

REVIEW ESSAY

On the representation of the island in my artwork

Astrid Nobel

Visual artist

The Hague, The Netherlands

info@astridnobel.nl

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the development of an art project with the island as its central theme. The process is explained through a selection of background material and other considerations that have led to the work. As a starting point for this project, the author worked on the island of Ameland, The Netherlands, where she was born and raised. To experience the island from an outsider's point of view, she also stayed for a period of time on Grímsey, North Iceland. The work that resulted from this period of experiencing and gathering information around islands, *Iland / Us*, consists of two sculptures that deal with borders, protection, self and community. Among selected fragments are texts from literature and science, photos and sketches, underpinned by personal experience.

Keywords: Ameland, art, bubble, community, Grímsey, island, sculpture

© 2015 – Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Introduction

In my work, I use existing shapes, forms and appearances to symbolize and represent that which one cannot touch: an idea, a feeling, a certain state of being; something that I feel the need to understand better. I collect information, materials, shapes and memories that I recognize as having affinity with this untouchable but existing subject to the point where these fragments become intertwined and show connections near and far, or recent and historical that I can translate into a form. Louise Bourgeois (1999, p. 15) explains this process thus:

A work of art is a solution to the problem of the terrified artist. What is the shape of the problem? It is a logical elaboration, constructed like a building, stone by stone... As the architectural consciousness of the shape mounts, the psychological consciousness of the fear diminishes...

I would call the fear that she describes something that is both known and unknown at the same time, something that is blocking all processes and can only be dissolved if understood. For example, I know what an island is, but when I think of the different things it can be and all the different ways it can be looked at, the idea of an island as a concept becomes scattered, blurred and elusive. To understand the concept of 'the island', it must be dissected and put together again in a form that is the result of all relevant considerations. At the same time, this form should be a logical whole with the same self-evidence that the word 'island' has in the first place.

A. Nobel

In this essay, I lead readers through the process of my 2013 project with the island as a central theme and offer a selection of information and associations that led to the sculptures *Iland* and *Us*. This is not a chronological journey with a question, answer and conclusion, but an elaboration of themes used as building blocks for my artwork: the duality of the island and oneself; the strength and resilience of community and the possible pressure it is subjected to; the being near the edge of a landscape and how it can affect a person.

A representation of the island

For my 2013 project, I studied the island as a subject for new artwork. I looked for connections between my ideas of the island, other people's ideas on the island, the island's geography and related materials and forms.

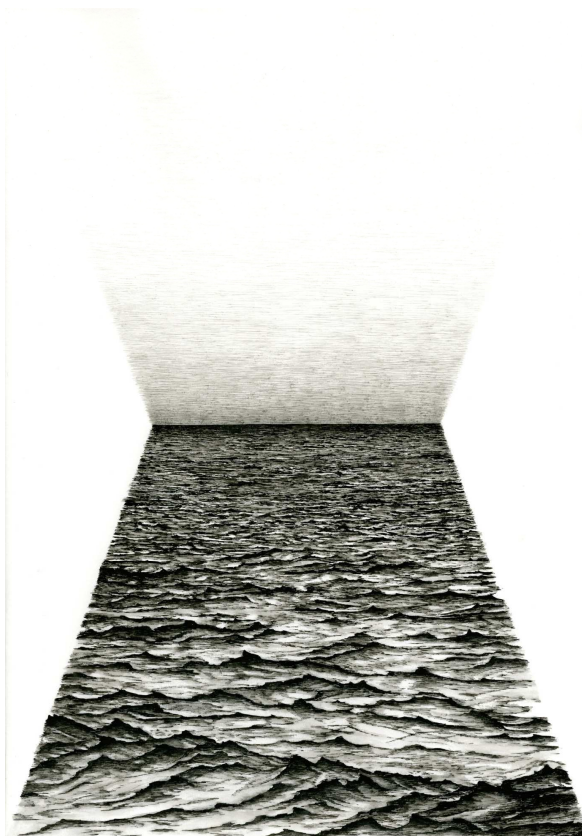
To begin somewhere, as we must all do, I started where I began. I was born and raised on Ameland, an island in the north of The Netherlands. But I do not live there anymore. Ameland used to flourish because of the whaling business — my parents still have a fence of whale bones in the garden — but tourism is the main occupation and greatest source of income today.

