

the white saboteur

Barthélemy Antoine-Loeff | Hugo Arcier



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INTENTIONS

The world as we know it is disappearing right before our eyes. Some parts of this world are melting... Like our glaciers, of course. And polar ice packs are breaking up and dispersing under the pressure of human actions. These ice packs are natural habitats for icebergs.

« The iceberg floating alone carries the melancholy of the fragile human condition. »
Thinking like an iceberg by Olivier Remaud, philosophe

It is said that when a glacier gives birth to an iceberg, it “calves”. Contrary to glaciers which are seemingly eternal, an iceberg is therefore destined to die. As it drifts across the ocean, away from the shores, it melts very slowly until it completely disappears. And if it knows where it's going, an iceberg needs to be able to wander aimlessly in order to get there.

In this environment made of ice, human presence fades away, and the iceberg can evolve peacefully. And yet, icebergs are coveted for the freshwater they contain... and it is not so rare for an iceberg to cross paths with a hunter who won't hesitate to harpoon it and chop it up in order to bottle it.

Hugo Arcier's approach is to explore the disappearance and the replacement of reality by simulation, while Barthélemy Antoine-Loeff explores the finite cryosphere and the human being's impact on its environment. Hugo Arcier and Barthélemy Antoine-Loeff's work is marked by a particular relationship with time; their work exhibits how time stretches and slows down, imposing its presence on the spectators, particularly as it relates to geology (see the *Tipping Point* installation) and emptiness (see *The Ghost City* installation), both of which are vehicles for transformation.

The “White Saboteur” is situated in a white landscape, an ice pack. The spectators experience the privilege of penetrating an autonomous world: the world of icebergs. The world they discover is almost exactly as it was left by the previous spectators. Simply by being there and looking at it, the world they see around them is visibly deteriorating. Beyond the human presence though, this glacial ecosystem has a natural power of regeneration which takes effect when the spectators look away.

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TREATMENT

We enter a landscape made of whites and blues, populated by icebergs slowly and peacefully drifting around us. We are standing on an ice pack. The midnight light is almost blinding. The wind is whistling in our ears. The ice is cracking, lifting, breathing. One iceberg flips over with an animal-like rumble. The apparent hostility of this polar universe, where humans may not have their place, is a chance for poetic and contemplative experimentation, with great freedom, offering a rich and immersive sensory experience: it opens a window onto a rare landscape. It doesn't appear anything can come and disrupt this unique and fragile ecosystem, made up of 99% water. Except maybe the intensity of our gaze.

“The White Saboteur” VR experience has no beginning and no end. For the spectators, the experience starts when they put on the VR headset and enter an autonomous universe, the ice kingdom, and ends when they remove it.

The next spectator will in turn discover this world in almost exactly the same state the previous spectator left it in... similarly to how generations succeed each other on Earth, and greatly modify its natural balance and ability to regenerate.

Some icebergs around us appear to have holes in them, as if they had been pierced and left incomplete, obliterated by perfect spheres; it looks like an invisible hand came and extracted some of its water. This organic landscape, with its shades of blue sprinkled with white and which we'd like to stay immaculate, bears the scars of human actions... someone was here before us and took away some of its resources. Someone before us left a mark, as will we when we leave.

Looking and gazing – vehicles for transformation and interaction

The spectator's action on this virtual world is simple: wherever they look, the world will change. Their eyes and the way they stare at icebergs, little by little alter the landscape around them. And the more intensely a spectator stares, the more the icebergs surrounding them change and lose part of their appearance...exponentially so.

While the visual environment is meant to look “realistic”, the missing and obliterated parts of the icebergs, on the other hand, leave the spectators with a pervading sense of “artificiality”: the

gaping holes in the icebergs get bigger and bigger as a spectator's stare intensifies, as if their eyes are chipping away at the icebergs to extract their water, in turn altering their shape, their density, their colors.

As spectators enter this world one after the other, it changes and becomes more artificial. It would in fact take several successive turns entering this universe to observe the multitude of transformations the field of icebergs endures.

If we take the time to observe this universe which is becoming more and more artificial, possibly to the point of disappearing, we will notice that some icebergs are regenerating very slowly. A skin of ice seems to form, much like scars, as the wounds left by the previous spectators slowly heal. In fact, some wounds have already healed, leaving scars which form a strange mix of natural and artificial textures.

An autonomous world

The VR universe that is rolled out is autonomous; it continues to live and evolve even when the spectator is not present. The wounds left behind from one spectator after the next continue to change as time goes by, and eventually scar. The icebergs' healing and rebuilding process is akin to nature coming in to its own again in an abandoned city, like when ivy gradually covers up the façade of a building. This process sends a strange feeling, as if icebergs had a life of their own, with their own powers of regeneration.

In this autonomous world, it is not a rare occurrence, with the effects of human actions, to see icebergs flip over with a deafening sound or burst into pieces.

