

THE AESTHETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE: CLIMATE CHANGE, ANTARCTICA AND THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME IN THE WORK OF ANNE NOBLE, CONNIE SAMARAS AND JUDIT HERSKO

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This paper discusses a shift in representation of the Polar Regions from the older aesthetic tradition of the sublime as pure heroic wilderness to the aesthetic of the contemporary sublime wherein categories of both nature and civilization are undone because extreme nature is disappearing. By focusing on the work of three artists this paper asks: What new stories and images are being produced through recent attempts to re-visualize the Antarctic.



Fig 1. With Scott at the South Pole, 2010, Judit Hersko, collage, Copyright Judit Hersko.



Fig 2. Barne Glacier, Antarctic Center, 2001, Anne Noble, photograph, Copyright Anne Noble.

In the last ten years, global warming has brought renewed attention to the Antarctic, as scientists and the media report almost daily on shrinking ice masses. Recently, there has been a shift in the representation of the Polar Regions from the older aesthetic tradition of the sublime as pure heroic wilderness to a contemporary sublime that visualizes Antarctica as a place of fascinating terror and beauty not because of its remoteness or severe climate but rather as a result of man-made climate change and neo-liberal economics. [1]

If the traditional sublime introduced danger to the act of viewing extreme nature as thought by both Burke and Kant in the 18th century, [2] the contemporary sublime is about the undoing of the categories of both nature and civilization because extreme nature is disappearing. [3] The Polar Regions have shifted from being the last space of heroic exploration to the first place of global decline. As the ground zero of catastrophic climate change, the Antarctic is no longer seen as simply the continent most extreme and inhospitable to humans.

How we see Antarctica now is in marked contrast to most of its short history, a space that was radically uninhabited and afterwards conceived as a place where only the presence of men was deemed appropriate. Just who belongs in Antarctica has now become an especially vexed issue for contemporary women artists because only in the last few decades have women been permitted to work on scientific bases, as researchers and as maintenance workers and more recently as artists and writers. [4] By focusing on the work of three women artists that traveled to Antarctica--Judith Hersko, Anne Noble and Connie Samaras-- I ask, what do these women artists see in a place where their history has been so brief? [Fig.1-2] This is not to beg the essentialist question but to ask how their work has changed our ways of seeing this region as a primary site of the contemporary experience of the sublime and climate change.

As I wrote in my first book *Gender on Ice* (1993), polar exploration narratives in the late 19th and early 20th centuries redefined the legacy of the Heroic Age of Arctic and Antarctic exploration (1895-1914) in explicitly gendered terms as spaces of male bonding, conquest and suffering. In the early 20th century both the North and South Poles represented one of the few remaining masculine testing grounds where "adventure and hardship could still be faced." [5]

As climate change melts the ice we are seeing a re-emergence of interest in polar narratives marketing an imperial masculinity that were the subject of this earlier critique. The surge of interest since the late 1990s is exemplified by recent reprintings of original exploration accounts, new biographies of 19th and early 20th century explorers, and even reality TV simulated re-enactments of their journeys.

Almost one hundred years later, the Antarctic is no longer the site of a privileged white masculinity and these regions are no longer understood as just remote or forbidden areas, but rather as spaces closely if complexly connected to globalized and political forces that also impact the rest of the world. In what follows I will examine how artists Judith Hersko, Anne Noble and Connie Samaras are playing off or in dialogue with issues raised in my book about the Heroic Age of exploration, science, and photography and how these discourses are reworked in the context of twenty-first century artistic practices. In what follow I present their work as a dialogic set of texts that move in new artistic directions beyond the bounds of my original inquiry, contemplating new forms of critical awareness about climate change and the paradox of human belonging in Antarctica now. The title, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, is meant to underscore this link between art, aesthetics, new media, science, global warming and culture. It brings back the issue of aesthetics and feminism to discussions within new media, and questions how much older narratives of male heroic exploration and colonialism are still part of the discourse.

