

The Polheim - A marker of absence



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Introduction

This essay analyses a particular historical record that memorializes the arrival of Roald Amundsen at the South Pole in December 1911. The record is a photograph that shows Amundsen and three of his team with the “Polheim” (the “Home of the Pole”) which they had erected and left as a marker of their achieving the Pole. I examine the historical records of the Polheim and what it signified for the explorers at the time.

I look at the history of visual imagery at the Pole and consider “convergences” between historical imagery and the tendency towards artifice in its content. The isomorphic qualities of the Antarctic landscape are discussed in detail along with notions of “information gradients” and of “smooth” and “striated” space.

These theoretical considerations provide a context for the evaluation of contemporary art practice in the Antarctic. I propose the notion of an art of “absence” and consider the larger field of conceptual art for precedents and convergences.

Finally I conclude that the Polheim can be productively considered as an iconic precedent within the trajectory of contemporary art as much as an historical artifact of Antarctic exploration.



Fig. 1.
At the South Pole, December 1911
Oliver Bjarland, 1911.

The “Polheim”

In Figure 1, what are we looking at exactly?

This is a digital reproduction of a print from a negative exposed at the South Pole. The original negative is a photographic record of a moment in time, a singular artifact (a negative stored in the British Library to be precise) and an historical record of the moment staged at or near the South Pole by Roald Amundsen and 4 members of his expedition who were the first humans to reach the South Pole on December 14th, 1911.

Or maybe they never actually reached the Pole at all. It wouldn't be the first time that an explorer had made a misreading or illusory observation. The lines of longitude converge at the pole and the way to determine your location in these pre-GPS days was to read your latitude using a theodolite. However, Amundsen's had been damaged during his trek from the Antarctic coast, requiring him to use a sextant instead; an instrument designed to work at sea where a level horizon is always available. The South Pole is over 3,000m above sea level and though the terrain is very flat it can't be relied on to provide a true horizon. So Amundsen performed a series of careful observations (using a pool of mercury poured into a dish to provide a false horizon over which he could use the sextant) and calculations (presumably with pencil, paper and slide rule in a cold and crowded tent over a smoky paraffin stove) to determine the location of the Pole.

Amundsen knew his reading had a wide margin of error so he got his men to pace out 20kms in each direction and leave markers to ensure that he had "boxed" the Pole, and that there could be no doubt as to his precedence to the Pole. He knew that a British team led by Robert Falcon Scott was also on the Ice and headed for the Pole. Who would get there first was a question of personal and national pride.

The fact that they only had a vague idea of where they were in this wide open, "isomorphic" landscape is critical to this story and will be discussed at length. What matters at this stage is to note that the location of the Pole was largely notional.

I intend to focus on a single object in this iconic image of Amundsen at the Pole, the Polheim: the tent-like structure on the right of Figure 1. The Polheim, though a historically verifiable object, now exists only in a series of images and in the texts of the journals of those men who experienced it. The Polheim was a historical artifact but it was also a 'marker' or signifier of many things, which we will examine in detail.

What was it physically?



Fig 2.
*Commander Robert Falcon Scott at
Cape Evans.*
Herbert Ponting, 1911.

The Polheim was fabricated at sea aboard Amundsen's ship, the Fram, bound for the Pole. It was just one of their tents, not particularly fabricated for its future role. What we know of the Polheim comes from the contemporary diary records of the Norwegians under Amundsen and the British team led by Robert Falcon Scott.

The image above of Commander Robert Falcon Scott was taken at his base camp on Cape Evans prior to his setting off for the Pole racing against Amundsen to see if his British team could out run the Norwegians. When Scott was approaching the pole and saw something on the horizon that he suspected was his competitor's markers. It was one of the markers laying out the 20km perimeter surrounding the Polheim. Key documentary evidence that we have of the Polheim is in the images and diary notes made by Scott when his disappointed and exhausted team arrived at the Pole two months after the Norwegians. Scott and his party died of exhaustion and hunger on their way back from the Pole and Scott's notebook was recovered from his corpse 8 months after his death.

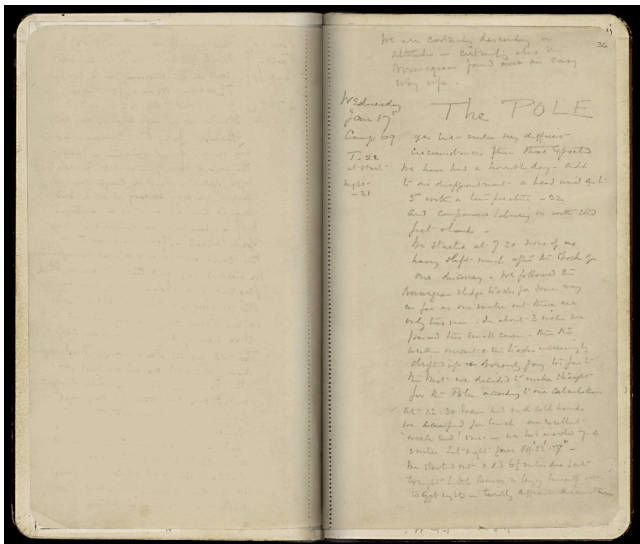


Fig 3.
Pages from Scott's Original journals
of the first two days spent at the
pole (January 18th, 1912).

