

“Frank Thiel: Brazil Melt Down?,” *LoDown*, April 2014.



# FRANK THIEL: BRAZIL MELT DOWN?

What is typical for Brazil might be a topic of this issue, but we tried to blaze a trail around what you might not expect. Glaciers are something you will certainly not find in Brazil's vast climate zones, but still everything is possible for human contemplation. Frank Thiel, the acclaimed Berlin artist, sets this topic in motion or better yet, in stills. Thiel is no stranger to the country of Brazil, he's had a lot of exhibitions in Brazil so far and contributed to the the XXV Bienal de São Paulo. His latest body of work entitled 'Nowhere is a Place' are large scale photographs of glaciers in Argentine Patagonia, now showing in an exhibition in São Paulo at Galeria Leme in May 2014.

The body of work includes Thiel's largest work to date, a 30-foot long, five-panel photograph of the leading edge of the Perito Moreno glacier in Los Glaciares National Park, which is part of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, the third largest ice cap in the world.

The expansive size of the photographs is crucial for Thiel, as he hopes to give the viewer an understanding of the imposing physicality of the glacial configurations, and to make them experience the seemingly endless variations of colors – from deep blue to slate grey – shapes and forms of these majestic ice walls in unknown detail. The technical aspect of creating those sharp images can fill some pages when you think of weather conditions, the resulting thermal currents of slipping down mountains of ice and the ever shaking ground of the ship you are on.

The images that Thiel has created for 'Nowhere is a Place' provide an opportunity for the viewer to experience the timeless and raw beauty of one of the purest landscapes on earth.

We asked Frank Thiel, what he expects from the viewer in Brazil, a country that is a stranger to ice but will be an endangered country to the effects of global warming due to the fact of its own massive deforestation and pollution of its waterworlds.

**Besides the perception of sheer overwhelming beauty of your pictures what else could be received by a São Paulo audience in terms of consciousness?**

I do not think art or artists have a special or even greater responsibility than any other person to participate in any kind of social debate. Given the scale and urgency of today's social problems, art is certainly not the suitable arena to address these questions or solve these problems even. My pictures of glaciers in the Argentine part of Patagonia are not part of a political agenda or strategy. First and foremost, they are a kind of reflection on the majesty and resilience, as well as on the fragility, endangerment, and mortality of these unique natural formations.

But it's been interesting to hear quite a few people talking about very existential questions while looking at the images, such as the limited nature of their own lifetime and the continuous destruction of our planet. To a large extent, the perception of images is closely related to the exhibition history of a country, its educational history, cultural traditions and historical and contemporary artistic practice. Showing these images in Brazil could be interesting because Brazilians - first of all - do not know ice and furthermore photography of this kind and size does not have a strong tradition nor is it a very common part of the country's artistic production.

**What do you think of the Brazilian path of growth - being the seventh largest global player in the world's economy?**

Having traveled to Brazil many times during the last 25 years doesn't automatically make you an expert on Brazil. Due to the high complexity of the country it very much keeps remaining an inscrutable mystery for "beginners".

In the 21st century it would be inappropriate to analyze a single country's economy separated from the world economy. Many of Brazil's problems are "homemade", but the North has no moral authority at all to deny, dictate or limit development and growth of other countries. A North who's dream of everlasting prosperity and unlimited rising wealth has caused and enforced growth problems to a large extent, one that has highly benefited from these self-afflicted global imbalances and injustice.

This primacy of economy and profit over other issues of the future in alliance with a largely unregulated and privatized economy and the almost messianic export of this "Allheilmedizin" as the one and only recipe for the whole world is the real problem.

By now there are several studies on the costs and consequences of this mantra-like growth ideology and short-term way of thinking that explicitly show that growth changes on the contrary and causes costs rather than profits.

Knowing that Brazil has only a 1 to 2 percent share in the whole world trade (which is less than Switzerland with its only 8 million inhabitants), knowing that a German worker is about four times more productive than a Brazilian - even with working less hours a day and knowing that Brazil's productivity has actually stagnated for the last three decades clearly shows you the nature of the country's economic problems. Europe lavishes praises first on the Lula administration and now on Dilma Rousseff's government for their economic policy obviously only because such limited kind of development serves the interests of the North much more and guarantees continuous profits. Social injustice seems to be the one and only field where Brazil can prove its world class status undisputedly. If Brazil succeeds to overcome the huge conflict between its "economic miracle" and its ongoing social crisis to achieve a socially fair, economically sustainable, and environmentally sound development has a vital and cross-border, if not global significance.

A radical, fundamental switch in the thinking and acting of the North would be a substantial contribution to Brazil's achievable success.

### **Is there an environmental movement found in Brazil?**

Drastically speaking, the country's culture is a culture of destruction. After role-playing the "ethical" opposition for more than 20 years the Workers' Party PT under Lula has integrated itself smoothly and highly pragmatically into the political system. But since the PT never holds more than 20 percent of the seats in the federation's parliament, the party relies on political alliances that reach deep into the conservative camp. And these coalitions based on rotten compromises are one reason that make the centre-left government susceptible to blackmail and corruption. The old demand of the PT for a fundamental political reform kept failing repeatedly because of the political majorities and was only taken up again by Dilma Rousseff just very recently. For the environment, the Dilma Rousseff government is the worst in history, primarily blackmailed by agribusiness and the energy, mining, lumber, and oil industry. Given the sheer size of the country and its population, the environmental awareness is generally very marginal. As with the North, the environmental organizations are "poisoned" with

urban-influenced economists, sociologists and anthropologists, who's emotional connection with nature is usually missing.

Nonetheless, half of the global killings of environmental activists do take place in Brazil. Environmental protection can be rapidly fatal in Brazil.

**In your work the topic is always construction and deconstruction as the main objective zooming in on the details of the process - this time you captured geophysics that are way beyond control of human power. Is this personal exploration and documentation a shift in your view towards things and systems?**

Only at first glance my new works seem far away and very different from my more than 20 year long, ongoing engagement with how the urban, political, cultural, and social changes in the post-wall Berlin inscribed themselves in the radically changing urban topography of the city. Even though it may look like eternity is my new subject, I actually have only spread my aesthetics of the incomplete over to this organic "architecture" and the more plodding pace of prehistory, executed with a very similar, almost archaeological eye for detail, composition, abstraction, and color. Only that these monuments of nature were sculpted and shaped out of ice over thousands of years and thus far more ancient and gradual than any human construction.

SKNY.COM  
WORDS: MRK

SPREAD:  
PERITO MORENO #16, 2012/13

ALL IMAGES COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK  
AND GALERIA LEME, SÃO PAULO





