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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

An Art Festival on Norway's Arctic Islands Considers How Humans Are Changing Them

by [Karen Gardiner](#) on September 23, 2015



Svolvær Harbor (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

SVOLVÆR, Norway — “Lofoten is at a tipping point,” a local artist told me the night I arrived on the Norwegian archipelago for the opening weekend of the 2015 [Lofoten International Art Festival](#) (LIAF). The artist was lamenting the increasing touristification of these islands: what he saw as the exploitation of their natural resources by hotel developers, cruise-ship companies, and other tourist businesses that have replaced stockfish — dried cod — as the islands’ principal industry.

LIAF, curated by [Arne Skaug Olsen](#) and [Matt Packer](#), is being held this year in Svolvær, where gleaming new hotels and condominiums sparkle between traditional red wooden houses. Titled “Disappearing Acts,” it examines the precariousness of human agency in the face of historical, ecological, and technological processes. With the artist’s words in mind, the title also spoke to me of the question of what is lost when a place gives itself so fully to tourism.

Although it began as an annual event in 1991, LIAF is now held biannually, unbound to a permanent space or particular location on the islands. Different curators come in for each edition, opening up new approaches every time, but given the setting, the landscape has an obvious presence.

In the Arctic, climate change is occurring at twice the rate it is elsewhere, and so the festival’s title also evokes an anxiety about the tipping point at which the damage becomes irreversible. Encircling oil companies’ wishes to conduct oil exploration around the islands have, for the time being, been foiled by the work of environmental activists here, but there are [no guarantees](#) that they can be held

off for longer than another couple of years.



In the opening seminar, Tromsø-based artists Emilija Skarnulyte and Tanya Busse presented their short film "[Hollow Earth](#)," exploring how technological advances (in seismic tools and other imaging instruments) are facilitating the extraction of previously hidden metals and minerals from the earth, causing a transformation in Arctic geography. They described their interest in "landscape trauma," saying that they see the Northern landscape as a body that has been scarred by mining. In the text accompanying the film onsite, Mattias Åhrén recounts the vastly different ways that members of his Girjas Sami reindeer herding community and an Australian company hoping to pursue open-pit mining describe the same landscape. But, he writes, the two descriptions are mutually exclusive: if the mining company is given permission to move forward, there will be no more Girjas.



One of John Russell's digital prints

LIAF is expansive, encompassing a broad range of disciplines, but the ecological theme is clear. One of the first work on view is [John Russell](#)'s series of digital prints: "Diagonal Slaughter Optimism," "Parallel Domination Facility," and "Adjacent Bureaucracy Enhancement." With their corporate-speak names and queasy images of skies lit up by chemical pollution and figures fallen to their knees, the images evoke the kind of dystopian landscape we might imagine after climate change has wreaked havoc upon the earth.



Mercedes Mühleisen, "The Gnomic Puddle"

Deep in the bowels of the sprawling building in which the exhibition is held, a video by [Mercedes Mühleisen](#), "The Gnomic Puddle," examines what would happen to language beyond that point: when humans disappear and consciousness is no longer attached to it. A figure — the unmoored language — walks through a hostile landscape of twisting helixes, trying, through the use of riddles and nonsensical sentences, to find a way to talk itself out. But "there is no harness, nothing to tie the words to flesh," it says. "I myself must ebb away."



Anna Ådahl, "Impossible Image"

Anna Ådahl's site-specific piece "Impossible Image" is made up of three parts. Sand collected from a Lofoten beach is projected through a live-feed microscopic camera, old newsreel footage relays images of Lofoten from the first half of the 20th century, and a large print features many internet-sourced touristy images of the Lofoten Islands superimposed on top of one another. The actual image of Lofoten seems to disappear beneath so many reproductions.



Installation view of work by Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni (photo courtesy LIAF / Jon Benjamin Tallerås)

Responding to advances in technology and an impending loss of human control over our lives, **Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni** present three videos from an ongoing untitled series recording sunsets with a video camera without a lens, developed each time there is an advance in image resolution. The sequence anticipates the moment when technology will overtake humanity and image resolution will surpass human perception.



Roderick Hietbrink, "Slime is the Agony of Water"

But it's not fair to say that the exhibition is entirely pessimistic. For "Slime is the Agony of Water," **Roderick Hietbrink** buried sculptures — which represent his feelings of anger, fear, sadness and joy — in the sea for three months, then recovered them. Next to the sculptures, a video replays his opening night performance in which he anthropomorphized them. The act of submerging, or disappearing, created something new.

The main site of the exhibition is the Jern & Brygg building on Svolvær's harbor, and it is perhaps the building itself that plays the most obvious role in upholding the theme of "Disappearing Acts." A hardware store, Jern & Brygg was a reliable place of industry from 1948 until its closure in 2010. More than a dozen different rooms over four floors now hold the work of the 24 artists. The building was added to over the years and gradually inched farther out toward the harbor as the business grew. Several rooms still bear the memory of the place's history in their varying styles of wallpaper and carpeting. A plain, functional building sitting on the harbor alongside new hotels and cruise tour companies, it is too ugly to remain standing in a place marketed for its beauty.



The Jern & Brygg building

When the festival ends, the building will be torn down and multimillion-Kroner condominiums will rise in its place. Several artworks are currently displayed in light-filled rooms that look out onto the harbor and the surrounding mountains — a view the condominium developers have placed a very clear price on, and one that can't quite brighten the exhibition's dark sense of foreboding.

The 2015 [Lofoten International Art Festival](#) continues at various sites around Svolvær (Norway) through September 27.

Anna Ådahl
climate change
Emilija Skarnulyte
Fabien Giraud
John Russell
Lofoten International Art Festival
Mercedes Mühleisen
Norway
Raphaël Siboni
Roderick Hietbrink
Tanya Busse