



NATHALIE TALEC
THE ONE WHO SEES BLINDLY





PAUSE ② Practice and Exchange

YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS // 701 MISSION STREET // SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94103 // 415.978.ARTS // YBCA.ORG

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INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

JULIO CÉSAR MORALES YOU HAVE BEEN SHOWING WORK SINCE THE EARLY 1980S. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE ART SCENE IN FRANCE AT THAT MOMENT AND TALK ABOUT YOUR INITIAL INTEREST IN THE ARCTIC EXPLORER?

NATHALIE TALEC: The art scene in France in the 1980s was in no way spectacular, yet you could sense a change was coming as more artist collectives were forming and more independent spaces were opening. In 1983, I took part in an exhibition in Paris that became very important to me and my practice: A Pierre et Marie, une exposition en travaux. The show was a bit like a manifesto and was organized by a fresh new community of artists and art world figures. The exhibition featured 69 French and foreign artists and the show seemed to reflect true artistic actions, collective engagements, and the desire we had for community and, most of all, for authentic encounters.

In the 1980s autonomy, ruled. It guaranteed real independence and a freedom that seems almost utopian by today's standards. One could see that art's almost systematic dependence on its commerce was changing both the nature of the works and their content and we were trying to rally against that. Those were times of real acrobatics, irreverence, and arrogance. The works had an almost epic quality to them and took risks. At that time galleries could be laboratories, experimental and utopic spaces where real debates about art, culture, and politics could take place.

My initial interest in the Arctic explorer was in finding an artistic way for my work to be shown in this context. More than an attraction to the Arctic, it was an attraction to polar explorers and the cold, as an abstract figure of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. The cold, in all its states, has always been a concern of mine. I look for the heroic aspect, its imaginary or enigmatic power in stories of polar explorers or in Dutch paintings. Moreover, I have always approached making art as if it were an adventure story, adapting a screenplay, composing a score; or as a heroic experience of radical disobedience. It soon became clear to me that there was a close relationship between the polar explorer and the artist. Both investigate unknown territories, challenging what is real, and experimenting with principles of survival while attempting to find a way to relate that experience, whether it's through forms, gestures, or movements. Danish polar explorer Knud Rasmussen's words offer a metaphor for the artistic act: "There is only one purpose in our progression: to define our position. We are moving through a strange land and at any time we never know what chasms each new look will reveal, but our pace is still the same."



SELF-PORTRAIT WITH GLASSES FOR ASSESSING DISTANCES IN A COLD LAND, 1986. BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH ON BARYTA PAPER PASTED ON ALUMINIUM, 100 x 100 CM. EDITION 1/1. COLLECTION FONDS NATIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN, MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE ET DE LA COMMUNICATION, PARIS.

JCM: YOU'VE QUOTED FRENCH ARTIST ROBERT FILIOU, WHO STATED: "ART IS WHAT MAKES LIFE MORE INTERESTING THAN ART." CAN YOU EXPAND ON THAT STATEMENT IN RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR ARTISTIC AND SCIENTIFIC INTEREST?

NT: Filiou (1926-1987) was close to the Fluxus movement and his ambition was to break down barriers between art and life. I approach life in a similar way. My emotional and artistic relationship to the world depends on experiencing life. It involves a subjective and aesthetic mechanism, an opportunity to tame forms, to convene dialogues and hack into reality. That being said, I have always had a fascination with science and its discourse within my work. I'm interested in how science has been apprehended together by scientists, philosophers, and artists since the Renaissance; and even science as a space for melancholy. For example, the snowflake is a mathematical form that embodies geometric rigor. During the course of its making, it presents a great diversity of forms and goes through several states. In that process, the snowflake no longer obeys mathematical rules; its form melts, is scattered, and becomes random. It intrinsically contains disorder. I compare my artistic language to these acts of dissipation, of apparent dispersion, of disorder, of disobedience and randomness. Because the snowflake undergoes an inexorable transformation, only speech or writing can make it last.



Köln den 19.12.85



PHOTO CREDITS FOR THREE POLAROIDS HERE

JCM: YOUR EXHIBITION AT YBCA ORIGINATES FROM AN IDEA YOU HAD IN 1985, BUT YOU DID NOT SEE IT THROUGH UNTIL 2012. HOW IS THE CONCEPT AND OBJECTIVE OF THE WORK STILL RELEVANT IN 2012 AND WHY?

NT: For me, an exhibition is an act in which a new stage has to be reinvented each time. The One Who Sees Blindly involves a subjective and aesthetic mechanism, an opportunity to trap experience and provide a refuge, a site for transition and impermanence. With this show, I want to tame forms, to convene dialogues and hack into reality. I've transformed Gallery 3 into a living space, an isolation lock, a fictional space where new stories are constructed and new dialogues are improvised between the works and viewers.

The exhibition is an updated form of Game of survival in a cold store (1985). It was done the same year that I wrote and proposed the project, Survival Game In Cold Storage, 7 Days/7 Nights, at 0°. It involved a base camp that was a refuge for experimentation with objects that also gave a corporeal sense to its architecture, delineating a sedentary but temporary space intended to be observed and lived in: a journey with no displacement other than symbolic. That project was an experiment: a shelter, a place to live, a new unusual fictional space for replaying acts of time, acts of sharing and acts of otherness in real time. The temperature was a substitute for the pole, a threshold temperature that symbolized "cold." Survival Game would have taken place in a refrigerated warehouse, providing a real experience of isolation and art as performance. I would have communicated with the outside world (artists, philosophers, doctors, scientists, and musicians) via an in/out video capture system.

