Creation of a Textual Topography in Roni Horn’s

The Lava Fields of Iceland (1992)

In 2003, American artist Roni Horn wrote in a series of essays, “We need these places that we’ve never traveled to, these places we may never go to... We need them as a way of balancing what is, with what may be; and as a way of understanding the scope of things, of admitting that the things beyond us are also the things that define us.”¹ For many people, the country of Iceland is an unreachable volcanic utopia, a small isolated landmass surrounded by the vast Atlantic Ocean. This is especially true today due to the constraints on travel necessitated by the pandemic. Roni Horn creates works of art for the populace made stagnant by movement restrictions, distilling the miles of open plains of volcanic rock into planes of text viewable in a gallery. Horn’s The Lava Fields of Iceland (Fig. 1, Museum of Modern Art) is a primary example of one of these works. A letterpress print dating to 1992 and measuring approximately 10 x 16 inches, height by width, the printed image is a rectangle – comprising the names of every lava field in Iceland – set in the middle of a large piece of paper with a generous border on all four sides. The names, inked in black, are arranged horizontally, one after the other in a composition of unpunctuated prose.

Upon viewing the work from afar, despite the stark contrast between the black ink and the manila paper, the individual words are not visible given their diminutive scale. Rather, the image appears to the viewer as a solid grey rectangle, not unlike an abstracted depiction of a field of hardened grey lava. However, as the viewer moves closer to the framed print, the words slowly come into focus. The text, typeset in a regimented and serifed – yet simple – font, is not fully legible unless viewed in close proximity. Despite the small size of the font, upon closer

¹ Roni Horn and Gary Indiana, Going North: Roni Horn (München: Prestel, 2017), 20.
inspection, it is easy for one’s vision to become engulfed by the landscape of the letters forming words, which in turn form lines, which in turn form an almost textured surface. The letters indent the surface of the paper, mimicking an uneven, rock-littered plain. Although Horn’s print comprises only typed script, it functions as a visual metaphor for the vast terrain of an Icelandic lava field. Horn employs letterpress, which uses lead type to imprint these words onto the paper’s surface. Lead type presses into the paper, causing it to be “physically, not literally, located on the page… it allows the possibility of a typographic drawing.”2 The three-dimensionality of the words’ indentations create a physically and optically traversable paper geography.

The first word, in the top left corner of the typeface rectangle, is “hraun,” which means “lava” in Icelandic. This word is repeated throughout Horn’s composition, both on its own and as fragments of larger words. The ground of Iceland is almost entirely composed of hardened lava, just as the word “hraun” forms the basis for almost the entirety of the composition. Lava is everywhere. It is inescapable. Lava represents the “youth and volatility” of Iceland’s landscape, geographically considered to still be in its infancy.3 Lava is the unifying factor through every line of the print; it flows through almost every word. The words, often ending in “hraun,” are separated by the smallest of spaces. It is difficult – almost impossible – to tell where the name of one lava field ends and becomes the beginning of another. The names of the fields flow into each other, just as the physical fields themselves do. This continuous verbal flow is due to Horn’s exclusive use of minuscule letters; though the names are proper nouns, the first letters remain uncapitalized. Furthermore, the two vertical sides of the rectangle end starkly, often in the

middle of words, which resume on the next line. This composition creates the appearance of a forever-renewing form that continues beyond the viewer’s perception. Indeed, the “end” of the composition at the bottom right corner is an individual letter “e,” indicating that the field is capable of growing beyond the confines of the frame. Horn’s words pertaining to Iceland’s landscape are organized in such a way that they synthesize into a visual representation of the land itself.