In it he recorded the discovery of the Polheim.

Tuesday, January 16. Camp 68. Height 9760. T. -23.5°. The worst has happened, or nearly the worst. We marched well in the morning and covered 7 1/2 miles. Noon sight showed us in Lat. 89° 42' S., and we started off in high spirits in the afternoon, feeling that to-morrow would see us at our destination. About the second hour of the March Bowers' sharp eyes detected what he thought was a cairn; he was uneasy about it, but argued that it must be a sastrugus. Half an hour later he detected a black speck ahead. Soon we knew that this could not be a natural snow feature. We marched on, found that it was a black flag tied to a sledge bearer; near by the remains of a camp; sledge tracks and ski tracks going and coming and the clear trace of dogs' paws—many dogs. This told us the whole story. The Norwegians have forestalled us and are first at the Pole. It is a terrible disappointment, and I am very sorry for my loyal companions.¹

¹ Scott, Robert Falcon. *Scott's Last Expedition*. Vol. 1. 1915.



Fig. 4.
*Forestalled! Amundsen's tent at the
South Pole*
Henry "Birdie" Bowers, 1912.

And two days later –

Thursday morning, January 18.

We have just arrived at this tent, 2 miles from our camp, therefore about 1 1/2 miles from the Pole. In the tent we find a record of five Norwegians having been here, as follows:

Roald Amundsen

Olav Olavson Bjaaland

Hilmer Hanssen

Sverre H. Hassel

Oscar Wisting.

16 Dec. 1911.

The tent is fine—a small compact affair supported by a single bamboo. A note from Amundsen, which I keep, asks me to forward a letter to King Haakon! The following articles have been left in the tent: 3 half bags of reindeer containing a miscellaneous assortment of mits and sleeping socks, very various in description, a sextant, a Norwegian artificial horizon and a hypsometer without boiling-point thermometers, a sextant and hypsometer of English make.

Left a note to say I had visited the tent with companions.

We carried the Union Jack about 3/4 of a mile north with us and left it on a piece of stick as near as we could fix it.²

² Scott, *Ibid.*

It is interesting to note here that Scott reckoned the Polheim's location as 1.5 miles distant from the Pole.



Fig 5.
*Within 13 miles of the South Pole:
Amundsen's Flag.*
E. A. Wilson, 1912.

“This sketch was given to His Majesty, King George V, in fulfillment of the Artists' wish, July 1913.”

Amundsen's marker, apparently in the middle of nowhere, marks both Scott's party disappointment and the notional goal of their quest. Days later, Edward Wilson, Scott's enduring right hand man, completed several sketches of the Polheim. He recorded its properties with the dispassionate observation of a seasoned scientific illustrator; as if it was part of the natural landscape, a specimen to be analysed.

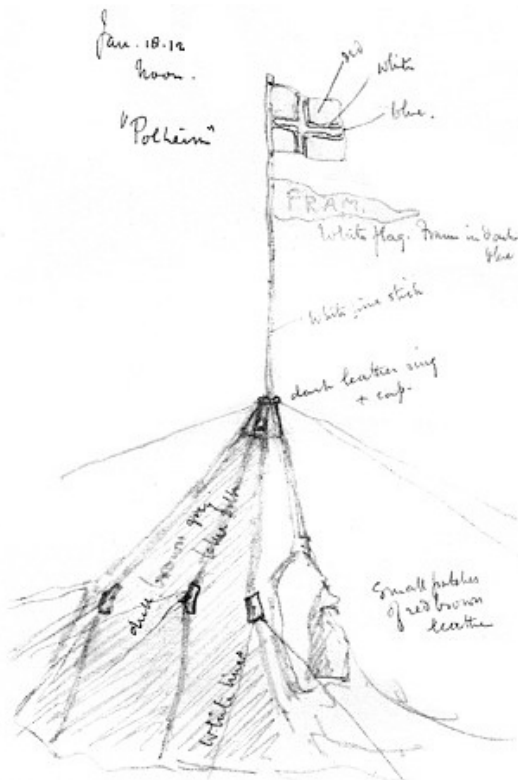


Fig 6.
Polheim
E. A. Wilson, 1912.



Fig. 7.
Polheim in March 2012. Amundsen's tent lies some 17 meters (56 feet) below.
Dr. Dale Mole, 2012.

