
6. Antarctica: feminist art practices and disappearing polar landscapes in the age of the Anthropocene

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INTRODUCTION

In what ways can art portray ‘the violence of delayed effects’, a phrase used by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*?¹ How might it do so in a way that goes beyond the socio-political phenomena in question to address the emotional disturbance of living amid the structural slow violence in the unremarkable everyday of the present? In what ways can environmental and climate change that still can’t be seen or felt introduce an age of dread and change our perceptual habits much as, say, Marshall McLuhan felt that new technology such as the telegraph did in an earlier era?

This article focuses on environmental work by two women artists that attempts to address visually new forms of art, seeing, feeling, and sociality that are coming into being in the age of the Anthropocene. In what follows, I bring together issues in ‘critical climate change’ scholarship to examine aspects of feminist and environmentalist polar art in the works of Judit Hersko, Anne Noble, and Connie Samaras. It is taken from a book project that is tentatively entitled *Visual Culture and Climate Change at the Poles: Contemporary Art in the Anthropocene*. This work builds on research from my first book *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*,² a special issue of a journal on gender and the polar regions,³ and a more recent article on climate change, art, and the polar regions.⁴ *Gender on Ice* invited us to think how conventional narratives about science, travel, gender, and race, as well as concepts of nationhood, attitudes towards nature, technology, and the wilderness were being reimagined during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Springboarding from the earlier study, the more recent writing draws on a range of representations within contemporary art and media production to rethink these narratives as the polar regions have shifted from the last space of heroic exploration to the first place of global decline.

Scientists agree that climate change in the polar regions is taking place at two to three times the normal rate of elsewhere on the globe. This was especially apparent in 2014 when we saw the western fringes of Antarctica ‘pass a crucial tipping point, condemning to collapse – either melting, or sliding in the ocean, leading in the future to massive coastal flooding’.⁵ The word ‘collapse’ implies a sudden process, but in human terms ice sheets disappear slowly. As Nixon puts it, understanding such a story might not just be about comprehending its overall ‘slow violence’ that is rapid in geological terms, but not fast enough to capture news headlines. Another way of comprehending the ways it is incremental is seeing it also in Nixon’s terms, as ‘a violence of delayed effects’.⁶

In an age that celebrates instant spectacles, the slow-paced and open-ended side of climate change, except in catastrophes of spectacular destruction such as hurricanes,

typhoons, and cyclones, creates representational obstacles that can hinder efforts to mobilize citizens when our evidence does not have the desired closure that the media seeks. Thus one of the tasks of my book project is to elucidate these complex images of global warming that are neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental.

The majority of these new kinds of images contrast with the older heroic and melodramatic tropes of polar exploration photographs made by the celebrated 'Heroic Age' photographers Herbert G. Ponting (1870–1935) and Frank Hurley (1885–1962). In Frank Hurley's photograph entitled 'A Blizzard at Winter Quarters' (1911–1914), silhouetted figures struggling against the wind and cold were superimposed onto a windy Antarctic landscape near the Australasian Antarctic Expedition's base to illustrate the narrative of heroic life and death struggle – one of the more common narrative tropes of Antarctic exploration narratives and photographs. Ponting's image of the Barne Glacier (1911) 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.

As the world grows steadily more unpredictable with climate change, I use the term 'anthropogenic landscapes' to also rethink our notion of landscapes that have changed due to human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. The term 'anthropogenic landscapes' or 'human-transformed landscapes' as adopted here signals how changes in the physical environment causing climate change are irrevocably altering our relationship towards the wilderness and disrupting our ordinary ways of knowing and seeing.⁷ The shift in perception I am suggesting follows environmentalist Bill McKibben's thinking when he renamed Hurricane Sandy a 'Frankenstorm' because of its hybrid nature and a 'spooky combination of the natural and the unnatural'.⁸ Here the unnatural is not a malevolent, unseen spirit but the unintended consequence of late industrial civilization. The term 'anthropogenic landscapes' displaces the question of a simple mastery over nature (or vice versa) that is often associated with the conventional landscape tradition and the natural sublime. It also makes us radically question the ways in which we understand and interact with what used to be known as 'nature'. These ideas are gaining momentum in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, as evidenced by the increasing frequency with which the term 'Anthropocene' is used in conferences and publications around the world. The Anthropocene thesis announces a paradigm shift in its claim that humankind is the driving power behind planetary transformation, an idea popularized by Nobel laureate and chemist Paul Crutzen. In other words Crutzen is saying that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she has always been. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, 'Humans now wield a geological force to have an impact on the planet itself. To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human.' The consequences of this are enormous according to Chakrabarty, 'since it shifts the temporal parameters away from the expectation of continuity to contemplate the idea of extinction, that is to say, a future without "us"'.⁹

