

Special Issue:

..... Changing Concepts of Nature in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature and Photography

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Mette Tronvoll's Series *Svalbard* (2014)

Zusammenfassung

Die Serie *Svalbard* (2014) der norwegischen Fotografin Mette Tronvoll (*1965) versammelt analoge Porträt- und Landschaftsaufnahmen aus Ny-Ålesund, einem internationalen Forschungsstandort auf Spitzbergen (norwegisch: Svalbard). Die von der Forschung bisher wenig beachtete Folge von zwanzig großformatigen Farbfotografien wird in diesem Beitrag methodisch in einer kunsthistorischen Einzelwerkanalyse untersucht. Hintergrundinformationen zur Entstehung der Serie werden einbezogen, um Tronvolls projektbasierte Strategie herauszuarbeiten. Die Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen dem Menschen und seiner natürlichen Umgebung, hier der Arktis, wird anhand von Porträts von Arktisforschern und Biologen sowie dem Motiv des Eisbergs erörtert.

Abstract

The series *Svalbard* (2014) by Norwegian photographer Mette Tronvoll (*1965) consists of analogue portrait and landscape photographs taken in Ny-Ålesund – an international research base on Spitsbergen (Norwegian: Svalbard). By means of art-historical, single-work analysis, this article examines the sequence of twenty large-format colour photographs, which has received little scholarly attention to date. Background information about the production of the series is included in the elaboration of Tronvoll's project-based strategy. The relationship between human beings and their natural environment – here the Arctic – is explored in portraits of Arctic researchers and biologists, as well as through the motif of the iceberg.

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In the Arctic ice – an introduction

Two people in thick protective suits are kneeling side by side in the snow, facing the viewer (ill. 1). Behind them, sloping upward to the right and bathed in warm sunlight, is a snow-covered mountain ridge. The snow-white protective suits provide perfect camouflage against the bright background. Only the black balaclavas which, except for the eye apertures, cover their heads entirely, create a focal point in the picture's dominant white, which fans out into countless nuances of colour due to sections of light and shadow. The two people pause and look at the viewer. Concealed in gloves, their hands rest on their laps. The person on the right of the picture is holding a trowel and their face is framed by the long earflaps of a thick fur hat, worn for protection from



Ill. 1: Mette Tronvoll: *Svalbard* #1, 2014, C-print, 80 x 80 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

the cold. In the snow between the pair is an opened metal equipment case and various tools. The photograph described is the first picture in a series entitled *Svalbard* (2014) by the female Norwegian photographer Mette Tronvoll (*1965). The subjects are probably two researchers from the French Polar Institute, the *Institut polaire français Paul-Émile Victor* (IPEV), taking snow samples near Ny-Ålesund on Spitsbergen.¹ Tronvoll recalls the extraordinary situation in which the picture was taken: »It was minus 40 degrees Celsius when I took this photograph. They were sampling clean ice, and wore these suits in order to be protected and so that they would not pollute the samples. I could only come close after they had gathered the samples, to shield against ›infection‹.«² So the work suits were to protect not only the scientists from the extreme cold, but the environment itself from possible contamination by humans.

The series *Svalbard* (2014) consists of twenty colour photographs whose dimensions vary from a square format of 80 x 80 cm to a slight landscape format of 80 x 97.8 cm. The images, taken with an analogue medium-format camera (Hasselblad) and without digital post-production editing, are presented in the form of large-format, framed

¹ My sincere thanks to Ann Kristin Balto, Per Kyrre Reymert and Geir Wing Gabrielsen at the *Norsk Polarinstitutt* in Tromsø (information received by email on 18.09.2020 and 21.09.2020) and to the *Alfred-Wegener-Institut* in Bremerhaven (email on 25.09.2020) for supplying these details. The permanent AWIPEV research base in Ny-Ålesund is operated jointly by the *Institut polaire français Paul-Émile Victor* (IPEV) and the *Alfred-Wegener-Institut* (AWI).

² Mette Tronvoll in an email to the author on 24.01.2020.

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C-prints. Each of the pictures is numbered, placing them in a predetermined sequence within the series.³ Other than the numbers, the photographs have no captions. The title Tronvoll chooses for her series is a place name, *Svalbard*, situating her photographic project in a place as geographically exposed as it is globally significant for scientific research. The Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen and its main island of the same name has been called Svalbard in Norwegian since the Svalbard Treaty, which officially granted the archipelago to Norway, took force in 1925.⁴ Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, its location at the extreme northern periphery of the globe, today the small archipelago in the Arctic Ocean has a global relevance: not just as a base of geopolitical importance in the event of a war between East and West or with a view to developing new maritime trading routes,⁵ but also as an important research station for the fields of climate research, atmospheric physics, glaciology and marine biology. Several nations operate temporary and permanent research establishments on Svalbard. Besides the *Norsk Polarinstitutt* and the Franco-German research station AWIPEV, these include the Arctic Yellow River Station of the Polar Research Institute of China, the Japanese National Institute for Polar Research (NIPR), for example, as well as the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, an international institution. It is because of global warming – which on the one hand, threatens to destroy the Arctic's characteristic face forever, but could facilitate access to valuable natural resources on the other – that the Arctic has become a growing focus of international attention in recent years.

Tronvoll is known for her photo series of different and rather far-flung places in the world, among them Mongolia, Zambia, Greenland or the island of Fukue in the Gotō region in the south of Japan. Monographic publications on her work have been issued to accompany exhibitions since the beginning of the 2000s, including a comprehensive volume published by Schirmer/Mosel Verlag in 2009 in conjunction with an international touring exhibition.⁶ The work *Svalbard*, which post-dates these publications, has received little scholarly attention to date.⁷ The present essay addresses this series in the form of an art-historical, single-work analysis and thus takes a new perspective on Tronvoll's oeuvre, which until now has been studied mainly under the aspects of portraiture, representation and time.⁸ Thus it will not only analyse the artistic strategy, but also pose the question of how the relationship between humans and the environment they engage with, in this case the Arctic, is taken up in the photographs. The current debate surrounding the concept of nature was intensified in 2000 when Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer

³ References to individual pictures in the following text follow this numbering scheme. All motifs in the series as well as other series of works can be viewed on Mette Tronvoll's Internet presence: *Mette Tronvoll*, <http://www.tronvoll.net/Svalbard.html> (16.09.2020).

⁴ Due to the title of the work, the name Svalbard is used in the following text even though the island is more commonly known as Spitsbergen in English. Svalbard is generally translated as »cool coast«. Cf. Arlov 2003, p. 50. Discussion of Svalbard as an alternative name to Spitsbergen was first officially raised by the Norwegian government in 1924. On the political significance of this change of name, cf. also Arlov 2020, pp. 10, 12.

⁵ Cf. Gaarder 2010.

⁶ See for example Winzen 2000a; Meyer 2009.

