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# The Anthropocene

## Key Issues for the Humanities

**Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller**

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## 7 Aesthetics

How to conceive of an aesthetics for the Anthropocene? In the art world, the Anthropocene has proven to be a particularly productive buzzword. Yet, it has also shown a tendency to devolve into a fashionable buzzword. When an 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene' is invoked at exhibitions, seminars, and public discussions, it generally refers, in a broad-brush fashion, to 'ecological crisis', 'global warming', 'the human footprint', or to more specific problems such as pollution, species extinction, or issues of coexistence with other species. Yet such references hardly add up to a coherent aesthetic program. Rather, they reflect certain prevalent assumptions about the purpose and relevance of art. In the first place, art is supposed to make the abstract concept 'Anthropocene' thinkable and perceptible: 'As the vehicle of aesthetic, [art] is central to *thinking with and feeling through* the Anthropocene' (Davis and Turpin 2015, p. 3). Secondly, art is thought to provide forms of expression that offer an alternative to the discourse of science and politics: 'Art provides [...] a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression' (Davis and Turpin 2015, p. 4). In other words, art should mobilize and 'raise awareness', conveying a sense of urgency in the face of the ecological crisis. Thirdly, art is supposed to provide new conceptual tools for approaching the problem. As the Field Book that accompanied the exhibition *Reset Modernity*, curated by Bruno Latour, reads: 'Modernity was a way to differentiate past and future, north and south, progress and regress, radical and conservative. However, at a time of profound ecological mutation, such a compass is running in wild circles without offering much orientation anymore. This is why it is time for a reset' (Latour 2016, p. 2).

None of this, however, takes us very far towards an aesthetic theory for the Anthropocene. It simply reformulates some fairly conventional expectations of art and its capacity to make the world a better place. 'Anthropocene art' is for the most part understood to represent certain *themes* such as climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, melting icebergs, species loss, and, more recently, geological history and stratigraphy. Many of the novels, films, and artworks that deal with climate change (such as climate fiction or

certain forms of landscape photography) belong to this category. For example, a study on *climate fiction* carries the title *Anthropocene Fiction*—without so much as addressing the specific role of climate change in the context of the more comprehensive problem of the Anthropocene (Trexler 2015).

A genuine aesthetics for the Anthropocene, however, cannot be satisfied with thematic references and the rhetoric of political mobilization. It must ask what it means to confront a deeper understanding of the Anthropocene, not in the content but in the *form* of aesthetic representation. Such a reflection on form is exemplified by Bruno Latour's reading of a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, reproduced on the cover of his *Gaia Lectures* (Latour 2017, p. 222; Fig. 7.1): *The Great Enclosure Near Dresden* (1832).

The painting shows the muddy floodplain of a river at dusk or dawn, speckled with pools of water. But, as Latour observes, this landscape appears oddly warped, as if one were seeing the curvature of the globe itself. The sky is similarly arched, displaying a concave upward curve. Only the horizon line in the middle distance is straight and separates the two distorted spaces of earth and sky. Because of this distortion of pictorial space, the observer's vantage point is difficult to make out. The observer seems neither to stand on the level of the curved floodplain in the foreground, nor on any determinable higher ground. It is this strange double curvature of space that for Latour epitomizes the disturbance in the human relationship to the

