

DIARY

OVER THE EDGE

June 28, 2016 • Svalbard, Norway • Cathryn Drake



Left: Artist Magne Furuholmen, curator Milovan Farronato, and artist Olav Christopher Jenssen. Right: Curator Adam Kleinman. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED artists, designers, academics, and scientists migrated north to Spitsbergen Island the second weekend of June for “Thinking at the Edge of the World,” a three-day cross-disciplinary conference organized by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) and the Northern Norway Art Museum that considered changes in the Arctic as a flashpoint for things to come farther south. Touching down at the northern outpost of civilization, the view out of the plane engulfed by the Norwegian territory’s austere black mountains veined with snow and topped by a misty halo, we were greeted at Longyearbyen airport by a stuffed polar bear at the center of the baggage carousel. Thus began a weekend that would bring home the importance of firsthand experience of the end of the world to saving our “brave new world.”

Our first stop was the Kunsthall Svalbard for Olav Christopher Jenssen's exhibition "Expedition," featuring specimens of fauna the artist discovered in the adjacent Svalbard Museum's stores during his five-week stay, inaugurating a new artist residency program. A rare snowy owl, an arctic fox, a seagull, a puffin, and a polar bear accompanied ephemeral watercolors of atmospheric conditions on aluminum plates, as if specimens gathered by a scientist. "These are expressions or impulses of experiences," Jenssen explained. "It is like the animals took part in the work."

Dinner that evening was at Kroa, a stone's throw from the statue of a coal miner and the general store in a rustic log cabin adorned with skins, where tattooed waiters served us a typically Norwegian dish of salted codfish with crispy bacon bits. "The cuisine is surprisingly good here—better than you find in most cities in southern Norway," noted *Kunstforum* editor Nicolai Strøm-Olsen. His suit-and-tie ensemble contrasted the northern dress code of big sweaters, plaid shirts, and skintight leather pants. Curator Milovan Farronato outdid everyone in a black ruffled number with Doc Martens and tights topped by an elegant aunt's vintage coat of curly black lamb fur. The walk back to the Radisson Blu hotel was equally surreal, with people clustered outside the Karlsberger Pub drinking beer and blinking in the midnight sun, as if affronted by a giant spotlight shining down from the heavens by mistake.



Left: Charis Gullickson, curator of Northern Norway Art Museum, and Leif Magne Tangen, director of Tromsø Kunstforening. Right: Candice Hopkins, chief curator at IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, and Julie Decker, director of Anchorage Museum.

The conference "Lands, Settlements, Peaks, Bones, and Appropriation" began the next morning at the University of Svalbard (UNIS) lecture hall, once everyone had shed their outer

layers and shoes at the locker-lined entrance. Candice Hopkins, chief curator of the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, and Sami-rights activist Niillas Somby discussed the striking commonalities in the histories of northern indigenous populations. Somby recounted his adoption by British Columbia's Nuxalk nation as a fugitive after blowing up a bridge in protest against the Alta River dam in 1982, losing a hand and nearly an eye: "We had tried to communicate with songs, poems, and books, but the government did not hear us," he said. "So we decided to speak in their language with explosives; it was meant as theater, but it went out of control."

Next, professor Elena Isayev talked about the ancient connections between global populations, pointing out that mobility was the norm until the Middle Ages and there was no word for "immigrant" in the Roman Empire. Architect Alberto Altés defined inhabitation in terms of "settling." The threat of the other arrived in modern times, along with the advent of the national passport. Curator Lutz Henke proposed the Berlin Wall as the paradigm barrier to human rights, quoting Rem Koolhaas's description of it as the "transgression to end all transgressions." Discussing the current unprecedented decimation and displacement of people, professor Robert Templer, director of Budapest's Center for Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery, concluded with the question at the heart of our contemporary condition: "Where does our nearly complete lack of empathy come from?"

"There is no edge of the world—as you move closer it dissolves," Katya García-Antón had told us at the beginning of the conference. To wit, that evening we sailed off in search of the Bore Glacier onboard the MS Polargirl, with the director of Norwegian Polar Institute, Kim Holmén, at the helm. In a lecture on climate change, he cited an 1896 article that already warned of the effects of human production on ground temperatures, and gestured out the window to the fjord, which opens up to springtime navigation three months earlier now than before. (2014 was the hottest year on record with average temperature in February nearly 15 degrees above normal.) There were surprisingly few icebergs floating by. After a lunch of grilled arctic salmon on deck, the cold wind ushered the jolly crew into the cabin for some whiskey to warm the spirits until the captain came in to sound the alarm: a blue whale had been sighted. Everyone hustled outside and watched as the colossal creature surfaced to breathe and exhale in spurts that rose high into air. Holmén, in a big floppy cap with a pink pompom, exclaimed through a megaphone from the upper deck: "This is the biggest creature on the planet ever!" Just as a giant flipper emerged out of the water, writer Anny Shaw screamed, "It's waving at us!"—and everyone went into hysterics.



