

### *To catch your breath*

Time is like the water,  
and the water is cold and deep  
like my own consciousness

And time is like a picture,  
which is painted of water,  
half of it by me.

And time and the water  
flow trackless to extinction  
into my own consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

I am writing this text whilst packing up everything around me, as I am about to move. Gradually, the familiar things that surround me every day, books, objects, household supplies, clothes, a few works of art.... disappear. Everything is organised in boxes, labelled, to be given a place in a new environment within a few days or weeks. Some things I keep aside, I don't put them away yet, I still want to have them with me during these last days here. They include two drawings and an LP by Gudny Rosa Ingimarsdottir. The LP « *comme ça louise?* » is a vinyl release by Sound By Visual from 2017. It is, on the one hand, a sound work in which a girl can be heard reciting a text in a language that is not her own, searching for rhythm, stuttering, uttering sounds that are recognisable only sporadically. On the other hand, the cover is a veritable work in paper, a cut-out of a floral form, white providing glimpses of a black paper background, a layering of paper and materials that is enhanced by the plastic cover and the vinyl itself. On the inside of the cover of this issue, there is a short text by Gudny Rosa from 1997. The text recited is an English translation of the poem 'Time and Water' (Tíminn og vatnið) by the Icelandic poet Steinn Steinarr (1908-1958). The poem, of which the opening verse is printed above, explores the fluidity of time, the conscious and subconscious, and the way they intertwine.

I have owned these two drawings by Gudny Rosa, framed, each the size of an A4 sheet, since 2005. The drawing from 2004 depicts a white cocoon-like shape with red veins and two red fins. It could be both a tiny amoeba or a whale, floating in the lower part of the otherwise empty sheet. Hovering over the tail are two fine pencil-line circles, like text balloons waiting to be filled in. The body of the form is filled in with white paint in subtle shades of grey, with a darker grey core. Around one of the red fins there is a barely visible dotted line in pencil. The form and the composition have a free and playful feel, enhanced by the red colour; exuding movement and elegance. One can sense the presence of water or fluidity. The title is listed on the back: 'Untitled (Dolphine)'.

The work from 2005 combines various elements. On the bottom right, there is a drawing of parts of a skeleton, a thorax with ribs, a round skull or cochlea-like shape, protective but empty. The structure is clearly visible on a grey background. It could be a person's chest, with a heart shape on top. This drawing on grey paper is placed on a white sheet. A number of straight lines of black yarn extend from the shape and secure it onto the surface of the page. The round shape is contrasted with six straight and interconnecting lines, clearly stitched together with a few stitches. The end of the thread floats on the sheet. It looks as if the shape has been repaired, sutured. To the left of this composition, there is a sentence in pencil, written by hand: *I think you are very lucky.* The drawing contains several contradictions. When I look at it - which I have done countless times over the past fifteen years - it somehow reassures me, makes me see things in perspective, gives me room to breathe. Both the words and the closed-open cocoon shape that is carefully anchored onto the sheet contribute to this effect. These three works by Gudny Rosa Ingimarsdottir surround me as I write, as do memories of studio visits, of conversations with her and of exhibitions in which I have seen her work over the past twenty years. These three works contain elements that run like a common thread throughout her diverse artistic practice: forms that hover between figuration and abstraction, fragile drawings with layers of paper, the use of various materials and the use of words or language.

# IRÈNE LAUB

Gudny Rosa Ingimarsdottir starts from personal experiences, emotions and encounters that are intuitively translated into a composition on a plane. They refer to a certain state of mind, to conflicting sensations, to the complexity of human relationships and to verbal and non-verbal communication in society today. In a sense, her work is based on non-understanding, on emptiness and stillness. It exudes a sparseness and openness, a fragility that attracts attention, not by being loud, but rather through its stillness. Her work emerges as she spends time in her studio, amidst her own work and numerous objects and collections of all kinds that she has collected around her. She creates her work through a constant handling of loose elements, physical things, paper, text, found and made objects, and also by engaging with memories, events, references, sources of inspiration. She seeks for a state of alertness in the midst of all this material, focusing her attention, hesitating, looking for openings and allowing time for the ephemeral, trying to grasp that which is almost nothing, that which tries to escape, shaping it, and allowing it to disappear again. This presence in the studio - y être, as she herself puts it - is both obvious and complex.

