

# THE RENSHAWS

## *Dane Mitchell in conversation with Martin Germann*

*Martin Germann is an independent curator who lives and works in Brussels and Cologne, and adjunct Curator at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo Japan.*

### *On a precipice, in purgatory*

**Martin Germann:** *Everything started when you asked me if I would like to do a conversation with you for a project. We both then thought it was a good idea to have that conversation in a place where we had both never been, and now we are here, in Svalbard. How far do you think that fits to this occasion and to your work?*

**Dane Mitchell:** *It was a great idea when you suggested we think about meeting somewhere neither of us had been. I quite quickly settled on Svalbard, as it is a vivid place I was interested in thinking about. I sensed there was a synthesis between Svalbard and my work.*

*This place oscillates between extremities. I would describe it as being both on a precipice and in purgatory. It's fair to say that purgatory feels like an accurate descriptor in the way Svalbard hovers in the purgatory of environmental ruination. Further, it is not just in purgatory, but is purgatory; it is the archetypal heterotopia. It is a non-place—an un-country that reflects and upends things. Its non-statehood status and the fact no one is permitted to be born here or die here lends it the qualities of a purgatory place.*

*Purgatory is at work here in relation to absence too. Absence is something that I've been thinking about and generating work around for some time now. And by extension, thresholds: the edge which defines or gives shape to an absence, and this place does sit in a void-like purgatory state of in-betweenness, and no question, these qualities render this place interesting to me.*

**MG:** *Maybe this aspect of Svalbard being in purgatory and on a precipice is also because it's an opposite to almost every other place in some respects. For example, there is no evidence of anyone having inhabited this place before whalers arrived in the 1600s. We should not forget to mention that it's a country where anyone can come. You don't need a visa. And the precipice — can you describe how you perceive Svalbard as being on a precipice?*

**DM:** *This place is on a precipice in so many ways. Most self-evidently in the way it's quite literally on the edge of human habitat, being right at the northern tip of the world in the Arctic Circle. It's certainly on the precipice of loss. Loss is something I have been circling in my work for some time too. Svalbard is a bellwether for environmental loss in that it's experiencing some of the highest increases in global temperature globally. This sense of a precipice is expressed in several specific forms I'm interested in here in Svalbard, namely the Global Seed Vault and additionally polar bear habitat, but let's talk more about the bears and vault later.*

**MG:** *On our first full day here, we got up and we went on a boat, and we were moving towards a precipice of another kind: a 40 metre high glacier wall of the Tuna Glacier margin. Whilst we were floating amongst the ice, I saw you performing some work there. Maybe we can talk about that later, but...*

**DM:** *The glacier and the sounds it produced were so beautiful—popping and cracking—it was incredible. And of course, glaciers are also on a precipice in respect of receding, vanishing time capsules. They hold crystalline water and air from another time—lock up time and freeze it—but they are collapsing and so they're releasing time as they do, I like to imagine that's what the popping sound is. Time being released.*

**MG:** *A thousand years old they say.*

**DM:** *It's probably more than a thousand years. Less than 3000 years it's understood. Although yes, the glacier is a time capsule or container of environmental conditions from another time.*

## *Fortress of a universalist proposal*

**MG:** *...like a museum. I mean, you've been working with and thinking in your works about the relationship between loss and the museum.*

**DM:** *Yes. This place is interesting to me because of the Global Seed Vault that's here, which is a very specific sort of museum—it is an apex museum in many respects — that has a peculiar relationship with the past and the future, which undeniably all museums do. We could talk about this in more detail in a minute. But there's this other type of loss here in Svalbard to speak about which I think underpins why we are here in Svalbard. Fantastically, off the coast of Svalbard there is a Phantom Island. A Phantom Island is one that has appeared on maps and has subsequently been found to not exist. This particular island was un-discovered in 2017. So, until that quite recent date it appeared on maps—named and drawn on all cartographic documents of this territory since the early 1900s when it was initially 'discovered'. In Post hoc, my sprawling project for the Aotearoa New Zealand National Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, I generated lists of millions of vanished, lost and disappeared things and amongst these lives The List of Phantom Islands, which counts 65 recordings of such instances, and the Svalbard phantom island is part of this list.*

