

Figure 1: Dart Glacier Nève, 4.02.05 (photograph courtesy of Jo Woolley).

VANISHING ICE

Wayne Everson

Jo Woolley was born in England but grew up mostly in Wales. In her late teens she was a Welsh international swimmer, later travelling widely throughout the United States where she taught swimming professionally. Returning to England to undertake a design degree at the University of Brighton in Sussex she completed a BA (Hons) in 1994. She worked briefly in France and following that an international design company approached her to work for them in London. At the age of twenty-seven, having spent three years in the London design context, Woolley decided to travel again. She motorcycled solo overland through Europe and Asia, arriving in Australia eighteen months later. In Perth she did freelance design work and later worked for a design company in Sydney. Discovering the Southern Alps while on a brief trip to New Zealand in 2000, she decided to stay and in 2004 became a New Zealand citizen. By that time her work had become three-dimensional. She set up a successful business making small scale design-based sculptural objects referencing land and bio-forms and doing larger commissioned works around the Wanaka and Queenstown area where she also pursued her passion for tramping and climbing. While working towards and graduating with a Master of Fine Arts Degree in 2007 from the Otago Polytechnic School of Art, her work has moved toward installation sculpture and new-media art.

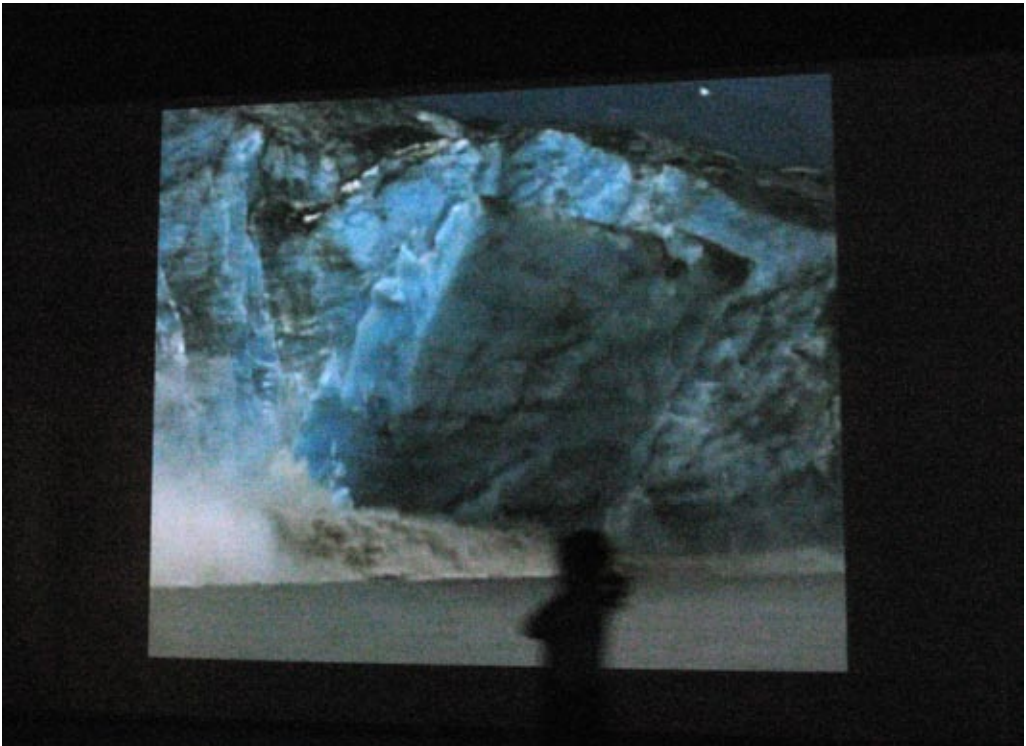


Figure 2: Jo Woolley, *Vanishing Ice* (detail), 2007, re-edited digital moving image (original source courtesy of Natural History New Zealand), Southland Museum and Art Gallery, New Zealand (photograph by the author).

