



Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal
University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Author(s): David Winfield Norman

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2011, Vol. 4, pp. 67-74

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

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Altered States: Performance and Perception in Form – A Kristján Guðmundsson Retrospective

David Winfield Norman

This retrospective of the art of Kristján Guðmundsson will address how by refining the elements of painting and drawing, while simultaneously engaging the viewer in new and more thorough ways, the artist broadens the capacity to interact with art by confusing the viewer's own immediate perception. Through unconventional, visual ways of measuring time and altering audio perception, the realm of the art becomes ours as well. By requiring us as viewers to relinquish our senses to fully participate in the work, it broadens one's perception of art to the essential level of how one perceives the world.

White and Black Paintings in Grey and White Frames (fig. 1) are four thin panels painted in shades of white and grey, framed in painted steel. They are backed with engineer's sound-insulating material, which absorbs the surrounding noise, effectively deadening the space before the paintings. Here Kristján Guðmundsson's ideas of spatial emptiness converge with the question of how one views painting. These pieces won him the 2010 Carnegie Art Award.

Kristján Guðmundsson arose out of a wave of Fluxus ideas and practices coinciding with Dieter Roth's temporary residency in

DAVID WINFIELD NORMAN is a first year History of Art student from Chicago. He worked for a year as assistant director of a Chicago contemporary art advisory, Rena Sternberg Gallery, and as an archivist to a private art collector. He intends to pursue a BFA in Denmark for the next three years before completing his History of Art degree. He has previously had poetry and fiction published in various literary journals in the USA, Canada and the UK.

Iceland in the 1950s and '60s, which culminated in the formation of SÚM – a collective of young artists, and later a gallery, that opposed the conservative Association of Icelandic Artists. Fluxus, often termed 'neo-Dada,' is a movement motivated by interdisciplinary approaches to non-retinal art, with importance placed as well on the elevation of the mundane and repulsion of academic art. But while Kristján's interest in approaching art beyond the academic mainstream grew stronger and more complex, his work soon departed from the rhetoric of Fluxus: interdisciplinary approaches became focused on the critical analysis of painting and drawing, his visual language and mode of exhibiting became minimal while still experiential, and he turned senses and perceptions into raw material. His work is characterized by extreme economy; Kristján isolates the most essential elements of a medium, and then brings them back further by relating them to the senses – through sound alteration, mathematically accurate representations of time, performative creation – thereby asking the viewer to consider the experience of viewing and interacting with that medium. In this way his work can also be viewed as realism, relating painting more acutely to the viewer beyond the visual, while remaining structurally only visual. This paradox of perception countering material has unified Kristján's varied projects, working as he says, "within the tension between something and nothing."¹

His earliest installations toyed with the notions of mass and emptiness with environmental concerns; that is to say, in the alteration of a spatial environment. A work titled *Environmental Sculpture*, 1969 consists of a room filled with massive amounts of empty or unused materials: discarded bottles, loose coat hangers, boxes. But the focal point is an ironing board with a haphazardly constructed neon bulb resting on it, which in its small size and quickly-formed shape can be looked at as a sketch.² This construction confuses the nature of space

¹ B. Nordal, 'The Hour of the North' exhibition catalogue, *Nordic Council of Ministers* (Barcelona, 1995).

² C. Schoen and H.B. Runólfsson, *Icelandic Art Today* (Ostfildern, 2009), 18.

– by emptying everyday items of their usefulness their identity is obscured, and by imposing a ‘drawn’ element the discussion becomes one of two/three dimensionality and media. Removing these objects of their purpose, making them holders of vacant space, in this context relieves them of their position as objects of function and they become, dually, symbols of banality in a mass-produced culture and basic, structural forms, interchangeable with raw sculptural material. If the light itself is to be considered a drawing, then everywhere the light falls is drawn upon as well, completing the examination of how art affects its whole surroundings by transforming an otherwise banal environment into a pure, structured artwork. Discussions of dimensionality and modes of construction within space simultaneously become discussions of the material of art, and of the broader issue of perception. In this early work the former is only the means to reach the latter, but coinciding with Kristján’s relocation to Amsterdam in 1970 – the beginning of his direct involvement in the avant-garde – his work’s formal and experiential qualities began to unite.

Kristján began to actively challenge the concept of time in this period while bringing material inspection into the spotlight. In this period he developed what he called “Equal Time-Lines, lines drawn slowly with a fountain pen on blotting paper, each one representing both a length of time and a length on the page.”³ Though pure drawings, they are performative – imbued with and dependent on time – to the point where time becomes a medium in itself, and then becomes interchangeable with drawing. Here Kristján iterates a truism: art is as much made of time as material. It is also key to examine the concept of measurement in these drawings – measurement being a means to define reality, whether in a literal sense in the measurement of time and space or in an illusionistic sense as in Renaissance-era linear perspective. Here Kristján only employs measurement as it pertains to reality, showing the emergence of literalism in his work, the desire to

