

Anthropocene Objects: A Cabinet of Curiosities

Rachel
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Center

5–7 July 2015, Rachel Carson Center, Munich

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

Conveners: Marco Armiero (Environmental Humanities Lab, KTH Stockholm), Rob Emmett (RCC/ Munich), and Gregg Mitman (Center for Culture, History, and Environment, University of Wisconsin)

Participants: Thomas Bristow, Trisha Carroll (via Skype), Jared Farmer, Nils Hanwahr, Rachel Harkness, Nicole Heller, Elizabeth Hennessey, Judit Hersko, Michelle Mart, Mandy Martin (via Skype), Daegan Miller, Rob Nixon (via Skype), Laura Pulido, Cristian Simonetti, Sverker Sörlin, Julianne Warren, Bethany Wiggin, Josh Wodak; Gary Kroll and Cameron Muir (presented in absentia)

“Anthropocene Objects: Cabinet of Curiosities” followed the “Anthropocene Slam” in November 2014 also co-sponsored with the University of Wisconsin and KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. Conveners invited a shortlist of scholars, writers, and artists to contribute short essays and commissioned several longer critical pieces to form a planned multi-authored volume. The writing workshop accompanied the opening of the “Cabinet of Curiosities” addition to the Anthropocene exhibition at the Deutsches Museum, Munich. On Sunday, 5 July, participants were invited to visit the full exhibition for a guided tour with Carson Center director **HELMUTH TRISCHLER** and **NINA MÖLLERS**, head curator of the exhibition. Möllers and Trischler described the epic labor involved in translating the abstract concept “Anthropocene” into a world-class exhibition. It is not only a matter of translating a technical term with which 80% of visitors are unfamiliar, but also of dramatizing visually and sensually the uncertain, provisory nature of dating this epoch. Here, the six “tectonic plates” in the main hall become a provocation for visitors to puzzle over how processes in agriculture, urbanization, and migration (for example) take on combined planetary significance.

Days two and three of the workshop focused on revising pre-circulated essays. Conveners **ROB**

EMMETT, GREGG MITMAN, and **MARCO ARMIERO** emphasized from the outset the goal of shaping these to produce a book to capture the more open and creative spirit of the Slam event in Madison, Wisconsin, in November 2014 as well as the sensory quality of materials. Contributors were asked to reconsider their essays not as traditional academic papers, but rather take their proposed objects as a starting place for investigating different dimensions of meaning in our encounters with Anthropocene thinking.

The first panel, “Reworking the Anthropocene,” featured two papers on the dynamics of labor in making Anthropocene objects. **DAEGAN MILLER** spoke on “The Possibilities of a Monkey Wrench” and opened one of the major themes of discussion: What are the right aesthetics for engaging with the Anthropocene? Miller used the wrench to pose several questions, including: Whose work made the Anthropocene? And if we want to re-shape the world for more just environmental futures, who will do this work? **JARED FARMER** picked up on these questions in thinking about his “future fossil,” a synthetic “fossil” of a Blackberry Curve phone. This essay functioned both as a work of art criticism of the making of similar artificial “future fossils” and retro techno-fossils by artists, some of which are marketed now through new media ecologies. In this context, Farmer raised the notion of a “planet of art” as opposed to a geo-engineered planet which may be one response to the Anthropocene’s call to recognize the planetary scale of human activity.

A second panel on “Sedimentation: Future Bedrock” linked ongoing geological processes, including the formation of fragile, thin strata from living creatures and human cultural activities. **RACHEL HARKNESS** and **CRISTIAN SIMONETTI** presented their multivocal contribution on the voices of “Concretes,” which was installed both as a video of their team making a concrete test cube along with an actual concrete test cube at the Deutsches Museum. Many participants were curious to hear more about how concretes might speak in different geographical and cultural contexts, as well as the playful conceit of an object narrator. Breaking out of the potentially limiting frames of the concrete test cube, as well as how to position a political economic critique, were identified by several readers as challenges for tuning into the voice of concretes. **JOSH WODAK** explored further the “notion of art as a remediating and mitigating force” through synthetic coral, where a symbiotic creature comes to thrive on substrate provided by humans. Coral holds tremendous symbolic power, as one of the most common objects found in earlier cabinets of curiosities and one of the forms of life most dramatically threatened by ocean acidification due to human carbon emissions. Wodak’s piece pivoted in many directions and raised the issue of synthetic biology and bio-engineering in contrast to the more widely discussed “geo-engineering” proposals linked to some proponents of a good Anthropocene. Many wanted to hear how the piece might read with a stronger first-person framing rooted in Wodak’s artistic practice and diving

experience. Biologist **NICOLE HELLER** presented on “A Jar of Sand: Digging into the Anthropocene,” a piece focusing on the perception and politics of publicly funded beach re-nourishment along the Carolina coast.

