

## ■ Roni Horn

Library of Water Stykkishólmur

Permanent installation

Roni Horn has described Iceland as her 'open-air studio'. Since her first visit as an arts graduate in 1975 she has spent long periods working on the island, gathering material for many works and artists' books which have included the series 'To Place', 1991/92, and 'You are the Weather', 1994-95 (exhibited in the Venice Biennale in 1997 and currently displayed as part of a Roni Horn show at the Museum of Modern Art in Reykjavik, titled 'My Oz'). She sees herself as a 'permanent tourist', an oxymoron which describes her close yet reflective relationship with Iceland's culture and elemental landscape of glaciers, treeless tundra and lava fields. The profound connection between that culture and its tempestuous (but now changing) climate is one of the most intriguing themes of her project *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, commissioned by Artangel and opened in May 2007. The sculptural installation, community arts centre and weather archive are constructed in the former library of the harbour town of Stykkishólmur on the west coast of Iceland. Placed on a rocky mound at one of the highest points of the town, *Vatnasafn* commands an impressive view of the port and the western fjords. Replete with nautical metaphors, the building appears to ride the weather and the waves; its rounded art deco windows suggest a glass cabin at the top of a lighthouse, an association which Horn has embraced.

While lighthouses emit beams of bright light signalling land and protecting seafarers in dangerous weather, Horn's installation has been compared with a lens which reflects and refracts the lights and colours of different weather, encouraging metaphorical musings on identity, climate, ecology and place. Dispersed around the main room are 24 glass columns, each 30cm in diameter and 3m tall, containing water collected from Iceland's major glaciers. These watery columns have replaced the stacks of books, providing the medium through which light, landscapes and human figures are reflected – or sometimes imaged in blurred and clouded form. Ice from the glaciers (the nearest, Snæfellsjökull, is a 20-minute drive south – weather

permitting) was collected in August 2006, and installed in March this year. Mineral deposits have rendered some columns opaque, while others reflect clearly defined landscapes from inside and outside the space, reversed like mirror images. As the deposits settle, tiny piles of sediment are forming at the bases of the tubes, combining miniaturised landscapes with reflected ones. From some angles even the lichen on the surrounding volcanic rock seems to be imaged through the glass sculptures – or could it be snow?

Lichen can be an indicator of a lack of environmental pollution, an issue which Horn references obliquely without hectoring her audience. The Icelandic air is so pure that the Kyoto Protocol gave Iceland permission to increase its carbon emissions by ten percent from 1990 levels. Controversial plans are pending for many geothermal and hydroelectric power plants, along with several new aluminium smelters which will be allowed to emit an extra 1.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide until 2012. Meanwhile, the smallest glacier is now all but gone, and others are visibly shrinking. And according to the many local testimonies compiled and edited in Horn's accompanying book, *Weather Reports You*, and on her website, the weather is changing. Árni Helgason (born in 1914) claims: 'Winter's always come here until two or three years ago. And now you can travel wherever you like, there's really no snowfall.'

More often than not the experiences recorded in the archive are associated with water, with the effects of sea, rain, snow or ice. As an installation *Vatnasafn* presents the idea of water as transformed and transformative. The columns can stand as melted glaciers, reflective lenses and mirrors, ecological weather vanes and aesthetic sculptures. Embedded in the vulcanised rubber floor is a field of English and Icelandic adjectives which have been used to describe the weather, reminding the viewer of the slippery connections between words, images and meanings. English words which evoke both weather and human emotions, such as 'oppressive', 'violent', 'gloomy', 'serene', 'dull', 'frosty' are scattered among their Icelandic equivalents. Human emotions appear to be refracted through weather conditions and vice versa, revealing Horn's concern with identity as elusive and changing, echoed in titles of works

such as *You are the Weather* or *Weather Reports You*.

Unlike Artangel's more ephemeral time-based commissions for site-specific buildings in London's East End, such as Rachel Whiteread's *House*, 1993, or Gregor Schneider's double house *Die Familie Schneider*, 2004, *Vatnasafn* is designed to last, and was enthusiastically supported by the local community and the Icelandic parliament. The project stands as a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, comprising sculpture, a community arts centre and an accumulation of oral histories, and includes a writer-in-residence programme, based in the lower floor of the library. And with glacial water at its heart, *Vatnasafn* gently reminds us that the weather can be political. ■

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## ■ New York Round-up

Of all the versions of Modernism and modernity on view in New York in May, the most powerful was also the most disillusioned and most various, and that was seen in the Whitney Museum's comprehensive retrospective of Gordon Matta-Clark. It was surprising, as the artist found his material and motivations in the bankrupt and crime-ridden New York of the 70s. Yet he evolved a response to ruin and recycling which transcends its time. His solutions ranged from the simple and limited, as in 'Glass Plant: Garbage Bricks', 1970-71, a series of glass bricks he fabricated from melted down bottles, to what seems like the total and unlimited, as in *Hair*, 1972, in which he had his dreadlocks mapped and labelled before being shorn, so that they might be glued back at a later date. He was also a commentator on urban blight: rather than install sculptures in the city's abandoned buildings, Matta-Clark cut holes in them, and in *Window Blow Out*, 1976, he shot the glass out of the windows of the Institute for Architectural and Urban Studies and installed pictures of the similarly shattered windows of blighted housing in the Bronx, suggesting that the language of the architectural profession and the language of simple needs were no longer the same.

So much of Matta-Clark's largest and most important work has inevitably disappeared, one fears that a retrospective might be a paltry recovery. Aspects of the Whitney's show seemed such: 'Bingo', 1974, a series of building fragments, was erected as a long barrier to greet us at the outset and, while it was sizeable, it was nothing compared to the scale of some of the cuts Matta-Clark executed. Nevertheless, while he engaged with the built environment of the city, he also remembered the galleries: the cut he carried out on an office building in Antwerp in 1977, *Office Baroque*, was amply memorialised in a film and a series of photo-collages which furthered his project of restructuring as planes are angled and upturned, rooms are spun about and fixed on new axes.

Matta-Clark died in 1978 and has now effectively joined the canon, so it was strange to consider that the survey of Brian O'Doherty/ Patrick Ireland, at the Grey Art Gallery offered something even older. Born in 1928, O'Doherty showed promise as a figurative painter in a severe, realist mode, but he left Ireland for New York in 1961. He worked as a critic and turned to Conceptual Art, and has maintained both enterprises ever since. The Grey's show was an oddly jumbled survey, with early paintings yards away from a new installation O'Doherty had created, *Talking with Bramante, Rope Drawing #111*, 2007, which expanded an architectural wall painting into a diagrammatic grid of ropes. Elsewhere were various other projects: examples of his writing (among them his famous 1976 essay, 'Inside the White Cube') and those writings and artworks of his various aliases (he took

