Art for the Earth:
we are opposite like that by Himali Singh Soin

Lucia Claudia Fiorella
(University of Udine)

1. *Dear Earth: Art and Hope in a Time of Crisis* (21 Jun – 3 Sep 2023, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London)

Among the various exhibitions burgeoned on the art scene in 2023 and addressing the issue of climate change, *Dear Earth* has brought together some of the best talents among artists whose main concerns are ecological violence, environmental protectionism, and climate-related social injustice. The exhibition showcased 15 male and female artists presenting as singles, duos, or collectives, and working across disciplines from a variety of ethnocultural perspectives. It comprised paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, tapestries, site-specific installations, videos, performances, and even an ecotherapy scheme which led to the creation of a public garden on the rooftop of Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall.[1]

[1] The Grounded Ecotherapy scheme by gardener Paul Pulford combines care practice for people entrusted to social services to a transformative method of planting recuperating Native Americans farming practices and creating a garden for the whole community. If this is not a complete novelty, the use of indigenous technique to grow crops without water certainly is (Carrier 2023, 142).

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However, what characterized and distinguished this show from similar, parallel exhibitions was its hopeful outlook and its relative immediacy of language. Rather than simply documenting ecological catastrophes and contributing to the sense of impotence of those who cannot make the crucial decisions (a feeling often described as “climate doomism”, which is the paralysing perception of one’s insignificance, and may be as detrimental as denial is), the creators of the exhibition selected (and in some cases commissioned) artworks promoting a practical ethics of care and reciprocity in our relationship with the physical environment as well as its plant, animal, and human inhabitants as the only possible way out of the sense of a sealed destiny.

In fact, as the exhibition chief curator Rachel Thomas states in the introduction to the show catalogue, there is a need for “stories of quiet but positive environmental change to inspire new perspectives” (Thomas 2023, 15); and she then quotes a passage from botanist and activist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* stressing the importance of cultivating hope: “We are deluged by information regarding our destruction of the world and hear almost nothing about how to nurture it. […] Our natural inclination to do right by the world is stifled, breeding despair when it should be inspiring action” (Kimmerer 2020, 327). Judging by the huge success her essay collection has enjoyed worldwide in the last decade, the analysis seems to be correct, and the change in strategy may be able to intercept wider audiences as well as recuperate among disillusioned activists. Therefore, even though the Hayward Gallery show did include artists such as Richard Mosse or Imani Jacqueline Brown documenting and representing ecocidal practices and policies which widen deep-seated structural inequalities between the very few who can avoid their destructive impact and the most who are instead severely affected, the overall tone of the ensemble met the curators’ intentions and the visitors’ expectations.

Building on the pioneering work of activist and feminist artists such as Hungarian Agnes Denes (born 1931) and American Andrea Bowers (born 1965), the

exhibition traced an inter-generational – rather than a chronological – path, beginning with the present day and relatively recently established Otobong Nganka (Nigerian-born 1974) and then proceeding to emergent talents (or at least emergent on the international scene) such as Himali Singh Soin (born 1987) or Jenny Kendler (born 1980), so that three generations of (predominantly women) artists were included. The curators astutely contrasted early attempts to reflect on environmental issues (represented by Agnes Denes's exquisite 1970s map projections) with contemporary intersectional approaches. These new perspectives complicate the picture of environmental struggles into the wider scenario of an international demand for a greater economic, social, racial, gender, and also inter-generational justice – as the Fridays For Future movement has brought to the fore, and as Cornelia Parkers (born 1956) focuses on in her *The Future (Sixes and Sevens)*. The need for generational justice is further underlined by the inclusion, in the exhibition catalogue, of the transcription of a speech Greta Thunberg delivered at the Southbank Centre in 2022 for the global launch of her *Climate Book*.

Overall, and as pointed out by Rebecca Empson (2023), the exhibition seemed to be strongly committed to the ideals of prefigurative politics – a phrase designating non-centralized, non-hierarchical sociopolitical movements holding that the future is and should be made in day-to-day practice. Frequently referring to Gandhi's precept "Be the change you want to see in the world", they advocate for a profound transformation of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, what is represented in the show is not so much what already exists but what one would like to bring into existence – and in this sense it is "prefigurative": Agnes Denes's and Himali Singh Soin's manipulations of world maps, for example, resonate and allude to this need to rethink our ways of seeing and being in the world.

