

# Sounding out Arctic Coastlines

Eimear Tynan

The title of this essay, *Sounding out Arctic coastlines*, takes reference from a word and an expression. The word *sounding* is a measurement that is taken to ascertain the depth of the sea or height in the atmosphere, whilst the expression, *to sound out*, refers to enquiry and investigation. This essay centres upon photographic and sound experiments carried out along three distinct Arctic coastlines where notions of measurement and landscape enquiry were investigated. The essay explores the use of photographic archives as an entry point into measuring the changing material and spatial qualities of selected coastal sites alongside a series of sound recordings at these locations that evoke a more sensuous understanding of these sites.

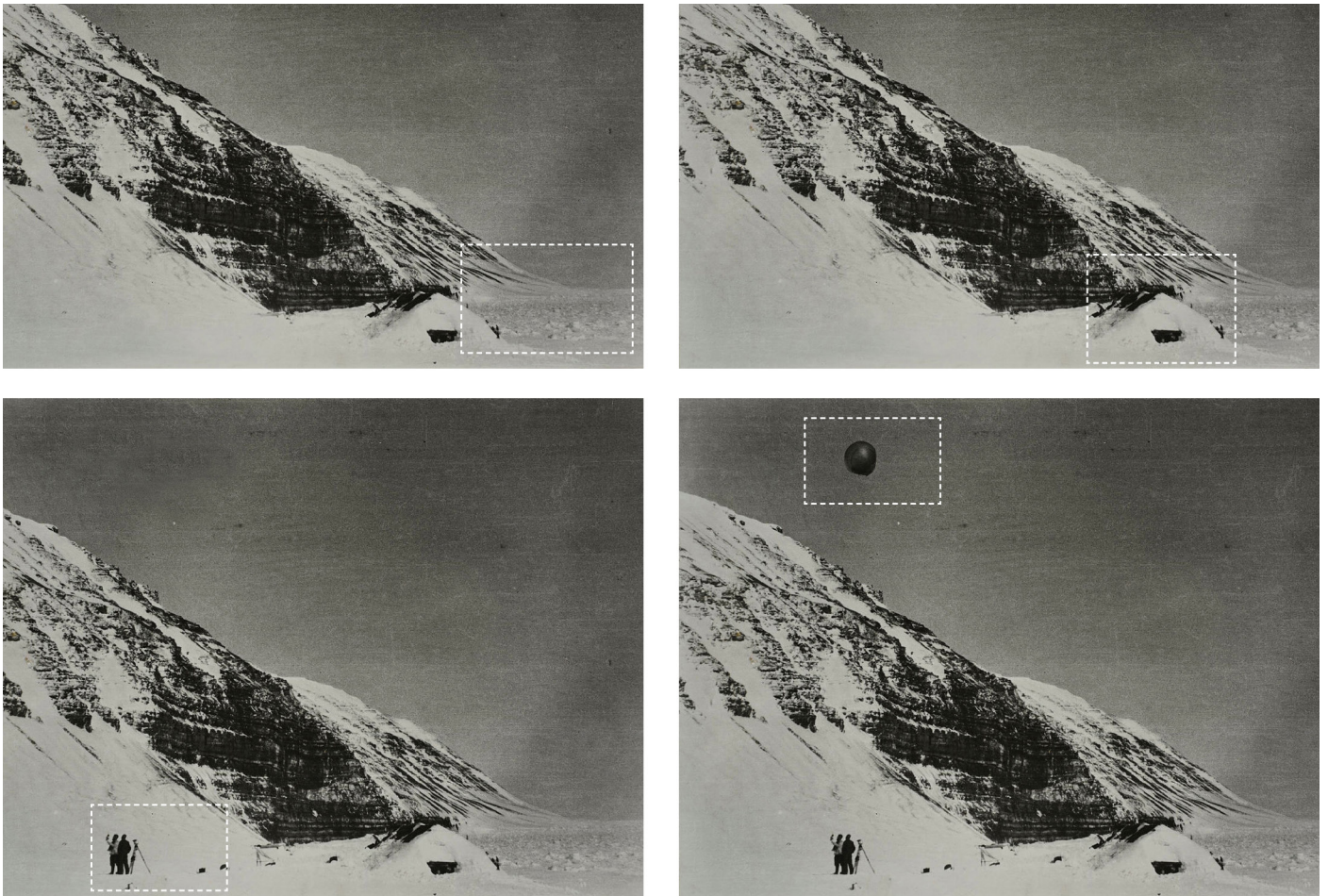


Figure 01: A series of four images manipulated from one historic photograph illustrating different elements in each. Source and permission granted by Svalbard Museum. Photographer unknown.

The above sequence of images in figure 01 uses a historic photograph deconstructed and reconstructed to draw attention to different components of the image. The first image on the top left illustrates a rather desolate scene with ragged, snow laden mountains leading down to a flat plain. But on closer inspection, the flat plain is in fact a frozen sea, finely chopped by the movement of the tides and wind. To the right a hut or cabin emerges despite being largely disguised in this snowy scene but suggesting habitation in this desolate looking place. Next, to the lower left photograph, the presence of two people looking skyward accompanied by what seems to be a tripod and other equipment. Finally, in the bottom right image, attention rests upon the main focal point of this image – the balloon – or more precisely a weather balloon that formed a part of meteorological observations by Germans who temporarily lived here, on the Arctic island of Hopen, during the Second World War.

Figure 01, in many ways, illustrates how landscape architects read a site. Relating to the weather balloon in the images above, we have technology observing the earth from above and providing valuable information about specific sites and surrounding contexts but often there is an over- emphasis on reading a site from this aerial perspective. Instead, the details of the site's materiality and their associated temporal processes are very much understudied in the discipline of landscape architecture thus limiting a broader understanding of a site.

