

FACING THE UNPROTECTABLE: EMERGENCY DEMOCRACY FOR POST-GLACIAL LANDSCAPES

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The politics of climate change is moving as fast as its science. A heightened sense of uncertainty arises from the alarming realisation that the threshold of irreversible global warming might have already been passed. The gathering speed of polar ice sheet melt and the global retreat of permafrost, as well as the ever more frequent occurrence of previously rare extreme weather events, with droughts, floods and gale-force winds sweeping indiscriminately across continents, are disconcerting manifestations of climate disruption that are a unifying experience for the living generation on the planet. It is increasingly evident that the hard-won recognition of the interconnectedness of species extinction, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, acidification of oceans and atmospheric pollution with anthropogenic climate breakdown also leads to the drawing of political conclusions. Resolutely, it is no longer possible to consider ecological crisis apart from political crisis.

The failure of late liberal governance to sincerely address the causes of climate chaos has been diagnosed as inseparable from the mounting dysfunctionality of the system, observable across its interlinked economic, sociocultural and democratic structures. A process of social stratification based on growing inequalities in the distribution of wealth is destructive of social cohesion and a barrier to effective decision-making on a national and global level. The consolidation of oligarchic power as a result of this polarisation means that, as political scientist Kevin MacKay contends, beneath the democratic façade ‘*societal decision-making remains captive to the interests of a predatory elite.*’^[1] In addition to direct political interference, he

also outlines a wider pattern of oligarchic rule in which ‘*deception is propagated through corporate media, popular will is undermined, science is manipulated, and our culture is unable to respond effectively to its many crises.*’^[2] Recent post-democratic reconfigurations of the political arena are also driven by geopolitical struggles over depleting natural resources and competing attempts to manage and profit from the effects of climate change.^[3]

An emerging radical response demands the taking back of political and economic power from elites, while insisting that governments act for public good, not for private profit, and reacting adequately to the magnitude of the challenges posed by climate breakdown. Burgeoning new movements for social and environmental justice seek to initiate a renewal of democratic politics to overcome the paralysis of representative institutions, encapsulated also in the call for the constituting of ‘*regional, national and international assemblies based upon more robust forms of participatory democracy.*’^[4] Disenchantment with the political establishment notably spills over into impatience with the complicity of the large NGOs of the mainstream climate movement, who ‘*continue to ask politely for gradual policy tweaks*’ when it is clear that ‘*this approach has failed.*’^[5] What is required, as the transnational platform Extinction Rebellion declares, is a ‘*massive emergency mobilization and a just transition*’ to a post-carbon economy.^[6]

Contemporary artists are active participants in the articulation of such radical ecological and political objectives in the face of an intensifying climate crisis. In particular, artistic practices directed towards magnifying awareness about developments on the frontline of climate change, namely the disappearance of ice caps and thawing of the permafrost, are in the focus of this contribution. It considers the variety of ways in which artists are approaching the predicaments of post-glacial landscapes, such as by visualising the retreat of ice from mountain tops, activating artistic, scientific and wider social circles, and bringing non-human entities into the conversation. Also at issue is how far such practices explore the potential of reinvigorated forms of democratic processes to bring about an ecological reorientation of the global social and political order.



▲ Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, *Ice Watch* (2014), 12 blocks of glacial ice. Installation view, City Hall Square, Copenhagen. Photograph–Anders Sune Berg. © 2014 Olafur Eliasson.

Olafur Eliasson’s *Ice Watch* could conceivably be regarded as an explicit climate change artwork, based on the fact that since it was first realised for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fifth Assessment Report in Copenhagen in 2014, it has been repeated on two further occasions to coincide with climate change summits at COP21 in Paris in 2015 and COP24 in Katowice in 2018. This public art project entailed the installing of twelve large blocks of Arctic ice in the formation of a clock as a tangible reminder that time is running out on efforts to find a solution to global warming. While compelling in its symbolism and sensory effect in imparting to audiences in Western capitals the enormity of the melting of primeval icecaps in distant seas, the work is illuminatingly problematic on a number of levels, as its cautious media presentation betrays.

