WHO OWNS THE ARCTIC?

POLAR HEROISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN MARIELE NEUDECKER'S TANKWORK *COOK AND PEARY* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

The ambiguous "conquest" of the North Pole is the core element of Mariele Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* (2013). The artist explores the idea of an untouched icy landscape and its roots in Western heroic narratives. In reference to an aesthetic of the sublime and modern forms of knowledge presentation, precarious voids in the viewers' longing for intact nature are questioned. By enabling the viewers to follow the ideological perspective of the polar heroes – while also illustrating their ignorance – Neudecker highlights contemporary threats to the Arctic and questions its accessibility and ownership. In doing so, the artist examines the influence of cultural imaginations of "extreme" environments within historical and current geopolitical contexts. This article traces the visualisation of the Arctic and its sensual aesthetics, starting from the period of polar explorations to current climate change.

KEYWORDS

Polar heroes; North Pole; Diorama; Arctic sublime; Climate change; Ice.

I. Introduction

A sublime icescape in miniature takes the viewer on an imaginary journey to the Arctic, yet it remains physically inaccessible behind glass. In Mariele Neudecker's artwork *Cook and Peary* (2013), a snow-white iceberg peers out of the surrounding fog [Fig. 1].[1]

Trapped as a miniature model made of fibreglass in a hermetically sealed box, the iceberg looks like an arctic landscape with its own microclimate. The glass box consists of salt water, enriched with other substances according to a secret chemical recipe. Positioned at the viewer's eye level, the so-called tankwork – a moniker for the artist's series of aquarium-like sculptures – has anti-reflective panes which invite both a vertical view penetrating the fog, and a horizontal view onto the ice. Its glow evokes a feeling of coldness, which condenses into a visible atmospheric phenomenon within the tank. The viewer is confronted with a polar region that seems both familiar and alien: as a self-contained world, the icy landscape appears to be alive and yet (in its frozen state) preserved in time.

The connector *and* in the title of Neudecker's tankwork refers to a historical conflict between the two polar heroes Frederick Cook and Robert Edwin Peary, who both claimed to be the respective conqueror of the North Pole in 1909.[2] A spatio-temporal indeterminacy has been attributed to the Arctic ever since.[3] The extreme climate of the arctic region (from a Western human perspective) made the ice the ideal testing ground for male heroic deeds, which was echoed in polar exploration writing and images.[4] Although the topics featured in the image culture of arctic explorations were more diverse,[5] imaginaries of the polar ice as an empty and solid stage for the performance of human conquest became most popular.

1
This essay was written during a stay at the Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg in Greifswald (Germany) in 2020/21. Special thanks go to the institution and its fellows (esp. Bettine Menke, Kyung-Ho Cha, Dörte Schmidt, Sarah Hegenbart and Kilian Heck) for the constant critical exchange, many suggestions and moral support. The topics discussed are part of a larger research project by the author, which examines the work of contemporary female artists who deal with heroic polar narratives.

2
The Research Group (SFB) 948 *Heroes, Heroizations, Heroisms* at the University of Freiburg (Germany) argues that heroes do not simply exist. Instead, people are made into such. Heroism is a cultural phenomenon, which points to changes, endeavours and identity constructions within a community. The term is thus used not in a positivistic way but with regard to processes of construction and deconstruction.

3
Bettine Menke, Polarfahrt als Bibliotheksphänomen und die Polargebiete der Bibliothek. Nachfahren Petrarcas und Dantes im Eis und in den Texten, in: Annelore Engel-Braunschmidt, Gerhard Fouquet, Wiebke von Hinden and Inken Schmidt (eds.), *Ultima Thule. Bilder des Nordens von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001, 145–172, here 167.

4
Hester Blum, *News at the Ends of the Earth. The Print Culture of Polar Exploration*, Durham, NC 2018.

5
Eavan O'Dochertaigh, *Visual Culture and Arctic Voyages. Personal and Public Art and Literature of the Franklin Search Exhibitions*, Cambridge 2022.

[Fig. 1]
Mariele Neudecker, Cook and Peary, 2013, water, salt, fibreglass, 47.6 × 482 × 47.8 cm, Courtesy of the artist © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2021 © Mariele Neudecker, all rights reserved, DACS/Artimage, 2021. Photo: Benjamin Jones.

Neudecker uses an uninhabited landscape in her tankwork as a stage for questioning Western ideas of the so-called end of the world; an imagination shaped by polar heroic narratives which centre on the vision of an untouched region offering itself up for appropriation. The artist's exploration of the topographical peculiarities of the Arctic – as a constantly changing region without an underlying land mass – testifies to her interest in the formation and consolidation of cultural imaginaries. At the core of the tankwork lies the cultural significance of the Arctic as a region which, on one hand, archives ideas of colonial expansionist endeavours and, on the other, emphasises the need for critical reflection on today's economic and ecological threats.[6] What is striking, however, is the ongoing influence of romantic aesthetics for the imagination of an untouched North in an age which has already been named "post-heroic".[7]

The article is divided into three parts. While the first part focusses on the interior of the tank world – i.e. the motif of the deserted icescape, its iconographic roots and its relevance in polar heroic stories – the second section is devoted to the aesthetics of the (arctic) sublime in the context of climate art.[8] Finally, the formal appearance of the tankwork is compared with the presentation device of the diorama in order to analyse ideas of intactness of nature. The aim is to systematically present the problems and potentials of a contemporary postcolonial and climate art when oriented towards heroic modes of perception and representation.

The pivotal point of the analysis is to outline the analogy between repeated and denied border-crossings evoked in the reception of the artwork and the historic attempts to reach the North Pole. In this context, I define a moment of tension between the delimiting gaze and the refused touch as a constitutive element in Neudecker's tankwork. While the immersive view into the interior of the tank and onto the untrodden snow seems to follow the allure of the North Pole, the glass box ultimately denies physical access to the landscape. In doing so, the inner landscape and outer form of the tankwork bring questions of preservation and reflective distance to the fore. The polar heroes – who give the tankwork its name without being present as figures themselves – function as a thematic frame in which the longing of a first-hand encounter with nature is made conscious.

