STRATEGIES OF AESTHETICS ON CONFLICTED BORDERS

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of the Capitalocene the essay examines the term “aesthetics” first, by considering its rather generalised contemporary applications and how such broad-brush meaning betrays a complex and sophisticated human faculty with the capacity to organise and trigger a vast array of emotive and intellectual response. The essay portrays aesthetics within the production of art as a means of sensitisation and explores how the careful consideration and strategic application of aesthetic choices in this way can play an important role as a tool for change in environmental awakening and behaviours. We reflect broadly on how aesthetic tuning has been utilised as a constructively disruptive mechanism, historically for example, in surrealist practices and demonstrate how conscious and subconsciously inflected decision making in art production today might be put to use to determine or inflect the responses of audiences in respect of environmental imperatives. In the second half of the essay, the author/artists focus specifically on the example of their 2019-21 project and exhibition *Visitations* to explore in greater depth the deployment of aesthetic decisions and their intended effects in the research, the making and presentation of individual works and their combined resonance in the context of their award-winning installation in Akureyri Art Museum (September 2021—January 2022).

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics and Art, Animal studies, Art & Environment, Capitalocene, Contemporary Art

AMBIGUITY AND FOCUS

In the context of global warming and sea-level rise, the art project *Visitations* (2019-22) set out to gather and respond to accounts (and the consequences) of specific, historic and contemporary polar bear arrivals around the coast of Iceland. The project's focus offered a point from which to consider issues of population displacement, hospitality and increasingly excited global migration patterns more widely. Approaching the subject from a contemporary art perspective, in a cross-disciplinary collaboration with folklorists, anthropologists and an art curator, the project probed intimate and geo-political contact zones, between humans and others and thereby, related networked effects of climate change, population displacement and environmental disruption. The research gathered and combined images, texts, audio, biological and other material relating to recorded polar bear arrivals. Methodologies involved a close study of the relationship between source material and its cultural and environmental contexts as well as to the transmission, interpretation and presentation of selected subtexts embedded within associated visual and textual material. The project involved various satellite partner institutions–both local to Iceland and abroad, most significantly in Alaska–which allowed for further comparative study across wider cultural contexts. It concluded in two major museum exhibitions, an international conference and a substantial section within our 20-year retrospective publication *Debatable Lands*, which documented the project and its artworks.

Notwithstanding centuries of philosophical baggage accumulation, the term aesthetics in general usage appears rather vague in meaning, often used simply to reference the "appearance" of things. And yet what also seems true is that in an art historical or critical context, long ago, it came to signify something other than what it meant to the Greeks[1], from whose language it stemmed.

This trivialising of the term is most obvious in the commonplace pronouncement–made by those with only a passing interest in creative decision-making (as well sometimes by artists themselves)–to indicate something being done "purely for aesthetic reasons." In such a context, to aestheticise means to prettify or to embellish… to make more attractive. More seriously, the ambiguity of the word has an advantage for artists, in that it gives each, licence to consider aesthetics in a very particular way–and in the kind of readings we explore here in this essay, we believe it stays closer to the original meaning, of "pertaining to perception through the senses."

Fig. 1
From the artists' research trip to Kaktovik, Alaska.
Photo: Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, (2018).

Just as anaesthesia–the use of anaesthetics–concerns the dulling, reduction or elimination of the capacity to feel, the application of aesthetic strategy can be understood as the means by which those parts or those individuals who (through familiarity or by habitual experience or thought) have become desensitised to experiences or phenomena, are actively stimulated or re-sensitised. With this in mind, we see the application of aesthetic thought and sensibility as being useful respectively in the conception, the construction of artworks as well as in anticipation of different audience responses.

Irrespective of the complex make-up or conceptual drivers of an artwork, (which might involve strategies of humour, shock, delight, surprise, sensuality, memory etc), the principal aesthetic criteria for us, concern its functionality. In this respect we have long held the idea that important questions regarding art relate not to what art is, but what art can be and most importantly of all, what it can *do*.

This relationship between aesthetics and functionality is therefore pivotal. We consider our art works (in fact, all artworks) to be machines which deliver to the mind, to the imagination and senses in ways far beyond their physical constitution. Implicit in this is the idea that art can effect change in the thinking or behaviours of its audiences. The first audience for any artist's work is the artist themselves. In making art, we construct models, either in the imagination or through the processes of making or through a combination of both. During the material development of a work, such models are tested and evaluated as to their efficacy in prompting a notional set of responses. At the outset of any project such desired or intended responses are most probably neither yet identified, nor yet even identifiable. Incidentally, it is in this speculative regard, first and foremost that "artistic research" is most clearly identifiable as a tool of inquiry in the production of knowledge. Aesthetics and aesthetic considerations are the tools by which a viewer may be wrong-footed, their thinking disrupted and, no matter how modestly, made to recalibrate their position, thereby leaving (the exhibition) in some way differently from the way they arrived. It goes without saying, the absorption of aesthetic experience occurs both subliminally and meta-cognitively–we experience it both subconsciously and consciously–and unsurprisingly so at first, usually in that order.

