

The Anthropocene in Museums: Reflections, Projections and Imaginings

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: Deutsches Museum, Rachel Carson Center for Environment & Society (RCC), and Museums and Climate Change Network

Conveners: Kirsten Wehner (RCC/National Museum of Australia), Libby Robin (RCC/Australian National University/National Museum of Australia), Jenny Newell (American Museum of Natural History, AMNH), Helmuth Trischler (RCC and Deutsches Museum)

Presenters: Nathalia Sofie Bricet (University of Aarhus/University of Copenhagen/Moesgård Museum, Denmark), Jamie Furniss (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM)/University of Edinburgh), Christina Geyer (Deutsches Museum), Frida Hastrup (University of Aarhus/University of Copenhagen/Moesgård Museum, Denmark), Rebecca Hofmann (RCC/LMU Munich), Malin Huber (FASAD film), Liisi Jääts (Estonian National Museum), Aleksandra Jach (Museum Sztuki, Lodz/Warsaw University), Alexandra Johnson (Science Museum, London), Sarah Kellberg (Deutsches Museum), Sabiha Keyif (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM)), Karlsruhe), Emlyn Koster (North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences), Jennifer Martin (TELUS Spark, Canada), Viveca Mellegård (Stockholm Resilience Centre), Nina Möllers, (Deutsches Museum), Tahani Nadim (Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin), Jenny Newell (American Museum of Natural History), Daniel Oakman (National Museum of Australia), Alison Pouliot (Australian National University), Siobhan Starrs (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington), Helmuth Trischler (RCC/Deutsches Museum), Chris Wingfield (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge).

Thursday, 3 December

I. Welcome, Introduction and Opening Remarks

HELMUTH TRISCHLER gave the welcome address and talked about the Deutsches Museum and the RCC. He explained how the Anthropocene could be researched and communicated to an audience through

exhibitions in museums. He also made mention of how the Anthropocene exhibitions in museums could be used as a springboard to both research and communicate the concept of the Anthropocene. He further briefed participants on the ongoing transitional phase (Renewal and Reconstruction) of the Deutsches Museum. He then introduced **LIBBY ROBIN**, **KIRSTEN WEHNER** and **JENNY NEWELL** as the co-conveners of the workshop.

LIBBY ROBIN introduced “The Anthropocene in Museums Workshop” by giving the timeline of events that led up to its conception, and mentioned the three pillars behind the idea of the workshop: the international Museums and Climate Change Network (based at the AMNH); the RCC partnership with the Deutsches Museum, which led to the 2014 exhibition “Welcome to the Anthropocene;” and the Mellon Australia-Pacific Observatory—particularly the work that **JENNY NEWELL** and **KIRSTEN WEHNER** have been fostering around objects, museums, and the Pacific. She spoke of the history of the enthusiastic, and at times critical, uptake of ideas about the Anthropocene by a range of environmental humanities institutions since 2011.

Libby also talked about the first “Museums and Climate Change Network” conference, held in 2013 at the AMNH, which led to the book entitled *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* (2016).

KIRSTEN WEHNER spoke about using the workshop as a platform to build and support a global community of people who can transform museums. She endorsed the term “Anthropocene” for its capacity to draw attention to the complex ways in which people are transforming the Earth’s environments. She reminded participants about the current International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) definition of a museum, and queried whether and how it might be re-shaped to develop more Anthropocenic concepts of “humanity.” She proposed that museums might focus on three trajectories when seeking new modes of addressing the Anthropocene by developing new representational narratives, more collaborative modes of engaging audiences, and new modes of exhibition design.

2. Guided Visit to the Deutsches Museum’s “Welcome to the Anthropocene” Exhibition

As part of the workshop, **HELMUTH TRISCHLER** and **NINA MÖLLERS** gave the participants a guided tour of the “Welcome to the Anthropocene” exhibition. They explained the decisions that led to what was included in the exhibition, as well as the reason for the particular structure and design of the gallery. They also pointed out the interactive “flower garden” exhibit—where visitors write down comments that are later collected and reviewed—which not only serves as an element of public participation but also as an evaluation tool for the entire “Welcome to the Anthropocene” exhibition.

3. Presentations

Welcome to the Anthropocene Gallery

NINA MÖLLERS and **HELMUTH TRISCHLER** then gave a presentation on the outcome of the public appraisal of the exhibition. They discussed the main goals of the exhibition, the evaluation results, an overview of the educational program connected to the exhibition, and the perspectives of the exhibition. They gave the demographics of the visitors, their reasons for coming to see the exhibition, their likes and dislikes of the exhibits, and their take-home message.