After this the Polheim was never seen again. It is presumed that it was buried under the accumulating ice. Exactly 100 years after Amundsen's efforts and to mark the centennial, several overwintering South Pole Scientists went in search of the Polheim. The ice moves about 10 meters (33 feet) per year the direction of the Weddell Sea and it is estimated that the Polheim is now buried under 17 meters (56 feet) of snow and ice.³ No trace of it could be discerned. The Polheim is "lost" and with current technology unrecoverable. A flag was raised to mark the estimated position above where the flag was raised above the Polheim 100 years earlier which in turn marked the estimated position of the South Pole. An approximation, of an approximation, of an approximation - or a notion, of a notion, of a notion.

Isotropism, information gradients and the blank page.

William Fox contends that,

[h]ow the human mind transforms space into place...is most easily traced when watching the mind at work in large, unfamiliar and relatively empty environments, where we often have difficulty understanding our personal scale in space and time, versus the temperate forests and savanna where we primarily evolved as a species, or in cities that we have constructed to fit our needs.⁴

Deserts, and the world's greatest desert Antarctica, present isotropic qualities to our senses – no matter which way you face whether you look near or far, the same scene presents itself. This is most extreme in a whiteout where even up and down are impossible to distinguish. In such an isotropic environment our perceptions can't be trusted and our minds create illusions or misguide us in consequence. Explorers, scientists and artists working in Antarctica deal with this in varied ways but all must face the "cognitive dissonance" presented by an isotropic landscape.⁵

³ <http://southpoledoc.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/in-search-of-amundsens-tent/>
Accessed April 10, 2014

⁴ Fox, William. *Terra Antarctica – Looking into the Emptiest Continent*. Trinity University Press. 2005. p.xiii

⁵ *Ibid.* p.21.

Roland Huntford in his important critical re-evaluation of the race to the pole by Amundsen and Scott, retells Amundsen's quintessential isotropic experience.

Mere tens of miles from their goal en route to the South Pole Amundsen's teammate Hassel had a dark feature catch his eye in the white on white landscape –
"Do you see that black thing over there?" Hassel called out urgently as they were making camp on the 13th.
Everybody saw it.
"Can it be Scott" someone called.
Bjaaland ran forward to investigate. He did not have to run far.
"Mirage," he reported laconically, "dog turds".⁶

The explorers' sensory space and psychological space were conflated. Perspective in both was lost and something as insignificant as a "dog turd" blossomed into both a sizeable object and a boogey man of defeat! Or perhaps, alternatively, Norwegians have a robust sense of humor.

Richard Byrd described the pole after his visit 1930 in this way. "The Pole lay in a limitless plain...One gets there, and that is about all there is for the telling." As Fox has stated "All sense of scale, distance and perspective can collapse and invert in the isotropic whiteness."⁷

Isotropism can be linked to physical and conceptual gradients across the Antarctic. Stephen J. Pyne has postulated that,

[t]he journey from core to margin, from polar plateau to open sea, narrates an allegory of mind and matter...Antarctica is the earth's great sink, not only for water and heat but for information. Between core and margin there exist powerful gradients of energy and information...The extraordinary isolation of Antarctica is not merely geophysical but metaphysical. Cultural understanding and assimilation demand more than the power to overcome the energy gradient that surrounds The Ice: they demand the capacity and desire to overcome the information gradient.⁸

Pyne compares the concentric ice terrains defining the Antarctic continent to "the ordered rings comprising the hierarchy of Dante's inferno". And describes two separate gradients that seem to run in parallel. As the pole is approached the physical landscape becomes increasingly isotropic and featureless (the information gradient approaches zero), so the scope for the human imagination to write its own meanings into the landscape increases. The lack of physical bearings unmoors us from the real world and we float into the worlds of metaphor and imagination.

⁶ Huntford, Roland. *The Last Place on Earth*. Modern Library. 1999. p.467

⁷ Fox, *Terra Antarctica*.

⁸ Pyne, Stephen J. *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctic*. Arlington Books. 1987.

All that inexorable isotropic whiteness and our predilection to read meaning into the void calls to mind my most beloved sentence in English literature – Herman Melville’s efforts to explain both the sublime and the horrific aspects of the enigmatic great whale Moby Dick as embodied in its whiteness.

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal preeminence in this hue; even the barbaric, grand old kings of Pegu placing the title “Lord of the White Elephants” above all their other magniloquent ascriptions of dominion; and the modern kings of Siam unfurling the same snow-white quadruped in the royal standard; and the Hanoverian flag bearing the one figure of a snow-white charger; and the great Austrian Empire, Caesarian, heir to overlording Rome, having for the imperial color the same imperial hue; and though this pre-eminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and though, besides, all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness, for among the Romans a white stone marked a joyful day; and though in other mortal sympathies and symbolizings, this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, noble things – the innocence of brides, the benignity of age; though among the Red Men of America the giving of the white belt of wampum was the deepest pledge of honor; though in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge, and contributes to the daily state of kings and queens drawn by milk-white steeds; though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power; by the Persian fire worshippers, the white forked flame being held the holiest on the altar; and in the Greek mythologies, Great Jove himself being made incarnate in a snow-white bull; and though to the noble Iroquois, the midwinter sacrifice of the sacred White Dog was by far the holiest festival of their theology, that spotless, faithful creature being held the purest envoy they could send to the Great Spirit with the annual tidings of their own fidelity; and though directly from the Latin word for white, all Christian priests derive the name of one part of their sacred vesture, the alb or tunic, worn beneath the cassock; and though among the holy pomps of the Romish faith, white is specially employed in the celebration of the Passion of our Lord; though in the Vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great-white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool; yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.⁹

Yes, that’s one sentence! Itself a heroic expedition to comprehend whiteness.