**MG:** *...so this Svalbard phantom island was unmapped as well?*

**DM:** *Or de-mapped? De-charted, yes. This phantom island was recorded and mapped very early in the 20th century, and it remained on maps of the region right through the digital rendering of the world. It's remarkable it remained on maps for so long. The Svalbard phantom island has a beautiful name: Perlamutrovy, which translates from Russian as 'the mother of pearls'. The island's initial false-mapping and its persistence in remaining on maps for over one hundred years — throughout a century that one assumes had a pretty good read on the terrain — and its absence in material reality are demonstrative of the multiple ways Svalbard has captured my imagination, or maybe more accurately, captured my imagination on how my thinking can be mapped onto it. I'm still circling this idea, but I think my interest has something to do with the space between legibility and illegibility: the way we casually assume the world is legible to us, and yet the (un)reality of Perlamutrovy proves otherwise.*

*In Svalbard I took a photograph of the sea out of which Perlamutrovy was believed to rise. I printed this image and sent it to a cartographer and asked them to carry it in their pocket. This act of holding has also become a work in the exhibition.*

*We were just starting to speak about the Global Seed Vault, and there is an interesting connection between the Phantom Island and the Global Seed Vault, as I think the vault also opens a space between legibility and illegibility.*

*Both propose questions for legibility as the method of understanding the world. The Global Seed Vault is both a museum of seeds and a burial ground that is illegible to us in many ways.*

**MG:** *Maybe it is also a form of purgatory. It's the last, maybe it's one of the last fortresses of a universalist proposal.*

**DM:** *It's a kind of futurist proposition.*

**MG:** *Absolutely. Yes.*

**DM:** *It's a techno-architectural monolith protruding from the mountain, but like an iceberg, most of it is below the surface, unseen. It's interesting to note that the engineers involved in constructing the vault specialise in extraction architecture—what I might call architorture—having designed many gas pipelines and processing plants, oil platforms and terminals. The Global Seed Vault digs deep into the permafrost of Svalbard and assumes a legible future — one we can plan for — which is a fool's errand, because there is too much future.*

**MG:** *While temperatures continue to rise....*

**DM:** *Yes. It presupposes loss too.*

**MG:** *You mean the Global Seed Vault?*

**DM:** *Yes, the Vault presupposes loss. It presupposes the loss it seeks to protect against. I think there's more to talk about here so let's circle back to this. But needless to say, loss is a seething presence in Svalbard.*

## *The bear and its enclosure*

**DM:** *Another brink of loss here in Svalbard relates to the polar bear — the archipelago is their natural habitat, and it is dwindling. The polar bear is a threatened species and is threatened by us, you and I, simply being here.*

**MG:** *Just before we sat down to talk, we went to an adventure shop where a number of high-tech guns were offered, as you are not permitted to leave the two streets of Longyearbyen without a gun in order to protect against the polar bear. The only way you are allowed to leave the town limits is to actually endanger what is endangered.*

**DM:** *Yes. You must endanger what has more of a right to be here than any of us.*

**MG:** *It sounds logical at first sight that the polar bear has a bigger right to be here than us.*

**DM:** *I think so. I mean, it was certainly here before us.*

**MG:** *It was here before us, however, we still don't know what was there before the polar bear.*

**DM:** *Given Svalbard was totally unpopulated by homo sapiens until the late 1500s, I'd be happy to surmise that the polar bear absolutely has more right to be here than us.*

**MG:** *Absolutely, let's conclude.*

**DM:** *Homo sapiens, as you were saying, are not permitted to leave Longyearbyen without a gun in order to protect themselves from the polar bear. We are forced to confront the possibility of annihilating an endangered species. Significant for me, the polar bear bridges an early childhood memory I have of being at Auckland Zoo. The Auckland Zoo polar bear enclosure was built in the 1930s and remained unchanged until 1993 or 1994 when it was closed. This enclosure or pit — it's more of a pit than anything, a bear pit—was dressed to replicate the Svalbard landscape,*

