

Geocentric Driftings #3

Iceland – Political Geologies

"What if culture was nature all along?"

Vicky Kirby

Running through Iceland and stretching all across the ocean, there is a rift, a wide, deep crack, reaching all the way to the Earth's mantle. Along this line, the European and American tectonic plates have been drifting away from each other for millions of years, and magma erupts over and over again, creating the very substance of the island. It is there, in between two cliffs that each belong to a continent, that the Icelandic Commonwealth held its outdoor parliament. For close to a millennium, starting in the year 930, it gathered around each summer solstice under a never-setting sun to discuss laws and settle disputes. This flatland framed by basalt walls – called Thingvellir, or "Plain of the Parliament" – is a geological landmark, yet it was inhabited as a quasi-architecture and above all as a cultural, political, juridical, diplomatic space by the Vikings of this medieval proto-democracy.

Taking this unparalleled geo-cultural space as a starting point, we will pace the surface and the depths of an island born of lava flows, observing some of the sites that manifest its turbulent geological life. The steam vents, the bubbling mud pools and the magmatic caves, the young volcanoes and the geysers. All those places where the geological shows itself, stages its dynamics and the ways in which it shapes the Earth, building a spectacle that never fails to attract crowds of fascinated tourists.

We will visit some of the cultural and industrial practices that engage directly with the geological reality of the island, as well as some of the architectures that emerge around its geological presences. Starting with geothermal power stations and aluminum factories run by multinational conglomerates, we will go through museums or mines, and meet designers that turn glass wool back into obsidian or lava flows into facade modules.

Finally, we will dive into geology as a political space, following the path sketched out by the tectonic and parliamentary site of the Thingvellir. We will investigate contemporary links woven between geology and environmental remediation, revealing global dynamics that affect the Icelandic territory but also our own European reality, going from drill holes communicating directly with magma pockets to facilities injecting captured Swiss CO₂ into the basalt ground of Iceland.

Following the igneous rock, the plumes of steam made by humans and made by Earth, the carbon dioxide and the industry, we will strive to understand how terrestrial dynamics affected the past of Iceland, how they keep affecting its present, and some of the many ways in which the geological can also be political.

21-28 October 2023 - 12 students

Team – An Fonteyne, Els Silvrants-Barclay, Galaad Van Daele

Cost frame F (CHF 1500 & above)

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Architecture assembles material and spatial forms that are primarily derived from the geological realm. Mineral substances, metallic ores, hydrocarbons and sediments such as clay, iron, sand, oil, copper, all of which result from terrestrial dynamics reaching beyond the millenary timescales of civilizations.

Yet the practice and history of architecture keep neglecting them, treating them solely as resources or inert mediums to be appropriated and shaped to serve grand architectural visions.

As the climate crisis forces us to reevaluate our ways, and to question our consumption of the terrestrial, how could we finally give geological matter the presence and weight it deserves? How to envisage architecture as being also – or mainly – an emanation of tectonic, metamorphic or sedimentary movements? And what do such considerations open up for our practice?

With this series of seminar weeks, the Dept. of the Ongoing will propose an alternative outlook on architecture, and create opportunities for geocentric reflection and exchange.