PRAXIS–AN AESTHETIC TOOLBOX

In the development of concepts and the gathering, organising and choreographing of materials toward a particular result–artwork,

installation, event–multiple, serial, aesthetic decisions will be made–many consciously, but many others, not so. The relative effects of every decision are weighed too during that process and, when the work is curated and presented, those effects are subject to further analysis and new understanding, which in turn empower the artist both consciously and subconsciously, intellectually and intuitively–in respect of this and future productions.

With "aesthetics," being a term so open to interpretation we should qualify it more specifically here in respect of our own readings and usage. In simple terms, it hinges on the concept of "association." Colours, materials, constructed objects, found objects, natural phenomena, signs–everything we encounter in the world, as we recognise them or their type, will have an associative charge or power–will make us think of their most familiar context or of things *like* them which we have seen, used, or otherwise experienced before. These associations are the currency of art–in traditional painting the things represented in paint, were a trigger, evoking situations which were recognisable as historic, biblical, social, contemporary and so on. Detail within the work might fuel an incrementally more specific reading until such time as we run out of familiar ground, where associations are scant–a place where we simply don't know or recognise the story or historical event in question and uncomprehending, we fall back on our own experience, our own memory by which to fill the apparent void.

In mining this associative field and the territory of the uncanny, the surrealists of a hundred years ago, had a field day, because their currency was to bring elements into painting, sculpture or film which were dissonant, irrational–where relational collisions between their associative qualities defied or stretched logic. In those terms, their work was strategically rendered as absurd, disquieting or disturbing. But any associative dissonance of content or subjects may be amplified or nuanced to a great extent by the further deployment of abstract qualities in material–hardness, smoothness, softness, viscosity, lightness, weight etc.–and of colour (which in itself of course is a semiotic minefield–colour symbolism is so ambiguous and contradictory as to be without any dependability at all). The management of such abstract qualities within works allow us to access a still deeper emotive, psychological palette implying danger, empathy, shock, disgust, melancholy and irony. In the hands of artists these manners, these protocols, irrespective of whether they are to be adhered to or contradicted, constitute the very instruments of

aesthetics—they are a smorgasbord of possibilities, and it is these qualities, in every work of art which are weighed together and delivered in highly-specific, constructed balance. If beauty has anything at all to do with aesthetics, (and of course it must, in that it exists on a spectrum of possible aesthetic prompts and response), then we'd argue it is most profoundly manifest as the beauty to be found in unexpected rightness, a coherence of incoherence in quotidian surprise, in devout irreverence—in short, in the things that through art find new associations that don't confirm but rather shift our emotional and intellectual registers—in moments where our capacities or expectations may be re-calibrated.

AESTHETICS IN ADRESSING A CONTEMPORAY IMPERATIVE

In the face of burgeoning global catastrophe, how might we mobilise the application of and functions of aesthetics in art to serve an era-specific and pressing set of demands? By catastrophe, we refer of course, to the Capitalocene[2], which currently drives for instance, the sixth mass extinction and has set the course upon which, once more, we seem fixed—in temporary service of the few, to destroy not just the richness and diversity of the planet but through escalating greed, intolerance, cruelty and neglect, the demise even of our own species. From the introduction of their 2015 essay collection, *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, the editors Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin quote Nicholas Mirzoeff as arguing that:

> Impressionism and other artistic genres might be usefully re-read through the lens of our de-sensitization to the world around us. He writes, '[t]he aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.[3]

They go on to say:

> Whether framing Anthropocene aesthetics through the arts or our sensory experience of an increasingly unpredictable world, 'The Anthropocene is so built into our senses that it determines our perceptions, hence it is aesthetic.' The fact that we have become so anaesthetized to these realities necessitates a reconsideration of the historical avant-garde. Beyond the modernist valorisation of the principle of shock in art, our current climate demands a different kind of aesthetic and sensorial attention.[4]

Fig. 2
***Visitations,* Room 1. Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).**
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

Fig. 3
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "Ursus maritimus Islandia" in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

In her "Minoritarian Manifesto for Re-occupying the Strata,"[5] Kathryn Yusoff lists ten demands, the tenth of which asks us to "Rethink the revolutionary subject in the context of the earth." This task—of reimagining revolutionary subjectification in the context of our geological reformation—is perhaps the most compelling and necessary of our current era. And finally, as Raqs Media Collective has written so eloquently:

> Without a recalibration of the senses, at the level of our global species-being, without at least half a conversation to understand, and then attenuate and nuance our desires and needs, we cannot conceive of another mode of production, another set of social relations, another ethic of husbandry between ourselves and the earth.[6]

VISITATIONS EXHIBITION—MOBILISING AESTHETICS[7]

Our exhibition *Visitations* is a good example by which to demonstrate how aesthetic decisions and effects and their perceptually inflecting power are manifest both during the conception and in the reception of works of art. It's worth prefacing the demonstration by saying that in all our artworks, an ethical consideration pushes first against the idea of a fixed and single ontological view, and also, that whatever views are suggested or mobilised within our work, amongst other functions, it calls up and suggests the intrinsic rights and values of specific non-anthropocentric positions.