Image 1: The portable studio. Hollum, The Netherlands, November 2012.



At the end of 2012, I did a short residency at Gallery Dit Eiland on Ameland. I worked in a portable cabin in a pasture, outside the village of Hollum (see [Image 1](#)). I made drawings and wrote while researching my subject. In January 2013, I travelled to Grímsey, a small island north of Iceland to work and experience the island itself, apart from mass tourism, social connections and a shared history. I was the only stranger in a small community, a position I have never envied (but it wasn't that bad). From the window of the house I stayed in, I could observe the 'other side', the mainland, and the boat coming and going. The weather changed a lot while I was there. It was of interest to be in a place where I could observe frequent shifts of the horizon (see [Image 2](#)), from a clear view of the mainland to almost zero visibility, and to be closed off from the outside world for a couple of days during a storm.

Image 2: Horizon, 2013: pen and ink drawing made on Grímsey, 29.7 x 42 cm.



Duality

To begin, I worked out what I thought I knew about the island. I wanted to collect similarities between my experiences, common knowledge and how 'the island' can be used as a metaphor. The first things that came to mind were extremes. Much of what I thought about had an opposite that was equally present: inside-outside, freedom-closure, open-narrow, tourism-authenticity, and other such binaries. These opposites need to find a balance to exist. For

A. Nobel

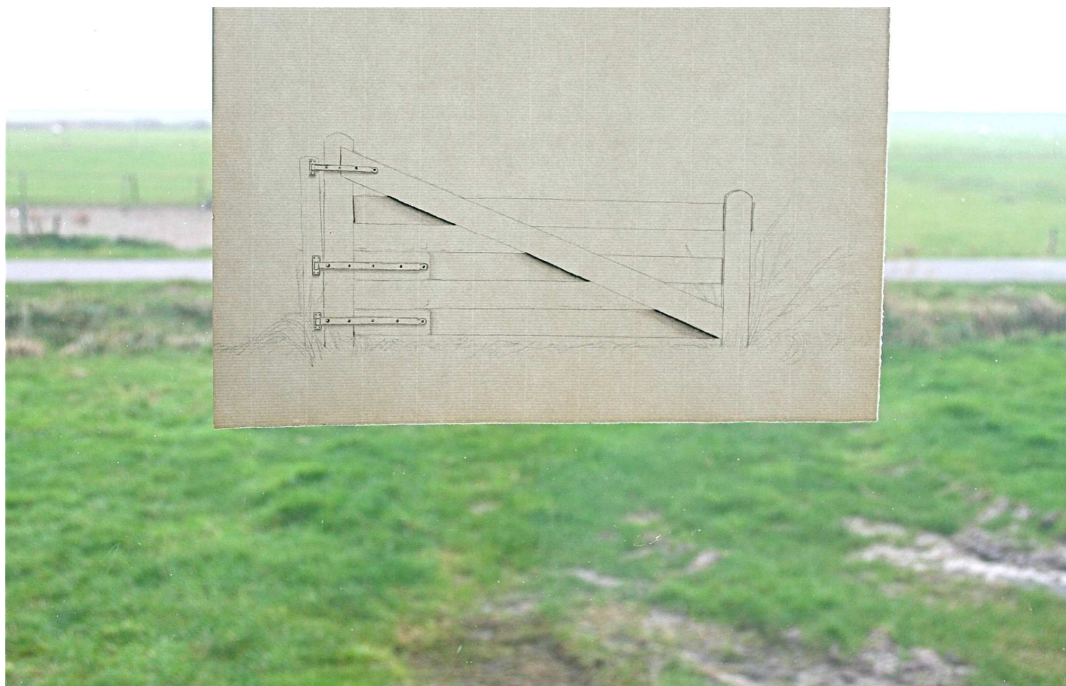
instance, tourism is increasing in most places but, if it loses balance and takes over, it may destroy what originally attracted tourists,

An island is a nervous duality: it confronts us as a juxtaposition and confluence of the understanding of local *and* global realities, of interior *and* exterior references of meaning, of having *roots* at home while also deploying *routes* away from home (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248).

