
Terra Incognita: Exhibiting Ice in the Anthropocene

JULIE REISS

One of the most widely recognized impacts of human activity on Earth is global climate change caused by trapped greenhouse gases that warm the atmosphere. Despite efforts by climate change deniers to debunk the scientific evidence, “97% or more of scientists agree that humans are significantly contributing to global warming and that global warming is happening now.”¹ Geologically, glacial ice functions as a sentinel for this warming process. In addition to evidence of climate change contained in ice core samples, retreating glaciers are a visible marker of the impact of rising temperatures on the planet.² Since 1980, the Arctic ice sheet has decreased in size by 50 percent and is now at an historic low. Glacier retreat is regularly in the news.³ It follows that some of the more iconic images employed in climate change communication are of melting glaciers. In the past fifteen years, paralleling the presence of representations of melting glaciers in the news, a number of artists have incorporated ice harvested from glaciers into their work. Unlike artworks made from manufactured ice, which have also periodically appeared,⁴ artworks made from glacial ice involve geographical displacement of material from remote sites and careful transport to a new location. Their remote origins and their innately fragile properties spark questions. Are they to be understood as rather obvious attempts to raise awareness of climate change—an awareness that would ideally lead to some sort of behavior change or action—or are they more complex in their exploration of cultural attitudes

that led to the Anthropocene? What are the conceptual differences between them?

Knowledge of these differences is an important step. As Marilyn Strathern via Donna Haraway posits, it matters what stories tell stories, or in this case, what visions create visions.⁵ In order to change a story or a thought, you first have to know what it is. Outside of science, the Anthropocene is “a particular way of understanding the world,”⁶ ranging from stewardship of nature to the idea of planetary management, and a range of such perspectives can also be found in these artworks, making them effective starting points for discussion.

Tavares Strachan created *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (The Arctic Ice Project, 2004-8)* while an M.F.A. student at Yale. He travelled to the Alaskan Arctic and sent a four-and-a-half-ton piece of ice, neatly cut as a cube, back to his former elementary school in Nassau in the Bahamas. It then went on exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. In both venues, the ice was prevented from melting by a specially designed and constructed solar-powered refrigerated glass case. Strachan has described growing up in the tropical climate of the Bahamas and his fascination with the idea of the Arctic landscape, leading him ultimately to journey there. In making the trek, Strachan takes his place in the lineage of artists who ventured to extreme northern climes

and found ways to represent the strange white landscape they found there.⁷ Strachan, however, is not only representing the Alaskan Arctic by bringing a piece of it back with him. Displacing the ice suggests other issues as well, as presented by the Brooklyn Museum, “including the realities of climate change, our notion of what is valuable, and the immigrant’s experience of displacement.”⁸ The sense of displacement is conveyed as the ice becomes a stand-in for the artist. As Strachan had to wear protective clothing so he would not freeze in Alaska, the relocated ice had to stay in a protected micro-environment so that it would not melt. It was preserved as something exotic and rare, a specimen reminiscent of moon rocks brought back to Earth by astronauts. And as with moon rocks, it can seem nearly inconceivable that this generic-looking block of ice came from so far away.

The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want was realized because of the technology that makes it possible for humans to keep things frozen on a small scale even as we are causing melting on a large scale. Strachan specifically

references refrigeration, as the installation at the Brooklyn Museum included photographs of low-tech ice machines in the Bahamas. On a large scale, his gesture is an attempt to unite the global north with the global south. It demonstrates “the miracles of technology, which can use one extreme of temperature to produce another.”⁹ This refers to Strachan’s use of solar panels to power the refrigeration that kept the ice cold, not the refrigeration that permitted its safe transport out of the Arctic. The format of Strachan’s work also suggests another idea. Bill McKibben wrote in *The End of Nature* that currently “nature is being deprived of its independence.”¹⁰ Strachan’s trapped yet protected ice block perhaps unintentionally illustrates his statement.

