We know from physics that every displacement is relative. It seems there is no such thing as displacement without a point of origin, without a point from where to measure both the direction and the distance of a certain movement from one place to the other. In those terms displacement can only be defined as a relative condition: the actual position (B) being relative to an initial position (A). To be out of place is to be displaced. We obtain the figures of our displacement by measuring the difference between A and B, a difference that implies not only space but also time. The sense of displacement depends on this relation between A and B, there and here, then and now. However, we also know things can be much more complicated. For instance, the kind of measurement we were just describing usually uses as reference a straight line going from A to B from which it is impossible to draw the real path taken during the displacement from one point to the other. Displacement is always an awkward situation based on strange connections between time and space. Displacement is not (only) a matter of measurements. Imagine A and B are not only two but a multiplicity of points, imagine then is now and now is then, imagine there is here and here is there, imagine everything is out of place. How to define displacement from such complicated placement of things? Retaining the basic idea that every displacement is relative, we will try to step a little further into this.

Shifting quickly to psychoanalysis, the terrain of a very complex notion of time and space, we will discover other useful notions to think about this topic. In fact, Freud, haunted by his former education as a neurologist, always felt tempted to explain the functioning of the unconscious through topographic models. Early in his work we find the very notion of displacement (verschiebung) being used as a key concept to describe certain unconscious processes of the psyche. Although the notion of displacement was approached differently throughout his vast work, Freud always kept it as a way to explain the reattachment (by a repressive displacement) of something to something else: B in the place of A; A transposed to B. But the interesting (and complicated) part of this process is that this Freudian displacement — relative as any other displacement — implies
a forgotten origin. We are displaced without any notion of displacement. And, in the end, reenacting it all, we discover that B is not B and it’s not A; A is not A and is not B. During this process A and B are transformed into something else. There is no return to any ideal point of origin. Furthermore, looking back critically at Freud and psychoanalysis, we realize there is no point of origin at all: A transforms B and B transforms A; this process is pure transformation and we never really get the answers we expect. Years later Lacan\(^1\), opening the book of linguistics to explain a former topological problem, compared displacement to metonymy, the figure of speech in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name. Actually, with the notion of displacement proposed by psychoanalysis we enter a completely different terrain, less topographic and extensive and more complex and intensive, a terrain where everything is out of place and where words speak different languages, a terrain where there are no points (A, B or even C) but only intensive connections between them. Following this, and knowing already how A and B are not what they seem to be, we also realize there is no such thing as a line between A and B, but only points precariously situated at the intersection of several lines\(^2\). Every displacement is in fact relative but is also intensive, complex and sometimes contradictory.

Early this year an Icelandic volcano with an unpronounceable name — Eyjafjallajökull — woke furiously from a long period of rest. Overwhelmed by it, but feeling safe monitoring the event at distance, we were far from imagining the real effects of this eruption in our lives. In fact, a huge cloud of ashes extended its long tail over Europe, creating chaos in the skies. Flights cancelled and airports closed, Europe rediscovered its geography and experienced something different about the idea of displacement and the effects of the so-called globalization.

First in April and again in May, the cloud of volcanic ashes covered the skies in an insidious manner, quickly reaching central and southern Europe. Invisible and silent as it was, at least from the ground, the cloud could only be (roughly) followed through satellite images and its position at a certain moment was always hard to determine with precision. So, during those two short but intense periods, some of us were transformed in amateur meteorologists and volcanologists, looking desperately in sites such as the London’s Met Office for information about a new monstrosity living somewhere over our heads\(^3\). To a

\(^1\) “L’Instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud” (1957).

\(^2\) “It is not the line that is between two points, but the point that is at the intersection of several lines” (Deleuze, Pourparlers, 1990, p. 219).

\(^3\) The Met Office is the UK’s National Weather Service. The Met Office hosts the London Volcanic Ash Advisory Centre (VAAC) and during this crisis updated every six hours forecasts monitoring the volcanic ashes cloud <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/aviation/vaac/vaacuk_vag.html>.
certain extent, we were standing still whilst trying to follow such an invisible (but huge) and ever-changing cloud, feeling uncomfortable knowing that something unpredictable was moving fast causing a temporary crash in the way we were dealing with geography, time and space. Things that we somehow took for granted suddenly disappeared: we were displaced without a single move from the place we were standing in.

There are several ways to link the effects of this eruption to the idea of displacement. One of them is precisely the feeling of perceptive disarrangement caused by the observation of an object that is moving while the observer is standing still (or the other way around), something that everyone has already experienced, for instance, looking up to the sky covered in fast moving clouds. But with the cloud of ashes caused by the Eyjafjallajökull the resulting displacement was coming more from the secret unpredictability and dimension of the phenomenon than from any bodily sensation. In fact, this cloud of ashes was to connect very closely those two figures of the unpredictable — the cloud and the volcano — and their corresponding sciences — meteorology and volcanology —, and so bringing a new certain uncertainty to our daily lives. In this way the cloud of the Eyjafjallajökull is able to force an ideal geography (both personal and collective) to collide with reality, offering at the same time an impressive metaphor to the dark times announced by the ongoing financial crisis. There is a shared secret monstrosity linking the real but invisible cloud of ashes to the metaphoric but quite real dark cloud originated during the 2009 financial breakdown. Both clouds were able to produce a feeling of impotence that transforms our lives and our experience of time and space, building, reshaping and even destroying our personal and collective geographies.

Similarly to the effects of the cloud of ashes, this financial crisis caused things that we somehow took for granted to suddenly vanish: we were displaced but forced to stay in our place. This is not only a question of knowing, for instance, if there is a chance for the politics of social welfare; this is a question of knowing if this is not simply an excuse to terminate any idea of political action. Neither politics nor the economy have been able to move from reaction to action. We are facing a simulacrum of consensus which announces the end of politics and the rise of a new pragmatic approach to the art of governing. The problem is that the economy — as we have learned from the Eyjafjallajökull and the threat posed by its bigger and more dangerous neighbour, the Katia — is also a kind of Russian roulette: we never really know when it is going to erupt again. More so, in one way or another, it's easier to talk to clouds and volcanoes than to the markets or the technocracy of the economists. Clouds and volcanoes are unpredictable, that is true, but at least they are not trying to occupy every interstice of our lives. They are ungovernable and that is the reason for their threatening beauty.
P.S. Reading the text again I have just realized that I ended writing about clouds, volcanoes and politics when I intended to write about art and its figures of change and transformation, something that turned my words into a truly metonymy of displacement…