that are put together with the picture of the viewer were taken of other viewers who had previously passed through the space of the work and are now retrieved by the viewer's own presence in order to share the space and time of the picture. Ragnar Helgi has said that *Rearview Mirror* slows down time so that the viewer can peek back into the recent past, which makes him conscious of his status as a temporal being. The presence, in the *Rearview Mirror* picture, of others who are absent from the real space also makes the viewer who is at the moment present in that space conscious of those who have passed through ahead of him. It is the computer software that registers, stores and sorts all of the recordings, but the condition for being able to retrieve them is the presence of someone in the space of the work. The viewer's participation in the work gives it the flavor of an amusement park where you can break into the game with philosophical notions of time over time.

5 The screen and the code

The equipment in Ragnar Helgi's *Rearview Mirror* belongs to the technical science that is dominant in contemporary society. Electronic communication and information technology can gather information, record and classify data and project them in the same space where the recording is made–or at another location in a different space. The internet work, *Eternal Sunrise*, by Ragnar Helgi and Páll Thayer exploits technical resources to collect live recordings of sounds from pre-selected localities at the time of local sunrise, sending them to the location where the work has been set up. This is made possible by a complex system of equipment and electronic signal transmissions that connects together machines, people and information. The information is not tangible but is converted into a language that the equipment understands. In communications technology, this language is built upon the transmission of electronic signals with electronic waves of a particular frequency. The computer software depends upon a programming language that travels through electronic circuits. What makes the programming language unlike a traditional language is that it treats all data as code. The code is composed of number sequences that are constructed out of two digits. The code makes it possible to shorten the sequences, although some codes are more complex than others, and thus programming elements can be layered, one on top of another, until the original number sequence has become deeply buried. That which makes the use of computers unusual is that the ordinary computer user does not need to have command of any programming language, although that is the only sort of language that the computer understands. This is the reason why computers are popular and also accounts for the fact that the knowledge upon which computer programs are built is not present in the user but in the equipment and devices that are of little use without the programs. Software is the brain of the machine and controls the processing of information that the user can enter into the computer memory and can retrieve through commands.

Data and information appear pictorially on the computer screen, which facilitates the interaction between the user and the program. This means that in fact computer users use code on a daily basis without necessarily realizing that all of the commands that are sent from a keyboard or a mouse are coded. As they may rely upon images

on the screen, the users see neither the code nor the actions of the program, but only graphic interpretations of them. Screen images are pictorial manifestations of coded commands, images that free the users from the necessity of learning how to program. To facilitate the interaction between users and programs, the graphic presentation is built upon familiar symbolic images, or icons, that help users to decide which commands they should choose. The symbolic images may be of file folders or paint brushes, but they may also be logos of the various companies that produce the computer programs. Here, each item refers to an action that may be performed by moving the cursor and clicking on the mouse. The characteristics and behavior of each symbol are pre-defined and thus the commands can only result in actions that the program has been told that it can perform. The only way to have influence upon these actions is to change the program. The basic idea behind open source software is that the user can participate in its development. Páll Thayer views computer codes as media that may be shaped by materials, and he has thought long and hard about the fact that most programs are closed and their codes hidden from the user. Páll has focused upon various programming languages such as *Perl*, *Processing* and *Pure Data*, which he uses to create works on and for the Internet. The code for these works is open and accessible, and it is therefore possible to process new material out of it. The code plays an important role in *On Everything*, where it is used to retrieve and work with materials from the Internet image bank, flickr.com. Anyone can upload photographs to flickr and anyone can view them. Páll exploits these possibilities by letting the code review all of the pages that share pictorial material on flickr. The pages then go through a Java application that gives life to the images by "painting" them in real time on the computer screen. The artist thus affects the work at the beginning and gives it commands, but thereafter the work sees to itself, so to speak. The pictures that appear to the visitors to the home page of the work are similar to pictures that are painted-by-number, which gives *On Everything* a popular flavor while at the same time making reference to the works of Warhol and Lichtenstein. As the program draws an image, its form becomes increasingly indistinct, and it is therefore not possible either to identify the original picture or to trace its origin. The pictures are accompanied by sound, so while the code recreates the picture, the viewer can hear a computerized voice

reading random texts taken from the most recent blog entries on blogger.com. The flat and monotonous computerized voice, generated by the code changing a text into sound, emphasizes the fact that the computer understands nothing of what it is reading and is unaware of the meaning of the words.

On Everything recreates itself in the same sense as the geyser, Strokkur, is forever changing while remaining always the same. No picture is retrieved more than once, and although each picture is unique, it loses its value as a prototype, since the pictures disappear as quickly as they appear. As all the pictures are created by the same code, each is a reminder of the others. *On Everything* reflects a constant flow of new information on the Internet and the fact that any personal information posted there becomes thereby the property of all other Internet users. *On Everything* is made from material that is only accessible online and lives independently in cyberspace, where anyone can call it up at any time on a computer screen at home by entering its web address into a browser. The condition for viewing the work is Internet access and a browser. The work is located online in public space that erases all distances. It can appear in many places simultaneously, which means that its existence is not tied to any given space. Moreover, its existence is diffuse, and its activity is a flow that is theoretically unstoppable as long as users continue to add pictures to flickr and create posts on blogger.[2]

6 Objects and unobjects

Traditional paintings are stationary, material and continually present. *On Everything* has the appearance of a painting, but there is disagreement about whether we can call a picture that constantly appears and disappears a painting. The static has given way to the real movement that artists have attempted to interpret on a stationary surface. Þorvaldur Skúlason portrayed the streaming motion and constant flow in an abstract painting of the river, Ölfusá, and Marcel Duchamp used moving picture frames as a model for his interpretation of a period of time in *Nu descendant un escalier*. Human bodily movement on the way down a stair exhibits a continuous sequence of events that is difficult to portray on a

2 The word "lag", in Icelandic can mean either a song or a layer.

stationary surface, except by repeating the form that you want to show as moving from place to place. This recreates a course of events on a surface that is static and immobile.

Guðrún Kristjánsdóttir is preoccupied with the effects of weather on the formation of the landscape. The snow patches that characterize her paintings refer to the transformation that occurs in the spring thaws when the winter snows begin to fall from the mountain slopes. The snow cover retreats and leaves behind patches in the clefts and gullies in the cliffs and slopes, as the melted snow collects in the channels and leaves a trace. In her older works one sees horizons defined by mountain ranges, but with time her focus has continually narrowed. Mountain slopes and close-up views of the white patches that remain on the slopes with the arrival of the thaws are her true subjects. Retreating snow is the sign of warming and melting as the frost leaves the ground, and is thus a sign of transition. Guðrún's paintings are physical and static, and yet she cannot resist giving them the appearance of instability and change by playing with transparent paints that transmit light. The light easily changes the color of the underlying surface of the works, and one may therefore say that the changeable weather has taken control of the paintings.

Each new work is a continuation of the previous work, but the use of cameras and camcorders have worked to narrow Guðrún's focus. The photographs or parts of them can serve as prototypes for paintings, and a painting for a photograph that is then scanned into a computer where it is broken down and changed into a moving picture. One picture disappears into another, although the patches that tie the works together persist. Guðrún's paintings thus acquire a second life beyond the canvas, in videos and movies, and as photographs, graphics, and wall and window paintings. The subject-matter calls for a multi-faceted realization, since computer processing and video recording make it possible to capture real movement and portray process.

Weather Song is a work that has been exhibited in several versions, being plastic and easy to adapt to each exhibition space. The projector is at the center of the installation and displays light patches passing by like scenery seen through the window of a moving car. The video challenges the stability of the painting and pushes it into motion. The time frame of the picture is rather short but it does not show real change but rather the horizontal movement of forms on the wall

that travel back and forth from one corner to another. The picture is in black and white, but the white color is based upon snow forms that appear as rays of light on a black background. The Icelandic title of this work, *Veðurlag*, involves a play on words that refers both to layers of snow and the method of painting in layers. Hróðmar Ingi Sigurbjörnsson has composed music for this work, based upon old poetic tunes *(stemmur),* to which Steindór Andersen chants with ballad verses *(rímur)*. The music, the verses and the motion refer to the journey of someone who sets off on a walk across the country, humming to himself to kill time. Opposite the projection is another wall with a painted mountainside over which passes the same pattern of light that is seen in the projection; this moving pattern is reflected onto the wall painting by a glass mounted on the projection wall. The work is layered in time, space and form, and the painting has become an environment in motion, with the viewer at its center. The connection of man and nature with the cycle of life is the core of the content of this work.

Tumi Magnússon's work has also undergone various changes, from picture-series to wall pieces, videos and photographs. Nevertheless, Tumi has always concentrated upon the basic characteristics of the painting, which are hue, line, pigment and the two-dimensional surface. The paint itself is a liquid material without shape, and, as Tumi removes the outlines from objects, the colors become mere surface coverings and the boundaries between the colors are made indistinct. The focus is upon formless hues and gradations of color that fade out and recede or change through contact with reciprocal influences. Two things are excluded from these works: distinct lines and perimeters. The line provides shape, but in Tumi's works there is only flatness in the sense that it is not possible to distinguish objects as such. The sole exception to this are the works that depend upon mechanical recordings, but in them, objects are either flattened out or their outlines blurred, so that the object itself is barely recognizable. Tumi's works can be picture-series tying together many individual paintings through imaginary chemical reactions, while others suggest a merging within the same surface. The monochromatic paintings in, *Brain Tissue and Red Wine* which are exhibited in a straight row, show a spectrum of change from pale pink to wine red, while in *Raw and Cooked Egg White* we see golden shapes of undetermined origin

surrounded by pale gray tones. Here, the intention is evidently to suggest the occurance of a chemical change. The indistinct outlines remind one of blurred photographs and give objects the appearance of weightlessness. It may seem at first that Tumi's works pertain solely to the picture surface, but the connection of the colors with external reality is always indicated by the titles of the works, which can be straightforwardly descriptive but are never without humor.

If we consider paintings as objects, the true disappearance of the object would be when the canvas disappears and we are left with color on the wall. In *Hen shit and Heroin* (two things that have in common only that their names begin with "H"), yellow color is thickly painted across the center of the wall. The color is strongest at one end and becomes fainter toward the corner, eventually fading out on the adjoining wall. In *Joris and Palina* yellow-brown tones, reaching from floor to ceiling, become stronger as they approach, from both sides, the corner of two walls. In both works, the frame has disappeared, and as the edges are indistinct, one may say that the boundaries of the work have disappeared as well. In *Camomile Tea and Cell Culture Medium*, two colors meet at the center of the canvas where they fade into one another. All of these experiments with chemical reactions and mergings of colors and liquids acquire a new dimension in the video, *Sips*, where one witnesses an actual change as the face of the artist takes on a circular form and is projected up onto a domed ceiling.

The face appears over the edge of a drinking glass within the optical range of the camcorder which is pointed upward at the bottom of the glass, which is filled with tea and other potable liquids. The circular form is reminiscent of drops, but its colors are never pure but are rather at the limits of two dissolving and merging liquids. In the video, *Mix*, Tumi again works with the blending of colors, letting drops of liquid of one color fall into liquid of another color. Here a transformation slowly occurs, where the colors blend little by little with each other. The work is shown on four different computer screens, located in the four corners of a room, with each drop accompanied by a sound; this composes an environment with the viewer at its center. Video affords the possibility of introducing both movement and sound, to which Tumi gives a new dimension in *Puddles*. There, five diminutive monitors, each on its own wall, show large splashes of paint, in close-up view, filling the frame. The colors

are pure and reasonably well separated from one another, with the change from one color to another occurring abruptly when the paint is splashed. Each visible splash is accompanied by a sound from a loudspeaker placed near another screen, thus giving the impression that the paint falls onto the surface with considerable force. It is as though the squirting paint comes flying through space before it arrives on the screen where the sharp sound is heard just before the picture changes. However, the source of the sound is unclear and it is difficult to locate it in space. The viewer reacts involuntarily by trying to connect the source of the sound with the picture; in this way, the work activates the viewer's perception. The splashes on the screens "pile up", one on top of another, and become a heap that creates a sense of the thickness of paint even though the screen is completely flat. In reality, the picture has no other physical qualities than attach to the electronic device that stores recorded information that is played from a disk. The viewer senses this discrepancy, which creates a tension between the immaterial and intangible qualities of the video and its subject. It is as if the painting had divided itself into many parts and traveled through space with the sound. The painting is no longer an object but a combination of elements, based upon recordings and equipment that give us possibilities for perceiving and experiencing in new ways. These technical possibilities set their stamp upon art, so that it should be clear that although art is not in itself technical, it nonetheless part of the technical world.