6
Kirsten Thisted, "A Place in the Sun". Historical Perspectives on the Debate on Development and Modernity in Greenland, in: Heidie Hansson and Anka Ryall (eds.), *Arctic Modernities. The Environmental, the Exotic and the Everyday*, Cambridge 2017, 312–344, here 317.

7
Ulrich Bröckling, *Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild*, Berlin 2020.

8
Together with Anna-Sophie Jürgens (ANU, Canberra), the author is currently editing an anthology on this topic entitled "Communicating Ice in Arts, Science and Popular Aesthetics", which will be published by Palgrave in 2023.

II. Imperial Conquests: The Phantasm of the Untrodden Ice

The idea of an ice-covered island of longing in the far North, called Thule, became a topos through the travelogues of the Greek adventurer Pytheas around 350 BC.[9] Because of its location at the – from a European perspective – end of the world, the attempt to reach the North Pole was soon considered an impossible feat. The lure of this ultimate challenge led to numerous expeditions, especially in the nineteenth century, when most regions of the world had already been conquered.[10]

Based on the logbooks of the polar explorers in the so-called far North, a "symbolic discourse of land approach" was established, which revolved around the untrodden white.[11] As Hanna Eglinger has shown, the notion of an untouched landscape was the result of a colonial view lauded by British, American, German and Scandinavian explorers, who ignored the traces and ways of life of those already there; that is, the indigenous population.[12] The fact that many Inuit had already crossed (what was supposed to be) the furthest frontier of civilisation before Westerners arrived was deliberately left out of heroic stories. Thus, the Arctic became an uncharted stage for imperial exploits, especially in European/American literature and art at the turn of the century:

> The polar desert evokes phantasms of firstness, and the areas of untouched to be discovered and mapped entice with their 'initial unmarked emptiness', which can be filled with different and often contradictory projections.[13]

9
Due to its difficult accessibility and the lack of seasonal change, the Arctic has been considered a kind of "inverted paradise" since ancient times. Jocelyn Godwin, *ARKTOS. The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism and Nazi Survival*, London 1996, 15. Regarding the journeys of Pytheas, compare: Joachim Gerstenberg, *Thule. Eine Fahrt nach Grönland*, Hamburg 1939, 12.

10
Tobias Schlechtriemen, Der Held als Effekt. Boundary work in Heroisierungsprozessen, in: *Berliner Debatte Initial* 29/1, 2018, 106–119.

11
Hanna Eglinger, *Nomadisch, Extatisch, Magisch. Skandinavischer Arktisprimitivismus im ausgehenden 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhundert*, Paderborn/Munich 2021, 115. Original: "Symbolischer Landnahmediskurs".

12
The inconsistent attitude of polar explorers to the Inuit at the turn of the century has been pointed out several times. Explorers made use of much of the Inuits' knowledge but ignored their existence when coming close to the North Pole. For example, although he respected the Inuit, Fridtjof Nansen claimed on 8 April 1895 to have set up the *northernmost* camp in the world. Roland Huntford, *Nansen. The Explorer as Hero*, London 1997, 269. The term *explorer* is used critically here and serves to characterise the hero's gaze and its framing of the viewers' gaze.

13
Eglinger, Nomadisch, Extatisch, Magisch, 115. Original: "Die polare Wüste ruft Phantasmen der Erstheit hervor, und die unberührten weißen Flecken, die entdeckt und kartographiert werden sollen, locken mit ihrer 'anfänglichen Leere ohne Spuren', die mit unterschiedlichen und oft widersprüchlichen Projektionen gefüllt werden kann."

The fiction of firstness is linked to a process of drawing boundaries: the idea of an area which has supposedly never been entered entails that which has so far eluded any permanent marking.[14]

Bettine Menke defines the leading motif within polar narratives as following in the footsteps of predecessors and the moment of their (un)successful transgression.[15] In texts from Dante to Edgar Alan Poe (and beyond), the Arctic became a mythopoetic terrain, since a "topos of tracelessness" was invoked in the attempt to repeatedly exceed the tracks of those who had already been there.[16] During the time of Europe's expansion, the Arctic was reimagined as an endless region beyond the horizon. Literature, as Menke makes clear, has developed a special form of referentiality and intertextuality for the phantasm of firstness, a kind of literary echo of the transgressive nature of (polar) heroic deeds:

> Polar journeys seek to realise the phantasm of tracklessness, which is pronounced as a metaphor of an absolute beginning. But such journeys were always bound to traces – those of predecessors, texts and models. Polar heroes follow in the footsteps of those who were there before them.[17]

While literary studies have defined techniques of overwriting (palimpsesting) and intertextual references for negotiating a topos of firstness, a similar systematic analysis for parallel techniques in visual arts is lacking. This article attempts to fill this gap, by looking at the iconographic, formal and meta-aesthetic features of Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary*. In doing so, moments of crossing thresholds/borders within the reception of the artwork will be central to the analysis.

The dispute over who was the first man at the North Pole – whether the American Cook or his compatriot Peary – became a media spectacle in the USA and Europe in the early twentieth century. Although Peary ultimately emerged as the winner, the topic continues to be somewhat disputed. The front page of the magazine *Le Petit Journal* of 19 September 1909 shows a caricature of the so-called battle of the North Pole [Fig. 2]. In this image, Cook and

14
Ibid., 116.

15
Bettine Menke, Pol-Apokalypsen, die Enden der Welt. Im Gewirr der Spuren, in: Maria Moog-Grünewald and Verena Olejniczak (eds.), *Apokalypse. Der Anfang im Ende*, Heidelberg 2003, 311–337.

