In closing, artist Indrė Liškauskaitė attempts to portray her poodle without framing, exploring the habitus and emotional learning unfolding in complex interactions with her dog who tends to strike a pose when photographed.

MARKING THE LAND, ATTEMPTING TO LEAVE NO TRACE: A Conversation on Artistic Intentions and the Current Landscape

Becky Forsythe and Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir

From Reykjavík, where nearby the earth has newly opened with volcanic activity—one of seven eruptions marking the calendar year—we settle into our shared studio. From a hill overlooking the Reykjanes Peninsula, we can trace the landscape's memory in glacial moraines and shifting forms, reminders of the forces that have continually shaped and reshaped the land. This landscape prompts us to consider our own roles in navigating and reimagining a reciprocal relationship with nature, as realized in contemporary art.

We have noticed that an increased awareness of women's contributions to environmental knowledge and movements has expanded this conversation. This guides us toward an ethos of restoration rather than extraction—similar practices in art and curation that seek to sustain rather than consume. As an artist from Iceland and a curator from Canada who have collaborated on exhibitions, writing, publishing, and public presentations, we are drawn to the intersection of female voices, creative practices, and the environment. We reflect upon the unique ways women engage with land, ecology, collection, care, and labour, while acknowledging that exploitation and repression are complexities woven into the landscapes we borrow and take part in.

This connection leads us to questions around identity, place, and responsibility: *Who are we in relation to the landscapes we inhabit?* How can we uphold artistic and curatorial integrity while addressing the urgent need for environmental action? Are our contributions impactful, informed, and transformative, or do they risk being symbolic gestures without real effect?

In this exchange, we reflect on our practices as an evolving dialogue—a process that, like a glacier's edge

reshaping the land it touches, embraces fluidity and transformation. The glacier's edge becomes a metaphor for our work, marking the threshold where solid meets fluid, the known meets the unknown. This invites us to hold space for artistic practices that remain exploratory and responsive, constantly questioning the potential of art to create real-world impact and foster shared understanding.

Becky Forsythe
What experiences or ethical considerations guide your artistic practice with landscapes?

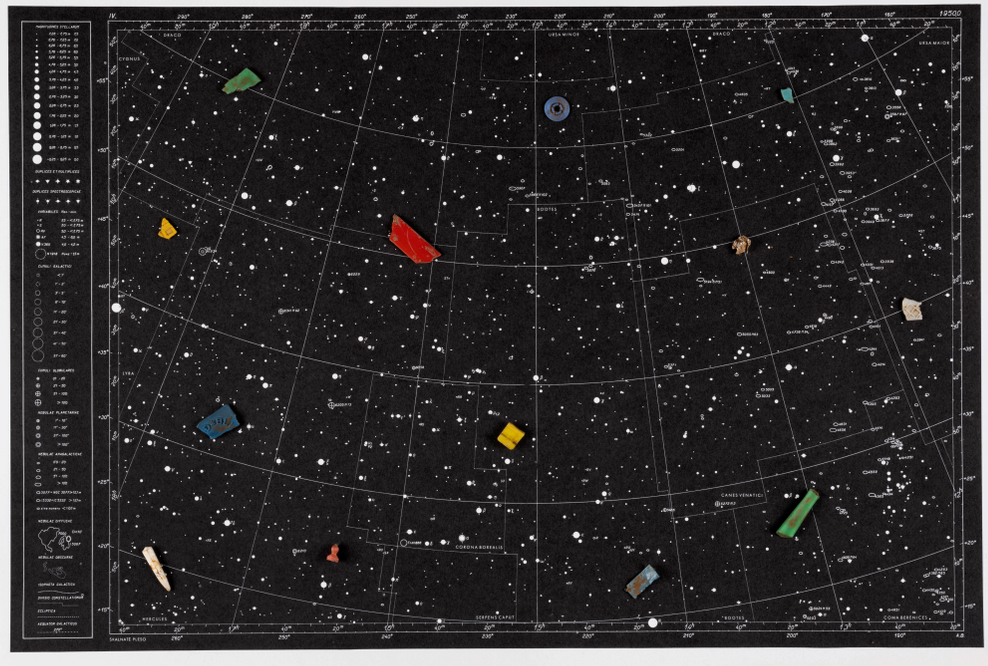
Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir
My background as a ranger in the highlands of Iceland has influenced me in meaningful ways. To stay with and close to sublime and sometimes staggering nature for longer periods of time is a privilege. Through this experience, I have learned an important lesson that, in turn, became part of my approach to making art: *leave no trace*. Many of us have had this urge since childhood to collect various things from nature. Sometimes it is to keep a tiny bit of a place if it fascinates or moves you, in the form of a stone, a shell, or perhaps a twig. The object itself can also sometimes be the reason.