The whiteness described by Melville is hardly the information poor, isotropically disorienting space of the Antarctic. Unless it is in that last phrase which forbodes that “yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.” Melville’s white is metaphorical rather than physical. It is a vessel for meaning.

⁹ Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick or the Whale*. Random House, New York. 1930. p.272-4.

Imag(in)ing Antarctica - Convergence and Artifice.

Perhaps the foundational metaphor of horror and the sublime in literature is the dreaded 'blank white page' faced by all artists and writers (including Melville, we know); the page awaiting our imprint, like footsteps in the snow. Many artist have taken the steps required to mark that page, to scale the gradients of that seemingly isotropic and blank landscape and in so doing have shaped our understanding, expectations of and perception of the Antarctic.



Fig.8.
William's Field No.6
Anne Noble, 2002.

Isotropism has been the subject of many works created by artists in the Antarctic. The New Zealand photographer Anne Noble who first visited Antarctica in 2002 attempted to capture the nature of this isotropic experience. Fox tells us that she

photographed in whiteouts and took pictures straight into white snow and white skies. She pushed the lack of definition in the landscape so far that, when she turned in her films for processing, the photolab called her up to alert her that there was "nothing" on the film. That's exactly right, as what she was investigating was the cognitive ambivalence of isotropy.¹⁰

Her blank page was inscribed with the blank of the Antarctic.

But once there is content in the landscape and hence the imagery, once we have objects or people by which to orient, how can we construct images of unknown spaces and how do those images influence further images? The US art historian Lawrence Weschler has coined the term "convergence" for the tendency of artists to gravitate towards iconic imagery, forms and typologies in their work - consciously or unconsciously.¹¹ Disappointingly, Weschler hasn't posited mechanisms for his observation of repeated formal echoes through art history, but other writers have been very specific in this regard, especially with respect

¹⁰ Fox, *Terra Antarctica*.

¹¹ Weschler, Lawrence. *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences* McSweeney's. 2007.

to the imagery and literature connected to the revelation of the Antarctic.¹² Francis Spufford, in his revealing analysis of the influence the Poles on the English imagination, has shown that this iconic imagery (and literature) affects more than the predispositions of artists who create new works engaged with the same topic.¹³ It also pervades the wider culture and shapes the way all of us perceive the world and our connection to it. This is especially pertinent for several early explorers like Scott who were so deeply involved in their romantic view of their exploit and of the polar landscape (largely constructed from popular literature and imagery) that they were ill-equipped for and insensitive to the reality that they were actually experiencing.¹⁴



Fig. 9.
The ice islands, seen the 9th of January, 1773.
William Hodges, 1773.

The “convergences” present in polar literature and imagery are revealing. By analysing them we begin to apprehend a distinctive aesthetic or set of tropes defining the art and literature of the Antarctic.

Our beloved Lieutenant James Cook in his third voyage (1772 -1775) was explicitly commanded to establish the existence (or otherwise) of Terra Australis. This took him and his crew the further south than anyone in recorded history. William Hodges drafted some of the first views of icebergs in the Southern Oceans and Cook’s illustrated account of his voyage was a publishing success – a best seller! The images of ships and men dwarfed by mountains of floating ice sent shivers up the spines of late 18th Century readers.

We can see echoes from Hodges appearing one hundred year later in Gustav Dore’s superb illustrations for Coleridge’s epic poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” - a tale of the luckless and doomed.¹⁵

¹² notable in this regard is Spufford’s treatise *I May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, Fox’s *Terra Antarctica* and with respect to Hurley’s work Helen Ennis’ *Frank Hurley’s Antarctica*.

¹³ Spufford, Francis. *I May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*. St. Martin’s Press. 1997.

¹⁴ This is the central focus of Huntford’s critique of Robert Falcon Scott in *The Last Place on Earth*.

¹⁵ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Chartwell. 2008.
Illustrations by Gustave Doré. Originally published 1876.



Fig. 10.
*"The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around;"*
Gustav Dore, 1876.



Fig. 11.
*The Endurance trapped in the Weddell Sea
pack ice.*
Frank Hurley, 1915.

And again 40 years later in this image by Frank Hurley of Earnest Shackleton's ship *Endurance* encased in ice. Hurley was an important figure in both the history of photography and Antarctic exploration. At the age of 25, in 1908, Hurley was selected for the position of official photographer to Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition. The Expedition departed in 1911 and returned in 1914. On his return, Hurley edited and released a feature length documentary "Home of the Blizzard" using his footage from the expedition.¹⁶

Hurley's photography wasn't purely photo-documentation (if there is such a thing), he was experimenting with all sorts of cutting edge processes in his work: 3D imagery, color photography, moviemaking, and carefully constructed images made from several exposures sometimes from different locations and times. All were taken in a physically and psychologically challenging environment where even chemistry and the properties of materials (so vital to the photographic project) behave erratically.