In the 'anthropogenic landscape' the polar regions may still be a place of fascinating but forbidden beauty, but the awe once reserved for Ponting's or Hurley's photographs of untrammelled nature now stems from the uncertainties resulting from the gradual human

destruction of nature transformed – the Anthropocene. By refusing to approach the idea of a wilderness or sublime landscape as separate from the human or the animal, some of the artwork here makes us more aware of how the Earth and human systems are intimately entwined. The threat this process evokes yields a different kind of horror as these places undergo accelerated warming.

By focusing on the work of three women artists that traveled to Antarctica – Judit Hersko, Anne Noble, and Connie Samaras – the article turns a feminist lens on what is still often seen as a very masculine heroic geographical site and questions the claim that these heroic concepts were left behind in the last century.¹⁰ It asks 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.¹¹ My analysis investigates the new stories and images that are produced by these women artists to re-visualize the Antarctic and examines the impact that the older aesthetic traditions of the sublime as well as the genres of literary fiction, science fiction, and horror, has had on their work. It calls attention to the shift in the terror of scale in these women's artwork. In the images of these artists we are no longer dealing with an inhuman scale. These landscapes, unlike the photographs of Ponting and Hurley, do not overwhelm our categories of understanding.

IN AND OUT OF PLACE: JUDIT HERSKO'S 'PAGES FROM THE BOOK OF THE UNKNOWN EXPLORER'

One representative artist of this project who deals directly with many of the key issues around gender, art, and climate change in my book is Judit Hersko. Hersko is a Professor at California State University, San Marcos, who traveled to Antarctica on a National Science Foundation Artist's grant in 2008. Her 'Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer' (2008–2015) unpacks the current revival of interest in polar narratives from earlier eras and the older images by Hurley and Ponting that mythologized the enterprising male explorer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her work, driven as she is with questions of time, perception, and shifting notions of nature, Hersko creates an alternate photographic and cinematic history of exploration and climate science in Antarctica. To do so she rethinks the landscape of Antarctica, a landscape that is on the verge of disappearing due to anthropogenic pollution, through a unique rewriting of a Jewish woman's presence in Antarctic history.

Hersko presents her recent work as part-fantasy and part-history, as a lecture with one hundred and twenty images that incorporates photographic and cinematic documentation as well as artwork about a fictional Jewish female explorer, photographer and Antarctic biologist from the 1930s named Anna Schwartz (see Figure 6.1).

Hersko's character, Anna, appears on Admiral Byrd's 1939 expedition and, while passing as a white man, becomes the only woman at that time to work before the 1960s as a biologist and photographer in Antarctica.¹² Schwartz's trip to Antarctica by its very choice of dates evokes the 1939 invasion of Poland when Eastern European Jews, such as Schwartz, were loaded into boxcars and sent to concentration camps.¹³ In this respect, the juxtaposition of Antarctica in the late 1930s with the contemporary debates around climate change today raises questions later in Hersko's narrative about how she connects the present to the past through a vision of traumatic catastrophe.



