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The slopes and the glory

Penal Colony, a 10ft tall snow labyrinth by Yoko Ono and the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki

The Snow Show aims to take contemporary art off-piste, reports a shivering **MORGAN FALCONER**

The hand holding my Dictaphone has ceased to function and my toes are regretting my choice of footwear, yet all I hear are complaints about the heat. "It's one below zero," one man said to me. "And OK, that's great, but at one point last week it was plus eight! It was terrible! You could see grass!"

To be honest, you can appreciate his dismay, for with days to go until the opening of this singularly odd contemporary art exhibition, *The Snow Show*, at Sestriere in northern Italy, and two weeks from the start of the Winter Olympics, whose downhill events will play out just up the hill, all it will take to demolish the work is a nice day.

If the sun does shine too brightly, Lance Fung, the show's curator, will have to break some bad news to some very important people. Six artists are collaborating with six architects. Norman Foster has teamed up with the Spaniard Jaume Plensa to produce a plateau of snow on which is etched the global positioning co-ordinates of Foster's London office, Plensa's studio and Sestriere (when the figures fade, their unity dissolves as well). Yoko Ono has collaborated with the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki on a round, high-walled labyrinth. The sculptor Carsten Höller has worked with the American architects Williams and Tsien on a slide that may stretch up to 70m in length and through which as many as three riders can shoot at once. And Kiki Smith has joined with Lebbeus Woods to produce a perversely fast-ageing shrine to eternal youth: a snow statue of Alice in Wonderland, which will sit at the head of a lake of ice embedded with glowing lights.

In some measure the roots of the project lie in a visit Fung made to Scandinavia a few years ago. He was surprised at the ingenuity of the northern people in dealing with snow. But he says that the key inspiration

was his interest in bringing artists and architects together on a level playing field, a feat that he says is impossible in normal circumstances, when the options for both parties (and the possibilities for squabbling) are much wider.

Surrounded by acres of snow, you do rather wonder about Fung's emphasis, but he strenuously insists on it, sensitive, perhaps, to accusations that his idea is just a gimmick. ("Gimmick?!" he says with mock incredulity. "This project is a pain in the ass!"). The project was born in Lapland and, Fung says: "It was like working on a

slave ship. Machines froze, cameras froze. You can't work on ice at that temperature because it becomes too brittle. Your eyeballs can freeze over."

And even in Sestriere's "salubrious" conditions there are problems. The team prefer to build with artificial snow, as it is much stronger than natural snow when compacted. But it is expensive to produce. "We've produced about 6,000 cubic metres," says Jeffrey Debany, who, along with his fiancée Noemi Lafaurie, is part of Fung's core team. "Of that, we've only harvested about 15 per cent because you lose a lot from transporta-

tion — as you plough it gets compacted into the ground. And we're apparently on the highest golf course in Europe, so we can't mess with it. We've had to build a compacted snow road and that used about 1,000 cubic metres alone."

You could put all these problems down to the devilry of the primitive medium, but Fung and his team talk about it like structural engineers talking concrete (there are problems to ponder such as tensile strength, compression strength, slumping). And Fung has engaged the services of serious amateur snow sculptors to bring their knowledge to bear. Of course, although *The Snow Show* is a first for the contemporary art world, it is old news in the strange world of snow sculpture. "There are a lot of competitions around the world," Fung says. "The leaders are Sapporo in Japan and Harbin in China — they rule. They build replicas of the Taj Mahal, Big Ben. But their vision is different, they are creating images for the mainstream. We're dealing with leading artists and architects to try and create conceptual projects."

Put like that, you would think that Fung could continue with this indefinitely, but actually this year's instalment will be the last. He has new goals and, you suspect, he is just tired of being cold. He hopes that his next project, entitled *Sink*, will take place under the ocean waves, and you'll have to snorkel to find it (negotiations continue about the location, but he hopes to be ready to stage it by next summer). Until then, Fung will be on the slopes.

"It's getting quite warm," he says to me, looking a little weary as we crunch our way up the slopes back to his makeshift office. Does that worry you, I ask? "A little," he sighs, "but it's just that I'm wearing three layers of thermal underwear."

The Snow Show opens to the public at Sestriere, Italy, on Monday. See www.thesnowshow.com