*which is where the bears at the Auckland Zoo originally came from. I remember thinking at that young age when I first encountered this scenography that this bear pit was trouble. That there was something wrong with the double experience of the bears being held in this technological failure—a concrete tomb painted to look like ice — and me standing there peering down into this scene. I vividly recall as an eight or nine year old watching the bears pace back and forth in a psychologically distressed state and thinking, this is trouble. And not the kind of trouble you want to stay with. This particular bear pit and my memory of it has crystalized as emblematic of the inherent problems of the insatiable drive to contain, collect and hold things—to build enclosures for the future and for the future of memory.*

**MG:** *...and to constantly expand it, to further colonise our environment, in the sense of, making it a container..*

**DM:** *The Svalbard polar bear held in a concrete and fiberglass replica of an ice-world in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland is a very clear example of the problems of habits of containment. The complete decontextualization of the largest carnivorous animal on the planet in the New Zealand suburban landscape—the Svalbard bear in the New Zealand suburban landscape—is an early experience in my life that I think deserves further thinking about in relation to my interest in ‘things that contain’, such as museums, encyclopaedic lists, maps, language and seed banks and ‘that which cannot be contained’, such as vapours, forces, extinctions, contagions and loss. A recent project of mine, Unknown Affinities orbits these concerns by directly displaying techniques of enclosure in the form of ‘museum mounts’ for every known extinct Aotearoa/New Zealand bird species and addresses a literal grasp of the past.*

*So, coming here is partially about acknowledging and eyeballing the specific habitat of the Auckland Zoo polar bear, and helps to inform my thinking about the correlation between the development of the museum out of the mouseion, and the zoo out of the menagerie and the synthesis between these two forms of containment and domination. Rather beautifully, an unexpected effect of being here in Svalbard in relation to the polar bear is the way you’re always thinking about them. That’s not an exaggeration. At all moments, you must have the polar bear in mind — the polar bear has to live in the enclosure of your mind the entire time you’re here. They always remain present in the interior of the mind and the exterior landscape at the same time. Even in their absence from view they den-in.*

*An artwork that addresses this experience after this time in Svalbard uses Headspace Technology capture technology to entrap the air of the enclosure that houses the only polar bears still held captive in the Southern Hemisphere, at Sea World on the Gold Coast. I travelled there to make take the air capture by crawling into the den of the polar bears.*

*Headspace Technology allows for the capture of volatile aroma molecules rising from objects to be captured, analysed by way of gas chromatography–mass spectrometry and then reproduced as a fragrance) to capture the fragrance of a polar bear den and vapourise it in a gallery space. The practicalities of the Headspace capture involved placing a six litre air sampling canister in the den of the polar bears. This non-invasive apparatus will allow for a reliable sample of polar bear enclosure air to be trapped and stored.*

*I’ve been exploring the possibilities of aroma and its molecules to summon up experiences and reveal unseen worlds for over fifteen years now, and I’m interested in conjuring up the polar bear quite literally in the viewer’s body. My long interest in scent and smell is bound up in its capability to dwell on multiple thresholds—of vision, physicality, affect, time, dimensionality — as well as its primal status among the senses, its ability to conjure the unseen, its disruptive quality to permanence, and the way it builds complicated, fusal relationships between the world and our bodies, so this idea of a polar bear being tangibly illegible given it will be an invisible vapour atomised in space, but become legible as it hits the olfactory sensory neurons in our bodies seems apt.*

**MG:** *Speaking of fusal relationships, what I experienced as remarkable here also in terms of thinking about the museum, is that Svalbard is kind of an ‘inside out’ place: all infrastructure here is outside. Everything is inside out. There is no decor anymore. You can see all the infrastructure in this city — all the pipes and conduit. There is nothing below ground, not even tree roots — as there are no trees at all.*

# Bodies in the permafrost

**DM:** *This exposed infrastructure is interesting in relation to techniques of containment. Here in Svalbard, there is a reversal in that the technologies of containment that support human life are exposed to us. We see it all—the skeleton is on the outside of the body. The Global Seed Vault is the only contradictory moment in this revelation of what is otherwise concealed. The vault is a burial site which no one can enter. In this sense the Global Seed Vault confronts us with an uneasy notion—that in order to save and protect the future, it must be buried. I find this really interesting: the idea that the future is about burial and storage.*