Figure 6.1 Judit Hersko, *Portrait of Anna Schwartz*, 2008

For her narrative, Hersko draws on both a rich artistic and literary tradition, the literary including Ursula Le Guin's short story 'Sur' (1982), a utopian feminist fictional account about an exploration in which a party of South American women reach the South Pole in 1909, two years before the official arrival of the real exploration teams of Amundsen and Scott.¹⁴ Hersko's work is influenced by the women characters in Le Guin's fantasy who do not feel compelled to leave any record, or proof, of their presence at the South Pole, as evidenced by one of the characters' activities of fashioning sculptures from ice. Like the disappearing ice sculptures in Le Guin's short story, Hersko's artwork and narrative can be preserved only in her ephemeral art, not in heroic monuments that celebrate male heroic narratives and imagery of the Heroic Age.

Hersko draws her aesthetic from an earlier historical moment of surrealist photography by using photo-collages, transparent sculptures, and cinematic projections to emphasize the shadow, light, and transparency of images and place. To do this, she draws on forms and styles rarely if ever used in relation to Antarctica: photo-collage and surrealism. Inspired by the surrealist albums of Victorian women, who invented a method of photo-collage later adopted by avant garde artists, Hersko borrows this aesthetic style to visually render the placement of people in circumstances they could not ordinarily inhabit. To reveal how visually out of place Anna Schwartz might have been on these expeditions, Hersko creates compelling photo-montages that place Schwartz, the fictional explorer, into already existing photographs of Antarctic exploration (see Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2 *Judit Hersko, With Scott at the Pole (collage by Anna Schwartz), 2011*

These images of her ‘unknown explorer’ depart from the images of the traditional sublime and its heroic masculinity and are much more in keeping with her interest in making visible threats from global warming that take time to wreak havoc. She highlights what otherwise might be difficult to see – two transparent planktonic snails, the *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and the microscopic *Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly) (see Figure 6.3).¹⁵

These snails were plentiful in the days of her ‘unknown’ woman explorer, but now due to the effects of ocean acidification their shells are dissolving. The danger that interests Hersko is less spectacular and less familiar to the public than dramatic popular images of the contemporary sublime and of apocalyptic climate change. But Hersko’s invented narrative highlights aspects of global warming that escape notice because they happen at microscopic levels and rates so slow that transformation is too gradual to note. In some ways her work addresses the failure of perception and cognition, the result of which is our inability to deal with critical changes facing us over extended time.

Hersko’s art explores representations of these microscopic creatures at a moment when they are disappearing, thereby creating a melancholic aesthetic that engages with the photographic materials from the past but gives them a new value that is different from the period from when they were made. The melancholia of her work has parallels to Walter Benjamin’s conception of surrealist allegory, as she engages us to think of these planktonic snails as having ceased to exist while we are presented with a fictional narrative and images about the first time they were documented in the 1930s by Anna Schwartz.¹⁶ As her work aesthetically activates these lost images, they begin to signify from both moments in time, almost simultaneously. In the place of the heroic portraits of Byrd and his men, the minimal scale of Hersko’s portrait of the ‘Unknown Explorer’ emphasizes the contingent nature of Schwartz’s heroism as well as the surprising obsession and motivation from another time for her clandestine expedition to Antarctica – the seemingly insignificant documentation of microscopic creatures. These details enforce the illusion of factuality that the story seeks to create and set up a creative engagement between the unknown explorer and her otherwise ordinary microscopic pteropods that are slowly perishing in the present. We never learn if the unknown explorer’s reasons to escape are connected to the Holocaust, but the evocation of this possibility seems to foreshadow further catastrophe for her pteropods. The persistence of this past in her narrative evokes the future. Significantly, Hersko’s reference to this history is tempered by her own personal relationship to the Holocaust and how her own parents survived Nazi persecution.

Hersko’s narrative and archive are symbolic since they imagine what Jewish women’s contribution to science, polar exploration, and art history might have been in Antarctica’s early history if women’s relationship to Antarctica was not merely speculative during Anna Schwartz’s era. For this reason, Hersko’s fictional narrative insists that one must take into account the imaginative histories that run alongside real polar histories. Her archive of images on Antarctica is suitably dreamlike and includes projected cinematic images, etched photographic images on glass and silicone, and photo-montages that deliberately draw on photographic tropes from the period to give the pictures a “reality effect” (see Figures 6.1–6.3). At the same time, her work disorients us since she puts people and organisms in an order and place they would not normally inhabit such as the unlikely inclusion of Schwartz at the time that Jews in Europe were fleeing the Nazis. Namely, by



Figure 6.3 *Judit Hersko, Pteropods (from the scientific notebooks of Anna Schwartz), 2008*

shifting the history of Antarctic exploration even slightly, Hersko alters our perception of the present and helps us understand how the rhetoric of both Antarctic exploration narratives and polar climate change bears the imprint of gender and Jewishness.