I also found that these extremes were very much present in everyday language, mainly as expressions of boundaries, using words like ‘inside’, ‘from the outside’, ‘stay’ or ‘go’, ‘us’ or ‘them’, ‘community’ and ‘individuality’.

When I looked outside from the portable cabin, I could see as far as the dyke, behind which lies the Waddensea. My eyes were not stopped by anything except for the field fence of the piece of land I was on. The fence, as a symbolic image, fit with what I was working on. It functions as a symbol of protection as well as entrapment. It is a boundary in itself, dividing private from public land (see [Image 3](#)).

Image 3: Sketch of the fence replacing the fence, 2012: pencil on paper, photograph.



The I in island

The configuration in which opposites support each other and need to find balance is applicable to an individual. The island made me think of extremes that also reminded me of being human. Apart from having a clear, physical boundary a person can ‘feel like an island’. From the 9th until the 15th century the English word for ‘island’ was ‘iland’ (Ronström, 2009), which, when

used now, seems to refer to the self, the 'I'. I made *Iland* the title of my first work for which I used the ideas of the fence, duality, resemblance of an individual and balance.

In this work, the island and the individual are united in an assemblage that represents what they share. Two fences support each other and have balance in a metaphorical border-section (see [Image 4](#)).

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself (Melville, 1851, p. 270)?

Image 4: *Iland*, 2013: wood, each fence is 300 x 300 x 105 cm.



The island and the people

The main focus in the first work is the individual as an island that keeps standing straight in a whirlwind of time and movement. This individual on his turn needs to find balance within the community. Simultaneously, I was working on the island from the point of view of a group or community. I needed both views, but they could not co-exist in one work without blurring its (visual) statement. I decided to make a second piece to supplement *Iland*, which I felt was complete.

Image 5: Group of eider ducks near Grímsey, Iceland, 2013.



Walking through the Museum of Natural History in London, I suddenly figured how to represent the people of the island community. A plate read:

A permanent attachment

Whales are living islands for barnacles – small crustaceans that are usually found attached to rocks.

Once attached, the barnacles are there for life.

Some may not take this as a compliment, but it illustrates the commitment islanders have to their land. Some people even get sick when they're away for long. Individuals living together on this piece of land have multiple connections amongst themselves. On Ameland, when people don't know me, they ask: "Fan wië binne jou iën?" which means something like "Who do you stem from?" If they do not know my parents, they will certainly know my grandparents. Any person from there can reduce anybody from the same place to something familiar. As a construction, because of multiple interpersonal connections, the community is stronger than the sum of its parts,

... many natural materials like bone, wood, and nacre (abalone shell) have highly sophisticated structures with complex hierarchical designs whose properties far exceed what could be expected from a simple mixture of their components (Munch et al., 2008, p. 1516).

Image 6: *Us*, 2013: bone, wood, mother of pearl, glass, 114 x 26.5 cm.



I made the work *Us* (see [Images 6 & 9](#)) from bone, wood and mother of pearl. The bones are fossil fish bones that I find beachcombing. I took the mother of pearl that I laid inside these barnacle-like shapes from blue mussel shells, found on both Ameland and Grímsey. I also used mother of pearl as a reference to nearly all islands having a nickname with the word ‘pearl’ in it and because of the characteristic of protecting the animal from parasites and dirt.

