

# Anthropocene: Nature and Technology in the Age of Humans

Rachel  
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Center

**25-26 January 2013, Deutsches Museum, Munich**

**Conveners:** Helmuth Trischler (Deutsches Museum/RCC) and Nina Möllers (Deutsches Museum/RCC).

**Presenters:** Caroline Breunese (Naturalis, Leiden), Sebastian Büttner (Gesamtkunstwerk, Köln), Owen Gaffney (IGBP, Stockholm), Bernhard Graf (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Hendrik-Jan Grievink (Next Nature, Amsterdam), Benjamin Hennig (University Sheffield), Serafine Lindemann (artcircolo, München), Kathrin Meyer (ARS Electronica Solutions, Linz), Nina Möllers (Deutsches Museum/RCC), Dagmar Röhrlich (independent science journalist, Köln), Jens Schröder (GEO Magazine, Hamburg), Heike Schuppelius (Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe).

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The human impact on the planet has become so great that the collective action of the species will be found in the geological record: we are living in the Anthropocene. This new concept, the story goes, has its roots at a meeting of the International Geosphere and Biosphere Program (IGBP) in Mexico in 2000. Scientists were sitting around debating the current state of environmental problems in the “Holocene.” Sitting at the table was Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen, also vice chair of IGBP at the time. He was getting increasingly fed up with this talk of the Holocene. Finally, he had had enough, he interrupted the group and said “we are not living in the Holocene, we are living in the ...,” he took a brief moment to think and then said “the Anthropocene.” That’s how it started, OWEN GAFFNEY, who had been at the meeting in Mexico, told participants of the Anthropocene Workshop. Since 2000, the Anthropocene concept has gained currency in a variety of scientific disciplines engaged with global change, and more recently in the humanities as a concept that genuinely challenges nature-culture dichotomies.

In 2014 the Rachel Carson Center and the Deutsches Museum will hold a special exhibition on the Anthropocene. The workshop held in January 2013 provided an opportunity to discuss options for communicating the concept and more broadly to discuss the role that museums play in the communication of current environmental and transformation processes. The exhibition team is currently in the throes of taking the concept from a complex array of academic insights into a collection to showcase to the public. As NINA MÖLLERS, the project manager, said at the opening session of the Workshop: “An exhibition can make the concept experienceable, speak to a broader public, and initiate discussion. For that, it needs to offer different ways of accessing the topic for a heterogeneous public and convey the content in an informative and entertaining manner.” The workshop set out to stimulate creative discussion about the Anthropocene among a transdisciplinary group of practitioners that included artists, academics, curators, designers, and journalists.

The Anthropocene concept has antecedents. As journalist Christian Schwägerl noted in the introduction to the session on journalistic perspectives, the concept of an “Anthrocene [sic]” was first proposed by a New York Times reporter in 1992, although this never took hold. Coverage of various environmental issues in popular magazines – such as GEO Magazine, represented at the workshop by JENS SCHRÖDER – over the past two decades has set the groundwork for an interested public and media outlets ready to discuss issues and themes in the Anthropocene. Even if, as journalist DAGMAR RÖHRLICH succinctly put it, “it is not a sexy word,” for the media, but “the concept is sexy.”

Engagement, as we saw at the workshop, is also about telling stories that break us out of our comfort zone. This is the case for film and multimedia, where new communication technologies coupled with advances in data visualization can have an especially strong impact. SEBASTIAN BÜTTNER’S interactive film *The Day it Rained Forever* is a dystopian story that crosses a number of media platforms to engage viewers. BENJAMIN HENNIG’S cartograms redraw the world and make people “look again” at the globe they thought they knew. And OWEN GAFFNEY’S film *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, which has since gone viral on the internet, was shown at the opening of the UN Rio+20 Summit by the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Gaffney’s film begins with the line, “This is the story of one species...”

If it is the story of the human species then how do we collect and exhibit it? And more so how do we encourage the public to engage with the Anthropocene in the museum setting? CAROLINE BREUNESSE, from Naturalis Museum in Leiden, began her presentation with three possible objects from their collection: Johanna, a whale stranded on the Dutch coast, Herman, the first genetically modified bull in the world, and the invasive house crow that is currently the defendant in a trial in the Supreme Court in The Hague. The whole museum is currently being redesigned and one of the key aspects is to provide positive experiences that encourage patron involvement. One example of this, as BERNARD GRAF showed, is the Max Planck Science Tunnel at the HNF in Paderborn, an impressive and interactive science exhibit. And the work at the ARS Electronica in Linz, presented by KATHRIN MEYER, had many of the curators in the room taking notice. From FabLabs to Shadowgrams, ARS Electronica provided many examples of people engaging with the museum in unique and creative patron-driven experiences. There exist many examples that an exhibition on the Anthropocene might want to draw upon.

Engagement can also be encouraged through art and provocation. Like one of the examples SERAFINE LINDEMAN showed of a business card that gives the phone number of a glacier. Formed out of collaboration with a major telecommunications company, the sound installation allows people to telephone a glacier in Tyrol, Austria to hear it melt. The diorama “Natural Habitat” presented by HEIKE SCHUPPELIUS is another example. Installed at Berlin Museum für Naturkunde, it shows a dancer performing a drama about the human interaction with nature; the installation challenged the traditional presentation of stagnant natural history objects. Added to this would also be the “Nano Supermarket” that HENDRIK-JAN GRIEVINK presented to the workshop. The “supermarket” is actually a bus is travelling around Europe showing the future possibilities of nanofood technology in a humorous, if not ironic, and consumable installation.

The workshop rounded off January as a big month for the Anthropocene concept in Germany. Earlier The Anthropocene Project was opened at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin on 10–13 January. The Rachel Carson Center is broadly engaged with many discussions on the Anthropocene and is a partner with the HKW on the two year festival. The Center was represented at the opening by both directors: HELMUTH

TRISCHLER moderated WILL STEFFEN'S keynote address and CHRISTOF MAUCH moderated the discussion "Storytelling in the Anthropocene." The opening of the Project was well attended and received impressively broad media coverage. Moreover, the opening showed a clear public interest in the Anthropocene. If the HKW Project is an exploration of the Anthropocene and its multiple lines of inquiry in the humanities and sciences, then the workshop in Munich was an intense and successful discussion on the possibilities for exhibiting the Anthropocene.

NINA MÖLLERS reflected on the final day that the presentations had made her more ambitious with what the exhibition can do. The workshop provoked all participants to engage creatively with the Anthropocene. In the closing session HENDRIK-JAN GRIEVINK noted the possibilities for the exhibition at the Deutsches Museum: "the powerful asset of a place like this is the objects ... use the aura of the objects to create different stories about them." How might we combine traditional museum objects with new modern techniques of display, engagement, and data visualization to showcase the Anthropocene? This is one of the great challenges that the Anthropocene exhibition team is currently undertaking. The workshop provided inspiration, the possibility of collaboration and close discussion of the concept for the coming exhibition. In a broader sense, the workshop created the space for genuine transdisciplinary dialogue on creative possibilities in the Anthropocene.

-- Luke Keogh