As in many of our art projects, initial plans for *Visitations* though conceptually concise, were in formal terms, at best, sketchy. Importantly, from the outset, there were other, non-artists involved in our project, whose own fields of study and interests in respect of a 500-year history of polar bear arrivals to Iceland, had nonetheless overlapped significantly with our own. *Visitations* in Akureyri Art Museum occupied five discrete rooms within the 3rd floor gallery. In the first space, there were two works, both diptychs, displayed on opposite walls.

URSUS MARITIMUS ISLANDIA

Records concerning arrivals, whether folkloric, historical, or scientific in nature, are human stories—no account is found to exist from the perspectives of bears. We have no capacity to repair this imbalance—the vacuum exists, but as in many of our works and projects, our concern nonetheless, is with destabilising the assumptions brought about through this inevitably anthropocentric bias. In *Ursus*

maritimus Islandia, (2020), by mapping the sites of bear arrivals, we wanted to make immediately apparent to the viewer, the number of recorded events across the timespan we'd selected, from 1880 to 2016 (the date at that time, of the last recorded arrival). Mapping was a very direct, visual way of accomplishing this—the diptych comprises a northern Icelandic coastline on the left and a southern coastline on the right. They are depicted in a way which contradicts the normal north-up, south-down configuration for twofold purpose—to make the viewer work a little harder and thus become more engaged. In that momentary disorientation the idea was that they might reflect that such conventions are entirely human constructs.

We have used a similar device previously for the project *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*.[8] This project referenced historic polar bear arrivals too, but in this case to the British Isles by means of human arctic plunder during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—providing trophies and museum exhibits, predominately on the back of whaling and arctic mapping expeditions, and more generally, Victorian adventuring. In this case, the map was inverted to reflect the arrival of bears from their native north.

In *Ursus maritimus Islandia* (2020) both coastlines are drawn in light pencil—this means that the coast appears as a secondary, contextualising element which only becomes apparent on closer inspection. The viewer is first attracted to the work by the many golden-yellow spots which mark the vicinities of the respective (approximately 150) non-human-determined arrivals. In this way, the device of a map says two things initially: *i)* that data or information is being communicated and *ii)* that this is a very unusual, stripped down and aestheticised type of map. Each golden spot, so coloured to draw the attention of the viewer, was placed nearby to the site of the respective arrival and bore handwritten details in ink, of the placename and the date of that event. The colour for this part of the work was a subject of much thought, trial and error during the work's development. Although as we've said, colour symbolism is highly unreliable, it's still the case that blue, though suggestive perhaps of the ocean, in this context might be perceived as wistful, red might be sensationally visceral, green might misleadingly elicit the pastoral, etc. Gold (or golden yellow) on the other hand—when we finally got there—was a colour that carried no direct or obvious associations with the subject. But it is a colour associated by humans, with value and commemoration—once discovered, it seemed and still seems, the appropriate choice.

Fig. 4
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson heraldic detail/s from the artwork “Ursus maritimus Islandia” (2020).
Photo: Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson.