Woolley's dissertation for her master's degree followed from her early fieldwork at the Dart Glacier in the Southern Alps of New Zealand and from her research into the effects and extent of global climate change. It begins by describing her time tramping and climbing in that alpine region and goes on to discuss her response to the mountains. She also reconstructs written and oral histories from that area. The 'mountain hut' is a major signifier in the 'text' of her new-media installation titled *Vanishing Ice*, and in her dissertation she examines the complexities in the psychological layerings of 'the intimate and the immense', which infuse 'the idea of hut' and 'wilderness'. Historical and philosophical concepts of landscape are paralleled with contemporary attitudes towards conservation, ecology and global warming. She concludes by looking at the origins and contemporary practice of installation art and discusses *Vanishing Ice* in the context of immersive new-media installation art.

Referring to the Romantics' preoccupation with wild, untamed, desolate regions and the mighty

natural forces that mould and 'inhabit' them, Kant, with elegant concision, called it the "dynamic Sublime".¹ To the Romantics, Nature was culture's mighty counterpoint. A mercurial and seductive muse; they invoked it as a greater reality, one which could perfectly silence all the arrogance and pretensions of civilisation. It was culture's shadow, the hidden presence 'out there' that implored all its darkneses, all the "...black horde of fears and sorrows that infest the soul..."² Irony aside, Nature is one of culture's enduring myths. Although turbulent with storm and volcano and brooding desolation, the Romantic repertoire is remarkably devoid of earthquakes and tsunamis. No "agreeable horror"³ there, just the numbing finality of anonymous death and meaningless suffering. Simon Schama's wry oxymoron posits a witty analogue to that cultural framing of Nature as an abstracted objectification: an intellectualised safe distance. Yet, with all our moral and rational, not to mention digital, greatness it can still rattle us.



Figure 3: William Bradford, *View of the Sermitsialik Glacier*, c.1870, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 76.2 cm. Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford Whaling Museum, Massachusetts (source: Eco, 2004, p.295, image now in the public domain).



Figure 4: Caspar David Friedrich, *Arctic Shipwreck*, 1824, oil on canvas, 96.7 x 126.9 cm. Kunsthalle, Hamburg (source: Helmut Börsch-Supan, 1990, p.145, image now in the public domain).

Moved by its magnificence and fearful of its power, Nature, for us, is more than just the Romantic touchstone against all the disappointments of civilisation or the equally idealised world of wondrous fascination, as framed by Science. Personified by poets and mystics (and even meteorologists), Nature's might is invested with what the Sufis call *Jalāl* - all the attributes of Majesty – such as Wrath and Vengeance. Indeed, central to the contemporary debate on climate change is the fear that, having played the rapacious exploiter for so long, civilisation may yet again suffer Nature's 'unforgiving' Judgement. It has often been the nemesis of civilisations as Jared Diamond details in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.⁴ Or, is it that Nature has become our folly's scapegoat? Is there perhaps more to the contemporary preoccupation with environmental purity than mere decadent catastrophism and political moralism? Rousseauian evocations notwithstanding, a general consensus of scientists, politicians and environmental activists places the blame for global warming explicitly on industrial carbon emissions. Even the few brave heretical dissenters to this orthodoxy agree that the planet is getting warmer. On a planet whose equilibrium closely correlates with minor fluctuations in mean temperature, the current trend of global warming predicts some bleak future scenarios. Economics and politics are inherently tied to that ecology. Consequently, we may all find ourselves increasingly in harm's way as the compounding effects of ensuing instability begin to play out globally.

Woolley has always been one of those people that Lucy Lippard describes as having nervous energy to spare. Like them she finds tramping across wild backcountry and in the mountains to be a particularly compelling form of meditation that stills her internal dissonances. It was during one of her excursions into the Dart Glacier region that she happened upon the shattered remains of a mountain hut that had been destroyed by avalanche some years earlier. With the help of a group of friends and the Department of Conservation she recovered those hut remnants and installed them in her studio.



Figure 5: Jo Woolley at Dart Glacier Ice Face, 25.04.05 (photograph courtesy of Kelly Lindsay).

The rapid decline of the Dart Glacier and the recovered remains of the mountain hut became the nascent influences for her research into huts, wilderness and glaciers and later on for that which grew to encompass looking at the effects of global climate change. Woolley's research explores the glacier's recent accelerated deterioration and increasingly fragile ecology as being symptomatic of a system under critical stress. She contends not only that global warming is playing the central role in its decline but also that the mountain of evidence which now documents global warming presents us with a serious ecological dilemma. Retreating glaciers and melting ice caps, like the bleaching of coral reefs from growing ocean acidity, are barometers of global climate change. Global warming has become a global emergency requiring urgent intervention. Woolley's work entertains no false diversions of hope for a future filled with foreboding but seeks to indict the Western economic mindset, the industrial establishment and the myopia of economic and political self-interest for the collective and compounding role they play in contributing to the degradation of the global ecosystem. Her exhibition, *Vanishing Ice*, deploys a strategy of foregrounding the anthropogenic origins of global warming to agitate for urgent debate and this work unequivocally adds her voice to the chorus of dissent which aims to forewarn that the consequences of inaction may be nothing less than catastrophic.