Amelia Jones, the contemporary art historian, in her 2006 book *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, argues that the most important legacy of feminism is its politics of positionality across the visual. By that she means the importance of emphasizing the situatedness of positionality, of visibility, and of spectatorship. Noble and Samaras are interested in the social space of taking photographs and their performances behind the camera are committed to recording their embodied relationship to Antarctica. For Samaras and Noble, that means highlighting the sense of dislocation and anxiety involved in living in such an extreme environment. In *Gender on Ice*, I pointed out how this is negotiated in the British early 20th century Scott narrative in which the gendered, physical body is replaced by moral character, which provided the foundation on which masculinity becomes heroicized and the exterior world loses its concreteness. Samaras' and Noble's work is not about heroic masculinity but something much more displaced, related to both their positionality as well as the placelessness of the site that they both photograph. Their detailed focus on the everyday moves us away from narratives that erase or ignore the real life suffering and counters the romanticism and fantasies of transcendence of the body through moral character that characterizes so much of the British discourse in Antarctica. At the same time, fantasy as evoked by science fiction is key to understanding Samaras' work. Samaras evokes how alien the landscape is in Antarctica, when she, for example, foregrounds how uncontrollable the ice is as it swallows up buildings and signs of life in photographs of the Buckminster Fuller Dome in *Domes and Tunnels*, in *Night Divide and Contrails* and in *Buried Fifties Station*.

If Hersko brings us back to the earlier days of polar explorers and the epic by inserting her unknown Jewish woman explorer in her fantasized re-enactment of the Scott expedition, [Fig.1] Samaras pulls us away, bringing us into another fantasy space where she plays with the abstract even inhuman aspect of Antarctica to make us imagine how climate change and globalization have transformed these spaces in ways we otherwise would not have imagined. By refusing the aesthetics of the sublime from the heroic age, Samaras highlights the unreality, as well as the drab ordinariness of this landscape and built environment. By virtue of her photographs that situate banal architecture in a sublime landscape, she draws our attention to the surreal contrast between the everyday and the heroic.

This is also an important concern for Noble especially in her *Whiteout Series*, but her use of color in the Antarctic displays, the *Piss Poles*, and the *Machine Series* tends to be more visceral than Samaras' to capture the sheer physical attraction and presence of what she photographs. Noble's method is to use beauty in her work in an unexpected and even jarring way to get us to retrieve the Antarctic that implicitly questions the framing of the Antarctic landscape as heroic and sublime. [Fig.2] In her work titled *Aurina* that is comprised of six large photographs of "piss poles" taken at various US research locations. Her documentation of the everyday use of flags as identity markers for peeing outdoors at many remote field camps in Antarctica is a deadpan twist to narratives of early 20th century nationalisms in which flags enjoyed an exalted status in the context of British colonialism. Not only has the heroic national banner been reduced to piss poles in her work, but she further banalizes them by shooting them in such a way to make them resemble golf course flags. To underscore the contrast between the piss poles and the flags of conquest connected with older narratives of colonialism and polar exploration that they inadvertently seem to mimic she refuses certain typical conventions of discovery, the horizon, the high vantage point, the gaze of acquisitional ownership. Instead, some of these images seek flatness by cutting out the landscape altogether or including a small portion not of a pristine landscape but of a more industrial one. The title *Aurina* refers to "aura," "aurinia" and "urine" and her images like her play on words also brings together visually dissimilar things such as the heroic dawn, a purse of gold, and male urine. What stands out is her jarring use of the color of gold that brings all three together, a color she then uses effectively to set the aesthetic quality of the image at odds with the content. Like in the *Barne Glacier* (2001), [Fig.2] she turns the most impossible and mundane evidence of human presence, the

stain of urine in a pristine landscape into an object of beauty rather than revulsion to make us aware of how the reverential attitude toward the heroic age can also extend to scientists who often see their pursuit of scientific research in Antarctica as following in the footsteps of the earlier explorers from the Heroic Age.

Noble's use of color is in contrast to Hersko whose aesthetic is drawn from the early history of photography, cinema, and photo-collage. Her photo-collages, transparent sculptures, and cinematic projections work more with shadow, light and transparency rather than color. Hersko downplays the heroic by having most of her images gradually disappear or having her characters fade in or out, whereas Samaras plays with disappearance by representing the older built environment of Antarctica sinking into the permafrost. By challenging documentary conventions in critical ways, such as her unsettling blurring of the boundaries between the artificial and the natural, she draws on the genres of science fiction and horror to give artistic expression to her experience of Antarctica, both in its routine everyday aspects and in its surreal extremes. This aesthetic strategy enables Samaras to visualize a neo-liberal sublime in which Antarctica on one level becomes like the rest of the world in terms of its built environment, but at the same time remains an exception and outside of nature as when she gives us something on a human scale we get either coffins or a ghostly presence of a man fast asleep on a transport plane. [6]

Hersko's use of science fiction, by contrast, is less about the paranormal but of feminist time-travel as evoked by Ursula Le Guin's *Sur*. She situates us in the past to reimagine the present through the embodied positionality of her female characters and their ability to reinvent themselves or escape themselves through writing, science and photography. Moreover, she critiques the scientific ideal that calls for professional detachment and scientific proofs, and the way scientific authority resides in the effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject. Despite the dreamlike quality of her images and narrative, the viewer or audience is included in the experience of her work as a participant, not a distanced observer. This is done through our fascination with her sensuous images and the compelling narrative point of view she offers in her performance to make us contemplate how this landscape is forever colored by its destruction through catastrophic climate change.