However, Hersko's goal is not to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it in terms of existing cultural codes, but to foreground and make connections between the affective consequences of the Holocaust and climate change. In its drive to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it legible in terms of existing cultural codes, her performance piece appears to disregard what Cathy Caruth calls 'the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding'.¹⁷ Yet, for all its investment in a surrealist aesthetic, the work remains haunted by a traumatic history that exceeds and breaks down accustomed habits of thought, narration, and visualization.

OFF COLOUR: HIGHLIGHTING THE GOOD OLD DAYS IN ANNE NOBLE'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Professor Anne Noble is a well-known New Zealand photo-based artist at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. She has been working on Antarctica since 2002 when she first traveled to the continent through the New Zealand Antarctic Program and on the US National Science Foundation Artists and Writers Program.¹⁸ Noble is interrogating landscape practices and the role of images in the construction of visual knowledge and understanding of Antarctica in the present day. Like Hersko's work, which is engaged with a woman explorer who did not exist in the early twentieth century, Noble also focuses on the relationship between fact and fiction. However, unlike Hersko, who sifts through the random detritus of the past, both real and fictional, Noble is more concerned with contemporary myths and calls the viewer's attention to the recuperation and rehabilitation at a distance of a kind of colonial masculinity in Antarctica. She 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 challenge 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 not only in the context of postcolonialism but also at a moment when we are thinking about the imminent decline of this icy habitat.

Substitution and humor are central to Noble's work, especially as they relate to hidden assumptions about Antarctica and contemporary tourism. In works such as 'The Barne Glacier' (2001) Noble presents two dummies dressed in NSF standard issue extreme weather gear standing before a panoramic photograph of the Barne glacier in an Antarctic-themed indoor entertainment center (see Figure 6.4).

It is sited in the foyer of the Christchurch Antarctic Centre. This image references Frank Hurley's photograph 'A Blizzard at Winter Quarters' (1911–1914) and Herbert Ponting's image of the Barne Glacier (1911).

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



Figure 6.4 Anne Noble, *'The Barne Glacier, Christchurch Antarctic Centre', 2001*

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 of the Barne Glacier (2001) she draws out the beauty of the sublime in her use of color and light in an artificial simulated landscape environment, making an uncanny commentary about the continuing cultural investment in Hurley's and Ponting'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 such as the Antarctic Center where she took this image.

Noble's critique of the contemporary banalization of early Antarctic exploration is taken even further in *Antarctic Storm, Christchurch, New Zealand* (2002) (see Figure 6.5) where we see another image of tourists at the Antarctic Center in New Zealand 'experiencing' extreme Antarctica weather inside a diorama. The glaciers and ice appear as crucial props to the scene, as does the very large thermometer in the foreground, which quickly makes us understand that the Antarctic experience of surviving the cold might only last twenty minutes. Whereas Hurley's and Ponting's images emphasize the heroic travails of members of different early expeditions to Antarctica, Noble's work by contrast hyper-aestheticizes these simulations to create a more jarring understanding of Antarctica that disrupts the 'experience' of this remote continent that is now made available to everyone.



Figure 6.5 Anne Noble, *'Antarctic Storm'*, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2002

At the same time she mocks the idea of a staged spectacle easily consumed by anyone who can afford a ticket at an entertainment center. In the past, the poles had served as testing grounds for an exclusive heroic masculinity. Photographs such as this one turn the conventions of photographic beauty back at the audience, and in so doing express a more ironic relationship to the way Antarctica's now lost heroic sublime is consumed uncritically by tourists in comfortable artificial settings.