Gunnar Harðarson

Thought at Work:
Painting, Photography, Philosophy

"When I sketch I always begin with my eyes closed."
– Haraldur Jónsson

1.

At first glance it appears that art and philosophy have little in common. Art is visual; it interprets reality in colors and lines, appeals to emotional experience and displays or reveals its subjects by depicting them in sensory form. Philosophical thinking, on the other hand, is rational; it grasps reality through concepts, appeals to intellectual understanding, grapples with and communicates its subjects through discussion and debate. This contrast of sensation and thought, the worlds of sense and intellect, the perceptible and the conceivable, is in many ways misleading. For example, Kant argued that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (1989, p. 93), and there exist works of art that are neither visual nor sensory, but are instead invisible ideas. Despite this, the idea of a contrast between the perceptual and the conceptual is quite ingrained. Plato, for instance, rejected the idea that a work of art was anything other than a sensory imitation of visible objects, an optical illusion without anything else to it. Hegel believed that art as an expression of spirit in sensuous form gave way to philosophy, which was its own time grasped in thought. And even an artist such as Marcel Duchamp claimed only to have wanted to move art from the level of the retina to the level of ideas. Should we then accept that art is inherently sensory and its effect an optical illusion? But if art is purely sensory, how is it possible to discuss the subject matter, message, or meaning of a work of art and the artist's thinking? Yet this we do unhesitatingly in our deliberation of the visual arts. We know that some works are conceived as symbolic representations of a state of mind, political satire, or lyrical expression, and even images that directly trouble or deceive the eye can in doing so be exploring various aspects of the visual arts themselves. Hegel's notion that an idea may be presented in sensuous form in fact suggests that art depends on more than sheer perception.

It is a distinguishing quality of philosophy that it posits the question of what philosophy is – the question of its own nature – as one of its main topics. This feature of philosophy has given rise to a description of it as thought that thinks itself. In this respect, philosophy is unlike the sciences and other scholarly disciplines: the question of the nature of

the sciences is, for example, a philosophical enquiry, not a scientific one; it cannot be answered by scientific methods. But what about art? Is the question of the nature of art a question that art seeks to answer as art? Artists such as Joseph Kosuth (1969) have in fact held the opinion that art is a definition of art, and have exhibited works designed to underpin this idea, while philosophers such as Arthur C. Danto (1986) have considered this question to be one of the main subjects of art in the 20th century. If so, this appears to be precisely one of the things that connect art and philosophy, in that it comes naturally to both subjects to explore their own nature and existence no less than reality and its different aspects and manifestations. The two think themselves.

For some time Icelandic artists have exhibited works that explore, at least in part, their own function and conditions as art. To some extent, such works refer to themselves – think themselves, so to speak. Some works draw attention to the illusional effect of the painting and expose it simultaneously; others explore the material elements of the drawing, the graphite and paper, and transform them into sculpture. Others take the shape of utility items, but are unusable and therefore demand to be viewed as art, stimulating the thought and imagination of the viewer (cf. Hafþór Yngvason, 2011). These are, in other words, works of art that are concerned to some extent with art itself, our understanding and perception of it.

Alongside contemporary art of this sort, there have gradually emerged works in which artists use photographs to explore, express, or provide insight into various aspects of reality; at the same time photographers have become more involved in the field of visual arts. To be sure, the variety of visual arts is extremely diverse, yet the question may be posed as to whether the photograph opens up any new possibilities closed to other media. It could be, on the one hand, that the photograph lends itself to use as a medium better suited to specific artistic ideas than other media, and on the other that it manages to capture reality and the moment and record the experience of the present in a direct way. The photograph thus becomes a kind of recording of the present, instead of being an expression of an artistic idea that has an indirect reference to the present.

What may be said about the entry of photography onto the stage of the visual arts at present? Does the photograph mark a return to two-dimensional art in the three-dimensional world of contemporary new

media? Has the traditional painting returned in the form of a photograph? Is visual art that explores the content and form of art through the traditional forms of drawing, painting, sculpture, performance, and installation in some sense different from art that captures the present moment in a photograph? Has art turned from a contemplative investigation of its own inner conditions and aesthetic effects to a reproduction of visible reality, as it seems from thought to perception, from content to the visual surface, from creation to imitation, from beauty to truth? In order to address these questions, we will first discuss some details that form the background for the self-reflective and experimental activity of art in the twentieth century, then turn our attention to various aspects of photography, citing examples of artists who utilize both photography and other media, and finally to the relationship of art to art theory and philosophy.

2.

Painting has been considerably affected by the advent and development of photographic technology, perhaps not least because various artists and critics in the late-19th and early-20th centuries inferred from this development that it was no longer the task or obligation of the painting to convey a realistic picture of external reality. Artists as well as scholars spent quite some time guessing at the impact and consequences of photography and it took considerable time to realize the possibilities that photography opened up in the field of artistic creation. Opinions are actually rather divided on photography's impact on the development of painting, with some scholars believing that painters have been accomplished enough in inventing new forms without looking to photography. In any case, painters began to think more and more about the properties of the art of painting and the medium itself, the painting: its conditions for existence, material qualities and possibilities, and the distinctive features of painting with respect to other art forms.

Photographic technology helped to induce a turning point in more than one sense. First, it made it possible to reproduce reality in the form of an image, provide a detailed likeness of it by mechanical means. This meant that the human hand had nothing to do with the creation of the image, per se; sunlight and chemistry saw to that. Moreover, the photograph came closer than all other art forms to reflecting reality itself; to reveal it as it is, not as it appears to be or should be, without

needing to take a detour through the mental powers of observation and artistic talent of any particular person. The technology itself saw to this. It is worth noting that Halldór Laxness (1929) maintained that technology in the form of the camera had quite simply replaced the paintbrush. Many painters believed that in doing so, the photograph had deprived the painting of its one principal role: representation. The French film critic André Bazin (1958) and the American philosopher Arthur C. Danto (1986) have argued that the development of art since the Renaissance may be viewed in terms of the concept of imitation, in which the goal of art is to make increasingly better copies of reality. According to this perspective, Western art history is the history of advancement, in that art aims at a consistently more accurate imitation of nature. This development appears first with improved painting techniques and the discovery of perspective during the Italian Renaissance, followed by the transformation of media under the influence of new technology in photography in the 19th century and the motion picture in the 20th; combined with this were changes in moral constraints, i.e., concerning what might be displayed and what not. But the main issue is technological progress, since modern technology solves the problems of handwork and succeeds in recreating reality in ways that older technology could never have managed. Subsequently, it can be said that the history of art has in a certain sense come to an end.

In the wake of this technical revolution some artists began pondering what were or could be the distinctive features of painting, i.e., what was inherent to the art of painting, and undertook to explore its potential as the art of painting – and therewith, the potential of the painting as the painting. One conclusion was that it was not necessarily the task of the painting to portray an accurate imitation of external reality, but rather to express inner feelings or spiritual reality with the tools and methods belonging to painting. This led, among other things, to the idea that the painter should not convey an image of reality, but rather, that the goal of art was to present a pure form or pure expression; the painting should not convey an image of the world – it was its own world. Discourse on the nature and role of painting was colored by the vocabulary of music, and artists such as Kandinsky can in fact be said to have treated art in the same way as music.

Kandinsky (1912) is actually a fine example of an abstract artist who tried to identify the distinctive features of painting, determine

its inner structure and draw conclusions about the possibilities of the art of painting in terms of the nature of the art form. The work of art is not an *imitation* of visible reality but rather a *creation* that expresses or conveys spiritual reality. The role of the painting is not to recreate a realistic image of the external world. Art should not be a mirror or reproduction of the visible, but rather search for new ways to express spiritual content. An artist who simply paints images of things trivializes his art in terms of technical skill and proficiency. An analogy to the photograph as a documentation of external appearances and a rejection of such reproductions of reality is apparent here. Admittedly, the painter's personality has the tendency to shine through and express emotion and refined experience that points the way to the work's spiritual content. In Kandinsky's opinion, that content is only to be found in art; art alone can express it by its own methods, but the art forms have gradually found a way to express what they are best at by means of the methods that are inherent to each of them. It is thus necessary for art to turn away from external illusory images, look inward and acquire self-knowledge. In doing so it turns to its own nature, possibilities, and limits in the spirit of the critical self-examination of reason in the philosophy of Kant.

In his analysis of the possibilities of the painting, Kandinsky looks to music as a model, because music shows that it is possible to express the artist's inner life and create a separate artistic world, rather than reproduce the external world of the external world. The painter can thus try to do the same in his own art, paying heed to the rhythm in the painting, abstract forms, repetition of color tones, suggestion of movement, etc. Nevertheless, art must use these methods in its own particular way, which is natural to it alone, since there is no real comparison between a piece of music, which has a temporal progression, and a painting, which the viewer beholds all at once. The task of visual arts thus becomes, on the one hand, to explore its own potential and materials and get to know them, and on the other, to utilize its materials and potential in a purely artistic and creative way.

In the 20th century a variety of schools of thought in painting arose in response to the self-examination of the art of painting, the exploration of its own nature and characteristics. It may perhaps be said that the purest form of this tendency to build on pictorial qualities appeared in abstract painting in its various forms and in the theory that the painting

is by nature form and color. But it can also be seen in the works of artists who explore other features of painting, such as the texture and thickness of the paint, sometimes in combination with its illusory effects.

This approach to painting is taken by a variety of artists in Iceland, both in their artistic works and essays. For example, Þorvaldur Skúlason (1955) writes about "non-figurative" art, actually tracing this type of art to Kandinsky, although he considers it to have changed a great deal over time. "Non-figurative" paintings are contrary to naturalistic works and are "in every detail creations, constructions of their authors' minds. When the work is completed, we stand facing an image that represents the inner vision of the painter in color and form." Refererences to the outer world and naturalistic imitations are rejected; the colors and form alone should suffice to inspire the viewer. Movement is represented through the proportions and rhythm of the painting, and the painter "expresses his sense of form directly." The painting is about color, form, and rhythm; i.e. the properties that define it. But painters of a different generation, such as Eggert Pétursson and Guðrún Einarsdóttir, explore the nature and properties of the painting no less, even though they direct their energies toward other elements of it, such as the paint itself, its nuance, thickness and texture, and references either direct or indirect to the visual effects that the "dimension of the figure" to quote Paul Klee (1924, p.37), inspires in the viewers.

But the exploration of the properties of painting was only one response among many to the changes that photographic technology and the possibilities that mass production opened in the field of art. It may be said that another turning point in 20th-century art came with Marcel Duchamp's insight, which he pursued in his works, that art should be elevated to the level of ideas. The artist has the freedom to express his creative ideas in any medium possible and by whatever means suitable in each instance, without being bound by the traditional genres of the visual arts. However, it was perhaps not until later that artists began to consider art as a kind of thought presented or expressed in matter, form, or performance, completely independent from traditional art forms and artistic media. Yet it is a relatively short step from the idea that art should express spiritual reality in a painting to it expressing ideas or thoughts in different media. The possibilities that this idea opened up did not find many enthusiasts, so to speak, until the 1960's, when it started making appearances in conceptual art, performance art, Fluxus,

and what in Iceland has generally gone under the name "nýlist" ("new art"), which has been disputed ever since the establishment of the SÚM group (Association of Young Artists, active 1965–1972).