Another way of understanding this idea is that Strachan’s installation is perpetuating a separation-based starting point, rather than what Joanna Zylińska refers to in *A Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* as the universal starting point, one which would acknowledge the “shared materiality of the universe, which is another way of saying that everything is made up of



Stefano Cagol, *The Ice Monolith*, 2013. Photo: Stefano Cagol.

the same stuff—although not necessarily the same way.”¹¹ For Zylinska, a minimal ethics for the Anthropocene includes “the recognition of the entangled positioning of the human, in, or rather with, the universe, and a uniquely human responsibility for that universe.”¹² Strachan’s refrigerated ice block communicates an ambiguous message: it is protected by refrigeration, but it is also displaced, and has become a curiosity and an object of aesthetic contemplation. As this particular piece of ice has no autonomy, by extension neither does the rest of the glacier in a warming world.

A major and valid criticism of the term Anthropocene is that it posits a single model of man, when in fact the destructive impact of human activity on the planet is skewed to the most economically powerful sectors which represent a small percentage of the world’s population. The question has rightfully been posed, “Who is the human in the Anthropocene?”¹³ Stefano Cagol’s work titled *The Ice Monolith* addresses this issue. It consisted of a neatly cut cube of ice measuring 200 x 120 x 50 cm, harvested from the Swiss Alps and brought to the Venice Biennale in June, 2013, where it was left to melt in public view on the Riva Cà di Dio along the lagoon.

Like Strachan’s *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want*, *The Ice Monolith* involved a block of ice that was cut, displaced, and transported. Unlike Strachan’s work, once Cagol’s ice arrived in a warm climate, it had no protective chamber but was deliberately left to melt, a reminder that the rest of the ice in the Alps and elsewhere is headed towards the same fate.

The Ice Monolith was Cagol’s contribution to the exhibition in the Maldives Pavilion, a group show by an international roster of artists that addressed the human impact of rising sea levels due to climate change. The low-lying islands of the Maldives, the lowest country on the planet, are under immediate threat from flooding, while that population contributes only minimally to the greenhouse gases that are causing climate change.¹⁴ Cagol created a video of the ice block melting, which was shown on a continuous loop, speeded up, in the Maldives Pavilion for the duration of the Biennale. It is questionable whether many people saw the video component given the remote location of the pavilion itself. While the ice block component of Cagol’s piece lasted, it brought part of the Maldives exhibition into a densely populated and heavily trafficked section of Venice, demanding although not always getting attention as people hurried by. The rest of the exhibition, titled “Portable Nation” in reference to the very real possibility that the population of the Maldives will be forced to move due to flooding, was held in

a peeling wreck of a building in the neighborhood of Costello, far from the permanent national pavilions in the Giardini, a physical reminder of the Maldives’ peripheral position on the world stage. By its placement in both locations, as ice and as video, Cagol’s *The Ice Monolith* presents this economic and political inequality and links it to global warming.¹⁵

Venice’s own precarious position made it a particularly meaningful site for Cagol’s work. Venice is sinking due to rising sea levels and the extraction of ground water and methane gas in the vicinity of the Laguna. The city’s vulnerability is evident as its architecture has visible water damage, and there is regular flooding in popular tourist locations such as San Marco. A multi-million dollar project called the MOSE project is underway and involves the installation of mobile gates on the seabed floor that will raise barriers when high tides are expected.¹⁶ The high cost of the MOSE project underscores the hierarchy in which solutions are found for the effects of climate change, and Cagol implicitly addresses this environmental inequality. Through the different positioning of the two components of *The Ice Monolith*, he tries to close “the social distance engendered by inequality [which] masks collective understanding and awareness of the immediacy of climate impacts.”¹⁷

Olafur Eliasson’s ice installation titled *Your waste of time* was roughly concurrent with Cagol’s *The Ice Monolith*.¹⁸ Eliasson’s installation consisted of large, irregularly shaped pieces of ice that had broken off Iceland’s largest glacier, Vatnajökull. The eight-hundred-year-old chunks of ice were shown in a refrigerated gallery in a group exhibition titled *Dark Optimism* at MoMA/P.S. 1 on Long Island City in the summer of 2013. The exhibition was part of Expo 1: New York, a multi-site series of events and displays dedicated to ecological problems. The continuous refrigeration for the ice in *Your waste of time* was powered by solar panels on P.S. 1’s roof. The chill of the room, cold even by the standards of air-conditioned spaces in New York in summer, was a physical reminder of the temperatures needed back in Iceland to keep the glacier frozen. Eliasson’s goal in bringing the glacier pieces to the public was to foster a connection to the effects of climate change.¹⁹