Vanishing Ice is a synthesis of installation sculpture and new-media art. It consists of large-format digital moving image, animations and an interactive sculptural component in the form of a 'hut', a huge three-dimensional plug projecting into digitally dominated space: stark and uncompromising. Woolley activates immersive strategies of installation art, physically locating the viewer in the work. Her use of the cinematic dynamic of the darkened space facilitates sensory reduction, focusing the viewer towards acute self-awareness, priming embodied phenomenological

engagement with the work. Although not minimalist, the work firmly references that lineage with the clean aesthetic of the hut and in its bold scale. Minimalist sculpture is a visual and tactile reduction; it is a radical, austere innovation that has the paradoxical effect of focusing whilst simultaneously expanding the viewer's sensory awareness whereby the whole sensorium becomes stilled yet intensely activated. Less becomes powerfully more.



Figure 6: Jo Woolley, *Vanishing Ice* (detail), 2007, re-edited digital moving image (original source courtesy of Natural History New Zealand), Southland Museum and Art Gallery, New Zealand (photograph by the author).

Installation art is indebted to Minimalist sculpture, and to its reception by artists and critics in New York in the early 1960s, for whom the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty were a major influence. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argued that subject and object are not separate entities but mutually enmeshed in a reciprocal interdependence of affirmation "...the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it..."¹⁵. Merleau-Ponty also argued in *The Primacy of Perception*, that perception is not just about the eyes but about mobilising the wholeness of one's being. "I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me"¹⁶.

In *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Claire Bishop writes that, "...installation art presupposes a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it..."¹⁷. The innovative work of Kurt Schwitters and El Lissitzky illustrates this point, that... "space does not exist for the eye only: it is not a picture; one wants to live in it...so that space becomes not a pictorial abstraction but a real arena in which every subject must act. The implication is that 'keyhole' space for the eye alone – the perspectivalism of traditional painting – is synonymous with complacent bourgeois spectatorship, in which 'real life' is observed from a safe, detached and disengaged distance..."¹⁸

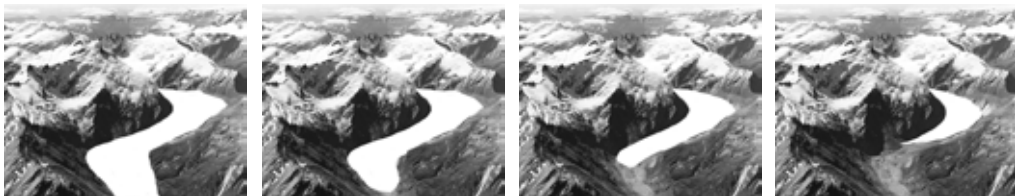


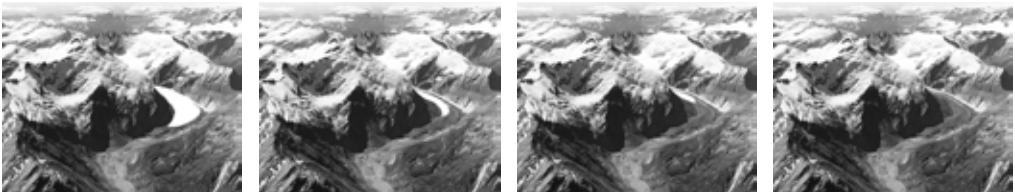
Figure 7: Jo Woolley, *Receding Glacier Sequence*, 2007 (original source: photographer D Homer, *NZ Geological*)



Figure 8: Jo Woolley, *Vanishing Ice* (detail), 2007, digital moving image, Southland Museum & Art Gallery, New Zealand (photograph courtesy of Jo Woolley).