**MG:** *At the same time there is a very heartwarming community. The first words we heard on arriving were from the taxi driver, and he was telling us, "no one knows what's tomorrow". And this remark is interesting in relation to the Global Seed Vault, and I think everyone here is a bit like that. So, it's a place in which there are only foreigners.*

**DM:** *Yes. No one's from here. In Zdenka Sokolíčková's book *The Svalbard Paradox*, she remarks that a local in Svalbard is someone who got here on the flight before you.*

**MG:** *We need to think about the 2024 Venice Biennale. Its title is *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*. Here, there are really only foreigners.*

**DM:** *Yes. This place might be the most vital unrealised pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale.*

**MG:** *Yes, that's why we came here.*

**DM:** *We arrived too soon.*

**MG:** *Approximately one year before the opening. To do a little research.*

**DM:** *A little research, a little thinking. Unfortunately, I have a feeling that the Svalbard Venice Biennale Pavilion will remain buried in this conversation. Something else that you and I have talked about as an interesting reality peculiar to this place is that, and again this relates back to burial, storage and museums—is that you are not permitted to die here.*

**MG:** *We just passed the cemetery where the last person was buried in the 1950s.*

**DM:** *And that buried body is preserved in the permafrost, they're still intact. We were talking to our host Anna on the boat trip out to the Tuna Glacier, and she was saying that there was a researcher here a few years ago who took samples from the bodies in the graveyard in order to research Spanish flu because it's also in hibernation in the preserved bodies of the graveyard.*

*There does seem to be a very interesting community here in town, in both the graveyard and the town. It feels like it's divided across the mining community, the scientific researchers and those supporting the tourism economy. The town is very interesting. Just to go back to the exposure of all that infrastructure for a moment — the technological infrastructure is not only laid bare, you also see on one side of town the coal mine where the miners work, and the coal fired electrical plant on the other side of town where the coal is burnt, which then directly supplies the town in the middle where there is climate research being done. It's very diagrammatic and very contradictory. Fossil fuel is powering the research of climate science in a very direct way here.*

**MG:** *Yeah. The infrastructure is in the centre. It's not on the periphery, which also means that the rules of discourse are somewhat scattered here. The weird separation between those who speak and those about whom is spoken somewhat collapse here as well, and I think the example of fossil fuel powering climate catastrophe research is a wonderful one...*

# Buried futures

**MG:** ...but thinking of technologies, today we went to the Global Seed Vault too.

**DM:** We did.

**MG:** You were actually doing two different kinds of things there. On the one hand, you were preparing artworks for later—much as the Seed Vault also prepares stuff 'for later'—but then you were also performing two artworks. Can you tell me a bit about these and how they relate to the place?

**DM:** I'll start by talking about the work that you described as being something that I'm preparing for later. I travelled here with a flatbed scanner in order to scan the doors of the Global Seed Vault. I've been using desktop scanners for some time as an alternative to a camera as I'm really interested in them as an alternative means of producing an image. They upturn the logic of the camera. The camera takes light in through an aperture, so in this way, a camera takes the world in to it: the world enters it. Whereas the scanner projects light outwards; it enters the world. The camera operates much like the eye, whereas the scanner reads the world in a left-to-right, up-down motion. It turns the world into a text. By its very nature it is indexical — scanning the world. The Global Seed Vault is an impenetrable space — no one is allowed in but for the small team who manage it in order to deposit seeds two times a year. At the vault I tilted the scanner on its side and pushed it up against the doors of the vault to scan them at a very high resolution in order to read and index the surface of the door. The doors of the vault are particularly interesting to me because they are the threshold to the vault. They define the separation of the world from the vault, and the separation of the present from the buried future.

**MG:** I like the way you describe the two different movements, mirroring or touching the world. In the latter way, then, you captured the shell of the vault.

