

### *Mask on, mask off*

#### *On the lookout for clues to the art of Guðný Rósa*

As our life progresses it dawns on us how much of our reality is hidden, not only to the external world, but also to ourselves. Between the outer, perceptible world and our inner anatomical composition lies an ill-defined area, a mental, neurological no-man's-land, whose dimension is incommensurate. It can be vast as a continent and tiny as a grain, all according to the attention paid to it, or should we say, the attention which it demands. This is the area that Guðný Rósa Ingimarsdóttir investigates, or rather, in which she operates, whereas it is from within that she carries out her exploration, metaphorically, as a spelaeologue examines the interior of unknown caves.

There is less of metaphysics in her approach than might be expected from the terrain she chooses to explore, where she does not try to retrieve any systematic knowledge from these expeditions, only vague signs, that she interprets in an exquisitely fragile way. Knowing the immateriality and inconsistency of the area in spatial terms, she does not dwell in it as if she were walking on a firm ground. Familiarizing with, and understanding an entity, which certainly exists but cannot be perceived, demands sensitivity rather than senses, intuitive instinct rather than conceptual speculation. Guðný Rósa's experience of time and memory runs along similar lines. It consists of a duration in the Bergsonian sense, where even the actual sound of ticking and chiming clocks, indicating mathematical time, is presented as a *durée* and the pounding hammering of the measured hour is given a musical dimension.

Two things are worth retaining here; the absence of visual perception, which is hinted at by Guðný Rósa herself, in her account of childhood recollections as a rationale to her *Requiem* project, and consequently the impossibility of relating sensation to its proper cause. This might explain the artist's difficulty when it comes to describing visually the most important things, which are synonymous with those responsible for the most enduring sensations. Describing her reminiscence, which she refers to as frequent visits to her own memory, she evokes auditory experience before any other - banging clocks and comforting baritone voices - and by referring to warm hands, follows it up with the faculty of touch. Neither sound nor touch are exactly the senses which first come to mind when we think of visual art and artists, but on top of that, it seems that Guðný Rósa recalls these sketches from the past as having happened 'in a closed room' and 'behind a glass door'. Does it mean that even these childhood sensory impressions were not experienced under the best receptive conditions?

If this is the case, Guðný Rósa's perceptual limitations at the time - or her recollection of the incidents - can be compared to the trials of Beckett's hero in *The Unnamable*, originally *L'Innommable*, 1953, whose position is determined in such a way as to make it impossible for him to successfully apprehend the obscure sensations that pass him by, which under better circumstances he would surely be able to define without difficulty. But compelled to the worst possible visibility he is obliged to inquire incessantly who might be moving in front of him.

Gathering from her works, drawings, textiles, sculptural and found objects, photos, videos and audios Guðný Rósa, as someone who senses space as sensation from within rather than a clearly defined geometrical entity from the outside, seems to shun spatial distance in order to get a direct hold of the detail. This perspective of closeness corresponds perfectly with the aforementioned description of childhood recollections, where sight was overshadowed by other more immediate senses.

In *What is ours*, a video from 1998, which deals with the tender act of breastfeeding, an important light is cast on this immediate intimacy, which favours detail at the expense of spatial distance. In psychoanalytical terms, breastfeeding is a perfect symbol of the Pre-Oedipal stage, which to a certain extent is synonymous with Julia Kristeva's rhythmic *chora*, prior to Lacan's seminal mirror-stage, when the child starts mastering language and discovers his or her independent existence as a detached being.

At its primordial stage of being, spatial sense, as well as temporal and representational perception, is for an infant highly confusing. Reality is either sheltering and satisfactory, or stifling and uncomfortable, whereas space as experienced on an individual basis, apparently, does not yet exist. The world, which is composed of mother's soft voice and body, is perceived by the nursling through touch and hearing rather than sight. These are precisely the senses upon which Guðný Rósa draws when describing her childhood sensations.

