

Frontiers of Solitude – Expedition report, Iceland 10th–20th August 2015

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Frontiers of Solitude (FoS) is a joint initiative of the Školská 28 Gallery (Deai/setkání) in Prague (CZ), the Atelier Nord in Oslo (NO), and the Skaffell Center for Visual Art in Seyðisfjörður (IS). It is supported by an EEA grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

The project's research approach aims to enable and encourage artistic responses to conflicted human-nonhuman ecological relationships in our time. This entails that the 18 participating artists – two of each country forming three groups of six – undertake a guided expedition to selected sites in either Czech Republic, Norway, or Iceland. During the expedition they observe the impacts of human land use on local and translocal ecological systems, looking specifically at the effects of mining, large scale industrial production, specific energy production-consumption-networks, and at the landscapes that these activities create.

The expedition through Iceland, which took place from 10th to 20th of August 2015, led participants to various locations in the South, East and North of the country, where the untapped sources of renewable energy – water, steam, and wind – as well as the impacts of hydro- and geothermal power plants on the landscape and on local micro-economies, can be observed.

Iceland, with its strong investment in geothermal and hydroelectric energy, appears to be in a different situation with regard to energy resources than continental Europe, which is still dependent on fossil fuels. However, the harvesting of “green” energy in Iceland also comes at a price for the country's local and translocal ecologies, and a closer investigation for which purposes this “clean” energy is used reveals a web of economic dependencies and strategies that is rather similar to those of more heavily industrialised countries in mainland Europe. The construction of Kárahnjúkar dam for example (2003-07), and the political process leading up to it, have been the subject of deep controversy in Iceland. Under the current government, plans for more hydroelectric mega-dams are under way. They promote an intensified “harvesting” of the country's large number of free-running rivers and promise cheap "green" energy – with the aim of attracting investors, multinational corporations, and energy-hungry heavy industry to Iceland. The ecological degradation of the river systems and the emission of greenhouse gasses from the new factories and from the hydroelectric reservoirs remain largely unobserved concerns.

The main emphasis of the Iceland expedition was the exploration of the Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project and of its three interrelated main sites in East Iceland: We visited the largest rockfill dam in Europe, Kárahnjúkar dam, as well as the aluminium factory for which it was built, and the two affected river systems. During the expedition the participating artists met with experts from other disciplines and were introduced to the ecological, political and socioeconomic aspects of the visited sites. The program aimed for a critical and informed debate about case-specific ecological and socioeconomic co-dependencies, and about the means and ends of renewable energy production and energy consumption.

Adding a (self)critical angle to Frontiers of Solitude's "artist as fieldworker" approach, during our 10-day expedition in Iceland we continuously discussed the chances and challenges of such short-term artistic fieldwork, specifically when investigating longterm ecological and economic relationships. Our conversations brought up a whole bundle of questions considering the role of the artist, the problem of aesthetic distance, activism versus spectatorship, disciplinary versus interdisciplinary knowledge, and the problem of grasping ecology as a concept and reality. Topics for discussion that we encountered throughout the trip were for example:

- How restricted are our field observations by an aesthetic experience of "surface ecology" and by romantic ideas of landscape?
- Is it possible to grasp instantaneously the deep layers of human-nonhuman ecological relationships, such as socioeconomic and political longterm developments, which may be the driving forces behind the visible symptoms of land use?
- How can the complexities of human-nonhuman ecological relationships be represented without repeating the image of a distant, sublime, romanticized Nature?
- How does an expedition such as ours differ from tourism?
- What could the role of the artist be or become in the quest for a new understanding of ecology, nature, landscape, and systemic relationship?
- Can the field experience be communicated through artworks at all, or does it remain the artist's personal adventure?
- Is it necessary to fly artists all over the globe as "witnesses", in order to produce art that tackles the question: What is ecology, and what is ecological thinking?