This emphasis grew subsequently after I had the opportunity to visit Surtsey island (erupt. 1963-67). The island is born anew every winter, so the first scientific expedition to venture to this place annually bears witness to the environment unbothered by humans for an entire year.

BF
What resonates with me in your work is the deep connection to human experience and our instinct to gather—from both a physical and a metaphorical sense. The impulse to pocket small fragments of nature, things that hold a world of memory or reflect an encounter with beauty that feels beyond our grasp, is almost

innocent. Yet, also very loaded. I guess one of many questions here is: do we need to have a physical piece of a place we visit for it to be tangible, or is a memory strong enough to carry us there?

Alongside intuitive gestures, your practice is rooted in geology, natural history, and archival materials. Here I am thinking specifically about your work *ca. 1950*, a photographic composition of the *Atlas of the Heavens* by Antonín Bečvář from 1950 and plastic artifacts that you call *Now Remains*. The idea was somewhat fostered in our exhibition *Afield* in 2022. Do these layers—intuition and research, memory and fact—intersect in the ways you approach and interpret natural landscapes?



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *ca 1950*, 2024. Photographic work of preserved *Now Remains* in the collection of The National Museum of Iceland. Photographic print of Atlas of the Heavens by Antonín Bečvář from 1950. Copyright of the artist.

ÞÓ

Sometimes experience is translated through organized geometries or systems in my work. My research and practice are intertwined, so the margins are often blurry. For example, I try to be attentive in my approach to specific or nonspecific places, objects, ideas, materials I use, and the process itself. I often find myself caught up in a lingering moment. When something occurs to me, a discovery, wonder or bewilderment. I really enjoy that part of my practice. A moment or event that happens during a walk with my dog, or on a field trip far away; something that resurfaces from a distant geological past or echoes from the future.

The idea behind placing these very recent artefacts, extracted from the ground, onto the sky map, was connected to ideas around drift (matter) as heritage. I was caught up in the idea that what we usually consider as sea or airborne debris is more than pollution



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Time Capsule I-IV & Atlas of the Heavens*, 2022 in *Afield*, Skaftfell Art Center, with works by Diane Borsato, Geoffrey Hendricks, Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir and minerals collected by Nicoline Weywadt (1848-1921). Curated by Becky Forsythe. Copyright of the artist.



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Flowers for Seyðisfjörður*, 2022 in Afield, Skaftfell Art Center, with works by Diane Borsato, Geoffrey Hendricks, Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir and minerals collected by Nicoline Weywadt (1848-1921). Curated by Becky Forsythe. Copyright of the artist.

that accumulates on land and travels in space, it is an obvious marker of the Anthropocene; moving heritage.

I try to pay attention to things that are discarded or overlooked, like the human influence on Surtsey, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Considerable and visible effects on this particular environment and landscape are very real and present. I've made a few artworks related to overlooked artefacts, refuse or trash heritage. In other words, things that are complex and unruly fascinate me.

BF

Bringing a sense of visual order or tidiness to things that are *unruly* or difficult to grasp seems embedded with ideas of women as caretakers or stewards of life

and therefore nature. This leads me to the ways we rely on intuition and collaboration as methods for curatorial and artistic cultivation and relations. Our work seeks to rethink various narratives and foster dialogues that prioritize female experience and creativity. In other words, we often find ourselves digging deeply to sufficiently acknowledge histories that are untold, but resonate strongly with the present. We strive to elevate this by recognizing the power of art to engage with ecological care and inspire restorative actions, especially in considering women's contributions through history.

Which often leads to turning points in our own individual explorations—points where we pivot or expand, as our ideas overlap and open up to one another. Part of this is the opportunity to realize ideas in physical space or publish in print. Make our mark—but why do you think we share a similar need to bring others in on ideas that are important to us?