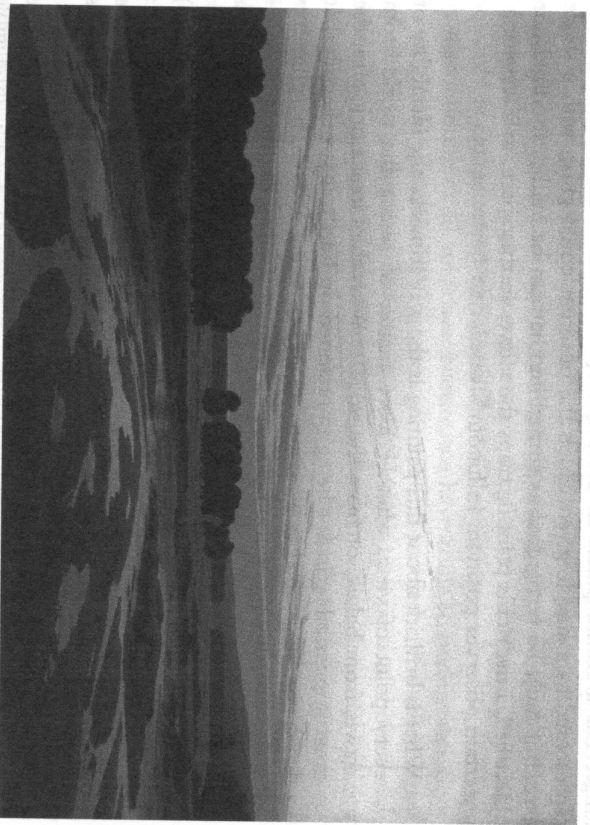


Figure 7.1 Friedrich, Caspar David., 1831/2. *The Great Enclosure near Dresden*. Oil on canvas. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photograph by Jürgen Karpinski.

world brought about by the Anthropocene. If the Anthropocene heralds nothing less than a *new way of being-in-the-world*, it solicits questioning on two levels: first, there is the epistemological question as to the modes of access to, and forms of knowledge of, the non-human; second, there is the question as to how this new relationship between the human and the non-human might be aesthetically represented. For Latour, these two questions are closely connected.

In Friedrich's painting, the classic formal convention of European art history, according to which space is to be rendered from a fixed vantage point, is suspended or distorted. This convention, according to Latour, perfectly expressed the Western relationship to nature: nature is subordinated to an objectifying gaze, as if it had no purpose other than to be thus represented (Latour 2017, p. 17). According to this paradigm, it is—implausibly—as if the subject-viewer and the object-viewed exist only *for one another* (Daston and Galison [2007] 2010). Although Friedrich's painting cites these conventions—its pictorial space is oriented towards a vanishing point—this only highlights the extent to which it deviates from them. As Latour writes: 'This is not a landscape that someone might contemplate. It offers no possible stability [...]' (Latour 2017, p. 222). Latour sees the curved, non-Euclidean space of the picture, the free-floating gaze of the disoriented viewer, as an allegory of the human standpoint with regard to a nature in which it no longer has a secure place. In the Anthropocene, nature can no longer be represented as a simple given which the observer could grasp with a single gaze, but must be recognized as something that can be neither totalized nor objectified. Friedrich's painting traps the viewer in this space, in a wavering, uncertain observer position. In Latour's words:

What is brilliant about this painting is the way it marks the instability of every point of view, whether it's a matter of seeing the world from above, from below, or from the middle. With the Great Enclosure, the great impossibility is not being imprisoned on Earth, it is believing that Earth can be grasped as a reasonable and coherent Whole, by piling up scales one on top of another, from the most local to the most global—and vice versa—or thinking that one could be content with one's own little plot in which to cultivate a garden. (ibid., p. 223)

Latour's reading of the painting is exemplary of what an 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene' might involve. At a first glance, Friedrich's painting appears to be a fairly straightforward representation of a landscape; in fact, however, it introduces a small twist in its *form* that makes all the difference. The painting abandons the presupposition of a transparent, readily intelligible structure of the world which the work of art simply reflects or re-enacts. It is replaced by a disorientation which is as subtle as it is profound, encompassing both the position of the viewer and the space of representation. In

this way, the painting performs a veritable 'mutation of the relation to the world' (ibid., p. 7) as well as of the categories of subject and object, human and non-human, whole and part. The Anthropocene fundamentally unsettles the dualisms that have long shaped not only our theoretical and practical access to the world, but also the conventions of aesthetics—even though aesthetics was often presented as a categorical alternative to the scientific relation to the world (Böhme 2002, p. 435). It is no accident that this unsettling effect is not an achievement of *what* the picture depicts, but rather of *how* it brings the world into a specific form and thus into a specific relation with the observer.