⁷ For instance, the series is briefly presented as part of a group exhibition on portraiture in contemporary photography, in which selected images from the series were shown. See Schubert 2016, p. 46f. and the interview with Mette Tronvoll on p. 80.

⁸ On the theme of time, cf. Kierulf 2004; on Tronvoll's portrait photographs and the aspect of representation, cf. Spreter 2009; on Tronvoll's early work, cf. Eckhoff 2000. Furthermore, there is a master's thesis by Ida Kierulf on Tronvoll's portrait photographs (with a focus on the series *Double Portraits* from the year 1998), which was published in Bergen in 2001, in Norwegian; see Kierulf 2001.

proposed the term Anthropocene as a new geological epoch influenced predominantly by humans,⁹ and now spills over into art-historical research, raising questions about how an interpenetration of nature and culture might be negotiated artistically.¹⁰ The field of contemporary international photography has been examined by many scholars with regard to such questions, especially in connection with climate change, an issue on which Tronvoll's work assumes no particular stance.¹¹ In relation to Tronvoll's *Svalbard* series, the question concerning an interrelation of nature and culture arises primarily because of the place she chooses as the starting point for a sequence of portrait and landscape shots:

I photograph people in my close surroundings or I look for people in areas that particularly interest me, either, geographically, politically, or socially. In Svalbard I visited the settlement of Ny-Ålesund, a former mining village that today houses international science stations researching subjects such as climate change, meteorology, the aurora borealis, deep sea currents or biological diversity. This place became my stage where I tried to give the most honest and personal insight into contemporary life on Svalbard, without neglecting its fascinating aspects and projections, or its importance on a global scale.¹²

As part of the Arctic, Svalbard is closely linked to the issue of climate change, as is demonstrated by the recent climate change protest, for instance.¹³ Referring to the motif of the iceberg and making comparisons with other contemporary photographic projects on the Arctic, this essay sets out to analyse the extent to which the theme of climate change has a bearing on Tronvoll's series.

Svalbard

The following brief account of Svalbard's history gives an overview of the geographical and historical context of the series. The Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz (c. 1550–1597) is regarded as the discoverer of Svalbard. Taking a naval fleet in search of a northeast passage to India and China, in 1596 he chanced first upon Bear Island (Norwegian: *Bjørnøya*) and then parts of an island that he named Spitsbergen because of its mountainous landscape.¹⁴ It cannot be ruled out that this was actually a rediscovery, as Svalbard could already have been mentioned in Icelandic chronicles dating from 1194 and in the important *Landnámabók* from the thirteenth century, which reports on the

⁹ »Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ›Anthropocene‹ for the current geological epoch.« Crutzen & Stoemer 2000, p. 17.

¹⁰ See for instance the introductory chapter in Dickel 2016; cf. Fehrenbach & Krüger 2016; Adolphs 2009.

¹¹ Some examples may be cited here: cf. Heine 2019; Remmers 2018; Ramade 2016; Hedberg et al. 2014; Faber 2008.

¹² Tronvoll 2016, p. 80.

¹³ On an ice floe north of Svalbard, the young British woman Mya-Rose Craig staged the »most northerly climate protest« of the Fridays for Future climate protection movement on 20.09.2020. Craig was participating in a Greenpeace Arctic expedition, dispatched to study impacts of climate change. Cf. Greenpeace International (25.09.2020): Bird prodigy and young activist leader holds most Northerly strike, *Greenpeace.org*, <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/45255/youth-activist-holds-most-northerly-strike/> (26.09.2020). On the role of the Arctic as a major arena for the visual communication of climate change, cf. Heine 2019, p. 127. I am grateful to Linn Burchert, *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁴ Cf. Arlov 2003, pp. 42–44. For a detailed description of Barentsz's voyage of discovery, see also Lainema & Nurminen 2010, p. 85f.

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land grab of Iceland by predominantly Norwegian settlers around the year 900.¹⁵ However, so far no unequivocal evidence could be found that this refers to present-day Svalbard, and nor could earlier settlement by Russian Pomors be proven beyond doubt.¹⁶ No sooner had Svalbard been discovered at the beginning of the seventeenth century than people took up whaling and walrus catching, hunting for foxes, polar bears, seals and reindeers, until by the mid-nineteenth century a number of whale and animal species had been so dramatically decimated that it was no longer a profitable business.¹⁷ From 1900 onwards, the mining of black coal grew to become Svalbard's most important industry in the twentieth century.¹⁸ Conflicts between different nations over mining rights prompted a necessity for institutional control of the area, and in 1920, after several failed attempts at unification, the Spitsbergen Treaty was concluded, designating the archipelago as Norwegian territory.¹⁹

Tronvoll took the photographs in the *Svalbard* series on the northern west coast around Ny-Ålesund at Kongsfjord (Kings Bay). Ny-Ålesund was originally a mining settlement, where coal was extracted from 1916 onwards by the mining company *Kings Bay Kull Kompani A/S*, whose headquarters were in the Norwegian town of Ålesund.²⁰ A number of serious mining accidents led to the closure of the mine in 1963.²¹ But it was not long before Ny-Ålesund succeeded in adapting structurally. This was acknowledged by Vidar Hisdal already in 1998: »Ny-Ålesund is, nevertheless, the »research metropolis« of Svalbard.«²² The Norwegian Polar Institute commenced research activities on Svalbard in 1968.²³ *Kings Bay AS*, a state-owned enterprise that emerged from the former mining company, now coordinates the numerous research activities and is responsible for the local infrastructure. According to its 2019 annual report, around 150 research projects from ten nations were registered to the Ny-Ålesund base.²⁴ As one of the world's most northerly settlements in the world and northernmost location on Svalbard, Ny-Ålesund also served as the starting point for several expeditions to the North Pole in the 1920s.²⁵ These days, touristic expeditions to Svalbard are taking off as a new and a rapidly growing market.

Besides its importance as an international research base, Svalbard is existentially bound up with anticipating the future: as a precaution in the event of a global catastrophe, since 2008 the Global Seed Vault near the Longyearbyen administrative centre has been safeguarding the seeds of vital crop plants, and hence biodiversity. In 2016, when

¹⁵ Cf. Arlov 2020, p. 11.

¹⁶ Arlov rightly points out the problems of translation in this regard. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 11f.; Hisdal 1998, p. 94; Chekin & Rogatchevski 2020, p. 1.

¹⁷ Historical placenames like Smeerenburg remain as testimonies to the whaling era. Cf. Hisdal 1998, pp. 96–98.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.* p. 98.

¹⁹ Cf. Arlov 2020, p. 9f. Cf. also the critical perspective of Avango & Roberts 2017, p. 127f.

²⁰ Cf. Arlov 2003, p. 269.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 352; Hisdal 1998, p. 100.

²² Hisdal 1998, p. 108.