ÞÓ

A lot of possibilities have opened up in our conversations throughout the years, since we first met and started working together at The Living Art Museum 10 years ago. I believe we took similar things and



experiences with us from the museum, our work with the different archives and artworks. Particularly the empty spaces in the collection and history, like the obvious gender gap. So instead of re-writing the herstory of the museum and instantly "filling in" the gaps with new works by women and non-binary artists, we addressed the void and generated awareness that is still at the forefront of the current museum's board.



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Drift matter on Surtsey island*, July 15-18 2021. Field documentation. Copyright of the artist.



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Storytellers*, 2021. Drift matter and Xenoliths collected from Surtsey island. Rocks preserved at the Icelandic Institute of Natural History. Part of a photographic series. Copyright of the artist.

I am curious to hear how these thoughts reverberate around your research project at the Reykjavík Art Museum where you are, literally, confronting a gap in art history.

BF

My current research is driven by some of these things, and attempts to bring various turning points to the surface or make them more noticeable in terms



Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Future Fragments* at The National Museum of Iceland, 2024. Installation view. Photo by Vigfús Birgisson. Copyright of the artist.

of women, art, and history. It is focused on a selection of artists who contributed in new ways to driving the art scene in Iceland forward in the 1980s, while at the same time opening up certain spaces for others. I am excited about the swell of energy that led this period, and am interested in networks and webbing, both intentional and unintentional, and that is a bit of an undercurrent. It is important to me to acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive claim, but hopefully one of many ways of entering into this period and providing space for some of the key voices to be heard.

Perhaps gravitating towards other females is natural, and creates alternate systems or structures for us to



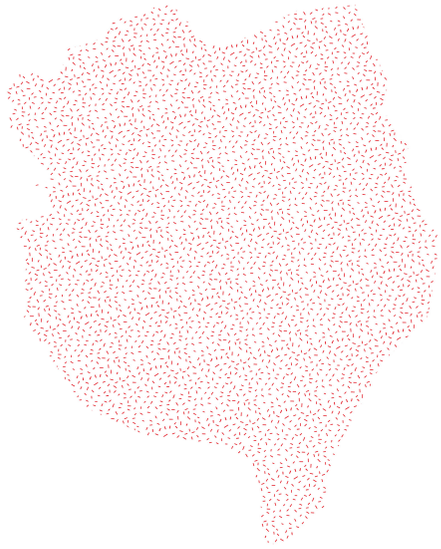
Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, *Like Landscape*, 2021-2023. Part of a photographic series. Floor sweep from Pálsbær cabin, Surtsey island. From the exhibition *Future Fragments* in The National Museum of Iceland. Photo by Ívar Brynjólfsson. Copyright of the artist.

navigate through personal realities and creative needs. It might be an awareness or sensitivity to works, materials, or his and herstories (written and other) that call for further speculation, and the potential in sharing those ideas through research, art, and exhibitions with others so they live on. A response to time, place, and situation that leads to uncovering or rediscovering information. Does this relate to ways you gather and process information on a specific place or material?

ÞÓ

For me it is a question of being open, curious and responsive to the subject I am looking into. The places I am usually interested in often have a history of change or temporality. Some are significant like a volcanic eruption, others more subtle like the ever changing coastline close to my home.

Over the last decade or so, I've been collecting thoughts and ideas that expand our understanding of