The modern construction of nature, which Latour sees unsettled in Friedrich's painting, was based on a fundamental dualism between subject and object. While the subject was traditionally understood to be a cognitive, reflective, and affective being, nature—as it was regarded by a subject—was conceived as lacking all of these qualities. Devoid of intention, perception, and consciousness, it was taken to consist of stable, inert matter which obeyed a fixed set of rules called the 'laws of nature'—laws which were furthermore believed to be fundamentally intelligible to the human subject. Leibniz famously summed up this belief in the maxim *natura non facit saltus*—nature does not make jumps. Because it was understood to be essentially immutable, continuous in space and time, and always acting in accordance with laws which can be expressed in mathematical form, nature could be systematically observed, broken down into its constituent parts, subjected to experiments and technologically manipulated. With the demise of this modern understanding of nature, a different nature emerges which not only is characterized by manifold, complex interdependencies, but also by discontinuities and surprises. Nature, we have come to understand, does indeed 'make jumps'. This nature cannot be objectified, i.e. epistemologically held at a distance, nor can it be divided up into parts without losing sight of the essential interconnectedness of its many active elements. Ecology played an important role in bringing into focus this interconnectedness, as well as the profound entanglement of human beings in the larger fabric of life. Cycles, interdependencies, feedback loops, and tipping points are the characteristic features of a new paradigm of nature (see Ch. 4: Nature and culture).

The modern dualism between this idea of an 'objectifiable' nature and a human observer, between object and subject, formed the basis of the modern aesthetics of nature (Böhme 2002). In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), one of the most powerful and influential expressions of such an aesthetics, Immanuel Kant argued that aesthetic experience complements the scientific and technical approach to nature. Aesthetics mediates between the theoretical-scientific approach to the world as it is laid down in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87) and the sphere of free will which he had discussed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). According to Kant, the aesthetic experience of nature does not originate in the object itself but

rather in the attitude of the subject when it experiences an object either as 'beautiful' or as 'sublime'. Whereas 'the beauty of nature' Kant writes, 'reveals to us a technique of nature', thus making known its inner purposiveness and coherence (Kant 2000, p. 129), the sublime is an experience of being overwhelmed by the object of contemplation. The 'mathematical sublime' overwhelms on account of being 'absolutely great' (ibid., p. 131), while the 'dynamic sublime' infuses the viewer with awe by the power or violence expressed. That which arouses in us a feeling of the sublime appears 'in its form to be contrapurposeful for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination' (ibid., p. 129). In the sublime, the human capacity for perception, imagination and judgment is pushed to its limits. The objects which occasion this experience of the sublime are above all natural phenomena such as mountains, glaciers, icebergs, thunderstorms, towering rocks, raging streams or desolate wastelands. Essential to such an experience, however, is the reflexive distancing performed by the viewer. The sense of the sublime attests both to the experience of being overwhelmed by the object and, at the same time, to the capacity of reflecting on that experience. For example, the vastness of a mountain range can, upon reflection, impart a sense of the infinity of the universe, thus impressing on us the 'superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility' (ibid., p. 141). The sublime overpowers the senses, but it is mastered and contained by reason. Kant thus construes the negative experience of horror before the magnitude or violent force of an object as an occasion for the self-assertion of the subject's cognitive faculty.