²³ Cf. *ibid.* p. 109.

²⁴ Cf. p. 3 of the 2019 Annual Report (*Årsberetning Kings Bay AS 2019.pdf*) on the website of *Kings Bay AS*: Elin Bang Tverfjeld et al. (2019): Årsrapport 2019, *Kings Bay Annual reports*, <https://kingsbay.no/kings-bay-as/annual-reports-2> (15.09.2020).

²⁵ Roald Amundsen embarked on his 1925 expedition to the North Pole from Ny-Ålesund, for example. Cf. Hisdal 1998, p. 104f.

melting processes produced a crack in the building of the world's largest seed vault, the conception of Svalbard as a secure location »in the eternal ice« for survival-critical resources was exposed as a cultural construct.²⁶ For the Arctic regions in particular react especially sensitively to global warming, which may in turn impair the entire ecosystem. This brief historical overview shows that the example of Svalbard, as a remote »isolated« microcosm allows to describe different attitudes of human beings to the Arctic: the Arctic is understood, first, as a pristine place that is discovered by humans; second, as a place that is forbidding and difficult to access, the heroic conquest of which promises glory;²⁷ third, as an exploitable material resource; fourth, as an object of scientific research interest; and fifth, as a valuable habitat that needs to be protected and preserved.²⁸ Tronvoll's artistic photographs additionally present the Arctic as an aesthetic motif that testifies to the fascination of this location.

The series *Svalbard* (2014) in the context of Tronvoll's œuvre and in the light of photographic tradition

After studying photography at Parsons School for Design in New York (1989 to 1992), Tronvoll began her work in the early 1990s, initially with studio portraits taken against a monochrome background. Her most notable early work is her series *AGE Women 25-90* (1994), in which she juxtaposed portrait photographs of young women from New York (mainly fellow artists) with those of older women from her home region in Norway, the small village of Svorkmo, south-west of Trondheim. The title alludes to the age range of the women portrayed, from 25 to 90. These portraits of two generations, which are very heterogeneous in effect, are unified by a common format, a dark red background, the lighting and the composition, which shows the women frontally from head to hip, their gaze directed at the viewer. They were followed by two further series in a similar conceptual vein: *Couples* (1996) and *Double Portraits* (1998).

In 1999 came a conceptual turning point: during two stays in Greenland, undertaken on a scholarship from the Norwegian state, Tronvoll developed a new visual language that she has since put to the test in different places. Once again, Tronvoll's interest is primarily in the people. In the series *Isortoq Unartoq* (1999) made in Greenland, however, the photographer looks at them in the surroundings of the landscape for the first time and begins to combine outdoor portraits with landscape views. In this case the embedding of the models in the landscape is to be taken quite literally: Tronvoll photographs the inhabitants of Greenland bathing in the natural hot springs on the island of Unartoq. Only their heads and bare shoulders emerge from the water, evoking comparisons with classical busts. Tronvoll does not apply a rigid compositional scheme in this series, but varies individual and group portraits, the camera angle and the distance from the model. The series is interrupted by some pictures of the landscape which

²⁶ Cf. LaFauci 2018, p. 23f.

²⁷ This refers to the expeditions that started from Svalbard in the 1920s. Annegret Heitmann argues that the expeditions were dominated by ideas of conquering nature, which was imagined as feminine, and demonstrating masculine heroism. Cf. Heitmann 2001.

²⁸ Avango and Roberts argue in their essay that such undertakings – the exploration, cartography and naming of the territory, the extraction of resources, the scientific investigation of the terrain as well as the establishment of national parks – ultimately also serve to legitimize nation-state control and power. Cf. Avango & Roberts 2017.

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show a contrast between the hot springs and cool glacier tongues under a misty sky.²⁹ This new orientation towards the landscape, the depiction of the models in their everyday context in natural daylight, becomes the hallmark of subsequent series, including the *Svalbard* series.

Even though Tronvoll uses the place name as the title of the series, her main focus is directed at the people who live there.³⁰ Thus, the first eleven pictures in the series are single or double portraits of people who live or work on Svalbard. Most of the people only reside on the archipelago temporarily during the summer months, for purposes such as conducting scientific studies. Different generations are depicted: a gaunt, elderly man in front of a pale wooden hut (*Svalbard #4*) or a child sitting somewhat forlornly in front of a house, holding a reindeer antler (*Svalbard #5*); but the majority of the portraits show scientists in work attire at their places of work. They appear to interrupt their work for the photograph, looking into the camera. Tronvoll's portraits give glimpses into Ny-Ålesund life: simple free-standing wooden huts in different colours characterize the building style in the small town. Life happens mainly outdoors. Without exception the people are photographed *en plein air* in natural daylight. As in earlier projects, for the most part Tronvoll shows people photographed frontally and positioned centrally in the picture. The usual format chosen for portraits has a vertical orientation, but here the square or horizontal format is deliberately employed to take in the surrounding landscape, including some spectacular views such as the snow-covered mountains in *Svalbard #3* and *Svalbard #11*. Choosing a camera angle that makes their heads and shoulders project above the line of the horizon, Tronvoll makes her subjects look larger, almost heroic, asserting themselves confidently against the impressive scenery. She also controls the depth of field so that the people, always sharply delineated, stand out against a slightly blurred background.

Elements of her approach – the documentation of various occupational activities, the compositional arrangement of single or double portraits showing the subjects mostly from the front and in eye contact with the photographer, as well as the objective, dispassionate view of the subject – derive from a visual tradition introduced by the photographer August Sander (1876–1964). In his ambitious project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (published in English as »People of the 20th Century«), Sander strove to present a photographic cross-section of the society of his day in Weimar Republic Germany. He took hundreds of black-and-white photographs of people immediately around him as representatives of different social groupings and occupations, and compiled the finished portraits in a total of 45 portfolios, which he assigned to seven categories: »The Farmer«, »The Skilled Tradesman«, »The Woman«, »Classes«, »The Artists«, »The City« and »The Last People«.³¹ The year 1929 saw the publication of *Antlitz der Zeit* (»The Face of Our Time«), a collection of sixty photographic portraits with a preface written by Alfred Döblin. This book was a preview of Sander's more ambitious project, which fortunately even the Nazis, who confiscated

²⁹ On the landscape photographs, cf. Eckhoff 2000, p. 65f.

³⁰ Cf. Tronvoll 2016, p. 80.