Pressure

I interviewed my father on being an islander. He was born on Ameland and discontinued his studies on the mainland to return. My mother is not from the island and when my father met her, he made it very clear that he would never leave the island again. The importance of community in his answers was very present. When I asked him what island life was, he answered:

Then you need to have affinity with the sea, the tide, combing the beach as well as the social island life. Otherwise, you probably won’t be staying here for long. An islander takes a certain responsibility for the community and does not just profit from it. I miss that sometimes in people who were born here, but especially in people who settled here from the outside. The islander life, that I might idealize, I see disappearing here (Klaas Nobel. Hollum, 1 April 2013).

A. Nobel

When I asked if that was because of 'imports', he replied,

No, because the isolation is decreasing, and therefore so is independence. Life here is beginning to look similar to life everywhere else. Everything becomes easier and more accessible. Island life and feeling are under pressure (Klaas Nobel. Hollum, 1 April 2013).

What my father describes is not just happening there and has also been described as follows,

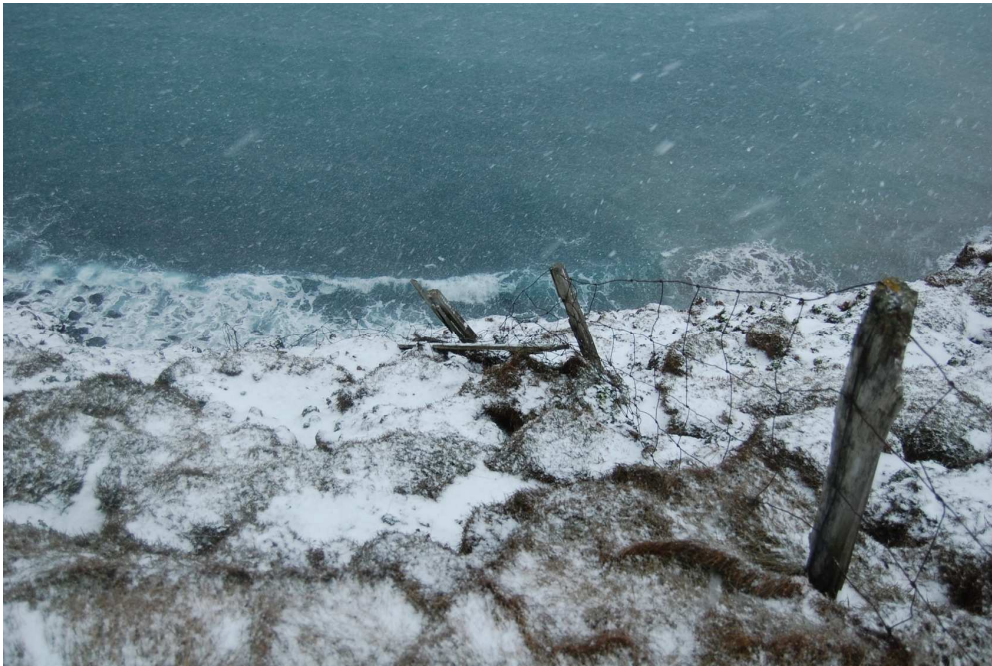
The greatest threat to the integrity of place, on both axes, stems from the technological intrusiveness of dynamic global capital, intrusions that conduce to a loss of diversity and particularity. By engendering an unprecedented mobility of people such processes weaken the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike, but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience (Hay, 2006, p. 33).

This threat – progress or development from another point of view – is also a threat to the island community. Islands that are ‘well preserved’ have traditions to fortify the community spirit that elsewhere have disappeared. With the coming of more ‘outsiders’ and tourists, such traditions possibly turn into hollow theatrical performances. What I liked about Grímsey was that there were no tourists or entertainment. But now, even on Grímsey, the people must attract more tourism to maintain their community (Stefánsdóttir, 2010). I only noticed this on my last day when I was asked to do an interview for a newsletter from Akureyri on why I was staying so long during winter. Apparently, more tourists and additional entertainment are inevitable nowadays. After considering this, I wanted to place a bubble over the island to protect everything strange, particular and beautiful.

Bubble and edge

Images 7 & 8: Edges. Grímsey, Iceland, 2013.