Irony is critical to Samaras' aesthetic as it is to Noble's, though Hersko's use of irony is similar to that of the surrealists. She returns to the heroic registers of the early twentieth century to perversely restage a masculinist imperial past within a neo-liberal present, whereas Noble's use of irony recalls that of the postmodernists that intervene in a discourse that confidently explores, maps and visualizes a space, thus turning it into a place we now claim to consume. Noble reworks contemporary images of Antarctica to examine the visual tropes that contribute to the maintenance of the perception that Antarctica is still an all-male continent or a living memorial to the good old days when only men could populate the continent. The creative challenges of Noble's work is her examination of how gender is implicated in her questioning of how we should see Antarctica in a context in which we can no longer distinguish between its everyday facticity and its cultural representation, as a place that is still very much constituted by male heroic narratives and imagery of the Heroic Age.

Her work explores what the formerly heroic age of exploration means through work such as *The Barne Glacier* (2001) [Fig.2] where Noble presents two tourists in survival coats before a panoramic painting of the Barne Glacier in an Antarctic-themed indoor entertainment center. Critical to the photographic history of Antarctica are the canonical photographic works of Ponting and Hurley that become synonymous with the heroic and sublime visual tropes of stoic heroism in the face of deadly conditions. Her work references Ponting's image of the Barne Glacier that emphasizes the magnitude of this uninhabitable landscape. In Ponting's photograph the epic scale of the glacier dominates the image to such an extent that

the figure in the landscape is dwarfed by comparison. In many ways this image provides an ideal image of sublime wilderness since it shows the inhospitable male space of the Antarctic as a testing ground in which isolation and physical danger combine with overwhelming beauty. Noble's photographs however reverse Ponting's use of beauty and space. Her images are much more tightly framed and almost claustrophobic robbing the setting of its epic character. While the photographic beauty of her images is central to the meaning, she is also asking us to rethink the way we currently understand the sublime in the present.

In her image *The Barne Glacier* (2001) [Fig.2] she draws out the beauty of the sublime in her use of color and light in an artificial simulated landscape environment to make an uncanny commentary about the continuing cultural investment in Hurley's and Barne's work and the contradictions between the Antarctica visualized in Ponting's and Hurley's photographs and the kitsch aesthetic of sublime wilderness now produced in indoor settings like the Antarctic Center where she took this photograph.

Samaras, Noble and Hersko are also telling stories about an absent subjectivity, but while Hersko uses this as an occasion to make a statement on the belatedness of woman's place in polar narratives and a lost or obscured perception, [Fig.1] Samaras's interest is more in creating a new aesthetics about daily life and survival in these unearthly neo-liberal institutional settings. Thus, her aesthetics, compared to both Noble's exuberant conceptualism and Hersko's sensuousness is extremely spare and pared down, though she does employ an emotionality to convey an informational richness in her work that differentiates it from more reserved dead-pan photographic practices. Neither of the artists' works can be simply folded back into a conventional discussion of the sublime or politics. All three are engaging these regions in new ways by searching for alternative narratives and aesthetics in the very dramatic contemporary situation of climate change without falling into the old heroic/melodramatic tropes of the sublime.

Hersko does this specifically by drawing comparisons between two holocausts to move us away from the purely visualizable as the basis for knowledge. Consequently, none of these artists offer the unimaginable scale that we associate with the sublime, and instead each plays off the epic quality of these male heroic narratives and images. Hersko's, Noble's and Samaras' viewpoints suggest some important new directions in contemporary art, and in the process, their work makes us think about how feminist perspectives have contributed to making us think critically about the conservative apocalyptic versions of the contemporary sublime and a kind of neo-liberal aesthetics that is at the heart of current discussion in climate change, art history as well as Arctic and Antarctic discourses. Viewers' aesthetic experience of their work is not just about landscape, the masculinist heroic subjectivity but also subjectivity itself, be it male or female since their narratives are about rethinking a landscape that is on the verge of disappearance due to anthropogenic pollution. One can only imagine what could happen if they, or other artists in their wake, bring this transformed aesthetic sensibility to other contemporary sites undergoing environmental degradation to examine how it is often in the spaces that we cannot see or know where history, aesthetics and climate politics intersect and collide in the most compelling of ways.

References and Notes:

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