Along with the ice pack and icebergs, this virtual universe also convenes the whole of meteorological phenomena present in the North and South poles: thick fog, snow storms, violent winds, light halos, aurora borealis... all of which will contribute to making the experience unique for each spectator, hopefully making them want to come back and see "how" this world has evolved.

Finally, the time lapse and time zone of the virtual universe will be in sync with those of one of the poles in order to transcribe real-time lighting that is so particular to the polar regions. This will also help impart a sense of slowness and peacefulness to the landscape unfolding in front of the spectators' eyes, and help them transpose it into their own temporality.

It is the month of October. Sunrise and sunset blend into one, bathing the landscape in its unmistakable tints of blue where shadows disappear. The white of the icebergs made way for an incandescent blue....The wind has died down and its whispering is almost unnoticeable. Everything inhabiting this universe seems to take advantage of the peacefulness offered by the temporary lull.

Experiencing the “timelessness”

The “timelessness” in which the spectators are propelled lends itself to escaping the ubiquitous and classic narrative and embracing the poetry that emanates from a device flirting with the artistry of an illustration. The spectator can freely enter an abstract world, stay for a while, contemplate or interact with the space around them, and leave...after which the apparatus continues to evolve without them, subtly suggesting that in fact, we are merely a parenthesis in its timeline. With this approach, we are hoping to steer away from the beaten path of a VR film which has a beginning, an end and closing credits, and rethink it as if it were a place where human action has an impact, a place that has a life of its own.

Just as time goes by, there is no beginning nor an end to what it proposes, but instead, offers a way for the spectator to witness this world's passing of time, and only they can decide to leave it and let it evolve on its own. As a spectator, we are not entering a storyline but rather catching it as it is already unfolding. By breaking away from the standard cinematic temporality and by using a 360° effect to isolate the spectator from the outside world, we are aiming to create a space, an experience, where all sensory bearings are lost, mimicking the intimacy and imperceptibility of time which passes differently for everyone. This will allow the virtual world to evolve in extreme slowness, at the human and geological scales.

Alone, we continue to drift on our platform which is now a field of icebergs plundered for their resources. Their regeneration is too slow to recapture their original splendor. It's enough to make us wonder if we still have our place among these wounded icy giants, even as they drift seemingly so peacefully... or if it is time for us to leave the fragile balance of this space-time continuum.

The place of the spectator

One might think that it would be disconcerting for a spectator to be part of an experience which has no beginning and no end. Even more so since the overarching theme raises questions relating to the disappearing cryosphere, the commercial exploitation of its freshwater, or more obviously, the impact of humans on the landscape.

With this context in mind, is it not the purpose of this experience for the spectators (i.e., human beings) to renounce their presence in this natural ecosystem inhabited by icebergs, so that it has a chance to regenerate itself? Both poles, but the North pole especially, are the world's most rapidly transforming regions due to the actions of humans.

The wounds left on the icebergs due to our presence, very slowly heal and close up, giving way to a new balance and a new landscape, far from our stares and gazes. A new fragile balance which will soon be disrupted by the next spectator, and so on, and so on... and for how long?

That moment when “natural” and “artificial” phenomena are no longer distinguishable

How can we observe this autonomous virtual world that is continuously evolving, once the experience is over? How can we collect evidence and traces of this world's evolutions in which two realities clash between the natural and the artificial?

One way to do this would be to take regular screenshots as if a webcam was placed inside this universe, and give them to the spectators after they have left the VR environment. The screenshots would be a way to capture the memory of what was and what no longer exists, in that moment when we can no longer distinguish natural phenomena from artificial ones because of every spectator's impact on this world, which ends up going extinct at the end of the exhibit.

« It is precisely because the Arctic's regime of light and weather is so different that this country is able to strikingly reveal what is presumptuous in our ways of thinking about natural environments in general. »
« Arctic Dreams », Barry Lopez, 1986

The obviousness of VR device

VR is an art of space, adapted to a continuity of time. The polar worlds are made in such a manner that time flows in a particular way in relation to our temporality: the cycles of light are different there. Often, what is commonly called "night" and "day" merge to the point of disorienting the smallest of our cells and our senses. Unless you have been confronted with it, it is impossible to experience this sensation. What VR makes possible here is an idea of this feeling, without trying to reproduce it exactly.

In this continuity, VR makes it possible to apprehend the reality of the ice floe, because it allows a visual and sound immersion at 360°. Of course, it is not a question of faithfully reproducing the world of the ice floe, but of appealing to the sensitive to propel the spectator in the middle of a living ice floe.

The polar worlds are so fragile that it is enough to put one foot on the snow to crush an entire forest. Perhaps the simple fact of staring too hard at these expanses of snow is enough to destabilize them. In other words, the impact of the human presence in these regions is immense, and the interactivity with the choice of the gaze as a lever of interaction makes it possible to put into perspective the human impact on this very particular environment.