Time plays an important role. On the one hand, allowing time, losing time, on the other hand, being in the moment, focusing. Characteristic of her working method is the constant rereading of her own oeuvre, returning to existing drawings, objects and texts. Making new cut-outs, revisiting fragments of sentences, giving them a new space and context. Literally and figuratively recycling experiences and emotions, processing them, elevating them. She adds new twists to older drawings, destroys and compiles. Even works that leave the studio to be exhibited, may afterwards still be worked on, or changed. In this way, one could conclude that all her work is interconnected, part of a continuum. It is therefore difficult to speak of a chronology or development within her work; there are no clear turning points or finished series. Each work can be seen as a response to itself, a continuation, and a reaction. 'Work's a series of replies without regrets' said composer John Cage (1912-1992).<sup>ii</sup>

Recently, the artist immersed herself in a pile of letters she received from friends and family in Iceland in the 1980s. She herself was living abroad at the time, as a student in New Zealand, at a place called Wairarapa, and only their replies to her letters were found. Rereading those stories and moments, including memories of what she could have written, gave new impetus to her work. In the drawings, she looks for visual translations, forms for twists of thought, the right balance between presence and restraint. Time is important in many respects. The time she spends in her studio, being there among all the materials, but also focusing and waiting. Her working process is slow, involving meticulous cutting of motifs, detailed snipping, gluing, sewing gossamer thread onto paper, letting watercolour dry. In a text from 1998 she writes: *L'eau séchant. J'ai admiré le changement de l'eau pendant l'attente. J'ai cherché une structure cachée dans la surface sèche pensant aux formes qui se sont façonnées durant « le temps humide ». J'ai mis des heures, des jours pour trouver. Au crayon, j'ai dessiné en détail mes visions, mes fantasmes, mes touchers ; mon rêve de faire partie de cette humide surface disparue.*<sup>iii</sup>

Her instrument is not so much the pencil but rather paint, water, ink, needle and thread, knife and scissors and a variety of papers - ranging from tracing and carbon paper to wallpaper - which she manipulates and combines layer upon layer. Her surface is partly translucent, the lines are often as fine as they can possibly be. In her work, she gives (breathing) space to that which is 'barely' something, that which could easily disappear into the margins and edges. Chance plays a role, but more than anything it is about being open and feeling or listening to whatever speaks to her. I see a similarity between her way of working and that which the artist Anni Albers (1899-1994) describes as a positive passivity that drives creation: *How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication? Accidentally. Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness or softness. It catches us and asks us to be formed. We are finding our language, and as we do along, we learned to obey their rules and their limits. We have to obey and adjust to those demands. Ideas flow from it to us and though we feel to be the creator we are involved in a dialogue with our museum. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become. ... What I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication. The listening to it, not dominating it, makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive. The finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art.*<sup>iv</sup> In the same way, I believe that Gudny Rosa intuitively listens to her 'museum', to her studio stuffed with things, listens to materials that she comes across, forms that speak to her. She works her way through layers of older work, revisiting and giving herself room to follow her feelings, to intervene, turn doubt around and create images.

Emptiness or nothingness has a special meaning in this regard. It provides context and importance to that which is present. It is certainly not an impoverishment or austerity; the emptiness that is brought forth is constructive and important. Silence and emptiness are significant playing grounds for many artists. In a text from 2006 on the work of Gudny Rosa, I referred to John Cage. The composer-artist who states that nothingness, silence, or empty space does not exist. There is always something to see or hear. As soon as things, such as sounds, are switched off or removed, space opens up for other layers, for what we otherwise do not, or barely, perceive. This is how emptiness shifts our focus. In Gudny Rosa's drawings, the emptiness allows one to focus. The silence she creates comes from within, it is a withdrawal from actions and stories, from busy visual stimuli. Her works and objects seek to visualise that which is concealed. This restraint makes that her work can be experienced as both personal and universal.

