

World Day for Glaciers at UNESCO in Paris – Side event 2026.03.19

Panel “Art for the Cryosphere”

# Gaze, in the Heart of Glaciers

From Jean-François Delhom

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you to be here and support our Topic.  
I would like to thank the UNESCO for welcoming us to this magnificent hall.  
Thanks Ignacio Palomo for inviting me.

I am a landscape photographer, a specialist of caving inside the glaciers, and the author of a book entitled *GLACE, Dans le ventre des glaciers* (which means in English: *ICE, In the Heart of Glaciers*). This book is accompanied by philosophical texts, some of which have been translated into English and are available on the home page of my website.

The last of these texts analyzes various artistic movements that have focused on the representation of mountains and which constitute different discourses on the subject (idealistic discourse, realistic discourse, romantic, glorious or mystical, patriotic, heroic, and so on). At the end of the analysis of these discourses, I advocate a contemplative attitude, which is not a discourse but rather a form of listening.

One of the common themes of our Panel is precisely to give glaciers a voice. As a photographer, I will bear witness to what they have revealed to me.

Delving into their insides, when I was expecting a more or less homogeneous mass, I discovered a universe.

Their lesson is one of diversity, a very elegant lesson.

A small sample of this fascinating diversity will be shown on screen while I read my thoughts to you. As I don't have time to go into detail, I will simply provide a few pointers.

My report on glaciers began in 2017, but it was initiated in 2015 by an ecological decision to boycott air travel.

I used to dream of icebergs in Greenland, but I settled for the glaciers in my own country—Switzerland—and challenged myself to learn to be moved by what was close to home.

Over the course of eight years, during approximately 200 explorations, I photographed around 90 cavities in 25 different glaciers. As a result of this challenge to learn to be moved by my local surroundings, I discovered unexpected beauty, undoubtedly just as surprising as what I might have hoped to find on the other side of the world.

Learning to be moved also means learning to worry about the fate of what moves us. Two-thirds of the caves I photographed no longer exist; the glaciers have receded. My report is therefore a *requiem*, an archive, but above all, it is a tribute.

When people ask me about my position as a witness to glacier melt, I always emphasize how insignificant my limited empirical experience is compared to the vast collection of facts gathered by scientists.

Artists interested in climate change make it their duty to remind us that this is established knowledge, based on tens of thousands of studies, subject to peer review and verification. It is therefore not a matter of believing – or not believing, as the big orange puffy puts it:

Scientific knowledge is not a matter of opinion!

Nevertheless, scientists are coming up against a wall of obscurantism.

We are gathered here today to ask ourselves whether, and how, artists could help to crack this wall.

One aspect of sensitive stimulation is recognized by neurologist Antonio R. Damasio in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and Human Brain*. Damasio provides a scientific basis for the observation that the decisions that guide our actions are based not only on what we know, but even more so on the emotions that accompany that knowledge.

Negative emotions and positive emotions in militant art:

Negative emotions can provoke indignation, pity, anger, and fear. They can inspire us to fight, but also make us feel powerless and resigned.

The television news is a good example of what I call the dwelling on the negative, where the endless stream of bad news tends to induce a search for consolation and a retreat into safety rather than mobilizing us.

To avoid this trap of resignation, we need other emotions: tenderness, admiration, altruism, hope. In my opinion, nothing is more motivating than the complementarity of negative emotions (such as indignation in the face of aggression) and positive emotions (such as appreciation for what is threatened and the desire to protect it).

Many artists confronted with the ecological crisis act as whistleblowers (which provokes negative emotions). I do this myself in my texts, but in my images, I invite contemplation (which provokes positive emotions).

We live in an age where contemplation, which was central to the birth of modern art, is widely dismissed as irresponsible in the face of the world's misfortunes. Yet, "contemplation is one of the most subversive attitudes of our time," dared to proclaim Jacques Ellul, one of the pioneers of ecological thinking.

Subversive and therefore misunderstood, going against the grain of our dominant ideologies that demand meaning, function, efficiency, and performance in everything.

It is not a question of rejecting all meaning, all function, all efficiency, all performance, but rather of not demanding them in every situation.

Meaning, function, efficiency, performance: these are buzzwords that reduce things and living beings to their productive value.

This represents a forgetting of the Being, to use Heidegger's term, and a contempt for otherness.

The contemplative attitude, understood as the ability to admire, restores the dignity of what we see before us and allows us to rejoice in its existence for its own sake, without expecting anything in return.

Here is a quote on this subject that I am fond of:

"Everything has either a price or dignity. That which has a price can be replaced by its equivalent; on the other hand, that which has no price, and therefore no equivalent, is that which possesses dignity."

(Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785)

*Homo oeconomicus* is so often incapable of contemplation, which is why he destroys our biosphere in the name of an equivalent that he identifies as power or wealth. But those who are capable of contemplation recognize the dignity of each ecological partner in the biosphere and refuse to replace it with a supposed equivalent. In this way, they establish a counterbalance to predation.

Admire! If only humanity could let go of its desire for hold and find pleasure in supporting what is, rather than consuming it.

The future will depend less on our power than on our thoughtfulness.

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