

# Seeing Yourself Sensing

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'Hi there, landscape!' I say, and look in front of me. In the foreground, a flat dark area with water or marshy spots, then a jump-wide stream delimits the small brown elevations with knee-high birches. Behind them, more hills and more colours. A few small trees but mostly moss. Further away, different light, higher slopes, and more yellowy colours. Shadows from the mountains shade the valleys. And finally the mountains themselves, furthest away, bright with colour and lit by the sun, not that high but distinctly organised into a background panorama, fitting well under the white sky. 'Hi, Olafur!' I decide the landscape answers.

By now I can tell approximately how far it is to the second row of hills or to the mountains further away. I can estimate how much time and what effort it would take to go from here to there. I can tell if the water in the stream runs faster than I can walk, and whether by the time I get to the mountain the sun will be low, so it would have been better to walk up the western side of the mountain to enjoy the evening heat. If I want to take photos while walking up the mountain I should go up the eastern, shady side, so that the landscape is lit from behind. I believe that at the foot of the mountains, not visible from here, there is a glacier river, which I would have to wade through. I don't look forward to the cold water, but I have some sense of where, and where not, to cross. If the river is too wide and deep to wade through, I imagine that further away, at the source, there is a small glacier tongue, and envisioning it (although I could be wrong), I can see the safest path up and down the ice, which offers the smaller crevasses, and so forth.

I am not trying to advertise what little experience I have had over the years. In the hiking and trekking world I am an absolute novice and will probably remain one forever. But what I want to say here is that after repeatedly visiting the same type of landscape, I have achieved a level of orientation. I can determine the approximate height of the hills and their slope, estimate how long it would take to get there, and try to use the weather to my benefit. With a cityscape, I can relate to the landscape not as an image, but as a space.

So what is it that I know? Is it nature? Nature as such has no 'real' essence – no truthful secrets to be revealed. I have not come closer to anything essential other than myself and, besides, isn't nature a cultural state anyway? What I have come to know better is my own relation to so-called nature (i.e., my capacity to orient myself in this particular space), my ability to see and sense and move through the landscapes around me. Looking at nature, I find nothing . . . only my own relationship to the spaces, or aspects of my relationship to them. We see nature with cultivated eyes. Again, there is no truthful nature; there is only your and my construct of such. Just by looking at nature, we cultivate it into an image. You could call that image a landscape.

The museum presents itself to us as a place for art. For a while now, it has been meaningless to speak of objective, autonomous conditions in the museum. This is not only vis-à-vis art objects, but also the exhibitions themselves and the museum's position in society more generally. As in many other fields, the acknowledgement of this has meant that the whole notion of orientation and observation has changed. Even in physics the subatomic particles can no

longer be subjected to a causal description in time and space. Exercising the integration of the spectator, or, rather, the spectating itself, as part of the museum's undertaking has shifted the weight from the thing experienced to the experience itself. We stage the artefacts, but more importantly, we stage the way the artefacts are perceived. We cultivate nature into landscapes. So, to elude the museum's insistence that there is a nature (if you look hard enough for it), it is crucial not only to acknowledge that the experience itself is part of the process, but, more importantly, that experience must be presented undisguised to the spectator. Otherwise, our ability to see ourselves seeing, to evaluate and criticise ourselves and our relation to space, has failed, and thus so has the museum's socialising potential.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York, one of the most highly esteemed museums in the world today, is at the moment partly a construction site. I would like to think of the awareness of this architectural intervention, including the construction site, as part of my project, and use this moment of megamuseomaniac instability as an occasion for visitors to take their eyes off the museum and look back at themselves. Reverse the perspective: the museum as the subject, and the spectator, the object. Like a landscape, the museum is also a construct; in spite of its comprehensive and far-reaching role as a truthful myth, it can indeed have social potential. See yourself sensing.