

An Interview with Artist SIGURÐUR GUÐJÓNSSON

Lukas Kindermann

Artist Sigurður Guðjónsson was selected to represent Iceland at the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale. Postponed due to the pandemic, the international art exhibition will now take place between April 23rd and November 27th. Three months before its opening Sigurður was visited in his studio by Reykjavík based, German artist Lukas Kindermann. The resulting conversation opens up and gives insight into Sigurður Guðjónsson's ideas and the process behind the development of his work *Perpetual Motion* for the Icelandic Pavilion.

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LUKAS KINDERMANN:

Congratulations on being selected as the Icelandic representative at the 2022 Venice Biennale! The show has been postponed previously due to the pandemic but will finally happen soon. How are things developing, are you able to reveal a little bit about what you will exhibit?

SIGURÐUR GUÐJÓNSSON:

Thank you very much, and yes I really hope that we'll meet in Venice soon. The title of the work is *Perpetual Motion* and I'm working with the concepts of space, energy and time in order to create a multi-sensory sculpture. The work is staged as two screens. It's actually a gigantic screen split into two perpendicular axes intersecting at a right angle. On the horizontal axis, a large floor projection occupies most of the space while interplaying with a vertical axis that ascends six metres. The screens depict an amplified compound of metal dust moved and magnified. This material is distorted and misshapen to a point where the original frame of reference is lost. The work will be accompanied by a soundscape that I've done in collaboration with the Icelandic composer Valgeir Sigurðsson.

LK: It is mid-January and the Biennale opening will take place in three months. How far are you into production of the multiple elements of the installation at this point and when are you planning to start the actual installation?

SG: The video and the soundscape are almost ready. I'm now in the post-production phase of these elements. We start installing the work at the beginning of March and that is very exciting because it is then that I'll put the work into practice and will have to hope that it turns out how I imagine it. I always like to be able to let the installation live a bit before the opening and that time also serves the practical purpose of being able to document the work in order to create the catalogue.

LK: Have you been able to spend time in Venice lately to visit the Arsenale and the actual space you will show the work in?

SG: Yeah, it's been a bit surreal. I was on my way when everything went into lockdown and the Biennale was postponed. I visited there in September 2021. It was a relief to finally see the space as this is a new location for the Icelandic Pavilion.

LK: How did these circumstances influence your work? Was your work decided a long time ago or were you able to develop it further during the waiting period?

SG: As I always wanted to create an experience for the audience that is inspired by the space, my greatest challenge was to have to wait to see the space and realise its size and feel. So, I think I can honestly say that I decided where I was going with my work when I had finally visited Venice and seen the space last September. I then understood the function of the room and that made it easier to make a decision about what I wanted to create.

LK: Do you think your works change in relation to the spaces they occupy?

SG: Yes, I think one always gets new perspectives on the works through a new setting. With work that is aimed at creating an experience for the audience and visitors to the space – like the music – are sculptures themselves. It's a conversation between the space, the visual work and the sound or a choir and preferably the space is in tune with the work and adds a layer to it. One of my videos was once projected on the floor of an old chapel and then I installed the same video in a barn five months later. The narrative was so different. In the chapel, it ventured into something very holy – of course – or apocalyptic according to the audience. While on the farm it became more industrial. The mind went to machines and the farmer's tools lying around in the barn so the symbolic meaning somehow turned out to be different.

LK: You describe *Perpetual Motion* as a multi-sensory sculpture. We are currently in your studio looking at its raw elements. What is your process for making the visual part?

SG: The visual part happens in my experiments with the material, objects, lenses, camera, light and motion. The filming process happens in real-time so it is very much about looking, and catching the moment. The work is captured in one long take so the process is very much about observing and waiting for that moment when everything comes together in one shot. Light, perspective and focus are key factors here. This approach can be challenging because it takes time to find the moment, the material and the right focus – and sometimes you have to film the subject a hundred times to reach the right result. So, it's a slow and intuitive process. The video post-production is minimal and only about tuning the speed, colour, motion and sometimes distorting the material. The idea is that when you experience the work in full setup you will get more sense of the scale. More into the landscape of the material in dialogue with its massive and immersive soundscape.

