

PERPETUAL MOTION

by

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curator

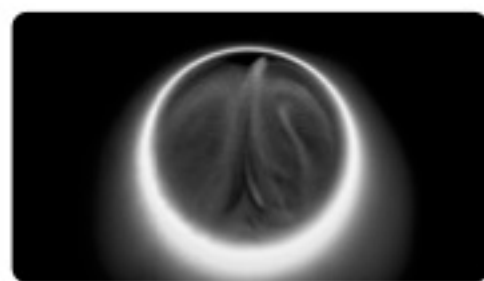
One may wonder how to register the physical world and the laws that govern it through contemplation and attentiveness. Moreover, one may seek the experience of the otherness existing in our world that can transform into a compelling, persuasive and profound event. Such reflections could be seen as attempts to explore our own nature in relation to other entities, and to become powerful drivers for artistic expression.

In John Berger's seminal work 'Ways of Seeing' he begins by stating that 'the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'.¹ Fifty years on, Berger's words still resonate in light of the ongoing questions about a shifting conception of physical materiality. This same logic can explain how the way in which we look never ceases to alter meaning or it could also be claimed that every time that we turn our eyes toward a form or an object, we perceive things as we have never seen them before.

Experiments in poetic materiality have occupied the last few decades in contemporary art, tracing philosophical discourse about how art functions and its potential to trigger the imagination and drive us into realms that transcend reality. Artists have engaged with the concept of materiality through materials that are inspected and manipulated with a consideration of their intrinsic processes and the potential to activate the observer's experience. The fundamental perceptual mechanisms that can give meaning to a material world are linked with notions of space, the interactions that take place and the processes in relation to motion and time. However, matter is not what it appears to be and neither is the space that is revealed to our eyes. In physics, matter is understood in completely different terms to the common notion – its obvious property is based in the mass, motion, or inertia – and is conceived in completely different terms. Behind the objects that occupy our ordinary reality there is the embodied energy of more basic building blocks, which paradoxically lack mass, but they reside in complex environments of energetic activity.²

The interest for the exploration of matter and energy can be seen as central in the work of Sigurður Guðjónsson. In his practice, he takes into account the aesthetic aspects of a material tradition,

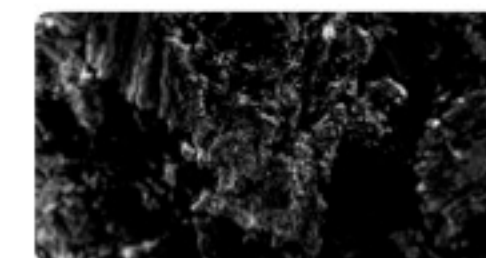
whether it is a certain material of an object or a signal collected from a given environment. These entities or forms are then assembled by means of a representational apparatus, video or film, and translated into poetic and cognitive phenomena. These are works that stretch periods and temporalities, transcending the seemingly static form of the art piece as they develop and are conceived as events. In his work for the Icelandic Pavilion of the 59th Venice Biennale, *Perpetual Motion*, he devises a multi-sensorial installation that embodies many of the concepts which he has been working on for the last years. In a fascinating moment in the artist's thinking, his new work excels in the making of a distinctive image, made of colours, light and transformation by the exposure and adjustment to other scales. The combination of visuals and sound that blend together in the architectonic space form stunningly dramatic effects that invite us to an uncanny poetic experience. Throughout his career, Guðjónsson has strived for a visual language that expresses his profound fascination for the multiple ways of seeing a world in a mode that escapes conventions or codes. A detailed observation and subsequent finding of forms and patterns function in his work as springboards into atypical aesthetic experiences within the gallery space. An important aspect within his artistic reasoning is precisely the transitions that take place in the interplay of form and environment.



Fluorescent, 2021
Video, sound,
2-channel projection
28:50 min.

