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Face to face in the Arctic with a terrifying new sublime

The "sublime" power of nature once filled us with awe. Now we run the planet, the picture has changed and is even more terrifying, says **Sumit Paul-Choudhury**



The Global Seed Vault: the cutting edge of the Arctic sublime

JIM RICHARDSON/National Geographic Creative

By **Sumit Paul-Choudhury**

IT IS forbidden by law to die of natural causes in Longyearbyen, the world's northernmost town – because the rock-hard permafrost makes it impossible to bury you. Nor can you be born here, due to the peculiar legal status of the Svalbard archipelago, a thousand kilometres north of Norway.

Forty-two nations, including the unlikely Arctic powers of Afghanistan and Venezuela, have the right to settle and exploit its resources: from whales in the 18th century, to furs in the 19th and coal in the 20th. Now, with coal on its way out, Svalbard is presenting itself as a location for scientific research, ecotourism and the arts. As such it may find itself at the nexus of a new global reality.

“With the melting of the ice and thus new trade routes, Svalbard and places like it are really at the cutting edge of geopolitics,” says Katya García-Antón, who runs Norway’s

Office for Contemporary Art. That's why OCA and the Northern Norway Art Museum last month brought artists and scientists there to discuss representations of the fast-changing global north.

It quickly became apparent that there are few simple narratives to be had. Early panels at *Thinking at the Edge of the World* focused on Arctic indigenes' relationships with the land, and the value they place on it – attitudes that might be instructive when it comes to global stewardship of resources.

But Svalbard has no indigenous people, and its historic resources are increasingly worthless. So how do you represent the value – be it economic, cultural or ecological – of a place that belongs to everyone and no one, that's both untamed wilderness and Anthropocenic canary, whose fate is both utterly solitary and entirely global?

Delightful horror

Part of the problem is that our impressions of such places don't correspond with current realities. The "frozen wastes" of popular imagination don't cut it today. Another part is that what we find pleasing isn't always what's wise: a neat lawn is an ecological horror.



A Romantic view of the Arctic's terrifying beauty: *The Sea of Ice* by Caspar David Friedrich (1832)
De Agostini Picture Library/Getty

Lisa Phillips, director of New York's New Museum, which focuses on the dynamics of the 21st century, suggested that our aesthetic values might be out of date, failing to reflect today's ethics. What might a more appropriate aesthetics be like?

In 1688, literary critic John Dennis took a Grand Tour of Europe, as was *de rigueur* for gentlemen of his station. During his passage of the Alps, he wrote that he experienced "a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled". A term used in transcendent literature seemed appropriate: such

experiences were “sublime”.

The sublime caught on, with other adventurers extolling the terrible beauty of the wilderness. In 1757, the philosopher Edmund Burke defined it as an aesthetic category distinct from beauty, and it became a potent concept in 19th-century Romantic literature and art, in part as a reaction to early industrialisation.

Today’s visitors to Svalbard, Europe’s largest wilderness, might also be in search of the sublime, knowingly or otherwise. But the experience is not the same as it was for earlier adventurers. Gaze at the Arctic ice, and you become uneasily aware that it is vanishing, even if you can’t see that directly – and that your own presence is contributing to its thaw.

Longyearbyen’s residents attest to that thaw: the port opened months earlier than usual this year; last summer was sweltering; a polar bear had to be rescued from the bay’s thinning ice. “The landscape has changed dramatically over the 30 years I’ve been here,” says Kim Holmén, international director of the Norwegian Polar Institute.

Many attempts to capture this have translated climate models into graphical or sculptural forms. The effects can be stimulating to the eye, but less often to the mind. Straight depictions of its effects can be misleading, hence the furore over all those photos of gaunt polar bears: are they tragic victims or unlucky individuals? The sentimental imagery beloved of tree-huggers is unhelpful, too.

Climate change – its impact, complexity and persistence – is hard for human brains to parse. In his 2013 book *Hyperobjects*, the philosopher Timothy Morton described how “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” defy our intuition. Global warming is one such hyperobject: a panel about the ocean hinted at others.

Hidden depths

Anchorage Museum director Julie Decker talked in Svalbard about *Gyre*, a 2014 show based on how plastic pollutants travel the seas. “Alaska has a reputation as a pristine wilderness,” she said, “but we send trash around the world and receive the trash of the world on our shores.” It is also found, like handfuls of candy, in the entrails of animals and birds.

Presenting this in a way that doesn’t simply induce despair is tough. Part of the problem is that we are used to durability being of a piece with artisanry and scarcity. Our aesthetics are off: we don’t readily grasp that cheap, mass-produced junk will circle the globe and last almost forever.

Camilla Svensen, a marine biologist from the University of Trondheim in Norway, described the challenges of understanding food webs based on plankton, which are more abundant in the oceans than insects are on land. “The complexity is so huge: it’s like opening doors and doors to ever more universes,” she said. Hardly anyone has personal experience of this vast marine biomass, for all that we are its beneficiaries. Our efforts to manage the land, of which we at least have somatic knowledge, are fraught enough – how are we to manage the oceans, or for that matter the atmosphere or the ice? A return to the sublime in art might help us process them – but what does the 21st century version look like?

Véréna Paravel, maker of 2012 documentary *Leviathan*, fixed cameras to a North Atlantic fishing trawler, and to its crew. “We were trying to diminish the men, or at least to portray them in a way that subsumed them in something larger,” she said, to achieve a “self-portrait of the sea”. The result is a visceral, occasionally poetic and frequently alienating film that captures both the hostile majesty of the seas and our impact on it. As Holmén said: “The ocean is very big, but we are also very big.”

The film’s imagery is at once appalling and beautiful: fish guts splatter, scavenging gulls wheel in the boat’s wake, torrents of scarlet blood and tumbling starfish are discarded as by-catch. Delightful horror and terrible joy, indeed.

The backup plan

Back in Svalbard, a tiny portion of the abandoned coal mines in the mountains around Longyearbyen has been converted into the Global Seed Vault, a geometric concrete wedge driven into the permafrost. It holds 864,309 seeds as a “backup” against agricultural doomsday. Stand next to it, and you can hear the regular whooshing of air intakes, like the breathing of some gigantic, slumbering beast.

Last winter, the vault saw its first withdrawal: barley, wheat and grasses to replenish a gene bank damaged in the Syrian civil war. That was much earlier than expected: the vault is designed to last centuries, the permafrost protecting its cargo even if the power goes out, the climate heats up and the vault stops breathing.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that it was an artificial disaster, not a natural calamity, that prompted the move. With climate change continuing to surprise, in mostly unpleasant ways, the permafrost’s guarantee no longer seems so rock solid. Perhaps one day there will be bodies buried in it, as a new Svalbard emerges from the ice.

In an age where old certainties are collapsing, we need to find values and aesthetics more fitting for the times – or to renew old ones. Perhaps it’s time the sublime made a comeback. But if it does, it will have to include not just the horrors and joys of nature – but of humanity too.

This article appeared in print under the headline “The terrifying face of a new sublime”

Article amended on 30 June 2016

Clarification: *Since this article was first published, we have added a mention of the Northern Norway Art Museum, which co-organised Thinking at the Edge of the World.*

The writer travelled as a guest of OCA