Shame and Absence:

COLD DATA by Soft Turns at the G44: Centre for Contemporary Photography, Sep 19th - Nov

8th, 2025

When first entering G44: The Centre for Contemporary Photography at 401 Richmond, the first

thing you see is not a photograph, but a scale diorama of a data center. The model is easily the

biggest object in the room. This is the centerpiece of *Cold Data* (Fig 1) by Soft Turns, a

collaboration made up of Canadian artists Wojciech Olejnik and Sarah Jane Gorlitz. This

exhibition came about during their residency at G44 and ran from September 19th to November

8th, 2025.[1] The large model, the eponymous *Cold Data,* depicts a large data centre. The structure

is set on a large table and pushed up against the wall.

Figure 1. *Cold Data,* 2024, Diorama[2]

All sides are enclosed apart from the opening which faces a long bench for viewers to sit and

look inside. The model is similar to a shadowbox or a puppet theatre, or perhaps even a

dollhouse. The craftsmanship is quite remarkable; when one looks close enough, it feels as

though you are on a balcony looking down on a fully usable space. Strewn about the floors and

server towers of the diorama are piles of dirt, sprouting the first signs of plant life. Nearby, there

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[1] G44: Centre for Contemporary Photography,"Cold Data." *G44: Centre for Contemporary Photography*, October 11th, 2025.
https://www.gallery44.org/exhibitions/cold-data.

[2] Wojciech Olejnik, Sarah Jane Gorlitz, "Soft Turns," *Soft Turns*, accessed Nov, 10th, 2015.
https://www.softturns.com/index.html.

are two spray bottles of water, no doubt used to nurture their development. On the left wall there is a small tv playing a piece entitled *Reach* (Fig 2). The stop motion video work shows roots growing towards rocks. The point of view rotates around, with the roots acting as a gravitational center for the camera.
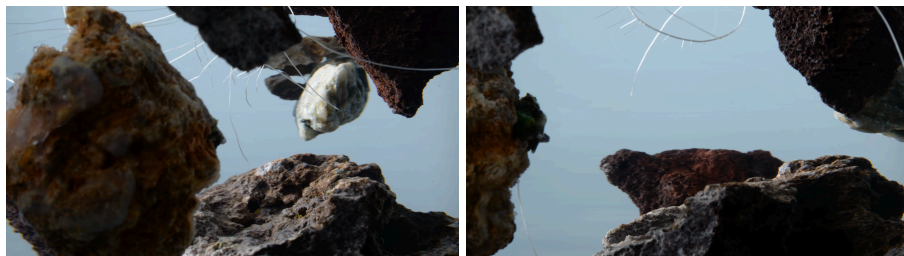

Figure 2. *Reach,* 2021, 6:21 loop, Stop-Motion Animation[3]

On the far right wall there are a series of three digital collages displayed, collectively entitled *Rare Earth* (Fig 3), depicting what look to be aerial images of forests, rolling hills, and farmland. Upon closer inspection, there are in fact images of circuit boards and machinery integrated into the landscape.

Figure 3. *Rare Earth,* 2024, Collage[4]

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[3] Wojciech Olejnik, Sarah Jane Gorlitz, https://www.softturns.com/index.html.

[4] G44, "Cold Data."

 In the corner of the gallery, behind a black curtain, is a viewing area. The video displayed here, also named *Cold Data* (Fig 4)*,* is the companion to the aforementioned diorama. The work consists of long shots and pans of the inside of the diorama. We can see areas that are easily viewable, as well as areas inside the model that are inaccessible to the eye in the gallery space. In the first shots, the data centre is clean and productive. The machines beep and whirr. As the video plays, clouds spread throughout the building and snow builds inside the core. After it dissipates, water pools on the floors. Dirt builds and plants begin to grow. At the end of each loop there is a statement reading:

> "When an HVAC unit failed inside an early Facebook data centre, an actual cloud formed
>
> And it began to rain."

Figure 4. Stills from *Cold Data,* 2024, 6:04 Loop, Stop-Motion Film (Photos taken by Author)

Soft Turns is composed of GTA based artists Wojciech Olejnik and Sarah Jane Gorlitz. They have been collaborating since 2007, and individually have careers spanning over 20 years.[5] As

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[5] Olejnik and Gorlitz, "Soft Turns."

Soft Turns, they have built a body of work focused on both stop motion video and installation work. Within their oeuvre, space is a common denominator, particularly how we move through it or how it moves around us.

