

An aerial photograph of a rugged, snowy landscape. The foreground and middle ground are covered in a thick layer of white snow, interspersed with dark, craggy rocks. To the left, a body of water is visible, with thin, dark lines of ice or submerged vegetation extending into it. The overall scene is desolate and cold, typical of a high-latitude environment like Greenland.

Rewiling Cultures Mobility Grant

Report of Art Residency in Greenland
“Investigations on Permafrost”.

Jean Danton Laffert
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THE AUTHOR

My name is Jean Danton Laffert Parraguez. I born the 07 October of 1983 in Santiago, Chile.

I am a visual artist and docent, currently based in Netherlands. Bachelor Fine Arts Education, Master Media Arts from the University of Chile, and Master Fine Arts-Ecology Futures at St. Joost School of Arts, Netherlands.

My work embraces the intersections of art, science and ecology through mixed media installations including light, space, electronic systems and living material. I explore a hybrid aesthetic between the digital and the organic as bio-interfaces, reflecting on bio-political topics.

My creative method arises from the collaborative process, connecting diverse specialists such us scientists, artists and humanists. I have been docent at universities and schools, as well as research artist in laboratory FABLAB, University of Chile.



THE PROJECT

Is our idea of control and permanence of the ecosystem an accurate vision of reality? How do we face uncertainty and social resilience in our globalized era?

My project in residence, "Observations on Permafrost", explores a visual narrative around permafrost in the Arctic and its thawing process as traces of the current anthropological crisis.

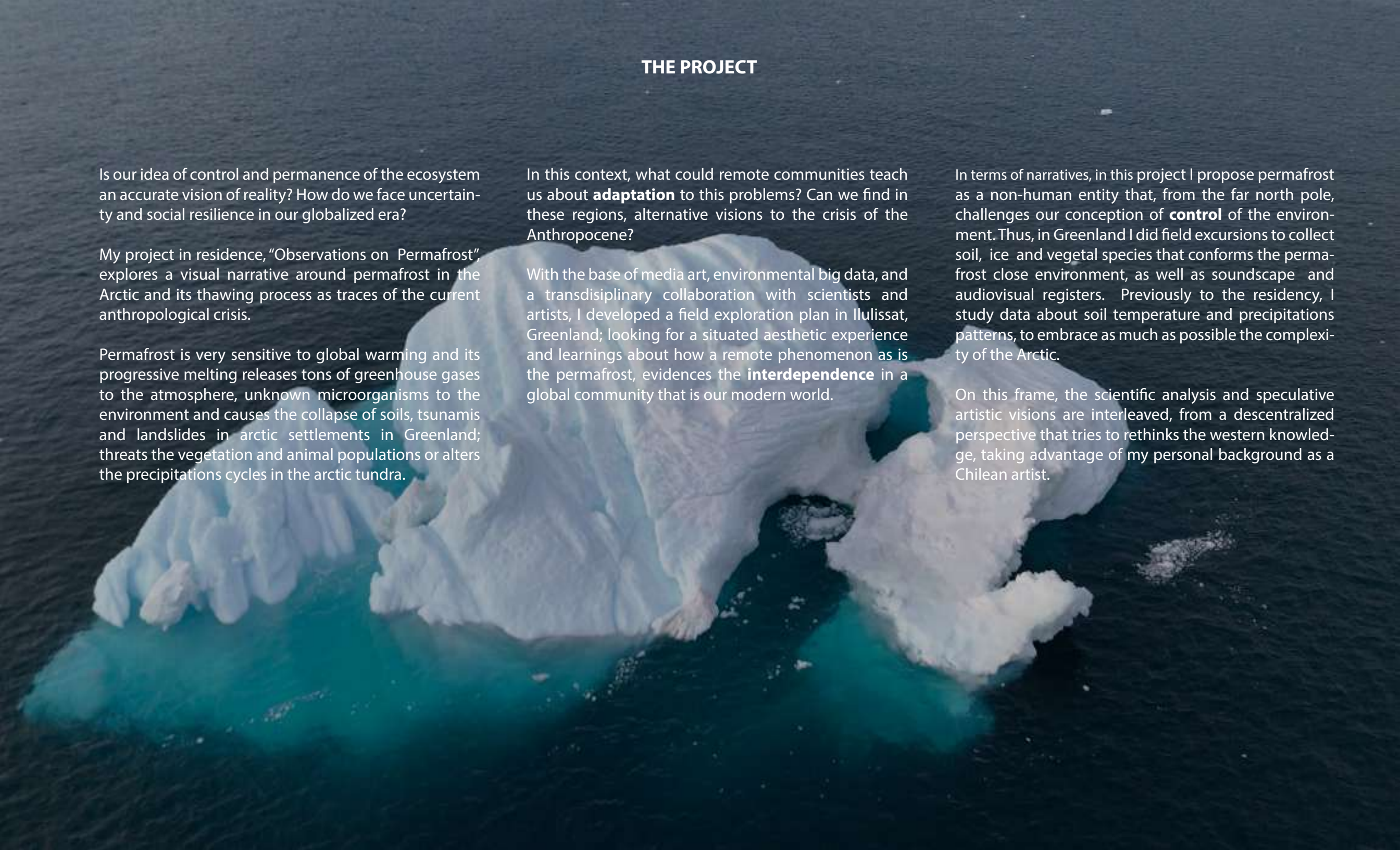
Permafrost is very sensitive to global warming and its progressive melting releases tons of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, unknown microorganisms to the environment and causes the collapse of soils, tsunamis and landslides in arctic settlements in Greenland; threatens the vegetation and animal populations or alters the precipitations cycles in the arctic tundra.