Anthropocene Challenges—Waste

ALEXANDRA JOHNSON presented on the “Rubbish Collection,” a London Science Museum exhibition from summer 2014, which was a collaborative project with artist Joshua Sofaer. She discussed the processes involved in the curation and display of the waste materials. She also pointed out how, by treating waste materials like historic objects, humans can reconsider their value.

JAMIE FURNISS presented on “Waste and the Anthropocene From an Ethnographic Point of View,” coauthored by Matthieu Duperrex and Yann-Philippe Tastevin (also participants in the discussion). They discussed collections of materials (waste) and the concept of waste. They asked whether the Anthropocene changed the waste problem and highlighted their approach to waste in their future Anthropocene exhibition (“The Idea of Beauty in Ugliness”).

Anthropocene Challenges—Energy

CHRISTINA GEYER and **SARAH KELLBERG** from the Deutsches Museum presented the exhibition project “Energy. Transitions,” which aims to discuss pathways to sustainable energy systems. They talked about the Anthropocene topic of energy transition and the issue of energy use and its sustainability, which will be the focus of their future exhibition opening in late 2016. They discussed how the exhibition would show conscious energy transitions and challenge visitors to make these transitions a reality.

JENNIFER MARTIN presented on “But Oil Pays My Mortgage and Feeds My Family.” She gave a history of bitumen oil-sands deposits and pipelines in Alberta (Keystone XL), describing how the mining of oil-sands is carried out, and how residents are responding to change in the oil price in relation to energy sustainability.

Transforming Museum Institutions in the Anthropocene

EMLYN KOSTER presented on “Navigating the Museum’s Purpose Towards the Needs of the Anthropocene.” He mentioned the massive challenge facing museums in their need for greater external relevance and discussed how to meet this challenge from a field perspective; whereby museums combine usefulness and popularity to attain relevance, and further combine relevance and renewal to attain sustainability.

4. Public Lecture and Discussion

In the public lecture, **JENNY NEWELL** began with “Activism, Art and Atolls: Communicating the Oceanic Anthropocene.” She looked at activism and art in relation to climate change in the Pacific environment, and talked about how Pacific Islanders are using art to respond to this situation—being not just bystanders but strong activists who create the concept of hope in the face of climate change.

For the final talk, **REBECCA HOFMANN** gave a presentation based on her work in the Pacific, talking about the effects of climate change in the Pacific region and how residents were responding to these changes. All talks were followed by discussion.

Friday, 4 December

I. Presentations

Anthropocene Markers, Tools, and Materials

Before the presentations, **KIRSTEN WEHNER** and **HELMUTH TRISCHLER** welcomed the participants. **SIOBHAN STARRS** from the National Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institute gave a presentation on “Deep Time Context for the Future: The Anthropocene as Future Fossil.” She mentioned the exhibitions in the museum in general, presenting the demographics of visitors and their reasons for visiting. She discussed the design evolution and challenges in the planning of the Anthropocene Gallery within the newly-renovated National Fossil Hall, and asked for suggestions on how to approach these challenges.

SABIHA KEYIF gave a presentation on “Man-Made Exo-Evolution.” She gave the history of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe (ZKM) and the demographics of their visitors. She mentioned the “Globale” part of the exhibition, which features exhibits on how the environment has been shaped by new discoveries, as well as the solutions for problems of the twenty-first century.

CHRIS WINGFIELD gave a presentation on “Transforming the Earth: Exploring the Roots of the Anthropocene.” He talked about the new MAA project “Shared World, Shared Museum,” giving the timeline for the project, and reviewing the feedback they have received in terms of content and connections of the project, as well as comparisons with other projects. He discussed the types of materials (which include stones, ceramics, metals, and plastics) that the gallery will focus on, and their significance in the exhibition.

Imaging the Anthropocene

To begin the session, **ALISON POULIOT** showed images from her work on the subject “The Accidental Museum.” She talked about how these images draw our attention to nature as a “dominant” curator, thereby asking the question of whether museums have to be in buildings and whether curators have to be humans.

ALEKSANDRA JACH presented her research on “Art Practices in the Anthropocene,” where she discussed how the notion of the Anthropocene is transforming art practices and models of cultural institutions, pointing out how the limits of imagination were the limits of possibility.

VIVECA MELLEGÅRD gave a presentation on her project “Making Craftsmanship Visible as a Source of Social-Ecological Resilience: From the Swedish Arctic to the Stockholm Archipelago; Sami Duodji and Baltic Small-Scale Fishing.” She talked about her motivation for undertaking this project and she further shared insights from this work.