**DM:** Yes, the shell—mother of pearls of the vault maybe — and the images do produce a mother of pearls-like patina and offer a vision of the doors that would otherwise be unseen.

**MG:** I just wanted to ask how closely does this precise reading or scanning the surface relate to the purpose of the Global Seed Vault? Because it's not just a door.

**DM:** It's not just a door, but it is a very specific door. I mean, I could have stayed home and scanned a door.

**MG:** Yes, exactly. But we are here.

**DM:** The scans are illegible in their abstraction, yet factual, and they can only be so if I'm here making them. I think this takes us back to this space between legibility and illegibility. I often make things that are not clear from what you see alone—they conceal a lot of their underpinning 'logic'. I really wanted to treat the doors indexically, to read them through the scanner to produce images that are somewhat indecipherable or illegible in order to propose a question to legibility as the methodology for understanding. I'm interested in questioning the primacy of legibility as a means to know a thing, and to do so in actuality—to be at the gateway to the burial site that this vault is—so it is really deliberate and important to me that I'm here making these scans.

And I think why it matters to do this at the Global Seed Vault is because the vault presents storage and burial as key methodologies in pre-imagining the future. The doorway is the impenetrable gateway to the present's idea of the future. We can only have an exterior experience of the vault, and in this way, it exists in our minds as much as it does the side of the mountain, much like the polar bear while you're in Svalbard. And the door, the surface that we see one side of, is all the material that we have access to in relation to the questionable, ideological, futurist proposition that is the Global Seed Vault. The doors are literal thresholds. We can't access the future in which these seeds might be used—we don't have access to that and nor do we to the vault — and so looking at the skin of the vault—the doors—seems to me to be the best way to engage with it.

**MG:** *Yeah. Since we don't know what's going on tomorrow, although they write in their information panels that it's an encyclopaedic support of our future, of which we don't know much.*

**DM:** *Well, you know, after all, it is a doomsday vault.*

**MG:** *Exactly.*

**DM:** *The vault is both imaginary and real. It's built based on an imaginary future, and we can only imagine the interior of the vault too: what it might feel and smell like, what it might be like to permeate the permafrost and to be inside the mountain. We can only do this through an imaginary inquiry. So, the doors are crucial, the doors are, in a way, all that matters to our present selves.*

**MG:** *Like Rodin's The Gates of Hell, in a strange way. Which is an icon for modernism. Maybe this door is some type of a strange icon for purgatory?*

**DM:** *And we cannot be sure which side of the seed vault doors hell is. We don't know whether it's out here or in there, whether it's now or then. These doors present us with a knowing and not knowing, a before and an after. They are all those threshold moments at once.*

**MG:** *And speaking of thresholds, we were at the vault this morning between 11:00 and 1:00. There were masses of tourists coming in buses from big cruise ships which anchor here in front of Longyearbyen for the day. They get off the bus and then they walk to where there is nothing to see but these doors — this entrance in the mountain. They take some photographs of the doors, and then they go back on their bus to the boat and leave, which is interesting because it's almost like a ritualistic place, without access to the ritual itself. It's a bit like the pyramids, however the vault is visually totally underwhelming.*

**DM:** *I agree, it's an architectural cliché appropriated from the screen. It sits comfortably between the archetypal architecture of a Bond villain's lair and a billionaire Prepper's safe haven. And the tourists that come — and we should count ourselves among them really—they don't have an encounter.*

**MG:** *Exactly, they just have: We Were Here.*

**DM:** *Witnessing themselves witnessing. It's not direct engagement, which is also true of most contemporary tourism. Much tourism occurs whereby you go somewhere, you photograph it, you go home, and then you have the experience. Or perhaps moreso, you put it online and the experience is validated and confirmed through those that don't have the experience but see the photographic evidence. Tourist as conduit, or tourist as a threshold to an experience of another. We're engaged in this same procedure.*

**MG:** *Yes. One person who passed by was not a tourist. We could identify her by the gun they were wearing. She asked me if you would be a scientist as well, because what you were doing there looked like an experiment. It was a pleasure for me to explain your artistic work as a meta science, toward what the vault contains in the end.*

