

# Your Gravitational Now

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I make my day by sensing it. Measuring by moving, my body is my brain. My senses are my experiential guides – they generate my innermost awareness of time while generously giving depth to my surroundings. Constantly and critically invested in the world of today, they receive, evaluate, and produce my reality.

When I walk or drive through the Icelandic landscape, I sense the surroundings and sense myself searching for sense. This vast landscape is like a test site that nurtures ideas and helps me process them into *felt* feelings – maybe even into art. Exercising physical and perceptual means of charting out space, of *becoming*, is for me a way of speaking to the world. This method or ‘technique’ raises questions that might just as easily be asked at different times in different situations, removed from their art context. Depth, time, psychological and physical engagement, perception – topics abound for which the landscape welcomingly offers experimental conditions and material.

In Iceland and elsewhere, I continuously exchange my private being for a shared reality. I – sensorium, feelings, memories, convictions, values, thoughts, uncertainties – only am in relation to the collective.

Imagine standing on the vast banks of black sand just south of Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Iceland, looking northwards onto the tip of Skeidarárjökull, one of its glacier tongues. From this particular point, the wide glacier takes up a large part of the horizon, and its gravel- and ash-covered nose sprawls into an ungraspable mass. Abstraction and impalpability pervade, filtered through your here-and-now body. Standing right in front of the glacier, you may first begin to feel a degree of intimacy and familiarity. The experience of proceeding onto the glacier itself is a moment of intense physical drama. Pressurised by the mass of ice, a sub-glacial water current causes the otherwise dry black sand right in front of the tongue to undulate like a fatigued trampoline. Cautiously trying to cross the few yards of billowing sandy surface to the glacier itself, you develop a funny, anti-gravity-like gait – a bit like moon-walking. Hoping to defy physics, you make yourself light, distribute your weight as evenly as possible, heart pounding. Quicksand below threatens to pull you in.

Three years ago, together with a local driver and my good friend the landscape architect Günther Vogt, I undertook a trip on Skeidarárjökull that began with this chillingly destabilising experience. Our journey was charted out by glacier mills, those incredibly deep holes in the ice carved by the rush of surface glacial melt water and debris. For two days we travelled from void to void. Strapped to a ladder cantilevering off the roof of an all-terrain vehicle, I would lie suspended horizontally in the air, camera in hand, examining this extraordinary phenomenon directly from above, these ice perforations, each unique in shape, depth, and balance of dirty grey, white, and turquoise hues. Add to this a powerful soundtrack of the rushing melt water spilling into the voids. The mills made explicit this wonderful interior life of the glacier, its transformations, inner crackling and grinding, and other sub-surface noises that we tend to associate with the sounds of deep oceanic life. They were like glacial loudspeakers, whose sound waves spoke of the type of dark space I was studying from above. My – sadly soundless – archive of photographs later became *The glacier mill series* (2007).

Once on my feet again, walking on the crusty crystalline ice surrounding the mills, I would gaze southwards over Skeidarárjökull and the sandy lowland, towards the coastline and horizon in the distance. This is a perfect setup for an exercise of the senses. On the large surface of the glacier, no familiar forms or objects give a sense of scale or distance. The ice is like a perfect, giant, tilted plane as far as the eyes can reach. If you halt, the sheer size of the ice plane blots out its subtle sloping towards sea level, about 200 to 300 meters below. Looking firmly towards the horizon, you suddenly experience the large icy surface as if it were raised to become horizontal with the sea beyond, tipping surrealistically towards you. For a second, the rational structuring of your perceptions is short-circuited. All knowledge of space and its dimensions dissolves. Breathtaking! The brain protests: obviously it is the glacier that is inclined, not the black sand desert and the sea. But the vivid unfamiliarity of the situation makes it surprisingly difficult to ascertain which of the two is inclined. Should you consciously decide to see it that way, the image can snap back into a sloping glacier with flat land and horizon. The exercise consists of this sense/brain-driven oscillation, a peculiar back-and-forth between self and surroundings.

When I started walking again, the ice gloriously crackling under my feet, my vestibular system at work, I found myself adjusting my steps to even minuscule changes of level in this sprawling glacier landscape. Gravity, movement, and the passing of time effortlessly conjured up the feeling of the inclination of the ground. Then the slightly oblique surface of the glacier became immediately graspable again. Consider this simple sensory re-evaluation, prompted by walking and driving around on the great Vatnajökull, a mild attack on the ever-increasing experiential numbness that society produces in abundance. Evaluating the (partially self-imposed) rules by which we live implies giving renewed attention to our definitions of time, space, and of ourselves as sentient agents.

At my studio in Berlin I work with similar sensory-motor experiments. The sandy underground of this city, vaguely reminiscent of the Icelandic quicksand zone, continues to challenge local city planners and inhabitants. 'Berl', derived from Old Slavic, probably means swamp – the swamp upon which Berlin was built and which has influenced its urban organisation. Often less than three metres below the surface, the natural groundwater level calls for unusual building methods. When Potsdamer Platz was rebuilt following the fall of the Berlin wall, deep giant holes were made in preparation for the high-rises to come. Had the construction sites not been sufficiently sealed off, the adjacent Tiergarten park would have been threatened by dramatic changes in its hydro-geological balance, causing trees and shrubs to die.

