

Altering the Edges

Ellen Dahl

Interested in 'places at the edge of the world', Dahl probes the idea of landscape to articulate Anthropocene trepidations. Through a series of digital prints, she documents Norwegian sites known for pristine Nature and aesthetics of deep time, but which now also reveal human impact at Earth's peripheries.

Altering the Edge teams Dahl's framing of these uncanny, ambiguous places with responses by poet Hannah Jenkins. The resulting works articulate uncertainties of place and belonging, suggesting how poetic intimacy might help us contend with mega-concepts like globalisation and the climate crisis that now threaten to overwhelm us.



Ellen Dahl, *Field Notes From The Edge #13*, (2020), Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm

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Drawn into the sublime landscapes of Ellen Dahl's photographs we are invited to meet the edges, to view the geographical extremes of the far north, the Norwegian Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard. Dahl's enticing images conjure unease as they ask us to consider what it means to stand at the edge of our known world, to meet the edge of ourselves and perhaps even the edge of all existence.

Artists have long been fascinated with edges and the endurance required to encounter them: physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. Often staged within or against nature, this sublime notion of 'the artist at the edge' is perhaps most historically linked to the famous Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich. However, his colonial sense of the heroic and Romanticism's yearning for an uncorrupted return to nature seem quaint and antiquated today, displaced and unhelpfully nostalgic, in the harsh glare of the Climate Crisis.

Today, the Climate Crisis reaches around the globe and taints all our interactions with the landscape, even as we look back into prehistory. This taint can become an almost paralysing awareness, expansive in all directions. One such trajectory from southern Australia to northern Norway is a homeward bound journey for Dahl. There is an elusive sense of return to origin, which poetically resonates further back through numerous eras contained within the glaciers she photographs. They are time capsules allowing us to look back into deep time and generate continuous reconstructions of past climates, via ice-core samples containing the greenhouse gases of other ages. ⁱ

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Dahl's meticulously composed photographs are not a scientist's viewpoint, but neither are they tourists' snapshots. She precisely captures composed poignant moments at edges of glacial landscapes slowly retreating. We have an uncanny sense of trying to reach towards the ancient ice as its edges melt quietly away from us. Elsewhere ice-shelves collapse much more dramatically, leaving in their wake gauged rock, shattered shale and rising acidic oceans. Looking through Dahl's lens, we feel an insidious sense of dread: the anxiety of the Anthropocene.

The term Anthropocene, begins with 'Anthropo' meaning human influenced, encompassing the extensive impact that humans continue to have on all interconnected aspects of the Earth: lithosphere (land), hydrosphere (water), biosphere (living things), and atmosphere (air).ⁱⁱ First coined by geologists over twenty years ago to describe a new stratigraphic epoch, the Anthropocene is becoming an official span of geologic time, recognising that we have entered into a new phase in the history of this planet.

The edge of the Anthropocene conceivably extends even beyond Earth, as there is now so much human generated space debris in Low Earth Orbit that NASA refers to it as the World's largest garbage dump. Our academic understandings of the Anthropocene have also extended beyond geology, to become interdisciplinary as the urgency of the Climate Crisis accelerates; the occurrence of 'unprecedented' events are increasing as the uncertainty and instability of the Anthropocene shapes almost all perspectives on future thinking.

Although we may not be able to rationally locate the edge of the Anthropocene, addressing this notion of 'the edge' can assist us to shift our perspectives. An edge is not necessarily an end, it can be a turning point, a position from which to change course. There is something hopeful in Dahl's title *Altering the Edges*, as her images and experiences from the 'edge of the earth' pose possibilities of opening up different relationships and perceptions. When we come to these edges we are confronted with a stark reality and are forced to grapple with absolute limitations, within which we must reconcile how we live. It will take collective imagination, creativity and active optimism to find the edges or turning points that might alter the trajectories of the Anthropocene. The layered sensitivities of Dahl's photographs contribute to these discourses as they open up poetic seams between perspectives, unearthing discomforts which aspire towards new ways of relating.

Dr Kath Fries

Dr Kath Fries is an artist and curator, with a PhD from the University of Sydney. Interested in the ways that site-responsive art practices engage with layered histories to open up empathetic understandings of interconnectedness, Fries exhibits widely and is currently the guest curator of HIDDEN Rookwood Sculptures.

End Notes

i. Bethan Davies, "Ice Core Basics", Royal Holloway University of London, <http://www.antarcticglaciers.org/glaciers-and-climate/ice-cores/ice-core-basics/>

ii. Félix Pharand-Deschênes, "Welcome to the Anthropocene," International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP), International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP), Stockholm Resilience Centre and Stockholm Environment Institute, <http://anthropocene.info/>

Ellen Dahl | About

Ellen Dahl is a Norwegian born, Sydney based visual artist working across photography, video, sound and installation. Much of her practice is rooted in working with or around the landscape, while conceptually informed by trepidation around the Anthropocene and a desire to articulate the uncertainties of place and belonging. She has an ongoing interest in the aesthetic/poetic potential within the photographic medium and its close relationship to how we assemble ecological meaning and geological imagination. Ellen holds an MFA from Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney and is a PhD candidate at School of Creative Arts, University of Tasmania.

List of Works

25.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #29 / Collapse</i> , 2021, Laminated wall paper, 130 x 190 cm. Poem by Hannah Jenkins, 'A Glacier Leaves a Deep Cut', 2021		POA
	Alternative Edition : Archival pigment print 65.5 x 95 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1500
26.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #5</i> , 2021, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2021.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
27.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #18</i> , 2021, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2021.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
28.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #21</i> , 2021, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2021.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
29.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #7</i> , 2020, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2021.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
30.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #20</i> , 2021, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2021.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
31.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #22</i> , 2020, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2020.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050
32.	Ellen Dahl, <i>Field Notes from the Edge #13</i> , 2020, Archival pigment print on fibre rag 35 x 45 cm, hand stained frame with museum glass. Stanza from Hannah Jenkins' 'VALLEY', 2020.	Edition: 5 + 2 AP	\$1050

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