Reflecting upon of the main theme of *Site and Situations* at the Floating Peripheries conference in 2019, it is probably wise to define what a site is through the lens of landscape architecture from which this essay emerges. Taking reference from the book *Site Matters*, the authors create a very informed and broad discussion on what a site encompasses specifically from a design perspective where a site, they claim, is process driven. They regard “the site as a relational construct that acquires meaning and value through situational interaction and exchange” (Burns and Kahn, 2005, p.xv). Evolving from site knowledge is site thinking where “As a form of knowing, site thinking is concretely situated, more interactive than abstract, and less concerned with the semantic content of knowledge than with a concern for relationships among knowers and known” (Burns and Kahn, 2005, p.xv).

Being on a site and in a site offer opportunities to engage more intimately with a site and that which a distanced, aerial perspective cannot offer. With this in mind, one of the main aims of this research was to incorporate other senses, besides the visual, with the view to opening up and expanding renewed and engaged site knowledge of three coastal sites. Three distinctly different coastal sites were chosen for the research. The islands of Hopen, Bjørnøya and Jan Mayen are located in isolated regions of the Arctic (figure 02). The islands have no permanent residents living on them. Instead, they have rich histories of people situating themselves there temporally. Today, the only residents there are people working at weather stations on the islands who spend six month shifts there.



Figure 02: A map showing the location of the three Norwegian Arctic islands of : 1. Hopen; 2. Bjørnøya and; 3. Jan Mayen

Historic photographs were used in this research and compared to present-day photographs through the technique of repeat-photography. This involves taking a contemporary photograph of a same view and from the same location as the original historic photograph to allow for comparisons to be made. Sound recordings were carried out at each location where the photographs were taken. These sound recordings expose a multi-sensory experience that immerses the viewer of these photographs into the site through a temporal, material and spatial engagement. Sound recordings were used, in a way, to unlock these photographs from the time they are fixed in.

