

Tue Greenfort

MEDUSA

ALGA

LAGUNA



NATURE, OF LATE

Notes on Tue Greenfort's recent projects

In past and in upcoming projects Tue Greenfort chooses to commission Murano artisanal workshops for the fabrication of his critical glasswares of marine species, a place to this day synonymous with glass as art and vice versa. The emergence of Murano as the ancient world's glass manufacturing and distributional hub until the 16th century was in fact due to ecological and public health concerns by the city of Venice that were already acted on in the late 13th century.

In order "...to remove pollution and smoke that is hard on breathing...", the industry's essential furnaces and workshops were evicted from the main islands of Venice to those on the perimeter which, as is the case of Murano, apparently welcomed this decree due to the boon this would bring to that islet's until then economically and politically rather peripheral community¹.

Glass as material culture and industry has furthermore from its inception in the 12th century crystallized the foundations of Venice itself, as a confluence of mixed ecologies, mercantile movement, natural resourcing and colonial expansion: "The raw material comes from a mix of silica (sand from the Lagoon and the nearby rivers) and soda (contained in ash imported from Syria, made by burning Mediterranean seaweed)"². As the historian Thomas Madden notes, the Venice lagoon is not simply "a work of art, but a birthplace of modern capitalism", essentially conceived and erected on the "marshes of a brackish hideaway... by ragged bands of refugees"³.

The predicaments by which water and climate are inescapably linked to so-called "cities of art" like Venice not only continue to present "complex and composite realities...due to their uniqueness as repositories of cultural, historical and artistic values"⁴. Moreover, the Venice lagoon's exceptionally condensed and heightened paradoxes and contradictions of global commerce, climate change, art industries and migration flows thus raise a host of questions and lines of enquiry for a practice like Greenfort's that is substantially informed by and responding to these very systemic "natural" and "anthropic" causes and challenges.

The thing about the anthropocene as our accursed if extremely unevenly divided share, is that its very definition, occurrence, and impact actually remain robustly dynamic rather than set in stone in so far as it is not least on account of human agency that policymaking and measures towards containing and repairing interlocked environmental destruction and losses may still be enacted⁵. The anthropogenic course/curse "...is a bet on the future and, as such, its meaning and eventual formalization depend on the future development of human affairs"⁶, the very ontology and conceptual benefit of any human specificity and affairs being subject to ongoing extensions, erosions and even tentacularization we might want to add, as advanced by species philosophers like Donna Haraway and others⁷.

When the Milanese cleric and geologist Antonio Stoppani developed the concept of the "Anthropozoic" in his 1873 *Corso di Geologia*, he "...described how what he called "human relicts" (tools, weapons, buildings, and products of art and industry) and other evidences of human activities have been accumulating in the Earth's surface in recent slumps, lacustrine and marine sediments, alluvial plains, deltas, marshes, peat bogs, caves, glacial moraines, or volcanic rocks. According to Stoppani, the "Anthropozoic" era should begin with the stone age with the first appearances of carved stone."⁸, in fact dating the first ur-cene of "our"⁹ own making long before the colonization of the Americas, the invention of the steam engine in the 18th century or the beginning application of nuclear engineering in the mid 1940s. While as polity and coming community we ought to better question and move on from turbid origin stories constricting and

1 Claire Judde de Larivière, *The Revolt of Snowballs. Murano confronts Venice, 1511*. London 2018, p. 8

2 Ibid.

3 Thomas F. Madden, *Venice. A New History*, London/New York 2012, pp. 2, 3 (word order slightly changed by the author)

4 See Eugenio Carminati, Carlo Dogliani, "The Subsidence of Venice: Natural and Anthropogenic Causes" in *Resilience of art cities to flooding: success and failure of the Italian experience*. Conference papers (Meeting Rome, November 4-5, 2014), Accademia nazionale dei Lincei 2014, pp. 143-144

5 On this see Reza Negarestani, "On an Impending Eternal Turmoil in Human Thought", in Garayeva-Maleki and Munder (eds.), *Potential Worlds. Planetary Memories & Eco-Fictions*, exh. cat. Migros Museum, Zürich 2020, pp. 125-134

6 Valentí Rull, "'The Anthropocene': neglects, misconceptions, and possible futures" *EMBO reports*, vol. 18,7 (2017): 1056-1060. doi:10.15252/embr.201744231, accessed February 2, 2022

7 See chapter 2 in Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham/NC 2016

8 Rull 2017, op. cit

9 “Anthropocene is a term most easily meaningful and usable by intellectuals in wealthy classes and regions; it is not an idiomatic term for climate, weather, land, care of country, or much else in great swathes of the world, especially but not only among indigenous peoples.”, so Haraway, op. cit., p. 49

10 As Scott and Swenson (eds. 2015) reiterate, Raymond William’s noted “etymological link between nature, nation and native—all derived from the Latin *natus*, meaning ‘to be born’—and the irrederentist myths and movements instrumentalizing this neat trinity—very much remains on topic., p. 4 (see f11)

