

# THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

## GIDEONSSON/LONDRÉ *I AM VERTICAL* FROM 29.6 TO 11.9.2018

EXHIBITION SERIES CURATED  
BY ALEXANDRA LAUDO

For the short memory of mankind, it is impossible to imagine that Mount Everest once was an ocean floor. What we measure as the highest altitude, the “roof of the world”, was once covered with water.

Johan Redin in private correspondence  
with Gideonsson/Londré

This is the road which I take, so that I may be quite sure of at last being alone.

Elisée Reclus, *Histoire d'une montagne*

The human body works particularly well at altitudes similar to those at sea level, where the atmospheric pressure and the percentage of oxygen in the air are high. This is largely because, throughout history, the spread of humans over the earth's surface has been principally guided by a logic of horizontality: groups mainly settled in plains and valleys, they plied the seas to inhabit islands, and many civilisations chose to put down roots at altitudes close to those of sea level. Nonetheless, humans have also shown a stubborn interest in exploring, conquering, and, as far as possible, occupying other places found on the earth's vertical axis: high mountains, ocean depths... As Gideonsson/Londré suggest, the colonialist urge that led European nations to dominate remote islands later developed into a nationalist drive to climb mountains, once the possibility of conquering the world horizontally had dwindled. But this “vertical colonialism” has always been kept in check by the fact that humans are physically unequipped for extreme depths and heights. Mountain climbers use the terms “vertical limit” and “death zone” to refer to areas more than 8,000 metres above sea level: altitudes where the level of oxygen in the blood drops drastically and it is very difficult to breathe. In other words, the start of the death zone is the upper limit for the existence of conditions that are favourable to human life. Beyond this point, inside the death zone, it is difficult for human beings to survive.

Gideonsson/Londré have investigated the effects of high altitudes on human beings and the way they favour states of isolation. The artists experienced these effects in person by engaging in mountain climbing expeditions and indoor training sessions simulating some of the conditions associated with these limit zones. Their project for Espai 13 is a video installation that explores the notion of vertically and also invites us to think of the world's highest mountains as islands, based on the fact that many of them were in fact once islands, and that some high mountain ranges have, functionally speaking, become land islands. The artists suggest that the horizontality of the sea leads us to see mountains as mountains, and islands as islands. If we ignore this marine division, the distinction between these geographical features begins to blur.

The installation *I Am Vertical* revolves around a video artwork based on a recording of one of the training sessions that the artists undertook in order to explore verticality and limit zones. In the video, filmed in a gym, we see an inversion exercise carried out repeatedly. One of the artists grasps a rope hanging from the ceiling, lightly rests her legs on a bar, and hangs upside down for long periods of time, until she weakens and falls. Hanging upside down is counter to the body's natural posture, and remaining in this position too long can lead to death, just like spending too long at altitudes beyond the death zone in alpine areas. Some of the bodily sensations resulting from hanging upside down are, in fact, similar to the physical effects of spending time in limit zones: lethargy, blurred vision, and reduced blood flow to limbs, to name a few.

As well as a physically gruelling training session, the action depicted in the video is also a poetry recital in spoken word style. As the artist hangs upside down and the blood rushes to her brain, she reads out a text, with increasing difficulty. The text talks about the process of climbing a mountain and the physical effects humans experience in vertical limit zones, about the history of mountain climbing, and also about death as a possibility, and even as a temptation. Like the filmed action, the speech is itself an

exploration of the notion of verticality, in this case through words, both in its content and in the form in which it is written and read. The text is in essay form, composed in poetic prose, syntactically fragmented, with short, often disjointed sentences, based on a cumulative rather than digressive logic. The words and the way they are recited appear to reflect a possible form of writing and speech befitting the limit zone: extreme, fragile, without formalities. During the laboured recitation, the speech is sometimes interrupted by the artist's gasps and groans when she falls, so that there is a blurring of the boundaries between the text and these other protolinguistic expressions.

In the video and the other elements that make up the installation, the artists use the lens of verticality to explore the way humans interact with the world. With a title borrowed from a poem by Sylvia Plath, Gideonsson/Londré's project reaffirms the verticality of human beings, which can also be understood as an expression of the condition of human culture. If we think of our vertical posture as a consequence of bipedal locomotion and a step forward in the hominisation process, it is easy to see it as a trait distinguishing *Homo sapiens sapiens* from the primates and other earlier human species, which were less erect and thus less advanced. In her poem, Plath refers to this verticality, but she also acknowledges the problems that arise from our singularity, from the self-awareness that makes us different, in a sense, from all other natural forms on the planet. "I Am Vertical", the title says, "But I would rather be horizontal", the first line continues, thereby expressing the philosophical and physical complexity of the human subject. These lines even indirectly suggest a certain wish to die, which Gideonsson/Londré also conjure up in their text. This desire resurfaces more forcefully a few lines later: "It is more natural to me, lying down. / Then the sky and I are in open conversation, / And I shall be useful when I lie down finally". In their project, Gideonsson/Londré also express this difficulty of recognising oneself as a human subject, upright and thus different from other animals. They do so through the metaphoric image of the vertical body turned outside down (in a posture that is also vertical, but unsustainable). Their project also talks about how these limit zones – the earth's vertical extremes – challenge and annul human verticality, which is much more fragile and modest than that of mountains.

The exhibition space contains other elements linked to the concept of verticality and the image of the inverted body, such as a shoe holder located on the ceiling rather than the floor, in which the artists have placed their mountain-climbing boots, upside down. There is also a series of sculptures based on a cross section of the top of the artists' heads and that are reminiscent of snow-covered mountain peaks. The artists have placed the sculptures of their heads at their own head-height. This emphasis on the body's extremes reflects one of the physical effects humans experience when they hang upside down, a position that causes pressure to build up in the head and feet. A series of vaulting boxes are also scattered through the exhibition space, suggesting training but also, symbolically, islands and mountains and the idea of climbing. Lastly, the graphic work *The World at 26,247 feet*, a totally white map with fourteen little holes, is displayed on one of the walls. The image recreates the idea of a cross section of the world at the height of 26,247 feet (8,000 metres), which is the start of the death zone. Everything below this altitude has disappeared from this horizontal cross section of the world, leaving only the peaks that are vertically most distant from the earth, in the form of small gaps, like islands in an invisible landscape.

Alexandra Laudo

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With the collaboration of:  
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