**DM:** *We should also talk about what that vault contains. The seeds. And that in order for seeds to grow, they need to germinate. And so, what does occur in the mind of a visitor to the threshold of the Seed Vault is the germination of an idea that takes seed in them rather than in the ground. I like the idea that there's a vault within us, and there's the vault in the mountain, and we are the site of germination caused by our thinking about the vault. Because there is no germination in the vault. It is a dormant burial site. The Vault is hopeful, but in another sense, it's emblematic that all hope has been abandoned and that the history of progress is really a history of obsolescence.*

# The imponderables

**MG:** *It's also numb. Maybe tell me about the second part — the artworks you performed at the Vault entrance.*

**DM:** *I performed a gesture there. I think that's what it might be termed.*

**MG:** *Yes, you literally performed. I was part of it. I mean, I witnessed it. I was the only witness actually. And these tourists we just spoke of, they were passing by, they were asking me, "what is he doing there?" And I would tell them, "he's performing an artwork."*

**DM:** *And then they left me to it.*

**MG:** *I was protecting you doing your work.*

**DM:** *You ran interference. I didn't want to record the actual act however, I took scans of the objects I performed with, which produce some very specific images, and I photographed the results, or residue of the action. It was a very simple gesture. I didn't want to leave a trace, I wanted it to be a dissolving, temporal impression on this place. I wasn't comfortable leaving any kind of permanent impression on a place that I don't come from, well actually that nobody comes from.*

*The gesture responds to Svalbard as a liquid world covered and shaped by water and ice. The gesture I made derives from an interest I have in homoeopathy which I first employed in my work in 2015. Homoeopathy is a very strange, simultaneously logical and illogical framework for (mis)understanding the material world and occurred to me as an interesting system to think about in relation to Svalbard.*

*Homoeopathy was invented by German physician Samuel Hahnemann in the 1700s and so it comes out of Western medicine, and you can buy it at the pharmacy today, but it has more to do with the 'logic' of magic than it does medicine. Homoeopathy presents itself as legible pharmacology, and yet it is deeply illegible once we get inside it. It is a threshold medical-magic cross-species reliant on belief and is involved in some beautiful misapprehensions of physical materials and their effects.*

*Homoeopathy has several core underlying principles. One is that water can contain memory: that you can put a substance in water and through a process of what's called succussion (agitation) the water molecules can contain and retain information or knowledge—material knowledge — of the thing that was diluted in it. And dilution is an understatement. The homoeopathic framework requires dilution to such an extent that the source material is quite practically gone. This act of dilution completes a beautiful equation: dilution equals potency. Homoeopathy believes that the less present something is, the more efficacious it is. It's an alluring notion — the less present something is, the more effective it is. I think this is an alluring sculptural proposition, which activates the invisible in such a way as to suggest that the less present something is, the more grip it might have on the world, and on a viewer.*

**MG:** *Is the highest form of presence is uncertainty?*

**DM:** *Yes, nicely put. The other underlying reality of homoeopathy is that you have to believe in it in order for it to work. It's reliant on being inside the frame.*

**MG:** *Because it can only be unlocked by the self. In the sense that it's exactly on this borderline of mystical and rational.*

**DM:** *Yes. This boundary between the mystical and the rational also extends to the way that it operates to cure; you take what causes the ailment in order to overcome it. For example, if you take a homoeopathic formula to help with memory loss, you take Alumina, which is derived from aluminium, which is known to cause Alzheimers. You take a (diluted until vanished) material that causes the disease in order to overcome it. 'Like cures like', whereby a substance*



*that causes the symptoms of a disease in a healthy person will cure similar symptoms in a sick person. This is akin to the Law of Similarity—'like produces like'—which is a major thread of sympathetic magic, or magic based on imitation or correspondence, which infers that effect is produced through imitation. This idea that you mimic the animal (the polar bear?) to call the animal towards you. And I think this act of mimicry—copying to conjure—is key to the history of art making; the earliest creative output by homo sapiens operate in this way.*

*I took two homoeopathic remedies to the Seed Vault, and both come from this very peculiar and beautifully poetic corner of homoeopathic medicine called The Imponderables.*