This ideological stance – based on an ideal of broad political participation achieved at a local level, and often influenced by anarcho-communist suggestions, spontaneism, experimentation in neo-utopian, transnational communities – expresses a precise idea of the nature and role of art that Rebecca Solnit enunciates in a clear, didactic way in one of the essays opening the catalogue. In her

view, art is very influential; it is requested to play a role in the present crisis, and this role must be just and useful. Art may be informative, but it must be mainly formative, denouncing power, escaping commercial logic, evading the individual in favour of the collective. Art may be a conduit for resistance to intersectionality, an injection of hope, a means to heal the world, and a factor of real progress (Solnit 2023). Himali Singh Soin, whose work I am now going to turn to, clearly shares this view of ethical art, as she stated in 2019: “Art is inherently political. I don’t know about making political art as such, because that tends to be bad. But I do think artists have to be good citizens” (Dawson 2019).

2. Himali Singh Soin: *we are opposite like that* (2018-19, Audio-Visual Installation, Two-Channel Looping Video Projected on a Screen over a Pool of Still Water, 12 min 54 sec)[2]

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors were confronted with an installation by Otobong Nkanga, whose works were given pride of place as the whole show took its lead from her idea of care “as a form of resistance” (Thomas 2023, 16). Yet, upon stepping into the hall, visitors were also engulfed by the music of Soin’s immersive environment, so when they were eventually able to see it in the darkest area of the exhibition ground floor, they had already been introduced to it. The music is an original score for a string quartet created by musician David Soin Tappeser (Soin’s partner in creative as well as personal life) which incorporates late Victorian composer Edward Elgar’s renown chorus for women’s voices and orchestra *The Snow* (1894, rev. 1903) as well as sounds from Soin’s video footage of Arctic locations (she had made an expedition to both poles in 2017). Her piece – which is part of an extended project by the same title comprising a number

[2] Excerpts from the video can be seen at https://www.himalisinghsoin.com/we-are-opposite-like-that. Soin’s work title is written in lower case, which is a statement per se. All images in this paper are courtesy of the artist.

of artifacts ranging from poetry to an artbook, prints, textile, sculpture, performances and moving image (2017-22) – is in fact conceived as a sort of reclamation of the Polar regions from the blankness which has been instrumental to far too many colonial enterprises – which to a scholar of literature as I am, and a sophisticated reader as Soin is (she graduated in English literature), is a clear reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The supposed emptiness and wilderness of the Poles were indeed used to justify the savage extractivism of the first half of the twentieth century, which was put on hold only by the establishment of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959 (see Fiorella 2020) and the Arctic Council in 1996. Yet, international appetites are far from being subdued, and, paradoxically, they are even enhanced by the transition to a post-fossil fuel society, as electrification requires an enormous amount of rare earth minerals.[3]

2.1. An Indian Woman in the Arctic

Soin has recovered a story and a lesson from this imperialistic practice visiting the forlorn site of Ny London, or New London – a deserted mining settlement in Blomstrandhalvøya, Svalbard, which was established in 1911 by the English Northern Exploration Company with the aim of excavating its substantial marble deposits. However, upon delivering their precious load in England, the entrepreneurs found that the stone blocks had crumbled due to evaporating permafrost – which proved to be their nemesis and put an end to the marble rush in 1920. Yet, as it was to be expected, the place was never restored to its original state, and in fact Ny London is today visited as a "cultural heritage site", a treasure of industrial archaeology – even though not even the Norwegian Polar Institute website, on which I have drawn for these facts, can fail to notice that "the remains of the

[3] For a comprehensive overview of the history of extractivism in the Arctic, see Sörlin et al. 2022. On the representation of extractivism in contemporary visual arts, see Fowkes & Fowkes 2022 (ch. 2 "Scars of extraction").

facility would perhaps be regarded as scrap elsewhere, and may seem like disgraceful and disfiguring litter in the otherwise magnificent and pristine natural environment" (Norwegian Polar Institute 2015).

