

Extremities at the Heart – Connecting (with) the Poles

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Owing to their geographic location, climatic conditions, and space and time dimensions, the Poles are for us extreme territories sharing with outer space and the underwater environment the fact that they are both originally uninhabited spaces and naturally uninhabitable for the human being. Although these territories are *in*-human in the true sense of the word, they have been continuously inhabited by humans for nearly 50 years.

Hostile and magnificent, the Poles have nurtured the Sublime and Romanticism. Artists, who have been present since the first expeditions, have had a key role in these representations, both real and imaginary. Polar art is a privileged tool for introducing them into “our” world through symbolic appropriation, through a sensory, sensitive, and cognitive translation. Eleanor Jones Harvey writes¹ that in the United States and Canada paintings about the Arctic at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century served as a specular image for defining a national identity. What sort of mirror do contemporary artists offer us today? In the first place, a mirror on environmental pollution and global warming, both issues prevailing in almost every current artworks. In addition, on life, human (what is it like to “inhabit” such extreme regions?) as well as of other species that need to be preserved. Nowadays, the artistic bestiary also includes plankton.

Polluted, melting, and threatened by human’s activity, but still barren, fascinating, and nurturing recurring myths (the lost paradise of a “virgin

¹ "La conquête artistique du Grand Nord", Eleanor Jones Harvey, in *Cosmos. Du Romantisme à l'Avant Garde*, Jean Clair (dir.), Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

continent”), the Poles are, to most of us, *an elsewhere*. Between a kind of new realism based on technological instruments and a metaphoric embodiment, the artworks build this dialectic link between the *elsewhere* and the *here* of the global mind.

The union and reunion of the periphery

Aboard the ship that was taking Adam Hyde to the SANAE base, he wrote, “For the first time, I feel a direct sense of where we are going, I feel a real sense of Antarctica as being part of the World whereas before it was always somehow on the periphery to me.”² To the traveler, the journey is the first way of appropriating such a space. Today’s version of the old travel chronicles and sketches, blogs build for us — like an umbilical cord— the link to this periphery mentioned by Hyde. Either checked in real time or *a posteriori*, the fragmented structure of blogs made up of a succession of moments recreates the duration, the temporality of the journey, and the experienced and inhabited reality of the Poles. Andrea Polli’s blog³ is a collection of sounds. The text and images are like the captions of a sound cartography —of the base, its inhabitants, and the scenery—within which we immerse ourselves. As you listen to this blog, both spaces overlap (here and there) – the *there* turning into *home*.

From space to place

In the mythology of expeditions, the discovery of new lands enjoys a privileged position. As sea ice melts, new islands are formed. Through his film *A Journey That Wasn't* (2005) and his topographic sculpture *Terra Incognita/Isla Ociosidad* (2006) about one of these new islands⁴ and the name he suggested for it,

² Adam Hyde, blog, December 17, 2006, <http://www.i-tasc.org/?cat=4>

³ <http://www.90degreessouth.org/>
At the time of writing this text, Andrea Polli was at the McMurdo Antarctic base.

⁴ Devised in association with R&S Architecture Firm.

Pierre Huyghe weaves myth with reality, and fiction with the actual facts, blends nature and technology, and reflects the appropriation of the former by the latter. For the installation *The Markers* (2007)⁵, Xavier Cortada planted fifty flags of different colors spaced at 10-m intervals indicating the South Pole coordinates over the last fifty years. In addition, each flag indicates a place on Earth where a major event took place during that year. This artwork ponders on human's conquering presence on the continent through the symbolism of the flag and its connection with the rest of the world with a critical statement. Being a creation for and about Antarctica, the artwork has a global scope, but also a local meaning as it recalls the official marking of ice drift and of the safety poles used as reference points around the bases and most used paths.

One way of turning a space into a place is *human marking* of the territory, namely, leaving a mark or a construction belongs to a symbolic *artificiality*. At the two edges of the spectrum, *Three Made Places* (2005) by Peter Clegg and Antony Gormley⁶, and *Groundhog AWS/Automatic Weather Station* (2006-2007) by Marko Peljhan, leave a mark on the landscape. *Three Made Places* comprises three constructions – *Block*, *Standing Room*, and *Shelter*, made with local material, i.e., frozen snow. These artworks relate to three *places* in human culture – a shelter, a cell, and a coffin. *Groundhog AWS* is the first stage of the I-TASC project⁷. Its external appearance is a black smooth monolith inevitably evoking the monolith in *2001 Space Odyssey*. While *Three Made Places* evokes hand-to-hand confrontations, the human being of a primitive culture appropriating the surrounding natural world, the sheer white of the snow

⁵ <http://www.cortada.com>

⁶ Artists participating in the Cape Farewell project, <http://www.capefarewell.com>

⁷ *Interpolar Transnational Art Science Constellation*, <http://www.i-tasc.org/>. The project including two mobile research stations (one on each Pole) and a satellite enabling communication between both aims at collaborative projects between artists, scientists, tactical media workers, and engineers within three broad topical fields: migration, weather, and communications.

construction, *Groundhog AWS* introduces the aesthetic rupture of a civilization of technological communication spreading its network over the world.