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The few things one believes to perceive in it can be freely filled in by anyone. This sparseness is a delicate force, a balancing act of giving and taking, the result of the ongoing process she is engaged in when working in her studio. In our society today, in which storytelling, interpretation and the expression of opinions prevail, art becomes a sanctuary for openness and silence. The Belgian artist Jan Vercruyse (1948-2018) emphasised this very need in his poetic and sometimes enigmatic oeuvre: *'Surely there must remain within our culture the possibility for silence and distance. As far as I am concerned, that is the place of art. ... An empty surface is a refusal. When someone thinks of filling it in, they should certainly keep it to themselves. They are not blank pages waiting to be filled in. They are definitely empty. One must learn to live with this definitive emptiness. ... Definitely empty is the tension between wanting to fill in and not being able to, between having to remain empty and not being able to be empty. Emptiness is dynamic.'*

In her drawings, the compositions hover around the centre of the page or gather near the edges. While most of them seem rather 'empty' and white, some of them are page-filling, all-over, as if they were cut-outs from a larger whole. Her drawings seem simple yet at the same time elusive. In almost every instance, the surface is layered, often made up of various media and several layers of paper. Her working method can be compared to that of a surgeon. She cuts deep into the surface and penetrates her subject, peels away, goes to the core, to what she wants to heal or restore, treat. This intense focus causes her to lose perspective and her connection with the whole body or overall picture. Often, there is no fixed viewing direction, as if the drawings are out-of-joint and could just as easily be turned upside down. We see drops, perforations, sutures, colour, and thread. Re-occurring shapes include cellular structures, amoeba-like shapes, intestines or tumours, floral motifs, spots. At other times, these same shapes rather resemble planets and solar systems, stars, explosions, or landscapes. This micro and macro level is a constant: the near and the far. Our eyes and brain zoom in and out.

Her play with transparency, the perforation of the surface and the cutting out of layers result in a composition that shifts between our eyes and the surface, that pulls us in, guides and seduces us. We see the smallest details that provide a glimpse of a bigger whole. Titles play a role in how we read these compositions, yet they also thwart understanding. The Sunrise series, for example, does not depict a sun, but rather angular line compositions, threads suspended between thumbtacks, a cloud of signs. How can one see a sunrise in a grid or an angular pattern of lines? The associations that can be drawn are undermined, rarely confirmed. Are these organic forms or conceptual-abstract compositions? In some drawings, there is a grid that fills the surface, like veined marble, like the floor plan of a building or trellis. Rhythm is a more recent presence, in the form of a succession of words, variations of similar shapes.

The majority of Gudny Rosa's drawings are portrait oriented, which, according to Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), is a more dynamic format: "Horizontalities are a desire to give up, to sleep. Verticality is an attempt to escape. Hanging and floating are states of ambivalence"<sup>vi</sup>. The floating forms, without a horizon, are almost a constant in the work of Gudny Rosa. In the drawings, we can observe a fascinating tension between free forms that float and an anchoring of sorts that is provided by contours, grid- or framework-like structures. Lines that create a certain order or direction, a sense of support sometimes through the numbering of individual elements on the picture plane. Cut-out shapes and loose elements are literally held in place by being sewn onto the sheet. The form of the rigid grid is often used as a counterpoint to organic natural features. The organised structure helps to keep the space - of the sheet, of the composition - under control. Artists such as Agnes Martin or Sol LeWitt explore the poetry of the grid, the texture or vanishing point of this dematerialised element. The grid of parallels crossing each other offers no perspective, no view onto a reality, it is primarily surface. Gudny Rosa transforms grids into a web, a free pattern as if made of broken glass, or a veined surface. She brings grids into collision with organic forms, restores patterns with threads, utilises them to visually undermine the fictitious nature of order. Her grids do not provide unity or certainty, they merely hint at it. They obstruct any sense of perspective, keep the shapes and the attention on the surface, close by. At times, the grid is subtle, arising from the repetition of forms, pixels, perforations, enumerations. The organising grid seeks to control the space, to instrumentalise it, silence it. An urge for order can also be discerned in the lists and rows of cut-out sentences, numbers, or letters. The recurring grid in her work is disturbed, twisted, organic, reminiscent of honeycombs. The process of numbering often recurs, as yet another way of bringing order.

Image and language become intertwined in a fascinating manner. Language and words not only communicate, they are also forms, graphic elements on the page. English, French, and her native Icelandic language are alternated, often in relation to picked-up fragments, memories, notes. These words play a direct role in imbuing her drawings and sculptures with meaning. In addition to the graphic nature of the text, the sounds of words also provide rhythm or warmth. The texts are sometimes mysterious, familiar, or incomprehensible. The sound work on the record 'comme ça louise?' (is this title a wink to Louise Bourgeois?) is about embracing the word as sound, about the way language comes into being and falters, about abandoning meaning -- even if it is inherently and sporadically present. The child's voice places great emphasis and attention in its recitation, applying feeling and intonation, even if it is not able to grasp the meaning. Letters, numbers, and words also function as signs in her work, often as minuscule pencil marks or incisions in the paper, cut-outs that remain barely attached. Often applied with an old typewriter, as a relief print on paper.