³¹ *Der Bauer, Der Handwerker, Die Frau, Die Stände, Die Künstler, Die Großstadt* and *Die letzten Menschen*. On Sander's overall concept, see the table headed »Einteilung des Werkes *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*« (»Structure of the work *People of the 20th Century*«) in the adjunct study volume to the new edition of Sander's oeuvre.

the remaining copies and destroyed all the printing plates in 1936, failed to stop him completing.³² The major work *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* could only be published posthumously.³³ From the late 1950s onwards, Sander's typological portraits, his serial approach and his matter-of-fact rendering of his subjects would inspire the artist couple Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla (1934–2015) Becher, and subsequently their students at the *Kunstakademie Düsseldorf*, known as the Becher class. Its members included such names as Thomas Ruff (*1958) and Thomas Struth (*1954), who produced realistic documentary portrait photographs in colour on large formats. Several previous commentaries on Tronvoll have drawn parallels with Sander and with contemporary positions such as the Becher class or the Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra (*1959), for example.³⁴ Other contemporary positions such as Albrecht Tübke (*1971) could be added to this list. In contrast to Sander, though, Tronvoll is neither interested in showing a representative cross-section of Ny-Ålesund's population, nor indeed in the people portrayed as »types«. She does not assign her individual portraits to any categories. The occupations of the individuals in her portraits are not her foremost concern, as is clear from the fact that, unlike Sander, she does not mention them in the image title. Unlike Struth or Dijkstra, who sometimes note the names of their models and the location and date in the picture caption, Tronvoll does not disclose these details. She is far more concerned with directly conveying the personal impressions she collects in different places around the world. Since the photographs show only a section of the place where they were taken, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the geographical location of the motifs – the series contains no panoramic shots of the landscape, for example – the work retains what Tronvoll herself calls a poetic tone.³⁵

In front of the camera lens

For the present article, thanks to the support of the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø it was possible to find out the names of quite a number of the subjects portrayed, and subsequently to interview them and gather stories about the making of the series.³⁶ To honour Tronvoll's conceptual decision to keep the work open, let it be emphasized at this juncture that the following background information is not a component of the work, but has been researched for scholarly purposes since it contributes to an understanding of the artistic approach. Only with reliable knowledge of which occupations the depicted individuals are engaged in, and in which circumstances or locations the portraits were taken, is it possible to describe the photographs properly. The subjects' accounts also attest that the photographs developed out of real situations and were not staged, for example.

³² See the reprint of the book *Antlitz der Zeit* (»Face of our Time«): Sander 2003.

³³ Cf. Lange 2001, p. 8.

³⁴ See for instance Dijkstra's series of *Beach Portraits* of young people on European and US beaches, taken in the 1990s. Cf. Elliott 2009, p. 24; Spreter 2009, p. 15f.; Eckhoff 2000, p. 66–68.

³⁵ Mette Tronvoll in a conversation with the author on 29.09.2020.

³⁶ My sincere thanks to Ann Kristin Balto, Per Kyrre Reymert and Geir Wing Gabrielsen at the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø for supplying these details.

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Methodologically, then, the interviews are an important source that sheds light on the motifs and on the process that gave rise to the photographs. The subjects' perceptions of the circumstances in which the pictures were taken enrich the present study with an additional perspective on Tronvoll's series.



Ill. 2: Mette Tronvoll: Svalbard #11, 2014, C-print, 80 x 97.8 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

These inquiries revealed that – in keeping with the location's international profile – Tronvoll photographed people of different disciplines and nationalities, including researchers from the *Institut polaire français Paul-Émile Victor* (IPEV) (*Svalbard* #1 and #12), the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) (*Svalbard* #7) and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) (*Svalbard* #8), the Japanese National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) (*Svalbard* #9 and #10) and the head of the Franco-German research base AWIPEV (*Svalbard* #2).³⁷ The series also features two field inspectors from the *Syssemmannen* (*Svalbard* #6), the governor of Svalbard,

who are responsible for overseeing compliance with the statutory regulations. The photograph of these two was taken in the former settlement of Ny-London on the now uninhabited island of Blomstrandhalvøya, located off Ny-Ålesund in the Kongsfjord.³⁸ The portrait of a miner in front of snow-covered mountains was not taken in Ny-Ålesund, but near Longyearbyen (*Svalbard* #3).³⁹ In this knee-length portrait, his head and shoulders tower over the expansive scenic backdrop. His clean work clothes suggest that the picture was taken before descending the pit. Other portraits by Tronvoll show a former miner who returned to Ny-Ålesund for a summer stay (*Svalbard* #4), and her own son in front of the hut that served as accommodation for the two of them and can be used by artists for project visits (*Svalbard* #5).⁴⁰ *Svalbard* #11 shows the only woman in the series, an English glaciologist who was then studying at the world's northernmost university, the University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS) in Longyearbyen

³⁷ Details according to Ann Kristin Balto, Per Kyrre Reymert and Geir Wing Gabrielsen at the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø (information by email to the author on 18.09.2020 and 21.09.2020).

³⁸ A marble quarry was operated in Ny-London by the English Northern Exploration Company Ltd. for the brief period from 1911 to 1920. Remains of buildings and equipment left behind in situ (see, for example, the rusty locomotive in the background of the picture) now constitute an important historical cultural site in Svalbard. Cf. Øystein Overrein (2015): London (Peirsonhamna) [78° 57' N 12° 00' E], *Norwegian Polar Institute. Cruise handbook for Svalbard*, <http://cruise-handbook.npolar.no/en/kongsfjorden/london-peirsonhamna.html> (23.09.2020).

³⁹ The source of this information was an artist presentation given by Mette Tronvoll on 29.01.2021 as part of the digital workshop *Mediating the Arctic and the North. Contexts, agents, distributions* at the *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to Mette Tronvoll for this information (conversation on 29.09.2020).

(ill. 2). Self-assured, hands thrust into her trouser pockets, the slim young woman stands at the centre of the horizontally oriented photograph, facing the viewer. Behind her a snow-covered slope ascends steeply to the right, and behind that a craggy, dark mountain ridge rises up against a brilliant blue sky. Tronvoll sets the camera angle such that the woman's head and shoulders stand proud of the impressive scenery while she directs a steady, somewhat downward gaze at the viewer. In her presence and frontality she is a stable counterpoint to the movement brought into the composition by the diagonal axes of the slope and the rock outcrop in the middle ground. The elevated position on the slope, the fine weather and the woman's sporting apparel put one in mind of Alpine sports. Her relationship with the arctic landscape seems permeated with delight in nature and the possibilities for sporting pursuits and the recreation they offer. The underrepresentation of women in Tronvoll's series might awaken the impression that confirms the Arctic's traditional image as a male-dominated region.⁴¹ Since Tronvoll portrays natural scientists in particular, the cliché of the natural sciences as a men-only research domain might also come to mind. In fact, Svalbard has a relatively balanced gender ratio. According to the Norwegian statistical office, in mid-2020 almost as many men as women were living in the settlements of Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund.⁴² In the period in which the series was created, women were slightly underrepresented, making up 42 % of Svalbard's total population.⁴³