Perpetual Motion stems from an established practice through which the artist has explored and advanced over a number of years. In previous works he has experimented with various techniques with which to explore notions of light and material dynamics by focusing on extreme close-ups of processes, or by magnifying material so that it can be appreciated at a scale appropriate to the human eye and the frame of a screen. In *Fluorescent* (2021), the interior of a fluorescent tube is portrayed on two opposing circular images to create an aesthetic environment and composition out of the movement and colours of what seem to be randomised patterns. In *Enigma* (2019), Guðjónsson magnified exposed fragments of carbon

with an electron microscope, an advanced technological device that enables an onscreen observation of visual composites of a subatomic nature. It is as if he wants to argue that an object, when observed and discovered, exists in some spatial distance between the eye and the lens



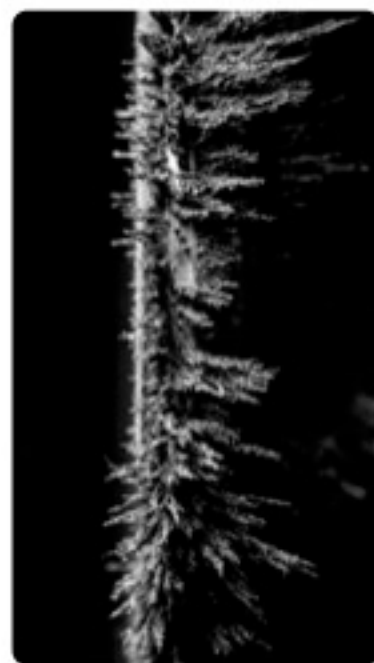
Enigma, 2019
Video, sound
27:49 min.

and that it is his duty to detect it and make us aware of it. As far as the artist looks into the world at unusual scales, what he sees is coming from a place far beyond form and meaning, and he remakes them employing the rules of our common perspectives. Such works of art acknowledge the relative nature of what can be seen, and how this is dictated by the given position of the one who looks, and, as Berger reminds us, the perspective that centres all in the eye of the beholder.

Perpetual Motion reflects on a body of work that brings attention to the continuum flux of energy and matter that makes up our world, an unperturbed system that defeats science and logic. In these instances, as it is often in art, we can find ourselves in a situation in which language becomes insufficient. It is significant to see the way Guðjónsson avoids common tropes of science or technology – which could offer him precise ways to define the world in motion that absorbs him – and instead he allows otherwise unremarkable scenes to reveal themselves on the screens. Thus, they can be recognised and experienced at the most intimate level; the tiny components that compose the field, the vibrations and persistent movement which do not rest. Shifts and disruptions in the micro-scales, in all their compelling and profound order, are drawn as glitches and error in the logical chain of things. While the artist emphasises the aspects of the event and the continuity occurring within some material or object, normal time appears suspended and temporality becomes formally reliant on the dynamic onscreen. Film and video, those media that were set free of time and movement, are employed by Guðjónsson to explore particular aspects of the kind of material processes which become central to his work. For him the visual image is better represented when considering its qualities in terms of scale, motion, temporalities, and spatial dimensions. Perspective

in the space is often determined as symmetrical set ups where a central image dominates the room. The gallery is usually darkened and the screen becomes a frame or a window to a designated event. Throughout *Perpetual Motion* the artist invites the viewers to change their position around the space and allow the screen to cut through reality in a carefully constructed visual perspective. Visitors to the work are invited to move within the physical space in order to relate their bodily spatial experience to the movement and the audio of the artwork. An image in permanent motion rules the drifts and wanderings of those walking in the space. In such an arrangement, a semi-passive viewer modifies the perspective with their own movements as they walk through the gallery and follow the rhythms and sequences of the film. The lateral spaces are emphasised by the surrounding darkness and so provide an illusionary function as frames of the actual work, separating the room in two different modes, scales or times. In this manner, perspectives are broken and distorted by the movement of each individual viewer. The giant split screen becomes the window into another space through which we discover a multi-layered reading of another micro-world never seen before, although its existence has always been intuited.