The idea of a bubble in relation to the island has always been familiar to me. I have spent many nights near the sea and find it comforting to be alone and away from city lights. It was during those dark and starlit nights that I felt encapsulated in a bubble. Without thinking about by who or what, it has always felt like this bubble was being taken care of,

Is it legitimate to imagine that everything which exists and becomes relevant is someone's concern? The need is a familiar one, in fact – Schopenhauer called it the metaphysical one – the need for all things belonging to the world or being as a whole to be contained in a breath like an indelible purpose (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 19).

This comforting factor lies in experiencing unity in time and space. To not just be the centre of one's own experiences, but to see and feel that this is so. In surroundings like this, this feeling may come from the need Sloterdijk suggests. However, I do think that people experience places differently when they know them well,

Then in the night, when the wind left off blowing in great gusts and volleys, as at sea, you felt that your island was a universe, infinite and old as the darkness; not an island at all, but an infinite dark world where all the souls from all the other bygone nights lived on, and the infinite distance was near (Lawrence, 1955, p. 152).

The visual aspect of the bubble experience is demonstrated in the work 'Celestial Vault' by James Turrell in the dunes of The Hague (Stroom Den Haag, 1996). It consists of a crater which can be entered by a tunnel. In the middle is an object on which two people can lie down facing the sky. The sky becomes a dome that is very close to the observer,

A. Nobel

My work is more about your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is a product of my seeing. I'm also interested in the sense of presence of space; that is space where you feel a presence, almost an entity – that physical feeling and power that space can give (Turrell, 1985, p. 43).

The Dutch-Belgian astronomer Marcel Minnaert inspired Turrell to develop this work. He wrote the book *Light and color in the outdoors* which includes descriptions of the dome-shaped sky,

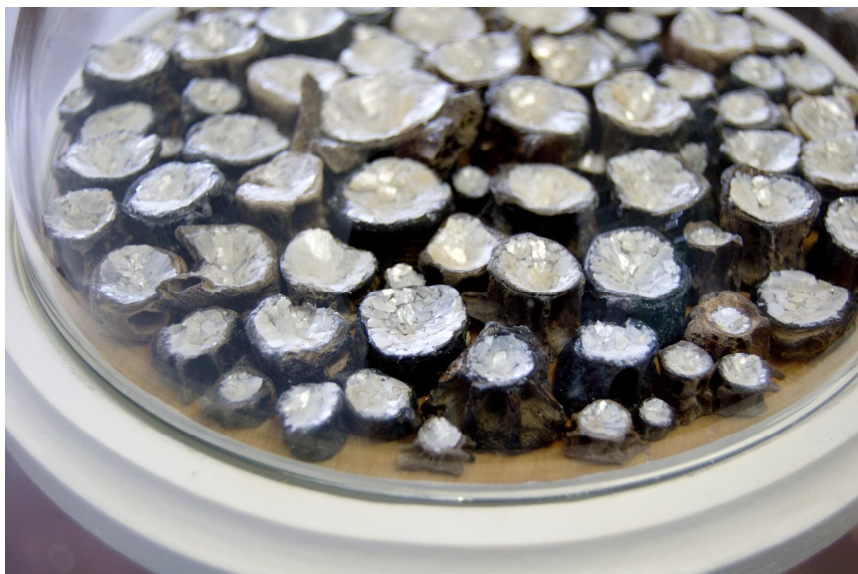
Note that observations at sea are of greater value, since the view there is generally unhindered and there are no other factors that may affect the estimates (Minnaert, 1937, p. 153).

By using a bubble, a certain area is confined and protected. At the same time, a bubble consists of a vulnerable tension and can burst easily. In the case of *Us* (see [Images 6 & 9](#)) the bubble covers the whole platform and goes around 'the edge', the transitional place between inside and outside,

The notion of the edge is central to constructions of islandness, and islanders are more aware of and more confronted by the fact of boundaries than are most peoples – and the smaller the island, the more this is so (Hay, 2006, p. 21).

