

KW

Hreinn Friðfinnsson
To Catch a Fish with a
Song: 1964–Today
28 September 19 –
5 January 20

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28 September 19 – 5 January 20
Opening: 27 September 19, 7 pm

Icelandic artist Hreinn Friðfinnsson (born in 1943, Baer Dölum, IS) is celebrated for his lyrical and poetic use of everyday objects. His artistic vocabulary, underscored by a delicate sense of humor, playfully implements storytelling and perceptual ploys. Friðfinnsson's work could be characterized as conceptual and investigates our understanding of time and the world around us. As explained by the artist himself: "Notions of time are always compelling. I read what comes my way about physics and mathematics, but I read as one who is uninitiated. The feeling and the interest in the essence of time is serious, but my dealing with time is not knowledge-based; it is more exploratory and feeling-based."

He is truly a natural storyteller; most of his works beg a narrative, or the fabrication of a story, even when there isn't one. Friðfinnsson is not simply one of Iceland's leading conceptual artists—he himself can be considered a landscape, an atmosphere, a state of mind. He has been compared to artists working in romantic conceptual modes. Though his practice is

grounded in the dematerialization of art, and also has strong links to landscape and natural phenomena, the artist has remained resolutely independent. Friðfinnsson's work does not incorporate a critical stance toward art, and the artist eschews strict protocols for the interpretation of his works; for him, making art has something compulsive about it. Friðfinnsson is a kind of idiosyncratic alchemist. With subtle gestures, he uses the exhibition space as a stage upon which to transform time, space, objects, the rational, and the irrational into captivating yet humble miracles. Although there is a consistency of theme and a common emotional thread running through Friðfinnsson's art production, the resulting works are remarkably varied in scale and substance. They include photographs, videos, and drawings as well as installations, texts, and ready-mades. Throughout the profusion of media and subjects he addresses, Friðfinnsson's practice maintains a unique character; his economy of means goes hand in hand with a poetic, elusive, and at times humorous language. His work has inspired younger generations of artists, such as Olafur Eliasson and Philippe Parreno, who have been involved in supporting his work throughout the years. Friðfinnsson is an *artist's artist* in the truest sense of the term—his work remains relatively unknown to the greater public. For this



Hreinn Friðfinnsson, *First House*, 1974, Courtesy the artist and i8 Gallery, Reykjavík, Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm/Mexico City, Meessen De Clercq, Brussels, Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid

reason, the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (CH) and KW Institute for Contemporary Art have joined forces to celebrate his extraordinary practice with a comprehensive retrospective spanning over half a century of work. The exhibition, titled *To Catch a Fish with a Song: 1964–Today*, is accompanied by a chronological catalogue raisonné that includes elaborate academic essays and an extensive bibliography. The exhibition is the artist's first institutional solo show in Switzerland and Germany.

The exhibition at KW begins with the very first pieces he produced: his *Self Portrait* of 1964 and *Dropping by at Jón Gunnar's* (1964), one of his first conceptual pieces. The works were part of the first exhibition by the SÚM group, an artist collective that initiated a space of the same name—Friðfinnsson was a founding member. The SÚM-group came into being in Reykjavík in the mid-1960s and remained active well into the 1970s. The group may be regarded as the first consciously disruptive movement in Icelandic art, aiming its barbs at two local trends, landscape painting on the one hand and abstraction on the other. The SÚM artists themselves were a diverse group, many of them largely self-taught. SÚM's artistic expression was partly born out of the social and cultural turmoil of the late 1950s and early 1960s, not least the manifold challenges to the moral values of Western culture. A new generation of Icelandic artists were introduced to many of these ideas through Swiss-German artist Dieter Roth, who lived in Iceland for a time.

The first floor of the exhibition also contains works from the 1970s, including some of his more iconic work such as the infamous *First House* (1974), part of the *House Project* (1974–ongoing)—a work spanning the artist's career. Inspired by a book of Icelandic author Þórbergur Þórðarson from 1938, Friðfinnsson built a small house in the summer of 1974—a house in the same fashion as Sólon Guðmundsson, an old eccentric living in a fishing village in north-west Iceland, had intended to do about half a century ago; that is to say an 'inside-out house'. The existence of this house means that 'outside' has shrunk to the size of a closed space formed by the walls and the roof of the house. The rest has become 'inside'. The house harbours the whole world except itself. This 'inside-out house' is situated in an unpopulated area of Iceland, and in a place from which no other man-made objects can be seen. It poses questions about space and its boundaries.

Alongside the *House Project*, his other long-term project *I Collected Personal Secrets* (1972–2015) can be seen, in which Friðfinnsson collected secrets from people over 40 years. In the early 1970s, the artist placed an advert in a Dutch art magazine asking people to send him their personal secrets. By posing as a collector of personal secrets, the artist would, he thought, allay suspicions that he had any ulterior

motive in using or revealing privileged information that might come his way. After 40 years, Friðfinnsson concluded his "secrets project" by shredding the accumulated unread secrets and using them as the base for a monochrome painting.

The second floor of the exhibition is a hybrid of subtle gestures in which the exhibition space becomes more of a stage, with objects and performative works at the center. Pieces such as *Point / Counterpoint* (2017), in which an arrow is being shot by a bow into the wall of the gallery, or *Beauty Marks* (2004), in which a fake beauty mark is placed on the face of the director of the institution and an enlargement of it positioned within the gallery, are playful and humorous. More subtle and poetic actions appear in *Atelier Sketch* (1990–ongoing), which literally captures spider webs from the various studios the artist has occupied to date, or *Placement* (1999–ongoing), where the artist dipped his thumb, index, and middle finger into red, yellow, and blue paint and then placed glass sheets onto the gallery wall, leaving colored fingerprints as the only evidence.

Friðfinnsson's unique understanding of origin, space, and time, in which absence and presence often play an important role, is what makes him a pioneer in our comprehension of ecology and existence.

Public Program

Guided tours through the exhibition by Icelandic artists interpreting Hreinn Friðfinnsson's artistic practice:

Tour with Hrefna Hörn Leifsdóttir
17 October 19, 6 pm

Tour with Egill Sæbjörnsson
31 October 19, 6 pm

Tour with Styrmir Örn Guðmundsson
15 November 19, 6 pm

red eye 1 & red eye 2

Performance with Liina Magnea and members of the ÍKB, including Sara Björg Bjarnadóttir, Leifur Eiríksson, Haraldur Þrastarson, and María Sólrún
29 November 19, 6 pm
12 December 19, 6 pm
Venue: in the exhibition, 1st and 2nd floor

Tours and performances are included in admission fee.

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Opening hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm
Thursday 11 am–9 pm
Closed on Tuesday

Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €
Combined Day Ticket KW / me Collectors Room Berlin
10 € / reduced 8 €
berlinpass holder 4 €
Free admission to visitors under 18, holders of the *KW Lover** card, and on Thursday evenings from 6 to 9 pm

Guided tours

KW offers free guided tours through the exhibition during regular opening hours. For further information on tours for large groups (over 10 people), please contact Duygu Örs at do@kw-berlin.de or +49 30 243459-132.

Colophon

Curators: Krist Gruijthuisen, Andrea Bellini
Assistant Curator: Cathrin Mayer
Public Program and Outreach: Sabrina Herrmann
Head of Production: Claire Spilker
Technical Management: Wilken Schade
Head of Installation, Media Technology: Markus Krieger
Installation Team: KW Installation Team
Registrar: Monika Grzymislawska
Press and Communication: Karoline Köber, Katja Zeidler
Text and Editing: Krist Gruijthuisen, Friederike Klapp, Karoline Köber
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