Mette Tronvoll's artistic strategy

Tronvoll's artistic strategy can be described as project-based. Her project is defined on the basis of her selected location, where she first spends a period of time to gain an impression of the setting in question. For *Mongolia* (2006), a series about nomads in Mongolia, Tronvoll spent several weeks travelling with nomads across the Gobi desert.⁴⁴ Following a documentary approach, the place where the series is produced usually lends its name to the title, as is the case for *Svalbard*. A work's dating, however, need not necessarily coincide with the date the photograph was taken. For Tronvoll, the conception of a photographic series entails a concrete and structured set of actions: much like a scientific research project, the necessary groundwork for a series of this nature involves research and preparation; the planning phase prior to the *Svalbard* series took two years. For example, one essential component of preparation is the choice of suitable technical equipment, because in this case it had to withstand the extreme climatic conditions of the Arctic. Tronvoll herself also had to adapt to the situation on Svalbard. Potential threats such as polar bears or nesting birds precluded solo exploration of the area with her camera. Her photographs

⁴¹ On the polar region as a gender-coded space, see Eglinger 2010, p. 123; cf. Heitmann 2003, p. 112f.; cf. Bloom 1993.

⁴² For the two settlements of Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund at the beginning of July 2020, Statistics Norway reported 1,302 men and 1,115 women in total. Cf. the table *Population in the Norwegian settlements of Svalbard, by sex and age*, published by Statistics Norway on 24.09.2013, cf. Population of Svalbard, 1 July 2013, *Statistisk sentralbyrå*, <https://www.ssb.no/en/befsvsvalbard> (09.02.2021).

⁴³ In mid-2013, a total of 1,271 men and 924 women were living on Svalbard, which corresponds to a 58 % male share of the total population. Cf. the table *Population in the Norwegian settlements of Svalbard, by sex and age*, published by Statistics Norway on 24.09.2013, cf. Population of Svalbard, 1 July 2013, *Statistisk sentralbyrå*, <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/befsvsvalbard/halvaar/2013-09-24> (09.02.2021).

⁴⁴ Cf. Spreter 2009, p. 13.

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are the product of advance planning processes such as these, and of learning beforehand about the place and its history and conditions. Due to the analogue photographic technique, Tronvoll only saw the resulting images after her return from Svalbard. In a multistage editing process, she selected what she considered a coherent series from the visual material produced – understanding the sequence of images not as a form of narrative but rather as the melody of a musical composition.⁴⁵

Portraiture for Tronvoll is first and foremost a personal encounter which she calls »an exchange, to communicate«.⁴⁶ »The encounter between the person being photographed and myself must unfold, the process must take place. The process means being involved, being fully present in the moments during photography, sharing a mutual experience.«⁴⁷ This encounter is etched into the photographs, from which it is plain to see that this is not a fleeting moment, captured in passing, but a moment of stillness, of mutual attention. In the vast majority of the portraits, the subjects are looking straight at the camera, fully aware that they are being photographed. They seem relaxed and grounded; they exude calmness and self-confidence. Just as the photograph bears witness to the encounter that took place between the photographer and the model, so can this encounter be re-enacted between the subject and the viewer, because the format of the photographic print shows the people almost life-sized and the vantage point is chosen so that the subject meets the viewer »at eye level«. »At eye level« is also the title of an essay by Stephanie von Spreter, in which she gives the dignified form of Tronvoll's portraits particular emphasis, in clear contradiction of other opinions which claimed to discern an ethnographic gaze in Tronvoll's various series.⁴⁸

Another practice that dignifies the form of Tronvoll's portraits is that the photographer always maintains a certain distance from the people portrayed, and they in turn, by looking into the camera, signal their consent to being photographed and observed. Contrary to the classical function of a portrait in the sense of *memoria*, however, these are »anonymous portraits« since Tronvoll does not disclose the identity of those portrayed. She seems instead to conceive of the portraits as part of a personal view of Svalbard, the place, which just happens to be populated by certain people, rather than as autonomous portraits aimed at rendering specific individuals mimetically.

»I am a very slow worker. I need a lot of time to approach. But when I am working, I am extremely fast.«⁴⁹ Tronvoll thinks it important to take time over establishing a rapport with the people she wants to photograph and to ensure the situation is relaxed while the pictures are taken.⁵⁰ Sveinn Are Hanssen, a biologist at the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA), recalls the circumstances in which *Svalbard #7* was taken on the island of Blomstrandhalvøya:

⁴⁵ The source of this information was an artist presentation given by Mette Tronvoll on 29.01.2021 as part of the digital workshop *Mediating the Arctic and the North. Contexts, agents, distributions* at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

⁴⁶ Mette Tronvoll, in: Winzen 2000c, p. 50.

⁴⁷ Tronvoll 2016, p. 80.

⁴⁸ Cf. Spreter 2009, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Mette Tronvoll, in: Winzen 2000c, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Cf. Spreter 2009, pp. 11f.

She [Tronvoll] approached me a couple of days before, asking if she could join us in the field. It was ok with me and my team, and so she followed us for one day at work. She did not direct me regarding the pose or anything; we had just caught the bird and I was returning to my colleagues with it for ringing, sampling and measurement. I just stopped for a minute, holding the bird, and she took the picture.⁵¹



Ill. 3: Mette Tronvoll: *Svalbard #7*, 2014, C-print, 80 x 97.8 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

The landscape-format photograph (ill. 3) depicts Hanssen as a half-length figure standing centrally, facing the camera. Behind him, sloping downward to the right is a stony hill with patches of moss. His head, slightly tilted, is just above the line of the horizon, which abuts a bright blue sky streaked with bands of light cloud. In the background on the right, snow-covered mountains tower above the fjord. Hanssen's eyes are on the bird he is gently cradling with both hands at chest height, a Long-tailed Skua (*Stercorarius longicaudus*). The bird seems to have his full attention. His gaze conveys respect, almost affection for his living research object.⁵² While other images in the series, such as the picture of the two researchers taking snow samples (*Svalbard #1*), document the researchers' attempt to penetrate nature scientifically, the intimate moment recorded in the photograph between Hanssen and the bird hints at an affective devotion to nature and a recognition of its fragility. Even though the picture itself was taken in a fraction of a second, Tronvoll captures a characteristic impression of the researchers' work, thanks to the time she spent with them beforehand. Tronvoll develops a method of capturing a situation and translating it into a

⁵¹ Sveinn Are Hanssen in an email to the author (22.09.2020).

⁵² The picture was taken in the summer of 2012. Hanssen was researching various seabird species on Svalbard at the time. These included processes such as surveying population numbers, determining threats to the birds from such factors as climate change, pollutants or predators, and tracking the birds' migration routes with the help of geolocators (information from Sveinn Are Hanssen by email to the author, 22.09.2020). Tronvoll reports that Hanssen has come to know particular birds for as long as ten years in some cases, as they return to the same nesting site on Svalbard every year (conversation with the author on 29.09.2020).

