HYPERALLERGIC

Stefanie von Schroeter, "Großer Knochen (large bone)" (2012), oil, lacquer, acrylic and ink on animal bone, 14.2 x 4.3 x 3.5 inches (photograph by Sean Smuda)

**Art** **Weekend**

# Art That Goes With the Floe

Works by 10 artists have been installed on an ice floe in arctic Sweden where they will remain until the ice melts and they sink into the sea.

Louis Bury March 6, 2021

In his essay accompanying apexart's current online exhibition, *Goodbye, World*, curator Raimar Stange wonders, "What options do the visual arts have in the face of the climate catastrophe?" He responds with several platitudes about art's capacity to raise consciousness, but the exhibition's valedictory conceit proposes a more original, if less comforting, answer. Stange and his co-curator, Andreas Templin, have gathered 10 artworks, by 10 artists, and installed them on an ice floe in arctic Sweden, where the works will remain until the floe melts and they sink into the ocean with it.

While its spirit of withdrawal is promising in ways I'll discuss, the conceit as realized is ineffectual and melodramatic. Similar to Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* installations — grandiose

arrangements of melting iceberg chunks intended to prick our species' climate conscience but that instead evinced climate fatalism — *Goodbye, World* fixates on the idle symbolism of its farewell gestures. Both place too much faith in the efficacy of artistic consciousness raising, while at the same time reducing consciousness raising to an exercise in confronting audiences with symbols of what they already know.

Nika Fontaine, "Bread of Shame" (2020), bread sculpture, active charcoal, wine, Weihrauch incense, dimensions variable (photograph by Andreas Templin)

Take, for example, Nika Fontaine's *Bread of Shame* (2020), which embeds tragicomic looking skull sculptures, fabricated out of bread, in a charcoal-dusted snow mound. In video footage of a ritual performed during the installation, Templin reads a fire-and-brimstone artist-authored invocation — "I welcome [the earth's] wrath as an act of self-care and preservation. One more swing of the eternal pendulum of life and death" — then pours wine over the blackened, skull-studded mound. Jonathan Monk's "The Tragic Tale Of" (2020) is less theatrical but equally flat-footed. On a tombstone-shaped wooden board, the artist has spray-painted the stenciled words "OCEAN WAVE," in reference to the eponymous sailboat that artist Bas Jan Ader rode on his ill-fated final voyage in 1975.

The show's more successful symbols have greater nuance. The mannered formality of the place setting in Olaf Nicolai's "Picknick, *égoiste*" (2020), for instance, appears knowingly absurd given the desolate arctic environs. Stefanie von Schroeter's multicolored painted animal bone, "Großer Knochen (animal bone)" (2012), is a compelling blend of the primal and the artificial. Eliana

Otta's wraith-like "Vicarious fragile pilgrims" (2020) — three white paper streamers hanging from a rectangular gateway made out of tree branches — alludes to the annual Peruvian *Qoyllur R'iti*, or "bright white snow," pilgrimage. Otta's makeshift structure, a portal to nowhere, loosely recalls the form of the draped orange gates that comprised Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's notorious 2005 project *The Gates*, minus the latter's sturdiness and self-assured pomp.

Olaf Nicolai, "Picknick, *égoiste*" (2020), dishes, flatware, basket, dimensions variable (photograph by Andreas Templin)

But it's the exhibition's farewell premise, more so than the intricacies of any particular artwork, that raises the most interesting questions. The decision to install an art exhibition on an ice floe is an act of withdrawal on several different levels: geographical, commercial, ontological. As a one-off symbolic gesture, such withdrawal is mildly clever and mostly obvious. As an eco-minded ethos, however, it has considerable potential.

What might it look like for artists and curators to pull back from capitalist expectations of production on environmentalist grounds? What artistic possibilities exist for eco-minded withdrawal that aren't fatalistic? What forms — aesthetic, interpersonal, institutional — could make such withdrawal viable as an ongoing practice rather than an isolated gesture? What would be a meaningful yet realistic scope for such practices? Admittedly, these are challenging, often counterintuitive questions, whose potential answers can conflict with artists' and curators' basic need to earn a living. But if your artistic response to the climate crisis is going to be impractical

anyway — and it doesn't get much less practical than installing an art exhibition on an arctic ice floe — half-measures make little sense.

Templin intuits as much in the conclusion to his own curatorial essay. To make the case for "radical hope," he quotes gadfly philosopher Slavoj Žižek's answer to an interviewer's question about hope in the post-COVID world. "One can hope," Žižek contends, "but in a paradoxical way! I advocate a courage of hopelessness. If we want to hope, then we should accept that our old life is over. We should invent a new normal." That sense of necessary invention, that search for alternatives to extant, failing structures, is precisely what's missing from *Goodbye, World*. Individual artists and curators may not always have their hands on the levers of institutional power, but what's vital to anybody in the arts concerned with climate change is finding ways to imagine what world might come after the present one.

*Goodbye, World*, curated by Andreas Templin and Raimar Stange, continues online at apexart until March 13th.

---