In this context, what could remote communities teach us about **adaptation** to this problems? Can we find in these regions, alternative visions to the crisis of the Anthropocene?

With the base of media art, environmental big data, and a transdisciplinary collaboration with scientists and artists, I developed a field exploration plan in Ilulissat, Greenland; looking for a situated aesthetic experience and learnings about how a remote phenomenon as is the permafrost, evidences the **interdependence** in a global community that is our modern world.

In terms of narratives, in this project I propose permafrost as a non-human entity that, from the far north pole, challenges our conception of **control** of the environment. Thus, in Greenland I did field excursions to collect soil, ice and vegetal species that conforms the permafrost close environment, as well as soundscape and audiovisual registers. Previously to the residency, I study data about soil temperature and precipitations patterns, to embrace as much as possible the complexity of the Arctic.

On this frame, the scientific analysis and speculative artistic visions are interleaved, from a decentralized perspective that tries to rethink the western knowledge, taking advantage of my personal background as a Chilean artist.





THE SITUATED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

“Observations on Permafrost” is a project related to a local field experience in the arctic. Normally, people from urban areas or big cities do not have access to this remote places, and sometimes they not connect with the arctic problems and their importance for all of us.

In this sense, capturing the life of local people, including Inuit communities, was an important point in the residency an the future creative results.

Permafrost is very present in the common life of greenlandics, so their perception is key to integrate the human factor in my project.

PREVIOUS STEPS

I started this project in July 2023, in collaboration with Runa Magnusson, a permafrost scientist from Wageningen University.

Initially, this project was born as a thesis research for the Master of Fine Arts - "Ecology Futures", which I was pursuing at St. Joost School of Arts in the Netherlands. After a period of theoretical research and small experiments, in March 2024 I participated in the Ars Bioarctica Residency. That was my first field exploration in Finnish Lapland, and my first insights into permafrost and its ecological network: the ice, soil, mosses, lichens, reindeers and the weather. All of this defined my initial stage of exploration.

In August 2024 I finished the Master Ecology Futures with a prototype of an art installation. After this I prepared the Greenland residency in Arctic Culture Lab for October-November, with the support of Rewilding Cultures Mobility Grant.