My studio sits on a hill called Prenzlauer Berg. Here the swamp has given way to a stable foundation. Originally a brewery, the building is equipped with a maze of double-tiered basements for beer storage. In 2009 I opened a school, called the Institut für Raumexperimente, and the first exhibition by the students took place in May 2010, in the cold but dry basements below – its title: *Let's start to implement little errors.*

Imagine leaving the studio with me and turning left onto Christinenstrasse, which slopes down to the intersecting Torstrasse about four blocks south and ten meters below your current position. Surprisingly, an exercise similar to the one on Skeidarárjökull can be made in this street, its one side flanked by the playgrounds on Teutoburger Platz, the other by the traditional Wilhelminian buildings of Berlin. The experiment is perfect for an unpretentious afternoon with students. Stand still, focusing on Torstrasse. Try to conjure up a sense of the street sloping softly downhill in front of you, the houses, the sky, the light, the other people. Now use your imagination to lift up the street to horizontal. Simply tell yourself that the slope in front is in fact level. Freezing this image, you notice that the buildings lean curiously towards you. At the end of Christinenstrasse, Torstrasse is now subtly tilted, fitting the image you have produced. Enjoy the thrill of this image or examine your feeling of what physical impact the spaces of the city have on your way of sensing them and you in them. By an act of sheer will, flip the image around, once again letting Christinenstrasse roll naturally downhill, the buildings straightening themselves to upright position. The brain finds it unexpectedly easy to make such momentary, relative contracts with reality. Our senses and surroundings are easily manipulated.

Start walking down the street, registering the inclination with your feet. You may experience a minor fall with every step you take – and another thrill while your limbs jiggle slightly. When in motion, our bodies co-produce what we sense, partially handing over the production of the space-so-far to our feet, eyes, and entire sensorium. The second exercise is to experience the difference between simply walking down the hill and walking while imagining Christinenstrasse to be straight. The discrepancy between the physical registering of the street and your brain projection imbues your experience of the street with a *felt presence*. The mental exercise disrupts and reshapes this everyday functioning of our senses, of our selves, our urban surroundings – exhibiting the sensory numbness (indirectly) nurtured by many city planners.

The intricate translation of information among our limbs, brain, perceptual apparatus, and sense of orientation is a vehicle of the self. To embark on such exercises and journeys allows time to give space to feelings. Walking becomes a tool for *emotionalising* space, a landscape, an urban setting, or a building.

Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, the French visionary architects of the 1960s and founders of Architecture Principe, celebrated *the function of the oblique* – moving and living on inclined surfaces, the body almost always tense, in constant disequilibrium or only momentary balance – as a vital spatial principle that could heighten the quality of life. What this also does is it counters the hegemonic status of vision (as if separate from the other senses) in a society obsessed with images, their mediation, and the representation of power. It is based on a belief in time, in transformation, and the potential for radical change.

Today, I insist on a similar kind of spatio-sensory holism, where art can challenge and change societies by instantiating different relations to the world,

where actions and consequences matter; art takes seriously the space-producing abilities of our bodies. It prompts us to re-evaluate the value systems according to which we measure ourselves and our surroundings; it insists on friction and difference. This offsets the alarming sugar-coating of experiences developed by a world that (involuntarily) generates numbness, a world obsessed with profit and consumerism, which packages experiences for sale rather than insists on individual and collective responsibility for sensation and shared space. As Barbara Maria Stafford has put it: 'Hiding the mechanisms behind visual construction is like window-shopping. No longer seeing the constitutive technology encourages the ingestion of a seamless spectacle of goods.' In this type of spectacle-driven world, our ability for refined sensation is dulled. Navigation happens via GPS, according to a map that represents a world 'out there', rather than with a map that we draw up as we go – what Bruno Latour calls a 'dashboard . . . or a calculation interface that allows you to pinpoint successive sign posts while you move through the world'. Ultimately, I am trying to produce sense.

## Epilogue

I met Doreen at a lecture on walking by the artist Hamish Fulton, while I was preparing *The weather project*, which was later installed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. This marked a turning point for me. I had for some time been interested in duration, temporality, and how our experience of time co-produces space – topics that are at the core of my artworks. Where phenomenology, which had been decisive in my early work, addresses temporality from the singular perspective of a subject, Doreen insisted on thinking of the subject contextually. Imagine a person boarding a train in Manchester, going to Liverpool, and disembarking at the station:

Your arrival in Lime Street, when you step off the train, begin to get into the things you came here to do, is a meeting-up of trajectories as you entangle yourself in stories that began before you arrived. This is not the arrival of an active voyager upon an awaiting passive destination but an intertwining of ongoing trajectories from which something new may emerge. Movement, encounter and the making of relationships take time.

Later we would talk more about the subject in relation to its social surroundings, the performative collectives in which it participates. For me, sensitivity to the mutable social context became a topic I developed while occasionally crossing paths with Doreen. I benefitted from her belief in making explicit the changing conditions under which exchanges take place and movements are made, conditions that always co-produce internal and external performances.

Doreen has changed my way of seeing my work in the world and the world in my work.