

McEvelley/Bjarnason  
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*SqARE zERo:*

*Gudjon Bjarnason's Dynamited Sculptures*

Bjarnason left Iceland at age twenty-two, and traveled about, spending most of his time in the United States pursuing his education at advanced schools in the Northeast, like the Rhode Island School of Design, where he received a BFA in Art and Architecture and the following year a Bachelor's of Architecture; the School of Visual Arts, where he earned an MFA in Painting and Sculpture, and Columbia University, where he received an MFA in Architecture and Building Design. In terms of professional qualifications he might in fact be most qualified as an architect, but his direction has seemed to lead him more into a career in art. One day he walked into my office at the School of Visual Arts and sat down and introduced himself, saying, "I make sculptures and then I explode them." How does this interesting description fit into the schemata of Modernism, Late Modernism, and post-Modernism?

Most of the dynamited works I have encountered started out as lengthy hollow metal bars. Some of the works that have stuck in my mind include: *I'MAGE Minglement*, (*Mixing Images*) 2006: six metal bars or hollow shafts, about ten feet long and six inches across, were taken to an empty outdoor space—usually a desolate old mine or something that no one is really using anymore—and attached with small charges of dynamite placed inside the hollow shafts near their points of juncture, and detonated. Sometimes other explosives have been used. The point is not to obliterate the metal materials nor to alter them in chaotic unpredictable ways, but rather to alter them in relatively controlled ways that involve a certain amount of creative control by the artist, in decisions such as how big to make the charges and where to place them. In other words this exploding process has to be regarded as a form of craft with which the artist makes changes in his materials which he has desired or felt were appropriate for aesthetic or philosophical reasons. When they explode the remnants of the pieces are thrown about the area—an abandoned mine or parking lot or just some old rubble strewn field. So far Bjarnason's process has something in common with the tradition of Earth Art or Land Art, which also often involves blasting. Then the artist gathers the remnants of the blast—or at least such of them as he wants—and relocates them either around the site, for photographing, or in some art world setting such as a gallery exhibition space. Acts of choice and aesthetic composition and so on have entered the process already in the placing of the charges and are apt to enter the process again at this phase.

Though this form of the creative process is not of an accustomed type, and has not been extensively explored by artists in general, still genre divisions have arisen within Bjarnason's own practice. *Swirling DiVISIONS*, 2005 (described as, "Approx. 20 bent and chromed metal fragments on floor") belongs in the same class of exploded and scattered art as *I'MAGE Minglement*. So does *MurMur WoOGie-desert*, 2006, a much larger piece involving "simulated explosion of 40 pieces of 31" x 31" x 6" metal bars." In this case it seems clear that the artist has meddled with the process of natural chance, arranging the forty pieces with a certain sense of rhythmic composition around a large outdoor space. Virtually all these works occupy the floor not the wall or any other part of the architecture, in the traditional Minimalist manner commonly associated with Carl Andre and also with the Earth Artist Robert Smithson. Several of Bjarnason's major works of this type are also closely related to works of Bernar Venet in which a series of related but damaged metal fragments are distributed about a field.

These and other pieces represent the idea that art can express itself, or can be perceived, in chance explosions of natural forces, and that the results should show it. They should give the impression of having been caught up in a natural force not exactly in human control. Other pieces show an origin less in natural process than in art-ontology and specifically Constructivism; they are cast in geometrical shapes based on Rodchenko—mostly squares in various dimensions--and scattered around the site, as in the major work *MurMurwoOGie-desert*, in which many of these figures, some of them altered or damaged by the travails they have been through, are scattered in a kind of stream-bed-like pattern as if they were flowing down a little valley. There is an interesting intersection or intervention between nature and culture here, which

Bjarnason presents in a hushed and inwardly burning series of photographs printed on his characteristic medium, plastic canvas. This huge outdoor-sited piece has been described by critic Ibrahim Quarashi as involving “explosive polarities, structural tensions and their darkened counterpoints”<sup>i</sup> The description suggests a sort of darkened northern Pythagoreanism, overshadowed by the Midnight Sun and festering in its “darkened counterpoints.”

