

Exhibition - Book

SURTSEY

THE ULTIMATE ISLAND

*picture[s]
history-storie[s]*



63° 18' N

20° 36' W

The project of exhibition and publication that we submit to you arose from a meeting with a place: Surtsey. Situated in the South of Iceland, Surtsey is an island, which appeared from the sea on November 14th, 1963, following a submarine eruption. Since then, it has unceasingly resisted the ocean, the assaults of violent winds that sweep this region of the Northern Atlantic Ocean, and mankind.

The place

Surtsey is an ephemeral place; an uninhabited place; a protected place; a named place; and like many islands: a place longed for.

A real-time laboratory of Creation, Surtsey is an island of scholars, or rather, an island of knowledge. An Eden of thought, it does not attract scientists only: it is as ethnologist and photographer that we are now interested in it. As a continuation of projects previously carried out on the notion of place (cf. book and exhibition *The island of Carn*), Surtsey imposed itself upon us as obvious subject matter.

Its uncertain, imperceptible character makes it a paradigm of islands. It is this fragility of the place, as to what we are going to be able to find there, which also attracts us and motivates this project.

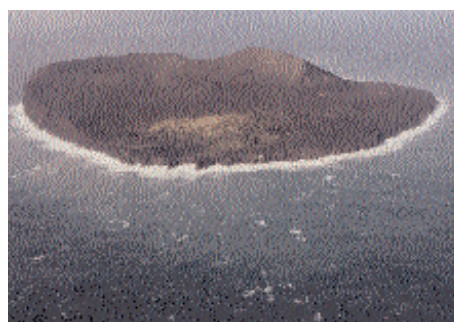
The convergence of views

Islands, real or imaginary, are spaces congenial to meetings; closed places, their demarcations open nevertheless towards infinity.

They became for us a prism through which we pursue a reflection on the notion of place. We would like to share "the experience" of Surtsey, by associating our own perceptions of this space with the artistic and scientific views of other disciplines. Anthropology, geology, botany, ornithology, vulcanology, astronomy, photography, video and sound recording, sculpture or painting are all welcomed to help create the "space of thought" that is Surtsey.

Surtsey thereby becomes the catalyst of multiple meetings: between island and men, between men and imagination, between imagination and the elements.

"Then sprang stones and partially intact rocks that the breath had expelled before their combustion, partially eaten away and having acquired the lightness of pumice stone. Lastly, sprang the summit of the burned mountain. Then its height increased and this rock increased until it had become so vast as an island"
Sénèque, *Natural Questions*.



Surtsey: a universe between two worlds.

Situated near the northern mid-Atlantic crest, Surtsey arose from a tectonic fault, from a crack, between Europe and America. Our approach of Surtsey is made in two ways: in one manner by recalling the geographic and historic reality of the island, and in another by proposing our own vision and narrative of the place through an experience of each of the summoned disciplines.

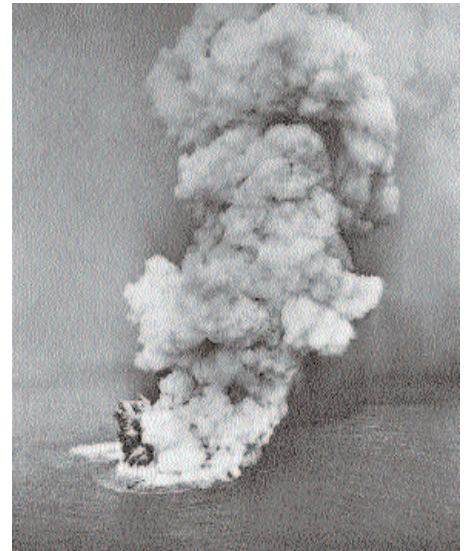
Here one finds, not encyclopaedic classification, but a set of voices and views woven and articulated together by words and images. The purpose of this process is not to exhaust the reality of the island, but, as through a kaleidoscope, to arouse a vision-in order to arouse our impressions; in order to mix with the story of the place a few sensitive images; in order to see what we imagine of the imperceptible; in order to contribute to the story which does not stop writing itself, on an island free of any inhabitant.

Surtsey is a garden to be shared, a memory to be investigated. An island-garden where a story is created and desire awakens; an island of memory where cultivated, collected, raised, and transcribed are the indications of life, creation, death, and infinity contained in a territory the limits of which exceed its geographic reality.