¹⁶ Hurley, Frank. *Home of the Blizzard*. 1914. 16mm silent movie. The movie includes a wonderfully slapstick interlude of Mawson's men struggling in a howling gale to erect a Polheim-like tent structure.



Fig. 13.
Endurance in the Antarctic night.
Frank Hurley. 1915.

(This photograph was taken using 20 flashes in temperatures of minus 60°C.)

Fig. 12.
Home of the Blizzard
Still from silent 16mm movie.
Frank Hurley. 1914.



A year later, Hurley was back at the Pole with Shackleton on his expedition. Their ship the *Endurance* was crushed and destroyed in the ice on 1st November 1915. Hurley indicated how important his photographs were in his diary.

During the day I hacked through the thick walls of the refrigerator to retrieve the negatives stored therein. They were located beneath four feet of mushy ice and, by stripping to the waist and diving under, I hauled them out. Fortunately, they are soldered up in double tin linings, so I am hopeful they might have not suffered by their submersion.¹⁷

The crew of 28 men camped near the destroyed boat for several months until the floe they were on started to collapse and they set to sea in three small boats for Elephant Island. This left Hurley with one small pocket camera and three reels of unexposed film which he couldn't process until returning to South America. From Elephant Island, one boat (the *James Caird*) set off with 6 men to voyage to South Georgia Island to seek rescue for the rest of the stranded crew.

¹⁷ Helen Ennis. *Frank Hurley's Antarctica*. National Library of Australia. 2010. p.92.



Fig. 14.
"A small ship came in sight; Wild gave orders to kindle the beacon. Relief had come at last!"
Frank Hurley. 1916.

Hurley legendarily kept one frame in his camera to mark the event on the 30th of August 1916 when the remaining crew of the *Endurance* was rescued from Elephant Island after 4 months of near starvation and isolation. Actually, the finally published image is a composite image that Hurley created after returning to Australia where he added the sun emerging from behind clouds as a metaphor of hope and resurrection.¹⁸



Fig. 15.
Polar Explorer Self-Portrait, New Jersey
Sandy Sorlein, 1996.



Fig. 16.
Snow, New Jersey.
Sandy Sorlein, 1996.

¹⁸ Ennis. *Ibid.* p.116

Following the convergence a bit further, the back-lighting, composite (and therefore fictional) images of Hurley have been echoed in the works of the contemporary American artist Sandy Sorlien. Sorlien applied to the US National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1995 to work in the Antarctic visiting artists program but was not selected. She decided instead to photograph the frozen winter landscape of New Jersey as an analog. Fox has noted that by “manipulating vantage point and scale, Sorlein balances an interrogation of how we cognitively frame geography with her desire to see the Antarctic, an emotional context seldom examined in a non-sentimental fashion.”¹⁹ She used the now familiar tropes and typologies of polar photography to construct a fictitious personal narrative.

Once mastered, these tropes can lead to pastiche, national geographic style image oversaturation and, as we have seen, even to manipulation.²⁰

The American artist Rachel Weiss has speculated that,

Antarctica poses a particular problem for art. In art, the argument generally goes, the world finds special form: whether this is an internal or external world, issued for the in abstract or mimetic languages, or even the compressed idiom of conceptual ones, the article of faith is that is that there is a meaningful relation to what is real...But Antarctica is different. Sure its real, it is an actual place, a landscape, a biosphere; but I would submit, an important reason why we are so drawn to it is because it is at once so plain and so unreal. So elemental and so unimaginable and, worse, so unrepresentable. And consequently, many artistic treatments of it tend to emphasize their degrees of separation from their subject, adding a habitual self-reflexiveness that operates in multiple and conflicting ways...The White Continent has, it seems, an extremely contradictory albedo, absorbing intense scrutiny and throwing back questions about what it might mean to represent something so alien.²¹

We can see the edited and embellished images and historical artifacts as creative constructions: evidence of a long trajectory of attempting to come to terms with the Antarctic landscape and our lack of agency within it. Fox has referred to the “Antarctic dilemma of attempting to construct meaning in an isotropic space with no vantage point, no “prospect” from which to leverage it.”²² The Polheim is perhaps the foundational object signifying the human desire to confront the abstracted territory of the Antarctic and the images of it have established key tropes and forms which through “convergence” have become characteristic of the art “tradition” of the Antarctic.

¹⁹ William Fox. *Terra Antarctica*.