11 Among these see especially Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook, ed. Max Andrews, London 2006; Linda Weintraub, To Life! Eco Art in pursuit of a sustainable planet, Berkeley/CA 2012; Emily Eliza Scott/Kirsten Swenson (eds.), Critical Landscapes. Art, Space, Politics, Oakland/CA 2015; and Sue Spaid, Ecovention Europe. Art to transform Ecologies 1957–2017, exh. cat. Museum de Domijnen Hedendaagse Kunst, Sittard/Netherlands 2017. Within this latest canonization, Spaid locates Greenfort’s international entry to it in the Global Financial Crisis kickoff 2007: “During Skulptur Projekte, Tue Greenfort inoculates water pumped from Lake Aa with iron chloride before spraying it back in. Münster/DE [Germany]”, summarizing the project Diffuse Einträge, which is also my first encounter with the artist’s work. Other high points in Spaid’s chronicle that year include: “Olafur Eliasson purchases a herd of Icelandic Grey Sheep to rehabilitate the Icelandic economy”; “Myvillages launch International Village Shop, ‘a shop with many shops’ that trade in goods from local communities.”; “Roni Horn’s Library of Water, 100 interviews regarding weather, conducted with Icelanders between 2005–2006.”, p. 284.

12 An approach already reflected in Greenfort’s Condensation Cube-series the

artist began in 2005, a pointed condensation of Hans Haacke’s by now iconic Condensation Cube from 1968, by which the erstwhile elemental water gets swapped out with site-specifically corporatized mineral waters that are all equally owned by The Coca-Cola Company.

13 See Luke Skrebowski’s essay on Greenfort where the critic assigns Andrea Fraser the branch of psychological institutional critique while Greenfort is representative of ecological institutional critique in this schema. The author notes however that Greenfort’s “...work produces a sophisticated conceptualization of the problems inherent to the critique of institutions, when a clear distinction between the social and the natural can no longer be sustained in such a way as to bracket the art system.” In, “After Hans Haacke. Tue Greenfort and Eco-Institutional Critique”, Third Text, Vol. 27 Issue 1, January 2013, pp. 115–130, p. 129

14 Ellen Barry, “Climate Change Enters the Therapy Room”, The New York Times, February 6 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/health/climate-anxiety-therapy.html>, accessed February 7 2022

15 The latest iteration of which looked to the state of Bavaria, with irresistible headings such as Der Ammersee Stinkt (Lake Ammersee Stinks) and Experte Erklärt Den Karibischen Schimmer (Expert explains Caribbean shimmer) (both 2021).

16 See also TJ Demos, Beyond the World’s End. Arts of Living at the Crossing. Durham/NC 2020 where contemporary art as case study is placed at the center of this wider discussion.

17 See Katharina Steidl, “Meeresblaue Abdrucke. Anna Atkins’ Cyanotypien als visuelle Medien- und Klassifikationskritik”, in: Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie, Heft 156, 2020, pp. 7–17, 9.

18 The wording, as it is applied to the Blaschka glasswares, is Lorraine Daston’s in “The Glass Flowers”, her fascinating essay in Daston (ed.), Things That Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science, New York 2004, pp. 223–254

constricted by the land and the natural¹⁰, Stoppani’s explorations on the nature of relicts lay relevant groundwork and provide a stepping stone to trace and think about Greenfort’s recent projects previously exhibited at the Munich-based ERES Foundation and on the occasion of the foundation’s showcase of the artist at this year’s Venice Biennale.

Greenfort’s practice since the early 2000s has been widely discussed in the concurrently produced bulk of scholarship on various “environmental” or “eco-critical” art practices, an ever-expanding spectrum conventionally traced back to various 1960s land arts as regards a US-Eurocentric realm, yet one that might as well align with and cite cultural-ritualistic practices and worldings of proto-industrial “indigenous” communities elsewhere aeons before¹¹.

Greenfort’s latest body of work is noticeably modular and as such adaptive to sites and audiences¹². His exhibitions may comprise a fully operative lab environment for potential visitors to study aquatics up close, elegant vignettes of sediments of regional water samples, rather formalized compact earthwallworks assembled from “local” ingredients/debris, handsomely obsolescent cyanotype prints of algae and artfully phosphorescing, hanging seaweeds made from recycled glass.