16
Ibid., 311. Original: "Topos der Spurenlosigkeit".

17
Ibid., 312. Original: "Polarfahrten wollen das Phantasma der Spurlosigkeit, die als Metapher eines absoluten Anfangs ausgeprägt wird, realisieren. Gebunden aber waren sie schon an die Spuren – von Vorläufern, Texten und Modellen. Sie folgen in den Spuren von Vorgängern. Der Ort des Anfangs, der unberührten Spurlosigkeit, wird erreicht als ein sowohl wörtliches wie metaphorisches Nachfahren, als die ausgeführte Nachfahrenschaft oder Intertextualität der Texte."

[Fig. 2]
The Battle of the North Pole, Cover of the *Petit Journal*, 1919, Journal Cover © Bibliothéque nationale de France.

Peary are engaged in a fistfight with Peary just landing a hit, and thus probably winning the right to hoist the American flag. Whether the irritating addition of penguins as the audience to the heroic deed indicates the impossibility of witnessing this imperial gesture, or whether the animals show the illustrator's geological ignorance, remains open.[18] In any case, a cartoon published in the USA in the same year confidently states it does not matter which of the two men won, for they are both American: "What's the Difference – It Cuts no Ice – It's Ours Anyway." The element of personal achievement in this heroic act – the pole marking – seems irrelevant as soon as it does not celebrate individual glory, but a nation's claim to power. This is why in today's conflicts over arctic resources released by melting ice, the USA does not argue their claim with their geographical location – i.e. belonging to the arctic incentive states – but with this highly ambiguous, historic heroic deed.[19]

Monika Kirstensen notes that it was only after the dispute over the conquest of the North Pole made headlines in the news that the mere description of conquests in log books was no longer sufficient to prove heroic deeds. Instead, it became necessary to leave permanent traces in the ice.[20] Peary's uncompromising ambition and his masculine approach to conquest manifested in him strategically assembling his expedition team so he was the only white male. This was done knowing that the heroic deed of reaching the pole would thus be solely attributed to him.[21]

As Paul Eric Tøjner points out, due to its heroic legacy, the Arctic was and still is, "a great, indefinable challenge for the human perspective on the planet we inhabit".[22] In particular, literary and cultural studies are currently devoting attention to the metaphor of untrodden icescapes and their political implications due to their increasing relevance in times of climate change.[23] However, in art

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Heroes are dependent on their appreciation and mediation, meaning that they are a cultural phenomenon rather than historic figures. Heroism is attributed to people. Ronald Asch and Michael Butter, *Bewunderer, Verehrer, Zuschauer. Die Helden und ihr Publikum*, Baden-Baden 2016.

19
Klaus Dodds, *Ice. Nature and Culture*, London 2018.

20
Monica Kristensen, Heroes, in: *Arctic* (exh. cat. Humlebæk, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art), ed. by Michael Juul Holm, Mathias Ussing Seeberg and Poul Erik Tøjer, Esbjerg 2013, 54–63, here 59.

21
Lisa Bloom has recently discussed Isaac Julien's video installation *True North* which gives voice to Matthew Henson as probably the first black man at the North Pole. Compare: Lisa Bloom, *Climate Change and New Polar Aesthetics. Artists Reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic*, Durham, NC 2022.

22
Paul Eric Tøjner and Mathias Ussing Seeberg, Vorwort, in: Holm, Seeberg and Tøjer, Arctic, 4–7, here 5.

23
Currently especially with regard to the colonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland: Kirsten Thisted and Ann-Sofie Gremaud, *Denmark and the New North Atlantic. Narratives and Memories in a Former Empire*, Aarhus 2020, 23.

history, very few articles have been written on this topic, especially with a focus on female artists who examine the national significance of (ant-)arctic landscapes.[24] By questioning the myth of untouched icy surfaces, women artists draw attention to cultural voids within the perceptions of "heroic environments", which include women in the history of the (Ant-)Arctic, animal and human expedition members, and indigenous populations.[25]

In Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* [Fig. 1], the atmospheric and figureless icescape visualises the phantasm of untouchedness, which determines heroic literature on the poles as a leitmotif. Human figures only appear in Neudecker's oeuvre in her first tankwork from 1995, but were then dispensed with to avoid the impression of toy landscapes.[26] As I argue, the decision to create an empty arctic landscape does not simply repeat heroic imaginations, instead, the voids of polar heroic narrations become negotiable in their visualisation. By using romantic aesthetics and forms of display, the artist emphasises that the heroic phantasm of untouched regions is a legacy of a colonial past. Neudecker reveals the cultural framings and modes of presentation which underlie these nostalgic imaginations. In its emptiness and stage-like character, the landscape itself becomes the object of critical reflection.

The title of Neudecker's tankwork, *Cook and Peary*, invites a polar heroic perspective. The recipients follow the gaze of Cook and Peary: an imperial gesture due to its upward and all-round view. Within the process of reception, a moment of encounter between the viewer and the historical legacy of his or her cultural imagination is initiated, which follows the popular concept of "contact zones" by Mary Louise Pratt.[27] The term became extremely relevant for postcolonial thinking and refers to either a geographical or a social space in which cultures meet and influence each other "often in highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism [...] or their aftermaths".[28] At the moment of encountering a still unmarked landscape, the necessary influence of a masculine ordering gaze is asserted. The significance of Pratt's concept lies

24
Stephanie von Spreter, Feminist Strategies for Changing the History. Re-Imagining Arctic Exploration Narratives through the (Staging of) Photographs, Travel Writing and Found Objects, in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 13/1, 2021, 1–20.

25
Lisa Bloom pioneered research on women at the poles. Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice. American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, Minneapolis 1993. In art history, Isabelle Gapp has drawn attention to female artists stepping into the footsteps of arctic explorers already around 1900: Isabelle Gapp, Women in the Far North. Anna Boberg and the Norwegian Glacial Landscape, in: *Kunst og Kultur* 104/2, 2021, 82–96.

