



Anna Ceeh in Conversation with Finnbogji Pétursson

AC: When music producer and musician Einar Örn Benediktsson (Ghostigital) began his political career as Minister of Culture for Reykjavik, Franz Pomassl said he should first look out for Finnbogji and then for Iceland.

FP: My relationship to Einar Örn goes back to when both of us were playing in different bands. He was playing in Purrkur Pillnikk, which was the early incarnation of the Sugarcubes and they were quite popular in the punk scene. I was in the art academy circuit, but we were playing a concert in Reykjavik together and we made a promise then that we would do something together. So finally, five years ago, we remembered this old promise and decided to do this project, that I would join Ghostigital/Finnbogji as a side project of Ghostigital. So if you say he should look out for me and then Reykjavik or Iceland, in fact he did that.

AC: How did your involvement with music start? Did you first work with music or art?

FP: When I was eight or nine years old, I was playing around with an electric transformer from a racing car track and I was just experimenting with it. When I connected it to a loudspeaker, I heard this beautiful low frequency sound. I got electrocuted, but the sound I heard then is still with me. It is the heartbeat of electricity, which is a 50-hertz vibration—here in Europe at least. So this 50-hertz-sound has been over the years the heartbeat for most of my pieces. For instance, the piece I did in 2005 right here in Iceland in the Highlands called *Current* involves a 20-meter-long concrete organ pipe blown by the North wind. It produces 50-hertz vibrations. So this electric shock was burned permanently into my memory and it has been following me all my career for 40 years.

AC: How did your work develop?

FP: We were at the art academy, playing in bands and doing lots of things the authorities disapproved of. We were very much under the influence of the actionist Hermann Nitsch and the late fluxus artist Dieter Roth because some of the band members had just been on a big tour in Europe with them. Everything that happened was very much under the influence of the spirit of that time, but also in 1980 there was the punk movement and the punk scene was becoming strong here in Iceland.

AC: You had your first exhibitions when you were in your twenties. Was it a successful and fast rise?

FP: My first solo exhibition after my studies at Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht in Holland was here in Reykjavik in 1988. I can't say it was a successful and fast-rising career, but I certainly was the only one doing the stuff I was doing. It's fair to say that, because though my pieces look quite simple, they are in fact quite complicated and need precise adjustments. Now I know the boundaries of some basic things I use—for instance water.

AC: What role has sound in your art work? Is it abstract matter or physical matter?

FP: It is both abstract and physical and also contributes an equal part to the visual appearance of the works. In some early installations, I was quite busy with the visual setting—visualizing the sound and the sound wave and its behavior. Some people would say that sound is non-visual, but for me



something you can't touch. In my case, the question is how to have control over the element.

AC: Morse code, water, fire, shadow, and light—is there a hierarchy among those elements or a kind of equality?

FP: Well, it depends on what I'm using at a specific time. I mean, ideas come up and lead to another idea. So, for instance, I recently sold a piece from 1991 which I exhibited in the Living Art Museum in Reykjavik called *Circle*. It is a pool or a pond of water with a loudspeaker hanging above it which formed a sound wave whose frequency shifted between 0 and 200 hertz and rippled the surface of the water so that the wave motion formed regular circles in the pool at certain moments of the process. As the pitch of the wave rose, the pattern on the surface of the water changed and was projected onto a wall. Then that piece prompted me to start working again with pools and ponds, and I decided to build them inside the gallery in a more delicate manner.

AC: As you mentioned earlier, you collaborated with the Icelandic project Ghostigital for several years. How exactly did that start?

FP: I think it was in 2006 or '07 for the Reykjavik Art Festival. We decided to go for it then. We only had basic ideas about what we were going to do. Einar uses the surroundings and the situation he's in, and he talks about what's going on in the room, he talks about what he's thinking and he talks to me. He talks to Curver. We start with our project and then we merge into the Ghostigital set and then I play along with them, so it goes from our project, Finnbogi Pétursson and Ghostigital, into just a pure Ghostigital program. There's a small demon which wakes up in him and this demon—he just does whatever he feels like.

AC: Which tools do you use for the Ghostigital set? Do you prefer digital or analog technology?

FP: I use various tools when I'm working with Ghostigital. Sometimes I use my computer and I use various software programs to play out loops and stuff like that. I use field recordings I make from various places. I put microphones into old chairs and I twist and pull them, put pressure on them and use that as a sound source and to build up a rhythm. The surroundings are quite important, and I listen to vibrations in the room and most often, I take it from there.

AC: For *The Morning Line*, you need to reduce your artistic contribution to sound because of the existing parameters. Does it mean a denser examination of sound, or a general reduction of possibilities?

FP: I got my first cassette recorder when I was 11 or 12 years old, I was making lots of recordings and doing lots of experiments. When I started at Jan van Eyck, I bought a really good Sony professional cassette recorder. But I haven't dared to do that much with those recordings, to make pieces using them or to make separate produced pieces of them because for me that is another direction to go in. So this work I'm doing now for *The Morning Line* is more or less nothing new. For *The Morning Line*, I'm using a teeny-weenie part from a recording I made from inside an Angelica plant. It started as just an experiment trying to capture the resonance of the plant. I saw the plans of *The Morning Line* for the first time back here in Reykjavik in 2008 or '09, and decided to use these specific recordings because *The Morning Line* structure reminds me of this Angelica plant with its natural growth patterns. It's like this cluster form which grows in perpetuity—you never know how it ends up. Though you know what the plant looks like, you never know how it ends up



in its growth.

AC: Do you think or are you experiencing sound as actually playing a more important role today?

FP: Sound has always played a main role in my works. But I can say through my teaching that there was a period when a kind of a sonic boom kicked in. It was maybe ten years ago. Before that, you had video artists who were working mainly in video and you had sound artists working mainly in the sound. I didn't want to fence myself in that box as an audio artist, video artist or sculptor or anything.