Noticeable is the engagement with and employment of the conspicuously crafted and tactile that characterizes a lot of these new works, in turn evocative of Western aesthetic sensibilities and formal escapisms of the 19th century then conditioned by the charred, “alienating” facets of the industrial revolution as much as of current cultural obsessions and investment in the “organic” broadly, symptomatic for the advent of climate breakdown and attendant anxieties. Making and exhibiting art that expressly draws from and addresses the environmental from within what at this point undoubtedly presents a wholly institutionalized as well as hyper-mediated meta discourse or junkspace (Rem Koolhaas) no longer relies on neat dyads whence to pursue an either “external/ecological” or “internal/psychological” approach toward any contemporary institutional critique.¹³ “Climate Change” has “enter(ed) the Therapy Room” as not only The New York Times assures or further disquiets us, bringing with it spreading conditions of “eco-anxiety” alongside accredited fields such as “climate psychology”¹⁴, in turn literally reflected in the site-specific doom-scrolling/infotainment that Greenfort employs in his tragicomic series of local newspaper articles covering environmental topics that get pasted onto shiny aluminum carriers.¹⁵ Rather, the intersectionalist and decolonial realization of the contemporary artist’s and their wares’ entanglement in thoroughly financialized environments comprising cultural artifacts and natural resources grasped as so many raw materials and data to be tapped, stacked, and valorized—as (taste)maker, model prosumer/polluter etc.—is not merely a given but accordingly feeds into devising aesthetic and work protocols imbued with and instructed by the however greened logics of 21st century capitalism.¹⁶

Viewed from this constellation, the discrete and at turns increasingly romantic nature of some of Greenfort’s works may not only be simply relicensed back to their specific (art-)historical quotations and periodic contexts, but more significantly to their respective paradoxical aestheticism and mainstream potential that the artist in turn consults and channels: Anna Atkins’ Victorian cyanotypes of algae and ferns, very much informed in her day by the contemporaneous British and rather gendered trends of “fern fever” and “seaweed craze”¹⁷; the Blaschka family business’ of the bedazzling “counterfeiting”¹⁸ of flowers and sea creatures, well before surrealist, pop and appropriative takes by Man Ray, Warhol or Jeff Koons; Robert Smithson’s neatly arranged, earthy-industrial non-sites, so attuned after all to the “special” viewing and commodifying conditions of the newly counter-cultural white cube and its freely

discerning consumers. Discussing the connoisseur-consumer in connection with Rudolf Blaschka's literally unique fin-de-siècle glass flowers he would singularly handcraft well into the 1930s, science philosopher Lorraine Daston notes how due to the artifacts' sheer supererogatory perfection out-naturalizing nature—their “extreme mimesis”—these pristine and once educational objects in the course of twentieth century modernist paradigm shifts came to “signal kitsch”, appreciated and theorized as such for representing “an artisanal dead end that inspired no styles or schools.”¹⁹

This is a telling angle from which to newly consider Greenfort's ongoing series of commissioning artisanal glasswares depicting jellyfish, beginning with *Medusa* (2007) that is modeled on the in some parts of the Mediterranean abundantly and alarmingly present *Pelagia noctiluca*, or mauve stinger, an anti-souvenir of eco-systemic shakeup affecting this still widely prized and seasonally overcrowded region. Artworks not only rise and crash in varyingly open seas of sales via partly cryptic flows, undisclosed hands and offshore ports, but more interestingly appear virtually alchemical in nature regarding their vacillating perception and reception for which symbolic capital may represent too anthropocenic, that is bourgeois a concept. We might instead broach the notion of deculturation, as a process and phenomenon which Pierre Bourdieu himself introduced in the research on colonizing and colonized cultures he conducted toward his *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958). Deculturation, historically and structurally speaking, is “both the condition and consequence of globalization”. Hence “globalization decultures and decontextualizes, detaches things, isolates them, and throws them into the global marketspace where they float and reassemble, often in a random way, and connect with other elements in the most unlikely fashion.”²⁰ To Visual Culture researchers like Thorsten Botz-Bornstein the past decade's various transgressions and ideological shifts named alternative truths, conspiratorial thought and the unrelenting “kitschification” of everything is but the screen-dependent metastasis of deculturation began by industrialization and subsequent digitally augmented globalization. If deculturation—less taken on pessimistic-culturally but as ontologically perplexing—is brought to bear on the level of aesthetics and contemporary art, what are we to make then, of Greenfort's glistening freakish-cute vessels floating and encroaching upon gallery and museum walls, collectors' homes, catalogue pages and the discourse on materiality and agency? Are they ironizing eco-critical kitsch actually, or do they pose somewhat kitschy eco-criticism? As we divest from dualisms, can they not better be conceived as craft-turned-kitsch detoured to objects by which literally specified instead of generalized eco-humanist matters of concern/matters of care (Bruno Latour/Puig de la Bellacasa) are newly addressed and reified?

Daniel Horn

19 Ibid., p. 252

20 See Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation. Neoliberalism, Fundamentalism and Kitsch*. London 2019, pp. 2, ix

Tue Greenfort Medusa Alga Laguna 23.04.—01.11.2022

La Biennale di Venezia 2022 / Collateral Event



Fondazione ERES
arte + scienza
Castello 1228
(Ca' Sarasina)
30122 Venezia

Opening Hours

23.04. to 11.09.
(Fri, Sat, Sun
11 am—6 pm)
30.09. to 03.10.
(11 am—6 pm)
28.10. to 01.11.
(11 am—6 pm)

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