In her more recent work, Noble playfully re-examines photographic landscape practices and strikes a lighter note in the context of these more serious historic discourses about the difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions, and substitutes the banal details of everyday life in Antarctica to inflect her work with humor and parody as a means of taking us beyond ordinary points of seeing. Her use of parody comes through best in work that explores the ways that male inhabitants of Antarctica still construct rituals that suggest that Antarctica remains the masculine space of the imperial frontier as opposed to the less exclusive and fairly developed domestic infrastructure of human habitation. This projection of an exclusionary masculinity extends to the fact that in the far reaches of the different American scientific bases of Antarctica, outdoor toilets exist alongside primitive peeing stations for men only, as documented in her recent photographic installation ironically entitled *'Piss Poles, Antarctica #1-#6'*. This work comprises six large photographs of



Figure 6.6 Anne Noble, 'Piss Pole #2', Antarctica, 2008

'piss poles' taken at various US research locations, and uses an aesthetic rhetoric as well as iconic markers, such as the flag to engage critically with the Heroic Age (see Figure 6.6).

Noble's documentation of the everyday use of flags as identity markers for peeing outdoors at many remote field camps in Antarctica is a deadpan twist on narratives of early twentieth 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 acquisitive 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. 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. In the *Piss Poles, Antarctica* (2008), 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 earlier explorers from the Heroic Age.

Noble's work is motivated by her belief that Antarctica cannot be visualized. To make her point she works as a conceptual artist rather than as a traditional photographer visiting the real place (Antarctica) as well as the simulacrum (the Antarctic discovery centers around the world) and giving them both equal weight in her work. One of the most compelling and well-known set of photographs that she took in Antarctica is a 2007 series entitled 'Whiteout' that presents complete whiteout conditions in Antarctica. Her photographic images capture the shifting effect of light during a whiteout, and since these are images of whiteness that capture the shifting effects of light, the photographs are of an entirely abstract nature. Like Hersko, Noble is concerned with issues of perception and what cannot be seen because the colonizing eye from the Heroic Age of photography is so strong. These photographs move us away from conventional photographs because of the way they formulaically apply the conventions of landscape photography, erasing or ignoring a more disturbing aspect that foregrounds the anxiety and sense of vulnerability and dislocation that is part of negotiating this extreme environment. Noble believes that Antarctica hasn't been properly observed, and her white-out images with their blinding light remind us that in the post-Heroic Age, while the region is increasingly more accessible, the same anxieties of managing the forbidden climate remain today.

CONNIE SAMARAS'S FUTURES IN EXTREME ENVIRONMENTS: TOWARDS A NEW AESTHETICS OF DAILY LIFE AND SURVIVAL IN VALIS

Connie Samaras is a photo-based artist and Professor at the University of California, Irvine. She has been working on Antarctica and the South Pole since 2004–5 when she first traveled to Antarctica with the US National Science Foundation Artists and Writers Program.¹⁹ As an artist, Samaras is drawn to communities in geographically extreme environments – Antarctica, Dubai, Las Vegas and the US Southwest Desert – that are unique and lack a conventional historical core, or a conventional population make-up. Situated in the desert or on ice, these places almost appear like a tabula rasa where various urban and community experiments are carried out – both in the past and present.

Samaras's 2005 Antarctica project entitled VALIS (vast active living intelligence system) consists of photographs and two videos she took while on an artist's residency at the American base in the Antarctic station.²⁰ Like Noble and Hersko, she approaches Antarctica from a deliberately anti-heroic perspective through a focus on what it means to live in such an inhospitable, and thus anxiety-provoking built environment. Samaras herself uses the phrase built environment to describe her work to invoke a critique of 'environment' as solely about nature. Putting in the word 'built' foregrounds the architectural and technological transformations of the environments that we tend to think of as our natural spaces.