Image 1: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

In Soin's film, their alien presence insults the fragile surface of the island shore, but her focus is not on the temporary, albeit destructive, imprints of human raiders: only a tiny fraction of the film shows shots of the remains – which is allusive of the relativity of human time if compared to the "deep time" of the Earth, that is, geological, as opposed to historical, time.[4] She has conceived of Polar ice as an

[4] Soin worked on the same theme in a parallel work (*Too Much and Not Enough*, 2022), a sculpture representing the miniscule Deception Island, located in South Shetlands, Antarctica. By reproducing the island features in marble, she makes a similar point on Nature's capacity to resist human extractivism. The island, turned into a slaughtering site of seals and whales for over a century, was eventually abandoned due to a volcanic eruption in 1967, which to environmentalists cannot but appear as Nature's sickness at ruinous human presence.

archive of stories risking extinction, and she has conjured up a sort of *genius loci* acted by herself: a brown, female body in the Arctic, a striking decolonial statement responding to nearly two centuries of masculine narratives of Polar expeditions.

Image 2: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

The tiny figure – which may well be a revenant from the colonial unconscious – materializes out of a block of ice and begins to walk on the shore, wrapped in an emergency blanket which sadly reminds us of migrants approaching Mediterranean shores, fleeing hunger and violence – a reference reinforced by the Indian or Sikh turban she is wearing; but her boots and leggings are also reminiscent of an astronaut or an alien, suggesting the idea of a future including the past as well as the present, in what Soin calls South Asian futurism, or "Subcontinentment".[5]

[5] From her website: "Subcontinentment is a manifesto that stems from my fieldwork in the polar circles, where I was confronted with my alienness as a brown body in a landscape

2.2. Beyond the Binary

A voiceover, poetic commentary spoken by the artist – who refers to herself primarily as a *poet*, and this is a significant point –[6] tells her loosely-connected narrative in five scenes of different length. The performer is to be understood as the embodiment of Polar landscape, "an elder" delivering an invigorating message ("the ice fortified her") to those who are willing to listen; a message in the third, feminine person ("She'd take the third person over you"),[7] and a testament against the antipodal semiotics of the poles, which is an attempt to overcome the Cartesian dualism of the I-you, male-female, North-South alternatives. These binary oppositions have structured Western civilization and epistemology since the antiquity, when polarity par excellence was conceived, and Antarctica was to all effects invented to provide a complementary counterpart to the Arctic. Binary logic has eventually sustained a system of power and exploitation that has persisted for centuries, legitimized by both religion and science, and made invincible by technological development. This is the central theme of Soin's work, as foregrounded in the title and often declared in various interviews and on her website: "In fact, I don't think binaries exist at all […] And if we think about any binary, we realize that they are actually not that far away from each other" (Wilch 2022, E11).

The first scene of the video visually translates this idea of polarity as a misconception by means of a two-channel sequence regularly interrupted by a single-channel shot. The former shows at a quick pace a series of photos of the Svalbard

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commonly used for outer-space simulation experiments. As part of a series of fictional ice archives, south asian futurism, renamed subcontinentment, anti-chronicles the geopoetic links between the poles and the subcontinent" (Singh Soin n.d.). The artwork can be listened to at https://soundcloud.com/st_age/subcontinentment-2020-duration-1022english.

[6] See for example her introduction of herself in the video presenting her *The Third Pole/El Tercer Polo* exhibition at Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza (Stir World 2023).

[7] All quotes are sourced from the video transcript courteously provided by the artist.

coast and a vessel – bare rock, bare ground sparse with blocks of ice, remains of mammals and birds strewn along the seashore, two portholes, cordage. Most pictures are inverted or rotated, which is a way to undermine the up and down opposition, or an allusion to the difficulties in navigating the North Sea even when provided with adequate instruments. It can also be a hint to the fact that Polar history is now glitching in the technological sublime – an idea emphasised by the 5 seconds, single-channel shot of a mountain wall pixelating and reflecting on the water which punctuates the two-channel sequence. This wall of bare rock – to all effects immersed in a pool of still water – is allusive of glacial melting, and repetition helps stress the point that we are losing mountains of ice. At the Hayward Gallery recurrence was further duplicated by the reflection of the video in the real pool of water underneath.