²⁰ There is an intriguing history of charlatanism and fakery (or perhaps more kindly, artistic license and self-deception) when it comes to the polar territories. Frederick Cook perhaps most famously, stridently (and now seemingly purely theatrically), concocted his own peculiar vision of his own exploits in the ‘North’ in his film *The Truth About the Pole* (Frederick Cook, 1909-12). His cut out igloos and border collies panting in the heat of the film studio are delightful! And they tell us a lot about the capacity of the poles to absorb our reason and lead us astray.

²¹ Rachel Weiss. Tall Tales, Apocryphal Visions and Hoaxes: Why Antarctica makes us make it up. In Kathryn Yusoff, ed. *BiPolar*. The Arts Catalyst, 2008. p.86.

²² Fox Ibid. p.250.

Marking Territory

We have seen that the “White Continent” is the perfect blank sheet on which to inscribe our own dreams - of heroism, of national identity and pride, and even of our deepest fears both individual and for human culture as a whole.²³

Mary Shelley’s iconic *Frankenstein* opens and closes in the wastes of the Arctic where Dr. Frankenstein has gone to destroy his monster and in so doing destroy himself. Robert Walton, the narrator of the tale and captain of the ship that discovers Dr. Frankenstein on the ice, opens the narrative with optimistic anticipation of what the Arctic holds.

I am already far north of London, and as I walk in the streets of Petersburg, I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling? This breeze, which has travelled from the regions towards which I am advancing, gives me a foretaste of those icy climes. Inspirited by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is forever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There - for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators - there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. Its productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle and may regulate a thousand celestial observations that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent forever.²⁴

Walton imagines the Pole as the source of all knowledge and power - a popular view through Edwardian times and one of the drivers for the polar exploration according to Spufford.²⁵

Since its first discovery, the Antarctic has been contested territory as various nations have striven first to land on it and then to assay ownership of it or at least to portions of it. The German Third Reich even claimed it as “Neuschwabenland” and proved ownership by flying over it and throwing 1.2m long missile like “flag poles” emblazoned with swastikas on their tail fins out the doors of their seaplanes.²⁶

²³ Despite considerable research, I have been unable to discover who coined the phrase the “White Continent”. It is presumably in contrast to “Dark Continent”, ostensibly coined by Henry M. Stanley who was probably the first to use the term in his 1878 account *Through the Dark Continent*: his legendary record of traversing unexplored hinterland of Africa.

²⁴ Shelley, Mary Wolstonecraft, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Originally published 1818. Gutenberg EBook #84. 2008. p.1.

²⁵ see page 10.

²⁶ Summerhayes, Colin and Beeching, Peter. *Hitler’s Antarctic base: the myth and the reality*, Polar Record, Volume 43 Issue 1, Cambridge University Press. 2007. pp.1–21
McGonigal, David, *Antarctica*, Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2009. p.367

And yet, Antarctica has been the stage of unprecedented of international co-operation; as seen in the International Geophysical Year (1957), the declaration of the international Antarctic Treaty (1959), and currently the many multinational scientific experiments, observatories and expeditions carried out in the Antarctic every year.

Today Antarctica is increasingly seen as a barometer of our lasting effect on the global biosphere - our contemporary Frankenstein's monster. Accordingly, Antarctica is constantly being keenly measured, observed and contested. We can read Antarctica as both a palimpsest of national and international identity and a barometer of our deepest fears.

As a contested space open to definition, Antarctica fits within the philosophical framework of "smooth" space as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in their text *Nomadology: The War Machine*.²⁷ Smooth space is "open" and "deterritorialized" as opposed to closed and defined "striated space"; it is constantly being redefined and has no clear boundaries. It is like the space on the board of the Japanese game of Go where it is a "question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival."²⁸

Striated space is the territory of the sedentary. Smooth space is the habitat of the nomad; open to speculation and resistant to measurement and definition.

Christopher Hubert summarizes Deleuze and Guattari's analysis.

Smooth space is occupied by intensities and events. It is haptic rather than optic, a vectorial space rather than a metrical one. Smooth space is characteristic of sea, steppe, ice and desert. It is occupied by packs and nomads. It is a texture of "traits" consisting of continuous variation of free action. The characteristic experience of smooth space is short term, up close, with no visual model for points of reference or invariant distances. Instead of the metrical forms of striated space, smooth space is made up of constantly changing orientation of nomads entertaining tactile relations among themselves.

Smooth does not mean homogeneous, however, but rather amorphous non-formal (cf. formless) in fact, striation creates homogeneity.... The sea and the desert are examples of smooth spaces that became striated (cf. the clock and navigation) (cf. also time) Striation seems to be, at least in part, the effects of technological mediation resulting in mathematical quantities as opposed to qualities.²⁹

Hubert's characterization of "smooth" space as "short term, up close, with no visual model for points of reference or invariant distances" is a perfect description the isotropic character of Antarctica emphasized by Fox and of the terminus of the information gradient across the continent espoused by Pyne.

But surely any documentation of such a smooth space or, in our case the location of an object like the Polheim within it, is an attempt to define and map that space - to contribute to its increasing striation. Deleuze and Guattari themselves have said that "the two spaces

²⁷ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. Translated by Massumi, Brian. *Nomadology : The War Machine*. Semiotext(e). 1986.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari. Ibid p.4.