The most recent edition of *Ice Watch* took place not at the site of the climate summit in Poland, but in front of London’s Tate Modern. The accompanying statement conspicuously supplied the weight of each ice block when installed,

along with the information that ‘the estimated energy cost for bringing one of these blocks to London is equal to one person flying from London to the Arctic and back to witness the ice melting.’^[7] The implication of this claim is that the carbon footprint of the transport to realise the work is environmentally justified, because with the same amount of emissions many more people could experience the melting of the ice first-hand than if they had to travel to the Arctic. Although this might be a starting point for a discussion about the need to find alternatives for international tourism, nobody is actually arguing that large numbers of people need to travel to see climate change effects in situ, not least because its disastrous effects are now tangible across the world. The question of how to justify taking glacial ice out of its natural environment to create a spectacle of its disappearance was raised already with the work’s first and arguably most authentic iteration in 2014. The artist’s response at the time did not dwell on the carbon footprint of the refrigeration of the ice during its transport from the Arctic, but, rather, evaded responsibility with the disclaimer that the ‘icebergs transported to Copenhagen were fished out of the fjord, that is, they had already calved off the ice cap and had been irreversibly lost to the sea.’^[8]

Noticeably absent from the description of the work on the Tate Modern website was any call to action, apart from referring to the artist’s hope that by experiencing *Ice Watch* more people will ‘understand the reality of climate change.’^[9] The literalism of a clock ticking down to disaster, which is how the spatial arrangement of the ice blocks was presented in Copenhagen and in Paris, is exchanged here for the less urgent and reassuringly cyclical metaphor of ‘the form of an ancient stone circle.’^[10] The acquiescent stance of *Ice Watch* echoes the complacency of an established political order that is unruffled by the multiple crises of the age of climate disorder. And yet traditional democratic mechanisms have consistently failed to compel politicians to reach binding global agreements to combat climate chaos. The roots of this tragic political failure can be traced at least as far back as the Rio Summit of 1992 when, as Naomi Klein convincingly argues, the impact of globalisation on carbon emissions was deliberately excluded from the discussion, as ‘climate negotiators formally declared their subservience to the trading system from the start.’^[11] The repeat of *Ice Watch* mirrors the restaging ad infinitum of COP summits that regularly announce new measures with no prospect of enforcement.

Dramatic changes to the cryosphere, the cold zone of the planet where water is frozen into ice or snow, are accelerating at an unprecedented rate with global warming, evident in the fact that seventeen of the hottest years ever registered have occurred in the new millennium. ‘The distress signals from our overheated

planet are all around us, warns Dahr Jamail in *The End of Ice*, with glaciers ‘vanishing before our eyes, having shrunk to the lowest levels ever recorded.’^[12] The catastrophe is compounded by the fact that as the disturbingly impermanent permafrost melts, it releases vast quantities of carbon originating in vegetation that absorbed it from the air centuries ago but froze before it could decompose. Much of this organic material is being released back into the atmosphere as frozen regions thaw, constituting one of the unpredictable feedback loops that threaten to nudge the climate towards the tipping point faster than is anticipated in most climate change summit scenarios.

Intimations of anthropogenic impacts on climatic conditions can also be found in the work of artists active at the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The dosage of sunlight breaking through polluted air was the compelling prism through which painters captured the nineteenth-century city. More recently climatologists, in their attempt to estimate the concentration of pollutants in the atmosphere at the time, have also turned to the analysis of historical paintings in search of visual confirmation of scientific observations. For instance, by examining Claude Monet’s series of depictions of Charing Cross Bridge they have established a direct correlation between the distance at which buildings are visible in his paintings and measurements of visibility published in the *London Fog Inquiry* of 1901.^[13]

A different kind of evidence was on the agenda of British artist Emma Stibbon when in 2018 she followed in the footsteps of J.M.W. Turner’s visit to the largest glacier in France, the Mer de Glace in the Chamonix Valley, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a route that had already been retraced in 1854 by artist and critic John Ruskin. While the older artist, Turner, had first depicted the sublime presence of the Alpine ‘sea of ice’ in pencil and chalk drawings, Ruskin turned to the daguerreotype to capture the same jagged frozen scenery. For her visit to the site, Stibbon also used early photographic technology—returning, however, not with images of the magnificent glacial landscape that had awed Turner and Ruskin, but with bleak photos of a moraine-strewn terrain. The shocking retreat of the glacier from the position it occupied in the valley a century and a half ago is stark evidence of the dramatic effects of climate breakdown on the highest and coldest places on the Earth.