Expedition Program 10–20 August 2015

Day 1: Arrival day and journey from Reykjavík to Akureyri



Participants: Karlotta Blöndal, Julia Martin (Expedition leader), Pavel Mrkus, Diana Winklerová, Ivar Smedstad, Finnur Arnar Arnarson, Greg Pope, Lisa Paland (Documentarist). Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 2: The raw powers of nature

On our way from Akureyri to Seyðisfjörður we visited the geothermal energy landscapes of Krafla Power Station as well as the surrounding steam vents and lava fields in the North of the country. The extreme sound and sight of enormous amounts of steam hissing out of the bare ground, the pungent smell of sulfur, and the experience of walking through vast areas of lava formations provided a first impression of the violent natural forces that are being harnessed in this area.

Further along the road in the Northeast we visited Dettifoss, reputedly the most powerful waterfall in Europe. Here again, sight, sound, and touch (the spray was blowing everywhere) combined into a strong sensual experience of the sheer power of falling water.

Both Krafla and Dettifoss showed very clearly how landscapes are formed by the relentless forces of water, steam, and wind. But we also encountered another transformative force at these sites: people. As two of the most popular tourist destinations in Iceland, Krafla and Dettifoss have had to be developed infrastructurally in recent years, in response to growing numbers of visitors and to the damaging traces they leave behind in their admiration of Nature. Parking spaces have been expanded, roads widened, toilet facilities added, and paths stabilised, in order to accommodate large groups of visitors and to protect, as much as possible, the fragile sites that would otherwise be eroded even faster.



Steam rising from the geothermal power station's pipelines, Krafla, North Iceland.
Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



The group at Dettifoss waterfall. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Car park at Viti crater near Krafla. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 3: Environmental Art in Iceland

On the first morning at our "base camp" in Seyðisfjörður we explored the town, visited Skaffell Center for Visual Art, and went for a walk to experience the sound sculpture "Tvisöngur" by Lukas Kühne.

In the afternoon we assembled in the town's theatre/cinema for a public lecture by art historian Markús Þór Andrésson, organized by Skaffell for the FoS project. Markús outlined for us the history of environmentally engaged art in Iceland from the 1970s until today. He discovered a need for further art historical and critical research into these ecocritical artistic practices in Iceland, which should resonate strongly again today, in the light of worrying future plans for Iceland's industry and energy production, worldwide environmental crisis, climate change, etc.

Markús also pointed towards the difficult relationship between the rhetorics of nature preservation and nationalism in Iceland and elsewhere: In the current debates about mass tourism and industrial development in Iceland the "baddies" in people's perception tend to be foreign companies and foreign tourists, while the Icelandic population's own contributions to environmentally damaging behaviour and political decisionmaking remains largely uncriticised.

Following the lecture we watched the Icelandic documentary movie *Draumalandið* (2008), based on Andri Snær Magnason's book with the same name. It traces the political and historical background of recent large scale industrial development in Iceland, highlighting the construction of Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project and the Alcoa Fjarðaal smelter in Reyðarfjörður. Taking the Kárahnjúkar case as a very powerful example, the movie and book expose the need to keep discussing questions of value, individual and collective responsibility, democracy, and the prioritization between economic growth, prosperity, and an intact nature.



Tvisöngur (2012), sound sculpture by Lukas Kühne. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Lecture by Markús Þór Andr sson, Sey isfj r ur theatre space. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 4: Ecology, micro-economy, and education

On the fourth day the group visited the Nature and Heritage Center Sk lanes, located on a cliff at the very end of Sey isfj r ur fjord. Sk lanes has been restored in recent years from an almost abandoned farm building to a family-run center for environmental education. It regularly houses international student groups, wildlife researchers, reindeer hunters, volunteers, and other visitors. Sk lanes aims to develop further as a largely self-sustainable economic venture, experimenting with small-scale local hydropower, permaculture, and green tourism. On our visit we were guided by the center's director  lafur P tursson and learned from him about the practical and ideological challenges of striving for a balance between practical and academic research, green tourism, environmental education, and economic self-sustainability under the conditions of extreme weather and remoteness.