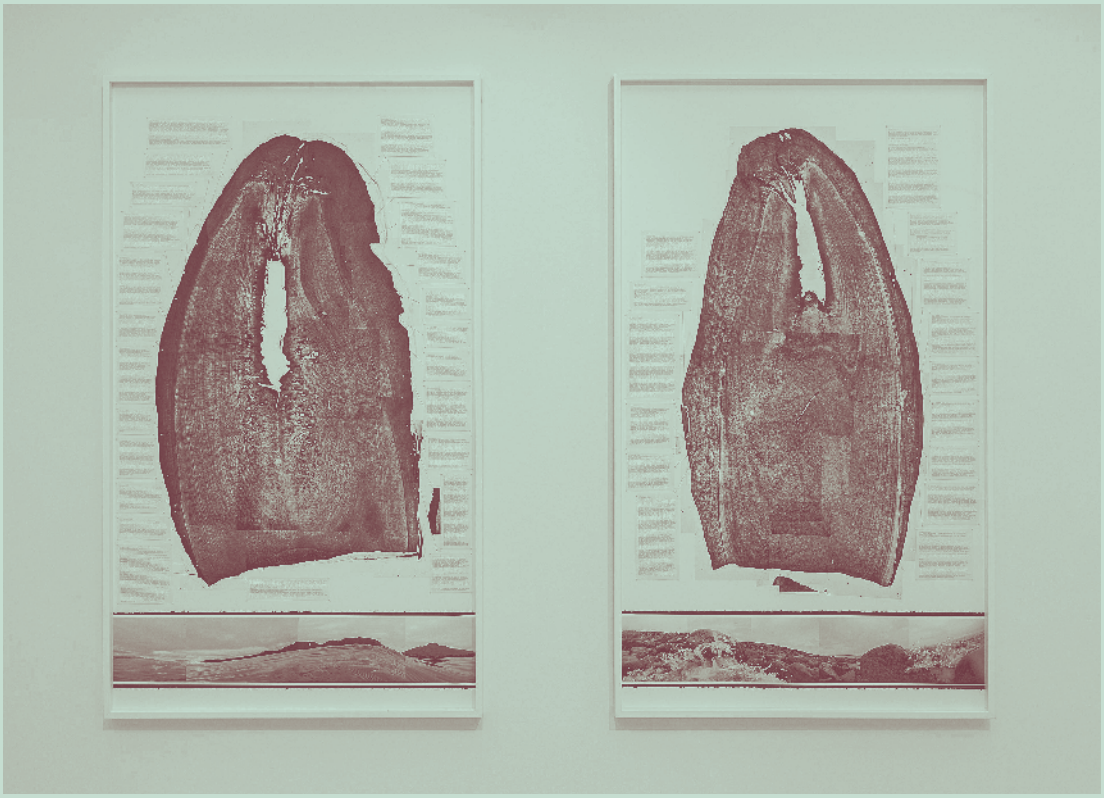

Fig. 5
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, “Shooting the Messenger II” in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

Each of these two framed works measures approximately 2m × 1.5m and carries two graphic, "heraldic" elements. The first was an altered Icelandic coat of arms, privileging instead of man, various animals, all of which were visitors to, or inhabitants of the land many thousands of years in advance of its human colonisation and occupation. The coat of arms in each case, was rendered by hand in pencil. The second heraldic flourish, situated at the top of each of the two works, incorporated the title of the diptych, along with a depiction of the head of a polar bear–playfully suggestive in some ways of the lion's head which is the central feature of the iconic logo of Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM)

Both elements brought a wry humour to the subject–a little subverted hubris, considering the undignified way most polar bears meet their end when landing on Icelandic shores, where polar bears once detected, are typically hunted down and shot. Handwritten in pencil, in juxtaposition to the respective coastlines to simulate the waves of the surrounding ocean, were extracts taken from folktales concerning bear arrivals. The visual hierarchy of these four elements–the spots, the inked data, the heraldry and the folktales–is managed by the relative use of light and dark, suggesting alternately, permanence and impermanence–real events together with cultural context. The arrivals themselves are privileged as those things that are recorded (through press and the media) as having taken place. The elements in pencil reference more human conceits and invention, which although playful, ironic, and culturally situating, here are decorative and implicitly, subject to further transformation and possible erasure, according to the vicissitudes for instance, of political focus and social taste.

SHOOTING THE MESSENGER

On the wall opposite, in contrast, the second diptych references two specific arrivals (both of which unusually in recent times, occurred in the same year, 2008). The events are memorialised in vastly magnified "trophies" of delicate, premolar tooth sections taken from the respective dead bears in question. This contradiction between the monumental and the modest serves to underpin with irony the more significant encapsulation of relative time within the piece. Each assemblage maps out a specific timespan alluding to the lived years of each bear–the female died at age 16, a fact verifiable by the cementum growth layers visible in her magnified pre-molar tooth–the male died aged 24. For each year of the respective bears' lives there was listed a notable environmental parliamentary discussion

or event which took place that same year, thereby fusing a human calculus with a specific non-human life, ultimately cut short by a fateful and fatal encounter with humans. Despite considerable and multiple conscious interventions, the images have some aesthetic qualities which were already determined—for instance the dominant blue of the dye that is used in the forensic process to optimise the readability of the cementum growth layer. Such decisions, to leave well alone (which nonetheless carry aesthetic consequences), are just as significant as those made to interfere and manipulate. By leaving the colour as it was, we nod directly to the analytical care that is paid in the processing of such samples and allude to contradictions in how human attention is (and historically, has been) variously manifest and divided in respect of our objectification of non-human beings. This factor of anomalous human behaviour of course constitutes a recurrent thread in our wider practice. At the foot of each piece there were the two panoramic, multiple-photographic "joiners" made using stills from video footage taken at the respective sites of the bears' arrivals—at Skagafjördur and *Hraun*—thus providing a site-specific anchorage for the pieces. Rather than a still or continuous panorama, the scenes are strategically fragmentary suggesting the dynamism of the moment—its temporal approximation, an implicit, disruptive violence and the absence (and loss) of its actual subject.

