

## Two Weeks in Svalbard - a report

In the course of the preparations for a project that will be presented at the Bergen Assembly in September 2022, I had the great pleasure to be part of the Artica Residency Programme and to be able to spend two weeks in the arctic archipelago of Svalbard. The work that brought me here deals with the idea of the voice as a resource, especially in relation to coal mining, its predicted end and its political legacy. The project will come together as an installation coupled with a piece for voices, conceived in collaboration with the Volve Vokal choir and performed in the Cathedral of Bergen.

Coal, ice, water and wind: Svalbard is a place so terrestrial that it feels like another planet. Longyearbyen, its main inhabited area and the "world's northernmost settlement", counts a population of 2000 humans, reportedly surrounded by about 3000 polar bears, and probably at least twice as many roaring snow scooters. Set in rows of wooden housing, it is an unusual social mix bringing together last features of a mining culture, an active scientific community, and the influences of the raising tourist industry. Conversations easily slide into the essential life basics in Svalbard; weather, mechanics, routes to take for this or that outing and so on. Here nature still dictates its laws, although not always along the expected course: a few days after my arrival, we were surprised by an unseasonable heat wave with temperatures above 0 degrees Celsius, and the (here quite disturbing) sound of nocturnal rain. Within 24 hours, the icy valley turned into a lagoon, the snow tracks into impassable muddy streams (there are hardly any roads in Svalbard), with high risks of avalanches forbidding us to go anywhere.

During this forced immobility, Charlotte Hetherington, head of Artica, invited me to discover the residency workshop and its authentic manual presses. I experimented with the word "bore" in its double meaning, as Robert Smithson liked to emphasise it, "to dig" and "to be bored". I thought again of Smithson's non-sites, the alphabet-rock and his "language heaps", where the etymology of a word becomes like sedimentary layers. Almost like a reminder that the most untouched parts of the earth remain those where indigenous languages are spoken. Some days later and as some kind of echo, Maria Jensen, a geologist from the UNIS University, spoke about her work in Smithson's terms, almost word for word. Geology is like a book, coal and ice in particular, formed in static environments, are like archives spread out in time and space, in them, we can read (or hear, I thought) the past and the future.

When the cold returned, we were able to visit Mine 7, the only still operating mine in Svalbard. An eight kilometres drive on vehicles worthy of science fiction films, straight into the mountain, inside a rock that is over 60 million years old. What looks like a car tunnel at the beginning becomes an increasingly low passage. Once on foot, one walks bent over or crouched on the knees. The walls are shiny and black, sometimes covered with limestone to prevent fires. The danger, palpable, is mixed with a feeling of uterine security, the rhythms of the machines, the bumps and noises finally lulling us. And the tight social tissue interconnecting the miners appears as another vital resource - knowledge, gestures accumulated and materialized over generations. When the excavator (a giant wormlike machine weighing several thousand tonnes) proceeds to the production area a few metres from us, the earth shakes, almost obediently, and the coal is driven away.

That moment returned like a leitmotiv, taking different forms during my stay. The extraction of the combustible archive becoming the melting library, when visiting an ice cave. It was no longer the "black diamond" but the scales of time, tone and colour. From pearly white, oxygenated (recent ice), to translucent blue and pure transparency (old ice). A truly wonderful place, fleetingly invaded by our little group of helmeted fireflies, artist-tourists, winter-seekers, who came to see the snow and the ice, to feel the cold, "before it disappears".

What are we doing here? The exceptional opportunity of having been invited to Svalbard is tied with the need to ask this question. The inability to change our lifestyles, even at 78 degrees north latitude, where we find all the necessities imposed by global consumption, such as tropical fruits and organic products wrapped in plastic, air humidifiers or the constant coming and going of tourist convoys. But as one co-resident pointed out: if we were activists, we wouldn't be here.

However, the war that is thundering on our doorstep reminds us of the urgency. This hideous land grab, which, in Russia, one is not allowed to name, and which hides another one. What exactly should it be named? In the face of the unspeakable, formal mutism is a voice that breaks through, as shown by this Russian demonstrator, arrested as she was holding up a blank sign. Mladen Dolar says that the voice goes beyond what it expresses, that it is a lever of thought. A resource? Maybe, ubiquitous like coal, both solid and airy, only definable through the circumstances that surround it.

Again, questions of words and sites, of non-words and non-sites. I came to Svalbard to look for possible relations between raw resources and the human voice. In line with my transdisciplinary premises, I attempted to draw links between subjects and areas, like between geology and music. As if we could enter and leave these disciplines, as if we could extract and deduce from them when it suits us, as if we could actually escape from them. Is that research? In the end, it was not about entering a stuff that I didn't know about, but rather realising, how much I am part of it. That we are in geology as much as we are in music, in an ongoing flow of memories and anticipations. In the impossibility of separating ourselves from the timbre of our voices, or from the dynamics that inhabit our movements. I had to travel this distance, to walk on this millions of years old ice, to make this tiny but primordial shift.

Many thanks to the Office for Contemporary Art Norway for enabling this experience, and to Artica - Charlotte Hetherington and Lisa Bøen for their kind hospitality.

Augustin Maurs, March 2022