In 1975, Horn took her first trip to Iceland, marking “the beginning of what was to become for her a sustained relation to the... land mass.” The composition’s representation of constant renewal references how Iceland’s topography appears to grow exponentially beyond one’s perception. In the second volume of *Pooling Waters* (2004), Horn describes her experience regarding Iceland’s landscape: “I am seeing all that is visible in each direction, as far as that direction goes. Only the curvature of the earth diminishes and eventually removes the most distant part of each view.” Just as the arc of the horizon diminishes in the Icelandic landscape, the words at the distant edges of the composition curve over to the next line until there is no more composition to be seen or read. The sharp demarcation of the edges of the printed rectangle mimic the sudden disappearance of all things beyond the horizon line, though they still exist just out of view. The existence of the words left behind is made known by the inclusion of the final sole letter “e.” Though there is a semblance of an ending to this composition, just as there is a semblance of an end to the scenery of Iceland, the viewer knows that it continues beyond perception.

---

4 Neri, 32.
5 Roni Horn, *To Place: Pooling Waters*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), 11.

*To Place* is an ongoing series of artist’s books by Roni Horn in which she explores her relationship to Iceland. *Pooling Waters* is the fourth installment in this series.
There are 100 editions of this print, many of which reside outside of Iceland. As a result, a majority of the audience encountering this work is unfamiliar with the Icelandic language. Icelandic – as exemplified by the complex names of the lava fields – is a foreign experience to many, with accented combinations of letters that create a rocky and mountainous linguistic landscape. Attempting to sound out the unknown words is akin to climbing the craggy fields of Iceland for the first time, feeling like an infant taking its first unsteady steps. Horn’s typeface topography translates the unequaled adventure of exploring Iceland’s lava fields for distant gallery audiences.

The print discussed in this paper is certainly not the only work of Horn’s to make use of text for the purpose of evoking the physical experience of a landscape. Louise Neri describes these works as metaphors: “In the elemental vastness of Iceland, Horn began to explore the possibility of rendering language graphically as objects or views, like landscapes.”6 Throughout the artist’s career, she continuously represents vast expanses of natural imagery with text in different mediums. Horn’s intention is not to necessarily transport the viewer directly into the landscape described by the text, but rather to deliver them to a space between their individual consciousness and the physical reality of the terrain. Essentially, “the words act as a Möbius strip… and in doing so access a completely different place in the world – the interior reality of the viewer.”7 The words do not merely evoke the appearance of Iceland’s terrain – as a landscape painter may depict on their canvases – but rather the journey of mentally transporting oneself there to experience the atmosphere.

This is where the power of words diverges from that of imagery; this level of corporeal transportation is not possible with solely mimetic imagery, for photographs do not naturally

---

6 Neri, 48.
7 Ibid, 51.
penetrate and cycle through one’s mind the way words do. Instead, they rely on two-dimensional representations of reality while words evoke concepts, memories, and sensations. This is especially true, for Horn and her focus on the geology of Iceland. She describes its landscape syntactically: “So here is Iceland: an act, not an object, a verb, never a noun. Iceland taught me that each place is a unique location of change. No place is a fixed or concluded thing.”8 An image, like a noun, is inherently static. The fullness of language, on the other hand, is dynamic; when written, words move across the page and create meaning through code and concept.

_The Lava Fields of Iceland_, in addition to being a meandering, textual landscape, also contains a broad expanse of blank page. The four sides of manila paper surrounding the interior rectangle are essential to the print’s evocation of Iceland’s terrain. The empty paper channels the relative blankness of the country’s often overcast sky in contrast to the awe-inspiring vistas of its land. Weather, especially in Iceland, is an ever-changing phenomenon that cannot be encapsulated in a single image. A work composed of words describing weather’s behavior offers more options for the representation of the atmosphere’s polarities. Indeed, Horn describes the weather as a “national sport,” as it both shapes the lives of the country’s citizens and is a constant topic of conversation.9 She has explored Iceland’s weather throughout her oeuvre, frequently evoking the feelings associated with experiencing the country’s frigid temperatures and harsh precipitation. Indeed, Horn’s 1994-5 photographic series entitled _You Are the Weather_ (Fig. 2) connects Iceland’s weather to human emotion and subjectivity.10 In a collection of 100 close-up photographs of a woman’s face as she stands in the water in different climatic