26
Ariane Koek, Sediment. An Introduction to the Works of Mariele Neudecker, in: *Mariele Neudecker. Sediment*, London 2012, 103–115, here 107.

27
Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 2007.

28
Ibid., 30–31.

in the challenge to "straightforward Eurocentric narratives, which view the inhabitants of Europe's colonies as passive objects of European efforts to culturally transform, 'civilize' them to conform to European ideals and cultural practices".[29]

With reference to Neudecker's tankwork, Pratt's concept is used in a larger framework of meaning. The artist provides the icy landscape with an agency of misty allurement; an affective pull. Instead of human cultures coming into contact with each other, the viewers encounter ice itself as a living entity which invites a sensuous and immersive experience. In doing so, the tankwork addresses the imperial dispositions of the viewer's perception and its limits: the gaze penetrates the glass box, whereas the notion of touch is denied. Following W. J. T. Mitchell, this aesthetic experience can be more precisely defined as a "contemplative" and "interpretative" form of perception.[30] The contemplative view of atmospheric density – in which the viewer can potentially lose himself (like so many polar heroes before him) – also invites an interpretative – i.e. ordering – view of a seemingly chaotic nature. This tension raises the question of "how we naturalize what we do to each other, and how these 'doings' are encapsulated in the media we call 'landscape'".[31] Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* thus highlights the cultural conditioning of our visual memory, its historical voids and romantic notions, which still determine our understanding of the Arctic.

III. The Sublime North: Failed Expeditions in Romantic Art

Central to Neudecker's work is her engagement with the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, especially his *Sea of Ice* (1823–1824) [Fig. 3].[32] Friedrich's paintings made snow- and icescapes, and, with them, the gruesome wasteland of the Arctic – which John Ruskin had denied any pictorial worthiness – the subject of art.[33] Although icescapes can be found in paintings before Friedrich (especially

29
Pascal Firges and Tobias P. Graf, Exploring the Contact Zone. A Critical Assessment from the Perspective of Early Modern Euro-Ottoman History, in: Laila-Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos and Susan Richter (eds.), *Engaging Transculturality. Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, London/New York 2019, 109–121, here 110.

30
W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago, IL/London 2002, 2.

31
Ibid., 2.

32
In her tankwork *Ship* (1998) and the installation *After Life* (2016) the artist directly refers to Friedrich's painting.

33
Dirk Tölke, *Eislandschaften und Eisberge. Studien zur Motiv- und Bildgeschichte von Eisformationen und polaren Szenerien in Gemälden und Graphiken des 16.–20. Jahrhunderts*, PhD Thesis, Aachen 1995, 1.

during the so-called *Little Ice Age*), ice primarily served as a backdrop for human actions rather than being the main topic.[34]

In Friedrich's painting, ice functions as an empty stage in and of itself: the viewers become witnesses to a dynamic spectacle in which the violence of the frozen water forms pyramidal shapes, threatening to crush a small ship pushed to the edge of the picture. The ice even seems to break through the painting's surface.[35] The motif was inspired by the polar voyage accounts of Englishman William Edward Parry, who tried in vain to find the Northwest Passage in 1819–1820.[36] Parry's journal of the *Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific* of 1821 became an international bestseller and was probably known to Friedrich.

The aesthetics of the sublime played an important part in the motif of a chaotic – i.e. disordered – landscape becoming worthy of representation. According to the philosopher Edmund Burke, the experience of overwhelming terror can be transformed into an aesthetic pleasure in the knowledge of one's own safety.[37] The sublime feeling means a special intensity of bodily experience. This is also true for the sublime in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, to whom it is that which is great par excellence.[38] Unlike the beautiful, the sublime is not part of the experience of ordered structures, but of the formless (in) nature. It is not an object quality, but its effect unfolds in the observing subject; here, "the superiority of the determination of reason [of] the faculty of knowledge over the greatest faculty of sensuality [...] becomes vivid".[39]

Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* clearly evokes a sensual confrontation with the boundlessness of the icy landscape.[40] However, the sublime effect of Friedrich's painting has been questioned with reference

34
Bärbel Hedinger, Wirklichkeit und Erfindung in der holländischen Landschaftsmalerei, in: *Die „kleine Eiszeit". Holländische Landschaftsmalerei im 17. Jahrhundert* (exh. cat. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), ed. by Michael Budde, Berlin 2001, 11–25.

35
Dirk Tölke, Eislandschaften und Eisberge, 3.

36
Ibid., 25.

37
Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, Cambridge 2015, 10. Doran defines the sublime as an heroic expression.

38
Immanuel Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft und Schriften zur Naturphilosophie, in: Wilhelm Weidschel (ed.), *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, Darmstadt 1983, §27, 333.

39
Ibid., 344. Original: "[wird] die Überlegenheit der Vernunftbestimmung [des] Erkenntnisvermögen[s] über das größte Vermögen der Sinnlichkeit [...] anschaulich."

40
Hans Dickel, Eiszeit der Moderne. Zur Kälte als Metapher in Caspar David Friedrichs „Eismeer" und Joseph Beuys' Installation „Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch", in: *IDEA* 9, 1990, 229–248, here 234.