³ J. Proppé, ‘Kristján Guðmundsson Makes More with Less’ The Center for Icelandic Art (Reykjavík, 2009) 9 Feb. 2011.
<http://www.artnews.is/artnews_article.php?no=23_11&is=23>.

portray only what is apparent, while searching for “the essence of drawing.”⁴ With these drawings Kristján’s work deepens; now the ‘alternative medium’ is non-tangible (unlike light), thus conceptual, and he has begun to focus on examining the internal structures of art – how the essential, physical principles of art relates to the experiences it evokes in the viewer. These rapid developments came at a critical time; in 1977, Kristján Guðmundsson along with his brother Sigurður, Hreinn Friðfinnsson and Þórður Ben Sveinsson were invited to contribute to one of the first exhibitions at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.⁵ Two years later, he began to experiment with large rolls of industrial paper on graphite blocks, realizing his examination of purity in drawing, and expanding his exploration of emptiness into a minimalist approach of total spatial emptiness. This same year he returned to Iceland.⁶

From this time on Kristján rapidly challenged himself to examine the themes of drawing, painting and measurement from the purest approaches possible. He began arranging sticks of graphite against a surface into pure, geometric shapes, titling them as drawings. The effect is not unlike the uniform purity in some of Donald Judd’s grainy steel stacked works. Significantly, Kristján exhibited with the leading Minimalist artists Donald Judd and Richard Long in 1988 at the Living Art Museum, which evolved out of Galleri SÚM. In these works Kristján approaches the theme of drawing with wit and matter-of-factness, and indeed they enhance his “connection with reality” by way of “sheer frankness.”⁷ Another such project was *Blue Transmission* (fig. 2), which periodically moved in and out of exhibition from 1988–2006. Originally exhibited in Gallery Strandkasernen in Helsinki, it consists of five massive industrial rolls of paper below two bottles filled with blue ink, which slowly release single drops onto the paper. By the end of the installation the rolls of

⁴ ‘Kristján Guðmundsson’ I8 Gallery, 6 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.i8.is/?s=8&aID=17>>

⁵ Proppé, ‘Kristján Guðmundsson Makes More with Less.’

⁶ Schoen and Runólfsson, *Icelandic Art Today*, 20.

⁷ H.B. Runólfsson ‘Kristján Guðmundsson’s Poetics’ Listasafn Íslands, 8 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.listasafn.is/?i=171>>.

paper are saturated with blue ink, the entire work being as much about time as media, since the completion of *Blue Transmission* can be measured by the paper's saturation and the bottles' emptiness. These works show Kristján's most austere and accurate examinations of media so far, having "eliminated everything that is unnecessary."⁸ What else defines a drawing besides graphite or ink and a surface? And all this within a medium often only considered preparatory, between the act of making and the final artwork. But in the case of *Blue Transmission*, the work is created before the viewer in real time, and as such can be looked at as a performance as well, akin to live drawing similar to Ragnar Kjartansson's lengthy performance *The End* which he exhibited at the 2009 Venice Biennale. As such, *Blue Transmission* is the first instance where Kristján simultaneously examines spatial alteration, the essentials of artistic media and the ways in which the viewer experiences art.

And it is this expanded idea that Kristján's *Black and White Paintings* emerge from. On top of this refined method of production and conveying experience, Kristján integrates a performative element, as seen in *Blue Transmission*, in that the viewer's actual experience with the work is both cause and effect of the specific use of material and the notion of experiencing time. This altered audio/spatial experience cannot be divorced from the form as it is not something that can be conceived of without viewing; the experience of the viewer is necessary for these works to be considered complete. In these paintings, Kristján's aims become fully synthesized, addressing perception, time or performance, and form – it is this last area that Kristján uses most inventively. By using a formal painting to alter the experience of the viewer, instead of passively being reliant on the viewer's more subconscious reaction to a static, non-interactive space, all while remaining within the structural realm of painting, Kristján reflects on the experience of art as an act that addresses all of

⁸ 'Paintings in White and Gray Frames' Galerie Anhava (Helsinki, 2010) 9 Feb. 2011.

<<http://www.anhava.com/?http://www.anhava.com/exhibitions/gudmundsson/index.html>>.

the senses and the mind, “the aesthetic dimension in painting.”⁹ Transcending the exhibition space by eliminating outside sound, these paintings exist staunchly in their own physical realm while confusing that of the viewer, and thereby time in the time isolated from audio stimuli, reaching out to and toying with the viewer’s perception. Conceptions of space and time are enhanced upon viewing these drawings and paintings, and yet Kristján makes no demands of the media or the viewer; his art is exactly as it appears, for his “works deal in many ways with the material as the essence of all art”¹⁰, and in this way Kristján seeks to engage viewers more thoroughly and actively in art of all media.

⁹ ‘Kristján Guðmundsson’ Carnegie Art Award (Stockholm, 2009) 7 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.carnegie.se/sv/ArtAward/artists-2010/Kristjan-Gudmundsson/>>.

¹⁰ H.B. Runólfsson, ‘Kristján Guðmundsson’s Poetics.’

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