The order of her exhibition *Panic 2* at Les Témoins Oculistes, in Brussels 2001, with its arrangements, also seem significant in this respect. The emphasis on a centrifugal, cavernous type of installation, where the public had to scan the walls at extreme levels, as with paintings of animals in a Magdalenian cave, in order to view the works distributed about them nearly from the floor to altitudes above its average height. However, by turning their back to the empty space in the centre of the room, the spectator experienced a different kind of spatial effect. Even the few freestanding three-dimensional works at the exhibition were, by their location near the wall, made dependent of the verticality of the installation.

The affinity between the spelaeological reality of the exhibition and Guðný Rósa's drawing, knitting and crochet is another trait worth studying. From the outset, drawing has been her cherished activity and it still has a unique position in her art. Careful, playful, unpredictable and full of fantasy it depends, for the most part, on highly mature contours, rendered with an astounding precision. The positioning of the content on the A4 format speaks of Guðný Rósa's strong, undeliberate formal sense. The imagination and ease with which she realizes her drawings is sometimes breathtaking. Again, two distinct elements are worth retaining; the effect of weaving, and the effect of mending by stitching, or plastering. Already in the mid-nineties Guðný Rósa's drawings had been likened to organic oddments such as bodily organs, and they still preserve a fair number of surgical elements and traces such as bandages, compresses and pinholes. Some of the drawings are handled as if wounded and in need of being dressed. They seem to be pasted over with plaster cast, forming various patterns, yet at the same time half obliterating something, perhaps important information, beneath the bandage. Thus the treatment of the wounds amounts to a palimpsest where an old message is regularly coated over with a fresh layer. This procedure carries the meaning of the cuts immediately from the medical sphere to the level of psychology. The benevolent acts of mending, healing and stitching suddenly become extremely significant in a highly subjective game of hide and seek. Covering up information, in whatever way or circumstances, amounts to the worst of crimes in today's society of unimpeded communication.

The tension between disclosure and concealment is the problematical point of departure in Guðný Rósa's approach, its 'ripe moment' and key to her reluctant perfectionism. Her use of text – not least in connection with the drawings – bearing on short, explicit statements and aphorisms, is the revelatory part, while the weaving, in its most extensive sense, is its latent half. A highly significant photograph in *Panic 2* shows the artist with a thin, translucent paradermatic mask, probably of acrylic substance. Whether she is covering her face with this second skin or peeling it off is impossible to determine. Found and altered material, of clinical provenance, attests to Guðný Rósa's dermatological interests, a curiosity possibly related to her set of reasoning as a textile artist, regarding the Penelopean activity as a continuous narrative renovation, possibly even a reincarnation parallel to the spinning of a cocoon.

In this respect it is worth noting how much of the artist's textile works – textile in the extensive sense – are vessels in the double sense, both recipients and organs, some of them even connected to the more comprehensive vascular system. The conveyed meaning is never far away, whereas typewritten labels, aphoristic as the texts in the drawings, may be seen to connect some of the items with symbolic references from the scriptures such as a 'vessel of wrath' or the 'weaker vessel', connotations, which in the case of Guðný Rósa, are perfectly appropriate.

Nowhere in Guðný Rósa's works is the association between text and textile as clear as in her many references to loss of language. In *Devoirs – Mes mots perdues*, from 2001, two bottles, perfect vessels for messages, contain a bundle of Icelandic words, cut out of a dictionary, and a knitted wool garment as a surrogate for words, which the artist has forgotten. *I miss not having your tongue to play with*, from 2002, is a poster-like photo of a printed aphorism, which expresses the trauma of loss of language, connected as a part of a triptych with a photo of a labial detail of Icelandic landscape, and a third photo of a pile of organic intestines.

Loss of language is synonymous with loss of the Heart – a white porcelain sculpture on a low aluminum pedestal, on display in *Panic 2* – again refers to a curious, intestinal object labeled with a typewritten aphorism; *Yet another case of female depression*, as if an operation – possibly in order to remove the gall-bladder – had been effectuated in order to get rid of the infamous organ of melancholy. At first glance abjection comes to mind with all its terrifying loss of identity midway between subject and object, but gathering from Guðný Rósa's critical instinct nothing is more relevant to her art than Nietzsche and his ceaseless rebellion against cultural deflation and self-deception. Taking off one mask was, according to him, the same as putting up another, since truth in its most transparent form is beyond our limits. *We have art in order not to perish in truth*, Nietzsche said, without meaning that we should hide in an illusion. But as Guðný Rósa seems to have understood through her art, truth is a thing merely to approach, but let us not believe that we will ever get hold of it.