Advocates of traditional media criticized this type of art from different points of view. They either considered it not to be art or claimed that it fostered disrespect for professionalism: art meant craftsmanship and skill, knowledge of the nature and possibilities of the artistic medium. However, a clear statement by an artist on the presuppositions for these ideas of art hardly appeared in this country until two decades later, in the writings of Magnús Pálsson (1987), one of the main advocates of "new art" in Iceland. The presupposition is that the concept "art" has simply lost its meaning, and visual art as a special craft has ceased to exist. Art is no longer confined to technical expertise in one particular artistic medium such as painting, graphic art, or sculpture; artists simply utilize the media that are best suited to conveying ideas: "There are no longer painters or sculptors, just artists, without further distinctions. People no longer have know-how in anything but at the same time they know everything." Accordingly, Magnús believes that art has become philosophical, because the emphasis has shifted "from the visual to the philosophical," at the same time as it has separated itself from handwork. The artist is simply a creator who uses various tools to convey his ideas in a pictorial or sensory form, regardless of whether it is a painting, performance, or photograph, for instance. This idea of the artist as a creative individual who expresses his thoughts in the medium best suited for the conveyance of his idea could imply that everyone is an artist and everything is art (cf. Þorvaldur Þorsteinsson, 2004). Subsequently, the distinctive features of art would be rejected and there would be no way to distinguish art from life. Everything is art, and therefore, with a Hegelian twist, nothing is art. However, the difference is that artists present their work under the banner of art; their intention is to take advantage of the cultural platform that the concept of art demarcates. This, however, may be one of the reasons why art has to address the question, "What is art?", a question that actually has its home in both philosophy and art.

These two different currents in art – on the one hand the introverted art of painting, which turned to an exploration of its nature and form in search of spiritual reality and affective content, leading eventually

to pure abstract art or variations thereof, and on the other hand the performative activity of the "new art", which can be attributed to the influence of Duchamp and Dadaism and utilized all sorts of new media and unconventional forms of expression – survived, so to speak, side-by-side for quite a long time, but perhaps they may be said to have merged with new trends in visual arts during the last third of the 20th century. The reason may be that art is considered to be an expression of the artist's ideas in visible form. This is clearly seen in conceptual art, where the thought or concept is the artwork itself, while its visual presentation plays only the role of bringing the work across. But it so happens that the visual presentation possesses aesthetic qualities, whether the artist likes it or not. In addition, paintings are spoken of without hesitation as "conceptual works," something that would have been unheard of a few decades ago. But where does the photograph stand in all of this?

3.

The photograph appears to come closest to representing what Plato considered the nature of visual art, i.e., to be a visual imitation of perceptible reality or "a mirror with memory," as has sometimes been said (Holmes, 1859). But the phenomenon of the photograph is more complex than that. It has been described as being both an "objective record and personal testimony" (Sontag, 2003, p. 23). It refers to the subject, displays it, and says something about it, interprets it. The objective record and the subjective attitude thus form the dualistic nature of the photograph.

The objective element, a direct recording or documentation of reality, was long considered the hallmark of the photograph. The main reason for this was that the photograph was created as a copy of light reflected from objects through a lens; the result of this process might be described as a kind of *lightprint*. This was and still is considered by many to be the chief characteristic of the photograph as a visual medium and what distinguishes it from the painting. Jonathan Friday (2002) has emphasized that the photograph as such stands accordingly in a *causal* relationship with the object photographed, but the painting is in an *intentional* relationship with its subject. We say that we take a picture of something when we use a camera, but we do not use that wording if we draw or paint a picture. These relationships between a picture and its subject must not be confused by the fact that both the photographer and

painter have the intention to create an image; both create their images in an *intentional context* (Friday, 2002, p. 39–40).

The causal links are often considered to lend the photograph two features that have been characterized as objectivity and transparency: *objective* in the sense that the photograph, which is the offspring of this process, is a copy of the things that it displays; it displays the objects themselves as they are, without the attention of the artist playing a part regarding particular details of the image, records them automatically (cf. Walden, 2005; Edwards, 2006). The photograph is *transparent* in the sense that we may experience the feeling of seeing things through it. We feel that we can view objects in a photograph in a different way than in a painting: the artist's touch, his interpretation and powers of observation, do not stand between us and the image photographed; we have the sense that we see the object itself (cf. Friday, 2002; Edwards, 2006). On the other hand it must not be forgotten that the photograph is, like the painting, a representation of the object (most often three-dimensional) in a two-dimensional image; it is not the thing itself but rather just an *image*, a photograph, which is also within a specific frame, allowing us to see only part of the reality photographed, while a painting does not need to have anything outside its frame. This has been described by Stanley Cavell as follows: "A painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* the world" (1979a, p. 24). The frame demarcates the subject on the surface that we see and encloses it. Furthermore, the point of view of the photograph is, under normal circumstances, the point of view of the eye that takes the picture, and the photograph puts us as viewers to some extent in the place of the person taking the picture. Finally, the texture of the photograph is smooth, unlike the painting, which has a tactile texture, although a photograph may be textured in other ways, for instance with grainy images, etc.

Yet another feature of the photograph is the interplay between presence and absence. As a matter of fact, the photograph shares this characteristic with some paintings, although it appears most clearly in its own case because of the way that the photograph is an offprint of reality. A photograph of a particular object shows us the object photographed, but it implies on the one hand the *absence* of the object itself, and on the other hand its *presence* in the picture. Occasionally when we view a photograph we experience the feeling of viewing the object itself; that the image of it makes it present, in some sense: we see

the object through the image. The image corresponds to reality, one might say, but on the other hand it is not the same as reality; there is no identity between the image and the reality of the object. The lived reality in the presence of the object – with varying degrees of attention and a subjective experience – is completely different than the image as a substitute for the reality that it displays; an image that becomes for its part the focus of the viewer's subjective experience.

But a photograph is not just a picture of something, it is also a pictorial composition. The tendency of the photograph be a document of reality does not exhaust the subject. This is caused by the fact that the image is on a picture plane that is demarcated by a frame within which the photographer has located the subject. The field of vision in nature is different than that of the image, which appears within the frame. Even though the photograph might only be intended to be a record of reality, it appears as an image within a specific frame. The photograph is thereby connected to an intentional context: what it was that attracted the photographer, his intention as an artist. This need not be pure-aesthetic, but can have different motivations: social, political, philosophical, etc. Formed within the frame is a picture plane that is subject to the same laws as a painting, that is concerning composition, movement, expression, etc. The photographic documentation is transformed into a pictorial or visual canvas that takes on the same characteristics as a painting, even though the reproduction, per se, is based on technical methods and not on the coordination between the mind and the hand.

In addition, it has been pointed out that the photograph removes the object photographed from its original conditions and puts it into a new context. In the sense that it is the freezing of a moment or the fixing of a perception or a mood, it also makes reference to what happened before and after it was taken, thereby implying a potential narrative tendency, in the same way that normally applied to painting, originally – the painting told, or, more correctly, showed, a story. Moreover, the camera is a medium that is inherently connected with what is not art – in that sense it is an unartistic medium (cf. Badiou 2005, p. 86). Weighing against this is what might be called the *sensitivity* of the camera: that is, it is in direct contact with visible reality and records whatever appears before its lens, whether the photographer notices it or not. Thus it has sometimes been associated with the unconscious, and Walter Benjamin (1936) compared the photograph to psychoanalysis, in the sense that

the image visually displays unconscious reality in a manner similar to the way that psychoanalysis exposes unconscious urges and quirks that dwell in the subconscious.

One reason why photography appeals to artists may in fact be the ability of the camera to reach out into reality – to manage to touch reality itself through the lens, unconsciously and almost blindly – which makes the photograph a fascinating artistic medium under particular circumstances. We can indeed make a distinction between a painting, a photograph, and a photographic work, and therewith between the aesthetics of photography in a general sense and whether the photograph is used as a painting, as a kind of successful performance in an artistic context. We can then consider the concept of a painting as an open concept (cf. Weitz, 1956) that we can use for more phenomena than conventional paintings, since it may be said that there is a certain family resemblance between the photograph and the painting. When an artist exhibits a photograph in a gallery, it can be called a photographic work, since it is approached and viewed in the same manner as a painting; the photograph has thereby become a kind of painting. On the other hand, the painting becomes a photograph when a picture of it is put in a book, on a postcard, or on the Internet. The photograph might therefore be called an itinerant form (cf. Bal, 2002), since its variable characteristics can appear in different settings: in a book, on screen, as a frame in a gallery.

The photograph thus manifests reality and corresponds to it, yet the truth of the image does not lie in the correspondence alone. The reason is in fact the dualistic nature of the photograph, as a documentation and a personal vision. In displaying the object the photograph manages to say something beyond that, sheds light on some thought, some truth beyond it, in a sensory image, assuredly, but in such a way that the thought is conveyed. Or, as Sigrún Sigurðardóttir (2009) has expressed it: "The photograph rejects the idea that what is not true necessarily needs to be false – and at the same time it rejects the idea that what is not reality itself must inevitably be a replica of it. The photograph is both at once: reality itself and its replica, and at the same time it is neither. The photograph contains both reality itself and the photographer's interpretation of this same reality" (p. 54).

4.

In recent years many Icelandic artists have turned to photography as a medium of expression, and photographers have been more active in the field of visual arts. For example, Haraldur Jónsson (*The Story of Your Life*), Pétur Thomsen (*Imported Landscape*) and Katrín Elvarsdóttir (*Without a Trace*) all exhibited photographic works at the National Museum during the period 2005–2007, and the joint exhibition *Reflection* in 2008 at the same place was a genuine event on the artistic stage: eight photographers took part in the exhibition (Katrín Elvarsdóttir, Pétur Thomsen, Ívar Brynjólfsson, Bára Kristinsdóttir, Einar Falur Ingolfsson, Bragi Þór Jósefsson, Spessi, and Þórdís Ágústsdóttir). Photography was the focus of the Arts Festival 2010, inspiring five television specials that were televised in the spring of 2011. The initiative to raise photography to a place of honor and respect as a contemporary art form in the public sphere has come particularly from the National Museum; its Photographic Collection has been very active in research and the publication of works related to the history of Icelandic photography (cf. Guðrún Harðardóttir, 1999; Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, 2001; Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008), and numerous exhibitions of historical and contemporary photographs have been held there. It is somewhat remarkable that a museum devoted to older art has embraced the photograph as contemporary art and taken the initiative to exhibit these works.

Is the interest in photography in some sense a response to the works that seem to be concerned with art itself, its performance and conditions for existence? Such works do not have specific political references or contents, although some photographic works focus on contemporary disputes over dams, construction, planning issues, and contemporary historical events. Of course works in more traditional forms contain such references. The paintings, drawings, and utility items all can be seen as reflections on aesthetic and artistic-philosophical value first and foremost (although the value and beauty of nature is in some cases an underlying factor), but photographic works are in part a search for or expression of wonder regarding moral and political factors. This is perhaps caused by the way that the photograph, as a medium, naturally demands that both the past and present be reasonably dealt with (cf. Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, 2006 and 2009a). The concept of "neo-realism" has been associated with this

tendency, whether it applies here or not. Perhaps one might rather speak of a "new realism" or "subjective realism," which is moderately paradoxical. Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, who more than anyone else has sought to identify the distinctive features of contemporary Icelandic photography and emphasized the new realism, summarizes her conclusions as follows (2009a, p. 171):

> What characterizes the work of contemporary Icelandic photographers is a conflict between the subjective and the objective, the need to communicate a personal vision of reality and the desire to document it as impartially as possible. The new realism is thus characterized by the desire to capture reality itself, to break free from the discourse, postmodernism, which ensnares us like a web and follows our every movement. This effort to discover reality itself, to lift it out the context in which we are accustomed to viewing it and expose what really is and what really matters for our well-being and existence in the world, has found different manifestations in the works of contemporary Icelandic photographers.

Let us look briefly at some examples, by no means exhaustive, as they appear in works that have been exhibited at art museums or in galleries in recent months in Iceland, and consider along the way the distinctive features of the photograph as an artistic medium of expression. The photographic work of Haraldur Jónsson can be said to be concerned to some extent with touching reality, in direct relation to the natural tendency of the photograph to perceive what we do not see, what our attention does not focus on and our consciousness does not notice. This is particularly prominent in the series *The Story of Your Life*, which was exhibited at the National Museum in 2005 and published in the book *TSOYL,* 2010. Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir (2005, p. 472) has pointed out that although the images appear to be commonplace, they are not all as they seem; they are "obviously of something other than what they display." These are images of what we do not see but that the camera records, thereby directing the attention of the viewer, and perhaps also the artist, to what the artist has overlooked: they reveal an unconscious perspective on reality. It is still the transparency and objectivity of the artistic medium that the artist utilizes in creating the artwork, because

the images are of the reality that is located beyond one's notice. Moreover, the images draw attention to the narrative tendencies of the artistic medium, both because of the title of the series and because they fix a particular moment in time, which comes after one moment and before the next. Æsa has stated (2005, p. 464) that this photographic series conveys "the complicated nature of the photograph, its close and complex relationship to the individual, reality, the environment, time, narrative, and memory." Haraldur describes his subject with the word "exemplaire," indicating that the photograph is a copy of something general that describes something particular, taken under "circumstances that lead truth into the light".