Forecasts of the life expectancy of Surtsey range from a few hundred years at the most optimistic to the equivalent of a human life at the most pessimistic. It is an island of human scale, spatial as well as temporal, and a place by its very nature unstable and fragile.

Volcanic island, young island, unstable island, virgin island, Surtsey is actually more conducive to the imagination of islands.

The subject matter indicated might amount to a question: What is place? Through the variety of physical and human paths with which we meet it, the answers will be as much material as symbolic; scientific as literary and aesthetic; or perhaps, as objective as they might be subjective... Such will be the purpose of the work and the exhibition that we wish to create: to get a little closer to the notion of place, by approaching Surtsey.



Myth of creation: Edda

At the beginning, there is a name ... Surtsey, the island of Surtur, giant of the fire in Scandinavian mythology; such was the name given to this newly appeared land.

Born of the bottom of the Ocean, issuing from a union of water and fire, Surtsey embodies a myth of creation. The Scandinavian myth told in Edda echoes its origin. Surtur is the creative fire, but it is also one of the principal factors in the dawning of the gods, the Ragnarök, sounding the end of a world and the beginning of another—that of human beings, who appeared on a land emerged from the sea.

The Elements

A place by nature entropic, Surtsey, in the visible disorder of elements, offers itself to us as a stimulating space where matter and light excite our senses.

Water: strength of life and death, water for a moment lost ground in its wrestling with earth. A destructive element, which will eventually gobble up the island one day due to its gnawing force, it is at the same time a power of regeneration from which life is born.

Earth: element of fertility, earth is formed here at first by lava and by ashes, synonyms of death. Having become fertile while the island was still being formed, the ambivalence of this element is strengthened by its volcanic nature.

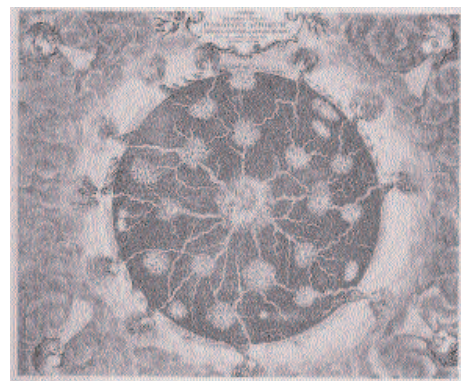
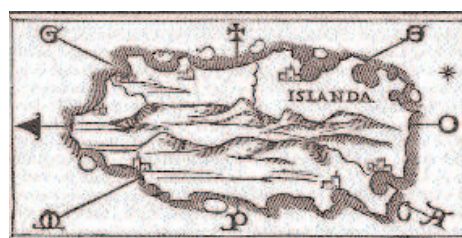
Air: the principal element of movement, it stresses the imperceptible aspect of the island. The air shapes, models and gives its silhouette to the island. Appearing from aquatic depths in a panache of smokes propelled into the atmosphere, Surtsey is, today, as a finger pointing towards the sky.

Fire: creative force stemming from the bowels of the earth, fire symbolizes life imposing itself upon the ocean. The power of this life is in fact as much as an element of danger and of death as it is of heat and light for man.

An island between Heaven and Hell

Islands are by nature ambivalent. This one is, more than any, situated between heaven and hell. Iceland was, in the Middle Ages, already perceived by western Christians as one of the gates of hell. Surtsey is in fact a distant echo of this idea, except that it is marked as much by the seal of the infernal mouth of the volcano as with the notion of an Eden of origination; at

"In the beginning, there was however a world situated in the meridional regions which is called Muspell. It is brilliant and very warm, as this region is only fire and flames, and it is also inaccessible to foreigners and to those who do not possess ancestral domains there. It is there that the being called Surt lives: he stays within the borders of this country to defend it possessing a flaming sword. At the end of the world, he will leave to fight, will overcome all the gods and will set the whole world on fire."
Edda



least for the scientists who protect this ultimate witness to Creation.

Here we thus navigate between volcanic hell and terrestrial paradise, between Virgin islands and islands generated by the Deluge, between St Brendan's navigation in the XIIth century and Jules Verne's journey to the centre of Earth...

Reflections of stars in the sky, islands contribute not only to the embellishment of the world, they are also beacons essential for navigation. Surtsey, much as the northern star, will guide our route through the islands at the end of the ocean.

