

Perito Moreno: Projects for the Fin del Mundo Biennial.
Esteban Alvarez.
2nd Bienal del Fin del Mundo (2nd Biennial of the End of the World),
Ushuaia, Argentina.
24 April - 25 May 2009.
Reviewed by Rebecca Potts.

Esteban Alvarez proposed three projects for the Fin del Mundo Biennial in Argentina. The biennial gets its name from its location in Ushuaia, the capital of the Argentinean part of Tierra del Fuego and "the southernmost city of the world." The event began in 2007 "as a contribution to the International Polar Year." While the curator, Alfons Hug, recognizes the significance of the biennial's location for global climate change and many of the artists contribute to the dialogue about this pressing issue, Alvarez falls short, at least in his explanation. His projects as described are at worst destructive to the environment and at best naive. I can only hope this is a sick joke to make us reconsider how we bend the land to our will.

The first project attempts to purify dirty river water by bottling it and bringing it to a pure lake for a visit. The artist hopes that the dirty water will become pure through proximity to the pure water and will return to the river to clean the remaining river water. This project on its own is an intriguing personification of water. Can water be cleaned by osmosis? I initially assumed that the artist intended this project to be seen as a bit ridiculous and humorous, but to push boundaries of scientific assumption. Learning about his other two projects led me to believe that perhaps he truly does hope to clean the river water through "good vibes."

The second project claims to democratize access to Perito Moreno Glacier. Alvarez proposes to clean up the glacier using "a series of cuts and icefills" to erase irregularities, making it more "easily transitable." He adds that "hockey and ice skating rinks, among other sports activities" should be built on the glacier. I am not a hands-off environmentalist - I see a lot of sense to Michael Pollan's suggestion that our role should be that of gardener as humans are part of nature and must learn to share our common habitat - but giving a glacier plastic surgery and adding a few skating rinks so people can play on it is definitely overstepping, even if that glacier were not in peril. To propose this today, when we should be focused on how to prevent glaciers from melting so that places like Tuvalu, Bangladesh, or New Orleans can keep their heads above water for a few more decades, is just wrong. I hope Alvarez is aware (how could you not be?) and has

written his imperialistic proposal to make us consider how common this sort of proposal is elsewhere. Why is it acceptable to bulldoze land and build hockey arenas? If it's okay to do in suburbia, then why not on a glacier where the ice already exists? Obviously the impact of building such a development and inviting thousands of people to visit the rinks on the glacier would significantly contribute to its melting. Picture any stadium after a game. Is that going to be good for a glacier? It is not clear whether Alvarez agrees with me. I would like to see just a hint that Alvarez is proposing such ridiculous ideas to point out the flaws in society's relationship with the planet.

Alvarez's third project takes it even further. He proposes using explosives to create scheduled calving of the glacier to increase tourism. Glaciers usually calve, meaning pieces of ice fall off, in the summer and regain what was lost through snowfall in winter. In recent years, most glaciers have not been keeping up. The loss of ice to calving is no longer benign. Perito Moreno Glacier is in a unique location that allows tourists to get close to the glacier without boats, so many people travel there to watch the spectacular disintegration of the glacier in summers. Alvarez suggests using explosives to increase calving so that it could happen year-round on a fixed schedule. This would increase tourist revenue for the region. He again does not mention the extreme side effects. What will the region do with all that tourist money when it's underwater? If it's on high enough ground that it won't suffer from sea level rise for a long time, how will the community survive when the glacial water supply is gone? Alvarez has got to be joking. Who in their right mind would suggest blowing up a glacier? For all our sakes, I hope he's trying to teach us a lesson with his project proposals and he won't see them to fruition.