Another example of images of what we do not ordinarily see is found in Guðrún Hrönn Ragnarsdóttir's series of photographs of lamps. In these photographs, perspective is everything, since they are taken from below, thus showing the lamps from a perspective that we normally do not have of them. Furthermore, they appear as exotic objects, sculptures, or abstract forms, since the photograph takes these three-dimensional everyday objects out of their original utilitarian context and puts them into a new context on the picture plane, upending them. This process is somewhat reminiscent of the methods of Duchamp, except for how the camera manages to turn everyday objects into art by virtue of point of view and reproduction.

In its time photography was used to document performances and other ephemeral artistic events; the images then became historical sources for these events without having been directly intended to have particular aesthetic value. This, however, is not universal, since the photographic works of Sigurður Guðmundsson are in fact of performances, but the performances are intended to be photographed and take into account the picture plane, the frame, and point of view. These are actually photographic works composed as still lifes. Anna Líndal uses this method to photograph performances or arrangements of objects that are meant to be fixed in images. One of her most famous images is from an installation in 1995, of a homemaker who continues to pour coffee from a coffeepot into a cup even though it has long since overflown. If we think of this as a painting, we can see that the image's force and expressive power would presumably be wasted. It is precisely the transparency and objectivity that allows the dramatic expression of the scene to work, along with the colors, composition, and perspective.

But an image of the artist herself, from the series *Mapping Everyday Life* (1996), ironing while the shadow of her husband reading a book falls across the wall behind her, is also an example of a photographic performance of this kind. Both images certainly have feminist political content and were made relatively early in the artist's career. They show how it is possible to connect the documentary capabilities of the photograph with political content and polemic.

Other women artists base their photographic works on arrangements of objects and utilize the documentary nature of the medium in different ways to achieve effects that cannot be achieved by any other method. In Ólöf Nordal's series *Iceland Specimen Collection* (2005), the documentarian's perspective is not at issue; instead, she composes the images in a way similar to still-life paintings, a kind of "nature morte" out in the wild. She takes stuffed animals, lambs, sheep, dogs, brings them back into nature and poses them like stage props on the original scene. Again it is the transparency of the photograph that matters, because if these were painted images it would likely be impossible to see whether the animals were stuffed or not. This uncanny take on a classic art form would then miss the mark. In addition, these images utilize the capability of the photograph to recover foregone time at the same time as it makes the viewer aware of the gap between the present and the time of the image, the past (cf. Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, 2006, p. 94), of which the stuffed animals are a further reminder.

Animals in a rural setting are also the subject of Þóra Sigurðardóttir, whose simple documenting of flies in a window manages to transform them into an aesthetic vision of an immediate environment, in which the transparency of the photograph is emphasized by the transparency of the windowpane. Þóra has also applied a similar perspective to everyday reality, utilizing color and transparency. Solveig Aðalsteinsdóttir covers much the same ground in her documenting of the play of colors in old, worn-out household fixtures, revealing the beautiful in the commonplace, which people do not notice. Solveig has actually experimented with other methods in photographic works as well, for instance in the series *Surroundings*, 1998, wherein the camera is turned rapidly during the shoot, capturing the light and color of the surroundings on film. In this context we can also name Tumi Magnússon, who during the past decade has done various experiments with the "elasticity" of digital images.

Several artists have managed to record the historical events of the past decade in photographs, availing themselves of perspective and transparency in order to convey a feeling for their subjects. A reference to the construction boom during Iceland's financial upswing may be seen in Hrafnkell Sigurðsson's images from 2003–4 of half-constructed apartment blocks, in his series *Buildings*. The images' effectiveness is based on the one hand on the camera's direct contact with reality – we see the objects themselves as they are. On the other hand, the frame is used to define the point of view in such a way that through it we see an abstract composition that is reminiscent of or refers to the constructivism of a previous time, making it possible to say that the images are both figurative and abstract. They are photographic works but also to some extent paintings; the viewer has no inclination to move outside the frame but instead keeps himself within it as if he were viewing a painting. It might be said that the images are questioning themselves concerning the nature of the painting and the nature of the photograph, are an exploration of the form and structure of the image but also an enquiry into the reality that they display. They are both pictorial and conceptual processes that manage to reveal truth in the context of art.

The series *Imported Landscape*, which Pétur Thomsen exhibited in the National Museum in 2005 and which was again exhibited in the National Gallery of Iceland (2010) and the Akureyri Art Museum (2011), contains photographic panels showing the construction work for the Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project in eastern Iceland. The series is a good example of how a new-realist artist shows us the object itself through the image from a particular point of view. The images are a documentation, but also communicate an experience of enormous size and scope, in which the biggest machines become tiny in the landscape. Furthermore, we also recognize in the images various aesthetic features such as texture, form, and lines, and get a sense of the enormous sizes in the landscape, among other things because we extend the reality photographed beyond the picture plane. In this series the artist derives aesthetic ideas from Kant's theories of the sublime and works consciously with the idea that the reason for the images' effectiveness is man's interference with nature, interference that is morally questionable. The aesthetics of the images thus have a direct moral reference and are conducive to inspiring the audience to

reflection. It is worth noting that the photographer Spessi (Sigurþór Hallbjörnsson) also took photographs of the Kárahnjúkar Project, but especially of the construction workers there. Another of Pétur's series, *Disappearing Environment*, which records man's interference in nature in other ways, is based on philosophical ideas that he derives from Páll Skúlason's book *Umhverfing* (1998), among other sources, and makes aesthetic use of Kandinsky's ideas (Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, 2008, p. 22).

The third contemporary historical event that has been documented in photographic works is the departure of the American military from Iceland in 2006. Bragi Þór Jósefsson, who was on the scene by accident, realized what was going on and set about photographing the abandoned base, the ammunition depots, nightclub, operating room, hangars, apartment blocks, petrol station, etc. The photographs as such play on the interaction between presence and absence, and as a result viewers are able to experience this exodus through them.

Comparison of past and present, or of milestones in history and time, is the subject that Einar Falur Ingólfsson dealt with in both an exhibition and book that describe his travels, camera in hand, to the sites visited by the English academic W.G. Collingwood in the late-19th century. Einar Falur places special emphasis on time, and on how the painting and the photograph deal with time and the moment. In this case, however, it is no less remarkable that what we have here are parallels between paintings and photographs *of the same place*. We see how the painter arranges the landscape and transforms it with his watercolors on the paper, and how he tries to recreate his *experience* of the landscape, whereas the photograph *records* the landscape from one point of view, since the frame and the technique are different. The subject, per se, is the same, or is at least comparable, but its transformation onto the picture plane is different. Yet particular photographs, for instance the photo of Hrafnagjá Ravine, have been composed in such a way that we tend to view them as *paintings* rather than photographs, and then with reference to the paintings of Kjarval rather than Collingwood.

Photography's narrative tendencies are often at the forefront in works by Katrín Elvarsdóttir and Þórdís Erla Ágústsdóttir. They both make use of the viewer's tendency to make imaginative connections within an image or between images to construct sequences of images that seem to tell a story without the viewer being fully aware of what

the story is; it appeals more to his feeling for nondescript events. Both use fixed arrangements to stage the images, although that is not true in every case. Katrín has used this technique to create a photographic work dealing with refugees, staging portraits and the consequences of traumatic events, and Þórdís documents reality in a frightening way in the photograph *Nature: Breast Operation*. The feeling for the moment and time factors are powerful in their works.

Among others, we might here mention the work of Ívar Brynjólfsson and Bára Kristinsdóttir, who have recorded the present in various ways: Ívar through photographic glimpses of homes and supermarkets of various kinds, in addition of photographs of the urban environment from personal points of view, work places, and the tracks of construction machinery, and Bára with photographs of the city, its back gardens and streets. (For more on the aforementioned photographers and several others, see Hjálmar Sveinsson, et. al. 2008; Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, 2009a, p. 168–177; Sigrún Sigurðardóttir, 2009b.)

Whether photographic works are created by professional photographers or artists who take advantage of the features of the camera, it appears that their creators conceive their works in similar ways. Behind them is a plan or idea for the work, series, or study that is then expressed in photographs; the artists basically work in the same way. In much the same way as some paintings are not traditional paintings but rather conceptual pieces, one might speak of these photographic works as conceptual works, in which the nature and characteristics of the artistic medium are utlilized to express a variety of experiences of reality, to reproduce a particular idea or vision and move the viewer by showing him something he has not noticed, putting it into a new or unexpected context and thereby inspiring him to think.

This breakthrough of photography into the art world in recent years, despite what has been called "the omnipresence of the image" in contemporary visual culture, raises various questions. Perhaps what is at issue here is the recovery of the image by artists, whereby a "canvas" in the form of a photograph is located within a "frame" and viewed in the same manner as a painting. But despite that, we know that these are photographs; they are analagous to works that recreate commonplace utility items in the respect that we recognize the photograph from its everyday surroundings and uses even though it is presented as a painting. Perhaps what we have here is a kind of

reverse development, compared to the ideas of Walter Benjamin and perhaps others, who saw the photograph and the motion picture as new artistic forces in the modern mass-production society that would take over from the painting and other traditional two-dimensional artistic media. But by using the photograph as a painting, the artists effect a return to traditional methods of viewing. This might be seen as a resistance to the impact of technology, in that the structures of handwork successfully resist the technological diffusion of the image. The photograph is indeed everywhere but the context is different, because when the museum or gallery has become the context of the image, we view the image under the same conditions and by the same approach as a painting. There is, however, a definite paradox in this, since it is precisely the development of technology that has enabled us easily to create color photographs the size of paintings – which in turn makes this recovery of the image in new realism possible.

5.

Philosophy has had a contradictory relationship with art since the days of Plato and Aristotle, either rejecting it and writing it off or seeing it as the only worthy philosophical subject. Arthur C. Danto has proposed two interesting hypotheses about the relationship between art and philosophy, hypotheses that may be said to locate the beginning and end of art in philosophy. On the one hand, he has argued in support of the view that theory makes art possible: art theories make it possible for us view various things as art that are not in the traditional form of a painting or sculpture. On the other hand, he has maintained that the history of art in the 20th century may be viewed as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, wherein art comes gradually to self-knowledge and self-realization. On inspection, the various artistic movements turn out to present different theories about what art is; when art has realized that its main subject is in fact the question of what art is, the question of the nature of art, which is a philosophical question, then art has reached its terminus; it ceases to be art and is transformed into philosophy.

The first hypothesis, which states that the theory of art makes art possible and thereby makes it possible for us to view a work of art as art, appeared in Danto's essay on the art world (1964) written during the boom days of pop art. The occasion was Andy Warhol's exhibition of Brillo boxes, which were works of art but looked like ordinary

merchandise; they were visually indistinguishable from ordinary Brillo boxes. But the same went for many other works that were not only visually indistinguishable from everyday merchandise but were also purchased directly from a shop and set up in a gallery as works of art. It may therefore be difficult to determine what is a work of art and what not, because, as Danto states, "these days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so." He continues: "And part of the reason for this lies in the fact that terrain is constituted artistic in virtue of artistic theories, so that one use of theories, in addition to helping us discriminate art from the rest, consists in making art possible" (Danto, 1964, p. 572).

There is no longer any visible difference between what is art and what is not art. How then are viewers, the public or art lovers, to know whether something is art or not? The answer is that it is the idea, or the theory, which makes this distinction, not unlike what we find in a work by Kristján Guðmundsson, who exhibited a triangle of consecrated earth within a square of unconsecrated earth. Thus, what makes art possible, according to Danto, is the theory of art. Art is not self-evident; it needs concepts, and in order to understand that a particular thing is a work of art we need a theory of art, a theory that explains to us why we are able to view a particular thing as a work of art.

How then are we to understand the relationship between theory and art? If theory makes art possible, then theory appears in some way to be the predecessor of art. Reading Danto's text literally, we could even conjecture that it was art historians or philosophers who declared works admissible as art, perhaps similar to how a priest declares two people married ex officio. The work of art must be a part of the art world, or the atmosphere that includes art history and theories of art, if we are meant to view it as art.