LK: And the video is one take?

SG: True, there is no editing involved as it's only one take.

LK: The sound is not directly connected to the image, as in it's not directly from what you see. How are the two elements then connected?

SG: The soundscape is inspired by the visual content and the setup, and I made it in collaboration with composer Valgeir Sigurðsson, which has been an enjoyable collaboration. I would say that it is a poetic connection. A kind of response to the granulated texture of the video by adding stacked electromagnetic sounds, manipulated via granular synthesis. So it's not a direct machine sound that comes from the source. It's more of a soundscape with fragmented parts that hopefully lead to individual experiences in the room.

LK: Does the image always come first?

SG: Not always, but with *Perpetual Motion* that is the case.

LK: Through the varied sound parts you really divide the visual constant into partitions.

SG: Yes, one sound or tone can have a big effect on the perception of the work, so this balance between sound and image always plays a big part in my process. It's an intuitive thing and a process that can take a long time. It really needs to connect and have the right flow rather than take over or contrast the visual side of the work. It needs to click.

- LK: The combination of light and sound within a space creates a strong physical experience. How important is the experience of the audience to the concept of the work?
- SG: I would say that it's an important element – it is then that everything comes together. I think I am always looking for this experience. It is the idea of experiencing an installation like this, almost like music. The trick is to fine-tune everything until you find what you're after.
- LK: The Icelandic Pavilion is located in the Arsenale this year. Will you use the existing architecture or build a specific space for your installation?
- SG: Yes, it will be located in the Arsenale for the first time, which is very exciting as it's one of the Biennale's main exhibition venues. I'm using the existing architecture but the way I install and sculpt the moving image into the space transforms the gallery into a different space.
- LK: How important is responding to an existing space for you in general? Do you tend to work site-specifically or do you prefer to construct exhibition architecture?
- SG: My reaction to space as an inspiration for intervention has always been a big part of my artistic process. It has appeared in different manifestations in my video works and installations and recently I have been thinking more about video and sound as elements to activate the exhibition space itself, in a sculptural way.
- LK: From a historical point of view you would connect the term sculptural to a very material-based artistic practice. In contrast to that, you've been focusing very consequently for many years on video projections. How important is the projected light in terms of materiality for you?
- SG: The projected light gives the work an effect which is of an importance. It's somehow more fluid and more poetic than the flat screen in my opinion, although the flat screen can serve its purpose for other kinds of work and influence. I always think of the projection in the creative process and in my opinion it offers a different kind of experience, so it definitely adds an important dimension to the installation.
- LK: And it's a very immaterial technique. Is it a decision to work so immaterially?
- SG: I have never made a firm decision about it, but it has evolved in this direction alongside the technology I use the most, which is video and audio. At the same time the subject is material as I am always looking into all kinds of material with filming objects or machines.

- LK: You have realised various works referring to historic technical machines and curator Monica Bello refers to how you have talked about the archaeology of media in the beginning stages of your dialogue on your Venice contribution. I gather a lot of material and items in my studio. Are you also a collector?
- SG: So far I have not systematically collected items in order to create my works. For example, I do not go to the junkyard to look for materials. In many cases, these are things that have been around me for a long time or they come to me accidentally. I've got two studios: one where all my stuff is collected and I do some experiments and another one for editing. Some of the things I store are precious to me because they were part of my process and I guess I'm slowly creating my own junkyard, as you can see all kinds of old devices and materials lying around in my studio.
- LK: There are several plastic boxes with various materials on the desk over there. Is this the actual dust you used for Venice?
- SG: Yeah, this is the material I was using. I have a lot of boxes like this. Here is another one from my last show.
- LK: Will you keep it? I mean it's so beautiful that this is your Biennale piece.
- SG: Yes, I keep it as it's one of the sources and an important starting point. These materials very often come from strange moments. For example, when you enter a metal workshop in Garðabær and you get something from the staff – and it takes you on a new journey – and then at the same time through experiments with the material where I'm magnifying it and distorting it.