[Fig. 3]
Caspar David Friedrich, Sea of Ice, 1823–1824, oil on canvas, 96.7 × 126.9 cm, Hamburg, Kunsthalle Hamburg © Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg.

to its intensity, which seems to threaten the viewers' standpoint.[41] As the ice floes move towards the picture's surface, a physical immediacy occurs in which an aesthetic "expedition that had turned towards the sublime" fails: distant observation turns into a bodily participation.[42] Instead of merely evoking sublime effects, Friedrich's sinking ship thus becomes a metaphor for the critical negotiation of sublime aesthetics in the arts. The painting questions the viewer's safe standpoint and enables a self-critical and highly subjective reception of nature in the heroic age of conquest. This is why Friedrich's painting is regarded to mark the beginning of ecological awareness in romantic art and is accordingly a much-cited pictorial formula for communicating climate change to this day.[43]

Neudecker's art has frequently been associated with the aesthetic of the sublime, but often without taking into account the miniature size of her landscapes.[44] Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* is the pivotal point for Neudecker's artistic work because it is a visual discussion of the sublime (rather than its expression) and connected to a special version of it: the so-called arctic sublime. As a media phenomenon the arctic sublime circles around the feeling of loss. This notion of loss not only refers to the disappearance of heroes and their traces, but also to that of ice itself. The term arctic sublime was used by Chauncey Loomis in the late 1970s in the context of the fatal arctic expeditions of colonial England, which caused a great media echo in newspapers, theatre productions and literature.[45] Loomis characterises the sensation-hungry Victorian public as enthusiastic "armchair travellers"; travellers, that is, who undertook imaginary adventures into inhospitable landscapes of the North from the safety of their own homes.[46] The author cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Ancient Mariner* (1798) and its haunting imagery as the initiator of the arctic sublime in literature. The poem influenced the polar imaginaries of Victorian England through newspaper accounts and magazine illustrations. Even polar explorers themselves quoted it, merging fictional literature and

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Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich und die Theorie des Erhabenen. Friedrichs ‚Eismeer' als Antwort auf einen zentralen Begriff der zeitgenössischen Ästhetik*, Weimar 2001. Original: "Expedition, die sich dem Erhabenen zugewendet hatte."

42
Ibid., 65 and 84.

43
Peter Rautmann, Winter-Zeiten. C. D. Friedrichs und Ph. O. Runges künstlerische Konzeption und Praxis. Denk- und Sehanstöße für heute, in: *Kritische Berichte* 9/6, 1981, 38–64, here 41.

44
Maite Lorés, The Magic Mountain. The Work of Mariele Neudecker, in: Katherine Wood (ed.), *Mariele Neudecker*, Colchester 1999, 9–28, here 9–11.

45
Chauncey C. Loomis, The Arctic Sublime, in: U. C. Knoepflmacher and G. B. Tennyson (eds.), *Nature and Victorian Imagination*, Berkeley, CA 1977, 95–112.

46
Ibid., 96.

documentary reporting into an inextricable conglomerate.[47] The sublime representation of icescapes in literature and art led to the reception of "environments within which a cosmic romance could be acted out: man facing the great cold forces of Nature".[48]

The imagination and aesthetic experience of sublime polar landscapes as a heroising stage gained its attraction from a tension between conquest and loss. Frequently, the fame of polar heroes was enhanced by the fact that they disappeared for a time or even forever.[49] Keeping this in mind, the view of Neudecker's untouched icescape in the tankwork *Cook and Peary* provides a dystopian quality as well as a nostalgic tone: in addition to the imaginary journey in the footsteps of the polar heroes, a post-apocalyptic world without people becomes imaginable.[50] A complex temporality can thus be detected with regard to the miniature icescape behind glass: the threatening loss of the eternal ice and sensual effects are intertwined in order to evoke feelings of past, present and future.

Today, there is an ongoing discussion about the appropriateness and purpose of the sublime in eco-art. Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller emphasise that the function of the sublime in romantic aesthetics is to make human's (physical) entanglement with the world perceptible in the era of industrialisation.[51] The challenge of visualising the complex scales of climate change – i.e. its ongoing processuality and (current as well as upcoming) catastrophic events – is understood as an intrinsic quality of the sublime aesthetics which gives form to what is otherwise unrepresentable.[52] Visceral art can evoke a connection with the world in which man bears responsibility without dominating nature; this is why romantic aesthetics also play a dominant role in contemporary artworks dealing with climate change. However, some scholars argue for a more science-related art and artistic practice which helps people grasp the alarm call of graphs, tables and statistics from climate research.[53]

47
Ibid., 98.

48
Ibid., 110.

49
This most recently happened to the extensive Arctic expedition of the MOSAIC-Expedition from the Alfred Wegner Institute in 2019. A crack that appeared in the ice soon swallowed a whole research camp.

50
The term "nostalgic" is not used here colloquially, but in reference to Dominik Schrey, who describes nostalgic aesthetes of contemporary art as a form of memorising disappearance. Dominik Schrey, *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur*, Berlin 2017, 12.

51
Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *Anthropozän zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2019, 12.

52
Ibid., 134.

53
Birgit Schneider, Sublime Aesthetics in the Era of Climate Crisis? A Critique, in: T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott and Subhankar Banerjee (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture and Climate Change*, New York, NY 2021, 263–273.

To Birgit Schneider, for example, the sublime is unsuitable for communicating climate change and activating ecological awareness because it conveys the feeling of a secure standpoint. The danger of a nostalgic "nature snuff" evoked by sublime aesthetics – i.e. the pathetic pleasure of watching a region die while believing one's own standpoint to be secure – rather calls for a future-oriented aesthetical expression.[54] Other scholars take the middle ground by reflecting on artistic and digital images of icescapes and their stage-like quality while at the same time questioning their cultural voids.[55] As an example, Amanda Boetzkes argues for the sublime as a means of communicating ecological urgency due to its activating potential in evoking connectedness. An emotional address is regarded as necessary to provide the abstract nature of climate change with sensual immediacy. As the argument goes, the need for the viewer to be physically affected or feel endangered when confronted with images of climate change increases the likelihood to act. However, sublime icescapes often reiterate colonial perspectives:

> The representation of climate change often risks overwriting planetary knowledge with these latent colonial fantasies of finality: the extinction of species, the end of indigenous people and knowledge, total economic control of environments.[56]

Thus, although the arctic sublime communicates immediacy, it is precisely the sense of loss – of people or ecosystems – evoked by icescapes that ultimately (and somehow ironically) disqualifies this romantic aesthetic from engaging with a decolonised, communal and forward-looking stance.