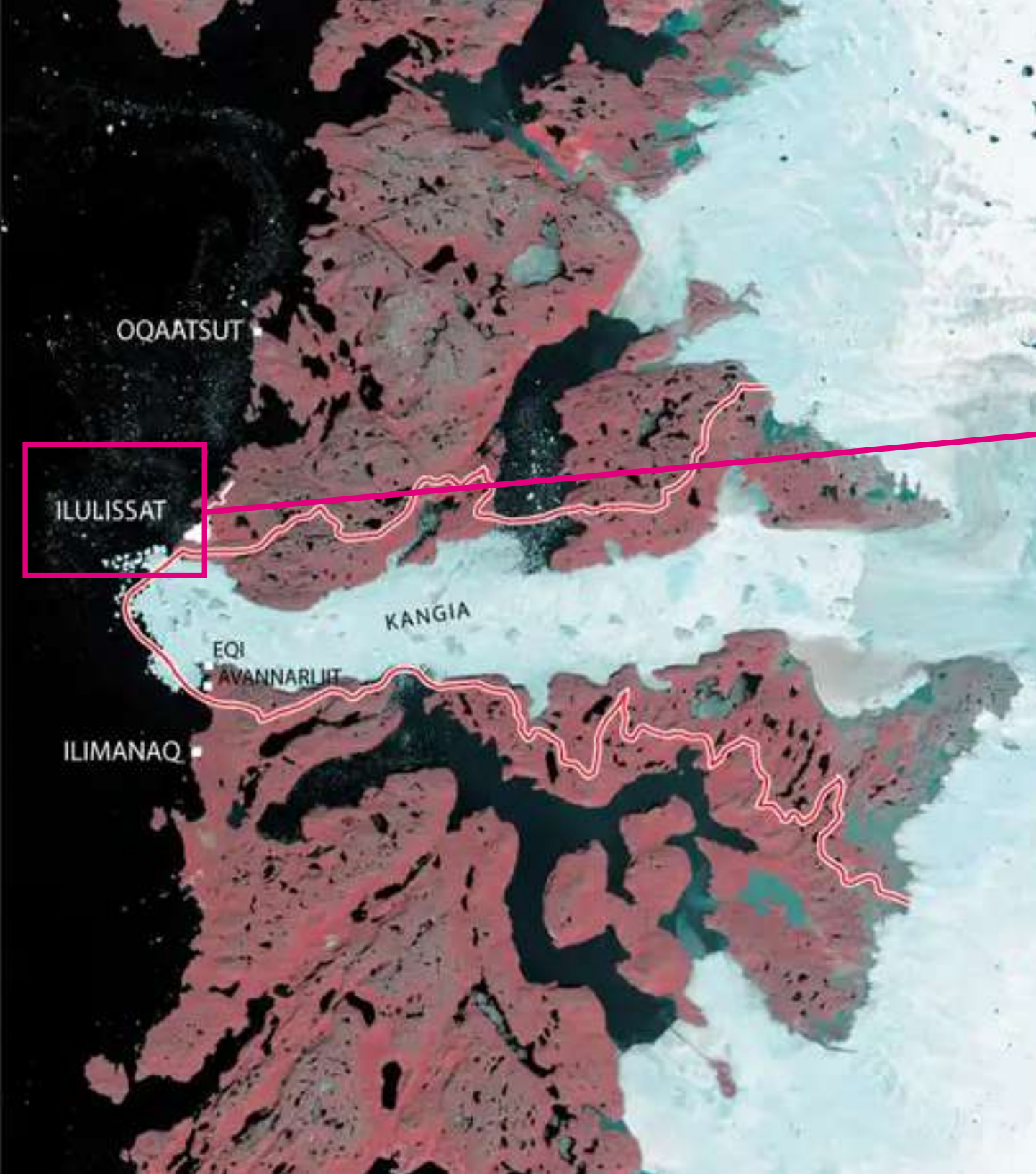
Left: Images of an art installation presented in August 2024 at St. Joost School of Arts, Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands. Right: Residency in Ars Bioarctica in Lapland, Finland in March 2024.

THE MOBILITY

In the next pages I present a brief description of the various activities carried out during a month-long residency at the Arctic Culture Lab in Ilulissat, Greenland.

These activities are diverse and include outdoor excursions, sailing, visits to settlements and artistic, cultural and educational outreach activities.





THE LOCATION

The residence is located in Ilulissat, a small town on the west coast of Greenland. It is very close to the Kangia Glacier and surrounded by numerous fjords, as well as settlements to the north and south of that area.

