

Planetary Thinking in Contemporary Art Writing

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Anthropogenic transformations of the planet are not new. Globalisation, capitalism, colonization, and industrialisation have long histories, and have displaced so many people, animals, plants and geophysical resources that it is nearly impossible to say where 'here' is anymore. Planetary change in the earth system is even older. Now though, something is different. We have a name for it—the Anthropocene.

Although we may have only experienced the first seventy years of the Anthropocene, rapid acceleration and climactic uncertainty mean we have already left the Holocene well behind. During the Holocene, art was a reflection of humanity's growing understanding of our place in the world and the universe. Art was a way of communicating all the wonders that could be seen and imagined. Now humans are a geological force and new forms of imagining and recording the planet are necessary. In this context, how do we write about contemporary art? Do new words need to be invented? Or should we look to figures of thought already present in galleries and on pages that tell our stories? The critical framework of the Anthropocene offers a way to write about contemporary art as a form of planetary thinking.

Drawing on observations of contemporary art installations exhibited in public art galleries, this project explores whether art writing that combines the ecopoetic voice of the lyric essay with the critical methodologies of art history might contribute a way to describe what it means to live within the Anthropocene. Art history is a discipline that tells stories about what it sees. Art history helps us to observe subjects, objects, concepts, affects, movements, events, energies, and bodies as they shift and transform, creating even more ways to see and imagine the world. Art, like science, is always culturally and temporally specific. In a real and practical sense, artists have been responsible for our visions of the past. The prehistories of the Anthropocene are found in images of geology, humans, plants, and other species in the environment. This project explores ways of writing an art history for the future by telling stories of artworks that both question and describe the world as it is now. In tracing the ways in which artworks enable us to understand planetary relationship between the biological, the social, and the geological, this project seeks to articulate an aesthetic way of knowing that is not just responsive to change and transformation, but that suggests new ways to imagine the future of the world in which we live.