---

8 Howard, 104.
conditions, Horn explores how the woman’s relation to the weather causes her to “[take] on these different personalities,” which impacts how she is perceived by the viewer.\footnote{Ibid.}

Water, both liquid and frozen, is a vital part of Iceland’s geography. Horn’s *Library of Water* (*Vatnasafn* in Icelandic) (Fig. 3) is a permanent installation in the western peninsula town of Stykkishólmur containing twenty-four floor-to-ceiling glass columns full of ancient Icelandic glacier water.\footnote{Lowell Duckert, *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 244.} Indeed, Iceland (known as Ísland in Icelandic) is a solitary island primarily composed of igneous rock and surrounded on all sides by water, both in the form of glaciers and the vast, unyielding ocean. In Horn’s print, the blank paper surrounding the textual landscape of Iceland’s lava fields offers a metaphor for the miles of sea encircling the small landmass of a country. Furthermore, the color of the sheet mirrors the often somber skies of Iceland, which are frequently deluged by intense rainfall. Art historian Briony Fer focuses primarily on Horn’s work relating to the often damp weather of Iceland in her analysis of the library. “Outside: driving sleet, slate gray sea, low cloud. Inside: twenty-four columns of still glacial meltwater. Between: glass panels of a large bay window. My first impression of [the library] was filled with water on all fronts. Torrential rain could not have made it any wetter.”\footnote{Roni Horn and Briony Fer, “Storm of the Eye,” in *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (London: Steidl & Partners, 2007), pp. 20-31, 22.}

The library also contains a version of Horn’s other work entitled *You Are the Weather* (Fig. 4), first exhibited in New York in 1995.\footnote{Roni Horn, “You Are the Weather,” in *Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), pp. 198-199, 198.} This installation, realized in different iterations around the world – such as the Meteorological Bureau of Munich – is a collection of adjectives that describe both the weather and humanity.\footnote{Collier Schorr, Interview with Roni Horn, *Frieze*, January 1997. https://www.frieze.com/article/weather-girls.} Horn’s primary examples are words such as
“bad’, ‘good’, ‘cool’, ‘hot’, ‘torrid’, ‘frigid’, and ‘balmy,’” all of which can pertain to weather and people’s personalities.16 It is displayed in the *Library of Water* on rubber mats spread throughout the floor, with the cream-colored words in both English and Icelandic.17 Similar to Horn’s treatment of language to evoke imagery in *The Lava Fields of Iceland*, she has called the installation “a kind of bilingual drawing.”18 Though *You Are the Weather* uses adjectives, as opposed to *The Lava Fields of Iceland*, which only uses proper nouns, the two visually distinct works both exemplify Horn’s employment of text to evoke the inherent nature of change in a place or a person.

There is an equivalency of means in Horn’s work. Her use of words to create both textual meteorology and topography allows the individual – in a gallery or another space far displaced from the actual landscape of Iceland – to undergo a process of internalizing the external. In *The Lava Fields of Iceland* print, Horn intricately organizes text in such a way that the viewer’s process of seeing the words, reading them, synthesizing their ideas, and finally generating their own internal images, invokes the experience of standing in a lava field in Iceland and gazing at the seemingly never-ending landscape.

---

16 Ibid.
17 Fer, 23.
Illustrations

Fig. 1. Roni Horn, *The Lava Fields of Iceland*, ca. 1992. 10 x 16 inches. Letterpress print. Edition of 100. Various collections.

Fig. 2. Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, ca. 2007. Glass, glacial water. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Stykkishólmur.

Fig. 3. Roni Horn, *You Are the Weather*, ca. 1994-95. Thirty-six gelatin silver prints and sixty-four chromogenic prints (detail). 10 ½ x 8 ½ inches each. Various collections.
Fig. 4. Roni Horn, *You are the Weather*, ca. 2007. Rubber (detail). Dimensions variable. Library of Water, Stykkishólmur.
Bibliography