I arrived in Ilulissat by plane, in three stages:

- Day 1) From Amsterdam to Copenhagen.
- Day 2) From Copenhagen to Greenland.
One-day stopover in Kangerlussuaq.
- Day 3) From Kangerlussuaq to Ilulissat.

THE EXPLORED AREA

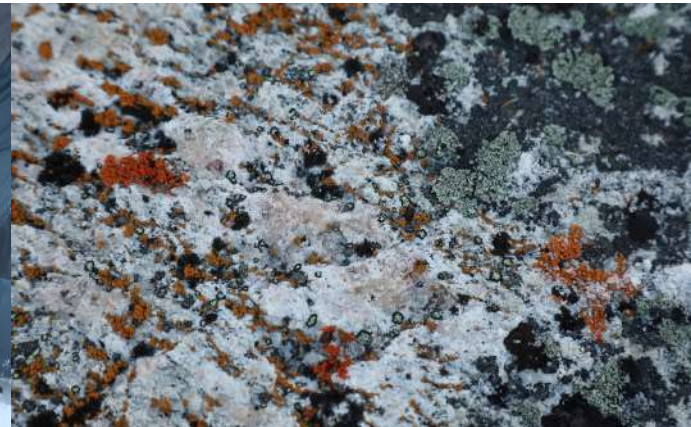
The settlements I visited frequently during my stay were Oqaatsut (north) and Ilimanaq (south). I arrived by boat.

In the area around Ilulissat, I went on hikes and field explorations on the fjord coast and inland, as well as sailing through part of the sea area of the icefjord.



FIELD EXCURSIONS

Excursions to different areas of Ilulissat. The aim was to take soil samples and collect plant species in open fields and fjord coasts, where traces of landslides and tsunamis linked to the melting of permafrost are found.



SETTLEMENTS

Located in remote areas of the west coast of Greenland, many of the settlements are only accessible by helicopter or boat. We used the latter option.

On these trips we visited, together with the collaborating photographer and a guide, different locations in the villages, houses and areas that have been affected by previous landslides caused by permafrost. We talked to local people about this, as well as learning about their daily life and their personal view of climate change in Greenland.

I also collected soil samples and plant elements from that area, as well as soundscape recordings, photos and videos.





Above: Spontaneous meeting at a cultural house in Oqaasut. From left to right: Ivan Matrosov, trip guide; me; Oqaasut inhabitant; Wanda von Bremen (photographer, co-resident artist and partner in the project).

All the images belongs to Oqaasut and Ilimanaq settlements, captured with drone and reflex camera.





Husky dogs in Oqaatsut settlement.

PERMAFROST SOIL EFFECTS ON BUILDINGS

Beyond the general effects of landslides and tsunami across Greenland, there are certain buildings with particular significance to the society. One of them is the Ilulissat Historical Museum, part of the town's history and a house that highlights the controversies of the issues of permafrost melting in the city; a time-less mirror of the human relationship with the land and climate.

During my residency, I gave special attention to this building. It shows a great unevenness in its constructive base, risking its collapse in future years. Thanks to the support of Andreas Hoffman, one of the directors of the museum, I was able to access the internal spaces of the building and check the exact degree of unevenness and deterioration of its structure, all due to the melting of the permafrost which year by year is increasing





In some sessions I studied the floors of the large, medium and small houses in the museum. I measured their internal and external slopes, as well as reviewing historical records and photographs of the houses, thanks to the guidance and support of Andreas Hoffman and the museum management.

I made video recordings and photographs. I consider making an eventual 3D model using photogrammetry techniques. I also took floor samples.

With all this I can explore the possibilities of a future artistic installation that includes the progressive slope of this floor over time. Thus, this place was a key point in my residency.



Above: Unevenness in the three adjoining houses that make up the Historical Museum.

Mid-above: Alteration in the staircase between the two houses.

Right: Cracks produced in the base of the building due to the pressure of the building on the ground as it sinks over the years due to permafrost melting.



Measurements of internal unevenness of the building's floor.