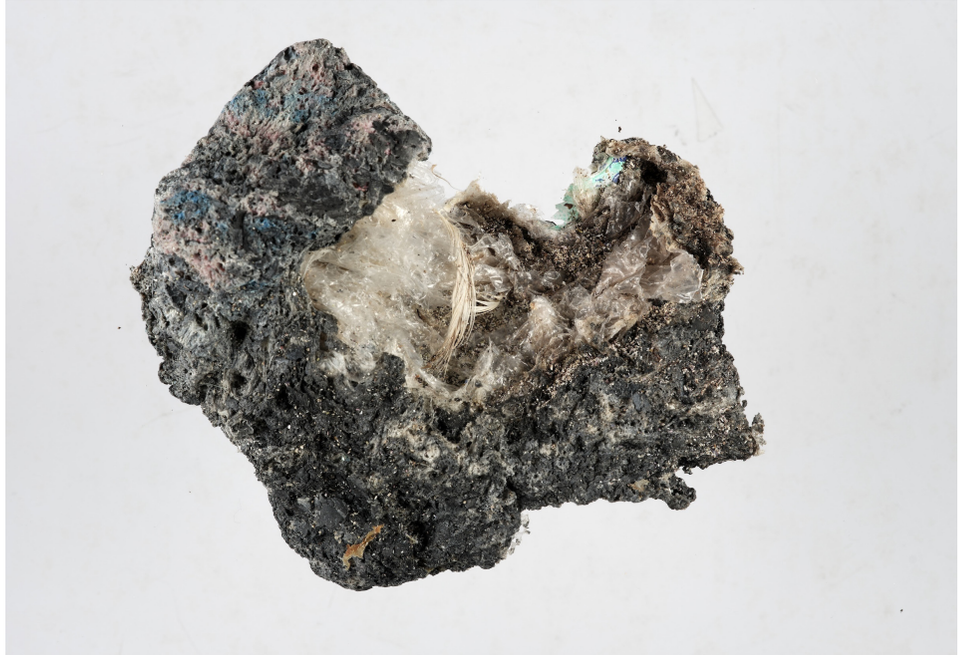




Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, From the *Eldfell Alphabet*, 2013-2023. Silkscreen print with lava from Mt. Eldfell, Vestmannaeyjar. Photographs taken by Einar B. Pálsson (1912-2011) in 1973. Copyright of the artist. Typography designed in conversation with Studio-Studio and Símon Viðarsson. Photo by Vigfús Birgisson.

and relation to the natural world as it meets and is interpreted within human environments. Some of them are manifested in found objects or archival material, others are out of reach or faraway places.

One of the most important moments that radically shaped my practice came about when I went on a field trip up north in Mývatnssveit in 2014, where I assisted the Archaeological Institute of Iceland in registering their findings. After hundreds of bone, glass, and ceramic fragments, a tiny piece of red plastic was handed to me. It was as bewildering and complex as its future. I followed this plastic fragment and learned a lot about museum preservation and ideas around heritage on the way, which sparked the idea behind the exhibition *Future Fragments* in the National Museum of Iceland. There were many stops on the way, of course; one of the most important ones was Surtsey in summer 2021.



Plastiglomerate, part of *Archive of Future Artefacts*, 2015- . Photo by Ívar Brynjólfsson. Copyright of Þóra Pétursdóttur, Relics of Nature and the artist.

In my application to visit Surtsey island, I had failed to ask for permission to collect any natural samples on the island, but as I stood on the newly swept floor in Pálsbær cabin, just one hour away from our departure, I asked the ranger if I could keep the sweep in the shovel. Ever since that summer, I've gotten a new fresh bag of floor sweep from the last scientific excursion to leave the island. I share more about this in my book *Esseyja / Island Fiction*, pages 6-159.

BF

A significant challenge lies in finding the delicate balance of the aesthetic qualities of the materials and their geological or historical significance. You gather unexpected materials like plastic, floor sweep, things that drift between different locations. How does your understanding of geological processes influence the materials you choose and what you do with them? Are there physical properties that influence the conceptual aspects of your work?

ÞÓ

In recent works related to Surtsey or Eldfell (erupt. 1973), the question that has been in the back of my mind is *what makes and shapes a place?* To witness a volcanic eruption can be fascinating and terrifying at the same time, but I am more interested in what happens after. How a new place becomes actual, like in the case of Surtsey. Or takes over and changes the environment and ultimately becomes the landscape, like in Vestmannaeyjar during the Eldfell eruption. What we are witnessing now in the Reykjanes peninsula incorporates so many layers of these thoughts.

A lot of my work shares similar aesthetics with the visual language of documentation or registration found in museum environments. These kinds of images of an artefact or a mineral often lure the viewer to look deeper and closer at the details. And who doesn't love a good rock!? But it's the history of the rock and its participation in the world that I would like to bring out.

One of my concerns is that as soon as things / unruly objects / artefacts become part of a collection, they are just kept in a storage box—like a waiting room, waiting to be heard and have their participation in the world further acknowledged.

BF

Fieldwork and experience can form an archive that acknowledges scientific and historical narratives from various and new directions. For example, intuitive knowledge feeds what you do and how you later create. How does your work engage with the history of the landscapes or geological formations you study?