II

Nothing of the aforesaid places Guðný Rósa harmoniously among Icelandic contemporary artists; so different is she in most respects. Icelandic conceptual art certainly does not lack unassuming banality where everyday monotony is displayed with its endless boredom and dullness. It is nevertheless a poetic kind of sadness described from the outside with a befitting a stop or at best a slight passing of time. A latent tension and danger are absent and do not disturb the sensation. In Guðný Rósa's art everything is full of discomfort, as if the spectator were following the toil behind the making of the pictures without asking for participation in such an experience; the feeling of hunger as a consequence of the artist being lost for too long in detailed minuteness; the sore fingertips due to excessive use of the cutter when making patterns; or sore muscles when squatting while working on texts near the floor.

In her expressive arsenal are numerous elements gathered from the artistic turmoil of the fifties and sixties when formalism and specialization reached their extent and painting – the common denominator of visual arts from the end of the Middle Ages, when the European bourgeois began certifying its social status – faced deep crisis after a particularly brilliant comeback after WW2. Many artists began to stretch the support towards the surrounding space – by shaping it, adding woodwork to it or by turning the support from a vertical posing on the wall to a horizontal position on the floor, carrying all kind of objects – until it occupied all of the environment, the exhibition space or the entire local, with a single unified display.

Other artists sought escape by leaving colourful large format painting of heroic abstraction for more reasonable media such as drawing, printmaking, motor-driven sculpture, sculpture of mechanical parts. big and small, and various combinations of crafts, design and pure art. Artists became generally more modest and opted for a living standard in line with common civil society. The call of the day was to shun specialized media for artists and to choose, instead, ordinary industrial means used by house painters, electricians, photographers, illuminating engineers, printmakers, graphic designers, ceramists and other craftspeople.

Here is where Guðný Rósa discovered her place, after finishing her post-graduate studies in Brussels, and made the city her headquarters in the mid-nineties. There she met with a certain tradition, which suited her exquisite drawings and knitting. This activity, which really introduced her in Belgium as an artist, just before the end of the last millennium. After mastering with astonishing ease, the pencil, the pen and ink on paper, a period of knitting followed where one sculpted article of wool, or elastic thread, succeeded another, often in the form of intestines or organs. Measured against the drawings, the knitted sculptures tend to look like exact, three-dimensional renderings of them. There is, however, nothing indicating a perfect replica among the knitting although the spectator acknowledges immediately having seen something similar in her drawings, or vice versa, an identical drawing when contemplating a knitted item. That is how Guðný Rósa is always true to herself, although she never repeats the pattern exactly.

In order to place her chronologically it must be said that she is an artist of three, if not four distinct periods. If we postpone for a while, what she has in common with her contemporaries, to whom she pertains as a person of flesh-and-blood, it is not far-fetched to hark back to medieval times, when textile art and illuminations flourished in Europe. Contrary to the Florentine School, which with its massive, static volumes, managed to move the monumental Mexican muralists of the last century, Guðný Rósa is nearer to Frida Kahlo, in the modesty of her format, their sensitivity and irony. The notion to stamp with her red lips an air sickness bag, or cut her hair and have it fall in wisps on the floor might very well have occurred to her.

This is how her impulsive spontaneity surges unreservedly when everything otherwise seems in perfect balance between line, pattern, stitch, numbers and text. The last appears in various ways, but most often the spectator has to repeat the lecture several times in order to get it right. Sometimes the text is so crammed by other items, clear, voluminous and importunate, that it slips, however unforgettable it may be. Sometimes the underlay disturbs the monotonous wallpaper, or the text is too small to grasp and no magnifying glass to be had. This problem with the text is quite frequent in late medieval Flemish Art, as well as, in Italian Gothic Art, particularly Sienese painting in early 14th century. A remarkable example and probably nearer to Guðný Rósa than most are the series of tapestries on the theme of *The Lady and the Unicorn* in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. The series comprises six colossal tapestries revolving around the senses and shows a lady, a unicorn and a lion in a grove, either near other beasts or musical instruments on a reddish ground. It might be possible to fetch numerous other examples of Flemish and Burgundian tapestries and paintings having in common the small details of various kinds mixed with people, living animals, handiwork, colourful and carefully woven clothes in a stylized vegetation or narrow interiors, where all kind of articles are gathered in a paraphernalia of decorative items, books, manuscripts, furnishings and a candlestick with a smoking candle.