Help Corridor at YBCA is a way to realize Survival Game but also re-configure it for a new context, new time and new space. Unlike the original project, I've eliminated the temperature factor. In this case, it is not a resistance to the cold but a resistance to time and a set of deep principles of survival. The title, The One Who Sees Blindly paraphrases an Inuit shamanistic phrase that lends a corporeal sense to architecture, while questioning the gaze and its blind spots. It also touches on the potential for shelter, a temporary nomadic setting that is designed to be travelled through and inhabited, but through the lens of wonder. This exhibition uses a new protocol, an opportunity to present this new story for the first time, producing acts of time, of sharing and otherness, all in real time by engaging with themes hitherto unexplored in my work.



THE ONE WHO SEES BLINDLY # 2, PORCELAIN, 2012

EXTREME TEMPERATURES

BY LISA E. BLOOM
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR AND WRITER

Though Nathalie Talc had a retrospective at the Musée d'art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL) in France in 2009 and has had a well-established artistic career in Europe since the 1980s, she is still little known in the United States. However, the major themes that she has undertaken during her extensive career resonate with two groups of contemporary art practitioners: performance-based, feminist American artists working since the 1970s who constructed fake personae using their own bodies—such as Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin and Lynn Hershman Leeson—and artists from other countries such as Anne Noble (New Zealand), Tom Corby (UK) and Judit Hersko (Hungary and US), who have redefined polar art in relation to changes in the Arctic and Antarctic brought on by climate change and the races for new sources of carbon fuels. In her artwork, like that of Antin and Hershman Leeson, Talc performs a fictional identity while sustaining the image of the self-portrait in a variety of media including sculpture, photography, painting, drawing and video. Her exhibition at YBCA represents a new departure in her art, pairing works from her sustained polar project with more recent watercolors on heat. These vibrant and colorful paintings evoking the tropics are a sharp contrast to her bleeding cold walls. Both the extreme temperatures of heat and cold envelop Talc's inert objects transforming them into talismans of harsh physical reality.

Talc is uniquely and persistently fascinated by the impact of extreme temperatures on the body, and it is here that she draws on the symbolic impact of the protective gear as well as our dependency on the animal world, to endure these extremes. Her work draws, in part, on the singular tradition of polar exploration narratives, both fictional and actual that include accounts by polar explorers such as Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933) as well as science fictional accounts of polar explorers such as Ursula Le Guin's short story "Sur" (1982), a utopian feminist hoax about an exploration in which a party of South American women reach the South Pole in 1909, two years before the official arrival of the exploration teams of Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott. Talc's work is influenced, indirectly, by the actions of the female characters in Le Guin's fantasy who do not feel compelled to leave any record, or proof, of their presence at the South Pole, as evidenced by one of the characters' activities of fashioning sculptures from ice.

Like the disappearing ice sculptures in Le Guin's story, Talc's sculptures of pseudoscientific instruments and fabricated exploration accounts are preserved only as conceptual art, and do not achieve the status of heroic monuments or scientific proofs that populate Western male colonialist narratives and imagery of the Heroic Age of polar exploration from the end of the 19th century to the early 1920s.

Talc's art takes the form of non-functional readymade objects: fake polar logs, pseudo snow glasses, cameras, lamps, journals, survival food and emergency gear. Her polar explorer persona often has a dark side. She is fascinated by what is hidden or absent from the heroic polar exploration narrative accounts. She searches out what goes wrong and focuses on how, despite the best efforts of both technology and extensive pre-planning, the explorers are often not fully protected from the extremeness of the climate. Her self-portraiture probes these cruel aspects of exploration and expresses the aggressiveness of the cold—the wounds inflicted by freezing, the nosebleeds suffered by the body. For Talc, "One cannot be attracted to the cold without bearing in mind its fundamental incompatibility with human life." She defines ice as "a state of duality: it burns when it is too strong." (Talc, 2008) Talc's focus on intense cold is a vehicle for exploring an interest in the ways humans are seldom able to keep the material world at a remove through knowledge-based systems, including science, when faced with the far reaches of extreme weather in natural settings. Thus, her work endows cold with an anthropomorphic physical reality. For example, she shows walls crying and humans and animals gasping for breath. The Arctic is no longer seen as simply a formidable, unearthly place, but also as strangely fragile, where the ice itself is in jeopardy and has the potential to collapse, swallowing everything up. In Talc's work, ice transforms otherwise functional objects like thermometers, lamps, fireplaces, cameras, and walls into useless, inert ones, and can even transform them into its own frozen likeness.

Talc reveals the disturbing and disquieting aspects of negotiating any extreme environment—anxiety and an unnerving sense of vulnerability and dislocation. The title of her installation, *The One Who Sees Blindly*, suggests that she believes that the Arctic has yet to be properly observed.

In this respect her work deals with issues of perception and what happens when our bodies and our minds are no longer able to accommodate rapid weather changes. Her bleeding walls and ready-made objects of once useful technologies remind us that in the post-Heroic Age, technology, science and our constructed environment might not be enough to protect our increasingly vulnerable bodies from the consequences of rapid changes in weather. Even though Talc began working on this topic in the 1980s, new interpretations of this multi-decade project on the Arctic must include recent scientific knowledge about climate change. Her current installation, featuring both arctic and tropical environments, acknowledges contemporary fears of the ravages of record heat as well. Her work foreshadowed that of other contemporary artists working on this topic such as Subhankar Banerjee, whose photography and activist work focuses on Arctic conservation and indigenous rights. It not only resonates with these issues, it evokes some of our worst anxieties about the possible consequences of extreme climate change on our increasingly vulnerable built environments and bodies.



FIVE MINUTES ON THE ROAD TO THE POLE, 1983. BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH, ON BARYTA PAPER MOUNTED ON ALUMINIUM AND FRAMED, 120 x 80 CM. EDITION 1/1.