My favourite way of observing this boundary, which moves according to the tide, is when bioluminescent organisms light the sea. The island is dark, the sea is dark, but where they meet there is a fluctuating line of light. The unknown, for me, used to be over the edge; as a child, everything I did not know and had not seen was behind the sea. I was allowed to go in to my knees – and if the tide allowed – to my waist, and thus get a little closer to the unknown. It is this position that I am reminded of when I start working on new artwork.

Image 9: Us (detail): bone, wood, mother of pearl, glass, 2013.



Last words

In this contribution, I have put together what was already written or could be translated into words; but those are not the absolute components of the work. Its consistency lies where different forms of information and materials meet and that has more to do with accident, recognition and intuition: ways which I cannot reference. To use a fitting metaphor, the idea develops like driftwood. Where did it lose its rough edges and get its shape? It has been cherished and under attack, it got eaten, it reached great height and got stuck, but the main thing is that it drifted.

The artwork strives for definition and represents a conclusion in the form of a compact sphere. It is a visual statement that reveals and hides at the same time and should be as Kierkegaard's description of a significant moment:

Everything must be gathered together, the greatest contrasts united in the moment ...
(Kierkegaard, 1843, p.188).

When explaining a piece of art in words (especially one's own), it seems inevitable that it will sound vague. As Nabokov admitted when asked for an explanation about the origins of his work and he had to rely on terms like 'interaction of inspiration' and 'combination': "that sounds like being a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another" (Nabokov, 1956). In this essay, I have tried to show what was of importance to get to a form and capture long-term complex ideas in a shape that can be observed for a brief moment. In the end, the form itself and what it evokes is what matters.

Acknowledgements

The two sculptures were shown together as one piece, *Iland / Us*, in my solo show at the C&H art space in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in May-June 2014. I also issued a publication that features *Iland* and *Us* and their fragmented background material. The project was made possible with support from the Mondriaan Fund. For more images of works, visit: www.astridnobel.nl. All photos in this essay are taken by the author - ©2015: Astrid Nobel.

References

- Baldacchino, G. (2005). Islands: objects of representation. *Geografiska Annaler*, 87B(4), 247-251.
- Bourgeois, L. (1999). Diary entry, January 14, 1999. Louise Bourgeois Archive. Also in J. Gorovoy & D. Tilkin (1999). *There's no place like home. Louise Bourgeois: Memory and architecture* (pp. 15-17). Madrid, Spain: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
- Hay, P. (2006). A phenomenology of islands. *Island Studies Journal*, 1(1), 19-42.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1843). *The seducer's diary*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lawrence, D.H. (1955). *The man who loved islands*. In *The woman who rode away and other stories*. New York: Knopf.
- Melville, H. (1851). *Moby Dick*. London: Penguin.

A. Nobel

- Minnaert, M. (1937). An excerpt from 'Light and color in the outdoors'. In *James Turrell, Celestial vault in the dunes*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Stroom Centre for Visual Arts.
- Munch E., Launey, M.E., Alsem, D.H., Saiz, E., Tomsia, A.P., & Ritchie, R.O. (2008). Tough, bio-inspired hybrid materials. *Science*, 322(5907), 1516-1520.
- Nabokov, V. (1956). *On a book entitled Lolita* from *Lolita*. London: Penguin.
- Ronström, O (2009). Island words, island worlds: the origins and meanings of words for 'islands' in north-west Europe. *Island Studies Journal*, 4(2), 163-182.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1998). *Spheres Vol. I: Bubbles, microspherology*. Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e).
- Stefánsdóttir, M. (2010). "I will never be an islander" Grímsey, small island north of Iceland. University of Akureyri, Iceland: School of Humanities and Social Sciences.
- Stroom Den Haag (1996). James Turrell: Celestial vault. Retrieved from http://www.stroom.nl/nl/kor/project.php?pr_id=4616026
- Turrell, J. (1985). *James Turrell: Occluded front*. Los Angeles CA: MOCA and Lapis Press.