Despite his use of solar panels, Eliasson was criticized in the press for the resources spent to bring the ice intact from Iceland to New York. Ken Johnson, reviewing *Dark Optimism* for the *New York Times*, voiced this critique: “The obvious lesson of Mr. Eliasson’s installation... is that global warming is wreaking havoc on nature. But I couldn’t help wondering: how much power does it take to keep the room so cold?... Does raising awareness of a phenomenon that most viewers already know



Olafur Eliasson, *Ice Watch*, 2014. 12 Ice blocks. City Hall Square, Copenhagen, 2014. Photo: Anders Sone Berg. ©Olafur Eliasson



Tavares Strachan, *Me and You (North Pole Ice and Cloned North Pole Ice)*, 2013. North pole ice, fabricated ice, 2 freezer units, 2 steel stands. 50 ¾ x 24 ½ inches (129 x 75 x 62 cm) each. Exhibited: Polar Eclipse, Bahamas Pavilion, 2013 Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the Artist, Photography by Tom Powel Imaging.

make it worth the energy drain?”²⁰ Possibly in response to this line of criticism, one year later, in 2014, Eliasson took his concept into the street with *Ice Watch*, installed from October 26-29 outdoors in the City Hall Square in Copenhagen with no refrigeration. He transported one hundred tons of glacial ice in twelve huge, irregularly shaped chunks from a fjord in Greenland directly to the public square, reaching a wider and potentially more diverse audience than at a museum or a gallery.

The choice of site and timing was highly specific. *Ice Watch* was timed to coincide with the publishing of the Fifth Assessment Report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), so the environmental agenda of the work was implicit.²¹ Eliasson acknowledged the resources spent to ship the ice in refrigerated containers from Greenland to Copenhagen, but felt it was worth it, saying “With *Ice Watch*,

the ephemerality... introduces an urgency to the work—we are running out of time.”²²

It is difficult to gauge whether having a direct experience with pieces of a glacier, either in a museum or gallery or even on the street, effectively connects people to the realities of climate change. These pieces of glacier are a synecdoche, and in that sense alone may always be inadequate: how would these pieces ever convey the whole? But *Ice Watch* may have failed on other levels. Something of the arrangement of the ice chunks, arranged like a watch or clock around which the viewer had to navigate, evokes minimalist sculpture and its emphasis on viewer interaction. In the triad of object-space-viewer, as Robert Morris explained in “Notes on Sculpture” in 1967, the object becomes less self-important,²³ and importance shifts onto the phenomenological experience of the viewer. When the object in question is a piece of a glacier, sharing the space

arguably undermines the intended environmental point. In a video of *Ice Watch* taken by the artist and posted on Vimeo, it appears that the impulse of the public upon first encountering the ice was to photograph it with their phones, kick it, or break off pieces of it. Children licked it.²⁴ The ice was treated as either a novelty that likely made it from people's iPhones onto social media or some sort of unwelcome curiosity. Taking photographs of the ice turned a direct visceral experience into a mediated, visual one. Breaking off pieces and kicking the ice expresses indifference to the point of hostility, indicative of at best a disrespectful and at worst a destructive impulse. Eliasson is hoping to get people to show good will towards nature, embrace it and want to take care of it, but with this model, "nature is seen as having little or no remaining autonomy and agency. It is dependent on 'our' good management and goodwill."²⁵ This goodwill is insufficient and capricious.

The most provocative of all the artworks under discussion here was a pair of small objects titled *Me and You (North Pole Ice and Cloned North Pole Ice)*, that was part of Tavares Strachan's multi-media installation in the Bahamian pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. The artwork consists of two small glass vitrines standing side by side, each containing an identically shaped and sized piece of ice: one sourced from the North Pole, and one its clone.