In the afternoon we visited Sey isfj r ur's Technical Museum, where its director P tur Kristj nsson gave us insight into the history of the town and its cultural and technological connection to continental Europe: Sey isfj r ur does not only host the only passenger ferry between Iceland and abroad, but was also very early on influenced by the arrival of new technologies in Iceland, such as the telegraph, telephone, and radio. The first undersea telephone cable between Iceland and Europe arrived in Sey isfj r ur. The town has maintained its open lookout across the sea ever since.

In the evening we attended a performance by Gerd and Karin Aurell, artists-in-residence at Skaffell Center for Visual Art.



Walking towards Skálanes. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Talk by Ólafur Pétursson, director of Nature and Heritage Center Skálanes. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Guided tour of the Technical Museum in Seyðisfjörður. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Guided tour of the Technical Museum, with director Pétur Kristjánsson. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Artist talk and performance at the Skaffell Project Space. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

The next three days were devoted to the core question of the expedition: How to trace and reveal the complex ecologies of human-nonhuman relationships which transform and create landscapes and cultural habits through visible and invisible processes?

Day 5: Alcoa aluminium smelter

On day five we travelled to Reyðarfjörður, a small town on the east coast where the Alcoa Fjarðaál aluminium smelter is located. A guided tour gave us a good impression of the enormous size of the factory, its production capacity, and of the company's very well functioning public relations department. Our guide also mentioned the economic risk involved in using renewable energy sources such as hydropower: In case of a power shortage, which could be due to a very long winter, resulting in low water levels in the reservoirs, and therefore low electricity production, the factory would not be

fully operational. Once shut down the factory's melting pots would require a whole year to be fired up again. Unsurprisingly, the currently very low water levels of Kárahnjúkar's reservoir (the winter had been very long) were a serious cause of concern.

Before driving back home, we looked at the local extensions of Alcoa's presence in Reyðarfjörður: the newly built gigantic sports hall sponsored by Alcoa, the new highrise buildings and bungalows implanted into the fishing village, expecting Alcoa workers as new inhabitants, the abandoned work camp for the factory's construction workers which is now gradually being transported to the north of the country where a new silicon factory is going to be built.



Alcoa Fjarðaál aluminium smelter. Photo: Julia Martin, 2011.



The group following the health and safety instruction video. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Incorporated into the factory. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

In the evening, we held an informal artist talk in Seyðisfjörður's community house. Greg Pope and Diana Winklerová shared their work with the group and with Skaffell's artists-in-residence.



Artist talk, Herðubreið community house, Greg Pope. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Artist talk, Herðubreið community house, Diana Winklerová. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 6: Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project

On day six we expanded the "ecological object" of the Alcoa smelter and looked for the means upon which its operation depends: We drove into the highlands to the Kárahnjúkar dam. Along the way we saw the transmission lines connecting the smelter with Fljótsdal Power Station, we listened to the humming of their transformer station, we saw lake Lagarfljót, whose colour has changed from milky green to milky grey after the dam became operational. Once arrived at the site, we explored the gigantic structure of the dam itself, noticed the marks of wind erosion on the banks of the only partially filled reservoir, and saw the dry canyon where once a river had been flowing freely. The group was stunned by the silence of the place: no sound of flowing water, no birds, and – exceptional for the highlands – no wind on that day.

On the way back, the group experienced a bath in a hot spring up in the highlands. Drilling for this hot water in the ground provides affordable heating for most households in Iceland.



At the transformer building. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Aerial view of Kárahnjúkar dam and Háslón reservoir. Photo: Julia Martin, 2011.



Kárahnjúkar dam. Photo: Julia Martin, 2011.



On top of Kárahnjúkar dam, Finnur Arnar Arnarson and Greg Pope. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

In the evening Pavel Mrkus and Ivar Smedstad shared their work with the expedition group and with Skaffell's artists-in-residence.



Artist talk at Skaffell Project Space, Pavel Mrkus. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.



