

Opinion

Calm Yourself, the World Is Ending

Following on from her presentation at the Everyday Militarisms Collaboratory, Dr Xan Chacko explores the aesthetic and affective role of iconic spaces of scientific research, like the Svalbard Global Seed Bank, through art, speculative fabulation and anthropological research.



The Entrance of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Longyearbyen, Norway. Photograph by Xan Chacko.

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Located in the town of Longyearbyen, 78° North of the Equator, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault (SGSV) captures the imaginations of artists and researchers alike; an icon of conservation, desolation, hope, and doom. Opened in 2008, the SGSV was formed out of a tripartite agreement between Norway, the Nordic Genetic Resource Centre ([NordGen \(https://www.nordgen.org/sgsv/\)](https://www.nordgen.org/sgsv/)) and the [Crop Trust \(https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/\)](https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/), as part of an effort to conserve plant variety and secure our future access to food. The Norwegian government provided the space and is responsible for on-going security, NordGen coordinates the transfer of seeds, indexing, and placement, and the Crop Trust performs political, fund-raising, and legal work for the vault. The idea for the vault emerged in the aftermath of a perceived global crisis in agricultural biodiversity. While collection and conservation efforts for seeds of agronomic import

had been underway locally and regionally since the mid-twentieth century, the SGSV was envisioned as a safety net; its isolated location surrounded by permafrost provided physical security that other seed banks lacked.

Aside from scientists, politicians, and researchers, such as myself, the SGSV also captures the attention of artists who flock to the vault each time it is opened for the deposition of seeds. Artistic renderings inspired by Svalbard look to its desolation, pristine frozen landscape, and promissory future of the seeds that lie within the stark edifice. While the scientific, economic, and social outcomes of a long-term investment like seed banking cannot be realised until a future when the seeds are used (or found to be useless), speculative imagining allows artists and writers to project a vision of what might come to pass. If the worst-case scenario that necessitates seed banking is a post-apocalyptic world where agrarian livelihoods are insecure, we do not need to look into the future. The Hungarian-born, Estonian artist Dénes Farkas has been showing that there are parts of the world that are already living through this apocalyptic present.



The entrance to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault after the surrounding snow melted. Photograph by Dénes Farkas.

I met Farkas during my first visit to the SGSV in February 2017, but for him, it was a second attempt to enter the vault. Six months prior he had been on a list of approved visitors but had been denied entry in the last minute because of a leak in the entryway that had allowed some water from the melting snow outside to pool in the antechamber outside the vault. Farkas was denied entry into the vault but took photographs of the exposed outer concrete façade, rising from grey rocks in a landscape that was decidedly not frozen. The photograph resembles the triangular shard of Richard Serra's sculpture *Schunnemunk Fork* (1990-1991), a site-specific installation in weathering steel on the grounds of Storm King Art Center, New York. Half a year later, in February, the next time the vault was opened to visitors and my slated entry, maintenance workers from the Norwegian Directorate of Public Construction and Property (Statsbygg) had patched up the leak and built a system to prevent it happening again.



Schunnemunk Fork (1990-1991), by Richard Serra. Photograph by Nick Kahler.

During the ten days of the vault being opened in late February 2017, Farkas and I only spent a few hours on three occasions inside the vault as the entry schedule was filled with dignitaries, photographers from major news sources, and depositors from around the world bringing with them seeds for storage in the vault. Finding activities to pass the time in a town of only two thousand residents, Farkas and I walked, ate reindeer, drank whiskey, and talked about the forces and questions that brought us to Svalbard. I learned that Farkas' interest in the vault stemmed from a [news story \(https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/19/europe/svalbard-global-seed-vault-syria/index.html\)](https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/19/europe/svalbard-global-seed-vault-syria/index.html) about the first withdrawal of seeds from the SGSV, in 2015, by scientists from the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) whose facility had been taken over by militants of the Islamic State. The scientists, led by Dr. Ahmed Amri, withdrew seeds that they had previously banked at the SGSV and planted them in exile in Lebanon and Morocco, in order to create new stores of seeds for farmers and researchers that they had previously served from Aleppo. Farkas juxtaposed this event with a 2014 novel, *An Unnecessary Woman* (<https://www.npr.org/2014/02/04/268951211/a-widows-quiet-life-leaves-room-for-sex-guns-and-literature>), by Lebanese author Rabih Alameddine, which is a reflection on the futility of life told through the eyes of a tragic protagonist, Aaliya Sohbi. Living in a small Beirut apartment, Aaliya spends years translating Russian literary classics into Arabic. She does not share her translations with anyone, storing them in her basement, but continues the painstaking work, text after text, until misfortune strikes and the collection is destroyed due to a leak from a faulty water pipe.