The reason for the reference is the recurring theme of sensing in all its variety constitutes the subject throughout aforementioned series. There is hardly a similar association to be seen elsewhere with such strong emphasis on perception in all its richness, touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. The sixth tapestry, *A mon seul désir*, or *To My Sole Desire*, is the largest of the series and also the most abstruse. In the middle there is a big, blue conic tent with the girl, or the lady rather, in or in front, the lion to its right, with the dog and the unicorn on the opposite side, accompanied by a maid with a small chest. On the roof of the tent stands woven: «To my sole desire», but hitherto no agreement has been reached on the meaning of the statement or the signification of the work. There is even a disagreement whether it is the beginning tapestry or the conclusion of the series.

In the past there was an impressive room in the Louvre in Paris dedicated to Peter Paul Rubens, without doubt the towering painter in the West in the first half of the 17th century, as well as being later the best-known ambassador of his time. His magnificent series, heralded the marriage of Henry IV, King of France and Mary of Medici in 1600, a match supposed to consolidate the peace in Europe between Protestants and Catholics. The series was Rubens' Cinera poem to the royal couple and monumental as such, originally planned for the sumptuous Luxembourg Palace on the left bank of the Seine. The next room in the museum, and considerably smaller, contained a much humbler painting, *The Seamstress* by Jan Vermeer, visible from the room with Rubens' series. This small painting – less than a quarter of a square metre – lured museum guests, but often left Rubens in the adjacent room alone in all his multiple greatness. Guðný Rósa has generally approached Vermeer's *Seamstress* in her choice of format, where exquisite and finely tuned handling mingles with material at the limit of art and crafts. As well as choosing the material, often recycled from former drawings, cut in patterns, sewn together, glued and painted with watercolours and gouache, she marks carefully each snip with tiny numbers, as if she were joining prefabricated cuts. Nothing however is repeated precisely, no more than tidewater or the waves in nature. Everything is dependent on concentration, beat free of measured time, rhythmic ecstasy, where the hours dedicated to the struggle with coinciding works are not counted. At heart she obviously identifies with Vermeer's *Seamstress* rather than the French royal couple or Rubens the court painter, although this determined woman bears no name and it is hard to see what she is doing, absorbed as she is in her timeless and minute diligence.

Although there are no straight answers to our attempts at deciphering Guðný Rósa's works, any more than there are solutions to our efforts in explaining absolute music, however close to our emotions it may get, we do not stop searching for clues to her unique artistry. The reason is not least our inextinguishable need to understand sensations in all their force, our own as well as our nearest, nor least the feelings of those who are the most different to us and we are in the most urgent need to understand.

The little there is to squeeze out of her inexplicable works is how free they are of figurative references and contrasting colours. Were it not for bits of texts, most often typewritten and emotional, or sarcastic, outspoken and intrusive, it would be difficult to speak of expression in actual terms. Guðný Rósa's lyrical anguish on behalf of Icelandic as a language and her own verbal means is arresting and different from all other textual usage, at least among her countrymen. The typewritten text is surely familiar, having been the chosen print-type of concrete poets and conceptual artists who tried to sway art away from pure, intoxicating sensation to a more contained level of lexical discourse and controlled emotion. The Swiss-German artist and designer Dieter Roth used the typewriter copiously when working on his book-art, when introducing this pollination of poetry, visual arts and crafts to the emerging generation of artists in Iceland, the so-called war-generation, at the end of the fifties.

