

# Saving Precarious Seeds:

## Visualisations of Care and Control in Global Seed Banking



### ***,The seeds that could save a post-apocalyptic world'<sup>1</sup>***

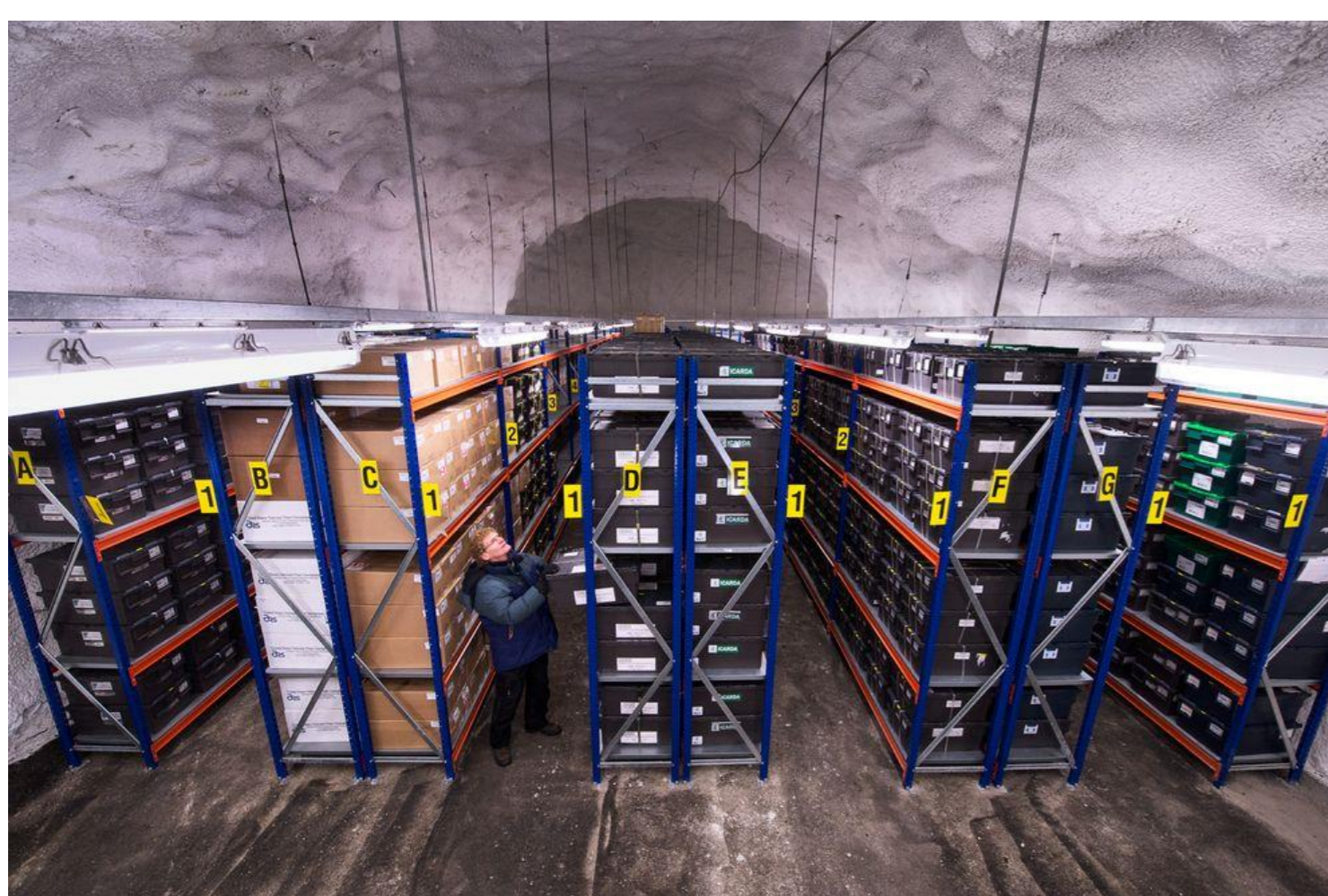
We are witness to a violent **loss of biodiversity** globally and experience the impacts of **anthropogenic climate change** on food security. Undeniably the Global South, home to most of the planet's biodiversity, is more vulnerable to this. Seed banks as a comforting 'solution' have captured imaginations since the launch of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in the Arctic in 2008. 'Norway's gift to the world', functions as a cryo-political **insurance system** - or rather an 'ideological mechanism of reassurance' (Demos, 2017)? - housing security deposits from a global network of seed banks.

Rooted in the symbolic optimism of the seed, seed banks are an affective '**doomsday metaphor**', both for the dystopian potential of a derailed neoliberal future as well as humanity's domination of 'nature'. Three case studies of seed banking practices offer divergent imaginaries of control, care and vulnerability from anti-capitalist sites of resistance to semi-nomadic precarious collections and bureaucratic risk managers.



Top & Bottom: Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Spencer Lowell, New York Times (July, 13th 2017)

To analyse the precarity that seed banks instrumentalise and are exposed to, I draw from a biopolitical reading of *slow violence* - ,a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (Nixon, 2011:2) as the context from which to investigate the roles of seed banks vis-à-vis inequalities produced by climate change, war or neoliberal capitalism. On this basis I consider how seed banks respond to this through the affective **imaging of temporality, vulnerability and care**.



Left to right: (1) Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Spencer Lowell, New York Times (July, 13th 2017); (2) Vandana Shiva in Navdanya Seed Bank (Navdanya website, 2018); (3) Ali Shehadeh, a plant conservationist from Syria..., Diego Ibarra Sanchez, New York Times (October, 13th 2017)

## Methodology

**Image and discourse analysis:** I investigate visual artefacts produced on and by selected seed banking practices - the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, the displaced ICARDA dry lands seed bank, originally in Aleppo, Syria, and the Navdanya grassroots seed-saving movement in India. Bringing together post- and decolonial theory, feminist Science and Technology Studies and affect theory in an iconographic and discursive analysis, I analyse how e.g. image material of the Global Seed Vault (above, left; top, right) reveals a techno-determinist, resilience-driven approach to care and labour in the depiction of workers and architectural spaces, rather than the focus on fragility, nurturing and co-dependency emphasised in the other practices (above, middle and right).

## Research Question & Hypotheses

The challenges for seed banks lie in developing (1) an affective (image) politics to express the banks' claims to territory, visual representation and sovereignty/heritage, and (2) a double temporality of both potential infinity in their capacity for care and control, and urgency in response to the vulnerabilities they face. *How are seed banks participating in and objects of visual and theoretical discourses around anthropogenic violence and inequality through the careful performance of vulnerability and control?*

→Seed banks are actively contributing to the iconography and temporalities of the Anthropocene and its affective politics.

→ They make scientific and political claims on the control of 'nature', knowledge and future scenarios whilst feeding into discourses of vulnerability and violence.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Goldenberg, S. (20<sup>th</sup> May 2015). The doomsday vault: The seeds that could save a post-apocalyptic world. The Guardian.  
Demos, T. J. (2017). *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.  
Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.