A swallowed island

Surtsey will disappear soon. Of a maximum surface of 2,8 km² in 1967 (the date of its last eruption), it is no more than 1,4 km² today. Already, its two younger sisters, Jólnir and Syrtlingur, formerly "satellite" islands of Surtsey, have disappeared without ever having appeared from the depths of the ocean, much as Surtla, an "aborted" island. Floating islands, moving islands, swallowed islands-the instability of Surtsey takes us once again to Saint Brendan and an unstable island on which he and his companions used to celebrate the mass of Easter, an island, which was none other than a whale.

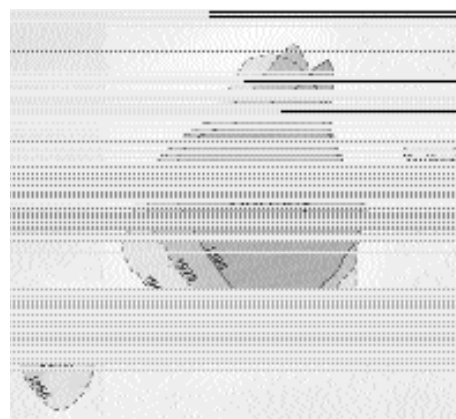
It is, therefore, an unstable island . Having emerged from a crack, it is in this precarious balance that Surtsey remains on the surface of the ocean, ceaselessly called back by this ontological in-between, which constitutes the fault that gave it birth.

A place is first the subject of a story.

Mysterious island, Surtsey is a bottomless well which reflects back to us the echo of distant narratives. The narrative becomes established around a place and around the imagination which it arouses in man. It finds its source in the interstices of the memory, and tries to pull from this a relationship, written or oral, of true or imaginary facts.

The stories that we collect all contribute to deciphering what makes a territory; they shape, by impressionistic touches, the memory of Surtsey. The narrative that ensues from it contributes, in its turn, partially to the myth. The created gap between the geographic reality of the place and the points from which we choose to view it feed the narrative. The use of images will be, beyond words, one of the major elements in the fabrication of this narrative of Surtsey. The image infers a necessary distance and may become the connecting thread between the stories that constitute the narrative.

*"It was at the origin of time,
When nothingness reigned.
Neither sand, nor sea were there,
Nor ice-cold waves.
There existed neither the earth,
Nor the very sky above.
Immense was the abyss,
But not even a plant grew."
Edda*



Cartography

Observed, mapped, watched, marked out in squares, measured, analysed, Surtsey has been examined from all angles since her birth by a myriad of scientists.

To draw up a map is to trace the path made as we walk, to inscribe the route in the course of its navigation; it is to know where we are going, to perceive its future, to return to its past, to project ourselves. But the map may also lead us astray. Already, the ancient maps and the Isolarii allow us to suppose that what we have in the cartography is but only an ephemeral image of the representation of territory.

A map guides us more towards physical geographies than imaginary, scientific than aesthetic. Surtsey, very recently appeared on the map, and became from then on the object of musings, including those of scientists.

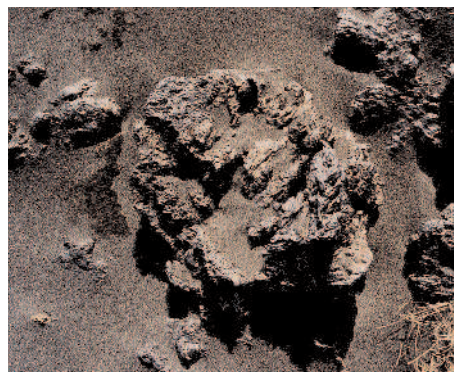
A laboratory of the creation

An Icelandic territory managed by Nátturuverndarráð (Council of Nature Conservation), Surtsey has been, since its creation, the object of research coordinated by the Icelandic association Surtseyjarfélagið (Committee of Research for Surtsey).

To such a "laboratory of the Creation," scientists from the most diverse horizons came to bend over the cradle of the island, the Wise Men of modern times, to attend the creation of a place. The scientific community concerned with protecting the site appropriated the place before others-the curious, in too big a number-could come to walk over and to desecrate this territory virgin of any human presence.