²⁹ http://christianhubert.com/writings/smooth_striated.html. Accessed May 11, 2014.

in fact exist only in mixture; smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space”.³⁰

Many artists working directly in the Antarctic have opened up and laid claim to their own territories within Antarctica. Paul Smith (aka DJ Spooky) in his project “Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica” created the notional territory of the “People’s Republic of Antarctica” to highlight the fact that this continent is neither a country nor a territory of any country.³¹



Fig 17.
Manifesto for a People’s Republic of Antarctica.
Paul D. Miller, 2008.

Other artists mark out territory and investigate location in a larger sense. They recognize the polar regions (and particularly Antarctica) as a locus for comprehending our orientation with respect to the planet and the wider universe. Clearly Amundsen’s aim was to locate his activity at the “scientifically determined” South Pole and so the artists who work in this mode today are following a trajectory aligned with the Polheim. They are also in close accord with the perspectives of the science teams currently working in Antarctica: operating from permanent bases loaded with sophisticated equipment that are essentially congruent to Amundsen’s Polheim (though light years from it in technical engineering). The particular conditions at the Pole make it peculiarly suitable for astrophysics - lack of moisture in the atmosphere (Antarctica is an extremely arid), lack of anthropogenic “noise” in the forms of electromagnetic radiation, reduction in both ozone layer and the magnetic

³⁰ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. Translated by Massumi, Brian. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p.474.

³¹ Miller, Paul D. *The Book of Ice*. Mark Batty Publishers, London. 2011.

protection provided by the Earth's magnetic field, and the thinness of the atmosphere (due to the polar altitude of 3,000m and the equatorial bulge of our atmosphere). Their work at the Pole is helping to locate us within the knowable universe and even to determine the very nature of the universe and its origins.

Many contemporary artists working in the Antarctic are engaged in a parallel project, often in direct collaboration with scientists working at the Pole.



Fig. 18.
Stellar Axis: Antarctica.
Lita Albuquerque, 2006.

In 2006, aided by a grant from the National Science Foundation, [Lita] Albuquerque created the first and largest ephemeral artwork created on the continent. The resulting installation consisted of an array of 99 fabricated blue spheres. The placement of each corresponded to the location of one of 99 specific stars in the Antarctic sky above, creating an earthly constellation at the earth's pole.³²

Albuquerque essentially mapped the celestial sphere onto the terrestrial one. This is a remarkably similar process to the act by Amundsen as he “drew the sun down” (as the phrase goes) onto a pool of mercury to determine his latitude by sextant - another celestial mapping and act of “striation”.

We have seen how artworks were an essential component of the discovery and revelation of the Antarctic and how that imagery has shaped not just our imagination but the direct experience of those who travel and work there. We have also seen how contemporary artists and scientists working in Antarctica strive to locate themselves through mapping and referencing larger human, terrestrial and astronomical systems.

Marking Absence

The early explorers, contemporary artists working in Antarctica and scientists experimenting and observing in the unique conditions of Antarctica share the common goal of inscribing the unmarked space of the Antarctic; striving for human, geophysical and universal reference points to striate the smooth space of the Antarctic. But is it possible to

³² Lita Albuquerque's website (accessed March 1, 2014).
<http://litaalbuquerque.com/2006/10/stellar-axis-antarcticaantarctica2006/>

negotiate the space and comes to terms with it by simply accepting its smoothness; by making works which are in essence about “absence”? Searching beyond Antarctica, several convergent works come to mind that allow us to see Amundsen’s Polheim as both an action and a marker of absence.



Fig. 19.
Dusty Boots Line - the Sahara
Richard Long, 1988.

The work of the pioneering British land artist Richard Long focuses on the body in the landscape, the traces left by human passage and the immensity of the landscape compared to human agency. His works in the landscape survive purely through their documentation (much like the Polheim). His role as an agent is not explicitly depicted but only implied by the traces left, and his absence from both the site and the exhibited documentation of the action.



Fig. 20.
One hour - a sixty minute walk on Dartmoor.
Richard Long, 1984

Long’s works in the landscape are typified by their notional parameters and their lack of physical evidence. He barely leaves a mark except on the maps and diagrams that he created to document his lived experience. Marks that are abstract notions imposed on a very real landscape and so are inherently approximations - unavoidably “off the mark”. As well as maps and diagrams, Long’s documentation includes photographs, materials removed from or relocated in the landscape and constructed texts. These text-based works are interesting

corollaries to the traditional journals of explorers.



Fig. 21.
I like America and America likes me.
Joseph Beuys, 1974.

A striking convergence that helps me think of the Polheim and its placement as a performance or action, is Joseph Beuys' "I like America and America likes me".

Beuys was closely associated with the Fluxus group whose public "concerts" brought a new permeability to the boundaries between literature, music, visual art, performance, and everyday life. Their ideas were a catalyst for Beuys' own performances, which he called "actions".

