

UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

APPROACHING POSTHUMAN LANDSCAPES

reflection



In September 2015 I visited Iceland. I like to travel with a project in mind that makes me more attentive to the surroundings and helps me see the place differently. This time the task was to build cairns around Iceland and make a zine - piling up rocks in different places, taking pictures of the cairns, then dismantling the structure and taking pictures again. The idea was to create a certain ambiguity in the viewer, related to what was before and what after, and to show the passing nature of marking, of leaving a temporary trace of one's personal passage through the area.

(see the attachment)

Before going to Iceland my graduation project theme was 'the uncanny' in relation to disturbed sites, a combination I was quite convinced could offer an alternative to the current trend of post-industrial transformations by being perhaps slightly unpleasant but challenging, powerful as experience and calling for subject's active participation. Iceland helped me realize that in order to address 'the uncanny' I needed to go beyond the purely psychological concept and discover what its implications could mean inside the field of landscape architecture, in relation to contemporary context and specific area of interest - disturbed sites.

Iceland is full of phenomena that are at first sight inexplicable, making it in a sense uncanny. Very basic elements that are familiar to all of us are combined in unfamiliar ways which brings about a certain previously unknown effect. Icelandic landscape is extremely unpredictable and constantly in flux and there is a certain humility to the human interventions made - any intervention is seen as subservient to the processes we cannot fully predict, let alone delimit, therefore always temporal and open to change. And most importantly, the unfamiliar, the unknown and the uncertain are considered as landscape's positive characteristics that drive its continuous becoming. Nothing is fixed, things are made with their eventual disappearance in mind.

With this experience the project began to take a somewhat different path - the goal became how to think of a landscape intervention not as a complete or final thing but as a constant action, how to find the possibility of something new with what is given and how to understand landscape as being always incomplete and metastable, constantly on its way to becoming-different.

More specific task became discovering a framework based on which to form alternative ways of 'reading', 'intervening in' and 'representing' disturbed sites that would capture the character of the site, work towards novelty and subject's engagement. This was done by a theoretical exploration into 'the unfamiliar' and 'territory'. What emphasis on territory does is that it from the start puts forward a continuous territory-production instead of a stable landscape image. To look into production of any kind means looking into the processes, changes and tensions that go on before and beyond the finished product. More than that, production puts emphasis on continuity and moves away from predetermined and fixed identities. Research provided a framework based on which to read the site and move towards design stage. The key ingredients to bridge the gap between research and design became learning-through-making research components that applied theoretical findings to a specific site (Fort de Vaujours). They became a form of analysis that non-hierarchically looked at the territory as an affective and dynamic system, and served as a tool to form a position on the role of design intervention inside unfamiliar territories.

The proposed intervention took a form of 'territorial markers'. Markers articulate the territory while allowing for openness, freedom and emergence; designing in markers means to bring in time - to talk about the present while being oriented into the future. Markers are composed out of ordinary, familiar things, and yet their composition manages to stay permanently unfamiliar - allowing for excess to stay untamed, they guide territory production as a process of constant becoming. The ones that work best are uncanny, comfortless, even otherworldly. Demanding response, they influence our thinking, judgements and desires, and last as experiences while expressing the openness and incompleteness of this world. To design in markers means thinking about their expressive and functional components, as well as their relation to the territory they draw and their patterns of change.

What became clear during the last stages of the research is that in order to potentially discover the possibility of something new, what is perhaps even more important than marking is unmarking - deterritorializing, releasing fixed relations and setting things free.

With this in mind, the most challenging part of the project was to discover a suitable design methodology and afterwards representation technique that would adequately communicate the fleeting nature of designed markers and the multitude of site's possible futures. The task was to discover the right amount of 'control' so that the site would through time retain its differences and diversity without compromising it through proposed intervention or limiting its becomings. This was done by proposing a set of potentials (markers) that can unfold in various unpredictable directions but are initially precisely defined. Drawings tried to communicate that open-ended futures and precise intervention do not need to be mutually exclusive but work hand in hand to achieve desired landscape performativity.

An important part of design proposal is the practice of gardening. Gardeners are in direct contact with the site and work as a collective self-organized group, managing their work as a team. They record site's feedback to the proposed intervention, interact with site's development, carefully observe the dynamics of processes on site and approach their work as a continuous project, cooperation – establishing a structure, proposing direction, letting things evolve and react, over and over again.

Despite the fact that the project does not explicitly address individual human experience on site, it nevertheless has a strong social component. The experience of landscape is approached as an arrangement of affective encounters with possibly ethically and politically enabling potentials that are followed by an action, a response - challenging one to question the extend of human agency, apparent landscape stability, the categories of 'the natural' and 'the cultural', as well as the long-standing tradition of landscape experience-through-vision itself. If successful, the experience of landscape through time works towards alternative production of human subjectivities, triggers collective thinking and organises specific forms of action. In this way it wishes to challenge the *status quo* and make landscape active in relation to contemporary concerns.

Despite beginning with the concept of 'the uncanny' the project quickly became an ethico-aesthetic endeavour of which the uncanny played a rather small but important part. I still believe in it as potentially extremely strong and powerful as an experience but what the exploration into the concepts of 'the unfamiliar' and 'territory' showed is that there are no 'uncanny landscapes' per se, but rather, once looking at a landscape through its dynamism, openness and continuous becoming, there are territories that are from time to time invested with uncanny qualities - when they are most productive and creative, going beyond the familiar and already experienced.

From the start, the project's aim was to tackle a specific area of interest (disturbed sites) while providing a framework general enough that it could be applied to other areas of landscape architecture as well. Far from reaching a definite conclusion, I believe approaching landscape-reading and landscape design intervention through 'territory' and 'territorial markers' holds the potential of discovering how could we deal with complex landscapes or places of tension around us without reducing their complexity or eliminating their creative potential for the sake of 'familiarization'. Instead, they could be seen as sites that would diversify the present and possibly lead to alternative futures.

Much more thorough research would be needed in order to try to unravel all implications of the proposed approach inside different contexts but as a starting point, what 'territory' and 'the unfamiliar' bring is an understanding of landscape not as fixed but as continuous, in constant negotiation with its surroundings. Human & non-human actors are treated on equal basis, interacting and transforming the site when critical points are reached. Design intervention is precise but open to further reconfigurations, in time supporting novel encounters that trigger affective response. Intervention necessarily connects to the wider context in which it is set to describe from where it emerged from and to hint to what it could potentially become - design in its initial implementation stage is short-lived, seen as laying the groundwork for communities and landscapes to come.

Perhaps one thing the project did not explicitly set out to achieve but in the end still managed to acquire, is *in-betweenness*. Refusing to be labelled, it ended up feeling right at home somewhere in-between posthumanist debates and landscape theory, ethics and aesthetics, territory and landscape, nature and culture, art and science, actual and virtual, static and dynamic, now and after.

Maybe this is what links it back to the cairns I built in Iceland - a certain ambiguity to what it speaks about exactly, the one or the other, while when its best it sits right in the middle, speaking about both at the same time.