An island: the origin and the species

Scientists will deliver bit by bit the narrative of creation... We shall find, from a geologic point of view, many similarities with her great Icelandic sister, also situated on the mid-Atlantic crest. It's the same as for the fauna and the flora; we shall soon be listing migratory birds and residents (seagulls, guillemots, fulmars, etc.), identical to those of the big island. As for seaweeds, lichens, mosses and plants, all or almost all result from micro-organisms brought by birds, wind, and sea,



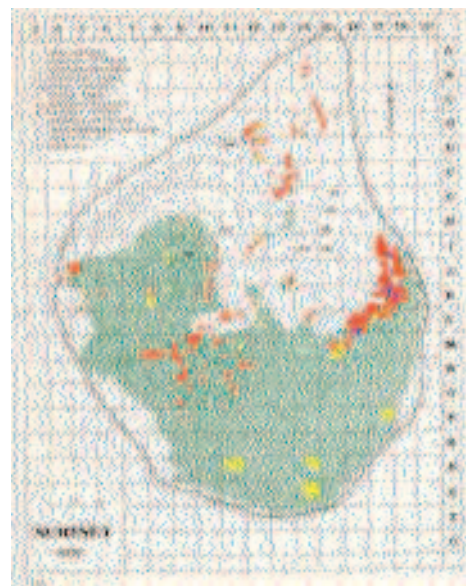
as well as from organic fragments deposited on the beaches of the island. Today, 56 species of vascular plants and 8 species of resident birds have been recorded.

A myth reduced to ash

Surtsey did not delay in delivering what nobody imagined to be there, namely fossils. Indeed, emerging from the earth's depths during the eruption, and resulting from submarine sedimentary layers, fossils (xenoliths and fragments of molluscs "arctica islandica") found themselves exposed on Surtsey. In a true insult to its youth, these ancestors of some millions of years ago were imposed on this newborn ecosystem against all expectations.

Appearing with this young terrain of hardly forty years, these fossils remind the island of its previous history, inscribing in her a sense in the scale of geologic time. A new terrain certainly, but carrying the stigma of what took place, once, hundreds of metres deep, and what forbids her in a sense from claiming a birth ex nihilo.

“ Mais qui a jamais compté les grains de sable
et est arrivé jusqu'au bout ? ”
Al Idrîsî, géographe du XI^e siècle



Photographs : Surtseyjarfélagid. (internet)

Of the Earth and the Moon

"Historical" links unite Surtsey to France. The first people to have set foot on Surtsey were journalists of Paris-Match... Before anyone else, they planted a flag in the effigy of the magazine, prefiguring in a sense the gesture, not so remote, of Armstrong, in 1969, on another terrain, a little more coveted: the moon...

Under surveillance of NASA, both the moon and Surtsey have more in common than a simple symbolic image; uninhabited territories, they are nevertheless mapped from all "angles," in three dimensions and identified by a detailed toponymy. Another point which moves us a little closer to the moon: before sending its astronauts, NASA made simulations in the Icelandic deserts, the terrain most similar to what we imagined of a lunar landscape at that time. Surtsey-a satellite island of the moon or of Iceland?

Doubtless both at once: Claudius Clavus's map (XVth century) supports this fancy which we cherish, on which an island in the form of a crescent moon situated to the north of England could indeed be Iceland. Is it not the island of Utopia evoked by Thomas Moore, also the shape of a crescent moon, which one can reach only with the assistance and collaboration of one of the Utopians?

The ethnology of an uninhabited place

Rarely has man been perceived so explicitly as a vector of pollution. Nevertheless, following the example of the Irish monks who came to settle in Iceland in the VIIIth century to devote themselves to their spiritual quests, scientists were called to Surtsey to carry out their research and other quests. So, a few people have occasionally stayed there-a small red hut serving as the inn of Surtsey. Another human imprint marks the territory: a white, square tower, perched on the highest point of the island, like a beacon directed towards the sky...

As any named place, Surtsey has been for almost 40 years the subject of narratives, images, and stories. For the moment, only reports produced by and for scientists exist, utilized by the media, who were deeply interested in the place during its creation. What does Surtsey represent in the memory of those who deciphered her, and to those who are familiar with her?



Paternity of the island

We shall go to meet the scientific community as that community which holds knowledge, a quasi plenipotentiary of the island. We shall insist on the notion of membership, appropriation and protection of a territory such as Surtsey, echoing other ultra-protected islands, for reasons scientific as well as economic. Consequently, it is also the question of the patrimonialisation of a natural place, classified as a National Monument, which will be raised. Sensitive point that it is, it becomes all the more so when we realize that Iceland has no other historical monuments, so to speak, than natural places.

Heimaey, the mother island

It is also in the speech of the "neophyte" that we shall be interested, quite particularly the Icelanders from Heimaey, the principle island of Westmann from which the majority of expeditions to Surtsey departed. If, during its eruption, Surtsey was evidently the object of curiosity for all Iceland, we can believe today that few Icelanders are still interested in a small more or less established island, to which one cannot even go. On the other hand, have the inhabitants of Heimaey created a theory parallel to that of the scientists? Or are they indifferent to the researchers (wondering what treasure they could hope to find on "a heap of ashes") or in the evolution of an island?