The weight that immersive installation art assigns to proprioception deprivileges ocular dominance. The viewer must physically negotiate the work, engage with it, thereby subverting traditional memes of ocularity, initiating a systemic chain-reaction destabilising established boundaries of spectatorship. The messiness of participation seeps into the clinical detachment of optic ordering, crumpling the clean laundered edges of objective certainty. In *Vanishing Ice* the inherent intellectualisation of objectification suffers displacement as cool dispassion struggles to maintain a footing in the increasing subjectivity initiated by multiple sensory engagements. By admitting proprioceptive, kinaesthetic and haptic modalities of perception, the ratios of perceptual bias embedded in the sensorial matrix are redistributed and reintegrated with memory and cognition, permitting a fuller consummation of awareness.

In his book, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Mark Hansen writes "...human perception takes place in a rich and evolving field to which...tactility, proprioception, memory and duration – what I am calling affectivity – make an irreducible and constitutive contribution."⁹ He sees the parts of the interactive perceptual whole as being "...inseparable from the cognitive activity of the brain."¹⁰ The interdisciplinary fusion of Woolley's immersive installation analogises the internuncial configuration of affectivity where visual authority is subsumed in a non-reductive gestalt.



Survey, March 1976, courtesy of the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, Dart Glacier File Archive).

Woolley's work is firmly contemporised by her deployment of new-media. Onto each of three walls is projected a digital moving image, two of which are animations. The third is a digitally reformatted and re-edited DVD of film and audio segments sourced from Natural History New Zealand of a glacier calving into the sea. The images are massive, spanning floor to ceiling or skewed across the entire length of walls displacing the traditional filmic frame and enacting the reflexive dynamic of scale.

With her hugely spatial sound track, which has links with bio-music and the expansiveness of soundscape, Woolley implements strategies to collapse the boundaries between viewer and artwork. Body becomes ear as sound is felt viscerally and through the soles of the feet. Reverberation effects an almost corporeal 'suturing' of the viewer's own physicality into the heart of the work. The hues and rhythms of memory and proprioception modulate in sympathetic resonance with sound and vibration, suffusing layers of embodiment in the enriched timbre of affectivity.

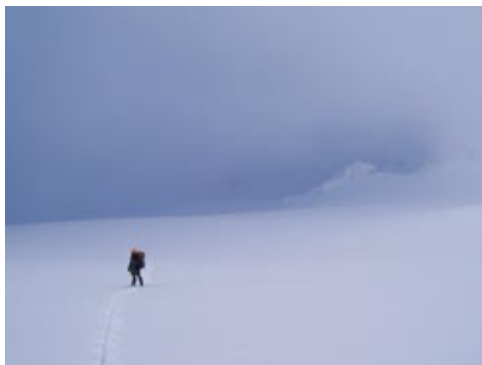


Figure 9: *White-out on the Franz Joseph Glacier*, 2006 (photograph courtesy of Ostiane Massiani).

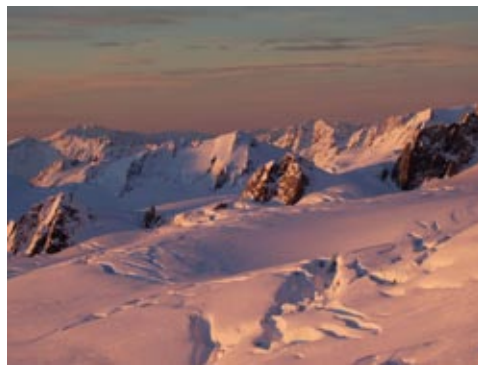


Figure 10: *Crevassed Nêvé, Winter Evening Twilight*, Fox Glacier, 2006 (photograph courtesy of Ostiane Massiani).

The remastering of the sound track and audio mixing is meticulous. Sonic physicality is achieved more through the privileging of frequencies than by volume. Manipulating the diegetic flow of time-based media, Woolley overlays a sustained still image of an icewall with resounding cracks and deep thuds which advance with increasing intensity, ominously foreshadowing collapse. The sounds of disintegration invite interrogation of the image of the wall of ice. The disparity between passive image and active sound enlists the viewer's desire to resolve the dissonance of contradiction. This perceptual *déférence* captures the viewer in a noose of anticipation until a deep fracturing pop detonates the ice-face into a sustained cadenza of aural and visual collapse. That is followed by the film image of a colossal serac overbalancing into the sea in a sweeping silent arc of *sostenuto*, striking the surface with an erupting tympanic plunge. It falls the way only truly massive things fall, creating a displacement of time where every reducing second seems recalibrated into an extended deferment of climax.

