



BJARKI BRAGASON
Past Understandings, 2014
Intervention at Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien

Past Understandings is a new body of work by Bjarki Bragason. A two channel video installation depicts human hands holding rubber replicas of the same hands, attempting to sort and to conduct technical drawings.

The work, developed in September 2014 is an interrogation of the making of historical narratives. The original version was shown at Hverfisgallerí in Reykjavík as part of *Selfsame*. Bjarki's practice is concerned with time, history and architecture, which he often investigates through fragments or residue. In his work he has focused on narratives where individuals or buildings become placeholders for historical paradigms. The underlying structure of *Past Understandings* - and part of the previous version of the work - is an interview of the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) on ways and methods how people have used and relate to the past.

Central to Bjarki Bragason's work is his investigation about the importance of fiction and subjectivity of historical understanding. In the two video works the actions of sorting and drawing are made visible. To highlight the buffer between the artist and the subject, he uses two rubber hands to move and draw the pieces; the fragments, which he is studying in his left hand, and the pencil active in his right hand. In this way the results of the act of drawing are testimony to the act, to the movement of the hands and the endless negotiation of juggling and placing the rubber hands and drawing tools in the right position.

At the Kunsthistorisches Museum Antikensammlung, the Collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Bjarki has developed the work in specific relation to the museum, the collection and its history. Installed among objects from the collection the work takes the form of foot-notes, placing it in relation to sculptural and architectural objects and fragments.

The videos present a study of ruin fragments acquired by Bjarki in a garbage container at a Berlin building site, where the basement of a 19th century building was unearthed from beneath a mid 20th century office building following its demolition. Through dialogue with the museum and research at its depot on the outskirts of Vienna, Bjarki developed a narrative surrounding the history of some of the collection's display items, plinths used to present ancient sculptural fragments. Some of those plinths derive from the archaeological site at the Ancient Greek city of Ephesus in present day Turkey, where they were excavated as columns, parts of architectural structures, and later brought to Vienna in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and cut down into museum displays. This practice was abandoned, in favour of using cheaper marble, mined as raw material as opposed to cultural artefact. Elements of *Past Understandings* reflect on this complex history and attempt to engage with the viewer on the subject of the layers of the narratives present in the space.



Past Understandings was initiated and curated by on site (Judith Stöckl & Giulia Tamiazzo) and made possible with the kind support of Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, The Federal Chancellery of Austria/ Bilateral and Multilateral Cultural Cooperation, KulturKontakt Austria, Myndlistarsjodur, Muggur Fund and Icelandic Art Center.

Bjarki Bragason (b.1983 in Reykjavik, Iceland) studied at the California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles. His research-based practice revolves around questioning identity and the construction of narrative. In Oct - Dec 2014 he is artist-in-residence at Kultur Kontakt Austria and the Austrian Federal Chancellery.



BJARKI BRAGASON
Ephesus / KHM

TEXT VIDEO - VOICEOVER

The Celsus Library in Ephesus was destroyed by fire following an earthquake nearly 1800 years ago. The library was built in honour of Tiberius Julius Celsus, who is buried in a sarcophagus beneath the building. The facade of the library was reconstructed after the mid 20th century. The entrance is dominated by four sets of columns standing on pedestals. Above them are Corinthian columns.

Since 1895, Austrian archaeologists have been active in Ephesus. Between 1896 to 1906 some of the artefacts found there were brought to Vienna. Among them were parts of building structures, precious marble columns of various kinds and colours.

Once in Vienna, some of these samples were cut into smaller parts and used as museum plinths, on which sculptures or other historical fragments were displayed. The fragments are believed to be from public or private buildings.

In the 20th century, the practice of cutting ancient architectural elements into museum displays was abandoned in favour of using cheaper marble, mined as raw material as opposed to cultural artefact.



BJARKI BRAGASON
Reconstructions / KHM

TEXT VIDEO - VOICEOVER

Reconstruction one:

He was a young architect and historian, fresh out of school after the Second World War. He described running between his drawing table in the studio and the building site at the old market square, observing and heading the reconstruction of the burnt out facades, which had already been reconstructed in the 19th and 20th centuries, reinforced with steel, altering the window frames and proportions. He went up on the scaffolding, folded up the sleeves of his shirt and went into the concrete with his hands, reshaping the slowly drying material, correcting details in the reliefs and statues, just in time to place them in the right position.

Reconstruction two:

In the mid 1920s, Walter Gropius, the then headmaster of the Bauhaus school, built a villa for himself and his wife, Ilse Gropius, in Dessau. It became known as Haus Gropius. The modernist building featured amenities and aspects of a style distinctly different from the older buildings across the street, but in line with the row of new houses erected for the school's professors. After the war, a local Dessau man acquired the property with the intention of rebuilding the Haus Gropius. After several attempts, he was not granted a building permit. Instead, he built a typical suburban home on the forested plot, integrating parts of the surviving structure into the building.

Reconstruction three:

The temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, located in Ephesus. It was rebuilt three times before its eventual and total destruction. A miniature replica of the temple, as it may have looked, can be found in the Miniaturk park in Istanbul, Turkey. The temple's foundations and some sculptural fragments survive at the original site. An archaeological mission sponsored by the British Museum conducted excavation at the site in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Findings from the site were taken to the British Museum in London, room 84. Today a single column stands on the site, composed out of multiple dislocated fragments from the area.

Note one: they were thinking about leaving traces.

Note two: He was talking about looking.

Note three: I was thinking about how I should tell you.

Note four: he said that he was wondering whether it was possible to learn something about a time which has hardly begun.

Note five: he said that you were learning faster than ever before.

Note six: they said that people sometimes learned the wrong lessons.

Note seven: he said that we need to learn from the past because other ways of predicting the future have failed.

Note eight: they were trying to remember what others forgot.