Neudecker stands in Friedrich's tradition by critically reflecting on the problematic origins of the arctic sublime. In perceiving the tankwork *Cook and Peary*, the recipients do not immerse themselves into heroic polar narratives; instead, arctic imaginaries are presented as cultural models and stereotypes. Thus, arctic images and their affective pull are examined, rather than confirmed. By stripping the motif of Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* of all human traces and transforming it into a miniature format, Neudecker turns the icy landscape into a stage for reflecting on the voids of our own cultural imprint. In doing so, the icescape transforms the heroic

54
Ibid., 269.

55
Amanda Boetzkes, Climate Aesthetics in the Ablation Zone. Dossier, in: *Afterimage. The Journal of Medial Arts and Cultural Criticism* 47/2, 2020, 35-39.

56
Ibid., 38.

imagination to a "ridiculous disillusionment, in which the former sublimity coagulates into banality".[57]

The artist's strategy of artistic miniaturisation effectively counterforces the illusion of immediacy. It playfully criticises the ignorance which underlies our conceptions of the far North as a boundless and unmarked expanse and lets us question the cultural framework through which we perceive the Arctic. However, Neudecker's icescape is not banalised in a strict sense. Instead, due to its apparent liveliness and haptic withdrawal behind glass, it retains a magical and alluring power that awakens our desire for a physical experience. In its suggestive microclimate preserved behind glass, it ties in with the history of presenting knowledge in the field of sciences around 1900.

IV. The Tankwork as an Icy Habitat Diorama: Denied Touch and Visual Access

Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* [Fig. 1] as a hermetically sealed glass box deals with the history of polar sciences and their mediation. It is reminiscent of a polar diorama, but with one important difference: neither stuffed animals nor human figures inhabit the ice world. The imagination of untouchedness is heightened insofar as the artist thwarts the expectation of a populated landscape arrangement by exhibiting only the icy region. As a "surrogate of the original", the nebulous icescape – with its apparent microclimate – opens up imaginary access to an arctic region in miniature, but without physically endangering it.[58] However, in the tradition of the diorama, the miniature landscape as a model also carries an imperialistic undertone due to cultural historic acts of objectifying nature.

Karen Wonders speaks of a dual function of natural history dioramas between education and modern entertainment: as showcases of the findings and discoveries of European expeditions, dioramas illustrate "man's effort to classify, define and generally comprehend the natural world by means of ecological model".[59] In this respect, dioramas are closely related to the ordering gaze of the cartographer, not in the tradition of Louis Daguerre's panorama-like and effective theatrical productions, but with regard to his habitat

[57] Hartmut Böhme, Der Niedergang naturästhetischer Evidenz oder: Über die Unvermeidlichkeit der Natur in den Künsten, in: *Kunstchronik* 73/7, 2020, 340–357, here 353.

[58] Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder. From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Los Angeles 2001, 326.

[59] Karen Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas. Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History*, Uppsala 1993, 9. Compare also: Katharina Dohm, Claire Garnier, Laurent Le Bon and Florence Ostende (eds.), *Erfindung einer Illusion*, Frankfurt a. M. 2017.

arrangements.[60] These glass boxes were initially built in miniature and originated as a "logical outgrowth of the habitat group in natural history exhibition".[61] In addition to conveying knowledge, habitat dioramas were intended to transport an appreciation of nature and encourage its preservation.[62] However, the aims were also to suggest a feeling of accessibility of remote landscapes and the evocation of national belonging.[63]

In a specially close relation to polar explorations and their scientific endeavours stood Carl Hagenbeck's Arctic Diorama, first exhibited at the Berlin Industrial Exhibition of 1886, which showed a landscape inhabited by animals and sometimes humans.[64] The crucial difference to other installations was that here, the habitat arrangement – complemented by illusionistic background images and a floor area designed with real set pieces – did not imitate a concrete place, but exhibited a *type* of landscape.[65] This idea went back to Alexander von Humboldt, who advocated for the communication of scientific knowledge through presentation devices of modern entertainment cultures.[66] Humboldt was interested in the different emotional reactions of people to various types of landscape and gave central importance to their realistic staging through art. Thus, it became common to the creators of dioramas in natural history museums to give the viewer the impression of an alluring landscape region untouched by foreign influences and intact in its ecological connections.[67]

However, the habitat diorama was a paradoxical form of showcase: on the one hand, it presented the landscape as a unique place of longing and on the other, it stressed the typicality of remote regions. While the habitat diorama gave the viewer the impression of taking the place of the discoverer and casting a genuine gaze at an unknown region, it simultaneously emphasised the presentation of

60
The second type is the anthropological diorama which contains human figures. In its typical form, however, the life-sized measurements of the figures are important to this type of diorama, which is why it is not considered here.

61
Wonders, Habitat Dioramas, 15.

62
Ibid., 17.

63
Russel A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles. The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818–1875*, Seattle/London 2007.

64
Ursula Storch, *Die Welt in Reichweite. Imaginäre Reisen im 19. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 1999, 182.

65
Wonders, Habitat Dioramas, 193.

66
Ibid., 194–195.

67
Hans Buddemeier, *Panorama, Diorama, Photographie. Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert*, Paderborn/Munich 1970.

collected objects of knowledge arranged in the glass box. Phantasms of firstness were addressed in the reception of habitat dioramas, but they ultimately tipped over into the act of merely retracing the explorer's gaze. What is more, habitat dioramas worked with an interweaving of scientific knowledge and its sensual staging. Therefore, Uta Kornmeier and Georg Töpfer argue that the "main goal of the habitat dioramas [was] to make an entire landscape directly physically tangible".[68]

As early as the mid-twentieth century, habitat dioramas within museums of natural history were criticised for being instruments of "popularisation and emotionalisation" instead of conveying complex scientific knowledge.[69] Another point of criticism – examined by Donna Haraway – hit at the colonial roots of habitat dioramas.[70] The author emphasises that the nineteenth-century display of the habitat diorama still preserves uncomfortable memories of colonialist and social practices. Haraway not only criticises the contradiction underlying habitat dioramas – i.e. the mass killing of wild animals for their life-like presentation – she also classifies habitat dioramas as dangerous "meaning-machines" that, in their petrification of all living things, "threaten to govern the living".[71] To Haraway, "the glass front of the diorama forbids the body's entry, but the gaze invites its visual penetration".[72] Following Haraway, colonial power structures, notions of possession and exploitation are continually updated in the perception of habitat dioramas and thus shape our imagination of nature to this day.

