

EXHIBITION

Watching Al Gore with the aircon turned up full blast

In New York, Constance Wyndham visits a sobering show of photography and video devoted to a powerful eco-message

The arctic ice area has shrunk by nearly 30% since 1978, sea levels have risen by 4 to 6 inches over the last century and air temperature has increased by 1 degree Fahrenheit. Despite these alarming facts, New Yorkers can sometimes seem oblivious to the realities of the environmental crisis. Many saw *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's terrifying documentary about the state of planetary emergency, in cinemas with the air-conditioning cranked to teeth-chattering temperatures.

Al Gore states that Hurricane Katrina made the US enter "a period of consequences", and last month, the message finally hit home when leaflets warning about potential flooding appeared in every mail box in the city.

The International Center of Photography tackles the pressing ecological emergency with *Ecotopia*, its second Triennial exhibition of photography and video. Not one to shirk relevant issues, ICP's first Triennial, *Strangers* of 2003, addressed themes of loneliness and estrangement as consequences of globalisation.

This time, the ICP has amassed work by a range of 40 artists, some emerging, others renowned, organised by its all-

star cast of curators, Brian Wallis, Edward Earle, Christopher Phillips and Carol Squiers. The result is a grim, thought-provoking look at man's disastrous effect on nature.

Videos were shown in dark little hovels fashioned from glued Styrofoam peanuts, which look horribly environmentally unfriendly and seem to creep, sludgelike, through the pristine galleries. Although it resembles an oil spill, the substance is in fact Tubolit, a recyclable material used for insulation purposes. Encased in Tubolit is Catherine Chalmers' video of a cockroach navigating an environment full of colourful frogs, lizards and newts that the artist created in her studio. As the clumsy, urban cockroach interacts with the wild insects one can't help thinking about a city slicker lost on safari.

Nearby are Harri Kallio's realistic models of the Dodos that he took back to Mauritius to photograph in their original setting: a gang of wide-eyed creatures staring confrontationally at the viewer, mouths agape. The piece serves as a bizarre reminder that once a species is extinct, it is lost forever.

Goran Devic's wonderful film about the Croatian town of Sisak tells another tale of man's disastrous

attempts to intervene with nature. A bug infestation prompted the townspeople to introduce more crows to the area, but they soon came to dominate the food chain. The film shows a man up a ladder poking nests full of baby crows out of trees. As the nests fall a church procession passes solemnly underneath, a warning of the consequences of man trying to play God.

Downstairs, in a room filled with an eerie green light is Diana Thater's *Perfect Devotion*, a film in which a group of tigers romp in and out of a paddling pool. The colours are strange and unsaturated, as if the scene had been filmed long ago and the tigers are already extinct. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *Amphibious Login/Logout* shows six turtles trying desperately to escape the rapid development of the Chinese landscape by floating down the Pearl River on a log.

Work by several photojournalists is presented as a slideshow in a small Tubolit hut. Gilles Mingasson's shots of the first global warming refugees are followed by Patrick Brown's images of the shocking Asian black market in endangered species. Also on show are photographs of the approaching tsunami quickly taken with a cell phone, the label on the wall chillingly describes the artist as "anonymous".

Throughout the show, each work is accompanied by a small text. These are informative but over-zealous curators sometimes dictate the meaning of the image, leaving no room for interpretation, so the visitor feels slightly nannied. Most pieces can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities; others rely on the text to explain the context of the image. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin have photographed what at first appears to be a scruffy wood, but on reading the text one realises that one is looking at an Israeli wood planted on top of destroyed Palestinian villages.

Simon Norfolk's photograph of a war-torn forest in Iraq is composed to include a partially destroyed building reminiscent of a picturesque ruin found in classical landscape painting. Photography has reinvented the genre of landscape in western art. Eighteenth-century landscape painters depicted the sublime in nature with images of towering mountain ranges that instilled feelings of awe and wonder in the viewer. Now, we look in horror at Simon Starling's images of missile-strewn beaches and severed palm trees. Where once we stood and marvelled at the power of nature, now we stare in disbelief at man's ability to destroy it.



Christopher LaMarca's photograph of an environmental protestor in a national park

'Ecotopia' is at the International Center of Photography, New York, to January 7. Tel +1 212 857 0000

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