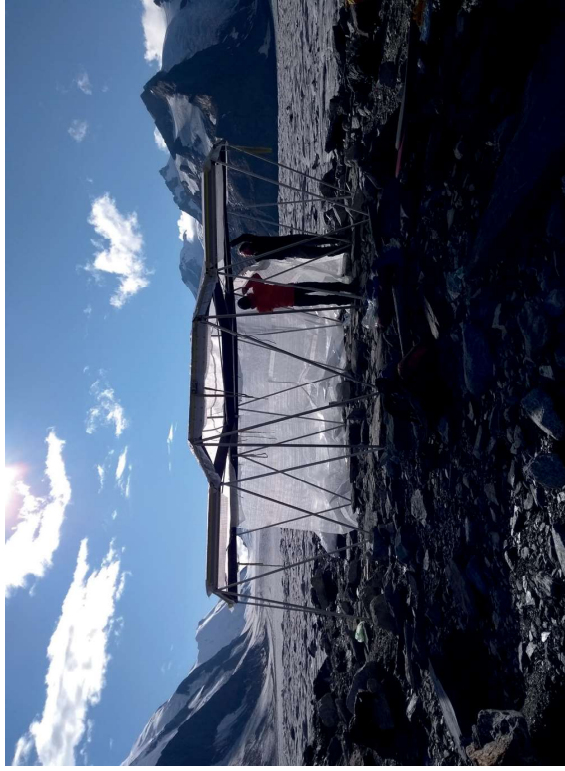


▲ Plateauresidue (Aljaž Celarc and Eva Pavlič Seifert), video still from *Ex Topia* (2017).

In their work *Ex Topia* (2017), Slovenian duo Plateauresidue (Aljaž Celarc and Eva Pavlič Seifert) addressed the vulnerable state of the Triglav Glacier in Slovenia, which has shrunk in size from 36 hectares to just one hectare over the course of seventy years. They invited a group of participants to gather on the mountaintop and undertake a series of actions designed to awaken their receptivity to the vanishing glacier. The film records eight individuals going through a sequence of listening to a short intervention about ecological interconnectedness and human responsibility in a yurt-like camouflage tent before putting on a ghillie suit to amplify their sense of merging with the environment and setting off to immerse themselves in the post-glacial landscape.^[14] Sharing her experience, one interviewee reminisced about an attempt by the local authorities in the 1980s to protect the glacier by banning the construction of ski lifts and restricting skiing on its surface. Whereas thirty years ago there was enough ice to consider turning it into a ski run, today, as the informant put it, *you need a microscope to find it*.^[15] Testifying to the momentousness of the effects of climate change, she poignantly surmised that due to the immense scale of natural and human forces at work, *some things cannot be protected*.^[16] This aptly identifies the absurdity of attempts at localised conservation in the face of global effects of climate disruption and emphasises what a profound challenge it poses for the present generation of terrestrials.

The proponents of the ‘good Anthropocene’, who contend that we should not view today’s human-dominated geological era as ‘a crisis, but as the beginning of a new epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity’,^[17] would opt for a technological fix to the problem of melting ice. Such a strategy has been tried by Swiss villagers living near the Rhône Glacier to protect a historic ice grotto endangered by the warming climate, who have begun to cover the glacier with white blankets every summer in an attempt to slow its rapid retreat.^[18] More speculative proposals that seek to cover glaciers with artificial snow or use giant pumps to refreeze Arctic ice are indicative of the technocratic faith in the ingenuity of geoengineering, understood as ‘deliberate, large-scale intervention in the climate system designed to counter global warming or offset some of its effects.’^[19] As author Clive Hamilton points out, ‘there is something increasingly desperate about placing more faith in technological cleverness,’ when it is precisely the ‘unrelenting desire to command the natural world’ that brought industrial civilisation to this impasse in the first place.^[20]