From the first room in the gallery at Akureyri Art Museum there was access to (and therefore a choice) regarding three further rooms with a fifth room accessed from two of those. As we've discussed here, an aesthetic journey involves memory and association. Just as an aesthetic experience is informed consciously or otherwise by all previous subjective experience, within a single exhibition, a bank of signals and responses both gathers and is inflected by what has gone before, both immediately and by accretion over the course of the exhibition in toto.

THREE VISE MEN

In the room on the right—the visitor entered a small, black-out room occupied only by three portrait-format, pole-borne video screens carrying alternately, in sequence, but at no point simultaneously, the talking head observations of what we came to call the "three wise men."

The edited interviews were made with Ævar Pedersen, a natural historian, Karl Skírnisson, a forensic biologist who had dealt physically with the corpse of every bear to have been apprehended in Iceland

Fig. 6
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "three wise men" in *Vistations*, Akureyri Art Museum.
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

Fig. 7
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "When Once Comes Once Again", (2021), *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum.
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

since the nineteen eighties and Þorvaldur Björnsson, a museum taxidermist whose job it has been to prepare and preserve the bones of the doomed visitors for storage and posterity. The effect of the video assemblage was to plunge the viewer alternately from a world of material encounters and forensic analysis, into a festival of old-fashioned, enlightenment reflection. The interviews were broken into fragments and arranged in such a way as to suggest serial, thematic linkage where none necessarily existed–not to deceive as such, but to provide focus and flow to the many individual ideas and subjects raised.

WHEN ONCE COMES ONCE AGAIN

Alternatively, in the room on the left, the viewer entered a long, narrow space with natural light from tall windows along the left wall and to the right, a bank of framed, poster-like, collaged images in which rupture, disarray and sensationalism bristled. The series, entitled *When Once Comes Once Again*, comprises eight images, each depicting the imagined spectacle of an historical encounter–where bears were variously observed, pursued, shot (or in one case, was hanged from the side of a boat), or where they miraculously escaped. The collage series uses graphics and illustrational motifs for a dramatizing effect, which in style, or perhaps more in effect, reference historical theatre or cinema posters. Accordingly, they are all portrait in format. They are expressionistic and dynamic, balancing combinations of text, graphic flatness (referencing the picture plane) and to some degree aerial perspective, suggesting pictorial space. The apparent melodrama in these works is controlled and managed–largely by the subdued colouration–predominately sepia, black and white. Bright colour is used sparingly, locally and strategically for focusing effect. The oblique (implicit) referencing of age (anachronism) in these images is deliberate, to suggest a human approach to bear-arrivals that is both long established and, for the most part, strikingly unchanging.

According to the recorded events, typically, the bear is first noticed, then tracked and in most cases shot, very often, and unsurprisingly, in a conspicuously inexpert manner, often with firearms unsuitable for the purpose of killing large animals. A few, escape, usually back into the mist or the sea. Each work, pertaining as it does to a discrete arrival, when presented in this way suggests an epic “filmic” tale, a poorly conceived action movie for instance, incorporating interspecific threat, a search or hunt, followed by combat and ultimately, loss. The posters bring multiple, fragmentary elements together in

a way which signals the reflexive, often ad-hoc response. Those fragments, comprising drawing in multiple styles, text in multiple sizes, both hand-rendered and torn from newspapers and reassembled, photographs (doctored or otherwise) and printed material–graphic, representational and atmospheric components, are all made to sit together in an enforced (though strategically awkward) and violent (in)coherence. As a body of work, more broadly, the posters interrogate the ways stories are constituted and re-configured in the mind–in this case, only partly from recorded facts and including hearsay, dates, places, weather and topographic conditions and so on. Strategically, the incomplete and incoherent nature that is their vital, constitutional quality, mobilise intrinsically hybrid approaches and to the viewer, speaks of rawness–generally, an unsophisticated response.

The other element included in this room was a durational audio work commissioned by us, from the artist Sabine Fischer, entitled *32 hours*.[9] In contrast to the tales of human/bear encounters framed on the walls, the sonic content was of a real-time, though imagined, thirty-six hour ocean journey (the estimated time for a bear to swim from Greenland to the Westfjords). A slowly changing sequence of atmospheric, meteorological and aquatic noises, the work was both an homage and a flight of fancy, infusing the space with something suggesting what the bear's experience might have been and the "ordeal" of swimming over 300 kilometres in a single stretch. In the context of this essay, the effect of juxtaposing these two works was to contextualise affray and violence with a sense of the slow, meditative and measured animal determination which will have prefaced each human encounter.

A line of sight directly from the first room into the largest gallery space lay through the door beyond the *Shooting the Messenger* diptych. In this, the largest space in the exhibition there were four works, three on the walls and one, a pair of neat, custom-made crates, set diagonally in proximity to each other on the floor, over towards another large, windowed wall on the left. Directly opposite the entrance on the far wall of the space, was a single glass object.

