

# *Journal of Earth Sciences*

16:9 HD video with voice-over (EN) 17”

Malin Pettersson Öberg 2015

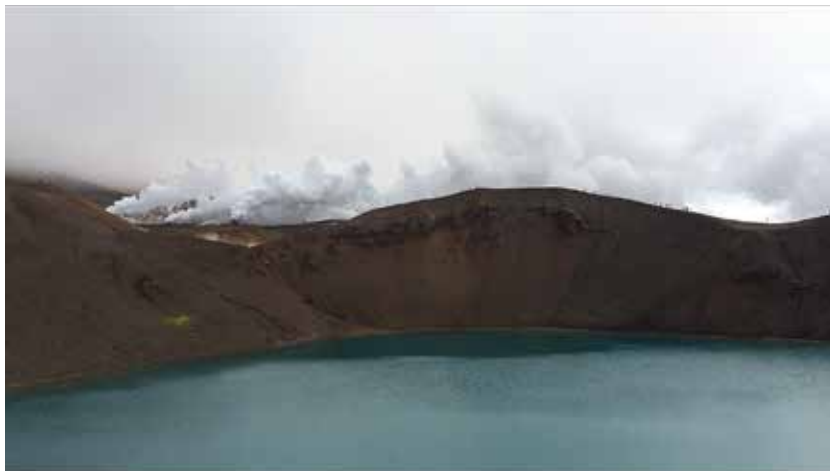


”In Malin Pettersson Öbergs film *Journal of Earth Sciences* a story based on the artist’s own journey through Iceland in 2014 is told. In the form of a fragmented narrative her film moves through a mythical Iceland where imageries of origin and nature merge: the movements of Teutonic plates and the geological remains of the glacial age develop into a backdrop for questions of culture and identity. As a story, Iceland is one of the places where an extreme climate, in the form of storms, occasional earthquakes and volcanic activity has an effect on those who live there. The film focuses on this and is permeated by a psychoanalytic narrative that through scientific associations revolves around isolation, travel and exploration. The work becomes a kind of self-reflection that concurrently stages fiction and presents documented material. The desire to discover something raises questions about who owns the story, how much the translator adds and what the viewer projects onto it. There is a passage by Simone de Beauvoir that comes to mind, where she writes how she would like to become the landscape in front of her: ’I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone, and I remain at a distance”, she writes, ”but it is also by this distance that the sky and the water exist before me. My contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy. I can not appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph, not as a defeat.’”

Jonatan Habib Engqvist, about the film *Journal of Earth Sciences* in the text *Impossible Possession*, 2015. The text was written in connection to an exhibition with the same title at *Slakthusateljéerna* in Stockholm, conducted in relation to the conversation and screening *Translating Places and Constructing Landscapes* at Iaspis - The Swedish Arts Grants Committee’s International Programme for Visual Artists, where the film premiered in Sweden. The film has been produced as part of an exchange between *Slakthusateljéerna* in Stockholm, *Air d’Islande* in Paris and *Skafitfell Center for Visual Art* in Seydisfjörður, Iceland, where the film was initiated in August 2014. All images in this pdf are stills from the film *Journal of Earth Sciences*.

*Journal of Earth Sciences* : <https://vimeo.com/119071309> - password *journal2015*

*Journal of Earth Sciences* can be described as a video essay in which the relation between the outer, physical landscape and the inner, psychological or emotional landscape is examined. Dramatization, projection and connection of inner emotions and experiences to nature and the landscape around us is nothing new for artists and writers in the Nordic countries, however, in the work with *Journal of Earth Sciences* I reflected on how places through their physical conditions shapes us. The Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant describes, in *Philosophy of the Relation. Poetry in Extension* (2009), how people from island communities are formed and think differently than people from the (colonizing) mainland. Glissant mentions how we always "carry our place with us" - how the place from which we come will echo in all other places that we encounter. Thoughts on how we are affected psychologically by being in nature; experiences of liberation, relaxation, beauty and perspectives on our existence but also experiences of loneliness, isolation and lack of interaction with others, lack of "words" and the formulating of thoughts, has informed the work with the film.



I wanted to explore the tension and contrast that occurs between the precise, controlled scientific language used to describe the Icelandic climate and nature in magazines such as the *Icelandic Journal of Earth Sciences*, from which the film borrows its title, and the relatively violent and uncontrolled processes which takes place in "real" nature: the earth's interior, as well as in people's (internal) emotional life.

Through a web of fragments from different sources; borrowed images and texts, sequences filmed in Iceland - mainly in the volcanically active *Krafla* area, where the film's background noise has been recorded - as well as sequences filmed in my studio, where books and postcards from Iceland appear in front of a snow white wall, the image of a place and its construction is examined.

In addition to landscape, *Journal of Earth Sciences* attempts to approach narration itself, the power of words and the importance of "expressing oneself". The theme is addressed in the beginning of the film where the word *saga* appears - denoting something that has been told, whether it is real or a product of the imagination. However "true" a document, story or statement might seem, there will always be a level of construction, fiction or invention involved in each story, newsreport or artistic narrative. The story might function as an invocation, to understand or make our existence meaningful. In *Journal of Earth Sciences* I try to examine how we read images, character, landscape. How, through narration, we try to reach out to other people. As Esbjörn Rosenblad puts it, quoted by the speaker voice at the end of the film: "The art of writing – this 'peculiar ability to, by small characters, transmit ones thoughts long distances to other people and to immortalize strange events'."



If the parallel track of the film is the process of writing and interpretation, Marguerite Duras thoughts on writing as well as the effects of alcohol (*Practicalities*, 1989), become a helpful tool. Just like the passage about the Icelandic artist Birgir Andr sson, in whose former house I spent much of my time in Iceland. Andr sson's practice touched, like my own, questions of identity, perception and interpretation, how we read that which we have around us; language, characters, images, architecture, landscape. But also issues of blindness and the inability to see and interpret; various forms of collapses and loss.



To me, visual and narrative work become meaningful when one is allowed to explore several parallel and partly contradictory themes. Basic human questions about who we are; how we are formed and assigned roles and places in relation to our surroundings and history, but also an exploration of the possibilities of creation and *mise en sc ne*. How can we, through montage, through assembling images with words and sound, express these questions? How can we identify and depict the specificities of our own time, without telling a simplified story?

Just like in Simone de Beauvoir's idea of impossible possession, referred to by Jonatan Habib Engqvist, or in  douard Glissant's idea of the right to remain 'opaque' and incomprehensible in relation to your environment, is perhaps ownership, knowledge and understanding not a condition for approaching a place and making it your own. Perhaps, on the contrary, it is in the realization of our limitations to understand and possess that liberation and satisfaction lies. These are some of the thoughts that have informed the work with the film *Journal of Earth Sciences*.