Artist talk at Skaffell Project Space, Ivar Smedstad. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 7: Héraðsflói estuary

On the next day, we looked at the two rivers that have been affected by the construction of Kárahnjúkar dam. Driving to Húsey, a remote farm in the Héraðsflói estuary, we followed Jökulsá á Dal, the dammed river that is now for most of the year fed by rainwater instead of glacial water. Further in the south the other river, Lagarfljót, makes its own way through the estuary. Its waters have turned greyish-brown from increased glacial sediments, because Jökulsá á Dal's glacial waters have not only been stopped by the hydroelectric project's reservoir but have also been redirected through tunnels into the powerstation and from there into Lagarfljót river. The redirection of one river into the other has caused the aquatic life and diversity in Lagarfljót to decrease dramatically.

From Húsey we walked towards the coastline as far as we could go, looking for the place at which both modified rivers flow together before entering the sea. The difference in their water colour is profound and clearly visible.



Glacial and nonglacial waters mingle in Lagarfjót lake, flowing towards Héraðsflói estuary. Photo: Julia Martin, 2011.



Héraðsflói estuary. Photo: Julia Martin, 2015



Héraðsflói estuary, confluence of the two rivers affected by Kárahnjúkar Hydroelectric Project.
Photo: Julia Martin, 2015.

In the evening, back in Seyðisfjörður, Karlotta Blöndal and Finnur Arnar Arnarson gave an informal presentation of their work for the expedition group and Skaftfell's artists-in-residence.



Artist talk at Skaftfell Center for Visual Art, Finnur Arnar Arnarson. Photo: Julia Martin, 2015.



Artist talk at Skaffell Center for Visual Art, Karlotta Blöndal. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 8: Reflection and presentation

On day eight we prepared for our public presentation of the Frontiers of Solitude project, which was held in the afternoon in Seyðisfjörður's theatre space. The organisers gave a comprehensive overview of the project's intentions and partners, and outlined the expedition program. The participating artists presented initial responses to their experiences of the encountered places and issues, and opened up a discussion with the audience. The conversation revolved around the Kárahnjúkar case, democracy, activism, local passivity as a cultural trait, the lack of a willingness to plan and make decisions, the touristic gaze, the dimensionality and relativity of local environmental issues in relation to the rest of the world, and the gap between self-perception and outside perception.



Project presentation and discussion, Seyðisfjörður theatre space. Photo: Lisa Paland, 2015.

Day 9: Travel observations

On day nine we drove back to Reykjavík, stopping at the Geological Research and Heritage Center Breiðdalssetur, where we visited the exhibition "Parallel Line Up" and spoke to the artist Jenny Brockmann and to the center's director Christa Maria Feucht about their individual approaches to fieldwork. Jenny Brockmann's artistic practice links geology and weather, and during her research in Iceland she has been able to explore and appropriate various techniques of measuring and recording, as used in geological field expeditions.

The rest of the day and evening saw us travelling along the south coast of Iceland, stopping briefly at the famous glacial lagoon Jökulsárlón, where the topic of the touristic gaze came up once again with force.



Jenny Brockmann at the geological heritage center Breiðdalssetur. Photo: Julia Martin, 2015.



At Jökulsárlón glacial lagoon, South Iceland. Photo: Julia Martin, 2015.

Day 9: Art and activism

In Reykjavík we had a meeting with author and activist Andri Snær Magnason at Toppstöðin, a former power plant which has been transformed into a center for cultural entrepreneurs, activists, and artists. With Andri we spoke about the writing strategies of his book and movie *Draumalandið*, the development of his writing practice as a whole, how to sustain an investment in activism, and about the latest developments in Iceland's energy policy. We also discussed poetry as a political agent and as a method to bring disparate elements of a complex system into direct contact and context with each other – for example linking, through poetic association, the political, psychological, and socioeconomic aspects of the *Kárahnjúkar* project.

In the afternoon we visited the National Museum of Modern Art and spoke to the director of the Woody Vasulka Chamber research and archiving project.

The day – and the expedition – ended with a fabulous dinner at Finnur Arnar Arnarson's house in downtown Reykjavík.

Day 10: Departure day for all.