Left: Nicolai Strøm-Olsen, editor of *KUNSTforum*, and Ute Meta Bauer, director NTU Center for Contemporary Art Singapore. Right: Jan Martin Berg, director of Galleri Svalbard.

The forum continued the following day at the defunct Gruve 3 coalmine, and I stopped along the way to check out the Global Seed Vault, which recently had its first withdrawal, by Syria, much earlier than expected. The region has become a repository of global geopolitical forces as the center migrates to the outer extremes. “We were supposed to talk about sea monsters, and unfortunately I think the monsters are us,” Ute Meta Bauer, director of Singapore’s NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, began her talk. With the Arctic landscape a barometer of things to come everywhere—altering forty times faster than many predicted—it is clear that “what goes around comes around, there is no final edge, the horizon is infinite, and we are all connected.”

After a lunch of reindeer stew we watched Somby’s documentary *Gáddegáddat: Who's Left on the Shore?* about how the Sami’s fishing and reindeer-herding rights—their means to survival—have been taken away with the establishment of national borders and private land. We took a tour of the mine outfitted in hardhats and headlamps, and I asked Somby about a story I heard in town about his hideout in Canada, where a Norwegian journalist had discovered dynamite stored in the latrines. “He thought we were planning another terrorist attack, but we were using it to destroy beaver dams so the rivers wouldn’t flood,” Somby explained. Since last December the local Norwegian coalmines have all but stopped after years of losses due to price declines, and only the Russians continue the local industry. The Norwegian government is retooling the economy for tourism. “Even though they have no real reason to stay now,” a Norwegian art critic explained, “the Norwegians want to hold it

against possibility of Russian takeover.” Yet even continents migrate: In fifty million years Svalbard will be part of Russia. Likewise, after centuries of failure by humankind to open the Northwest Passage, nature has stepped in.



Left: OCA's Antonio Cataldo, Sami activist and journalist Niillas Somby, and writer Stephanie Bailey. Right: The blue whale.

On the final day I visited Jan Martin Berg, director of the Galleri Svalbard, for coffee and stories. “Svalbard is thought of as a place of extremes, but you only face two dangers here: going out into the field without being aware of the weather conditions and meeting a polar bear,” he said. Longyearbyen’s homely wooden buildings seem perched tentatively at the brink of another dimension, and a strange energy pervades the air. Snow-white reindeer graze around town among the snowmobiles, parked randomly here and there for the summer as if stopped in their tracks just as the snow melted, the landscape largely brown and barren in early summer. Svalbard is populated by more polar bears than humans, and it is illegal to be unemployed—and even to die. Recalling a set for the TV series *Northern Exposure*, the frontier town is the locale for the upcoming BBC docu-soap *Ice People: Living on the Edge*. The solitary souls who populate the archipelago are said to be happier in the darkness of winter, and neighbors often have to rescue those who refuse to open their curtains to the sun come springtime. You feel a sort of instant intimacy with the rare person you meet, like alien beings encountering each other on another planet.

I ran into artists Jason Rosenberg and Marie Kaada Hovden, and we agreed to take a long hike with artists Elin Már Øyen Vister and Victor Costales. They had found a bear guard to

lead us into Bolter Valley, so we were dropped off at a dog-sledding camp where dead seals rotted from ropes—last year’s bear decoys—and the dogs were chained to their houses and sick for affection. We scaled a slope between rivulets of glacier melt, jumping between spongy clumps, and coming upon the corpse of a dead reindeer. As we limped home in the broad daylight around midnight, while muscles I did not know existed were screaming for attention, we ran into New Museum director Lisa Phillips and landscape designer Edwina Van Dal, who characterizes proximity to nature as the new luxury. The edge has certainly moved to the center of politics and debate. US Secretary of State John Kerry arrived the next day to check out the climate situation (a side trip after security policy meetings down south, truth be told). Everyone should visit Svalbard—maybe just not all at once. I saw Phillips again two days later in Athens, where there was an extraordinary heat wave: “It seems so strange that it gets dark here,” she said longingly.

— Cathryn Drake



Left: Landscape designer Edwina von Gal and Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Right: Kim Holmén, director of Norwegian Polar Institute.



Left: Curator Lutz Henke and artist AK Dolven. Right: Perfumer Nadjib Achaibou and artist Victor Costales.



Left: Writer Filipa Ramos, Adam Kleinman, and OCA director Katya García-Antón. Right: Gruve Coal Mine tour.

ALL IMAGES