Strachan reportedly had scientists at Yale University make the clone. While it sounds like science fiction, cloning ice is not in itself so remarkable. There is a microbiological difference between glacial ice samples from different geographical sites. DNA can be extracted from the ice and cloned in order to analyze it and better understand the microbiological diversity that is out there, but this is not how Strachan frames the idea of the clone in this work. In an interview, he states that

[I cloned the ice because] this is a bit of a melancholic piece. The two pieces of ice address issues about change more than anything else, and also engage with our fear of change, our desire to try to preserve what we have and know. I was extremely fascinated by the fact that you can make North Pole as many times as you want.²⁶

Strachan's overall installation, titled *I Belong Here*, was focused on issues of race and historical invisibility. He provided a revisionist narrative of the discovery of the North Pole, focusing on African American explorer Matthew Henson and his unacknowledged discovery of the Pole ahead of Robert Peary. Strachan's reclaiming of power and representation sent a strong message about accuracy and agency. Yet confronted with *Me*

and You (North Pole Ice and Cloned North Pole Ice), the dominant iconography suggested by this particular arrangement of objects appears to be planetary management, or geoengineering. This is also communicated in Strachan's statement, above, that "you can make the North Pole as many times as you want." The implication is that the clone may be needed as the "original" disappears. The vitrines holding the ice are generic; they could contain any type of specimen, and they would be at home in the Hall of Enlightenment at the British Museum. The difference is that we are no longer restricted to collecting and cataloguing specimens. We can now also clone them.

The fact that Strachan can bring a piece of ice back from the North Pole and exhibit it at the Venice Biennale is already a technological feat, but to see it alongside its apparent manufactured double reflects our attempts not only to achieve mastery over nature, but to manipulate it. The *Me and You* of the title effectively forces us to imagine our existence in a world where the only ice left from the glaciers would be a small-scale sample seen in a museum in a glass case, and scientists would be creating what was once naturally present: the natural world surviving only through artificial means. The sinister aura of the work is palpable, and herein lies its strength. Strachan's cloned ice is a warning sign of interventions into natural processes, of technology regarded as a viable solution to fixing our damaged planet, a worldview that has been aptly characterized as Promethean.²⁷ It calls forth Naomi Klein's succinct summation of the pitfalls of geoengineering or "techno-fixes" as she presents the image of "the earth—our life support system—... on life support, hooked up to machines 24/7 to prevent it from going full-tilt monster on us."²⁸ In fact, Strachan, who still has this particular work in his studio, has continued to make and remake it. He has the formula for the original ice, its salinity, and its freezing point, allowing him to continuously replicate it although not keep it permanently.²⁹

Like other instances of ephemeral art, the glacier ice installations discussed here are not easily collected, preserved, or displayed. Yet their prevalence still makes a mark, documented through first-hand accounts of people who saw them, photography, and other media that create the potential for them to contribute to future narratives. They are part of the fabric of visions for the future. Defying ownership as objects, their material serves as a reminder of the precious resources—air, water, habitable land—that are in the commons. Taken separately and in context, each offers a different perspective on the current environmental crisis, exemplifying the moment in all its complexity. Taken together, they underscore a collective urgency, and we stand to learn from our encounters with them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Julie Reiss directs a Masters program in Modern and Contemporary Art at Christie's Education.

