

Berliner Treibholz

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When travelling in Iceland, you may encounter piles of driftwood along the coast. In a country where no trees grow, the huge trunks washed up on the shore are like alien bodies: they come neither from a nearby forest or fjord, nor from a neighbouring country (there is none). Subjected to wind, tidal movement, drift ice, and waves, bleached by the sun and the ocean salt for up to fifteen years, most have made their way from Siberia, a few from North America, and some are even said to have come from South America, surfing the Gulf Stream. These nomads, their surfaces chafed by water, ice, and shore friction, make no demands on their host country as they hover on its periphery. Unfamiliar and real at the same time, they tell a story of migration and of the natural forces that shaped their route. For me, they represent an emotional journey.

In 2008, with as yet no specific use in mind, I had about fifty trunks collected from the Northern Icelandic coasts of Drangar and Kaldarnes in Bjarnarfjordur. Packed in a container labelled Berlin, they were shipped across the North Atlantic via Holland, where they were caught up in an unexpected current, the financial crisis. After an involuntary stop of several months owing to the sudden collapse of the freight company, the transport to Berlin was continued. The trunks arrived last summer only to be stranded outside my studio for some time while I pondered their future journey.

Urban spaces have long held my interest as sites for experimentation. Sociality, interaction, and individual experiences are up for negotiation if the site allows. Apparently stable spaces become malleable and responsive when, for instance, time is reintroduced as a space-generating factor.

I have for some time wanted to investigate ideas of liquid or ephemeral objects in public space, of drift and non-normative sites, unpredictable encounters and our sense of community, of the emotional city. The place to do this is Berlin. Despite its spatial restraints, I think it is fair to say – without romanticising – that there is enough air between the layers of this multilayered city to make it generously open. Its patchwork character – empty lots, commercial streets, historical monuments, and residential areas juxtaposed – makes one sense a spatial potential that has yet to be verbalised.

The driftwood became a means for me to cut into this urban space and, by doing so, to add a temporal dimension to it. With a team from my studio and a rented lorry, I carefully placed the trunks on pavements, roundabouts, in parking areas, and other in-between spaces as if they had simply drifted into the city and become entangled in its grid. I found spaces that I thought might generate small frictional dialogues; spaces where the trunks would be perceived as momentary thresholds, offering subtle resistance to our too pragmatic and automated relations with our surroundings. In this way, a small narrative was added to the multiple stories-so-far of the city.