Now it certainly must be mentioned that Danto is of the opinion that the theoretical aspect of art does not appear except under certain circumstances, that we are not aware of it until works of art raise questions; only then do people realize that they take a particular art theory for granted. The theory may be self-evident for a specific period, but under different circumstances it turns out that it happens to be just one theory among many other possibilities. All the same, the theory is a necessary condition of art, because it makes art possible, and without it there is no art. But we do notice that this does not work

the other way: the theory is not a sufficient condition for art; that is, even though we have a theory, it is not a given that we have works of art that correspond to this theory. An art historian or philosopher cannot formulate a theory of art except on the basis of artistic works; theory alone is not sufficient to create artwork. But this implies that Danto's idea must be interpreted to mean that it is in fact works of art that evoke theories of art and that the original "theorists" are the artists themselves. Art theory may be a necessary condition of art, but, on the other hand, the work of art is a sufficient condition for art theory. The theory appears in and through the works. The audience and art historians are free to interpret and discuss the works and the ideas behind them, but the artists do not need to wait for the scholars to formulate theories; this they do themselves, in and through their works. However, this means that the creation of art is also a work of the mind: an intellectual activity in which the ideas and intention of the artist are a part of the artistic creation. In other words: art is thought in at work. Theories of art follow the works like shadows and are an inseparable part of the artistic creation; they are posed by the artists, in or through their works, and thereby create the art world. According to this, the work of art never stands alone as an object or image; it always entails an idea. We see this, for instance, in how it was not scholars who formulated the idea of *ready-made*, but rather an artist who presented the work within an artistic context and thereby changed the thinking of artists and scholars about the nature and possibilities of art. Kandinsky himself formulated the theory of abstract form and of the value and effect of colors and applied it in his own paintings. And this is just one example among numerous others.

Danto's second hypothesis was presented in the essay "The End of Art" (1986, p. 81–116) and has inspired a great deal of debate. According to this essay, one can imagine different types of narratives of the development and progress of art. One of these implies that the history of art – as the story of how the image gradually manages to imitate visible reality in better ways – ended with the advent of the motion picture. Another rejects the possibilities of chronological progression and sees only different forms of expression. Again, a third implies that the history of art in the 20th century may be read as a developmental narrative of art gradually awakening to an awareness of its own nature (what it means to be art; what is its nature, role, and

impact) and thus turns out to have been a search for answers to the question of what art is, which is inherently a philosophical question. This narrative ends with art realizing that the question is not artistic, but rather philosophical, and with that art is finished; it has completed its mission and is transformed into philosophy. Its historical task has been to discover the question of its own nature, and subsequently the preconditions for a philosophy of art. It releases its grip on its material execution and wings its way to the stage of the idea alone. What remains are only the tracks or traces of art that artists can struggle to recreate by different means (Nancy, 2001). Works of art express and display the *absence* of art itself, which is gone, but the various characteristics and contexts of works of art suggest it to us, as well as the attempts of artists, as adherents of art, to deal with this situation after its departure.

But is art at an end, and the philosophical search for it over? There is much to suggest that this is not the case. In the first place, reflection is inherent in all artistic creation, and every work of art entails a theory of art. Art thus inevitably explores its own nature, directly or (more often) indirectly, and formulates various assertions and questions about what it is. Every single work of art is a particular statement (here is art), a claim (this is art), or a question (might this be art?). In every instance, what is at issue is a meaningful act within the context of the art world and culture. Just by being presented in the appropriate context is the work presented as a work of art. The questions of art itself, i.e., of the works, are thus not in the form of discourse, but rather in the form of presentation or performance, since the work of art can be viewed as a kind of act, in which meaning is conveyed through the artistic performance by something analogous to the illocutionary force of speech acts in human discourse. The work of art thus acts as a kind of statement or question that is formulated within either the accepted context of the art world or a general agreement about what art is. In other words, the works raise questions or communicate thoughts and ideas that the artist has pondered and formulates in his works. Art thus becomes a channel of thought that is presented in sensory form with the assistance of meaningful actions within the context of the art world, and with reference to the environment. In this way, art can contemplate itself, explore its own nature, the expressive potential of the imagistic medium, the nature

of the image, its composition, its relationship to the imagistic medium and the subject of the image.

6.

Secondly, it may well be that specific evolutionary processes or narratives within the history of art may be detected, without this meaning that the history of art is subsequently exhausted. It may be agreed that there exist various "narratives," but they can be diverse, and it is impossible to make generalizations about the whole story based on one part of it (cf. Badiou, 2005, p. 136). The history of art is not a single overarching narrative, but has many different strands. Our idea that art per se has a history that is subject to specific principles is a philosophical idea and takes specific criteria for granted, criteria that it seems reasonable to consider as having their roots in the philosophy of Hegel. Such a history exists on the levelof the idea, and other scholars and philosophers have in fact rejected such ideas of logical internal development and looked instead at external factors that are determined by various types of coincidence rather than necessity. But at certain times and in a limited context one may well imagine looking at a specific series of events as a kind of creative turn, which finds its correspondence in philosophical theories on historical roles and logical development in which art keeps moving forward in interactive relation to itself and reality.

7.

Thus, in conclusion, one might at present detect a certain tension between opposing tendencies in Icelandic art: on the one hand art that explores its own dynamics and potential and responds, among other things, to its own distance from everyday reality by taking in utility items from everyday life, and on the other art that attempts to display reality or a particular view of it. To a certain extent, the photograph implies both, because we recognize the photograph as a commonplace object from everyday life, but which also conveys artistic truth about the world and our existence in it. Moreover, Icelandic art appears to have developed from introverted and lyrical conceptual art, which plays on the diverse features of traditional painting or drawing, into something that makes contact with reality, which has a moral relevance and cognitive value. These currents, however, are not

completely distinct, because the photographic work refers to the nature of the photograph and poses it as a question to the viewer. Whether what is at issue is a painting, sculpture, or photograph, art is thought at work – practical thought that in part grapples with itself as art, explores both the conditions for its existence and possibilities of the artistic medium, and makes an attempt to retain or present some sort of content. The new, subjective realism, which accompanies the advent of the photograph, also shows that art can become – at least temporarily – the force that manages to reveal to us knowledge or truth about reality or the real. The photograph makes reality visible, raises it to the level of aesthetic awareness and thereby turns it into a subject for reflection, since it is particularly well suited to this, perhaps especially because as an art form, it has an inner connection with what is in fact not art; it is connected to the direct perception of reality itself and shows us unconscious aspects of the contemporary world. It is therefore not absurd to consider that by opening up reality, art has once again become an axis of truth at present. The photograph shows what can not be seen, what we have not noticed, the invisible. Thus, we have returned to the simple idea that art has the task, among other things, of being the field that reveals truth and thought in a sensory and aesthetic form.

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Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir

On the Way Down

Fluttering Wings and Three – Dimensional Afterthoughts

1 Emotions

I was in the museum in that old Paris railway station, standing in front of an artist's self-portrait, twisting my lips, trying to fit the picture into some cubbyhole in my brain so I could get on with my life. I felt as if my brain were dissolving. My cousin asked if I had come down with Stendhal Syndrome, which manifests as vertigo, weakness, hallucinations, and emotional lability. It was identified as an art-experience malady by an Italian psychiatrist who realized that many of those seeking help were arriving from the Uffizi Gallery, utterly overwhelmed. Similar symptoms were noted in travellers returning from pilgrimages to Jerusalem, city of faith, and Paris, city of love; there are now psychosomatic conditions named for both those cities. Patients perceive that they have been touched by something from another dimension and that all things can be explained in terms of beauty or love, as if they had their heads in a cloud of universal thought, a cottony bank in which all the world's thought were compressed.

The ideas sifting down from the cloud strike people or, finding no reception, settle on the ground. If you poke your head down through the strata, through time and the ages, you hear descriptions that are still apt:

> Such emotion all beauty must induce – an astonishment, a delicious wonderment, a longing, a love, a trembling that is all delight. (Plotinus, 1964, *Enneads*, I.6)

2 Unthinkable

Philosophy has received an immeasurable amount from art and likewise art from philosophy. It is thus an exciting challenge to convey that two-way gift to viewers. Yet almost certainly that gift will then become something else again, perhaps no gift at all. Philosopher Jacques Derrida has described the impossibility of a gift, and his description holds for our impossible attempt as philosophers to assemble an enlightening exhibition:

> There is no more gift as soon as the other receives… As soon as she keeps for the gift the signification of gift, she loses it, there is no more gift. Consequently if there is no gift, there is

> no gift, but if there is gift held or beheld as gift by the other, once again there is no gift; in any case the gift does not exist and does not present itself. (Derrida, 1992, pp. 14–15).

As soon as certain artworks are given out to be thought-provoking or to embody thought, they will all but certainly induce no thought. For is it not highly personal, and moreover dependent on untold external factors, whether an artwork strikes someone?

I ran across an interesting and useful analytical model by Níels Hafstein, a prime mover in Icelandic art. Having mounted many exhibitions of his own and others' work, he evidently had set out to create a tool to clarify his own and others' thoughts on art. His system, which he calls the *Cycle of Art*, includes sixteen headings; he lists definite characteristics and standards by which to classify art, such as: *Originality, Handicraft, Innocence*. Someday I would like to develop my own such system of classification. I am not yet conscious of what kind of art it is that moves me and makes me think. Usually it takes an abstract approach, if that explains anything. Otherwise you just feel it, as clearly as you feel how many artworks leave you cold, perhaps especially those that try to make you wrack your brains over a problem or to wring your emotions, forcing laughter, disgust, or amazement; such works seldom strike a chord with me.

3 Hurts

The urge to classify is contradictory: On the one hand it ultimately aims to create an analytical model that explains the world; on the other hand it desires the world to go on defying all models. When a classification proves to have wronged the world, when a category that has been taken for a solid understanding of the world proves to be based on flawed thinking, one is speechless. And can hardly bear to think through the flaw for more than a moment at a time.

I thought my way into one such discrepancy in our culture's thought-system and felt as if I were looking into an open wound. But my teacher said that it was neither a blister nor a spear in the side but the very heart of Aristotelian ethics, the very distinction between judgment and art, *phronesis* and *tekhne*. Yet still I smelled blood; this distinction needed review.

4 Perspectives

Philosophers squint like artists and carpenters, weighing perspective and distance, gazing into a composition and trying to visualize a second imaginary one that has always existed alongside the first, an unrealized potential.

Some philosophers try to summon this potential from the composition – and clearly must do so in dialogue with other people, for without different perspectives the potential appears as a lifeless character, not a three-dimensional infant. But philosophers soon abandon such midwifery in favor of sharpening their sights in solitude, staying up late to draw spirals and geometric forms, asking themselves whether the diamond is a subset or a superset and what about trapezoids? Here's where the artist comes sweeping into the philosopher's life; they share the desire to develop a plural perspective.

5 Circling

It's fun to watch thinkers talk and gesture and to wonder what fundamental flaw, deep in the composition, is drawing them toward uncertainty, fueling their wanderlust.

I remember a lecture that Jean-Luc Nancy gave in Paris. I had just read *L'Intrus*, in which Nancy describes in metaphoric and poetic terms the heart transplant operation he needed to undergo. He very ponderously said something that struck me as crucial, making an unusual circular gesture with one hand as he spoke: "Let us not rush to the point; let us rather circle around it." (Nancy, 2001, p. 53) My heart beat double-time; I felt the new distinction that to me had so urgently needed making, the pinprick in Aristotle's certainty, expanding as the lecture went on, and found myself able to breathe much more easily, through that opening.

Why was that 'circling' so exciting; why did it feel so good to sense an opening? Do we really want to reopen every wound to see how it managed to heal? How is it that we can't read the words 'open' and 'motion' on the same page without getting all fired up?

6 Lightning Bolts

I think we can just about assert that it is impossible to feel true lust without its pertaining to someone else. Excitation is not the same thing as feeling this rare and peculiar sensation, as if lightning had struck the

crown of your head. And then it's as if the mental sphere around the head opened up to bodily reality; the lightning goes clear through. But it doesn't just go down from your scalp and out your feet; it must also strike, simultaneously, the head of someone else, someone near you, with you, and then there's the question of whether the bolts cross, or another bolt goes between foreheads, or even parallel bolts between hearts and navels, in a double cross… Like the number sign # or octothorpe, a nonsense name. Or the sharp sign in music. And there's also the question of whether lightning can strike from an artwork, and whether an artwork has a navel.