And if the scientists are, in the end, the only ones to be interested in Surtsey, how much longer will it be the object of their work? When the island has delivered all the secrets of its youth, will it sink into oblivion, along with the multitude of other islands that strew the Icelandic coast? Unless it simply sinks before ...

"La vision que l'œil enregistre est toujours pauvre et incertaine. L'imagination l'enrichit et la complète, avec les trésors des souvenirs, des savoirs, avec tout ce que laissent à sa discrétion l'expérience, la culture et l'histoire, sans compter ce que, d'elle-même, au besoin, elle invente ou elle rêve."

Roger Caillois.



Photographs : Heimaey, 1900, 1973, 2003.

The transposition of a geographic place into a space of exhibition cannot have as its ambition the rendering of a portrait faithful to its geographic and material characteristics. The exhibition that we propose is a re-creation, a reinvention of the place, which we will submit here to the visitor.

Thus we shall create a blending of elements presented by images, words, and sounds, as well as a few objects chosen to establish, on the scale of the exhibition, a sort of visual journal of excavation or an imaginary cartography. The viewer, as his eyes focus, scrutinizes the terrain as if he were the one attempting to decipher a territory.

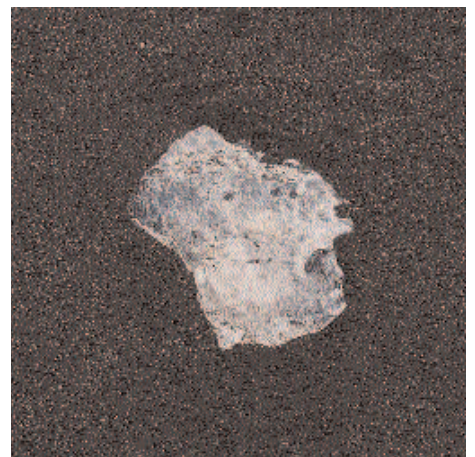
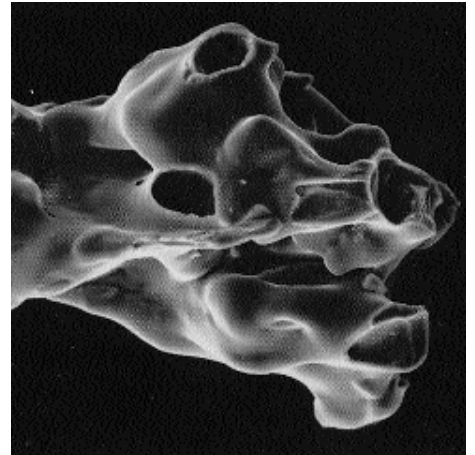
To do this, we propose cartography in three dimensions where Surtsey becomes an island-garden, the memory of which we measure by following a route delineated by the relationship of man to place:

- **The imagination of the place:** to present an introduction of Scandinavian mythology, the notion of creation, the links between elements, and the longing for islands.
- **The measure of the place:** to decipher and imagine a territory by displaying various mediums of representation and designation of the environment, through cartography and toponymy, as well as to present the methodology and work of the scientists as well.
- **The memory of the place:** to collect the testimonies of scientists, the inhabitants of the islands of Westmann, and other witnesses of the events that mark the history of the island.

Images and narratives of Surtsey will be essentially presented through photography, video and sound, and will form the bulk of the project.

In the experience of this journey of uncertain limits, combining images of reality and fiction, each visitor can imagine, in his or her turn, their own island.

The same principles will be utilized for creating the publication, which will take the form of a kind of atlas.





Vanessa Doutreleau is an ethnologist, who has specialized in Iceland since 1997.

She has stayed there repeatedly and speaks Icelandic. She is the author of works on representations of nature, of elves and of trolls. She is a doctoral student from the University of Lorient, and is connected with the CETMA (Centre of Ethno-Technology in Aquatic Circles).

Hervé Jézéquel is professor of photography at the Nationale Architecture School Paris La Villette. He has worked for several years on landscapes and islands in particular. He is the producer of several exhibitions both in France and abroad, and the work *Carn: meetings at the border of time*, Editions Créaphis, 2002.

Vanessa Doutreleau and Hervé Jézéquel, worked together on the elaboration of the *Carn* project and organized the exhibition *Memoirs of Iceland*, presented in 2003 to Paimpol.

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