Our third panel focused on “Arts of De-extinction” and featured three papers exploring cryostorage and re-animation of extinct species, the cultivation of viable plant tissue extracted from melted permafrost, and the lost sonic worlds of extinct birds, captured in the echoes of ethnographic recordings of hunters’ imitation bird calls. **LIZ HENNESSY** took us into the frozen zoo and framed the new bioethical challenges raised not only by re-animating extinct life forms, but the potential of intentionally ending lab-grown woolly mammoths or passenger pigeons. The next paper asked that we consider the potential significance of forms of poetic writing that resist sense-making, particularly as encountering this resistance parallels the troubling emotional effect of contemplating climate disruption and mass extinctions in the Anthropocene. **TOM BRISTOW** focused on the metaphorical power of seed banks and particularly, scientists’ successful cultivation of arctic flowers from seeds taken from permafrost. **JULIANNE LUTZ WARREN** spoke of the emotional resonance of hearing and playing recordings of the extinct Huia bird in new contexts—including the People’s Climate March in New York City. “Arts of De-extinction” pushed the participants to think again about how far the planned volume might go in terms of including poly-vocal writing as well as representing the weave of senses on the page.

Our last panel on 6 July featured two papers on the “Widespread, Invisible, and Violent” effects of Anthropocene processes and two critical commentaries from **LAURA PULIDO** and **ROB NIXON**. Nils Hanwahr proposed the marine animal satellite tags carried by sojourning dolphins and sharks as a concise window into how “dynamic ocean management” expands the reach of oceanic knowledge—and potential exploitation. Following one of these marine cyborgs online in its trajectories, according to Hanwahr, offers a different perspective on what dynamic ocean management means for individual animals. Carson alumni **MICHELLE MART** and **CAMERON MUIR** (in absentia) spoke about their co-written project on the domestication of ubiquitous pesticide use through artefacts such as the spray pump, a household consumer product marketed heavily in the mid-twentieth century. Rob Nixon (via Skype) asked: Why now? Why does the Anthropocene term become a key category around 2010, after a period of dormancy since it was coined in the natural sciences in 2000? One hypothesis is that the Anthropocene and attendant calls for “species thinking” undercut the burgeoning movements to address real global inequalities after 2008. The value of “Anthropocene objects,” then, is to vitiate “rotten diction” by “fastening words to things” anew. In her commentary, Laura Pulido emphasized that the violent effects of planetary-scale ecological degradation are seldom meted out equally—and therefore race and

critical race studies become even more salient as issues of environmental justice arise. In addition to delving deeper into specific work of inequalities that become visible in objects interpreted within the “Anthropocene” scale and frame, Pulido implored us to think of how some of the proposed objects resulted only from sustained activism. Innovative museum work such as the Deutsches Museum’s Anthropocene exhibit is also a form of public activism.

On Tuesday, 7 July, we met for two final sessions, beginning with a panel focusing on visual arts that featured professional artists as well as historians and critics. The painting team **MANDY MARTIN** and **TRISHA CARROLL** joined us via live feed from rural Australia for an extended discussion of their painting process and the role of country—landscape, history, identity, and feeling—in their art. They described the inter-generational process of apprenticeship and inspiration that goes into producing x-ray style ochre and charcoal paintings such as the “Davies Road” piece exhibited in the Deutsches Museum. Climate and the impacts of major dam building and irrigation schemes that destroy millennial-old ancestral sites are much stronger motivations for their paintings than the “Anthropocene” notion. **SVERKER SÖRLIN** and **NINA WOORMBS** emphasized the collective nature of their laboratory’s creative contribution, a film and an aphoristic prose poem on the mirror. The mirror as metaphor risks turning the Anthropocene’s “self-conscious” post-2011 phase of humans seeing ourselves as planetary agent into simple narcissism. Hence the light scattering effects of the poem’s “prism” motif represented a need to balance competing concerns: renewing a “principle of hope” in a more reflexive plural voice; calling for protest while maintaining transformation’s openness to diversity. Artist **JUDIT HERSKO** described her silicone print from “Anna’s Cabinet of Curiosities” and the work of translating time, reflection, light, and memory into the accompanying text, which follows the scientific career of a fictional polar explorer, Anna Schwartz. This unknown explorer became obsessed with photography and the movement of light through the fragile bodies of sea butterflies and sea angels, which she viewed through her microscope in Antarctica. Our final paper of the workshop by **BETHANY WIGGIN** wove together homespun and re-purposed materials with the deep convictions of abolitionist, taking a cotton quilt picturing Quaker-like William Penn signing the Treaty of Amity and Friendship in 1683 as both a primary object and “primal scene of the Anthropocene.” Through analysing cosy, comforting everyday objects like the c. 1824 quilt from Germantown, Pennsylvania, Wiggins argued, we might understand how the domestic and intimate are implicated in the Anthropocene and appreciate how by remaking objects we can suggest “a very different politics...located not only in the past but in the future.”

The workshop closed with a discussion of cross-cutting themes, our writing schedule, a workshop in Stockholm in June 2016, and a collective decision to keep sections in the edited volume.