



Chris Jordan: Denali Denial, 2006, inkjet print, 60 by 75 inches. Image is composed of 23,000 altered and unaltered GMC Yukon Denali SUV logos.

# Global Warnings

BY SUZAN BOETTGER

“Melting Ice / A Hot Topic” proclaims the name of the exhibition subtitled “Envisioning Change,” which opened in Oslo last June, traveled to Brussels and Monaco, and opened recently at Chicago’s Field Museum. Indeed, after being shocked by the devastation wrought by the Sumatra Tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, educated by Al Gore’s film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and entertained by Live Earth benefit concerts, the public is increasingly confronted with references to disturbed ecosystems and their source in human-induced emissions, carbon and otherwise. Last

fall, Bill McKibben began an article in the *New York Review of* declaring, “During the past year, momentum has finally begun for taking action against global warming by putting limits on emissions and then reducing them.”<sup>1</sup> Environmentalist ideals—making construction and consumption carbon-neutral and seeking natural, organic and local food; and recycling what whenever—have turned both public discourse and marketing. Now, as declared by a Chevrolet advertisement for a gasol and emissions-free hydrogen fuel cell, “Eco Takes Center St.

**Today there is a new version of “artist as guide to distant terrains”—akin to the 19th century’s Church, Heade and Bierstadt.**



Robert Bateman: Antarctic Evening—Humpback Whales, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 60 inches. Collection Richard Vencill Smith. Courtesy Natural World Museum, San Francisco.

stop at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, the show evoked a compilation of science-fair projects by New Age inventors—more clever engineering than visual dynamics. The accompanying book is a good substitute for seeing the work.

Last November, the PBS series “Art 21” jumped on the bandwagon.<sup>5</sup> An episode of the program was titled “Ecology,” seemingly more for topicality than precision. Featuring Robert Adams, Mark Dion, Inigo Mangano-Ovalle and Ursula von Rydingsvard, it showed work related to natural forces. But only Dion’s public-art greenhouse in Seattle, *Neukom Vivarium*, which keeps alive a fallen tree and its botanical milieu, directly references ecological systems.<sup>7</sup> Yet Dion’s construction implies that our universe will need to retreat within such protected environments to survive.

Significantly, it was two smaller museums, peripheral to the art world, that recently gathered large numbers of artists working on environmental issues to shape notable, truly topical exhibitions. “Melting Ice” was organized by San Francisco’s Natural World Museum. Founded in 2004 and dedicated to presenting art “through innovative programs to inspire and engage the public in environmental awareness and action,” this museum has a small collection in storage; it does not maintain its own exhibition space. Many of its shows, including this one, have been organized in partnership with the United Nations Environment Program to celebrate World Environment Day (June 5) and were presented internationally.<sup>8</sup> Bay Area Independent curator Randy Jayne

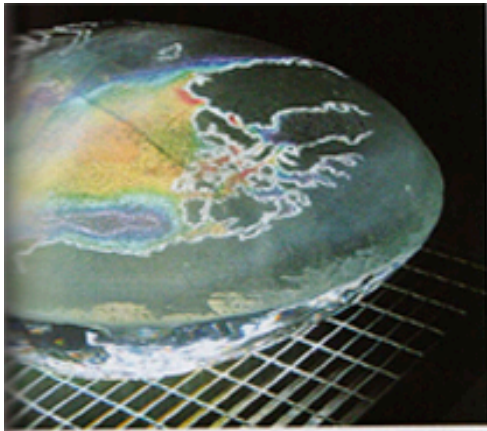
Rosenberg selected the work for “Melting Ice” and for the partnership’s group exhibition “Unlearning Intolerance: Art Changing Attitudes Toward the Environment,” which will be shown at the United Nations in May and June [see Exhibitions sidebar].

