

Nadim Samman, 'Art's own treasure island: the 'buried exhibition' that may never be found', *Guardian*, 26 May 2014

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Art's own treasure island: the 'buried exhibition' that may never be found

Circled by sharks and forbidden to humans, Isla del Coco is one of the most isolated parts of the planet. Why did the likes of Marina Abramovic and Ed Ruscha want their art buried there?

Nadim Samman
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The artworks are launched from the Dardanella on a raft and guided by divers to shore – through waters teeming with sharks. Photograph: Julian Charriere

How do you get some of the world's greatest artists to participate in an exhibition? Tell them you will do everything in your power to make sure no one ever visits the show. If you want them to contribute especially thoughtful works, swear to bury their offerings under mossy stones. And if you want a patron to back the project, explain that, instead of launching the event with champagne and canapes, they might find themselves standing kneedeep in mud with a shovel.

Two days' hard sail from the sweltering Costa Rican port of Golfito, [Isla del Coco](#) juts up abruptly from the Pacific deep. There is no way to fly in. The island covers just nine of the ocean's 64 million square miles, but the shallower waters around it are an important oasis – shelter and spawning ground for corals, a cornucopia of fish species, and legions

of predators. At any given moment, the island is circled by hundred-strong schools of hammerheads and a resident population of tiger sharks. It is here, far from the art world's madding crowd, that I – along with a motley crew led by the Swiss philanthropist Francesca von Habsburg – find myself swimming desperately for land, while the vessel that has brought us, the Dardanella, bobs safely offshore.

As we are taken rather too close to rocks by the churning waves, I wonder how many pirates landed on Coco this way. Perhaps the only place in the world where treasure-hunting is explicitly illegal, the island's jungle interior guards some enticing loot. Stories about what is buried here abound. The best known is that of the Treasure of Lima. In 1820, with the army of José de San Martín approaching, Peru's viceroy José de la Serna entrusted the gold from the city's cathedral to a British sea trader named Captain William Thompson. Instead of remaining in the harbour as instructed, Thompson and his men slit the throats of the viceroy's men and sailed to Coco. They were later apprehended and all of the crew bar the captain and his first mate were hanged. The lucky two were spared only after promising to guide their captors to the hoard – which included a solid gold statue of the Virgin Mary, ingots and coins worth many millions today. After arriving on Coco, the pair ran off into the trees, never to be found. Several treasure-hunting expeditions would later be mounted on the basis of claims by a man named Keating, who was said to have befriended Thompson on his deathbed in Newfoundland. Robert Louis Stevenson read about one such expedition in a San Francisco newspaper before writing *Treasure Island*, and some argue that the map he drew of his "fictional" isle closely resembles numerous treasure charts of Coco.

Our own expedition – called Treasure of Lima: A Buried Exhibition – aims to contrast all these legends of buried riches with Isla del Coco's real status: as a natural treasure worthy of protection. Works by 39 artists, ranging from Ed Ruscha to Marina Abramovic and Chicks on Speed, will be interred at a secret location. Then a map that may or may not make it possible to find them will be auctioned in aid of shark conservation. This kind of scheme does not usually get commissioned by cultural organisations, but ours, TBA21 Academy, has a unique remit – to bring artists and scientists together at sea, to engage with ecological issues, while steering clear of picturesque clichés and documentary exposés.

Earlier, my team-mates and I were, literally, thrown in at the deep end – swimming face to face with the sharks to make sure we understood the ecological aspect of our endeavour. After a few dives, even the most nervous among us had to concede admiration for these magnificent creatures. Now, nearing the shore, we grasp ropes once we can stand and begin to heave ashore a makeshift raft laden with artworks. When a wave picks it up, we have to pull left quickly, to avoid a crash into cliff face.



The steel chest filled with more than 30 artworks that has been hidden on Isla del Coco. Photograph: Alex Gruber/Aranda/Lasch

Every exhibition has its own method of display: ours is a container designed by New York architects Aranda/Lasch that looks nothing like wooden treasure chests of old. Its exterior is polished stainless steel, a truncated tetrahedron that opens to reveal a sphere. This oversized "pearl" is a vacuum-sealed glass vessel that would normally be used to protect underwater cameras. Instead, ours houses a series of aluminium boxes containing works on paper, small sculptures, LPs, video and sound files stored on a hard drive (that is as much detail as I can give, as this mystery is part of the concept). The whole ensemble looks like a kind of nuclear bomb. As the float carrying it tilts violently, I am worried that it will go off – the raft, that is – and sink to the bottom before we can bury it as planned.

Eventually, we get everything ashore and begin the hike, careful not to place our feet on mossy stones or in the ankle-snapping gaps between, lugging the dead weight past nests of brown boobys and their excrement. The chest glints like a mirror. It takes more than an hour before we can deposit everything at the bottom of a wall of basalt. When I look at our 14-strong team, now catching their breath before the final push, I can't quite believe we only received legal permission to go ahead two days ago – when we had already set sail.

I watch as the American artist Andrew Ranville climbs the damp rockface before setting up a ropeladder and another line. Piece by piece, the exhibition is hoisted up the cliff and then, finally, we reach our chosen spot. In a muddy grotto fringed by ferns, all the elements are assembled and the chest is locked. It is time to dig. Once buried, will the works ever be recovered?

Later, the GPS coordinates of our treasure will be digitally encrypted by the Dutch artist Constant Dullaart. The resulting string of code will then be given a physical form (a 3D-printed steel block) and placed in a second, unburied, version of our treasure chest. The

eventual buyer will get this "map" but not the key to decrypt it, while the money raised will go to a shark research and conservation project devised by TBA21 Academy in collaboration with La Fundación Amigos de la Isla del Coco (Friends of Isla del Coco) and Misión Tiburón (Shark Mission).



Curator Nadim

Samman (right) putting the Treasure of Lima artwork treasure chest in its hiding place.

Photograph: Julian Charriere

Whoever buys the encrypted map may have a better chance than most of reaching the exhibition, but the map does not guarantee possession – legally or practically. By adding a new treasure to Isla del Coco, we are both highlighting and challenging the regulations by which Costa Rica restricts access to this ecologically sensitive area. For the map-holder or any other treasure-seeker to experience the exhibition at first hand, the protection laws would have to be abolished (or not enforced). The recovery of the treasure would thus mean the loss of valuable environmental safeguards. This leaves the buyer with a moral quandary. They will have legally acquired some of the means by which to recover an amazing art collection; but in order to claim it, they may have to break the law. Which treasure matters more to them: the island or the art?

I thrust a shovel into the mud. Soon we're piling on rocks, digging them out of the soil with our bare hands, pulling them from under tree roots, kicking them down from higher ground, picking them up and laying them on. More slop and even bigger stones. It is buried. Francesca produces a plastic water bottle filled with rum and we all take large swigs. For the moment, there is nothing left to do but slip into a nearby pool and finish it off.

• More details: tba21academy.org