“Inhabiting” the Poles

Like outer space and the underwater environment, the Poles are *already places*, inhabited by temporary residents on a permanent basis.

What does the term inhabit mean when the installation is temporary, when everything (clothes, food, etc.) come from far away by ship or plane when the society dominated by a male culture looks like a phalanstery, to use Valéry Granger wording?. What does it mean living in a functional architecture resembling a hangar or capsule surrounded by machines and equipment of all kinds? Why do we have so many images of the landscape and so few of the bases, either inside or outside?⁸

Antarctica Village - No Borders (2007) by Lucy and Jorge Orta (fifty domed dwellings handsewn with flags and fragments of clothing) is defined by the artists as “a symbol of the plight of those struggling to traverse borders and to gain the freedom of movement necessary to escape political and social conflicts”.⁹ Human migration to the Poles is a voluntary act and a choice. This installation evokes to me the transient and vulnerable nature of such migration. These makeshift dwellings are no good for shelter and remind us that human life in extreme environments depends to a large extent on technology, both for survival and for scientific research.

William L. Fox points out that at the bases there is also folk art made by the people working there¹⁰. The oldest artwork of this kind may likely be *Man*

⁸ In her blog, Andrea Polli is one of the few artists to include a large number of images of the bases and work conducted there, which are very far from the typical postcard showing Antarctica's pristine environment.

⁹ http://www.studio-orta.com/artwork_list.php

¹⁰ William L. Fox, *Terra Antarctica. Looking into the Emptiest Continent*, Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007 (first edition, San Antonio, Texas, Trinity University Press, 2005).

Sculptured by Antarctica, known as *Fred the Head*, a sculpture carved by a plumber in 1977 at Davis Station. In 2003, Steven Eastaugh created a series of sculptures with material found on the spot - *Antarctic Sculpture Garden*, around *Fred*.¹¹ Inhabiting is also introducing art in an environment initially conceived as a transient workplace, and therefore interpreting it in a symbolic way.

Creating for a place is also creating for and together with the people who inhabit it. This is what Andrea Juan achieved in *Girasoles* (2005), a giant projection of sunflower images on the glaciers in which the residents of Marambio and Esperanza stations participated. The millennia-old ice disappears, vanishes under the flaring immateriality of the image, just like the ice shelves into the ocean. Some participants hold frozen snow pieces in their hands like small portable and intimate screens, but also as a way of ensuring that the ice is still there. *Girasoles* creates a link between the various territories, between the different temporalities of the recording, projection, and restitution as an artistic installation and among the participants.

The aim of *Polar Radio* was to create links. This work was put together by Adam Hyde, from Radioqualia, at SANAE station. A radio set up by and for the residents of the station,¹² either scientists, members of the logistic team, or artists. A radio that makes a community be aware of itself.

Outside, wrapped up in several layers of clothes, residents lose all external signs of human individuality – people become faceless behind sunglasses and balaclavas (like astronauts hidden behind helmets and filtering face shields). In this respect, it is worth noting two photographs by Marcelo Gurruchaga. The first one shows two black figures moving on the ice against a reddish gleam. The setting is confusing as well as the image of those beings which at first sight seem human but which are actually penguins. The second photograph displays a landscape of frozen snow and a chaotic jumble of ice blocks, enveloped in a predominantly white-bluish light, and with six individuals – four in orange, one in

¹¹ <http://www.aad.gov.au/default.asp?casid=9686>

¹² In the future, residents of other Antarctic bases will be involved as well.

black, and another wearing two colors. It might likely be a penguin rookery—the size and posture of the figures do not allow for a certain guess. In fact, we know they are human beings because their protecting artificial skin is *orange*. In the end, it is all a matter of plumage.

A magnificent desolation (or life's payback)

"Magnificent Desolation" were astronaut Buzz Aldrin's words to describe the Moon. This same expression could qualify Antarctica, but unlike the Moon, there is life at the Poles. White bears have become the icon of a threatened Arctic, but how can we raise people's awareness on the threat posed upon the tiny (and certainly less touching) plankton? By reversing the scale and turning it into jewels, into symbols of something precious, replies Karine Beaumont.¹³ Reversing scale is also shared by Lisa Roberts, who decided to engrave these organisms into plexiglass sheets in *Zooplankton* (2004) or *Antarctic Zoo* (2007). In her artwork *CPR: Continuous Penguin Recorder* (2006), Roberts referred to another emblematic figure in the Poles – the Magellanic penguin. On two fax rollers runs a silk mesh with the footprints of these animals. The author wrote, "I thought of the continuous toil of penguins, and of other Antarctic creatures in their struggle to survive: the treadmill of their lives. I thought too of the continuous toil of scientists collecting data on them"¹⁴. In *Arctic Pop* (2007)¹⁵, Valéry Granger superimposes natural death and artificial threats by painting logos of companies present at Ny Alesund on reindeer antlers collected during his walks.