Guðný Rósa's sensitivity regarding the denominator of poetry and visual arts could be – but not necessarily – the reason for her choice of format, nuances, watercolour, gouache and paper or wallpaper, her use of display cabinets, show-cases or vitrines – as in museums and jeweller's shops – and installations which echo the taxonomic obsession of the late Belgian post and artist Marcel Broodthaers. Nothing is too trivial to be excluded from an exhibition, or as Guðný Rósa calls some of her scrappiest works – *Les petits riens* or *the mere nothing*. Obvious examples are miscellaneous paper strips sewn in a line, falling down the support unevenly. Along one of the central strips, the broadest stands typewritten: *up yours – my lady – up yours*.

This, gently said, provocative address – others would say plainly vulgar – is an example of Guðný Rósa's direct speech, which she is constantly afraid of losing, or doubts continuously that she uses it appropriately. The question is, what is appropriate? Was it appropriate of Skarphéðinn, son of Njál, to silence Hallgerður, wife of Gunnar, by calling her either a pauper or a whore? Was it appropriate of poor loser Egill son of Skalla-Grímur to kill Grímur Heggsson, for being stronger than him? Was it manly of his father to throw a rock between the shoulders of his bondmaid, and drown her, after she had fostered his young son, Egill?

But, before placing Guðný Rósa in the contextual situation of Icelandic art, it is necessary to observe her particular position regarding her means, or rather methods, which reveal her approach and choice of direction.

*Un mot perdu* or 'A Lost Word', from 2007, tells a lot about her art, since she seems to know how to articulate her shortcomings, weakness creeps in and torment is inevitable. *I miss not having your tounge to play with* is not only a photographic poster, but also a typewritten statement, ambiguous, since it is an ode to Icelandic, which haunts her by threatening to leave her, yet a courageous proclamation full of blatant frivolity.

There are few things as awesome as the loss of language but little to be done except depreciate the words in the manner of a reliable accountant. A big canvas and oil colours would be excessive. It is not feasible to announce one's loss by advertising it. But in order not to hide one's grievances without exaggerating Guðný Rósa chooses to withdraw to the craftspeople's professionalism and limit her reaction over the terminological discount to a rather small and sober drawing, which looks like a cobweb pattern by the jeweller Philippe Wolfers, with veins and rills all over. In the areas between the rills she has assiduously dotted the numbers of the words, which she has forgotten. In 2007 they were already more than two hundred.

This marked deficiency is serious for someone who linguistically expects a dire outcome if she continues losing so many words annually. Guðný Rósa's control over her means of expression indicates that she might have chosen poetry if textile art had not caught her attention. It may be unnecessary to mention that etymologically text and textile can hardly be separated, at least not in the case of Guðný Rósa.

The sentence can be found among many other typewritten phrases and statements on top of a complex vascular system, marshland or transport system where sparse use of blue emphasis is mingled with the exquisitely drawn blood system or map of communication, which tightens as it approaches the centre. It is as if a cartographer were responsible for this finely executed drawing, despite the uneven print left by the typewriter and its unevenly soaked ribbon. The drawing is very similar to the one where Guðný Rósa's lost words are numbered. Simultaneously the spectator is pulled back near the end of the nineteenth century, to rue de Rome in Paris, where in 1887 Stéphane Mallarmé had just completed his monumental poem *A Throw of Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*, with its revolutionary layout, which turned the poem into a visual revelation of verbal art, nothing less than a mapping of a voyage in the rhythms of different type sizes spread over ten facing pages where the lines are freed from conventional ordering. Many readers were also baffled by the singular independence of the lines.

The aforementioned Marcel Broodthaers saw Mallarmé's poem as an un-intentional liberation of language from the traditional space and typology by dispersing the lines over the spreads and by using various typefaces in order to emphasize layout and content. This is how Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* led to the creation of modern space. In his from 1969, bearing the same title, Broodthaers hid the original lines and typography of the poem with black bars of corresponding width turning the original text into a visual abstraction, which he renamed Image instead of Poem on the title page.

Perhaps Mallarmé's poetic mapping was the precursor of all later concrete poems such as the *Prose of the Trans-Siberian* by Blaise Cendrars. appeared as a bookwork 1913 – maybe the first of its kind – in collaboration with the painter, textile artist and the craftsman Sonia Delaunay. The two-metre long watercolour could be read as a roadmap, being structurally nearer to a map in a tourist brochure than a conventional work of art.