Image 3: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

The sense of loss is moreover emphasised by the third person narrative. As Benveniste famously put it, the third person is in fact the *non-person*, the one excluded from direct communication – the one who is not there, who is not

present.[8] As if she were reminiscent of that construal of the third person, Soin's narrative is in the *past* tense as well as in the third person, so as to describe the ineffable, the unattainable, what is beyond the human, post-human, or more-than-human – according to expressions that have become common currency in the art of the Anthropocene.[9]

Soin's voice from the past tells a greater story than human history but it is capable of some significant insight on that smaller scale, focusing on the transmutation of Polar landscape from the Medieval *locus horridus* into the Romantic *locus almus* – a conversion epitomised by Burke's codification of the sublime. Among the Romantics, Coleridge, the Shelleys and Byron thoroughly explored the imaginative potentials of icescapes as *coincidentia oppositorum* (Wilson 2003, 34), incidentally playing a significant role in the birth of glaciology in the 19th century (Clarke 1987, 4). In particular, Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni* praising the majesty of Mount Blanc, constitutes a touchstone in the history of mountain theology, which has its roots in the antiquity; and Soin's prose

[8] "In the first two persons, there are both a person involved and a discourse concerning that person. 'I' designates the one who speaks and at the same time implies an utterance about 'I'; in saying 'I', I cannot not be speaking of [others but] myself. In the second person, 'you' is necessarily designated by 'I' and cannot be thought of outside a situation set up by an 'I'; and at the same time, 'I' states something as the predicate of 'you'. But in the third person a predicate is really stated, only it is outside 'I-you'; this form is thus an exception to the relationship by which 'I' and 'you' are specified. Consequently, the legitimacy of this form as a 'person' is to be questioned. […] The consequence must be formulated clearly: the 'third person' is not a 'person'; it is really the verbal form whose function is to express the non-person" (Benveniste 1971, 197-198). Working on the idea of the third as a sort of middle voice able to overcome the binary logic, Soin has developed another scientific suggestion, namely the idea of the Himalayas (of which she bears the name) as a third pole: an "equatorial" pole which seems to be a contradiction in terms, and yet it makes the exotic presence of an equatorial woman on the ice possible and legitimate.

[9] See Davis & Turpin (2015, 6-8) for a useful survey of these designations.

poem is certainly reminiscent of Coleridge in her almost exact quotation of his "suspension of disbelief" in scene 3 ("She'd take misdirection, indecision, intuition. Suspension over disbelief"). In this which is the climax scene of the whole work – a climax emphasised by a *crescendo* of the narrative voice – the artist is opposing or integrating an intuitive epistemology to technological knowledge: stuck and lost in the Arctic, when chronometers and compasses fell short and the sky was clouded, "sailors were down to their kidneys. Because kidneys contain these fluids [such that] you're able to tell how you are placed in accordance with the seas. You really have to *become sea* in order to know your way" (Wilch 2022, E15). Soin learnt about these and other sailing practices and wisdom in 2017 as part of a residency program in the international territory of Svalbard. There, she and her fellow participants were taught how to navigate a traditionally rigged vessel in the Arctic sea, how to read charts and maps (which resurface regularly in her entire work), how to plot a course, and stay on it.

2.3. The Alien Invader

The residency in Svalbard was fruitful in other respects, as on that occasion Soin met a science historian, Alexis Rider, who was working on the Polar sublime and scientific dissemination in the Victorian age. The second and the fourth scene of *we are opposite like that* are the result of the collaboration between the artist and the scientist, in an ideal composition of fields of knowledge usually perceived as quite distant one from the other. These scenes focus on the ideological construction of the ice as a potential invader in Victorian popular press and culture: they re-create the narrative of the alien invading British landscape by manipulating visual scientific archive material such as the *Erratic Blocks or Bowlders Resting on Glaciated Rocks in Foreground, Coolin Mountains, Skye*[10] or artworks as

[10] Picture 4 illustrating *The Age of Ice* (1874, 652).

Gustave Doré's *The New Zealander*.[11] In fact, among the many anxieties afflicting the Victorian public just at the time when their country was ruling the greater part of the world – a malaise known as Victorian pessimism –,[12] the paradoxical fear of being invaded made not only alien human races but also alien animals or plants or even inorganic matter (such as the boulder) unwelcome:

> With space destabilised and time porous, the illusion of ice as a looming cosmic monster sends shudders across the British Empire.
> Interglacial beings worry over the annihilation of their perceived centrality in the world. The potent imaginary of a sublime terra incognita is superimposed on the landscapes of home (sc. 4, transcript).

