

Culture and the Anthropocene

Alexander von Humboldt Transatlantic Network in the Environmental Humanities workshop

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Center

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Sponsors: Christof Mauch (RCC/LMU) and Helmuth Trischler (RCC/Deutsches Museum)

Convener: Sabine Wilke (RCC/Univ. of Washington)

Presenters: Georg Braungart (Tübingen), Gabriele Dürbeck (Vechta), Sabine Frost (Univ. Washington), Axel Goodbody (Bath Univ.), Ursula Heise (UCLA), Sean Ireton (Univ. Missouri), Jens Kersten (LMU), Reinhold Leinfelder (RCC/FU Berlin), Thomas Lekan (RCC/Univ. South Carolina), Bernhard Malkmus (Ohio State University), Wolfram Mauser (LMU), Amos Nascimento (Univ. Washington, Tacoma), Sabine Noellgen (Univ. Washington), Caroline Schaumann (Emory Univ.), Wolfgang Struck (Erfurt Univ.), Heather Sullivan (Trinity Univ., Texas), Sabine Wilke (RCC/Univ. Washington), Evi Zemanek (Freiburg)

Participants: Johanna Alcantara, Lawrence Culver (RCC/Utah State Univ.), Rob Emmett (RCC), Maurits Ertzen (RCC/TU Delft), Ananta Giri (Madras Institute of Development Studies), Eleanor Hayman (LMU), Annegret Heitmann (LMU), Agnes Kneitz (RCC/LMU), Kenichi Matsui (RCC/Univ. of Tsukuba), Felix Mauch (RCC/LMU), Mei Xueqin (RCC/Tsinghua Univ.), John Meyer (Humboldt State Univ./RCC), Tad Mianowicz, Ursula Münster (RCC/LMU), Katie Ritson (RCC)

The RCC and the Alexander von Humboldt Transatlantic Network in the Environmental Humanities (www.environmental-humanities-network.org) co-sponsored a conference that explored the cultural dimension of the Anthropocene, a concept that was coined over a decade ago by atmospheric scientists to indicate the geologic dimension of our impact on Earth and the radical interconnectivity between humans and non-humans. Scholars from literature, history, philosophy, law, and the natural sciences came together to discuss the concept of the Anthropocene in a variety of different formats, ranging from sections with individual papers and discussions to collaborative workshops and trans-disciplinary dialogues and panels. The impetus behind the conference was to fill the descriptive scientific concept of the Anthropocene with cultural meaning and debate its values, historical antecedents, aesthetic modi, and ethical implications. One of the overlapping concerns shared by the RCC and the Humboldt network is the definition and sharper articulation of the research agenda for the environmental humanities, i.e., fields of interpretive research that conceptualize the agency of nature and the environment and greater knowledge and clarification about the status of nature and the environment in the Anthropocene is an important part in that project. What is also crucial is the inter- and trans-disciplinary nature of that project which is reflected in the make-up of the panels of this conference.

In a panel on literary modes of the Anthropocene, WOLFGANG STRUCK opened with a discussion of Sebastiao Salgado's new book of photographs, *Genesis* (2012), in terms of an allegory of the Anth-

ropocene that shows the Earth as agent with the power to destroy or rescue it. To read these messages, however, we need to look at Earth from the outside. The whole Earth has become a world without us that is hiding the conditions of modernity behind the scene. The atlas thus emerges as a useful tool to document large-scale changes and an important literary mode for staging allegories of the Anthropocene. SABINE NOELLGEN commented on the tempi of the Anthropocene in a reading of two contemporary German-language literary texts, Julia Schoch's *Wo Venedig einst gestanden haben wird* (2011) and Kathrin Röggla's *Die Alarmbereiten* (2010). The future perfect has the capacity to effectively counter the cult of the accelerating depiction of disasters in scientific and journalistic prose and work against the culture of fear.

In a section on cultural landscapes and narratives, BERNHARD MALKMUS compared the reclamation of space in British poet Graham Swift and German author W. G. Sebald in a paper that offered a critique of anthropocentrism. Sebald's text *Ringe des Saturn* renders the Anthropocene thematically in terms of interweaving cultural and natural history in an attempt to reflect on what he calls the natural history of destruction and Swift's *Waterland* portrays life in the Anthropocene as a "dogged vigilant business" with an ethics of preservation. AXEL GOODBODY directed our attention to the discrepancy between risk perception and behavior in a paper comparing Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* and Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau*, two literary texts that engage with narratives and visual images around climate change, Kingsolver in terms of a more traditional "Bildungsroman" (novel of education) and Trojanow in terms of a disrupted pastoral. Literature was shown to close the knowledge-action gap by helping imagine climate change and encourage behavioral change.

