

# **CONNIE SAMARAS'S FUTURES IN EXTREME ENVIRONMENTS: TOWARD A NEW AESTHETICS OF DAILY LIFE AND SURVIVAL**

*Lisa E. Bloom*

*V.A.L.I.S.: vast active living intelligence system* (all works, 2005) consists of photographs and two videos Connie Samaras made in Antarctica while on an artist's residency at the Amundsen-Scott Station.\* Like her other photographs of extreme environments, these reveal Samaras's fascination with what it means to live in such uniquely inhospitable and anxiety-provoking communities that lack a conventional historical core or a conventional population make-up. For Samaras, such cities and communities situated in geographically extreme environments define the twenty-first century. Thus, she is drawn to sites such as Antarctica that appear like a tabula rasa for various urban and community experiments of the past and present.

Fantasy as evoked by science fiction is key to understanding Samaras's work in these geographically extreme regions, especially Antarctica, which is on the verge of disappearing due to anthropogenic climate change. For example, in *Domes and Tunnels*, Samaras evokes how alien the landscape in Antarctica is by foregrounding the uncontrollable ice as it swallows up sinking buildings such as Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, which, in an earlier era, stood for the South Pole's utopian possibilities.

Like her landscape views of Antarctica, the photographed interiors of the buildings there are empty and deserted. In *Dome Interior*, the un-domestic interior evokes meat lockers, cells for monks, or worse, a morgue. Samaras's slight digital manipulation of this space plays with the abstract, even inhuman, aspect of Antarctica to make us wonder about social relations and subjectivity itself—be it male or female—in such a strange, other-worldly interior.

Through such photographs, Samaras comments somewhat ironically on what one could call a “neo-liberal sublime” and presents a critique of the heroic, entrepreneurial, and enterprising individual subject who realizes his/her goals, identity, and selfhood through self-seeking or risk-taking activities in these unfamiliar environments. That is in part why her aesthetic approach focuses on the ordinary aspects of the place and injects something unsettling into them. Many of her photographs of the South Pole, such as *Underneath*

*the Amundsen-Scott Station*, draw on the genres of science fiction to give artistic expression to her experience of Antarctica in both its routine aspects and in its surreal extremes. Her work creates a dissonance between the heroic discourses of Antarctica as an untouched former colonialist landscape and, on the other hand, as a scientific utopia of the future. They fit neither.

In her Antarctic photographs, Samaras's aesthetic strategy combines the everyday with the surreal to visualize spaces in extreme geographical regions that on one level appear like the rest of the world's major cities, in terms of their built environment, but at the same time remain incongruous and outside of nature due to their seeming artificiality. This aspect links *V.A.L.I.S.* with her current project photographing a lesbian RV retirement community in the desert of the southwestern United States. Like her previous work, this project, titled *Edge of Twilight* (2011), highlights both the unreality and the drab ordinariness of the landscape and built environment. At the same time, Samaras expresses an undeniable fascination with these kinds of social experiments that have their origins in the women's movement and in these kinds of improbable spaces in which she imagines possible futures. Consequently, her work leverages the science-fiction imagination to make us think critically about our obsession with technology and the place of relentless free-market expansion in current discussions on gender, climate change, and development. At the same time, she wants us to imagine a new aesthetics of daily life and survival at a moment when we are contemplating a foreclosed future due to the way failed neo-liberal policies have led to crisis and even misery in the United States and elsewhere.

*\*This piece references earlier works by the author, including Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expedition (University of Minnesota Press, 1993); "Polar Fantasies and Aesthetics in the Work of Connie Samaras and Isaac Julien" (2008) in The Scholar and the Feminist online web journal by the Barnard Center for Research on Women; and "Connie Samaras's 'After the American Century,'" exhibition brochure, University of California, Riverside, California Museum of Photography, 2011.*