The 1997 video clip for Björk’s song Jóga offers an aerial view of the earth. Directed by Michel Gondry, this video scans the surface of the country from an elevated perspective. As the camera pans across a series of geological surfaces – mottled dirt, blue ocean, moss, lichen and stone – Björk sings of ‘emotional landscapers’. This visual and aural conjunction explicitly connects the land and the inner life of a human being. Standing atop a mountain, she peels back her chest with two hands to reveal an internal cavity occupied not by blood and bone, but by rock, earth and finally the tiny floating island of Iceland. If we understand a public space as aligned with surface, in this case a landscape or environment, then depth is an intimate space; the heart uncovered in Jóga when Björk exposes her pixelated, volcanic depths.

The concept of ‘public space’ in art usually refers to an urban environment. Characteristics of these spaces include a density of inhabitants and, in many cases, the presence of CCTV. In an urban public space humanity surveils itself and behaviour is thusly regulated and controlled.¹ A community space such as a national park has the same basic criteria as a city street in that it is open and accessible to the public. Yet, when surrounded by nature, away from heavily populated urban society, we do not feel so strongly that we are being surveyed; a natural landscape, despite often being open to the public, can feel like a secluded, private space where the individual’s imagination can roam. Romantic invocations of landscapes, as seen in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) or the landscape photographs of Ansel Adams (1902–1984), are predecessors of Björk’s Jóga video in that they depict nature as a sublime space, its immensity dwarfing humankind. The composition and framing of these works attempts to disregard urban civilisation, as we encounter scenes in the wild, largely bereft of human or animal presence. The viewer and artist exist in this scene due to their creation of and interaction with the artwork, but they are rarely placed within the frame – if a subject is present in such compositions, the space occupied is minimal. Friedrich’s small human figures, for example, the man featured in The Monk by the Sea,² stand before the landscape, looking out onto it as if it is already a painting.

Jóga encourages us to consider our coordinates on Earth, by placing the individual in relation to its surface and depth, crust and core. In modern philosophical and scientific thought, surface has been seen as a superficial space, with depth an analogy for a space of truth and valid meaning. In the natural sciences, for example, the physical world could be perceived as an illusion that belies the microscopic realms of protons and neutrons indiscernible to the human eye.³ Likewise psychoanalysis, which Freud described as a ‘depth psychology’ because it examined those processes in mental life which we withdraw from consciousness,⁴ sees a person’s identity as a façade that hides repressed desires and dreams, which require ‘diving deep’ into the subconscious to find.

‘Deep’ and ‘depth’ remain shorthand terms for what is actually I may argue, a specific way of viewing the world. As humans, our environment is the surface of the globe; the depths of the

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2. Caspar David Friedrich, The Monk by the Sea, 1808 or 1810, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
earth are difficult to encounter. That the earth’s interior or depth is equated with a hidden space, makes sense if we consider our nature, and our habitable limits. Analogously, though artworks are often seen as simulations of the ‘real’ world, these aesthetic surfaces that are received as art in the public sphere are often said to provide us with deeper insights into our world.

In 2013, whilst in Iceland participating in the SIM artist residency, I encountered the work of the artist Darr Tah Lei (b. 1988). She was creating a series of what she calls ‘geologiscapes’; meditative recordings of the idiosyncratic landscape of Iceland. These videos owe a lot to the vision of the country as represented in Jóga. Her videos are shot from the ground not the air, yet the earth is still looked down upon. And as in Gondry’s work, Lei’s Iceland is also represented as a natural space from which humanity in general is absent, with only the artist present as some kind of avatar (whether in front of, or behind the camera). The emphasis on looking down from above, present in both video works, calls attention to the fact that the earth we walk upon from day to day is only the visible upper layer of a deeper structure. In her video Geology #1 Lava Field the camera pans over gnarled ground, recording the blur from blacks to shades of grey to mottled greens. The frame is kept tight up against the earth so that we as viewers cannot spatially orient ourselves. The camera’s lens seems too close, as though the photographer were inebriated; its wavering movements suggestive of a leering gaze. Accompanying this footage is a deep, growling static; a subterranean sound simulating the shifting earth that we are eyeballing.

Filming or photographing the surface of the Earth creates a double layer – the plane of the projected image in turn depicts the terrestrial surface. Lei intends for her work to be an exploration of ‘Telluric Currents’ (low frequency electric currents that are in constant motion beneath the Earth’s surface). It is an irony that this activity, occurring amongst deeper earth strata is represented in Geology #1 by the crust. This choice highlights a conceptual tension between surface and depth. Dissecting this geological friction further, it is clear that the lava field in Geology #1 is a remnant of an event that began deep below the earth – molten insides that at one time spurted through a division from below to above. This subterranean matter now constitutes the surface we observe. The audio accompanying the footage played at a loud, uncomfortable volume, when installed reverberates in your skull like tremors through the earth. The amorphous shapes of the ground, further abstracted by the close-cut framing, could represent the subconscious, a place where thoughts retain an unformed quality. The video is a simulation of a living, ‘real’ earth, using the contrary artifices of screen and sound.

A similar depiction of Iceland can be found in Sigur Rós’ documentary Heima (Home), which focuses the majority of its shots on people-less landscapes, and like in Geology #1 a sense of scale is hard to determine due to the lack of objects in the foreground. But whilst Jóga and Heima both use Iceland as a backdrop for artistic exploits, Darr Tah Lei uses the Earth as her subject. Björk and Sigur Rós point to the land as a metaphor for human feeling, whereas Lei is representing Earth as a stand alone entity. The earth’s outer crust is used in all three examples to represent our globe.