As the many citations and interpolations from archive sources of all sorts – fictional and non-fictional, popular as well as academical – illustrate, a significant portion of late Victorian society was paranoid about the possibility of an impending glaciation, which was to be the culmination of the Little Ice Age in Europe – that is, a prolonged span of time from the 14th to the 19th centuries when average temperatures in the Northern hemisphere dropped by 2° C (see Blom 2019). Scientists such as astronomer Robert S. Ball – referenced and briefly quoted in Soin's film – theorized a causal connection between the Earth's orbit and the coming ice age. The conclusion to his influential *The Cause of an Ice Age* reads as follows:

> Slumbering in the Arctic regions lies at this moment the agent of the most dire of calamities. That agent has once, and more than once, been aroused into activity.

[11] See Doré and Jerrold 1970 (188-189). *The New Zealander* is the final plate of the series; it is a sort of *vanitas* reworking the trope of the colonial visiting the ruins of London after its fall. In Soin's work it is referred to as *The Southern Savage*.

[12] On the rise of pessimism in late Victorian age and its connections with the spread of Darwinism, see Lane 2011.

> Time after time it has happened that the planets have by their influence on the earth's orbit brought down on our temperate regions the devastations of the great ice-sheet. From its normal home at the Poles the great glaciation has spread southward; a sheet of ice and snow hundreds or thousands of feet thick has crept from the highlands of Norway and Sweden, has invaded Central Europe as far as Saxony, while the greater part of Great Britain was also submerged by an icy covering (Ball 1891, 170).

This perceived climate crisis was adequately and repeatedly ridiculed in *Punch*: Soin beautifully animates a cartoon depicting polar bears breaking through the crowd of London's weekenders.[13]

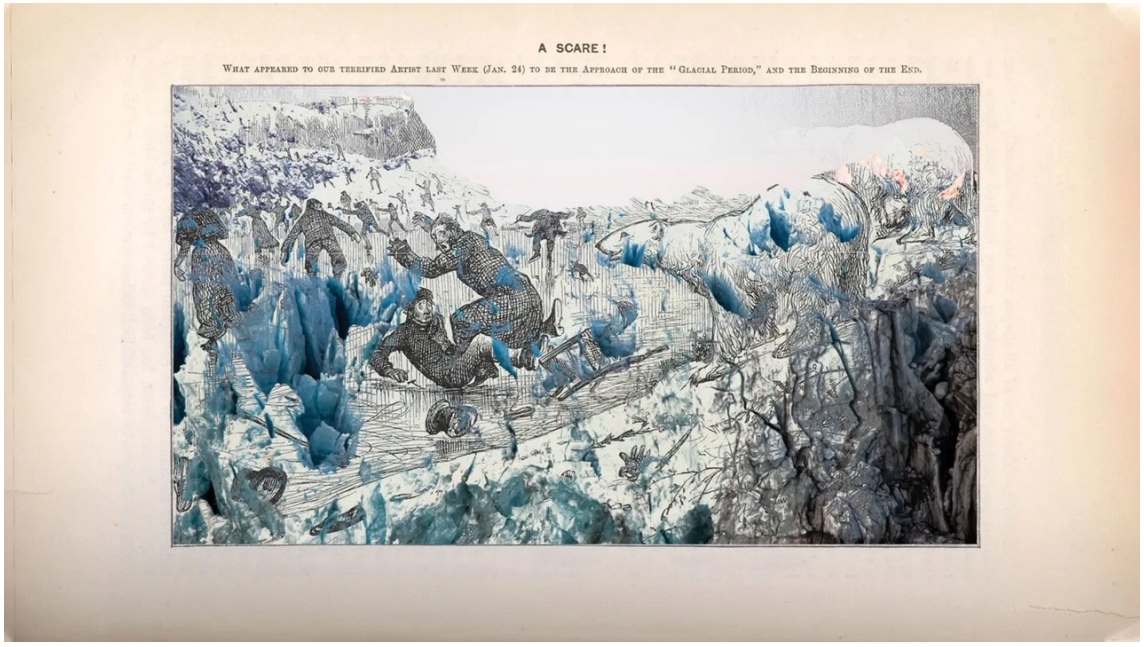

Image 4: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

[13] In the magazine, the picture is accompanied by a hilarious *Glacial Diary*: "February 21. Palaeolithic pterodactyl shooting commences. Gas extinct. Westminster Abbey lighted by fireworks. Sell my last damaged hot bottle to a distinguished personage for a magic lantern (lamp trimmed). Polar bears, without being admitted after seven, appear in the pit at the Haymarket Theatre, and are addressed courteously by the Management" (*All Froze Out* 1881, 46).