> Non-knowledge communicates ecstasy – but only if the possibility (the movement) of ecstasy already belonged [sic], to some degree, to one who disrobes himself of knowledge. (Bataille, 1988, p. 123)

7 Interim

On one of my many visits to the studio of a certain artist who was attempting to render his experience of our highland interior in oils on canvas, I gazed at an area that looked raised, it had been painted over so often, a square hole, sky over empty wasteland, and couldn't tell whether the hole pertained to sky or wasteland.

I had just begun studying philosophy and to classify this hole my mind quickly riffled through all the theories I had been reading. But I came up empty-handed: Is an opening the emptiness or what surrounds the emptiness? Through that hole, I plunged into the work. And since then I have always looked for holes in artworks.

When I was a teenager I once stood before an artwork at the Reykjavík Art Museum; my feet hurt and the work seemed ugly, dead, and boring. So I turned away. My mother, who was along, was surprised at me. This piece was so remarkable; it had a powerful but delicate motion. So I looked again – and no longer saw the work itself, only its motion. The lapse between the two viewings, the interim, created some kind of absurd angle; I experienced indescribable beauty, and laughed.

That's one reason why I've found it both an exhilarating challenge and an unbearable responsibility to write about art, to see if maybe words can get some viewer to look again at an artwork, entertain more viewpoints, circle around the work a bit longer.

8 Wavering

One characteristic of artworks that get you thinking and keep you thinking is a certain indecision or wavering. You sense the piece searching for its place in the world, it doesn't know what category it is in, where it belongs, or whether it is ready. Yet you also sense its stubborn certainty. Perhaps the wavering between uncertainty and certainty, meekness and audacity, slowly makes room in the work for multiple perspectives, in dialogue.

Philosophers and other academics tend to view art as a handicapped little brother who needs help expressing himself, maybe even needs someone else to speak for him. Here art's wavering is mistaken for incompetence. Maybe at some point in history art held the position of handicapped brother to the sciences, or maybe was their dog on a leash or mean lizard in a cage. But in our day one feels that academia can no longer afford to deny its own native wavering between certainty and uncertainty, and can engage in more dialogue with art. And learn a new language for doing so, even collaborate on a new language, a still-secret language. And learn to be quiet and hear the patter of the wavering, the seeds of a new language ticking open.

9 Opening

Philosopher Martin Heidegger pondered what thought might be when it didn't concern philosophy but dwelt on other things. He drew his answer from Parmenides, who lived in Greece five hundred years before zero:

> but you should learn all: the untrembling heart of
> unconcealment, well-rounded, and also the opinions of
> mortals who lack the ability to trust what is unconcealed.
> (Heidegger, 1993, p. 444)

Heidegger inquired thoroughly into this "unconcealment," disclosure, or opening, what it was really for, what was driving Parmenides. What he discovered was, in very simple terms, that we really ought to continually regauge our hearing, vision, and thought, to tolerate ever-greater opening. Since that opening would comprise the whole world's perspectives, endurance would be needed for the resultant extreme clarity.

Hannah Arendt, Heidegger's pupil, found, however, that his opening accommodated no viewpoints; what he was describing was actually a vacuum or dead space. She tried to give it dimension, to envision a real opening for dialogue, a forum modeled on a continuous spiral, in which the floor could not be closed to questions and answers by any one person who seemed to have the right answer in hand. She found that right answers were overvalued in relation to the potential of conceiving and comprehending other answers, of asking and answering on.

10 Void

In 1958, the same year that Arendt's book was published in New York, Heidegger organized a symposium in Freiburg on art and thought. Arendt was not the only one waiting for Heidegger to speak out on his inaction during the war, his willingness to work within the Nazi system; many were waiting for him to explain and justify his behaviour. Yet he summoned artists and Zen masters to a dialogue about opening, origin, motion, and void. Without a word about the dialogue itself.

Alcopley, a doctor, artist, and American Jew married to Icelandic artist Nína Tryggvadóttir – he and Tryggvadóttir were friendly with Arendt and her husband in New York – took part in Heidegger's symposium, transcribed it, and published part of it as a book-work, along with a letter he received from the philosopher, to the effect that

> In the end, there persists the insight that the plastic arts (the arts that form and show) can more easily say that which is essential but which is always unsayable. (Alcopley, 1963, p.37)[1]

1 Alcopley: What are the critera for judging whether or not a work of art comes out of the source?
Hisamatsu: The judgment itself must spring from the source…
In Zen, the source is the formless, the non-being. But this "non" is no mere negation. This nothingness is rid of all forms, and that is why it can move freely, in its complete formlessness, any time and any place. This is the free movement out of which the work of art comes into being.
Heidegger: This void is not nothingness in its negative sense. If we understand this void spatially, we must say that it is the emptiness of this space which makes room. It is what gathers all things together.

11 Thermal Time-Machine

Meanwhile, also in 1958, another German, Joseph Beuys, managed despite struggling with depression to submit a proposal to a competition for a memorial at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. He did not win and his proposal was forgotten until, decades later, it finally crawled out of his files. And Beuys managed to rise out of his depression and post-war trauma to develop ideas on art as a kind of civil engagement. His major and influential autobiographical installation *Arena: Where Would I Have Got if I Had Been Intelligent!*, slowly accumulated and modified over the years, includes a 1958 image titled *Thermal Time-Machine* (*Warme-Zeitmaschine*), a technological and poetic kenning for the Earth, through which all human endeavor must pass.

I have never associated Beuys's *Arena* or spiralling stage with politics but it plays out on many levels, many planes. And here, speaking of panoramic views, one recalls Ragnar Kjartansson's piece, *Hitler's Loge*, which displayed the ruins of Hitler's private theatre box, artifact of the viewpoint of a man who thought his perspective was the right one.

12 Totentanz

She said she had come to Iceland in 1939 with her Icelandic husband and it had been like going back in time, in a time machine. She sat on her bed in the nursing home and spoke of the strange tools of yesteryear. At first they lived in a soddy up north. I asked if she hadn't ever wanted to leave. Oh yes, and they had left once, to settle in Denmark, and had lived in the woods with wild deer, foxes, and peacocks; but the Occupation had sent them sailing back to Iceland.

It wasn't until I saw her obituary that I realized that this was the woman who had painted a picture I'd known since childhood, from the first book on art in Iceland, Kristján Friðriksson's *Íslensk myndlist.* That painting, *Olaf Lily-Rose*, had filled me with an untimely longing for love and a strange yet familiar sorrow. That woman had been the artist Karen Agnete Thórarinsson.

I was eager to see the original and went looking for it in museums but evidently no works by Karen Agnete Thórarinsson exist in the main Icelandic museums. *Olaf Lily-Rose* resides in the home of the descendents of the Laura for whom it was painted; Karen Agnete

painted it at her friend Laura's request. Laura was a kindred spirit; both women played piano, grew up in Copenhagen (Laura also in the Faeroes), and later lived far from world civilization, with their husbands in Iceland.

Olaf Lily-Rose is a triptych, coffin-shaped when its side panels are shut, an altarpiece when its wings stand open, inviting the viewer in. But instead of Biblical images it depicts the Faeroese-Icelandic story of young Ólaf. The images rendered here in oils are from a ballad telling of Olaf's encounter with elf-women, who try to lure him into their cliff abode. He balks, saying he doesn't care to live with elves; he'd rather believe in Christ Himself. They try coaxing him but the ballad ends with one elf woman, come to bestow a kiss, drawing a sword from her richly-coloured garments and stabbing Olaf through the heart. He rides home, where his mother and sister tend his fatal wound. At the bottom of the right panel is a small figure that in the published reproduction looks like Rodin's *Thinker*; in the original it is clearly the bereft, thoughtful sister.

The painting illustrates a storyline that lives on as a folk dance. The polyphonic cadence conveys the ravelled loves of a man who lives on the edge of two moralities, two orders; his thoughts and longings aspire to two worlds. His name and that of the artwork convey a hybrid, grafted being: lily and rose, different species of flowers, joined in one name.

13 Absurdity

The absurd is a kind of third dimension in two-dimensional conditions, a surprising widening of narrow straits, a quick dilation of perspective that often evokes laughter. The artist Muggur seems to have conducted a kind of dilation operation throughout his career. He went between media, drew, painted, sewed, and made collage, sang and frolicked. And persistently sought the point of view of other beings around him, evil or not, angelic and animal.

Muggur nurtured his imagination through threadbare travels, study, and intimate friendships. He contracted tuberculosis at an early age and thereby perhaps gained extra-sensitivity to the beyond. At least, for him the world of fantasy was not a faraway dream world but close and real.

In his illness he convened nature's sprites and creatures on his bed. Princess Dimmalimm awaits a swan prince, ancient symbol of miracle and the underworld divulged; with his long neck he trolls the deep. And dies for her love.

Jóhannes Kjarval's altarpiece for the church at Ríp in northern Iceland was lost after being rejected due to the artist's theological imprecision but was later located by a medium in a pile of junk in Denmark. Muggur painted one altarpiece; it resides not in a church but in the National Gallery. Jesus, smiling inscrutably, is healing the sick; it's hard to tell what sort of person he is, poking his fingers into eye sockets to push buttons in the brain: Behold! The images in the side panels are of tittering-scared people, withdrawn into themselves; the artist is trying to do as Jesus does: Open up! Thus the painting is a kind of self-portrait.

14 Transgression

Through persistent harrowing attempts under exacting specifications of draftsmanship a self-portrait came into being, a portrait of an unborn man, an artist's contradictory desires: For *Drawing Restraint 6* Matthew Barney jumped on a mini-trampoline, attempting to draw in midair. The performance was caught on film in 1989 and re-enacted in 2004. The jumping continued, with modifications to the trampoline, at the exhibition *Prayer Sheet with the Wound and the Nail* (*Drawing Restraint 17 and 18,* Basel 2010).

The title picture was Johann Philipp Steudner's 17th-century painting *Prayer Sheet with the Wounds of Christ* – wounds reminiscent of eyes, ink pots, or female genitalia. The impression is thus that the artist is jumping in a wound or over wounds on the brave flesh that reiterates them (as a hymen reiterates a woman's closed portal and also its possible opening). But what kind of image results from this drawing? Another self-portrait?

In the hidden cathedral structure of the exhibition space, the trampoline was in the altar's place. On the one hand an altar is the holiest spot in any space, where an individual says his most fervent prayers, seeking connection to an order other than the one that rules the world, puts his lips to the wounded side and sucks nourishment from another dimension. An altarpiece, with side panels, wings, to emphasize the portal: Opening, exaltation. On the other hand the altar may be seen as the locus of power, where archpriests stand and pat the heads of those who kneel before them in humility or sometimes abasement if humility becomes submission. At worst, the meek are sacrificed on the altar, like animals.

What kind of altarpiece results from the artist's performance? Certainly not one that would be accepted as an altarpiece at Ríp! Leaving a swathe like a battle or mating beasts or child's play.

As the artist leaps onto the membrane, from the right or from the left, and vaults up to draw a line on the wall, that beam of the cross appears which denotes direct contact with the power that heals wounds, in nature and love and pagan performance traditions. In part, an ode to the pyramidal memory of Osiris, god of purification, death, and resurrection. Scribbles of a gestating male on the cave wall of mother earth. And the nun alone in her cell longs for a touch from beyond, harping on her prayer till it echoes in the narrow space, pounding on the divine eardrum.

This cross, made by curving, overlapping, female lines, is already almost deconstructed. Yet you still glimpse the old cross, the crucifix. The vertical beam, the direct connection, is clear, but where is the horizontal? It is visible only in performance, in the creation of the work, and the film about it. The artist's trajectory from back in the gallery to the trampoline, his running approach in well-prepared shoes, is the horizontal beam. Indeed his approach is much longer, through many walls, the visible and invisible barriers of the art world, of art history. It is a pilgrimage of sorts into the maw of death, continuing into the next work, a still-unreleased Matthew Barney work, a journey through a broken ancient-Egyptian cycle of reincarnation.

Death, off in the back, observes the unabashed jumping, but on the reverse of Hans Baldung Grien's painting there is a picture of St. Christopher, who wanted to serve the world's most powerful lord. He began with the earthly king but saw that death and the devil had more power and then that fearless joy and charitable desire trumped the devil, so he chose to serve divinity, helping those who wanted to cross the water, who would let nothing block or hinder them.
As you leave the imaginary anti-cathedral, you plummet downward: A 16th-century copperplate by Hendrick Goltzius depicts one who was overweening and flew too near the sun; his waxen wings melted and he fell to earth. What was he thinking, on the way down, his senses full of wax?