This is notably not the path taken by Plateauresidue, who instead created a conducive setting in which participants could gain embodied experience and sensuous knowledge about the state of the glacier, with the expectation that they would pass these insights on to others. In other words, their focus lay in devising participatory strategies to break through the inertia of climate indifference, a collective passivity that is as much of an obstacle to confronting the intractable challenges posed by global warming as more aggressive forms of climate denial and the fostering of chimeric hopes in the prospects of purely technological solutions. While high-tech, top-down methods are favoured by technocratic elites whose interests lie in resisting systemic change to the social and economic order of global capitalism, contemporary artists are co-producers with social movements of alternative platforms for participatory, democratic responses based on more profound societal transformation inclusive of environmental justice. Such initiatives tend to align with explorations of natural solutions to climate disaster, such as rewilding, restoration and ‘re-establishing forests, peatlands, mangroves, salt marshes, natural seabeds and other ecosystems.’^[21]



▲ MATZA ALETSCHE, Campground, Aletsch glacier, Swiss Alps (2018).

Placing confidence in the ‘*capacity of a community to come together and to invent the tools of its own emancipation*’ was the underlying presumption of Swiss artist Séverin Guelpa’s initiative *Matza*.^[22] It borrowed its name from a local Alpine tradition that centred on a tree trunk carried around villages in the Upper Valais region to serve as a catalyst for channelling common concerns, agreement upon which was expressed by hammering a nail into the felled tree as a sign of support. The artist salvages this custom from past centuries and enacts a rudimentary form of plebiscitary democracy for contemporary purposes, proposing it as a reinvigorated instrument for the self-determination and empowerment of local communities at a time when mainstream politics is in crisis. To those ends, in his 2014 *Matza Manifesto*, Guelpa outlined the affirmative value of ‘*the ability of individuals to join forces and pool their strengths and skills*’, to engender ‘*forms of collective intelligence*’ that are ‘*capable of strengthening citizenship, democracy and self-management by encouraging different ways of collectively reclaiming collective territory*.’^[23] These principles were explored in a series of artistic meetings held in locations of environmental and social sensitivity that face specific political and

ecological dilemmas, including the Mojave Desert in the United States, the Kerkennah Islands of Tunisia and the Aletsch Glacier in Switzerland.

The Aletsch Glacier shares the predicament of other permafrost landscapes across the world in that they are amongst the most immediate and dramatic casualties of global warming. *Matza* excursions organised annually by Guelpa, which involve spending days and nights on what remains of the glacial wilderness, were designed to bring a select group of artists and architects into close proximity with the melting ice sheet and provoke direct responses in the form of artworks created in situ using improvised materials. These were accessible to audiences through a testing hike with mountain guides and an exhibition of photographic documentation of the ephemeral works that transmit the inevitable sense of ecological precarity engendered by intimate encounters with endangered frozen landscapes.



▲ Oto Hudec, video still from *Concert for Adishi Glacier*, 8 mins/50 secs (2017). Courtesy Oto Hudec and Gandy Gallery.

In contrast to these collaborative and participatory artistic initiatives, Slovak artist Oto Hudec’s engagement with the glacial landscape appeared more solitary, since the only protagonists in his venture were the artist and the glacier. As the title of the work indicates, *Concert for Adishi Glacier* (2017) was a recital performed one-on-one to the ice in which the intensifying sounds of the artist’s guitar and mouth organ attune with the disconcerting gush of meltwater. The film footage, shot from

a discreet distance, does not intrude into the space between the Georgian glacier and the performer, whose back remains turned to the camera to preserve the intimacy of sonic exchange with the non-human entity towering above. Plants growing in the Caucasus mountain sunshine in soil laid bare by the retreating ice are both reassuring signs of the resilience of natural processes and disturbing indicators of the melting of the permafrost.

The realisation that a rise in average temperatures of two degrees or above will ‘trigger a variety of world-altering events, including the disappearance of most remaining glaciers’^[24] raises the question of whether the notion of the Sixth Extinction should be expanded to include not just threats to biodiversity through species loss but also the disappearance of natural entities. In that sense, Hudec’s impassioned performance, rather than being a requiem for the loss of species alone, seeks to transmit an empathic gesture that recognises the entangled fates of humans, animals, plants and other living organisms, as well as the physical forces and natural phenomena of the Earth. At stake here could also be a reconfiguration of the notion of care, which, in contrast to the promotion by late liberal governance of self-oriented, consumerist and moralising versions of caring, advocates its extension to more-than-human worlds. Theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, therefore, that we reimagine care as ‘an obligation that traverses the nature/culture bifurcation in keeping with the expansive ethos of “human-decentred cosmologies.”’^[25]