EDGE OF THE WORLD

On the right-hand wall, beginning a few centimetres from the floor, and reaching four metres, almost to the ceiling was a suite of fifteen, monochromatic, portrait-format screen-prints arranged three sheets horizontally by five sheets high. The set of screen-prints indicate

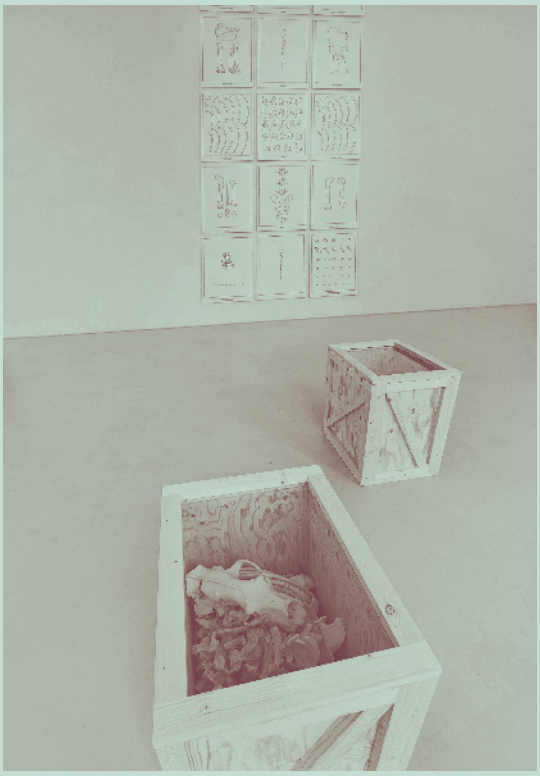

Fig. 8
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "Edge of the World", and two boxes with polar bear skeletons, *Visitations* (2021) Akureyri Art Museum. Photo: Daníel Starrason.

Fig. 9
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "Edge of the World" in *Visitations,* Akureyri Art Museum, (2021). Photo: Daníel Starrason.

the literal and metaphorical journey of *Ursus maritimus* from Greenland to Iceland. To make this work, we'd produced a life-sized scan of every individual bone of the female bear and from these, made linear tracings of them to that scale–thereby effectively rendering the skeleton as a diagrammatic simulacrum. For each print of fifteen, we grouped them according to their anatomical position whilst maintaining the integrity of the museum's bagging (of small bones) and wiring (in the case of the paws). We identified functionality in relation to the animal and cross-referenced that against elements of boat construction, thereby mirroring the respective functions in each, of motor, steering, navigation, cargo, stabilising, and so on. Effectively, this made more poetic than literal sense, but as such, served simultaneously to bolster and to trouble the anthropocentric view that objectifies non-human animals, and dismisses the intrinsic rights and integrity of the arriving "other"–the apparently "transgressing alien."

So, what function in all this did the aesthetics of the diagram perform? To turn the bones into linear drawings provided a visual bridge and thereby made the mental leap between bear and boat "construction" more manageable, and, for the audience, more subconsciously readable. As a pile in the crates the respective bone sets (stripped of flesh, muscle, viscera, fur and fat) seemed deceptively small–but the prints, when reproduced to actual scale and placed floor to ceiling on the wall as might be an animal skin–a diagrammatically exploded or physiologically "spreadeagled" view–presented the bear's size by contrast, as exaggerated–larger than life by far.

Aesthetics is the arrangements of presentation. Decisions that are made and mobilised are there, not to be explained as such, but to hang in unresolved phases of discord and harmony, dissonance and assonance, resolution and disruption. The sum of all readings is as we all acknowledge, subjective. Nevertheless, putting all absolute readings aside, as artists we are still able to discuss much of how things are constituted and at least something of how the works might be construed by audiences. Artists rely on instincts, through a constellation of elements to indicate or convey what is core on the one hand and what within the work plays a supportive role. The tension between disparate elements is a discrete dynamic invoked by juxtaposition and context and necessarily managed carefully, from conception to installation. Unsurprisingly, its substance and choreography are subject to many adjustments and alterations along the way. For the work to have purchase in the public imagination the

instincts at play in its making, must at the end be in some ways have correspondence with the experience (whether primary or learned) and instincts of the various audiences who will see the work. The aesthetic triggers must be drawn from collective currency.