Concurrently on view last fall in Boulder, Colo., was “Weather Report Art and Climate Change,” initiated by the local group EcoArts in cooperation with the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, and shown there and around the city.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition had the major advantage of being guest-curated by long-active and deeply informed art critic Lucy R. Lippard. The many works responding to local issues and sites made it impossible for the show to tour. [Pieces by about a quarter of the artists, in some cases the same works, will soon be installed at Deutsche Bank, New York, in a show it inspired, “Feeling the Heat.” See Exhibitions sidebar.] The number of participants in these two exhibitions—43 artists or artist groups for “Melting Ice” and 51 in “Weather Report,” with only a few overlaps—demonstrates that environmental degradation is definitely influencing artistic production. In fact, the interest goes back almost 40 years, to when New York’s John Gibson Gallery mounted “Ecologic Art” (May 17-June 28, 1969), with scale models by Christo, Peter Hutchinson, Will Insley and Claes Oldenburg, and drawings by Carl Andre, Christo, Jan Dibbets, Richard Long, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris and “Bob” Smithson (as the gallery identified him). That was the first, and very loose, use of “ecology” in an exhibition title; the work, while engaging spatial environments, was certainly not thematically ecological. That came later.<sup>10</sup>

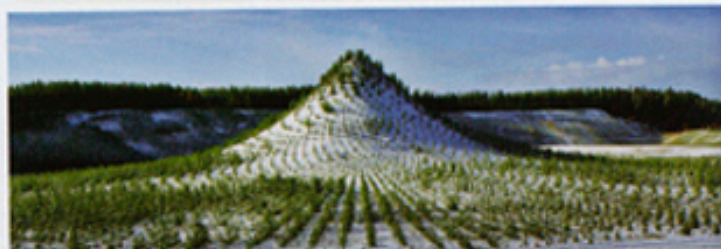
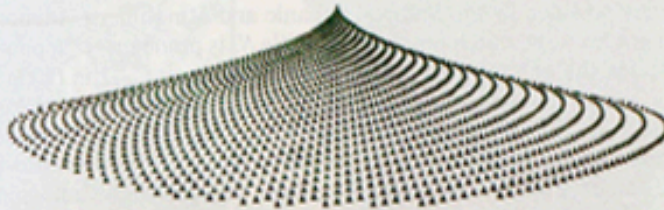
In Brussels last fall, the second stop for “Melting Ice” was the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts (originally the Palais des Beaux-Arts, for which BOZAR is an abbreviated homonym). The sprawling 1928 structure by the innovative Belgian designer Victor Horta accommodates adventurous programming of music, drama and dance in several theaters; it also houses exhibition spaces and a film museum. By presenting the exhibition at BOZAR’s locale on the “Mont des Arts” (the Museum of Fine Arts is nearby), the organizers got a prestigious venue in the heart of the European Union’s administrative capital city.

Xavier Cortada: The Markers, 51 colored flags along 500 meters of the moving ice sheet that covers the South Pole, performance documented in video, 2007.





In "Melting Ice," New Zealand artist David Trubridge represents, via laser-cut zigzags in steel panels, the process of warming sea ice breaking up.



Above, Agnes Denes: *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years, Ylöjärvi, Finland. Top, original design, 1983; Bottom, winter 2001.*



Left, top to bottom: *Lillian Ball: 66 Degrees, 32 Minutes, 50 Years, 2007, map morph animations projected on ice (in photo) or ice water (as exhibited).*

*The Yes Men: Exxon Vivoleum, 2007, video.*

*Arca Rahmani: Mississippi 2040, from the series "Trigger Points, Tipping Points," 2007, digital print, 13 by 19 inches.*

*Center for Land Use Interpretation Photo Archive: Dauphin Island, Alabama, November, 2005, inkjet print on paper, 16 by 20 inches.*



and "Weather Report," capture the sublime's qualities of "vastness," "obscurity," "power" and "solitude." Both the saturated hues of *Sea Ice in a Warmer Planet* and the abstract design of the aerial-view *Caribou Migration* stand out for their compelling rendering of the exotic icy terrain and its inhabitants.<sup>14</sup>

Also participating in both "Melting Ice" and "Weather Report" were the Harrisons, Jordan, Cuban-American installation artist Xavier Cortada and American video artist Andrea Polli. The last two exhibited works from their polar projects in both shows. Cortada's videos and 8-by-10-inch photographs document a trip to the South Pole early in 2007 as part of the U.S. National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artists and Writers Program. There he installed bright flags to mark human events in Antarctica over the past century. More pertinent to the show's theme—beyond the voguish locale for artistic expeditions—were his documentation and the residue of a strangely ritualistic performance in which he placed 24 identical men's black shoes around the South Pole. From each he drew and read a statement from an individual living in one of the world's time zones (such as: "I tell my wife, the day the mountain loses its snow, we'll have to move out of the valley." Jose Ignacio Lambarri, farmer, Urubamba Valley, Peru").