The press and popular fiction exploited the sensational aspects of stories of Polar explorations, touching upon contended issues such as the authority of scientific discourse and its legitimation processes. If that context may be missed by the unaware viewer of the film, one cannot fail to see the close parallel between Victorian obsessions for climate change and our present condition and concerns; and from our perspective of melting glaciers and rising temperatures, one may also grasp the sad irony of history, and realise that the real alien was not the erratic block on British soil but the British miners in Svalbard – a presence not less alien than that of an Indian woman.

2.4. Repurposing Found Materials

The way Soin is capable to make art and meaning by using found materials can further be appreciated by looking not only at what she has taken in but also at what she has left out. Edward Elgar's *The Snow* is a case in point, as the melody has been reworked but the lyrics have been dropped. The chorus text – which was written by Elgar's wife, the poetess and writer Caroline Alice Roberts – is a religious meditation on the importance of preserving one's integrity and hope in spite of the many hardships and challenges one may face in life.[14] As already mentioned, the song was meant for women's voices, which is a clear illustration of the moralising function ascribed to the feminine, with women expected to

[14] The full text of the lyrics follows: "O snow, which sinks so light, / Brown earth is hid from sight / O soul, be thou as white as snow, / O snow, which falls so slow, / Dear earth quite warm below; / O heart, so keep thy glow/Beneath the snow. // O snow, in thy soft grave / Sad flow'rs the winter brave; / O heart, so soothe and save, as does the snow. / The snow must melt, must go, / Fast, fast as water flow. / Not thus, my soul, O sow / Thy gifts to fade like snow. // O snow, thou'rt white no more, / Thy sparkling too, is o'er; / O soul, be as before / Was bright the snow. / Then as the snow all pure, / O heart be, but endure; / Through all the years full sure, / Not as the snow" (Roberts 1879, 9-10).

maintain the moral fabric of Victorian society. If the didactic message seems to be transparent at the beginning ("O soul, be thou as white as snow"), the imagery used is in fact deeply ambivalent, with the snow conveying both the ideas of tenderness and sterility ("O snow, in thy soft grave"), purity and inconstancy ("O snow, thou'rt white no more"); it is a shelter as well as a tomb, fantastic and spectral at the same time – a veritable semeiotic plenum, as I have noted elsewhere (Fiorella 2007), and again, a coincidence of opposites. The contradictory exhortation of the closing stanza, where the listener is invited to both be and *not* to be like the snow – which is pure but short-lived – confirms and emphasizes this ambivalence.

One may speculate on the reasons for choosing this particular piece, and there may be an autobiographical resonance. Caroline Alice Roberts was born in India like Soin; Soin and Tappeser are an artistic duo as well as a married couple, just like the Elgars. One may also note that the exhibition title words "Dear Earth" are actually mentioned in Roberts's lyrics. Yet, I believe the most obvious reason is that to the wider public this famous chorus is reminiscent of melting (snow-melting, and therefore ice-melting) which is materialised in front of their eyes by means of the pool of still water underlying the screen: an ominous preview of our planet's likely future, incidentally the opposite of what Victorians feared.

The pool remains always visible in the foreground, even when the film ends and the screen vanishes into a few seconds of darkness – which is symbolic of final annihilation. Nonetheless, Soin strikes a perfect balance between giving warning and offering hope, creating an exquisite as well as thought-provoking work of art. She strikes a remarkable balance also between a sort of neo-Romantic inspiration and a harmonious, symmetrical, even classical formal solution, with its five-scene score and circular structure. In scene 5, in fact, the camera returns to the performer walking on the shore, the two-channel sequence, the mountain reflection on the water, effectively closing where it began. And it is in this final scene that the voiceover commentary becomes strongly reminiscent of another celebrated nautical poem, Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, which Soin's work seems to be perfectly attuned with. I am now going to focus on the lyrical

and rhetorical aspects of the installation script – which I have been referring to passingly so far – as a whole.