The categorical rejection of the habitat diorama has recently been countered with its capacity to communicate climate change. The sensual effects of dioramas have been examined as a way to potentially visualise the complex temporalities of ecological processes. For example, Noémie Étienne observes how in current museum installations, one animal from a group always captures the viewers' gaze.[73] With this, the recipients are transformed from external subjects into temporary yet integral parts of the arrange-

68
Uta Kornmeier and Georg Toepfer, Natur im Kasten. Ästhetische und museale Antworten auf das Problem des naturgeschichtlichen Dioramas, in: Annerose Keßler and Isabelle Schwarz (eds.), *Objektivität und Imagination. Naturgeschichte in der Kunst des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, Bielefeld 2018, 225–250, here 227. Original: "Hauptziel der Habitatdioramen [...], eine ganze Landschaft unmittelbar physisch erlebbar zu machen."

69
Ibid., 236. Original: "Popularisierung und Emotionalisierung".

70
Donna Harraway, Teddy Bear Patriarchy. Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936, in: *Social Text* 11/11, 1984–1985, 20–64.

71
Ibid., 25.

72
Ibid., 25.

73
Noémie Étienne, *The Art of the Anthropological Diorama. Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity*, Berlin/Boston, MA 2021, 15.

ment. To illustrate this idea, Étienne refers to Pratt's concept of contact zones mentioned earlier. Through the presentation of "remote places" and addressing the threat they face from climate change, today's dioramas give the impression of a physical encounter with the staged habitat.[74] Twenty-first-century habitat dioramas thus have the ability to develop climate consciousness in the viewer, but only if their fictional character is put to the fore. This can be achieved by including certain details – such as presenting only a single egg within a bird's nest – and/or by conveying the feeling of immediacy.

Christiane Voss similarly regards the fictitious character of the diorama – which follows a "logic of vivification" – as a possible route for conscious renewal of our relationship with nature.[75] The tension between the dead animals which are exhibited and their dynamic staging in an apparently natural habitat results in an oscillation between nostalgic longings and future perspectives. As Voss argues, "the visual rhetoric of habitat dioramas oscillates between the commemoration of a lost nature, which strictly speaking never existed (an idyll) and the animation of an environmentally-conscious attitude towards a nature of the future".[76] The belief in the existence of an unblemished nature which needs to be protected from humans and which is imagined either in a distant past or future is currently debated in the environmental humanities, with much reference to the ideas of Bruno Latour.[77] Most recently, however, Hartmut Böhme marked the belief in nature as a perfectly balanced, human-free system as a slightly naïve construct.[78]

When Neudecker draws attention to the way arctic nature is presented in habitat dioramas on a formal level, she addresses humans' desire for an encounter with untouched, pristine nature and at the same time marks it as a fiction. If the viewers surrender to the impression of entering the glass box, they perform the transgressive action similar to the deeds of historic polar heroes. At the same time, however, Neudecker plays with the alienation effect of the diorama, which makes the fictional content and arranged char-

74
Ibid., 49.

75
Christiane Voss, Idyllisches Schaudern. Das Habitat-Diorama zwischen Leben und Tod (Bild-Besprechung), in: Luisa Feiersinger (ed.), *Science Fiction. Inszenierungen der Wissenschaft zwischen Film, Fakt und Fiktion*, Berlin/Boston, MA 2018, 127–129, here 128. Original: "Logik der Verlebendigung".

76
Ibid., 129. Original: "[Dioramen] sind als eigensinnige Schauanordnungen zwischen Kunst, Wissenschaft und Unterhaltung zu verorten: Zwischen dem Gedenken an eine verlorene Natur, die streng genommen nie existiert hat, auf der einen Seite (Idyll) und der Animierung einer umweltbewussten Haltung gegenüber einer zukünftigen Natur, die im diorama-technischen Vorschein ansichtig wird, changiert die visuelle Rhetorik der Habitat-Dioramen."

77
Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*, New York 2017.

78
Böhme, Niedergang, 341.

acter of the landscape clear and thus stops the eyes' penetrating movement. Neudecker's tankwork – which enables both a way of looking into the showcase and at its borders – thus stresses two things: firstly, the ongoing allure of colonial images within our visual memory, and secondly, the current endangerment of icy landscapes due to our colonial past. The icescape is more than a typical representation of an arctic region, it is a living entity. As such, the atmospheric icescape within the tankwork raises the question of whether it would exist without its physical-hermetic separation from the exhibition space. This uneasiness is enhanced by the fact that the solid glass box resembles an ice cube which could melt at any time.

In addition, the most crucial difference to traditional habitat diorama displays might be that Neudecker thematises loss without showing animals or human figures on the arctic miniature landscapes. Although the artist plays with illusionary effects and boundary markings of the diorama similar to other contemporary artists, such as Hiroshi Sugimoto and Diana Fox, the allure of the ice is evoked by the feeling of an encounter with the landscape and its misty atmosphere. As a result, the impression of loss becomes more generally disturbing – not because of the extinction of a specific animal population, but because an entire region no longer fits the cultural imaginaries connected with it. As sculptures, Neudecker's contemporary dioramas most resemble those of the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson – with his empty and stage-like snowscapes – or Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963–1968) – which considers art as a changing environmental system. A most recent artwork, Agnieska Kurant's glass box *Chemical Garden* (2021), which is devoted to chemical reactions of basic biological processes and draws attention to climate-related changes, might be inspired by Neudecker's art.