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photographic image which, despite its selective nature, says something quintessential about the individual observed. The moment that Tronvoll picks here is neither a dynamic moment of capture nor a moment of concrete research activity (such as surveying); it is a moment she has seized on, in between these processes, that tells its own story about the appreciative concentration that characterizes the researcher's interaction with the natural environment.



Ill. 4: Mette Tronvoll: Svalbard #2, 2014, C-print, 80 x 80 cm;
Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

In some cases, the subject demands that the photograph be taken very quickly. *Svalbard #2* shows the young Swiss researcher Sebastian Barrault holding a large white weather balloon in his left hand (ill. 4). Barrault reports that the photograph was taken at the balloon hall beside the Atmospheric Observatory of the AWIPEV research base.⁵³ As head of the research station at the time, Barrault's duties included releasing a helium-filled weather balloon into the atmosphere every day at around 12 noon (UTC). The box fastened to the balloon, which Barrault is holding in his right hand, measures humidity, temperature and air pressure at different altitudes by means of sensors, and transmits the balloon's position at any given time to the station via an antenna. The time window in which

the photo had to be taken was a maximum of thirty minutes once Barrault had received the green light from air traffic control at Longyearbyen airport, to be sure that the balloon would not collide with an aircraft. Barrault still has an exact memory of Tronvoll's one and only stipulation for the photograph: »I was asked not to smile. That I do remember well.«⁵⁴ Indeed, the facial expressions of all the subjects in this series and most of Tronvoll's other

⁵³ Sebastien Barrault in an email to the author on 28.09.2020.

⁵⁴ Sebastien Barrault in an email to the author on 28.09.2020.

works can be described as neutral, and yet much can seemingly be inferred from these looks about the emotional disposition of the people pictured.

In the middle of the picture *Svalbard #8* (ill. 5) a young man is standing in the water.⁵⁵ He is wearing a bright orange survival suit; the water, which appears to reflect the grey colour of the overcast sky, comes up to his waist. His long, somewhat uncombed blond hair falls across his face. He is looking into the camera, with his hands in the water. Behind him, a glacier is carving its way through snow-covered mountains to the fjord. Nevertheless, the young man is neither a marine biologist nor a glaciologist, as might be assumed. Vegard Sandøy Bråthen was a biology student



Ill. 5: Mette Tronvoll: *Svalbard #8*, 2014, C-print, 80 x 97.8 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. When the picture was taken, he was spending his second summer on Svalbard to complete field research on seabirds for his master's thesis in animal physiology. Together with colleagues he was taking samples from a large colony of Black-legged Kittiwakes which were nesting on steep cliffs on Blomstrandhalvøya, on the far side of the fjord. Tronvoll got to know the biologists in Ny-Ålesund and accompanied them one day to this cliff populated with countless birds, which she also captured for the series (*Svalbard #18*). Bråthen vividly describes the circumstances in which the picture came about:

⁵⁵ This could almost be described as a self-quotation: a parallel emerges with Tronvoll's series *Isortoq Unartoq* (1999), in which she photographed people in the hot natural springs of Greenland, albeit with a marked difference in temperature.

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Waiting for birds, we would let our eyes rest on the water below us and the glacier on the other side, which was surging. Stable glaciers can be quite grey and chilling to look at in summer, while a surging glacier is full of cracks and sounds and have this beautiful, clear, blue and white colour. Every now and then, a large iceberg would fall off into the sea with the sound of a large explosion, causing a thousand birds to fly off their nests above us; twenty minutes later, the beach would get hit by a tsunami. Back at the boat, the perspective changed and the glacier turned into a wall in front of us. This was the place where we were most vulnerable. Along with the risk of a tsunami, this is a common crossing point for polar bears getting in and out of the fjord. In a way, we tried to control nature while we were up on our cliff; down on the beach, we were a part of it.

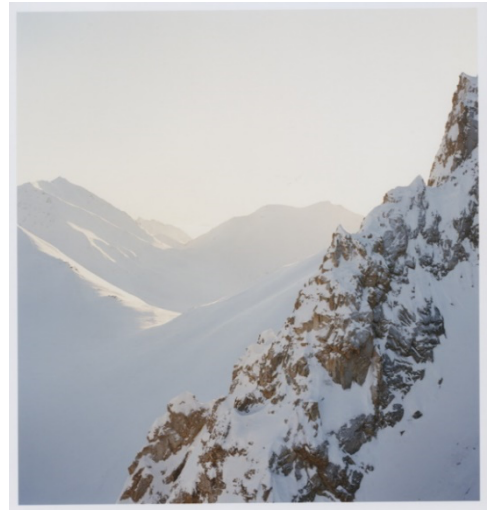
Mette was fascinated by the pale blue and grey look of the mixed sea- and meltwater full of sediments, with the clear glacier in the distance, and us in our orange survival suits, half-submerged in the water, bringing the boat closer to the beach so that we could get on board. It was our daily routine. After some time in the field, we did not bother much about shaving in the mornings, or about doing our hair. She asked us to stay like that: casual, half way into the water in front of the glacier – in direct coexistence with the elements – and she took our portraits with her analogue camera, herself with the water above her knees.⁵⁶

This account conveys an impression of the great significance of the natural environment in the researchers' work, how precisely they perceive it and conscious of how they themselves relate to it. Both knowing the fragility of one's own existence in this extreme location and differentiating between alternate perspectives that arise from vantage points at different heights within the landscape testify to a reflected relationship with the environment. Tronvoll chose a moment which could express this relationship in a visual way. Bråthen's precise description of various sensory aspects of the landscape, such as colour values or sounds coming from the glacier, points to an aspect that is emphasized in the photograph by the researcher's unusual position in the middle of the water: the body's direct exposure to the natural elements. At the same time the photograph harks back to a traditional hero image, reminiscent of intrepid polar explorers, when Bråthen immerses his hands in what must be ice-cold water without losing his impassive composure.

⁵⁶ Vegard Sandøy Bråthen in an email to the author (23.09.2020).



Ill. 6: Mette Tronvoll: Svalbard #14, 2014, C-print, 80 x 97.8 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.