2.5. A Prose Poem

When inquired about how she navigates her artistic approach across different media, Soin replied: “I always say that I start with the written word, and then it transforms – into immersive environments, into moving image, into performance, into being able to give those words, essentially, a sort of life of their own” (Wilch 2022, E10). In *we are opposite like that*, that written word has resulted in a combination of verse and prose, alternating in the five scenes of the transcript. Scenes 1, 2, and 3 are cast in free verse, mostly stanzas, whereas Scenes 2 and 4 are structured as a loosely organised narrative, partly original, partly sourced from archival materials. Poetry and prose perform different functions, and the difference is further emphasised by the fact that only the poetry sections are actually voiced by the artist, whereas the prose is given as running captions. Moreover, poetry and prose are accompanied by distinct musical scores. The prose is more bound to the necessity of *explaining* Victorian paranoia about an impending ice age; accordingly, the composer clearly references Edgar, yet modifies the original and emphasizes the shift between Victorian and contemporary times. The poetry is instead aimed at *conjuring images* that are not necessarily logically or coherently connected; likewise, the score for these sections is non-melodic, with the pizzicati frequently in sinc with the editing.[15] The lyrical images are subjective and may be only partially intelligible – a “translucency” which Soin elevates to a compositional principle and is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s “luminous halo”. Indeed, in what she termed “a mytho-poetic manifesto” of her work, she defines translucency as “both the right to illegibility and the desire for interpretation”

[15] I would like to thank my friend and fellow academic Roberto Calabretto, professor of Music History, for his insightful contribution.

(Singh Soin 2023) – in other words, the reclamation of an in-betweenness resisting the conventional quest for meaning.

The tension between clarity and opacity translates into the undecidability of form, in the constant oscillation between poetry and prose. Scene 1, for example, opens as poetry: despite the unmetrical setup of thought, the passage retains the visual architecture of verse as well as other cohesive features that are typically lyrical:

> A clear inverted mountain floating above the horizon.
> For historians the present had lost itself over time.
> There were no shadows
> Echoes of no surface.
> Nobody left to be beautiful.
> The ghost of what-was-to-come singed.

The first line focuses on image over narrative by omitting the main verb and effectively suspending time, which is probably the ultimate goal of poetry – to transcend the prosaic time of the world. The idea of a suspension is then reinforced in the second line by the unexpected mention of a "present" that has been "lost" (where the past is by definition the portion of human time which goes irretrievably lost). "Lost" then reconnects with "left" in the fifth line; and in general, the suggestion of some momentous loss is given by the succession of words expressing absence ("shadows", "echoes", "ghost") and by the repetition of negative syntagms ("no shadows", "no surface", "nobody"). The ghostliness of the scene is then in tune with the idea of extinction, of a landscape "haunted by past ways of life" as well as "by imagined futures" of rubble, as sketched in the introduction of an influential anthology on landscapes in the Anthropocene, that Soin mentions in the interview given to Wilch (2022, E12).[16]

[16] The reference is to Tsing et al. 2017, G2.

Scene 2 leans heavily towards prose; yet, a closer inspection reveals a meticulously crafted prose that is rich in poetic features:

> A foundling, an immense and immovable boulder, lies in a field of unfamiliar rocks. Native to Spitsbergen, this wanderer has found itself adrift in Britain.
>
> What terrible force could have moved this monolith? Wind, water, eruption, erosion: none of these natural cycles explain the foundlings scattered across British land. […]
>
> Rumbling and grinding in a deep and frigid past, thick sheets of ice had dragged material, scratched surfaces, and pulverised rock.

Here the *staccato* paragraphs, all of similar length, imitate the visual layout of regular stanzas; the repetition of “foundling”, “ice”, “rock”, tightens what is initially given as distinct units, as a sort of invisible *enjambment*; several alliterations (“what”, “wind”, “water”; “immense”, “immovable”) and alliterating consonant clusters (such as “*gr*inding”, “*fr*igid”, “*dr*agged”, “*scr*atched”) contribute to the overall effect of reading or listening to a poem. Finally, the vocabulary chosen to refer to the subject of this scene (the “boulder” displaced by ice) is not as objective as we would expect in the description of a natural phenomenon. The “monolith” – supposedly coarse inanimate matter – is humanized; it has been given poetic dignity in an exquisitely human kind of activity, which is artistic practice. It is a “foundling”, which finds itself in an “unfamiliar” environment, eliciting the readers’ sympathy. It is also a “wanderer”, who has lost its way and is “adrift” – a solitude any reader can relate to. Yet, the main point here is that the boulder is not used to project human feelings or symbolize universal states of the human condition; rather, it is presented as a fellow natural being from another time, having a longer-than-human story deserving attention and respect.