Referring to historic written accounts, sound has always played a very important role regarding the descriptions of the once mysterious and largely unknown Arctic. An example of this is an 1899 excerpt from Hjalmar Johansen (Johansen, 1899, p.65) who accompanied Fridtjof Nansen on the Fram Expedition to the Arctic from 1893-1896. He observes:

Nansen who forgot nothing in connection with the equipment of the expedition, had been thinking of taking a phonograph with him, but it came to nothing after all. It would, however, have been most interesting to be able to bring home with us the voice of this generally silent desert of ice, groaning in anger as it seemed, because mankind had ventured to force their way into it and lay bare its hidden secrets

Sound has become increasingly important in landscape studies with many inspiring references from geography, art and architecture that challenge the ocular-centricity of knowing the world. Finnish architect Pallasmaa, for example, compares sight and sound by concluding that “sight isolates, whereas sound incorporates; vision is directional, whereas sound is omni-directional” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p.49).



Whilst geographer, Tim Edensor, points out that while vision allows a surface reading of things, sound gives us depth (Edensor, 2017). Here, he suggests an immersion in space and a grounded-ness in the landscape.

The following section introduces some of the photographic and audio work carried out on the islands during late summer 2018. The historic comparisons are illustrated first followed by a link to the website Soundcloud where the sound files specific to each coastal site may be accessed.

#### Site #01 – Hopen



Figure 03. The historic photograph on the left illustrates the frozen sea adjacent to the isolated island of Hopen in the Barents Sea taken in ca. 1950. The image on the right was taken in August 2019 by the author from the same location as the historic photograph. Source of historic photograph: Svalbard Museum. Photographer unknown.

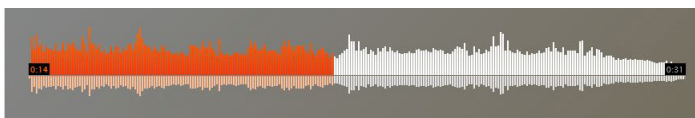


<https://soundcloud.com/user-921067170/hopen-zoom0012-lr>

#### Site #02 – Bjørnøya



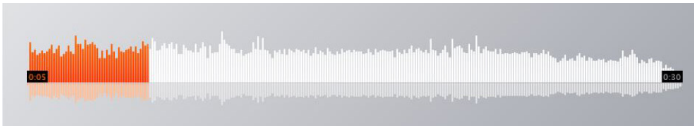
Figure 04. The historic photograph on the left demonstrates the arrival of goods on the island of Bjørnøya in ca. 1954. The image on the right was taken in August 2019 by the author from the same location as the historic photograph and shows the remains of the rail tracks and the addition of a new harbour in the upper middle-ground of the photograph. Source of historic photograph: Svalbard Museum. Photographer unknown.



<https://soundcloud.com/user-921067170/bjornoya-zoom0016-lr>



Figure 05. A historic photograph on the left , taken in 1949, shows a collection of cabins and huts on the western shoreline of the island. Today, the image on the right taken by the author in 2018, illustrates the destructive forces of the sea that has led to severe coastal erosion. Source of historic photograph: Norwegian Polar Institute.



<https://soundcloud.com/user-921067170/jan-mayen-file037>

Although there is an immediacy of information and knowledge through sight, dependency on the visual has led to a distance and sometimes an alienation from the landscape. This has increasingly been a subject of concern in landscape architecture practice. This short essay merely points towards a more multi-sensory approach to site fieldwork studies. It illustrates the potential limitations of relying solely on visual means to communicate site conditions and qualities. The addition of sound recordings invites the viewer into a site and encourages more engagement in this way. To conclude, an extract from geographer Paul Rodaway:

The senses are not merely passive receptors of particular kinds of environmental stimuli but are actively involved in the structuring of that information and are significant in the overall sense of a world achieved by the sentient. In this way, sense and reality are related. (Rodaway, 2011, p.4)

#### Bibliography

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