The conjoining of hopes for ecological and political renewal resides in the cosmopolitical proposition that constituencies other than traditional Western political subjects must be brought into discussions about the future of the planet. To take into account more-than-human interests and voices in reimagined forms of democratic assembly may require the development of novel approaches to representation, but would be an incontrovertible sign of the necessary shift away from pernicious anthropocentrism towards a pluralist, ecocentric position. That glaciers should also be specifically included in an expansion of legal and constitutional norms was signalled by the recent extension of legal personhood to Himalayan glaciers by an Indian court. This followed shortly on from the pioneering establishment of environmental protection for Patagonian glaciers by the Argentinian Congress in 2010, the first such law enacted anywhere in the world, by recognising them as ‘goods of public character’.^[26] The true political gravity of such legal gestures lies in the fact that in order to provide meaningful protection of the rights of vulnerable glaciers, a radical transformation of the global economic and political order is required that may yet avert catastrophic climate disaster.

- 1 / Quoted on the author’s website – <http://www.radicaltransformation.ca/chapters-2> (accessed 10 May 2019). See also Kevin Mackay, *Radical Transformation: Oligarchy, Collapse, and the Crisis of Civilization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2017).
- 2 / Ibid.
- 3 / See also Maja and Reuben Fowkes, ‘Feeling the Curve of the Earth: Deviant Democracies and Ecological Uncertainties’, in *Mutating Ecologies in Contemporary Art*, edited by Christian Alonso (Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 2019).
- 4 / See Extinction Rebellion’s ‘Declaration of International Non-Violent Rebellion Against the World’s Governments for Criminal Inaction on the Ecological Crisis’ (April 2019) – <https://rebellion.earth> (accessed 10 May 2019).
- 5 / Ibid.
- 6 / Ibid.
- 7 / ‘Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing Ice Watch: 11–20 December 2018’, description on the Tate Modern website – <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson-and-minik-rosing-ice-watch> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 8 / Quoted in Katherine Brooks, ‘Artist Melts 100 Tons Of Arctic Ice To Remind You That Climate Change Is Real’, *Huffington Post* (29 October 2014) – [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/29/artist-melts-100-tons-of-ice_6063550.html?r=US](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/10/29/artist-melts-100-tons-of-ice_6063550.html?) (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 9 / Ibid.
- 10 / Ibid.
- 11 / Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 77.
- 12 / Dahr Jamali, *The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption* (New York: The New Press, 2019), extract published in *The Guardian* (8 January 2019) – <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/08/when-the-ice-melts-the-catastrophe-of-wanishing-glaciers> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 13 / See also John Thornes, ‘Cultural climatology and the representation of sky, atmosphere, weather and climate in selected art works of Constable, Monet and Eliasson’, *Geoforum* vol. 39 no.2 (March 2008), p. 570–580.
- 14 / *Ex Topia*, film installation. Single Channel projection, 37 mins – <http://www.platauresidue.com/ex-topia> (accessed 10 May 2019).
- 15 / Ibid.
- 16 / Ibid.

- 17 / Erie Ellis, 'The Planet of No Return: Human Resilience on an Artificial Earth', *Breakthrough Journal* no.2 (autumn 2011), p.44. Also available at – <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/issue-2/the-planet-of-no-return> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 18 / See, for example, Rafi Letzter, 'Every Year, the Swiss Cover Their Melting Glaciers in White Blankets', *Live Science* (7 March 2018) – <https://www.livescience.com/61951-swiss-glacier-blanket.html> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 19 / Clive Hamilton, *Earthmasters: The Dawn of Climate Engineering* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p.1.
- 20 / *Ibid.*, p.199.
- 21 / 'A natural solution to the climate disaster', collective letter to the Editor, *The Guardian* (3 April 2019) – <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/03/a-natural-solution-to-the-climate-disaster> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 22 / *Matza Manifesto* – <https://matza.net/matza-manifesto> (accessed 9 May 2019).
- 23 / *Ibid.*
- 24 / Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.113.
- 25 / Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Chicago/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p.218.
- 26 / Jorge Daniel Taillant, *Glaciers: The Politics of Ice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.311.