ÞÓ

There were moments during my stay on Surtsey when I somehow felt like I came closer to sensing time, history, and the significance of the place. Whether it was imagining all the ships that had sailed across that part of the ocean, where I now sat on "solid" ground. Or matching my foot in one of the fossilised boot tracks in the hill slopes of the island. Or trying to balance from rock to rock on the northern peninsula called the *Spit*, a significant landmark on the island that will probably disappear in the next two decades or so. Or looking at the grey seals looking at me—the obvious intruder. Or coming across a massive rusty steel-blob on the shoreline of Surtsey that has been part of the landscape for more than half of the island's lifespan.

BF

So much is based on your own personal experience of special places. How do you think your work communicates the deep time scales you mention, involved in geological processes and seemingly distant to human life, to a broader audience?

ÞÓ

Through attempting to mediate or translate moments like I've mentioned. But the scope of my research and

project about Surtsey opened up in many different ways after I had the chance to stay on the island. I had tried to approach this place from as many angles as possible before I got to travel there and see the island for the first time myself, experience the landscape and environment. One year after my trip, I felt like I was ready to try to gather all the artworks, texts, thoughts and different viewpoints that had been circulating around this project. I wanted to invite certain women to participate in a book with me, who had already contributed so much to the field of environmental humanities and philosophy, artistic research, ecofeminism, thoughts on islandness and heritage studies. That was a very important step, to create a platform and a space in the form of a book, to allow for other viewpoints in this multi-layered realm of this place. And that is why I wanted you to co-edit it with me, because we share this emphasis.

BF

We definitely share an affinity for moving through the world as active participants of the things (natural and human) taking place around us, and a particular interest in cultivating meeting points for different female voices and viewpoints, reciprocating, attempting to make moves, but leave little trace, at least on the environmental landscape. To trace layers and attempt to present them in different forms. This book is an excellent example of the productive challenge in bridging artistic intentions and findings with other related, but also separate, fields and all the potential that exists in connecting things in this way. This brings me to thinking about how you navigate the tension between scientific understanding and artistic interpretation in your work.

ÞÓ

I try to see this meeting point as a possibility or a tool rather than a tension. One example that perhaps

reverberates with our conversation to begin with, *leaving no trace*, was my encounter with the fossilised boot tracks on Surtsey in 2021. I felt like time and scale had somehow collided and manifested in these tracks, which are the most recent fossilised imprints by a human known to exist on Earth, if the Moon landing is taken into account. My hope was somehow to prove that the footprint I stumbled upon had been left by one of the first woman to step on Surtsey, the journalist Elín Pálmadóttir. The tracks will eventually erode away like the ones that were discovered 20 years ago. But for a short moment in the history of this island, which has been dominated by men for the longest part, a woman's presence was noted.

BF

It is fascinating to learn more about how women, both historically and currently engage with the land—not as a passive canvas, but as a dynamic force that shapes and is shaped by artistic practice. Women's voices, movements, and reflections on the environment are critical to reimagining the relationship between humans and the natural world, most certainly so in the Anthropocene. How do you see your work contributing to contemporary discussions about the environment, sustainability and narratives about human interaction with the natural world?

ÞÓ

I can't be sure if the works that I make are successful in such a significant way, but I would like to believe that the effort of trying and allowing more narratives to surface counts as something. But it starts with your way of living and thinking in this world that informs and shapes your practice. I believe it's very possible to develop a meaningful and thoughtful practice that can generate awareness that will lead to something.

BF

Returning back to our current landscape, we invite you, the reader, to take these thoughts into your own hands—literally. Below are a series of prompts, inspired by our past collaborations, for actions that encourage new ways of considering nature, language, materiality. Inspired by our dialogue and environmental care, these gestures offer an opportunity to consider how we move through the world, and how it moves through us in return.

1

Travel somewhere you can feel and sense natural forces—wind, water, earth. Use a simple tool to temporarily map the direction of these forces on the ground. Consider the invisible labours women have performed throughout history, often unnoticed but essential. Think about how these forces shape and guide the landscape, sometimes without taking or leaving scars on the environment.

2

Walk to one of your favourite places and spend time there. Touch the grass, flowers, dirt, trees and rocks. Feel the textures and shapes. If you come across a creek or a river, let the water run through your fingers. Whatever nature you cross on your path, touch it and feel it touch you back.

3

If you find an object in nature that pulls you in, resist the urge to place it in your pocket and take it with you. Instead, try to remember where it is and visit it often, creating a relationship based on respect and presence rather than possession.

https://doi.org/10.37522/vxg7hm07