Figure 5. Stills from *bimensions,* 2008, 3:39 Loop, stop-motion animation[6]

In their 2002 video piece *bimensions* (Fig 5)*,* they created two environments from one material, a cave and a parking garage. Similarly to *Cold Data*, the shots are still, slow, deliberate, focusing on environmental storytelling and atmosphere. 2008's *Cloudbuster* (Fig 6)follows this filmic tradition. In this piece, we go through a diorama of a dilapidated house, not sure if we are inhabitant or intruder.

Figure 6. Stills from *Cloudbuster,* 2008, 4:50, stop-motion animation[7]

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[6] Olejnik and Gorlitz, "Soft Turns."

[7] Olejnik and Gorlitz, "Soft Turns."

If we go even further, into each artist's individual body of works, we can see the thematic and material building blocks that led to the pieces we see in *Cold Data.* In a series of paintings by Gorlitz entitled *New Space,* she expresses a deep fascination with the details that make up the wholeness of a space. In *In the Corner* (Fig 7) she renders the corner of a room, focusing not on the use of the space, but the tiled floor and the point of view of, presumably, herself. The point of view is distinct, it draws attention to itself and it is not hard to imagine how this artist would transition to a filmmaking practice, with an emphasis on frame of view.

Figure 7. *in the corner,* 2010, 70cm x 88cm, Oil on Canvas, 2011. [8]

Olejnik's take is less affectionate. In his series *Invisible Bunkers* (Fig 8)*,* he creates scale models of German World War 2 bunkers, which line the coast from France to Norway, out of malleable clear plastic. In a piece he wrote on the project, Olejnik referenced artist Leon Golub's painting entitled *Mercenaries III* (Fig 9)*:* "...This space, this absence, disintegrated what seemed obvious. I was left to witness what a text apparently cannot provide, because here the spatialization of

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[8] Olejnik and Gorlitz, "Soft Turns."

absence took place…"[9] Although he explains this in reference to a specific piece, this idea of absence is a strong thematic throughline for their work. They lack people and figures, and this absence is painfully apparent.
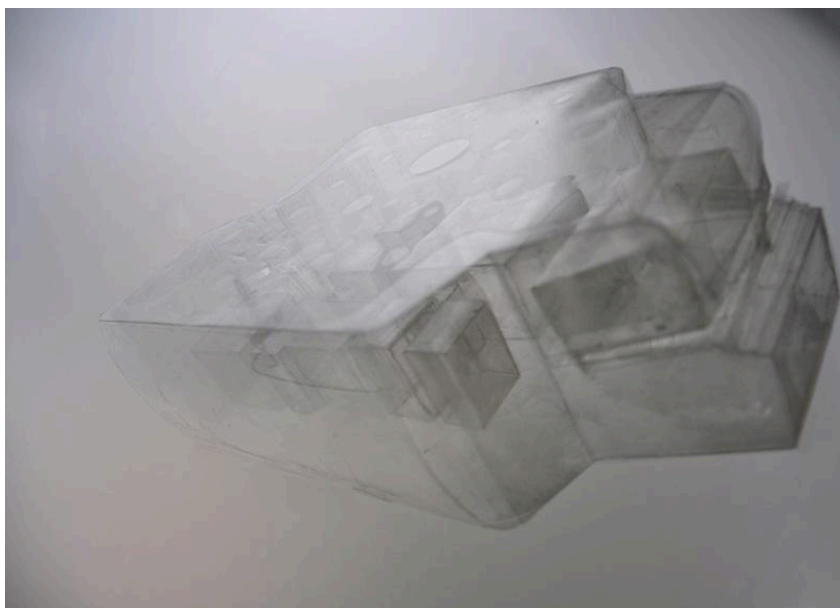

Figure 8. *invisible bunker 53 (regelbau m 262),* 2012, digital image.[10]

Figure 9. *Mercenaries III,* Leon Golub, 1980. Acrylic on Linen.[11]

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[9] Wojciech Olejnik, "Invisible Bunkers," 2012.
https://www.softturns.com/PDF%20files/Wojciech%20Olejnik%20-%20Invisible%20Bunker.pdf.

[10] Olejnik and Gorlitz, "Soft Turns."
[11] Leon Golub, *Mercenaries III*, 1980, acrylic on Linen, 120 x 198 in., Los Angeles.

Most of all, both individually and as a collective, Soft Turns has been using art as

documentation. They have built an artistic practice on archiving the technical physicality of

spaces, as well as creating a taxonomy of the affects associated with them.