How to Calm Yourself After Seeing a Dead Body—Techniques (2017). Images from seed banks juxtaposed with quotes from Alameddine's book in Farkas' exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn. Photograph by Xan Chacko.

Farkas brought together photographs from the SGSV and another seed bank, the Vavilov Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia, images and objects from the exiled ICARDA scientists, and quotes from Alameddine's book to make an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia in Tallinn. Thinking through the concepts of archive, the possibilities and futilities of future-looking practices, and how life is constituted and connoted differently depending on context, the exhibition titled *How to calm yourself after seeing a dead body—Techniques* (<http://denesfarkas.com/how-to-calm-yourself-after-seeing-a-dead-body-techniques/>), seamlessly wove these installations to create a haunting space.

Farkas holds together and in tension the challenges of imagining the horrors of the future, with the hope that scientific activities such as seed banking promise. Does the SGSV provide a calming point of focus to allay our anxieties about our mortality? Or, is the enterprise of banking seeds as futile as Aaliyah's translation project? Through art, Farkas shows the insecurity of the seed banking systems and the precarity of political systems that support and benefit from the enterprise of seed banking. At the same time, in his representations of scientists growing the repatriated seed in Lebanon, Farkas presents hope and liveliness for the future. Even the title of the exhibition, while referencing death, is about steps one can take to calm oneself in the face of the unpredictable future.

Further Reading

1. Alameddine, R. (2014) *An Unnecessary Woman* (New York, NY: Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2014).
2. Bruyere, V. (2018). *Perishability Fatigue: Forays Into Environmental Loss and Decay*. Columbia University Press.
3. Curry, H. A. (2017). From working collections to the World Germplasm Project: agricultural modernization and genetic conservation at the Rockefeller Foundation. *History and philosophy of the life sciences*, 39(2), 5.
4. Fowler, C. (2016). Seeds on ice. *American Scientist*, 104(5), 304-309.

5. Fry, C., Seddon, S., & Vines, G. (2011). *The Last Great Plant Hunt*. Kew Publishing.
 6. Sheikh, S. (2018) 'Planting Seeds/The Fires of War', *Third Text*, 32:2-3, 200-229
 7. Swyngedouw, E. (2013) Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 24:1, 9-18.
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Xan Sarah Chacko is a Research Fellow at the University of Queensland, TC Beirne School of Law. She is part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Project, 'Harnessing Intellectual Property to Build Food Security'. Her work troubles the science of seeds and their long-term preservation through freezing in banks. By studying the differences in the practices of seed banking, Xan sheds light on changes in plant science, the law around the movement and acquisition of living things for science and industry, and technologies of visualisation.

This work was presented at the **Everyday Militarisms Public Symposium** (<https://everydaymilitarisms.squarespace.com/>), held at the University of Sydney last month. **Everyday Militarisms** (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/research/culture-loss/everyday-militarisms-environmental-cultural-entanglements/>), a week-long collaborative between the University of Sydney, Sydney Environment Institute, The Seedbox and UC Davis, brought together researchers, artists, activists and other professionals in order to illuminate some of the underexamined, but vitally connected ways in which militarised infrastructures, languages, logics and matters pervade our everyday lives—for better or worse.