With regard to the motif of the untouched icescape and its scientific presentation, three central levels of meaning emerge from Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary*: 1. the imagination of the empty Arctic as a stage for (im)possible heroic deeds becomes negotiable; 2. the affective power of the (arctic) sublime shows how the former loss of arctic explorers has today shifted to the awareness of the destruction of entire ecosystems; and 3. the formal reference to nineteenth-century models of presentation functions as an objectifying *and* subjectifying technique to question humans' relation to nature. Although the artist evokes a nostalgic longing for an untouched – i.e. intact – nature, the miniaturisation and formal design of the tankwork lead to critical reflection on the cultural, ideological and scientific imprints of our perception. Thus, the tankwork *Cook and Peary* emphasises the invisible cultural mechanisms which shape our ideas about the Arctic. It shows how heroic perspectives and narrations continue to influence current ecological and geopolitical discussions – which nowadays also include that which lies below the ice.

V. Outlook: The Icy Submarine

In the tradition of habitat diorama and chemical displays, Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* [Fig. 1] stands on the threshold between art and science. Without a frame and filled with a salt water mixture, the tankwork refers to the aquarium as another late nineteenth-century form of knowledge production and presentation. By resembling an iceberg underwater viewed upside down, the tankwork thematises the "epistemological appropriation and symbolic domestication of the ocean",[79] while at the same time questioning common perspectives on the arctic regions. In the nineteenth century, the aquarium gained its fascination from the possibility of looking into an actual living world, even though – like the diorama – it worked with "techniques of miniaturization".[80] The fundamental problem of aquarium science between 1850 and 1880 was the need to externally regulate and preserve the artificial underwater world and its inhabitants. The idea of presenting the aquarium as a "mastery of nature" was connected with the longing for the experience of a living ecosystem which managed to survive without human influence.[81]

As an element of knowledge production, Neudecker's tankwork simultaneously generates the longing for a connection with nature and the destructive potential of human action. It is crucial, however, that Neudecker's tankwork *Cook and Peary* is closed on all six sides, thus making any physical intrusion impossible. Whether the miniature Arctic in the glass box would be able to survive without its protective frame is an unanswered question that haunts the recipients even after leaving the exhibition space. In its physical withdrawal from the viewers, the phantasm of untouchedness takes on a sensually appealing but nevertheless inaccessible form: the miniature Arctic thus becomes both a vulnerable landscape in need of protection and a more abstract landscape of longing taken from the realm of cultural imagination.

A recent artwork by Neudecker, *We Saw It Coming All Along (1 + 2)*, from 2019, explicitly negotiates the power relations in the invisible underwater realms of the Arctic and can be viewed as a counterpart to the tankwork [Fig. 4].[82] It is mentioned here as an

79
Mareike Vennen, „Echte Forscher" und „wahre Liebhaber". Der Blick ins Meer durch das Aquarium im 19. Jahrhundert, in: Alexander Kraus and Martina Winkler (eds.), *Weltmeere. Wissen und Wahrnehmung im langen 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2014, 84–102, here 86. Original: "epistemologische Aneignung und symbolische Domestizierung des Ozeans".

80
Ibid., 99. Original: "Techniken der Miniaturisierung".

81
Mareike Vennen, *Das Aquarium. Praktiken, Techniken und Medien der Wissensproduktion (1840–1910)*, Göttingen 2018, 7.

82
Natascha Adamowsky speaks of a new realm of wonder and a vertical understanding of space which sprang from the first expeditions into the deep sea. Natascha Adamowsky, Ozeanische Wunder. Entdeckung und Eroberung des Meeres in der Moderne, in: Nicola Gess and Mireille Schnyder (eds.), *Poetik und Ästhetik des Staunens*, Paderborn/Munich 2017, 17.

[Fig. 4]
Mariele Neudecker, We Saw It Coming All Along, 2019, mixed media on archive print on board, 122 × 81 × 5.5 cm (each), Courtesy of the Thomas Rehbein Gallery and Pedro Cera © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2021 © Mariele Neudecker, all rights reserved, DACS/Artimage, 2021, Photo: Benjamin Jones.

outlook because of Russia's increasing military will to expand at the time this article was written. It is a time in which NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg stresses the need for a more political focus on the Arctic due to Russia's economic interest in the region. In two objects *We Saw It Coming All Along (1 + 2)* Neudecker tackles the Russian flagging of the seabed beneath the Arctic (near the North Pole). This controversial event from 2007 – which, according to Klaus Dodds, is more symbolically than geopolitically meaningful – became a media spectacle, showing that the significance of marking the North Pole should not be underestimated even to this day.[83]

By directing our attention to the area under the arctic ice, Mariele Neudecker makes clear that the region around the North Pole is in the centre of various ecological, economic and political interests and thus runs the risk of becoming the next battlefield for leading nations' longing for power. By only pointing to the Russian colours in the outline of the flag, it becomes clear that the will to govern the Arctic is shared by various nations and can only be countered by joint efforts. Neudecker's critical re-examination of arctic visual culture from the nineteenth century to today – and more generally, of humans' relation to icy regions – demonstrates the current urgency of using aesthetic means to reflect on the survival of imperial power relations and their harmful effects. These reflections must now include not only the horizontal view of the Arctic but also the vertical perspective of what lies beneath the water.

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83
Klaus Dodds, Territorialisation of the Polar Regions, in: *Mariele Neudecker. SEDIMENT* (exh. cat. Somerset, Hestercomb Art Gallery, and Limerick, Limerick City Gallery of Art), ed. by Mariele Neudecker and Greer Crawle, London 2021, 135–145, here 144–145.