¹³ <http://www.oceanides.com.au/>

¹⁴ <http://lisaroberts.com.au/>

¹⁵ <http://www.ny-alesund-pole0.org/>

From the land to the landscape (or the challenge of perception)

“The images, as vivid and striking, as they are, cannot possibly fully convey the experience lived”¹⁶, wrote Vincent + Feria. How can we “embody” the Poles? How can we make them tangible?

Phil Dadson makes us listen to Antarctica’s living minerality: ice is present, but also water from the snow-melt in *Stone Water Air Ice* (2003), rock that comes up in *StoneMap* and *Rock Records* (2004), and recordings of the surface in Dry Valley and Arrival Heights (Scott base). The author wrote: “The sound continuum is silence, broken into the birth of a rock onto a surface littered with jutting boulders, rocks, stones, gravel and sand. Stones are living things, with voices”¹⁷. If we listen carefully, the Earth speaks. And so does the wind, which turns the aeriels put up by scientists into musical instruments. *Aerial Farm* (2004), a recording of the wind and the wind-generated tones from an aerial mast with multiple wires, is a shadow testimony of human’s presence on the continent.

Sound is perceived through the ears, but also with our whole body; its immateriality envelops us and makes the environment feel tangible. There are other examples of this sonic approach to other extreme locations – the artists collective Radioqualia¹⁸ is tracking the sound of celestial bodies and *Ground Breaking* (2007) by Paul Adderley & Michael Young "records" the Sahel.

The time *of* Antarctica and *in* Antarctica – a millennia-old geological time archived in continental icecaps, the time of Earth’s clock with a six-month day and night, the time of human’s activities slowed down by safety procedures and working conditions. In *A22A* and *Upsouth Down*, Mireya Maso explores the time scale and the limits of our perception.

¹⁶ Vincent + Feria, *Zones de recherche. Perspective Antactique*, Paris, 2007

¹⁷ <http://www.sonicsfromscratch.co.nz>

¹⁸ <http://www.radioqualia.net/>

Global warming and global awareness ...

On December 30, 2006, Adam Hyde wrote in his blog: “However, just two days before turning the transmitter [of the Polar Radio], [...] I turned on my portable radio. [...]. And what did I hear? Static. The sound of the Earth’s natural spectrum. There was no « artificial » source of radio emissions anywhere on any dial. I have never had that experience anywhere [...]” Environmental pollution is more deceitful and sneaky than we think.

Fair causes do not necessarily originate interesting artworks. Ecological didacticism and romanticism are trite resources. However, other creations strike us for their evoking power, such as the artworks *Red* (2005) and *Methane* (2007) by Andrea Juan. In *Red* (2005), a woman unfolds red tulle on the glacier. The fabric acts as a wound – Antarctica is bleeding. The lightness of the material, the woman’s vulnerability vis-à-vis the environment, and their combined beauty subtly and touchingly reflect human’s impact on the Poles. In *Methane*, Juan does not show statistics on gas emissions or their extrapolated effects, but reflects them through a metaphor also by using tulle.

Red and blue tulles, light and almost immaterial, envelop the body of the performers like a deadly cocoon; they nearly fly away from the hands holding them under a violent wind and unfold on a frozen landscape in inexorable layers, from which there emerge what look like gas bottles.

Ice as a metaphor appears in numerous creations, such as *Glacial Soundscape* (2005) by Max Eastley, an installation consisting of a sculpture of stones contained in a block of ice, and a composition of sounds recorded in the Arctic, or *Ice Tower* (2005) by Peter Clegg, who featured columns of ice signaling the volume of carbon dioxide generated by each person in the United Kingdom each year.¹⁹

¹⁹ Both artists participated in the *Cape Farewell* project.

...About a territory that leaves a mark on us

Philippe Boissonnet proposed to change our perception of the Earth, from Mother Earth to Child Earth, as if it were a being we carry inside us and must look after.²⁰ We are aware of our impact upon the world, but what Boissonnet awesomely expresses in *CP/TOMS: Global Ozone* (2006) is the world's impact upon us. *CP/TOMS* is a series of eight digital photographs displaying the anonymous portraits of seven men and one woman working in Antarctica. The map of the Antarctic continent is printed on the faces of these people like a tattoo, a birthmark, or a scar. Makeupless, showing their wrinkles and smiling, they could be our neighbors or ourselves. This imprint on their faces, in return, impacts us as a burn.

Annick Bureau, Paris, December 2007

²⁰ In "*De la Perception de la Terre-Mère à celle de la Terre-Enfant*", communication during the presentation "*Expanding the Space*", Valencia, Spain, 2006, http://www.olats.org/space/colloques/expandingspace/te_pBoissonnet.php