Ill. 7: Mette Tronvoll: Svalbard #13, 2014, C-print, 80 x 80 cm; Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

On the landscape photographs

The *Svalbard* series combines two perspectives: a portrait series of the people living there, and views of the extraordinary Arctic landscape. The eleven portraits with which the series begins are followed by the photograph of a slightly sloping snow field with a gently rounded, snow-covered rock looming up behind it. The two small dots in the distance can be identified as a back view of the two researchers from the image *Svalbard #1*, who are taking snow samples. The series is turning away from the people and letting nature take centre stage. In the landscape photographs, the sublime scenery makes its presence felt. High, snow-covered mountain peaks in the sunlight (*Svalbard #13*); steep scree slopes with an infinitely expansive blue sea of clouds as a backdrop (*Svalbard #14*). It is noticeable that Tronvoll brings out the abstract relations between the landscape features in her photographs; for instance, by fitting definitive lines for the image very precisely into the frame. For example, in *Svalbard #14* (ill. 6) the horizon is aligned on the picture's central axis while the diagonal of the stony slope in the foreground, cutting through the picture, ends exactly in the bottom right corner of the photograph. In keeping with the understanding of the »landscape« as a mentally defined natural entity of nature, which in human perception is removed from the context of nature⁵⁷ with an eye for proportions, Tronvoll transposes the scenery she has found into the balanced, square picture format. She uses classic compositional elements from painting, such as *repoussoir*⁵⁸ which accentuates the sense of depth in the picture. In *Svalbard #13*, for example, she lets the crevassed flank of a massif rise abruptly in the foreground, giving prominence to its materiality (ill. 7). The staggered, snow-covered mountains retreating into the distance are brightly lit by the sun until they get lost in the white of the sky. This view, which

⁵⁷ Dickel 2016, p. 111, translated by Deborah Shannon.

⁵⁸ The term *repoussoir* denotes objects or figures placed in the foreground of the picture which, due to their size and mostly dark colouring, heighten the impression of spatial depth.

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represents the Arctic in line with common imaginaries as an inhospitable region not fully inhabited or used by human beings, really is from terrain that is out of bounds for people: Tronvoll took the picture on Zeppelin Mountain, where an observatory belonging to the Norwegian Polar Institute is sited. Very few researchers are permitted to set foot on it, which is why the photographer herself was long denied access.⁵⁹ The series closes with two scenes: Five people exploring a rugged, dark scree field, three of them disappearing some distance away as the mist closes in (*Svalbard #19*). The last picture *Svalbard #20* shows a site strewn with rubble, timbers and rusty barrels testifying to the extraction of resources even in the world's most remote places.⁶⁰ Tronvoll subverts the topos of the Arctic as a wild, untouched place when she, in turn, juxtaposes it with images of landscapes like this one, etched with clear traces of human activity. It can be argued that with regard to imaginaries of the Arctic, Tronvoll's photograph sequence plays with common expectations about it, which she partly affirms, as in the heroic image of the polar researcher or the topos of the sublime North (*Svalbard #8* and *#13*), yet partly questions by offering alternative portrayals. For instance, the photographs *Svalbard #7* and *Svalbard #9*, taken in the summer, show snow-free, moss-covered terrain beneath a clear blue sky, overturning the cliché of the pure white Arctic. Tronvoll presents different sides of the Arctic landscape; on the one hand sublime scenery, and on the other hand, unusual views which contradict the usual representation of this region in an attempt to subvert a conception that has become entrenched through the use of cliché.

It is also interesting to consider what we do *not* see in Tronvoll's photographs. For example, we do not see the research stations, the large quay at Ny-Ålesund, the world's most northerly post office or Svalbard's emblematic polar bears, which are repeatedly pictured in material produced for touristic purposes. Tourist highlights of that kind are of no interest to Tronvoll. Stephanie von Spreter has described Tronvoll's landscape photographs as »extended portraiture«,⁶¹ which primarily tell a story about the people photographed. Applying this observation by Spreter to the *Svalbard* series, what can be seen from the images is how strongly determinative the Arctic landscape is for the people who live there. Despite the extreme conditions of the place, Tronvoll shows the people in harmony with their natural environment and interacting with it scientifically.

The motif of the iceberg in contemporary photography

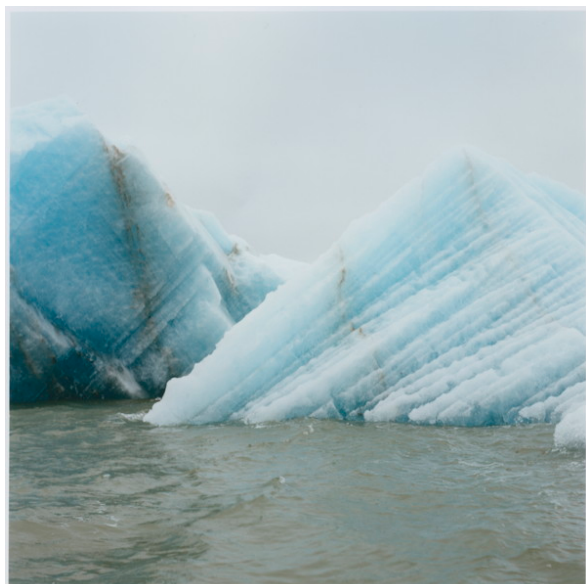
Within the landscape photographs of the *Svalbard* series, there is a striking, short and self-contained sequence of three consecutive pictures (*Svalbard #15–#17*), which show variations on the motif of the iceberg. There is a discernible momentum to this »series within a series« in which the photographer approaches the subject step by step; zooms in on it, so to speak. *Svalbard #15* shows a tilted iceberg protruding from the sea; the background is recognisably a coastline. The following photograph shows a section of an ice formation from a few metres away (ill. 8).

⁵⁹ Mette Tronvoll in a conversation with the author on 29.09.2020.

⁶⁰ These are remains of the devastating mining accident in Ny-Ålesund in 1962, which killed 21 people and led to the closure of the mine. The mining relics are now conserved as historical heritage. Cf. Avango & Roberts 2017, p. 134f.

⁶¹ Spreter 2009, p. 12.

The third photograph, *Svalbard #17*, focuses on the fissured structure of an iceberg up close. Here the blue colouring of the ice appears notably darker.



Ill. 8: Mette Tronvoll: *Svalbard #16*, 2014, C-print, 80 x 80 cm
Photo credit: © VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2021; Mette Tronvoll.

Tronvoll's artistic treatment of the iceberg motif differs markedly from the depiction and semantics of this motif in other contemporary photography projects. From an art-historical perspective, one may be reminded of romantic depictions of sublime nature, as in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Das Eismeer* (1823/24), although today the drifting iceberg and the polar landscape are more established as visual symbols of climate change.⁶² Tronvoll's fascination with icebergs is shared by the Finnish photographer Tiina Itkonen (*1968), who finds her photographic motifs during repeated stays in Greenland, which have allowed her to observe effects of global warming on the Arctic ice ever since the mid-1990s.⁶³ Itkonen's photographs of icebergs, which erupt

from the sea like bizarre sculptures, convey the fragile beauty of the Arctic.⁶⁴ For her work series *Iceberg Gallery*⁶⁵ (2005–2007), she assembles landscape-format colour photographs of ice formations, usually against a dramatic, dark sky. Icebergs off the coast of Greenland are also a motif for the German photographer Olaf Otto Becker (*1959). As the titles for his photographs in the series *Broken Line* (Greenland 2003–2006), he notes the exact geographical coordinates of the place where the picture was taken, which allow him, or indeed the viewer, to return to the same position and assess whether changes have occurred.⁶⁶ In the work of both Itkonen and Becker, aesthetic photographs bring the impacts of climate change on the arctic regions to public attention. The young Swiss artist Julian Charrière (*1987) – a student of the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson – strikes a distinctly ironic tone in his three-part work *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories* (2013).⁶⁷ His photographs show the artist standing on an iceberg in the Arctic Ocean off Iceland, attempting to melt it with a gas torch.⁶⁸

⁶² Cf. Heine 2019, p. 127, 129; Remmers 2018, p. 264.