In her work at the South Pole station, Samaras is rethinking a landscape that is now on the verge of disappearance due to anthropogenic pollution, even though in the recent past its built environment (as represented by the Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome at the South Pole) functioned as representations of Antarctica's utopian possibilities. A



Figure 6.7 *Connie Samaras, VALIS Dome and Tunnels, 2005*

common idea in the 1950s was to have Antarctic cities enclosed under such glass domes, which would have made colonization of this continent possible. Samaras's photographs of a sinking Buckminster Fuller dome are metaphoric since they suggest an end to Antarctica's long history of being separate from the world, and a place of both scientific and architectural uniqueness.

Fantasy as evoked by science fiction is key to understanding Samaras's work in these geographically extreme regions.²¹ For example, she evokes how alien the landscape is in Antarctica, when she 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' (see Figure 6.7), and in 'Buried Fifties Station'. Like the landscape, the photographed interiors are empty and deserted.²² Her focus on these alien-looking buildings, combined with her emphasis on the undomestic interiors and exteriors, such as her photograph taken underneath the new Amundsen-Scott Station when it was under construction, has a strangeness that is intermixed with ordinariness, creating a dissonance with, on the one hand, the discourse of Antarctica as an untouched landscape and, on the other, a scientific utopia of the future. Neither characterization fits the Antarctica represented in her art (see Figure 6.8).

All of Samaras's images are found rather than staged, except for a sole photograph of a strange empty domestic interior inside the Buckminster Fuller dome at the South Pole,



Figure 6.8 *Connie Samaras, VALIS Dome Interior, 2005*

showing two rows of red sleeping quarters facing each other that she altered slightly by flipping the negative, making the sleeping quarters mirror each other. Although the photograph is only slightly changed, the interior looks, in the mind of the viewer, alternatively like meat lockers, future cells for monks, or worse, like a morgue (see Figure 6.8).

The bright red sealed bunk spaces and the dome ceiling together are more easily imagined as occupied by a strange organized cult in a science fiction film than a real place where actual scientists live and work. Her slight digital manipulation of this space is done deliberately to make us wonder about social relations and subjectivity itself, be it male or female, in such a strange and unearthly interior.

In her Antarctic photographs, Samaras's aesthetic strategy combines the everyday with the surreal to visualize settlements in extreme geographical regions in a manner that on one level evokes the rest of the world's major cities in terms of its built environment, but at the same time remains incongruous and outside of nature due to its seeming artificiality. Her aesthetic approach to the ordinary and everyday is different to Noble's, since she injects something more unsettling and unearthly into what otherwise appear to be fairly neutral and objective images of Antarctica's built environment, with its mostly anonymous industrial structures, as in her photograph, *Underneath Amundsen-Scott Station* (see Figure 6.9).

Samaras understands these sites not as remote spaces that demand to be mapped, but rather as spaces closely connected to globalized economic and geo-political forces. Her work attempts to symbolically position Antarctica in the neo-liberal order of transposable postmodern architecture of new urban megacities. Which is fitting, as the new Amundsen-Scott Station, one of the buildings she photographs, was operated at the time by a division of Raytheon, a leading company in the weapons industry. One of the consequences of neo-liberalism is to impose a certain degree of uniformity on all cities. Despite Antarctica's extreme climate, the built environment there nevertheless suggests a kind of neo-liberal logic emerging, as evidenced by Samaras's photograph of the submerged Buckminster Fuller dome that makes it appear as if it has been abandoned or left to deteriorate, not because it cannot be used meaningfully, but perhaps because it cannot



Figure 6.9 *Connie Samaras, VALIS, Underneath Amundsen-Scott Station, 2005*

be used profitably. Samaras herself has written on neo-liberalism and why these images of Antarctica belong in a larger series that includes photographs of the built environments in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, among other sites.²³

Like Hersko and Noble, Samaras deliberately plays with the variable space between documentary and fiction that sets her images apart from the public narratives and images of the Heroic Age of exploration. Her photographs represent a shift from an image of the polar regions as representative of the sublime, to the present where the Antarctic is visualized as a place of overwhelming beauty and terror, but this time as a result of anthropogenic climate change and neo-liberalism. Moreover, in Samaras's images, the Antarctic is no longer seen as simply an unearthly place, but also as a strangely fragile site, one where the ice itself becomes an important entity. The built environment seems vulnerable and unstable, as in her work, 'Domes and Tunnel', see Figure 6.7, where the shifting pack ice will cover the Buckminster Fuller dome already slowly sinking in the permafrost, or in 'Antennae Field South Pole', an image of an empty Antarctic landscape that dwarfs a tiny radio antenna standing as the only sign of human habitation.