Another series of exploded sculptures gives less up to chance and retains more control in the artist’s hands. *Primary SOUND Structures OF MUSIC*, for example (a clearly Pythagorean title), 2005, involves a series of hollow bars that have been exploded here and there by numerous small charges inside but which still retain signs of their pre-exploded form. These are hung in a series in a straight line (reintroducing the concept of geometrical order as if in a restitutive attempt to give wholeness back to some degree to that which one has exploded); they are hung 20 inches above the floor, retaining that Minimalist focus on materiality. In *UnFRAMEd visions*, 2006, the precast forms of metal L-shaped corners undergo a process of apparently natural deterioration that might seem a symbolic representation of the process of entropy that also preoccupied Robert Smithson’s meditations on nature. High on the wall they start to come downward in an orderly grid-like flow, then as they are about to contact the floor they begin to come apart and then, having contacted the floor, they flow into a scattered entropic array which is the other end of the cycle that started in an orderly patterning high on the wall, like a waterfall. Another piece, *REGressive REGression*, 1996-2006, contains a hundred welded metal crosses, painted black, mounted in an orderly wall arrangement which again falls apart when it reaches the floor and flows away, getting more exploded, in minor ways, along the way. *disCLOSEd Emotion wide OPEN*, 2006, is of the same general type.

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These, it seems to me, are some of Bjarnason’s major works. But what genre do they belong to? In terms of Bjarnason’s dramatic process of creation through explosions, there is a performative element. In terms of how they’re exhibited they seem like sculpture or sculptural installation. But there’s a prominent element of the Found Object, too, in that they have been preshaped by a natural process rather than by more specific human aesthetic control. And it is important to point out that above all they belong to the twentieth century avant-garde category called Anti-Art. It is primarily the theme of aggression against the art object that places it in that category.

The term Anti-Art seems to have originated from Tristan Tzara in about 1918, then it was applied to Marcel Duchamp by Harriet and Sidney Janis in 1935, then became common in the Neo-Dada discourse of the 1960s and after.<sup>ii</sup> Various figures have proposed various variants of the term, such as Alan Kaprow’s Non-art. Or as Bjarnason puts it (quoting an audience member), “Is this accident or art?”

A classic early Dada instance of anti-art was a work at the Cabaret Voltaire in which Picabia walked past a series of blackboards, making a quick drawing on each, and Breton followed behind him erasing them. This classic example may have been in part the basis of the beginning of the later (neo-Dada) stage of anti-art after World War II—Rauschenberg’s *Erased DeKooning Drawing*, 1953, in which he obtained a drawing from DeKooning which he erased and re-exhibited as his work, under the new title. (They say deKooning was annoyed.) The gesture of erasing is the same in these works of anti-art separated by about fifty years, and involves a cunning reversal of the usual practice of drawing. This approach to the theme of anti-art—to actually attack and/or destroy the artwork after it has been made by an artist—has gained a classic status and spread to other cultures. At the famous 1989 show of Performance Art in Beijing, one woman artist, Xiao Lu, brought a gun to the opening and twice shot her own sculpture, for which she was arrested.<sup>iii</sup>

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Anti-art is different from taking an oppositional stance in one’s work in relation to previous work. That is what artists have always done—what Euripides did to Aeschylus. But the

direct anti-art that involves erasing, or exploding, or taking an axe to one's own or another's artwork (which was also done in the Dada period) is far more unusual. This more extreme form of opposition seems to be generated by a situation in which a certain community of people comes to feel they're being betrayed by their own culture—taken in by its methods of convincing, even though they may have been complicit in the formation and exercise of those methods in the past.

Anti-art in this more extreme sense doesn't occur frequently. It was especially characteristic of twentieth century western society, which created a situation in which that alienation could happen again and again and even become a profession—even a fairly respectable profession that one could make a living from.

The Scandinavian scenery is perhaps especially suitable for such a drama of desolation as anti-art, as it is, in terms of the tradition of western landscape art, a kind of anti-landscape. Bjarnason seems to take the desolation of the landscape with a calm smile and then respond to it with his explosive transformations of materials and forms. His exploded sculptures have attracted the most attention among his bodies of work (which also include paintings and installations). They have become his signature works.

And yet, in another sense Bjarnason's dynamited sculptures do not seem to belong wholly in this genre. For one thing, unlike Rauschenberg, he does not totally destroy the original work but leaves something left of it to be exhibited in an altered state in which nature has collaborated with him in its making. Rauschenberg exhibited the erasure, but Bjarnason exhibits the work at a stage in its alteration where there is something more left of it. You can still see the pre-explosion work hovering like a ghost around it. So the explosion can be seen not as an attack on the work but as a constructive contribution to it, a mode of craft that takes its toll. Bjarnason invites a meditation on how art appears from nature and what relationship it later bears to the nature from which it came. He balances creation and destruction, art and anti-art, Modernism and post-Modernism, standing with his feet solidly placed in different realms of meaning.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Vine, *Exploding Meaning: The Explosive Work of Gudjon Bjarnason* (Reykjavik Iceland: The Reykjavik Art Museum, 2006), p. 87.

<sup>ii</sup> See Thomas McEvelley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art* (Kingston, New York: McPherson and Company, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> See for example Adam Jasper, "Performance Art in China," *Frieze*, Sept. 2007, p. 40