Many years after Anni Albers had been a student at the Bauhaus, she herself taught at Black Mountain College in the United States. One of the subjects she taught there was Typewriter Studies, in which she approached, fully in line with her abstract geometric textile works, the characters of the typewriter as an alphabet of forms, drawn in a grid of horizontals and verticals. According to Albers, there is a significant similarity between a woven fabric and a written sheet of paper, both tactile surfaces onto which thoughts take shape. In her designs, she used upper- and lower-case letters, brackets and repetitions, spaces and punctuation. Etymologically, the word 'text' comes from the Latin 'textus', meaning woven. Text and fabric are both media that transform certain materials, processes, and patterns of thought into a form or texture; materials that can be approached both factually and conceptually. In every language there are so many metaphors and expressions that link 'threads' to stories, ideas, rhythm.

Language and thread are both connective, they express a concept. Aside from text, thread and textile are recurring techniques used by Gudny Rosa to structure the picture plane; they are used as words, as forms, as symbols, as connections. They are elements that embody a process. When knitting, weaving, or crocheting, threads are connected with each other through human actions, each thread grasped, handled and passed through the hands onto the next thread. In this sense, every object in wool or yarn already carries within itself a sense of caring, of being held, of physical attention. From the very outset, the body is already enshrined within the formless object or canvas. About her use of thread as an element of form, Gudny Rosa wrote in 1998: *J'ai cherché une autre ligne. J'ai trouvé le fil. ... Le toucher en soi a pris plus d'importance dans mon travail. Ce n'est plus la qualité du travail qui compte. C'est la quantité/qualité de mes moments passés pendant le travail. Le résultat est un objet rempli de mes moments. Je propose mes moments et les accepte.*<sup>vii</sup> The element of time and care, the stitching and the connection with the body are emphasised through the use of thread.

Language is one of the many layers in the image. Through the short sentences that form part of her work, we appear to gain an insight into the artist's emotional world. These texts express thoughts, statements, desires, or fears. They are both personal and universal, weighty and cynical, self-critical even. They deal with self-image «waking up with an overdose of self-pity», «Le moi en morceaux», as well as relationships and desires «I miss not having your tongue to play with», «I am trapped in the way you see me». They speak of powerlessness and the bigger picture «Time passed, I followed», «Me too I -would like to save the world» or cautious happiness «I think you are very lucky». They introduce physical sensations, including contradictions, «Unfelt earthquake», «Some things are too sharp to suck». The drawings, including the words in them, offer a way of dealing with feelings, with vulnerability. They speak of the overwhelming world, of relationships one has, as a parent, as a child or as a lover, of the relationship with oneself. The personal realm of the artist, of the viewer, versus the vastness of the world, of others. We can give meaning to it ourselves, link words to our own experiences. Some works literally invite us to do so and contain empty text balloons.

It is important to keep in mind that these sentences, even though they may sometimes feel very personal, should not be projected as signifiers onto the work. Louise Bourgeois, whose work is often linked to her biography, including all its traumas and relationships, pointed out that her work was never a direct expression of it. «We are not talking about the recording of events, the recording of emotions, the recording of motives. What we are talking about is the recording of lines and shapes; that is everything. The subject is only the subject ... The mystery resides in what you do with it.»<sup>viii</sup> In Gudny Rosa's short texts, as well as in the few photographic images, we find references to her role as a mother, partner, student or daughter. She, however, carries them further, they become recognisable reflections on relationships, on the connections that situate us in the world, also in the way they appear as lines and forms. Siri Hustvedt wrote that a successful work of art enables an encounter between the work and the viewer, that the work of art itself emerges from that open in-between space. «The experience of art is made only in the encounter between spectator and art object. We are not the passive recipients of some factual external reality but rather actively creating what we see through the established patterns of the parts, learned patterns so automatic they have become unconscious.»<sup>ix</sup> Gudny Rosa's works allow this level of openness; through their focus and sparseness, through triggers in images and words, they invite us to engage with them on a personal level.