The staging of such a work in the Arsenale in Venice is charged with meaning. We can find connections between the image seen in *Perpetual Motion* and a possible recording of the memory of the building. This notion can help the artist's vision to preserve this memory, and to transform it into a tangible form in the architectural space. The artwork embodies ideas and experiences of the past when the Arsenale was a cluster of shipyards and armouries, a hive of purposeful industry where materials were transformed and ships and equipment were manufactured. Without obvious intention, the artist has found significance in the reference to this pre-industrial history of the Arsenale, the hectic activity of fabrication and making that the space once hosted. The soundscape, with its drone and rumble and continuous deep tones, can prompt our imagination to think of machines in motion, and materials being transformed over



Perpetual Motion, 2022
Video, sound,
2-channel projection
45:00 min.

time. These hectic scenarios encounter the calm and gentleness of the layout of the space designed for the present by Guðjónsson. *Perpetual Motion* haunts the space with its echoes of worked metal and its residues, focusing on the stark and strange detail of its passage through processes. The work stretches and extends the usual physical appearances, rising from floor to ceiling to interact with the network of wooden beams, as if to escape into these new dimensions it inhabits. There is a timeless sensation in the vision, the audio and the sensing of the space, a consistent seeking towards an awareness of new phenomena emerging.

There is a sense of aesthetic revelation in the gallery space as sound and image blend in synthesis. At the same time, as our visual focus is drawn towards these strange, otherworldly landscapes and temporalities, our auditory senses are free to absorb the sonic aspects of the work. The sonic phenomena in the room are enquiring into the limits of perception, reinterpreting and reordering through process of focus and detail, as if we were in front of a sound instrument or an audible sculptural object that inserts function into the space through playing with lengths and scales. Guðjónsson, in collaboration with composer and producer Valgeir Sigurðsson, employs a technique known as granular synthesis, whereby a sound is fragmented into tiny slices, or grains, which are traversed and reordered by software. It is a powerful method of sound manipulation which operates on the micro-sound timescale. In the installation the sounds appear at first to be a simple drone, but as with the visual material it is a forensic examination of the details we find when we zoom in. Within the deep and sweeping gestures are recursive fragments of the holistic auditory pulses, transporting our consciousness into those same dualities of scale and focus. The synthesis pioneer Xenakis was instrumental in developing the technique, painstakingly cutting and re-splicing fragments of magnetic tape, and this resonance between fragmentation, materiality and focus is also present in Guðjónsson's work. The sonic aspect of *Perpetual Motion* embraces themes of continuity and discontinuity, performing manipulations on the temporal axis while creating a subtle physicality that binds it to the detailed presence onscreen.

Perpetual motion, movement with eternal free energy, a violation of the laws of thermodynamics. The phrase conjures up the feeling of desire for something magical yet unreachable, a promise that feels tangible but impossible. It is a reworking of the laws of physics, re-forming them into something that we want to see, rather than the mundane things that we are shown. True perpetual motion is made impossible by the unchangeable law that all moves towards higher entropy, an increase in disorder. The highly magnified images of Guðjónsson show us just that: what we see all around us as smooth, even, organised surfaces and structures are truthfully worlds of detail, disorganisation and apparent chaos. His focus on machines, man-made structures and technological relics impacts on the audience by providing insights into the abstract function and nature inherent in smaller, more fundamental scales.

With his work for Venice, Guðjónsson continues his focus on the temporal spheres of matter, and how they become actors and agents within his artistic research. The process of depicting these objects reveals an eye for the nuances of nature and the transformation of built spaces into poetical experiences. He is concentrated on an observation of the scales, energetic levels, frequencies, and dimensions of material substance with an on-going and very personal fascination for hidden and untouched places. In such situations he identifies forms and shapes that have been hidden, something he calls 'spaces of discovery'. These probes into transformed and hidden characteristics of matter are always imbued with motion, a continual refreshing of place and perspective, a restless exploration. To maintain a device in motion one must accomplish many things, and this seems to be another of the artist's obsessions, no loss of energy, or transference. In Guðjónsson's perpetual machine, perseverance seems to challenge an eventual movement towards a disordered state, as an acrobatic effort to maintain the geometry of a universe that nature simply does not provide.

¹ 'Ways of Seeing' series, created and presented by John Berger, and produced by Mike Dibb, broadcast in January on BBC Two and adapted into a book of the same name. 1972

² Wilczek, Frank. 'The Lightness of Being. Mass, Ether, and the Unification of Forces'. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008