A workshop on non-human agencies in the Anthropocene, conducted by GABRIELE DUERBECK, CAROLINE SCHAUMANN, and HEATHER SULLIVAN, challenged the common definition of human agency as the capacity to make choices and introduced an alternative idea of agency as emergent force that can be attributed to all sorts of matter including animals. In current debates on post-humanism (Jane Bennett, David Abram, Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, etc.), matter is not seen as deterministic; instead, things may have agency and we are thought to be part of an environment that has agentic force, a field of energy that highlights the greater entanglement of humans and non-humans. At the same time, the connection between being part of this world and the need to take responsibility for it seems problematic or, at least, undertheorized. The literary examples discussed included Goethe's *Werther* with its descriptions of agentic landscapes, Alexander von Humboldt's many scientific accounts of his physical experiences during his travels through Latin America and Central Asia, and Alfred Döblin's literary description of the consequences of geo-engineering in his novel *Berge, Meere und Giganten*.

In a panel on media images of the Anthropocene, SABINE FROST discussed Marlen Haushofer's literary text *Die Wand*, comparing it with its recent cinematic treatment with the same title from 2012. The text was seen as a critique of civilization; the destructiveness of humanity is rendered in terms of a forest growing inside the main female character's mind that "doesn't want people to come back." TOM LEKAN debated the images we use to envision the global, from the famous Blue Marble from 1968 as symbol of the whole Earth looked at from outer space, through a history of aerial photography and its use in narratives of failure, to fractal images that comment on our capacity to self-organize space.

A panel on critical theory of the Anthropocene highlighted the need for critical philosophical reflection on the core assumptions about our age. SABINE WILKE discussed the need for a more systematic ethics and aesthetics for a new geological age in terms of building on the critical apparatus of the Frankfurt School of thought and Western Marxism. A critique of capitalism and post-colonial and environmental perspectives are required to address problems of global environmental justice and aesthetic configurations beyond modernism and the grand narratives of the past. AMOS NASCIMENTO made a case for environmental ethics and environmental justice on a global scale, foregrounding Kant's notion of cosmopolitanism in the Anthropocene, a notion that brings us to understand the Anthropocene as a normative concept. Kant's rootedness in the sciences, physical geography, and mathematical geography generates his philosophy of radical natural events and urges us to change our behavior and become voluntary world citizens within a horizon of global collective responsibility.

One panel explored transdisciplinary conversations between two fields that are usually thought to be wide apart, geology and literature. REINHOLD LEINFELDER examined the need for the natural sciences to explore alternative methods of delivering its messages if it wants to be heard by the public. In his graphic tale, *The Great Transformation*, he and his fellow scientists tell the history of the Earth in a different way, as the story of carbon, in order to bypass anthropocentric narratives and highlight an anthropocene world view where we need new narratives and new interpretations. GEORG BRAUNGART addressed the role of geology in literature in terms of its effect on humanity through its temporal marginalization. Humanity becomes an episode in a longer geological record which appears as a shock that has been registered in literature for more than two hundred years. The role of the humanities is crucial in these conversations as they analyze narratives and visualization strategies of complex systems and foreground the role of stories and the imagination in configuring new ways of living on Earth.

A panel on conceptualizing the Anthropocene featured a conversation between URSULA HEISE, WOLFRAM MAUSER, and JENS KERSTEN about our changing conception of nature as dynamic and the need to design a better future in the Anthropocene . This future was understood as a successor to the concept of sustainability. How do we build a post-economic culture of scarcity? We need a new categorical imperative; we need to live our lives in a way that acknowledges the fact that there is no distinction between nature and culture. We need to decide what is important to us, what biodiversity we want, and move beyond the idea of sustainability. What do we want to sustain? Who shapes the research questions that value species conservation? Who shapes the concept of biodiversity? Are these stake holders part of the process of generating the knowledge we need to make decisions? These and other urgent questions need to shape the research agenda as we move forward into the age of humans.

A final panel considered the literary precursors of the concept of the Anthropocene in the proto-ecological discourses of the nineteenth century. SEAN IRETON talked about the Austrian writer and painter Adalbert Stifter and his gentle Anthropocene as he conceived it in the preface of his collection of tales, *Bunte Steine* (1853), in which he talked about geological phenomena. For Stifter, the deep organic processes of nature were important as they create a correlate between the human world and the world of nature. EVI ZEMANEK addressed the proto-ecological discourses in the German writer Fontane, who talks at length about bad air and the rise of carbon dioxide, especially in his letters and diaries. The novels also register these phenomena of pollution but keep them in the background.

—Sabine Wilke