15 Afterthoughts

We use a phrase from French, esprit d'escalier, for the inspiration that strikes as you go down the steps leaving a party, leaving a conversation: now that you're alone you realize what you ought to have said. Such thoughts, tinged with regret, may be classed as afterthoughts.

As I left my first meeting with Hreinn Friðfinnsson in Paris, my lips were burning with questions. But when we met again, I again went home without having raised my questions. One was about his piece *Afterthought,* old metal printing-type on a mirror. I later got to go through his archive, in his home: I saw snippets of ideas, plans for pieces, and wished I could track his works back to their origin in thought, follow their emergence and interconnections with other works, including those never made. But I also wanted to just let go, give up on the origin story.

When you talk to Hreinn your brain hemispheres seem to overlap; you understand the scientific in an entirely poetic way. However much of a revolution it was to grasp the discrete functioning of the right and left brain you can hardly stop there; the revolution continues and left and right say little of complex neural pathways. Friederich Schiller wrote of the aesthetic state as a simultaneous excitement of formal and sensual instincts, which tempered each other through their antagonism, as if body and soul had come free of moral barriers and risen to the ideal freedom of the aesthetic state. (Schiller, 1785)

Hreinn and I took a train out to see a house he'd built which was about to be unveiled and sealed off as an artwork, *Second House*, a snug small house in the golden mean, the size of a sheepcote or small chapel, enclosing another smaller work in metal, still in progress, little more than a three-dimensional drawing, wide-open, empty, poised on a meteorite. And your jaw hurts as you realize that the piece is basically standing inside its own story, in that Hreinn's first *House* (1974), built inside-out to realize the famous dream of an hospitable old Icelandic farmer, lives anew in the replica, even if it's a different house and wrongside-out. Three pieces in one, without being presented in an art-historical context of cause and effect: the works flow together but their separate temporal dimensions don't dissolve; each remains, in parallel, in a kind of symbiosis. You just want to move right in, into that little house and that three-dimensional metal drawing, and curl up in the hospitable emptiness.

A rectangle provides security, Hreinn said. He reviewed the comparative history of circular dwellings. What was that again, about the circle in the square? The zero in the house? In Friðfinnsson's work *Blue Corner*, even the zero becomes rectangular, an impossibility, as the composition holds out for further time.

When a rectangle is folded and its ends cut diagonally, new angles appear. On the end faces are scored or raised infinity signs, figure eights, fierce snakes infusing the angles with multi-dimensional desires. They grow inward toward infinity and nevermore can enclose basic shapes; rather they seek to encompass new space. They frame only infinity; only the opening is left, no closure possible. The blue corner endures the tension. Stubborn blue corner, cornette, blue angle, wide angle, philosophical angle, angling… Icelandic may be unique in its lovely uses of 'blue' as an emphatic prefix, the blue end, the blue brink, before the fall, when all the fundamental questions crowd into the brain's age-old pituitary pendulum. Hreinn Friðfinnsson has four such hard-plastic corners, two white, one red, one blue, each in its own corner of the world. Cornerstones for the new conversation.

16 Symbiosis

Hegel likened philosophy to Minerva's owl, who takes wing at dusk. And owls often lay eggs in the old abandoned nests of other birds. In his book-work, *On the Specific Contribution of Iceland and Icelandic Society to the History of Imperfection* (Gallerí Ágúst, 2008), Unnar Örn presented photographs of run-down houses and ramshackle huts in Iceland. The pictures were taken between 1930 and 1945 by Sigurður Guttormsson, who travelled around the countryside taking pictures to amass a collection that would prove the existence of significant class divisions in Iceland; he was fed up with the dominant discourse describing Iceland as a classless society, with no variance in social condition. He had heard that poor children had been shut indoors during the visit of the Danish king, that people had painted just the trim on their houses and hoped the king wouldn't snoop around. Sigurður wanted to photograph the truth. What you could see if you walked all around.

Unnar Örn locates this work on a timeline of Icelandic history, though imperfections and failures are seldom given a separate chronology. This unusual timeline includes other artworks such as

Dieter Roth's images of Reykjavík houses of a certain era and pictures by Douwe Jan Bakker, who photographed Icelandic houses for his project, *On the Specific Contribution of Iceland and Icelandic Society to Architectural History*.

Is Unnar Örn living parasitically, off honest photographers and other artists? No, this is more of a symbiotic relationship, two organisms drawing life from their mutual association. The young artist is host to the photographer's oeuvre, in what is probably the sort of mutualism found among fungi and algae, lichens, orchids, and heath plants.

For another exhibition, Unnar Örn draped a large cloth dyed in natural heath colours over male-shaped works such as models of buildings intended to form the perfect capital city, the pinnacle of Icelandic culture. Architect Guðjón Samúelsson worked on this ambitious city plan echoing the style of the home and eventual museum of sculptor Einar Jónsson. Let us imagine the point of intersection between two sightlines: If Guðjón Samúelsson looked toward the perfect urban organization and Einar Jónsson toward the perfection of his home, is the point of intersection circular or rectangular?

17 Dedication

It was to sculptor Einar Jónsson that Kees Visser dedicated his book-work *Dedication*, with its highly-imperfect images of the master's works, photocopied and altered. Perhaps as a reminder to ease up on the obsessive perfectionism. For reports concur that Einar Jónsson still walks his museum, making sure that his stipulations on the preservation of his collection are strictly followed, his commands obeyed. Kees Visser, in his book-work, accents Einar Jónsson's organic forms and their motion, filling dozens of sketches with bright cheerful colours. But Visser's work itself is hardly sketchy and it does cross your mind that here too is an artist grappling with perfection. In a colourful installation at the St. Eustache Church in Paris, strictly-flat painting is wrenched free of wooden clutches and given new life in three dimensions: vertical lines of light assemble before the organ pipes in the church's rear, creating a sort of crystal that is invisible in one light but from another angle shines forth in every colour of the spectrum, reverberating with the organ notes that then assume colour, and the colours resound – Arthur Rimbaud could have been happy at mass there.

18 Flow

Ten thousand million years. An overwhelming flash of history or an eon in steady forward motion. Like a brain cross-section showing the imagination coming alive after long stagnation. This image is digitally printed on canvas and is part painting, part textile art, and part teaching tool from a science fair on geology, neurology, physiology etc. and also chromatics, energetics, the sociology of emotion: a flow chart.

At this wildly-ambitious science fair, we are witnessing a war: information is being liberated from the received goals of its medium. There is pain in coming free of the violent imperative of Enlightenment thought. To survive the rebellion of the aesthetic, your eyes must engage both brain hemispheres at once, gain a new holistic understanding of world connections – but that evidently can lead to blindness or insanity, and whoever experiences it ends up in an exaltation that cannot be imparted to others. Hence the temptation to try to resume these mental postures, to train your eyes into a new default engagement with the brain, a new cross. In rare cases the tongue manages to access this vision and express the flow in the language of a prehistoric future. Sirra Sigrún looks toward painter Svavar Guðnason for ten thousand million years; their eyes meet at a pivotal point in artistic thought.

19 Timeline

This timeline is woven from rock and animal skin and is in essence philosophical. Like a manuscript many scribes have slaved over in cellars and caves. Like the rocky road of footsore seekers who roam the globe, the path of the fool who can't stop and turn back though he knows the trip is one giant impasse. The memories of the way down into the black hole of knowledge are tightly woven in rock matrices. Those who try to experience the journey by reading the strata soon give up, for this is a very personal timeline; only those who have themselves returned from a perilous journey can understand it.

Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir's *Relative Timeline* was exhibited at the Reykjavík Art Museum in 2008 along with giant chains of DNA made from triangular figures that leapt out of the chromosome. I wrote the catalogue text on this piece. Iceland and the world were in upheaval at the time and in my memory those events are all precisely recorded on Ingibjörg's *Timeline;* I hardly find it necessary to even glance in my journal; it's enough to look over the weave. Under the mineral flakes

lie all the intersections. In preparing to write, through dialogue with Ingibjörg about weaving, time, and dimensionality, I arrived at new realms of knowledge, but still don't understand a thing; the fool is just tying his shoes, warming up for the next excursion, having shed certainty but donned new rudiments of knowledge, about string theory and genes and everything currently being born out of the zeroes on the new timeline.

20 Sheep Bones

In order to study a section, the archaeologist must dig a trench. Then strata appear, in cross-section: layers of volcanic ash, human habitation. The scholar sketches the matrices with an eye to time, trying to grasp how time has arranged itself. Sometimes a hole has been dug through a layer of ash, wrecking the timeline. The matrices place events in "contexts" that afford clues to past habitations and natural conditions. In a Brooklyn project space known as Dandruff Space and Shroud, Hulda Stefánsdóttir created an exhibition based on a conversation with an archaeologist. She had been intrigued by a story about a layer of white ash that might indicate either natural catastrophe – a volcanic eruption – or the humdrum chores of a housewife burning peat at her stove. A second talk with the archaeologist brought a caveat: peat ash had a pinkish cast or something but by then the artist was full-steam ahead building associations around the white colour and there was no turning back. So a solution was found: some sheepcotes must have burned down, burned sheep bones are white; the archaeologist remembers: They turn to white flakes! Hulda's installation *A Hole in Your Time* (2005), in Brooklyn-apartment sheepcotes, was her personal stratigraphic analysis, made with paintings, photocopies, and photographs, an inspiration to antiquarians to finish all their unfiled white-blank-filled reports.

In the course of conversation the archaeologist repeatedly noted how good the artist was at reading strata, how quickly she read her way into each, extracted it with her eyes and stretched it out flat. In her analysis Hulda alluded to Derrida's writings on poet Stephan Mallarmé's use of the word 'hymen'. Hymen denotes both maidenhead and marriage, that which separates man and woman and also that which unites them, the discovery of the hymen at the hymen's cost, since a hymen disappears when proof is required of its existence.

Like a careless excavation of ruins: the effort to arrive at their origin may destroy them as resources.

In *Looking Back*, an installation created specifically for the present exhibition, Hulda revisits *A Hole in Your Time,* emphasizing the distortions of memory, adding another layer of distance to the prior work through a composition of photographic documentation, photocopies, and prints of the works themselves, many scanned directly onto the museum walls.

21 The Urge to Fly

A small, red, drop-leaf desk is the only surviving object known to have belonged to nineteenth-century poet and naturalist Jónas Hallgrímsson. Artist Kristín Jónsdóttir from Munkathverá regretted that the desk was in storage and got permission to exhibit it at the National Museum. She wanted to invite visitors to sit at the desk but due to the emphasis on preservation this was forbidden. So she asked a carpenter to make an exact replica of the desk. Seated at the replica, which at first glance might look like an IKEA desk, you could see for yourself how essential it was to write at a drop-leaf desk, a desk with wings. What scholars and artists share is the urge to fly: to comprehend and penetrate the natural order.

Kristín imagines that the poet himself designed the desk for ease in working through the data for his *Outline for a Survey of Iceland*. The desk has a large drawer suitable for holding drawings, maps, geological samples from the Icelandic countryside, and also freshly-coined astronomical terms: Kristín learned that Jónas Hallgrímsson had probably sat at this desk while translating a classic astronomy textbook, which obliged him to invent many new Icelandic words. Kristín projected them on ceiling windows in the National Museum: *sightfurtherer, sightangle, sightfield, pullingpower, discalm, domemirror*… In his *Astronomy* Jónas wrote:

> Sightangle [perspective] is our term for that angle originating at the eye when two rays enter it from two objects at some interval…If we were able, gentle readers! to shift places as swiftly as human thought, I would now, wherever you are, transport you with me far into outer space… We have a long road ahead… (Hallgrímsson, 1991, p.69)

In the drawer is Kristín's map of the mountain lakes of the Arnarvatn heath, where Jónas roamed, composing poems. This is Kristín's ode to the poet. And her admonishment to us to work at desks with wings. *Winged Darkness* is an earlier Kristín Jónsdóttir work, relating, via wool, to her musical compositions; the title comes from a story by the Faeroese author William Heinesen.