In recent years Guðný Rósa's art has evolved steadily towards decreased materiality, two-dimensional emphasis and the dispersal of the material at her disposal. Everything seems reduced, colour and depth, just as if it were necessary to dive a little beneath the surface in order to determine what lies thereunder. Time and its regular measure seems more important now than ever before, although remaining in this same time slows it down to a virtual standstill. Musical playing, melodic line with underlying bass creates a parallel intermediate passage of the sensed, felt and pure premonition. Guðný Rósa's reaction is perhaps not as decisive as that of Louise Bourgeois, who destroyed her works massively in order to recreate them, as well as herself, but her frequent speculation of guidance, *comme ça Louise?* is a sign of the genealogy, which she acknowledges as a bond between her and the sculptress, whom she visited shortly after the turn of the century.

The common denominator is nonetheless their modus operandi: *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*, whereas Guðný Rósa does not hesitate to create new combinations out of older works and material. She brandishes the cutter without hesitation and cuts away everything unnecessary, but does not throw away anything since used paper, sewn or stitched is more precious than a paper without history. Bourgeois is however a three-dimensional artist and her drawings are more often coarser and bigger, especially the ones which are executed with charcoal and chalk.

Guðný Rósa is somewhat an orphan in the Icelandic art world. It is possible to find a certain similarity between her works and those of Katrín Sigurðardóttir, where the latter suffers from solitude and an unquenchable nostalgia for a world that exists no more than as an artificial setting gauged through a perspective hole or a magnifying glass. Next to such a revelation is the moaning of an Icelandic storm by Guðný Rósa and a bright voice of a girl, her daughter, who carefully reads out loud a translation of *Time and the Water*, by the poet Steinn Steinarr, without knowing the language nor its pronunciation.

The world collapses when emotional control fails and a brand-new experience pushes through into commonplace presetting and order, as too many balls are kept rolling. This is what happened to Chantal Akerman's heroine and the response to such an experience must be a play of some kind, as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga predicted already in 1938, in his *Homo ludens* - 'The Playing Man'. Huizinga's premonition crystallized before the end of the war, when the most sensitive survivors of the destruction had started gathering from the ruins of faded time the possibilities of their, and coming generations.

Charles Baudelaire taught the modern man not to waiver before growing alienation nor give in, but rather drift about streets and squares in search of lost remains of past culture and thus rediscover new aspects in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. It dawned on him that such a shelter, to reinvigorate the imagination, was the new glade of the urban area, the fresh symposium of the artist, which nature provided formerly. New Babylon was the name given to this modern vision by the Dutch painter Constant, where all sensitivity and all the senses had to be activated in order to decipher the cultural and linguistic shattering of the environment.

The key to this new quest of correspondence between the mind and the ball of yarn in the labyrinth of the diverse milieu was the play. The riddle could also be hidden among old items, museum specimens and even one's own keeping. It is possible to find a lot from time passed complementary with Guðný Rósa's unique vision, vitrines and display cabinets adorned with works from an inscrutable past, such as the *Fairy Cloth from Burstarfell*, whose origin no one knows for sure, but may be from the 17th century. Therefore it is not unthinkable that New Babylon may hide in the belongings of someone who searches, just like the snips and scramble in the artist's studio.

Without anyone having solved the rebus of *My One Desire* of the lady in the famous series of tapestries in the Cluny Museum, we follow Baudelaire's quest through the mazes of the old shop windows in the passages of Paris where he realized the reawakened yearning of the city-dweller for a rendezvous with his own self and creative harmony. The tapestry in Cluny might have something to do with intuition, regarded by many as the sixth sense, or self-sense – proprioception – which allows the human being to sense its own limbs and body unrelated to conditions. Whether it is through direct impact or not, there is little doubt that Guðný Rósa's art traces its origin to the resonating era when the city of our time was still a crucible and full of the mysterious unforeseen, the aura, the apparition of the distant, however near it may be.

- Halldór Björn Runólfsson, independent critic, curator and writer