CONCLUSION

The recent art works of Judit Hersko, Anne Noble, and Connie Samaras have revealed new perspectives from artists who are restaging the politics of gender, sexuality, and climate change in Antarctica from feminist perspectives. Amelia Jones, the contemporary art historian, argues that the most important legacy of feminism is its politics of positionality across the visual.²⁴ By this 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. Their 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 real life suffering and counters the romanticism and fantasies of the transcendence of the body through moral character that characterizes so much of the British discourse in Antarctica in the early twentieth century.²⁵

If Hersko brings us back to the earlier days of polar explorers and the epic by inserting her unknown Jewish woman explorer into her fantasized re-enactment of the Byrd expedition, 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*, tends to be more visceral than Samaras’s photographs 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, whether from the remote regions of American bases in Antarctica or in dioramas of Antarctica in entertainment centers in New Zealand, Japan, or elsewhere.

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 masculine 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. Samaras, Noble, and Hersko are telling stories about an absent subjectivity. But while Hersko uses this as an occasion to make a statement on the invisibility of woman’s place in polar narratives and a lost or obscured perception, 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 artists 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. Herkso 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 offers 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's 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 about climate change, through art history as well as Antarctic discourses. The viewer's 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 threatened as much by human actions as through the agency of geophysical processes alone. Samaras's work is explicit about the fundamentally anthropogenic character of the Antarctic built environment in a way that troubles the assumptions of the Antarctic Treaty System, which defines human activity as being transient and thus inconsequential. 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.

NOTES

1. Nixon 2011, 2–3.
2. Bloom 1993.
3. Bloom, Glasberg and Kay 2008.
4. Bloom and Glasberg 2012.
5. Science and Research News 2014.
6. Nixon 2011, 11.
7. Bampton 1999.
8. McKibben 2012.
9. Chakrabarty 2009.
10. See Barczewski 2007; Collis 2008; Rosner 2008 and 2009; and Dodds 2009.
11. Morley 2010.
12. See Judit Hersko's website: <http://www.judithersko.com/> for images and a full description of her Antarctic, work-in-progress art project, 'From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer.' Also see Hersko 2009 and 2012.
13. Bloom 2006.
14. See Le Guin 1982; Glasberg 2012; and Leane 2009.
15. Hersko has been working with biological oceanographer Victoria Fabry, and her artwork on climate change and planktonic snails is an outgrowth of that collaboration.
16. Benjamin 1999.
17. Caruth 1995, 154.
18. See the first two volumes of a trilogy devoted to her photographic investigations of Antarctica (Noble

- 2011; Jones 2014), as well as Elena Glasberg's writings on Anne Noble's Antarctic photography: Glasberg 2008 and 2012.
19. For reviews of Samaras's Antarctic photographs, see Bloom 2008 and 2013; Carson 2013; Glasberg 2012; Newhouse 2008; Tsatsos 2013; and Viegener 2007.
 20. Samaras 2008.
 21. Samaras names her work after Phillip K. Dick's semi-autobiographical *VALIS* trilogy based on his own claim to have had paranormal experiences. Dick's *VALIS* trilogy is a study of the invasion of technology from the future into the present, established by supernatural intelligence, into the life of an ordinary, present-day man who is having a nervous breakdown. As Samaras indicates in her article 'American Dreams', her photographic work, like Dick's novel, highlights some of the ways that scientific and technological rationality combats but fails to contain the forces of superstition and irrationality. See Samaras 2008.
 22. \$\$\$
 23. Samaras 2008.
 24. Jones 2006.
 25. Bloom 1993, 111–36.

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