22 Descriptions

While Roni Horn, concerned over global warming and the lack of environmental awareness, was taking samples from Icelandic glaciers to preserve in tall glass columns, a team travelled the countryside at her behest, collecting accounts of the changing weather. Roni had been travelling around Iceland for years, drafting her own survey of Iceland and publishing it in book-work form. Her survey is personal and autobiographical, offering a fragmentary view of her connections to nature and her fellow travellers in this world, cross-connections she has transferred to print and to walls in galleries round the world. And the phenomenon that grew out of conversations about the weather, in a complex web of individual connections to Iceland and its art, manifests a kind of group self-portrait, wonderfully rendered by Roni in book form. There's a fine difference between normal chat about the weather and chat that is supposed to be normal but is intended for broadcast to the world. And there is a difference between a radio interview and an interview that is visual art! I worked with Roni Horn and Hjörtur the technician, splicing the interviews. The piece was originally aired at the Library of Water but had lain silent a while. Here in Hafnarhús it is removed from its Library context but remains, perhaps grows as, testimony to an artist's attempt to convey the connections that form between man and animal, man and nature, man and humanity. When close but ephemeral bonds are formed, and passing chat about the weather turns into a chat about yourself and what matters most to you. Then the unspoken gets loud in the background; words crowd the white spaces around the lines, long after the book goes to print.

23 Fishing Tackle

We try, with pencils, erasers, magnetic tape, digital recorders, cameras, oil, and light, to reel in the poetry of a day and its interactions.

Technology is not outside the sphere of human interaction, as might be concluded from Aristotle. The sphere of human activity is woven from gadgets and tools, organic and inorganic. The most important criterion of human life does not, I find, concern the level of technology but whether tools can create the prerequisites for the humane. Guðjón Ketilsson's tools live in the abandoned workshop that turns up when everyone has forgotten what such tools are for. Best let them be, until someone recalls their purpose or invents a new one. To me they look ideal for culling the roughness from thought, for extracting thought's greatest delicacies, so innovative they're barely there. These are artists' and philosophers' tools. For holding open the square in the middle of the sharp sign; for fishing down through the hole, into the depths.

24 Nearness

Caution: objects are closer than they appear. Ragnar Helgi Ólafsson's *Rearview Mirror for Martin Heidegger and Walt Disney* directs the weary traveller's eye to a digital cave in a primitive yet highly technologized park for philosophers. Philosophers can't help but get all elated when faced with slow-motion self-portraits; they feel as if they were proving Wittgenstein's theory of the impossibility of private languages, for surely the sum of the integers Heidegger and Disney is Wittgenstein. And the three-dimensionality swells over time, saturated with nearness.

25 Wooden Horse

Fernando doesn't take orders from anyone; his best moments are when he's at home in his living room, puttering at getting the world into some kind of shape. In the art world he sometimes balks, doesn't herd well, a wooden horse but also a stud horse. His thirst for the race turns inward; he gallops the fields of thought.

The artist is trying to find the commonality between the inner and the outer. And finds it useful to work with the mask that Nietzsche carpentered from words.

Improvisation in the air. The camera man probably has no idea how or when the performance will end. The video is like a rough-cut of recent Gabríela Friðriksdóttir works, beautiful in their insecurity and stubborn certainty or brazen harmony.

26 Greenhous

He was a real street-urchin, that kid, working in a toy store and splashing around downtown on his skateboard. And there he was in Sigurður Guðjónsson's multi-stage performance, a sedate professional, making rings spin as long as anyone cared to watch. *Insight* is a digital portrait of the magician when he has spun the rings so long, his soul has appeared between his hands.

Glasshouse is another short Sigurður Guðjónsson film from the same period, shot in a half-wrecked greenhouse in Hveragerði. There, doves that used to frequent vendors' wagons at an amusement park are flapping around startled. Souvenir animals of amusement-park joy, of greenhouse produce, of poets' lives on streets where no one remains but denizens of melancholy and age. These doves have seen better days, but they'll flap out of the magician's hat once more, when the new amusement park opens.

27 Carnival

I thought I remembered seeing a piece by Kristinn G. Harðarson that was a book and a theatre all in one. I couldn't find that but found another book with stories so vivid, they might as well have been a puppet theatre in my head. In the title story, "Sudden Certainty" ("Skyndileg fullvissa"), someone is talking to a person who thinks he has trained his vision to see inward and has seen that his brain is directed by a sort of spider with human eyes. The remove from insanity seems infinitesimal in this story but those who study the brain, mind-body connections, and the rainbow know that the line demarcating insanity is fuzzy. When sense is deliberately dilated, the line between logic and nonsense is almost erased. Almost. Aristotle defined humanity by its logical abilities in comparison to animals and tried to widen the gap as much as possible, to the animals' disadvantage.

Kristinn G. Harðarson has, as an artist, explored various fields that do not pertain to visual art as it is usually understood. For example, he has turned teaching and a creative take on developmental training into an artistic project, performance art.

In his 1995 performance *Around*, filmed while he was living in the United States, the artist is just playing indoors, but here 'playing indoors' conveys the precious childhood hours when school is cancelled or you're just sick enough to be allowed to stay home. He makes a stage

set and dolls and in nine segments portrays a daily American small-town life punctuated by a local fair, and also a domestic life plagued by insects. At the carnival, relative proportions go all out of whack: the small become big, the big small, the sick healthy, the healthy sick, the rich poor, the poor rich. The carnival continues at home in the artist's living room and we who are watching get to be children for a while, remembering how to lose ourselves in the childish gravitas of play, which philosophers would so like to join in on, could they but step down from the ivory tower to bug-level.

28 Ink and Graphite

Whispered Close, Twilight, Windless Calm, Up to the House, Cottage Memory, Good Times, Waffle Nights, Pumping the Accordion, Eavesdropping in Lamplight, Pitchfork and Wellingtons, Lady Ghost, Grey Herb-gathering, Lapping the Water of Life, Under the Crosswood… Some titles of woodcuts by Elías B. Halldórsson, who played at perfecting the woodcut during a lifetime of contending with painting.

His graphic works are dense in their lightness and convey such close familiarity, you feel as if they were images of your own thoughts in those poetic, fluid moments when men and beasts tuned to the same wavelength meet up. And his graphic compositions are so animate, it's as if they pop out of themselves. I've never seen anything so odd: woodcuts that feel like a movie!

You're somewhere rather far away with a jolly man wearing a cross round his neck that turns out to be the sign of Venus or just a pacifier and you turn upside-down and pat a frisky dog and see a tiny little woman with snipe's wings, dancing on the gate.

Some of the images have appeared in Gyrðir Elíasson's books; over the years a sturdy bridge seems to have formed between the oeuvres of this father and son. Visual artists often read books almost three-dimensionally, seeing behind the words. So the pictures seem to appear between lines of print and likewise words in the images, albeit invisibly. From out of the perspective, a shore bird flies up and whispers in my ear.

29 Airfish

While in a political and personal limbo, artist Nína Tryggvadóttir created several children's books. The best known is her *Flying Fish*

Story (*Fljúgandi fiskisaga*) which treats, in a wry but searching manner, the dread of the unknown. Soon afterward, Tryggvadóttir was deported from the United States for alleged Communist activities and could not return for many years. In her *Letters and the Clock* (*Stafirnir og klukkan*) you get the feeling that she's resetting her clock, tearing up the foundation, examining the gaps between words, the collages between letters.

A fine-spun and tenacious thread runs through Nína's oeuvre, and there's more difference than I have experienced elsewhere between enjoying a single Tryggvadóttir work and enjoying many at once. When I had the opportunity to view her collected paintings in New York, even the colours seemed to change depending on how the works were arranged. It was delightful to follow their arrangements and rearrangements.

30 Veterinarian

British-Icelandic artist Barbara Moray Williams Árnason, an identical twin and innovator in many fields, might have been classed as an animal artist, among other things, for she drew animals very well, managing to grasp their movement and moods like the best of veterinarians. She also seemed to know children. She illustrated many children's books with woodcuts, wood engravings, and drawings. I received one of her picture books from my father as a summer gift, Jakobína Sigurðardóttir's story of Snowbright Firedaughter and Kettlerid Cottagedaughter; published in Reykjavík in 1959, it is printed in my child brain.

31 Fluttering

Many years ago the broad journal of culture *Tímarit Máls og menningar* ran an interview with philosopher Jacques Derrida, in the margins of which were pictures by Halldór Ásgeirsson of so-called lava-flies, inspired by the congealed motion of a'a lava. You never know what kind of picture will make you think and think of it again later.

I recalled hearing the artist describe a performance with flags and horses at Skálholt, the ancient episcopal see. And how funny but poignant it was to hear how far short the event had fallen of what Halldór had envisioned, planned, and prepared. Instead of spirited

mounts he got sent old nags, and had to ask the church choir to process with the flags instead of riding in on fiery steeds.

I envisioned Halldór's banners and lava-flies all around this Hafnarhús exhibition of ours. And since he had just returned from long travels and was digging in his files, reading old journals and examining the evolution of various works, it was no digression to install a new piece in the spirit of his past work.

Halldór installed his first flag work years ago on the high heath at Úlfarsfell. When those banners began fluttering in the wind, Halldór had déjà vu and realized how flags had entered his work. Many years prior he had been on an arduous hike in Nepal, feeling more dead than alive, when all at once flags started fluttering, prayer flags halfway up the mountain, changing his whole experience of the trip and its hardships, infusing the moment with time and relativity. The flags on the Icelandic heath wore out quickly, got torn almost to threads, for the Icelandic cycle of elements is quick. Since then however Halldór has developed flagpoles based on Tibetan originals that rotate in place, simultaneously flags, sundials, and weathervanes.

> The world's wind, the breath of man: both manifest the "expansion of universal phenomena." Dispersing into the distant nearness and making it the power of all the world. Wind and breath… (Bachelard, 1943, p. 306)

In Tibetan tradition prayer flags are raised wherever deep breathing and prayer are needed, in city squares, schools, government settings, and up in the mountains. And now there is a kind of semi-heathen prayer circle slung round the art museum. The flags are painted with symbols from travel diaries, mainly from Mexico, but also include a supermarket logo, the Bónus pig, and various natural patterns and religious symbols that have accumulated in the artist's subconscious archive over time. The flags flutter outside the window of the museum's reading room, by the harbor, facing the sea, redolent of ties to other continents.

In the dark winter of our culture, prayer is somber; the wings of the triptych altarpiece, however well-oiled their hinges may be, are heavy in comparison with flags. Friedrich Nietzsche, inspired by Asia, urged philosophers to arise:

> Make like the wind when he plunges from his mountain caves: he wants to dance to his own pipe, the seas tremble and skip under his footsteps.
>
> Praised be this good unruly spirit who gives wings to asses and milks the lionesses, who comes upon all that is today and all rabble like a storm wind…
>
> So learn to laugh over and past yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you good dancers, high! higher! (Nietzsche, p. 240)

32 Night

The museum is closed; night has fallen. I go up to the museum window, through a passageway of flags; their rippling is like the wavering in art, fluttering book pages. Through the window of the museum reading room I see some book-works lying on the table beside the chess board: Dieter Roth's personal alphabet, his *Stamp Box*; a whole pile of works by Guðbergur Bergsson, who has created more book-works than any other Icelander; a ghostly moan emanates from Katrín Elvarsdóttir's spectral speculations; there are Kjarval's journal and Margrét H. Blöndal's three-dimensional dots; I see Magnús Árnason and Ófeigur Sigurðsson's waterproof book for Saga-author Snorri Sturluson to read in his thermal bath. And Jón Óskar's poems are there too, with Kristján Daviðsson's artwork on the cover; I try to recall "A Search for Beauty" as I walk away from the museum toward the promise of night, to lie down "wild on the grass on the eve of breeding season."

33 Thanks

I would like to thank Hafthor Yngvason for inviting philosophers into a dialogue with the museum. And to thank my collaborators for their incisive and rewarding conversation. I would also like to thank the artists for their conversation and their work. I did not intend to masculinize the women artists out of grammatical habit. And I intended to better describe the borders of philosophy and art. But I had to place myself within them and try to describe them from there.

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Perspectives is a collection of eight essays on the complex relationship between visual art and philosophy. All the authors are accustomed to applying philosophical thought in their writings on art. Here they approach philosophy from art's viewpoint, by examining artworks specially selected for an exhibition of the same name at the Reykjavík Art Museum. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has written a new essay for this volume.



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