Moving image, digital animations and sound track are looped to replay at slightly different intervals of around three to four minutes causing the 'cinorama' never to repeat with exact synchronicity. Referencing the voracious, vigilant eye of time-lapse photography, the animations transpose into human time the opaque imperceptibility of planetary processes that are obscured by the vastness of geological time.

Scientists studying the ecology of the glacier had used the mountain hut, parts of which Woolley discovered wrecked at the base of the Dart Glacier. In her studio Woolley constructed a hut following the exact dimensions of the original. Re-assigned as an abstraction into the syntax of the work, the hut serves to raise questions about sanctuary, safety, intimate versus immense and the psychology of space.

In the immersive space of installation both subject and object interpose, keying into the work, not just physically but textually. Appropriating the light beam from the projector Woolley activates the presence of the hut into the unfolding scene by silhouetting part of the hut against the animation of the receding glacier. Similarly the viewer's own revenant presence is confirmed, relocated in the mural projection. The shadows read like long late afternoon



Figure 11: Jo Woolley, *Vanishing Ice* (hut detail), in "Warming Inspires Warnings", *The Southland Times*, 7 September 2007 (photograph courtesy of Jill McKee).

shadows when slender fingers of light reach into shrouded valleys from behind mountain ridges. Reflective material covering the hut picks up light from digital projections, interpolating hut and moving image, blurring dimensional delineations. The hut's soft silvery exterior is evocative of a deflective shield, an emblem of scientific intervention, provoking questions about light and heat. Woolley symbologises material and process in parallel with content. On the inside of the hut door a sign in large red lettering accents the undertone of apprehension, intensifying the aesthetic of danger.

Elevated on hidden supports, the hut gives the convincing appearance of floating. Upon entering the hut one is assailed by text. The interior is not a place of stillness. Here is noise of another kind. The relentlessness of the text-covered walls confirms the prospect of shelter to be a mirage. There is no silence within and no platitudinous comfort. Peace of mind is denied in the growing disquiet that pervades the catalogue of uncompromising revelation. The text becomes internal noise, noise inside the head. Her method is *impitoyable*. The hut is an inversion, *not peace but a sword*.

The text consists of fully referenced news items detailing global climate change, collected over two years and chronicled on the walls and floor of the hut. As a portal to the pervasive and expanding debate on global warming, *Vanishing Ice* petitions the viewer to confront the obfuscations of time, text and politics that conspire to conceal the extent of global warming. There is so much text that it is impractical to read all in one go; yet this is unimportant, for as a device the text is not intended as a finite document but as an unfolding exposé. It is presented in a Chomskyan sort of way, bringing together isolated news items from the international media which, when viewed together as a broad collection, enables an entirely different analysis previously denied by their fragmentation.

The Moving Finger writes;
And having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a word of it.¹¹



Figure 12: Leonardo da Vinci, *Deluge*, 1514–1515, black chalk, yellow and brown ink, 15 x 19.3 cm. Royal Collection, Windsor Castle (in the public domain at www.aiwaz.net/gallery/deluge/gi948c42 last sighted 3.6.08).

Wayne Everson is a sculptor. He holds an MFA from the RMIT University, Melbourne. As a coordinating lecturer in sculpture and lecturer in drawing at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art he was a recipient of the Otago Polytechnic Staff Award for Teaching Excellence. He also taught sculpture at the Gaborone Polytechnic in Botswana. His work encompasses installation, sound art, performance art, new-media and public sculpture commissions.

Vanishing Ice is a touring exhibition. The Eastern Southland Gallery in Gore (3rd – 26th August 2007), the Southland Museum and Art Gallery Invercargill (30th August – 31st September 2007) and Ashburton Art Gallery (17th May – 15th June 2008) have already hosted it. It will also show at the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru (November 2008– January 2009).

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2 Umberto Eco, 2004. *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 294.

3 Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, Quatrain XLIV (44) (London: A & C Black, 1909), 82.

4 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: AA Knopf & Random House, 1995), 450.

5 Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1998), 320.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", in *The Primacy of Perception*, JM Edie (ed.) (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1964).

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8 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 6.

- 9 Ibid., 81.
10 Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), 101.
11 Ibid., 3.
Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, Quatrain LI (51) (London: A & C Black, 1909), 91.

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