The proposition for a new foundation of human relationships with the natural environment is further protracted and intensified in Scene 3, where the female subject seems to have a sexual intercourse with ice ("the ice moved through her for a few hours").[17] The image of a physical union with inorganic matter is reinforced by a *crescendo* in both pitch and speed of the narrative voice, culminating in what may be interpreted as an orgasm in the last two lines, with "the opacity leak[ing] out of her blood and her bones" and "the heat" being "dispersed".[18]

Scene 4 follows as a prose pause focusing on Victorians' confrontational, imperialistic approach to the Arctic, construed as an inaccessible, "looming cosmic monster" claiming victims among the boldest pioneers of coeval polar expeditions; in this perspective, their distance from the North Pole proves to be spiritual as well as physical – and arguably also very similar to current neo-imperialistic schemes over the Poles.

Scene 5 returns to the Arctic visitor, whose ecstatic but necessarily short-lived fusion with the ice has given way to the awareness of the ineffable distance between human and geological time (the word "distance" is repeated at least four times in the space of a few lines: "the great distance," "our distance," "distances," "long-distance"). This realization is expressed through the image of "her broken chronometer," signifying the inadequacy of human standards of measurement and/or the transformative impact of the polar experience: her timepiece has ceased functioning, "love letters" are "congealed," and something is, or has been, "petrified," as the subsequent text reveals:

[17] The suggestion is confirmed by the dedication of the piece, in the credits following the video, to "Devra Freelander, who literally made love to ice", an artist who explored climate change and geology from an ecofeminist perspective and who was killed still in her twenties in a bicycle accident.

[18] The physical union with natural elements, such as animal, plants, ground, stones is a common motif in contemporary ecological and ecofeminist art.

Dead reckoning
Adjusting for parallax
Distances were deceptive due to atmospheric clarity and the absence of trees.
The gloop of algae, and nets and straws and long-distance love letters congealed the ocean into a jungle.
Gelatinous gossip.
Quartz, astral, petrified.
Phosphorescent flares.

"Dead reckoning" is a navigational term, indicating a method of establishing one's current location by using a previously determined position when astronomical observations are not possible and there are no identifiable landmarks. In other words, it is a kind of guesswork, subject to error, and it has become a synonymic phrase for a doomsday, or a settlement of accounts. The sense of bewilderment and impending disaster (a slow and silent demise) recalls Coleridge's Mariner and his haunted ship sailing between the Tropics and the South Pole, and then the Tropics again, caught between extreme cold and intolerable heat. Soin captures this in-betweenness through the image of the ocean congealed into a jungle, which fuses the characteristic landscapes of the poles and the equator in an ideal *coincidentia oppositorum* dismantling binarism. A further allusion to *The Rhyme* may be seen in the "phosphorescent flares" – the emission of light without appreciable heat – which resonates with "the shining white", "the elfish light [which] fell off in hoary flakes" of the celebrated water-snakes passage (lines 275-276), when the eerie beauty of the slimy creatures prompts the Mariner into the blessing which will be able to break the spell. If the reference to *The Rhyme* in Soin's text is not obvious, the resonances are striking, as Coleridge's ballad can be seen as an allegory of the present state of humans' relationship with Nature – stuck, as we are, in a languishing world because of a curse that we have brought upon ourselves. Yet, Coleridge's poem, just like Soin's, is also a tale of potential redemption and reconciliation, as it is evidenced by the last four lines of her poem:

She went inside the boat.
Anchored never too close to shore.
She was thawing. Dripping afterlife.
Still, a thin haze persisted. She was translucent.

The visitor prepares to leave the icepack, boarding the vessel which has never touched the coast – a sign of the divergence between technology and wilderness. She is warming up and dripping melting ice; yet, the transformative nature of her euphoric connection with the Arctic is reflected in her shining expression.

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