Gudny Rosa's showcases or sculptures are more directly related to her studio practice than her drawings. In closed display cabinets, she combines objects and various materials in a way that is similar to the way in which she approaches the surface of the page. The display cases are usually placed on the ground, inviting the viewer to pause, to crouch, to contemplate attentively and actively. The display cases are like landscapes that she fills up entirely, making the most of the space, allowing less emptiness. What we see is a compilation of pieces of paper, photos, found objects - often found in nature, a spider, a flower, the roots of a plant - postcards, scraps, strips of text, small sculptures in fabric or elastic. These viewing boxes are like small museums, odes to the preservation of the ephemeral, of that which we cannot throw away. We see creases and tears in paper, beads, stones, porcelain, cut-out wallpaper, etc. Everything is arranged in both an intuitive and an archaeological manner in a composition that is confined by the display case, the protective viewing box. The objects in the cabinet are not autonomous as such, but rather form exciting relationships with each other. Here too, visual elements such as grids, threads, strips of paper, etc. provide a connective structure or foothold.

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The sculpture collections remind me of Joseph Cornell's 'shadow boxes'. Each box presents a miniature world, its contents often connected by threads. Mystery and fantasy blend together. In the boxes, which were always dedicated to a person or a theme, Cornell managed to create a world full of memories and unexpected associations, with carefully selected objects that could, taken together, refer to a deeper meaning. Here, even more so than in her drawings, Gudny Rosa plays with what we do not see, with text turned upside down, a roll of paper, illegibility. What we are presented with is a cabinet of curiosities of sorts, containing concrete and enigmatic cornerstones of her world. The glass of the display case forms a softening membrane between all the trinkets, between art and reality.

The attention paid to the ephemeral, to stillness, to small ripples, a fragile merging of form, language and material, results in powerful works that are poised between detachment and involvement. These works of art create room to breathe, they are ephemeral and instil a sense of quietude. What they are really about, perhaps, is time. How to deal with time, with memories, with past, present and future. How to invest time and break free from it, how to slow down, quieten and intensify time. In her work, as critic Filip Luyckx put it, historical and biological time is replaced by a timeless time. This alternative perception of time shows similarities to the way my 2.5-year-old son is currently beginning to understand and order the world. He calls anything that is in the past 'yesterday', whether it be experiences from months ago or whatever we did this morning, or visited last week. Every memory that pops into his head is 'yesterday'. In a similar way, Gudny Rosa's work is an accumulation of periods; each work is a brief anchoring, a compressed moment that creates space to breathe.

- Eva Wittocx, art historian, curator and author (BE)

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<sup>i</sup> Steinn Steinarr, 'Time and Water', 1948, translated by Marshall Bremert in *Tree Modern Icelandic Poets* published by Iceland Review in 1985.

<sup>ii</sup> John Cage, *M: writings '67-'72*, Marion Boyars, London-New York, (1969) 1998, p.124.

<sup>iii</sup> Drying water. I admired the transformation of the water whilst I waited. I looked for a hidden structure in the dry surface, thinking of the shapes that were being formed during the «wet time ». It took me hours, days to find it. Using a pencil, I drew detailed visions, fantasies, and strokes. My dream to be part of this vanished wet surface.

<sup>iv</sup> Annie Albers in the text *Material as Metaphor*, cited in Catherine De Zegher, *Women's work is never done: An Anthology*, Mer Paper Kunsthalle, Ghent, 2014, p.311.

<sup>v</sup> 'De dissident. Jan Vercruyssen in gesprek met Anna Tilroe', reprint of an interview from 1998 for the Cultural Supplement of *NRC-Handelsblad*, in: *HART*, Nr. 215, 1 July 2021, p.76.

<sup>vi</sup> John Cheim en Jerry Gorovoy eds., *Louise Bourgeois Drawings*, New York NY: Robert Miller Gallery, 1988, p.109.

<sup>vii</sup> I looked for another line. I found the thread. .... The touch itself became more significant in my work. It is no longer the quality of the work that matters. It is the quantity/quality of the time spent working. The result is an object filled with my instants. I offer my instants and accept them.

<sup>viii</sup> Paul Gardiner, *Louise Bourgeois, Universe Series on Women Artists*, New York, 1994, p.104.

<sup>ix</sup> Siri Hustvedt, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*, 2017, p.25.