NOTES

1. F.M. Dunnivant, *Environmental Success Stories: Solving Major Ecological Problems and Confronting Climate Change* (New York: Columbia, 2017), 163.
2. S. Borenstein, "Arctic Ice Shrinks to All-Time Low; Half 1980 Size," *Phys.org*, September 19, 2012, <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-arctic-ice-all-time-size.html>.
3. K. Pierre-Louis, "Antarctica Is Melting Three Times as Fast as a Decade Ago," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/climate/antarctica-ice-melting-faster.html>.
4. See, for example, A. Kaprow, *Fluids*, 1967/2015; A. Gallaccio, *Intensities and Surfaces*, 1996; J. Duwadi, *Melting Ice*, 2014.
5. D.J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke, 2016), 34-35.
6. J. Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch: The Ideology of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values* 24, no. 1 (2015): 9-29, at 10, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/whp/ev/2015/00000024/00000001/art00003>.
7. For more on the history of artists' representations of glacial climes, see B. Matilsky, *Vanishing Ice: Alpine and Polar Landscapes in Art, 1775-2012* (Bellingham, WA: Whatcom Museum, 2013).
8. "Tavares Strachan: The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (Arctic Ice Project)," *Brooklyn Museum.org*, April 30-September 13, 2009, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/arctic_ice_project.
9. Richard Benson, quoted in "Pierogi and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in Miami Are Proud to Present Tavares Strachan," October 25, 2006, <http://www.art-agenda.com/shows/pierogi-and-ronald-feldman-fine-arts-in-miami-are-proud-to-present-tavares-strachan/>.
10. B. McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 58.
11. J. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 27.
12. *Ibid.*, 34.
13. Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch," 15. T.J. Demos addresses this in detail in *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), where he builds a case against the use of the term also because the individual has little or no power compared to the global corporations that are waging war on the environment.
14. For an in-depth discussion of other art referencing the Maldives and the attention engendered by the pavilion during the Biennale, see T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), pp. 65-81.
15. Cagol has been criticized for presenting Europe and the Maldives as interconnected without addressing the economic power imbalance between them, and the pavilion overall was criticized for having Europeans speak for the Maldives. See A. Dawson, "Putting a Face on Climate Change," in F. Cameron and B. Nielsen, eds., *Climate Change and Museum Futures* (London: Routledge, 2014), 214. However, I would argue that this imbalanced relationship was self-evident through the positioning and condition of the pavilion itself.
16. M. Rossi, "Will a Huge New Flood Barrier Save Venice?" *Citylab*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/environment/2018/04/will-a-huge-new-flood-barrier-save-venice/556226/>.
17. Dunnivant, *Environmental Success Stories*, 180.
18. The first time Eliasson presented *Your waste of time* was in 2006 at the Neugerriemschneider Gallery in Berlin. At the time, he did not conceive of the piece as directly referencing climate change, stating "Even when I did *Your waste of time* in 2006... climate change wasn't really on the global agenda. It was also not what drove me to bring chunks of hundreds-years-old Icelandic ice into an art gallery for visitors to touch them. The focus then was on direct, visceral experience." N. Azzarello, "Interview with Olafur Eliasson," *Designboom*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.designboom.com/art/olafur-eliasson-interview-artist-designboom-02-16-2015/>.
19. R. Silverman, "Europe's Largest Glacier Comes to New York," *National Geographic*, June 30, 2013, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/06/130629-glacier-art-exhibit-moma-science-climate-change-global-warming.html>.
20. K. Johnson, "The Natural World: Here, It's Had Work," *New York Times*, May 13, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/31/arts/design/expo-1-new-york-at-moma-ps1-and-other-sites.html?_r=0.
21. Eliasson would repeat *ICE Watch* in December 2015 on the occasion of COP 21, the 2015 United Nations Conference on Climate Change, outside the Place du Panthéon in Paris, where the meeting was taking place.
22. A. Peters, "Why Artist Olafur Eliasson Hauled 100-Tons of Glacial Ice to Denmark Only to Watch It Melt," *Fastcompany*, October 29, 2014, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3037739/why-artist-olafur-eliasson-hauled-100-tons-of-glacial-ice-to-denmark-only-to-watch-it-melt>.
23. R. Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in G. Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 234.
24. "Ice Watch by Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, City Hall Square, Copenhagen," October 28, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/110121914>.
25. Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch," 24.
26. C. Coussonnet, "55th Venice Biennale, Exclusive Interview: Tavares Strachan/Bahamian Pavilion," June 7, 2013, <http://blog.uprising-art.com/en/55th-venice-biennale-exclusive-interview-tavares-strachan-bahamian-pavilion-2/>.
27. E.C. Ellis, quoted in Jeremy Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch," 14.
28. N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 279. The full quote reads "Techno-fixes" such as "sulfur in space to cool the temperature, cloud seeding to fix the droughts it causes, ocean fertilization in a desperate gambit to cope with acidification, and carbon-sucking machines to help us get off the geo-junk once and for all."
29. E-mail to author from Tavares Strachan's studio, May 23, 2018.