

Gareth Harris, 'Treasure of Lima: A Buried Exhibition – absurdity or great art adventure?', *Financial Times*, 13 June 2014

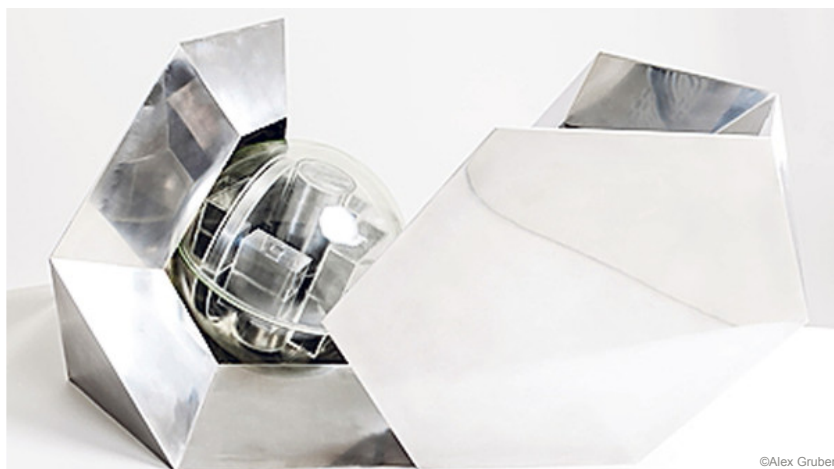
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Treasure of Lima: A Buried Exhibition – absurdity or great art adventure?

By Gareth Harris

A wildly ambitious site-specific show on an island off the coast of Costa Rica gathers works by 39 contemporary practitioners



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Once upon a time, on a lush island off the coast of Costa Rica, a young art curator decided to brave the choppy seas riddled with whitetip reef sharks and bury treasure in a secret spot. This glittering hoard does not consist of gold and silver but an asset even more highly prized by some: contemporary artworks by leading artists.

This is no fairytale. *Treasure of Lima: A Buried Exhibition* is a wildly ambitious site-specific show based on the Isla del Coco in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Works by 39 contemporary practitioners, including Marina Abramovic, Olafur Eliasson, Pierre Huyghe, Ed Ruscha and Angela Bulloch, are concealed in a secret spot on the tropical site: works on paper, sculpture, vinyl LPs, and digital and audio files are encased in a compact 80cm-wide, vacuum-sealed steel container designed by New York-based architects Aranda/Lasch.

There are already treasure legends linked to the island, including the saga of the British trader Captain William Thompson, who supposedly buried ingots, coins and a gold statue of the Virgin Mary on Cocos around 1820. The fabled stash is known as the Treasure of Lima. Today's island intervention is spearheaded by Nadim Samman, the curator at Vienna's TBA21-Academy, an offshoot of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary foundation founded in 2002 by art patron Francesca von Habsburg.

This archduchess is known for pioneering "experimental art programmes", and this so-called "fellowship organisation", described as an "itinerant site of cultural production and interdisciplinary exchange", brings together artists, scientists and thinkers. And on board a 129ft ship called Dardanella, Academy fellows can experience "a critical platform for redefining the expedition in the postcolonial era", says a press statement.

Samman's account of how they found the burial spot on the Isla del Coco, and the hazards faced, makes an engrossing yarn. "We discovered that a vessel can only be anchored in two of the island's bays. Following certain paths off these bays meant the island rangers would have a good idea about the location of our buried exhibition. How could we trust them, or even each other, not to reveal the location?" Samman asks earnestly.

According to legend, pirates usually killed their companions at the burial site to prevent the secret spilling out. Out of the question, perhaps, "though we did attempt to have our agreement with the [island] national park include a clause in which we would blindfold their appointed biological

observer,” Samman adds.

Surreptitiousness was everything: the artists must not, for instance, reveal details of their works. “In order to maintain secrecy we decided to land our ‘exhibition’ on a wild bit of coast far from human settlement. This meant floating all the elements of our chest to shore while negotiating some rather serious swell,” he says.



First mate of the Dardanelles Jacob MacDonald prepares part of the chest by Aranda/Lasch (Julian Charrier)

Samman stresses that “all the artists really embraced the perverse rhetoric of this initiative”. Perverse indeed if the works are never found or seen again. But fear not: the GPS coordinates of the exhibition location have been logged and digitally encrypted. These data have been given a 3D “physical form” by Dutch artist Constant Dullaart, and transformed into a scroll-like steel cylinder. The physical “map” will be encased in a second edition of the treasure chest, and consigned to auction later this year. The buyer has to crack the digital encryption to access the capsule. And the sale proceeds will be earmarked for a sustainable marine protection research project devised by TBA21-Academy in collaboration with La Fundación Amigos de la Isla del Coco, a local conservation group.

But buying the encrypted coordinates will not even guarantee access to the island or the chest – digging for treasure is banned on the island – so it remains to be seen whether contemporary art collectors will bid on a seemingly unobtainable collection. “This is an art world cocktail with all the right ingredients: a singular collector [Von Habsburg] with jet-set connections and a group of art market stars that make spectacular, entertaining art,” says Belgian collector Alain Servais.

For some, a hole in the ground is the best place for prime contemporary works. Bendor Grosvenor, director at the London-based Old Masters dealer Philip Mould, says: “An exhibition of works hardly anyone will ever see, which might as well not exist, but which, nonetheless, will fetch ‘record’ sums at auction: what better symbol of the more absurd end of the contemporary art market could there be?”

Such reactions are testament to the project’s potency. Yet Samman, who declined to give project costs, argues that the island endeavour highlights 21st-century cultural and economic issues.

“It plays with market-defined practices of ownership, it raises questions about the politics of access to art and unspoilt natural sites, and also prompts a debate about collecting.”

German artist Carsten Nicolai, who was part of the 14-strong expedition team, deposited a “huge collection of messages” in the container. He was overwhelmed by the experience. “It made me realise we should never forget our dreams and imagination . . . it was a real adventure in a classic sense,” he says.

The value of art now, and how we decide what is “precious”, comes under scrutiny through this bizarre but brilliant art adventure: a fitting fable for today.



The TBA21Academy expedition to Isla del Coco (Julian Charrier)



The chest floated ashore (Julian Charrier)

tba21academy.org/projects/treasure-of-lima/