**MG:** *The Imponderables.*

**DM:** *Yes. Imponderable substances. They can't be pondered. And they can't be thought about.*

**MG:** *So, it's like a paradox actually.*

**DM:** *Yes. They are unthinkable.*

**MG:** *Wow. Amazing.*

**DM:** *I think this is an alluring idea in relation to the Global Seed Vault. I see the Seed Vault as an imponderable place addressing an imponderable future. The vault is imponderable just as the future for which it is buried is—the vault being built based on present notions of an unwritten future.*

*These imponderable homoeopathic formulas I carried with me, they're called as such because they're made from energy, not substance. I took two formulas with me to the Vault. One called Sol—a homoeopathic formula made of light emitted from the sun. And the other is called Luna, which comes from sunlight reflected off of the moon. These formulas purport to have been entrapped in milk sugar (saccharum lactis, chemical formula C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>22</sub>O<sub>11</sub>H<sub>2</sub>O) which is exposed on a glass plate to the sun's rays and the sun's rays reflected off of the moon and stirred with a glass rod. So, it has some relationship to the production of a photographic image actually. I purchased these two substances from a pharmaceutical dispensary and took them to the Seed Vault and I buried them next to the doors. I worked with a fabricator in Aotearoa New Zealand to make a simple, brass core sampler, which I drilled into the soil by hand at the doorway to the Seed Vault, and I buried the sun and the moon.*

**MG:** *So that tool—the core sampler — is part of your work?*

**DM:** *Yes. The tool is part of the work.*

**MG:** *What happens later with that? Because again, it is a type of shell.*

**DM:** *I'll bury it in a concrete tomb perhaps.*

**MG:** *Imponderable things. It's so nice. So, is this core sampler the tool through which it was performed? In that sense it might be a transmitter.*

**DM:** *Yes, it's a sculpture to bury sunlight and moonlight. The first documented attempt to entrap sunlight and moonlight as an imponderable homoeopathic formula was in 1897. Luna is traditionally prescribed for people suffering from sleepwalking. And Sol for skin cancer and birthmarks. The action of implanting or burying these formulas produced from non-material energy by the door of the Seed Vault is a means for me to think about the contents of the Vault and their germination via photosynthesis too.*

*I will subsequently produce a work with these two imponderable substances in which they are continuously in movement, continuously in a state of 'succussion': two lab stirrers will sit side by side endlessly gyrating the sun and the moon into a state of homoeopathic becoming.*

*I made another small performative gesture with a homoeopathic formula when we took a small inflatable boat out to Tuna Glacier, specifically when we floated in front of this incredible wall of ancient ice.*

**MG:** *Of time. This wall of time.*

**DM:** *This gesture involved a homoeopathic formula called Ursus Maritimus, which is Latin for polar bear. It's a homoeopathic formula produced from either the blood or the saliva of a polar bear. I've been struggling to actually anchor down this information. The information is lost in time, as the 'proving' is from the 1800s. Actually, these homoeopathic 'proofs' are really beautiful texts, written to describe the effects of a formula on the body. They read like stream of consciousness writing. They're associative, rambling narratives, which describe an unmediated analysis of interactions between the remedy and body and are used in homoeopathy to gather qualitative information on a medication. I haven't been able to find a proving for Ursus Maritimus. But I thought it was interesting to take this remedy back out onto the ice — to return it. From a pharmaceutical supplier to the ice. As a further related artwork, I will produce 800kg (the weight of a polar bear) of liquid Ursus Maritimus in an Intermediate Bulk Container (IBC), as a physical supplement and dormant homoeopathic bear.*

*And this morning I went to the small museum in Svalbard and was given access in the conservation lab to a full polar bear pelt. I pressed the Ursus Maritimus remedy against it, and I also made some direct scans there too. Polar bears have an interesting transparency. Their hair is not white, it's actually transparent, and their skin black so as to trap heat from the sun. The scanner throws light around in such a way that it fills the follicles with light.*