During their residency at G44, Soft Turns worked closely with Writer-In-Residence,

Weiyi Chang.[12] In conjunction with the exhibition, Chang debuted an essay also entitled, *Cold*

Data. In this she explains how she lives only a few blocks north of a massive data centre. There

are hundreds of data Centers in the GTA alone, and more on the way with the increased global

interest in AI development. She writes:

> What if, instead of seeing technology as an omnipotent, semi-autonomous force, we
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> recognized it as a human construct, subject to the same vulnerabilities and weaknesses as
>
> ourselves? How might an emphasis on technology's material basis shift the dynamics of
>
> power between end-users and big tech, between black-boxed algorithms and the people
>
> they feed from?[13]

Each piece Soft Turns creates is preserving a place/moment in time, usually in the *past*, whether

it's a German bunker, the details of a tiled room, or a parking garage. By creating a data centre,

they are dealing with an object with significant ties to the *future*. Certainly their most political

piece so far, it's easy to get caught up in the craftsmanship of the diorama. The film is almost

sensationalistic in its effect on the body. At first you are not sure what you are seeing. Your back

perks up.It has the same images as a science fiction film, a video game, or even a table top RPG.

It clicks, you are seeing the inside of the diorama that is sitting just outside. As the video

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[12] G44, "Cold Data."

[13] Weiyi Chang, "Cold Data," booklet at G44: Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto, 2025.

continues to play, the servers break down, and the entire structure begins to disintegrate, evoking a theme of environmental collapse.

Environmentalism and climate change are not rare topics in the art world, but few evoke a sense of shame as effectively as *Cold Data* does. Technology is all around us, it is so deeply integrated in our lives and a lot of the time we do not confront the actual contributors of ecological collapse, just the results. Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (Fig 10) is a project that immediately comes to mind. Eliasson takes blocks of ice from Greenland to locations in Paris, Copenhagen, and London.[14] Here, the public can walk among the large pieces of ice, interact with them, and ultimately watch them melt. It is fun, family friendly, albeit slightly melancholic, but not immediately shameful. The spectacle of the piece overshadows any actual connection with the thematic material. The shame is diluted because the blame is placed on some metaphysical idea of a whole. This piece perfectly represents the pitfalls of so-called relational aesthetics. The involvement of the public takes precedent over actual explicit political thought. Claire Bishop writes "the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic (...) since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness."[15] In other words, *Ice Watch* can not start a constructive dialogue because there is no room for argumentation or blame.

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[14] *Ice Watch*, Olafur Eliasson, Tate Modern, London, 2014.

[15] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, Autumn, 2004, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004): 67.

Figure 10. *Ice Watch,* Olafur Eliasson, 2014. Photo: Justin Sutcliffe.[16]

In *Cold Data,* however, there is a clear antagonism, a connection deeper and darker. Society, we did this. What are we going to do about it? In the film, we are the camera, viewing this monument to technological advancement. We can literally see so-called human ingenuity disintegrating before our eyes. In Prehistory of the Cloud, Tung-Hui Hu puts it quite succinctly, writing that "The cloud is both an idea and a physical and material object, and the more one learns about it, the more one realizes just how fragile it is."[17] Nature takes over the structure, and you cannot help but cheer for it. In an essay entitled *Universal, Timeless, Celestial*, written and released during the construction of the diorama, Chang touches on the initial conceptual core of the project: "When we use nature metaphors to describe mechanical and technological entities, we naturalize and neutralize the man-made systems and structures that increasingly delineate our lives. The concept of the Cloud is one metaphor that has come under scrutiny as of late."[18] With the rise of AI and its controversies related to its carbon emissions, water usage, and electronic

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[16] Eliasson*, Ice Watch.*

[17] Tung-Hui Hu, *Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 1.

[18] Weiyi Chang, "universal, timeless, celestial." *G44: Centre for Contemporary Photography,* November 2023.

waste, these observations are especially poignant. Our technologies, the things we depend on every day, or the things we get excited to see develop, are not some distant abstract puff of air, nor do they occur naturally like actual clouds. They are boxes of circuits and wires, which require minerals to be built and water to cool them. They are tangible things that can, and have, destroyed our ecosystem.

   Cold Data is a bleak image of what is to come, and is one which you cannot look away from. It is a meditation on our preferences as a society for technological advancement rather than ecological harmony. This small data centre is made by human hands, although it lacks the obvious tangibility of a clay pot, for example, it is impossible to imagine it made in any other way. One can imagine the painstaking process of building it. Viewers are forced to stare down the reality of our technological age, and at first it is to marvel at the artistry of the piece, then recoil at the grim ecological reality. Unfortunately, compared to the centrepiece in the diorama and accompanying film, the other pieces fall to the wayside. *Reach* and *Rare Earth*, while fascinating in their own right, do not add anything to the exhibit, just reaffirm the ideas in *Cold Data.* However, the experience is still powerful, thought provoking, and a masterful piece of documentary.

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