In his iconic 1974 action, Beuys flew to New York and was wrapped in felt and taken by ambulance to a room in the René Block Gallery. For three days he shared the room with a wild coyote and several props (tools or equipment, perhaps) - a thick felt blanket, bails of hay, a cane like a shepherd's crook, a flashlight and a daily delivery of the Wall St. Journal.

At times he stood, wrapped in a thick, grey blanket of felt, leaning on a large shepherd's staff. At times he lay on the straw, at times he watched the coyote as the coyote watched him and cautiously circled the man, or shredded the blanket to pieces, and at times he engaged in symbolic gestures, such as striking a large triangle or tossing his leather gloves to the animal; the performance continuously shifted between elements that were required by the realities of the situation, and elements that had purely symbolic character.³³

After three days, Beuys returned to the airport. Again he rode in the ambulance, leaving America without having set foot on its ground. As Beuys later explained: 'I wanted to isolate myself, insulate myself, see nothing of America other than the coyote.'³⁴

This "heroic" and tightly focused expedition to America with limited equipment to hand, a defined though ambiguous goal, and an intention to return home (unscathed) resonates closely with Amundsen's polar action. The space inscribed by Beuys was the abstracted space of the gallery itself.

³³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Beuys#.

³⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Beuys#.

A final example along this trajectory of defined “absence”, is Tom Friedman’s 1992 artwork “Untitled (A Curse)” which consists of an 11” sphere of space cursed by a witch, located 11” above a standard gallery pedestal.³⁵

The curse seems as abstract and consensually defined an artifact as the South Pole. Friedman’s pedestal is congruent with Amundsen’s Polheim: a marker in a cultural as much as physical landscape demonstrating one’s presence there as an agent and at the same time marking the location of a notion.



Fig. 22.
Untitled - A Curse
Tom Freidman, 1992.

These three examples clarify what I am defining as an art of “absence”. They each begin as actions taken to inscribe an “empty” space: to leave a mark, to define, to striate. They also lay claim to a space: take possession of it. At the completion of the action, the only remnant is the documentation constructed by the artist. This is precisely congruent to Amundsen’s expedition, whose most significant remnant artifact was the now absent Polheim.

Conclusion

The Polheim (along with the documentary evidence of its existence) is a marker or signifier of many things. It is a marker for a historic moment and the ways of thinking about and seeing the Antarctic typified by that moment. It signifies a heroic enterprise with a scientific rationale and an attempt to territorialize a contested and “empty” landscape (and hence is a marker for all subsequent similar attempts). And finally it marked both a notional location and an attempt to map the notional onto the real.

More significantly for this analysis however, it can be considered as a marker of “absence”; or more precisely several absences. The absence of the (now lost) Polheim itself, the people that put it there and their world view. More conceptually, it marks the absence of information at the endpoint of the of an information gradient running from the Antarctic

³⁵ Hainley, Bruce; Cooper, Dennis and Searle, Adrian. *Tom Freidman*. Phaidon. 2001. p.130.

coast to the Pole, and the absence of orientation, definition and territory within the smooth and isotropic space of the South Pole. More generally, the Polheim is representative of a typology of 'absent' spaces; spaces which require human culture to achieve definition and which resist that definition to maintain their 'smoothness'.

The Polheim has limited interest as a misplaced artifact of Antarctic history. However it is invaluable if understood as an iconic first attempt at creating a space for humanity (physically and culturally) in an environment that continues to withstand our efforts to comprehend, define and territorialize. If this is the lasting achievement of Amundsen, then the Polheim (and its documentation) becomes a marker for a more enduring cultural act, an act that finds its contemporary resonance in the work of conceptual artists and contemporary artists working in Antarctica.

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Fig. 1. *At the South Pole. December 1911.*

Members of Roald Amundsen's South Pole Expedition 1910-12 at the pole itself, (from left to right): Roald Amundsen, Helmer Hanssen, Sverre Hassel and Oscar Winsig.

Image by Oliver Bjarland. 1911.

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Herbert Ponting. 1911.

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Fig. 4. *Forested! Amundsen's tent at the South Pole.*

Henry "Birdie" Bowers. 1912. Gelatin silver photo.

Fig. 5. *Within 13 miles of the South Pole: Amundsen's Flag.*

"This sketch was given to His Majesty, King George V, in fulfillment of the Artists' wish, July 1913."

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Fig. 10. *The ice was here, the ice was there,/ The ice was all around.*

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Fig. 11. *The Endurance trapped in the Weddell Sea pack ice, January 1915.*

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Still from silent 16mm movie.

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Frank Hurley. 1915.

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L'Atelier d'Artistes L41306

Fig. 14. *A small ship came in sight; Wild gave orders to kindle the beacon. Relief had come at last!*

Frank Hurley. 1916.

Glass lantern slide; 80mm x 105mm

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Fig. 16. *Snow, New Jersey.*
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