*Bringing the homoeopathic polar bear remedy back to Svalbard was a simple gesture. Polar bears are really interesting for me as I've mentioned in relation to the memory I have of the Auckland Zoo enclosure: this super problematic proposition of displacement of animals into zoological frameworks in which they can't survive. I mean, it's an impossibility. I was reading that the keeping of polar bears dates back to 285 BC where King Ptolemy II of Egypt kept polar bears in Egypt. Also, Henry III kept them in the Tower of London in his menagerie in the 13th century. So, they have a very long history of being de-natured and held in hellscape that mimic the ice.*

**MG:** *...it goes way beyond modernism.*

**DM:** *It's an ancient proposition of..*

**MG:** *Power.*

## *We are all visitors*

**DM:** *Zoo enclosures present us with the insurmountable difference between a natural environment and a produced one.*

*Zoo enclosures are things that I've been researching in some depth in the studio back in Naarm Melbourne. Polar bears are born to roam. They roam thousands of kilometres in a year. So, this memory I have of these polar bears being stricken in the hot summer sun of Auckland, New Zealand—pacing back and forth in this psychologically desperate state...*

**MG:** *...so this was where you opened up these grim projections?*

**DM:** *Maybe so. I was struck by the incongruous relationship between the bear and its habitat—a sprayed concrete, painted ice white hellscape. Seeing through this incredible, well, incredibly cruel fiction as a kid is a moment I remember very well. I subsequently found some footage on YouTube from 1988 of the Auckland Zoo polar bear pit, which is around the time that I saw it. We've already talked about these enclosures, but there is something to add here about their relationship to natural habitat itself. I've been working with Stealth Cell Towers for some years, and my most recent work makes use of pine-scented 'Little Trees' that hang from millions of rearview mirrors. Both Stealth Cell Towers and Little Trees reveal a bleak certainty: the distance between synthetic and natural is collapsing. Both are*

*peculiar copies of nature — poor copies of trees that delimit our experiences of nature. Both forms of mimicry and doubling have allowed me to think about the way all of our experiences of nature are technological to a great extent: that all nature is technologically framed. If we go to a National Park, we experience a technological invention. This is a framed, contained, managed experience of nature suspended in time.*

**MG:** *Yeah, of course. Yesterday, we were standing in front of this rather spectacular grindy/gritty mountain whose peak was disappearing in the fog. It was actually unphotographable as an experience. It was so incredible how the birds were circling around this, or in front of this mountain in formations and just kind of, giving up the formations and then flying together again. I don't want to romanticise anything, but it was incredibly beautiful — probably the same experience when we were going out with the boat, when this vastness also made clear we are not needed here as human beings because we are here at the edge of this planet where its own life, or the way it facilitates itself, becomes very, very much tangible and visible. Shortly before we were doing the tour to the glacier, a blue whale was spotted in that fjord, but we didn't see it. But it made me think of this passage in Moby Dick, where it's about when you were talking about the polar bear earlier on, whose habitat it roams is about the size of Austria — but the sperm whale is using the whole planet as its habitat. And I think it was said that the infrastructure in which he moves around the planet, the channels are described as, what is the name for this? Where blood flows?*

**DM:** *Oh, veins.*

**MG:** *Yeah. Veins through which whales are moving all around the world. And I thought it couldn't be nicer as an expression.*

**DM:** *It is a beautiful expression, though has a troubling double meaning. It's the same language used to describe the geology of fossil fuels and rare material deposits — vein deposits; hitting a vein—and whales were certainly treated as a resource to be mined. Whalers were the first to set up home in Svalbard—coming here and bludgeoning their way through a species as fast as they could. Language certainly frames nature (yet another technological frame) as do the borders imposed around it that seek to protect it. It's very easy to treat Svalbard ornamentally and to think about it metaphorically. What's interesting about what you said last night when we were looking at those bird murmurations off the top of those grindy, gritty mountains. It is as if, like you said, something like, this place doesn't need us. But mining companies came and started extracting materials. And there's environmental tourism and research that happens here now and they're also engaged (and dependent) on extraction. We're all visitors here, and I think this means it is easily appropriated—by scientists, miners, tourists and artists like me.*

THE RENSHAWS