SKAGAFJÖRDUR AND HRAUN

From the entrance to the room, it was not possible to see the contents of the crates, but on approach, each was seen to be topped with a glass lid, beneath which it was possible to see the piled bones of a specific bear–the entire skeletal remains of a male in one box and of a female in the other–the magnified premolar teeth of which had featured in the first room. To the audience it would be evident that the crates were newly- (and therefore, custom-) built. We made them in order specifically to provide a receptacle for the bones. We chose not to use old crates, or the cardboard boxes in which we received the bones from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History. However, the dimensions of those boxes informed precisely the scale and proportion of the crates we built. We didn't use found boxes or boxes of different scale. So, our presentation of the bones was respectful both to the memory of the bear and to their current custodial storage. We elevated them only in that we built something specifically for them, both beautiful and utilitarian. The fact that this will be registered by audiences consciously or unconsciously is not certain, but neither is it the point.

KALDBAKSVÍK

On the left, near the large windows was a single, framed photograph, depicting a north-Icelandic fjord and snow-powdered fell. Formed by the reflection of clouds in the foregrounded water, there seems to be an understated semblance of a walking polar bear. For us, the inclusion of the photograph in this room was as a kind of local haunting–the presence of a living bear conjured from virtually nothing, was certainly no conscious contrivance. At the time the photograph was taken in July 2020, we were visiting specific sites in the north-west of Iceland where at various times bears are reported as having made landfall. There was in fact nothing remarkable about the image at the time we made the photograph–it was simply a location shot, or so we thought–until on returning to Reykjavík, this and two or three others taken on either side of it, revealed this mysterious effect of the clouds in the water. Again, we have no idea really, how many people would, or did notice the apparition within the image, but because it served at least two relevant functions, we were determined to include it anyway.

Fig. 10
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "Kaldbaksvík" in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

MATRIX #I

On the largest wall, suspended horizontally on brackets at approximately eye-level, was the glass object, less than a metre long and ten centimetres high. In the largest room in the exhibition, the work *Matrix #I* was conceptually pivotal. With all the pieces so far described in the space, the presence of adult polar bears was suggested by their traces, whether the relics, their echoes or in the case of the photograph, a serendipitous cloud ghost, reflected in water. *Matrix #I* suggests instead an absence of a very different kind. The work is a 1/20th scale maquette in glass, of a specific polar bear maternity den, discovered and measured sometime in the late 1970s by biologists in Svalbard. The den in question was unusually large (18 meters in length) and where maternity dens will often comprise multiple chambers, this one was simple in its construction. A polar bear den has no external shape—in its interiority it is quintessential. It is a space, an emptiness into which new life is introduced. Our choice of material by which to give form to this idea was informed by the fragility of glass, its capacity to convey specific exteriority and interiority simultaneously, and by so doing, allow ambiguity in this respect—and elegantly allow scope for a clear imaginative projection into the denning space itself. But of course, the object, unlike the actual den has an independent materiality, perceptible within the gallery space and so, just as the interior was visible as an articulated volume with specific, measurable dimensions and form, the exterior must be imagined as first, being constituted not only by a much more substantial bank of snow (in this case, located some way up a coastal mountain) but the mountain itself—and indeed the entire rest of the world within which this den was simply once an excavated tunnel and chamber.

Glass functions therefore as a conductor between notions of what is in and what is out and makes this relationship palpable. The Confucian philosopher Lao Tzu observed that: "Clay forms pots, but it is the void within that creates the essence of the pot…."[10] The "essence" or "usefulness" in this case had been of maternal preparation, shelter, the act of birth and the nursing of new living beings. In a room in some ways devoted to memorialising two bears and their respective journeys leading to their deaths, this object is offered as a counterpoint—a reminder of tender and vulnerable beginnings in a place where polar bear life is still (so far) sustainable. *Matrix #I* was lit in such a way as to reflect and refract light on the wall around it—an emanation of energy, both animating and contradicting the relative stability of the glass itself as a way by which the absence of living mother and cubs was poetically manifest.

Fig. 11
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson "Matrix #I (2016)" in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum (2021).
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

Fig. 12
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, polar bear arrivals; interactive station, *Visitations* (2021) Akureyri Art Museum.
Photo: Daníel Starrason.

The final work, *Polar Bear News, 1968-2016* (2021) in the fifth room, to the back of the exhibition, was a contribution by another invited artist, Maria Sjöfn[11] who with Sabine Fischer, had assisted in our research during the project. A bank of eight video monitors ran looped, short features from RÚV tv on as many polar bear arrivals covered by the network since the 1960s. Being the most literal work of *Visitations* we needed the piece to be located in a position where its direct, public-media reportage delivery followed the audience' exposure to at least some of the other works in the show and so served to contextualise rather than pre-empt them. The various videos in both black and white and in colour, sensationally depicted graphic brutalisation of the animals in question, both as living beings and often as bloody corpses. It was eye-catching, busy, demanding and visceral—in the concentrated form that this installation offered, it was a chilling embodiment of the kind of summary and savage objectification of animal others that in more diluted form (in other words, one such feature every few years) might go relatively unnoticed as a news item "oddity." Of course, it chimed to a degree, with the studiedly more historical collage series *When Once Comes Once Again*, which the audience would encounter in another part of the exhibition. For most though, it would probably have gone unnoticed that in both cases, the works comprised eight individual components—which fact provided a satisfying symmetry.