KEY SITES EXPLORATIONS

The effects of permafrost thawing on the urban development of Ilulissat are significant. For some years now, government authorities have been working together with private companies to design a new sustainable, climate-resilient development plan in Greenland with a special focus on permafrost. I visited two important projects:

I) New Ilulissat Airport (above). Since 2022, land transformation works are underway, removing the entire underground layer of permafrost to have a stable base for the new airport, as the current one has suffered serious unevenness and damage due to permafrost thawing in recent years. We made videos, photos and an interview with an engineer in charge of the project.

II) New housing projects (below). I visited a site preparation project for a retirement home. In this work, part of the underground permafrost layer was removed with machine excavations at the red X marks. We spoke to the project manager, who explained the technical details as well as his impression as a citizen of the effects of climate change on everyday life in Ilulissat.



LINKAGE ACTIVITIES

ILLU science & art

Illu is a centre that serves as a meeting place for the local community, where artists and scientists organise regular activities open to the public. It was established by the University of Bergen (UiB), together with partners from the ClimateNarratives project, in collaboration with Avannaata Kommunia.

I was invited to participate in artistic events such as the presentation of “Whispers of the sea”, an interactive performance installation by Birgitte Bauer-Nilsen, a Danish choreographer. Here I established important links with artists and cultural agents from Greenland and Denmark.

Urban development plan and permafrost challenges

Meeting at Ilulissat Municipality

Meeting organised by the municipality of Ilulussat, inviting scientists, urban planners and designers to review from multiple angles the challenges of the city in relation to permafrost in urban and social planning, reflecting on the risks and opportunities.

As artists in residence we were invited by Andreas Magnussen, one of the participants.



LINKAGE WITH CULTURAL CENTERS

UNESCO Ice fjord Center

As part of the Arctic Culture Lab residency program I was invited to participate in activities at the Ice Fjord Center in Ilulissat. Here I meet Karl Sandgreen, the director of the center. Among other activities, thanks to Karl I engaged with local children through an art activity, I spoke with them and learned about their impressions of climate change and the effect of melting permafrost on their lives; something very present in their daily lives.

The center is now open to collaborate with me in future artistic projects.



The **Historical Museum of Ilulissat**: Here I got to know more deeply the culture and history of Greenland and its people, their language, technology and their old relationship with the European pioneers.

At the **Art Museum** I had access to the state of contemporary art from both local and international artists. I connected with different approaches on topics involving Greenland and its relationship with global tendencies.

Both institutions are linked to the Arctic Culture Lab residency, so I had direct access to its libraries, facilities and people.



EDUCATION

As I mentioned, it was very important for me to explore the human aspect of the permafrost phenomenon in Greenland. So, on my own initiative, I carried out an activity in a school in Ilulissat to find out the children's impressions on this topic.

I offered a one-day workshop to the Mathias Storch School and was very well received by the coordinators and teachers. After two weeks of coordination I held a conversation session with the students, about permafrost in their daily life. I encourage them to express this with basic art materials plus samples of lichens and mosses from the area that I collected on my field trips. It was a beautiful and enriching opportunity for both the children and me. Their writings and artistic creations will serve as a reference for my future artistic project.

