

Making imprints

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NN: Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

AN: An optimist!

NN: (astonished) Really?

AN: Yes, a convinced optimist – when it comes to the twenty-second century.

NN: You mean, of course, the twenty-first?

AN: The twenty-second! The life of the grandchildren of our grandchildren. Are you not interested in the world of those children?

NN: You mean we can relax because we have a lot of time available to overcome the ecological crisis?

AN: No, every week counts. How terrible, shamefully bad conditions will be in the twenty-first century, or how far down we have to start on the way up, *depends on what you, you, and others do today and tomorrow. There is not a single day to be lost. We need activism on a high level immediately.*

– Naess (2008: 308)

As an artist working with film and photography from a deep ecology perspective, I am interested in advancing our understanding of the shared environment, by examining human intervention in nature. My artworks are made during interdisciplinary expeditions to unfamiliar geographic and conceptual terrain. Through the creative process, I seek an understanding of time, history and ecological concerns. In particular, I am interested in how the distant past impacts on the actions of today, and will continue impacting on the distant future. In this reflective text, I unravel some of the background to two of my artworks: my film *Prosperous Mountain* (2014) and the series of electron micrographs *Ringhorndalen* (2020).

In 2013 I travelled to the High Arctic archipelago Svalbard to make *Prosperous Mountain*, a short documentary film about the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a facility that archives duplicates of food crop seeds for future generations (<https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/>). The

ecologically fragile nature of the High Arctic features in the film, as well as human interventions of mining, transport and global seed storage. The film does not centre on the human endeavour to safeguard food crop security for the foreseeable future; however, it is a visual portrayal of a geographic region that is significant in the current climate emergency.

The High Arctic is a region that has attracted many scientists, artists and filmmakers to engage in scientific and artistic pursuits (e.g. Martinsson, 2015). Somehow, Svalbard places the human in a very direct relation to nature, and is a stark reminder of how we have exploited nature globally. The vulnerability of the Arctic archipelago to human activity is very tangible.

In 2006 I visited the exhibition *The Ship: The Art of Climate Change* by the Cape Farewell Project at the Natural History Museum in London (<https://www.capefarewell.com/art-climate-change/>). The exhibition presented works by artists and scientists who had travelled to the Arctic to create works about climate change. It had a profound effect on me, as it offered a chance to see artworks that questioned humanity's short-term actions which will impact all life into the distant future.

The exhibition raised the question 'What can art do in the face of the ecological crisis?' – a question which continues to challenge and inspire me. Can art really promote a richer understanding of what actions are needed to contribute to a healthy ecosystem? 'Of course!' would be my immediate answer (to echo Naess's remark quoted at the beginning of this reflection). However, underlying this answer there is unease: Why am I in the Arctic to make a film? Of course my wish is to create artworks that aim to facilitate a space for reflection and positive action that will benefit all life, but am I ethically justified in travelling to a vulnerable region in order to create such artworks?

Let me illustrate this unease with an anecdote from my time in Svalbard. The photograph (Figure 1) from the series *The Road North* is a photograph from Svalbard, where climate change is a visceral experience. I wanted to capture the very rapid light changes around the time of sunrise during winter weeks when change from polar night to polar day occurs, and to observe how these fleeting light changes responded to analogue film. Visiting this unique region, I felt I should not leave an imprint, as if I were intruding in a very fragile place. However, when changing a roll of film in the camera, a tiny piece of paper was caught in the wind. It was upsetting, as I could not catch it due to the strong winds. I had left a mark.

Despite leaving my footprints and the tiny piece of paper in this fragile territory, the physical imprint of the visit resulted in an imprint of time in the form of photographs and film that may contribute to positive change for this shared environment through reflection and action. As an artist, it is an anticipation that art has the capacity to inspire action that will benefit all life. Despite various ethical dilemmas concerning whether one should travel to remote regions to make art, what kind of technical processes and equipment are used, and other concerns, one has a responsibility for witnessing, recording and creating with respect for the legacy one leaves for the distant future.



Figure 1. *The Road North*, a C-type photograph by the author (120 × 120 cm).

The second artwork inspired by my visit to Svalbard was my electron micrographs series *Ringhorndalen* (2020). During my visit, I heard about a collection of native flora seeds that are stored in the Global Seed Vault – in fact, the only flora collection in the vault. I was intrigued that plants could grow in such a barren and cold climate. A terrestrial biologist at the University Centre in Svalbard sent sixteen samples of Arctic flora seeds that she had collected in a sheltered valley in the archipelago. The idea behind my artwork was to optically investigate if one can see landscapes inside these tiny seeds that resemble the terrestrial landscape of the valley where they were collected.

In preparation for the electron microscope, I sliced the seeds into segments and covered the samples in gold dust. What emerged through the microscope were images that resembled extra-terrestrial landscapes; they appeared timeless, imaginary – an image of macrocosm within microcosm, a connection of the epic with the miniscule. They serve as reminders of the endless interconnectedness in nature, and that time refers to an immeasurable timescale. Yet – they are also simply images of tiny seeds of Arctic flora collected by a biologist's hands in a valley in Svalbard during its brief summer.

References

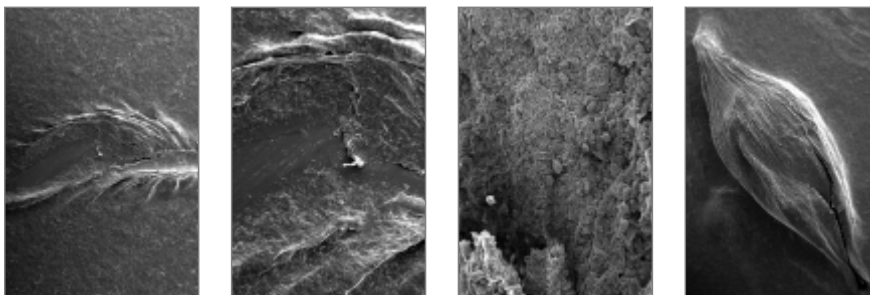
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Prosperous Mountain

Still from an experimental short documentary film directed and produced by the author (15 minutes 47 seconds; HD Colour; Digital Dolby 5.1 audio; 2014).



Ringhorndalen

Electron micrographs
(8 × 10 inches; 2014).

See following pages
for large versions.