Re-shaping Museum Disciplines in the Anthropocene

MALIN HUBER gave a presentation on “Portraying the Anthropocene in Transmedia Experiences.” She talked about the production company FASAD, their work, and the research that goes into producing their feature films and documentaries. She then showed excerpts of their project “Aeterna,” which is a two-part feature consisting of a cinematic study of how humans have become the dominant force shaping the earth, and an art animation that weaves multiple knowledge sources to communicate this in the context of the Big History. A discussion followed this presentation.

TAHANI NADIM gave a presentation on “Post-Natural Troubles in a Natural History Museum: The Exhibition Tote Wespen fliegen länger (Dead Wasps Fly Further), at the Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin.” She talked about the exhibition, which was based on her ethnographic work, describing the items used and roleplay involved—dressing like a wasp while giving visitors a guided tour. She made mention of institutions that collaborated with the museum in relation to the exhibition, discussing the struggle the Museum für Naturkunde faced in giving shape to issues on biodiversity loss.

The Anthropocene As/Through People and Environment in Place

LIISI JÄÄTS began the session with a presentation on “The Challenges of Addressing Global Environmental Topics Through Site-Specific Stories.” She talked about the cultural history gallery “People and Environment,” which is part of a permanent exhibition of the new National Museum of Estonia opening in Autumn 2016, addressing the environmental topics in the future exhibition, the content of the exhibition in relation to the site of the museum, and gave a permanent exhibition outline for the gallery in the national museum which is still under construction. She further mentioned the concept of the exhibition, the topics to be included, as well as a theme island design for the exhibitions.

DANIEL OAKMAN gave a presentation on “Making Environmental History at the National Museum of Australia.” He gave the history of some of the museum’s collections, focusing on how they expressed stories of people’s engagement with Australian species, places, and natural systems, and discussed how exhibitions drawing on these collections could foster ecological literacy and sensitivity.

NATHALIA SOFIE BRICHET and **FRIDA HASTRUP** gave a presentation on “Mild Apocalypse: Exhibiting an Anthropocene Danish Landscape,” which was co-authored with Mathilde Højrup, who joined the discussion. They talked about a future experimental exhibition at the Moesgård Museum which will be based on transdisciplinary fieldwork in a former industrial, brown-coal mining site, located in the middle of Jutland in Denmark. They gave a history of the mining site and how it has been shaped by extractive activities, and discussed how this exhibition would portray a “mild apocalypse” of the Danish landscape.

6. Round Table Discussion on Building Museum Networks in the Anthropocene

To begin, **LIBBY ROBIN** gave an introduction to the Museum and Climate Change Network and explained the aim for forming such a network. **JENNY NEWELL** then talked about the Museum and Climate Change Network website, encouraging participants to share their ideas and stories about their museums there. Jenny then gave a presentation on the Climate Museum, its history and its current state. She talked about the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI), which is a collaborative initiative of several institutions with the goal of establishing a national network of professionals skilled in communicating climate science to the public.

In the discussion session that followed, participants asked if the term “climate change” should be changed to “Anthropocene,” as the latter is a broader concept that captures the idea of the current environmental situation. It was suggested that the Anthropocene should be a leading theme in museums, not just on the websites. The topic of the Anthropocene should be discussed at forums within big conferences, in order to draw attention to the subject. On the issue of meetings (in relation to conferences), participants said it would be better to meet every two years, in addition to sharing information on the Museum and Climate Change Network website.

Participants were urged not to see this conference and the resulting discussions as a “cliff hanger,” but instead to see it as a valuable learning experience, and to look forward to future conferences as an opportunity to learn. Participant Charles Savage made mention of sharing with his class what he has learnt from the conference.

Participants asked about the next step following this conference, and how to make it a valuable event. Participants were encouraged to communicate and share with others about their upcoming exhibitions. It was suggested that participants could undertake field visits to other museums as part of future activities. Emlyn drew participants’ attention to an upcoming Science Centre World Summit 2017 in Japan.

Libby again made mention of the forthcoming book *Curating the Future*. It was also noted that it was important to revisit the definition of “museum,” as well as the museum profession. Participants further shared thoughts on what an ideal mix might be in relation to how to communicate the idea of the Anthropocene in their museums.

7. Closing Remarks and Appreciation

Jenny thanked the Deutsches Museum, the RCC, Helmuth, Libby, and Kirsten for making the workshop possible. Kirsten thanked the participants for being part of the workshop.

— Nana Oye Williams