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'End of Times; Beginning of Times': The ARoS Triennial in Denmark Stares Down Climate Change



As the sun started setting around 10 p.m. in Denmark, attendees at a reception on the rooftop of the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum included a lot of Scandinavians but also Rirkrit Tiravanija, Doug Aitken, and Meg Webster, all assembled amid an otherworldly vibe on a balmy June evening. The setting wasn't the typical go-to for congregation, but part of the art world descended upon the post-industrial city of Aarhus for a good reason—the new ARoS Triennial. The citywide showcase features 140 artworks, 23 of which are commissions, in a show with a theme: "The Garden—End of Times; Beginning of Times."

Sprawling from the city's monolithic brick museum to an urban beach and a nearby forest, the triennial opened its first stage in April and continues through September, with the offsite program running through July 30 and the museum show on view into the fall. Aarhus is a three-hour drive from Copenhagen, a somewhat remote home for fish, rocky beaches, and lager beer. The art scene consists mostly of the museum and a handful of galleries, but Aarhus also happens to be this year's

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European Capital of Culture, which means it was chosen by the Commission of the European Union to host year-long cultural events with a budget of €1.5 million (approximately \$1.7 million).



Claude Lorrain's *Landskab med Flugten til Egypten*, ca. 1646, in the ARoS Triennial.

With the world's ecological crisis at the forefront, the ARoS Triennial taps into the ever-growing problem of climate change at a time when science-hostile governments are seizing power and influence. The exhibition is parceled into three sections: "The Past," "The Present," and "The Future." The first portion ("The Past") opened at the museum on April 8 but didn't have its opening party until June, as the weather was so bad. "It was minus-zero weather in April," the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum's director, Norwegian Erlend Høyesteren, said with a cold stare.

The idea for the exhibition came about a few years ago as a bit of a joke. "Our first idea was, Let's make a fake triennial—something that looks, smells, and tastes like a triennial but isn't actually one, in that it won't happen again," Høyesteren said. "Then we realized we don't actually have a triennial on this large scale in Scandinavia at all. We thought, We can make a difference with this. We should do a triennial concerning nature and environmental issues."

"The Past" surveys the conception of the garden in the history of art, whether in luscious landscapes of the Romantic era or Land Art masterpieces by Robert Smithson. There are oil paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and Edvard Munch alongside sculptures by Olafur Eliasson and Yinka Shonibare MBE.

Meanwhile, "The Present" and "The Future," both of which opened in June, suggest how humanity has destroyed nature but, also, what we can still do to help. Environmental artist Meg Webster is showing *Concave Room for Bees* (2016), a large outdoor garden covered in soil, plants, flowers,

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and herbs so that honey bees—which are on the decline—can pollinate. “Pollination is a big deal,” Webster said. “It’s important to be doing this for animals, creatures and insects which foster the environment everywhere.”



Katharina Grosse's untitled work in Aarhus.

Some citizens of Aarhus are not especially used to public art. When the Berlin-based artist Katharina Grosse was covering a huge swath of grass in red and white spray paint, someone called the police. The concerned local had suspected the artist was vandalizing the park and, according to newspaper reports, told the authorities that “everything was smeared in this destructive, poisonous color.” Similarly, organizers notified the local fire station in advance about Fujiko Nakaya’s “fog” installation—a piece made with 2,000 smoke machines—atop the ARoS Museum, lest worried citizens see a fleet of smoke and think the building is on fire.

Some works are shown more safely indoors, like Los Angeles artist Doug Aitken’s *The Garden*, a new installation inside a warehouse in the city’s barren industrial district. In Aarhus, Aitken created an “anger room,” a designated space where people can destroy an area filled with cheap IKEA furniture with a baseball bat. Sign-ups are available on the triennial’s website and all 15-minute stints inside the anger room are live-streamed.

“It came out of this idea that we seek to control and defy nature,” Aitken said of the work set inside a tropical plant incubator. “I wanted to have something that was occupied, where the viewer is both a viewer and a participant. I was interested in a natural habitat in a closed surrounding. It has its own ecosystem, but it also has a deprivation.”

Over on Stranden Beach—a rocky, windy beach that was serene but a bit chilly—Tiravanija, with Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, created an outdoor pavilion called *Do We Dream Under the Same Sky*, which is an expanded version of their pavilion launched at Art Basel in 2015. Until the end of the July, they are screening films that address the human relationship to nature. They’re also

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hosting sustainable cooking sessions with locally-sourced ingredients and a series of talks with environmentalists, climate change specialists and scientists.



Katharina Grosse's untitled work in Aarhus.

“We’re using it as a kind of lab,” said Tiravanija. “Part of it is a living space and an infrastructure for a meeting place, a kitchen, and exhibition space.”

On the whole, in line with its theme, the ARoS Triennial aspires to provide a breath of fresh air that can be bracing too. Even if putting itself risk for, as Høyersten noted, being heroic, the exhibition takes the world and some of its most pressing problems as its charge.

“Nature and environmental issues are the most important topics to address these days,” Høyersten said. “We want to affect change.”