Our understanding of this surface/depth dichotomy is in part an issue of perception. In his book A Critical Path, Buckminster Fuller explains that ‘up’ and ‘down’ are incorrect terms to describe our place on planet earth; terms we continue to use despite the fact that science has proven for centuries that we live on a sphere, rather than a flat, four-cornered slab. For example, we continue to describe the sun as coming up in the morning and going down in the evening, when in actuality it goes around. He suggests that ‘in’, ‘out’ and ‘around’ are more correct terms to describe bodies in relation to our planet. Fuller’s terms also seem better suited to descry a three dimensional space, as they intimate a ‘depth’ dimension, whereas ‘up’ and ‘down’ only offer us height and width.

Artist Vija Celmins uses much smaller rocks to investigate our perceptive relationship to our planet. Her work To Fix the Image in Memory, utilises a disciplined reproduction of surface to create an effective simulation of the natural world. From 1977 to 1982, Celmins painstakingly recreated, through the use of bronze casting, paint and a sharp eye, eleven small stones she found in New Mexico. These recreations were exhibited alongside their counterparts, creating a visual trick for the audience, a sculptural twist on the trompe-l’œil. ‘Part of the experience of exhibiting them together with the real stones’, Celmins has said, ‘was to create a challenge for your eyes, I wanted your eyes to open wider’. She has remarked that the rocks she chose resembled galaxies and the collection of them, a constellation, a description that conflates the macro and micro. She sees the proverbial world in a grain of sand. As the work brings the artifice of the art object to our attention, we experience a heightened awareness of the visual surface of our world.

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5 Darr Tah Lei, Geology #1 Lava Field, 2012, 8mm film and HD transfer, 10:48, collection of the artist.
6 DVD, 84 minutes, 2007.
10 Ibid.
This work is a lateral attempt at understanding what a rock is. Instead of investigating their density, Celmins contents herself with becoming intimate with their surface structure, making her engagement completely aesthetic.

The field of Object Oriented Ontology suggests that aesthetic and surface is important in our understanding of the world because the reality of objects that we encounter is ultimately inaccessible. As Timothy Morton explains:

Objects withdraw such that other objects never adequately capture but only (inadequately) ‘translate’ them. This doesn’t simply mean that there is more to a glass of water than my drinking it. It means that even if I could exhaust every single aspect of the glass of water (melting it, smashing it, evaporating it, shooting its silicon atoms around a particle accelerator…) it would still withdraw. When creating To Fix an Image in Memory and focusing on her collected rocks, Celmins felt she would lose her bearing on where she was in space and what she was looking at. The visual surface of the world became momentarily blurred and incomprehensible.

This potential strangeness of our natural environments is also highlighted in Bridget Currie’s (b. 1979) The World is Not a Surface. In Adelaide’s Royal Botanical Gardens, Currie installed a series of metal sculptures. These powder-coated white rings were supported by inconspicuous metal posts, thin enough to remain unseen in the reception of the work. Installed in front of garden scenes of plants, grass and rocky waterfalls, the white rings appear to be floating as though they were an alien visitation. The circle is a disruption to the idyllic, manicured garden scene. Currie explains that she has ‘been thinking about (our) tendency to see the world as a “backdrop” or something we pass through, as opposed to a deep structure.

It is as though Currie has hand-drawn white circles over the landscape, likening it to her artist’s sketchbook, and in doing so, underlining the natural scenes of the botanical gardens as constructed and framed, similar to a landscape painting. The Botanical garden, as a microcosm and simulation of a larger natural environment, is especially suited to Currie’s sculptural intervention.

Perhaps artists are more inclined to think of the world as a backdrop. In A Tour of the Monuments of Passeic, originally published in 1967, Robert Smithson (1938–73) documents a daytrip to New Jersey. Recording the trip with writing and photographs, he interprets the potentially banal suburban surroundings as an evocative setting for his artistic exploits:

Noon-day sunshine cinematised the site, turning the bridge

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11 According to Object Oriented Ontology, an object is anything with a unified reality. To use some of Timothy Morton’s examples: ‘football teams, nuclear waste (rocks), birds’. Timothy Morton, ‘Here Comes Everything - The promise of Object Oriented Ontology,’ Critical Humanities and Social Sciences 15, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 4.

12 Ibid., 5.

13 Ibid., 4.


16 Email conversation with artist (9 September 2013).


18 Ibid., 70.


Landscapes become ‘scenes’ and ‘backdrops’ in part because we cannot touch all the things in them. The human eye has to take the multifarious world in with a look. Simulations like theatrical backdrops are an example of our inability to conceive of its totality. Our gaze upon the world is often reductive, as we succumb to a vision that flattens the world into a surface. Any artist working with images contends with this issue. In our daily lives the surface of computer and phone screens increasingly mediate our experience of the world. A photo sharing app such as Instagram flattens life into a series of 4:3 images. A technology such as this is widely dispersed in that it has over 150 million users who upload an average of 55 million images daily, yet it engages only in a swift visual sweep of people, things and objects creating an incredibly vast yet shallow exterior.

Let’s work likewise rests on the surface, she presents us with an exterior that alludes to depth but does not depict it. She suggests a significant ‘underneath’ to the earth (a space where important and mysterious things take place), but undermines this vision by presenting it all to us on a flat screen. I am reminded of my childhood home, where one room featured a wall of autumn forest wallpaper. My brothers and I spent hours attempting to enter the
scene, hoping to find ourselves in another world, but instead we were confronted with a flat, impenetrable surface. Celmins engages devotedly with the creation of surface, recognising that much art-making involves the manipulation of surface as an imitation of our lived environment, whether figurative or not. Currie transposes this idea into a lived public environment, delicately pointing to our tendency to see the world as an aesthetic surface. In doing so, she prompts us to reflect on this bias. All three artists are ultimately privileging observation by using it as a way to investigate humanity’s place in relation to natural environments.