⁶³ Cf. the short text on Tiina Itkonen in Broeker 2009, p. 65.

⁶⁴ Itkonen took part in the touring exhibition *Vanishing ice. Alpine and polar landscapes in art, 1775–2012*, which was initiated in 2013 by the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham in the USA. A dedicated website set up to document this exhibition bears the title *Vanishing ice: Artists on the front line of global climate change*, <http://vanishingice.org> (15.12.2021).

⁶⁵ The work series can be seen on Tiina Itkonen's Internet presence: *Tiina Itkonen*, <http://tiinaitkonen.com/works/iceberg-gallery-2005-2007/> (18.09.2020).

⁶⁶ Cf. Schaden 2007, p. 143.

⁶⁷ The work can be viewed on Julian Charrière's internet presence: *Julian Charrière*, <http://julian-charriere.net/projects/the-blue-fossil-entropic-stories> (24.09.2020).

⁶⁸ Cf. Franze 2014, p. 67. They document a performance by Charrière that lasted eight hours.

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The Swedish photographer Tyrone Martinsson (*1967), who wrote his doctoral thesis on photographic history, makes visual comparisons of Arctic ice formations in their historical and present-day states, using photography as his medium. He does not base his process on geographical coordinates, however, but on archive material – historical photographs and graphic works showing glaciers on Svalbard, dating back to the early 19th century. Working with Per Holmlund, an expert in glaciology, he identifies the place from which the historical pictures were produced.⁶⁹ Martinsson seeks out these places and takes a rephotograph, which repeats the composition of the historical original. His aim is to establish a concrete basis for visual comparisons, from which the current state of the glacier can be compared with the historical image.⁷⁰ This project, which Martinsson has been working on since 2011, grew out of a scholarly documentary approach and falls within the field of environmental re-photography.⁷¹ Martinsson arranges all the retrieved images of a glacier in chronological order and appends his own photographs, producing a kind of timeline that makes the retreat of the glacier visible in the manner of a cinematic sequence. Images that once served to document polar expeditions or as aids to the cartography of Svalbard now take on a new function as visual evidence of climate change. It is a demonstration of how views of the Arctic have changed since the 19th century.

Compared with these positions, it is evident that Tronvoll's photographs bring other aspects to the fore, chiefly formal characteristics of the object, such as the colour, shape and structure of the icebergs. She is not interested either in juxtaposing her work with historical photographs or in documenting the exact place or time that the photograph was taken. The images speak for themselves. Clearly the photographer does not associate direct political messages about climate change with them – and this is equally true of the photographs of glaciers in the series *Isortoq Unartoq* (1999).⁷² For Tronvoll, the iceberg remains an aesthetic landscape formation which characterizes the locality, and belongs in her series for that reason. Even if the landscape in other images, such as *Svalbard #13* and *#14*, has an element of the sublime, the photographs of the icebergs under overcast skies are not especially dramatic. Without reference points of any kind, the scale of the pictorial elements is unknown. Tronvoll is not showcasing the sublime. The lurking danger posed by an iceberg, which in Friedrich's painting is manifested in the shipwreck crushed by ice floes, is left to be imagined only. Because of the fact that the parts of icebergs below the surface of the water are substantially larger than the part visible above it, they are very dangerous to approach in case they flip over. Tronvoll got as close as possible to the icebergs in a boat (the photographs were taken with an 80mm lens)⁷³ yet the pictures convey no tangible sense of danger; more fascinating by far are the different structures and colour tones of the icebergs, which are firmly anchored in the format by the narrow field of view.

⁶⁹ The source of this information was a conversation between Tyrone Martinsson and the author on 23.10.2019.

⁷⁰ For further information, cf. Martinsson 2021.

⁷¹ Cf. Klett & Martinsson 2017, p. 119.

⁷² In the foreword to the catalogue, the editors observe that Tronvoll's photographs from Greenland »do not fall into the category of natural science, nor are they proof of the so-called ecological crisis« and proceed to pose the rhetorical question: »Has the artist therefore gone completely off the subject?«, to which their answer is a clear »not at all« (Winzen 2000b, p. 5).

⁷³ Mette Tronvoll in a conversation with the author on 29.09.2020.

Summary

The large-format, analogue colour photographs of the twenty-part picture series *Svalbard* (2014) show portrait and landscape photographs from the area around the Ny-Ålesund research base. Tronvoll's project-based strategy requires both planning and time, in order to meet all the prerequisites for taking the picture in the given situation and to establish contact with the people she wishes to photograph. In the case of the *Svalbard* series these are mainly researchers, whom Tronvoll captures on film as they go about their professional activities in the Arctic landscape. The background information gathered for this article and the recollections of the people portrayed give an insight into the production process of the series as well as the choice of motifs. For the photographs, Tronvoll always accompanied the researchers for some time prior to finding the right moment to take her pictures and, via that medium, to communicate something quintessential about what she observed. As a comparison with other contemporary photographers and their treatment of the iceberg motif shows, Tronvoll takes an original position by not making the issue of climate change central to her project. In fact, Tronvoll's artistic work focuses on human beings and on documenting the circumstances in which they live and work under the extreme conditions found on Svalbard. Nevertheless, the work *Svalbard* does give an insight into the work of scientists gathering data for the purpose of climate and Arctic research, and duly evokes an image of the Arctic as a research laboratory. With deliberate attention to formal aspects such as light, colour and structure, Tronvoll captures the interplay between humans and the Arctic on Svalbard, revealing not only different kinds of human-nature relationships but also different aspects of the Arctic landscape. In playing with common expectations about the representation of the Arctic, at times Tronvoll subverts established clichés. Her personal perspective on this special place brings an additional dimension to existing visual discourses on the Arctic. Subsequent studies might pursue the aspect of the relationship between humans and nature in the Arctic by considering Tronvoll's photo series *Isortoq Unartoq*, perhaps in comparison with Tiina Itkonen's Greenland photographs. They might also draw comparisons with other photographers, such as the Icelandic Ragnar Axelsson (*1958), which would be likely to underline the undramatic yet personal quality of Tronvoll's photographic encounters in the Arctic ice.

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