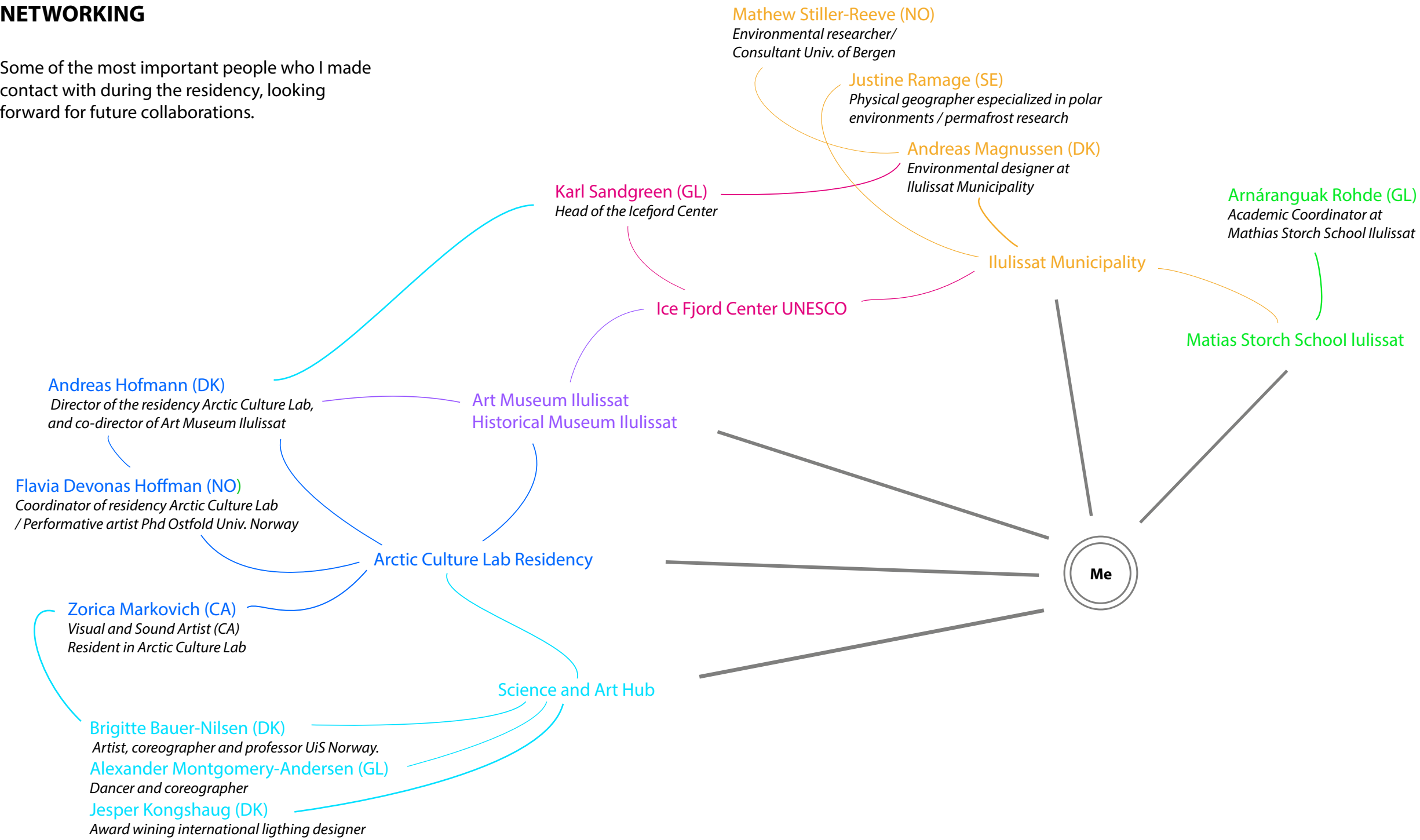




City of Ilulissat. Coastal view

NETWORKING

Some of the most important people who I made contact with during the residency, looking forward for future collaborations.



An aerial photograph of a white ship and a red car on a vast, cracked, and fragmented ice field. The ship is positioned in the upper right, and the car is in the lower left. The ice is a mix of white and light blue, with dark cracks separating the pieces.

FUTURE STEPS

With all this experience I plan to make a mix media installation for exhibitions in Europe in 2025 or 2026. I am currently working in the next steps for carry out this.

Some possible platforms are the Art Hub Copenhagen in Denmark, Bioart Society in Helsinki and the Arctic Symposium in The Hague, Netherlands. In parallel, I am in conversations with the Art Museum and the Science-Art Hub in Greenland, to exhibit there through the gestions of Andreas Hoffman.

Finally, I also have the prospective of a residency in Chile in 2026, to complement the arctic experience in Greenland and Finish Lapland with the austral zone in Chilean Patagonia or Antarctica.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The whole impact that I spect for this project is not only about art exhibitions, but also for education and talks. I think that I can contribute with this, to the global reflections about climate change. As Bruno Latour coins, "There is a esicion between nature and culture in the modern times". This project looks also to capture, as much as possible, a non-western vision in contrast with the single scientific knowledge and our classical perspective of nature in western societies. In this sense, the participation in transdisciplinary symposiums and cultural networks related to art and ecology are relevant.



Jean Danton Laffert 2024

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