The one, introductory, contextualising element of the show we included was situated close to the entrance of the first room. This was a digitally interactive screen where the sites of all 150+ polar bear arrivals between 1880 and 2016 were identifiable on a map of Iceland. At a click the contemporary, narrative account associated with each visitation was revealed. This very direct, informative presentation laid the ground for an understanding of the singular historic events which were the focus of the show—in relation to the hundreds of such historical encounters.[12]

CONCLUSION

Aesthetic "arrangements," strategies or effects have traditionally been associated with visual forms—how things look—appear or are manifest to the eye, or mind's eye. But we know that this emphasis is a consequence of the long dominance of the visual arts in such thinking—and specifically, art history. We also know well that in both art and music for instance, things (or "events") can "appear" or occur sonically. We can presume therefore, that the application of aesthetic thought and reflex can apply more widely, to every

sense—and indeed, perhaps most importantly, all combinations of senses. In this, we should acknowledge that context is manifest in myriad ways, the signs, or effects of which, are registered only occasionally consciously, or at best, some of the time. This phasing of conscious and unconscious acknowledgement or influence leads naturally to both conscious and unconscious action. In respect of artworks, aesthetic mobilisation and reception are complex faculties and are comprised multiply in a process that is fundamentally associative and again therefore, memory driven.

Although lacking space to discuss it here, we should never forget that the aesthetics of discrete venues—the sites of public presentations, of any kind—further inflect the meaning of any work. This is a factor which is instrumentalised by artists when making site-specific work and site-sensitive responses in its conception, construction and presentation. Much of our work over the years has been strategically site-specific, working from John Latham's 1970s maxim, "Context is half the work."[13] By definition, an analysis of the aesthetic imperative in such cases is case-specific—and therefore impossible a subject upon which to generalise. Nevertheless, such responses are made selectively in respect of anything and everything from the geographical and cultural locus, its history and social constitution, the season, the light, the local flora and fauna to the specific architecture of the building.

There is no doubt that now there is a profound need—again in the words of *Raqs Media Collective*—to "conceive of another mode of production, another set of social relations, another ethic of husbandry between ourselves and the earth."[14] And in respect of that imperative to recalibrate, the projections and models of art and the management of our aesthetic choices—the way we tell our stories—are pivotal in our attempts in achieving such recalibration.

Aesthetic judgment is a key instrument in art by which narratives are constructed, inflected and presented, and by which audiences are prompted to understand and interpret both in contextual and very specific terms. In their application, aesthetic choices in art are highly nuanced and, in a field encompassing unlimited media options *including* text, potentially infinitely more so than those deployed in solely text-based production. They speak to instinctual human senses and intuition that simultaneously stem from human, culturally based attunement, and to the accretion of the lived experience of individuals. By this means, art ultimately will always draw

on the capacity to communicate and move us subliminally in ways often unnoticed and certainly hard to imagine or articulate in rational terms alone–but to move us, and potentially to move us to action, nonetheless.

1 “[A]isthētikos – pertaining to perception.” See: “aesthetic,” Etymology World Online, accessed 28.04.2025, https://etymologyworld.com/item/aesthetic.
2 Wendy Arons, “We Should be Talking About the Capitalocene,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 67, no.1 (2023): 35-40. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000697.
3 Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, “Art and Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies,* eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (Open Humanities Press, 2015), 11.
4 Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, “Art and Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies,* eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (Open Humanities Press, 2015), 11.
5 Kathryn Yusoff, “Minoritarian Manifesto for Re-occupying the Strata,” *Sage Journals,* January 18, (2017): 105–127.
6 Raqs Media Collective, “Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet,” *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (January 2013): 114.
7 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, “Visitations in *Debatable Lands*,” Gerðarsafn, Kópavogur Art Museum, (2022), https://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/category/projects/visitations/.
8 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome,* Spike Island, Bristol (2004) https://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/category/projects/nanoq/; Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *nanoq:flat out and bluesome: A Cultural Life of Polar Bears* (Black Dog publisher, 2006).
9 Sabine Fischer, “32 hours,” in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).
10 Daodejing, chapter 11, accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.egreenway.com/taoism/ttclz11.htm.
11 María Sjöfn Dupuis Laufeyjardóttir, “Polar Bear News 1968-2016,” in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021).
12 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, “Map of Polar Bear Sightings,” in *Visitations*, Akureyri Art Museum, (2021). https://visitations. snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/map-of-polar-bear-arrivals/.
13 Artists Placement Group (APG), accessed 16.04.2025, https://en.contextishalfthework.net/about-apg/artist-placement-group/.
14 Raqs Media Collective, “Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet,” *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (January 2013): 14.