Nature, however, need not only be regarded as beautiful or sublime; in modern aesthetics, it has often been seen as something which occasions a sense of loss or alienation. Aesthetic representation would then be concerned with the attempt to repair this loss—in the form of nature writing, for example, or in modern landscape painting and photography. Such a *negative aesthetics* insists on the non-representability of alienated nature. In modern aesthetics, Kant's claim regarding the subject's ability to distance itself from the experience of the sublime is thrown into question. Theodor W. Adorno, for example, understands the sublime less as an indication of *superiority over nature* than of *dependency on nature*: 'Rather than that, as Kant thought, spirit in the face of nature becomes aware of its own superiority, it becomes aware of its own natural essence. This is the moment when the subject, vis-a-vis the sublime, is moved to tears. Recollection of nature breaks the arrogance of his self-positing' (Adorno 1997, p. 276). Following in the footsteps of Adorno's reinterpretation of the sublime against Kant, Jean-François Lyotard sees in it the signature of a postmodern aesthetic that 'denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share the nostalgia for the unattainable'. Instead, the postmodern sublime 'searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy

them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable' (Lyotard 1984, p. 81, emphasis added).

An aesthetic theory of the Anthropocene might well take up Lyotard's diagnosis of the sublime object's resistance to representation. It cannot, however, retreat to a Kantian aesthetics of nature, nor to figures of alienation or a 'nostalgia for the unattainable', e.g. by celebrating and mourning the loss of untouched nature. Instead, it must question the notion of nature as the other and opposite of the human. Timothy Morton has proposed that an aesthetic program adequate to the ecological crisis must do away altogether with any emphatic conception of 'nature'. To overcome the false sense of immediacy that is attached to the term, he advocates using the term 'ecology', to suggest a condition of radical mediation: 'Ecology without Nature' is the programmatic title of his book on the paradoxes of nature writing (Morton 2007).

Rather than discarding 'nature', however, it may prove more fruitful to proceed from the assumption that both the concepts of 'nature' and of the 'human' are fundamentally transformed. An aesthetics of the Anthropocene, we believe, needs to deal not so much with the alienation of humans from nature but with a more thoroughgoing alienation—the becoming *uncanny of the life-world*. The journalist Thomas Friedman, playing on the term 'global warming', has suggested the term 'global weirding' (Friedman 2010). As we have seen, in the Anthropocene nature can no longer be understood as a collection of inert objects, as a world of passive matter which is perceived and acted upon by an observing (human) subject but itself incapable of perceiving and acting, a world that occasions reflection but lacks reflexivity. On the contrary, as Amitav Ghosh has argued, nature now returns the gaze—it appears alive, threatening, unpredictable, sentient, and temperamental. As Ghosh writes, this is 'one of the uncanniest effects of the Anthropocene, this renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps with the planet itself' (Ghosh 2016, p. 63). Nature demands 'recognition'—both in the sense of recovering a knowledge that has been repressed and in the sense of a renewed respect for the non-human as an idiosyncratic, heteroclitic, unpredictable and potentially dangerous force. Once the emphatic concept of nature as the *other of culture* is abandoned, the sense of separation between the human and the natural disappears, disclosing the indissoluble interconnectedness of humans with and in the world—an existence 'within the thick of the world, life in a vortex of shared precariousness and unchosen proximities' (Cohen 2015, p. 107).

Humans thus no longer find themselves standing over and above a world of objects but rather caught in the midst of things—in the midst of climate change, of coexisting forms of life, of technologies and technological consequences—and, at the same time, dependent on capital flows and the circulation of material resources which ceaselessly and uncontrollably transform the economic and ecological conditions of human existence. The

world involves and affects humans in all kinds of ways, imposing responsibilities and material risks on them, and continually overtaxing their capacity to perceive and understand. In the 'thick of the world' (Cohen 2015, p. 107), what is most important may well be that which remains *imperceptible*. Art in the Anthropocene, if it is to be more than a thematic comment on this or that aspect of our present condition, must address these cognitive and ethical difficulties as a question of *form*, in an effort to render visually, sensually, affectively, or conceptually phenomena which otherwise elude experience, not because of their distance from the observer but because of their proximity. Unlike in the aesthetics of classical modernity, unrepresentability, then, has nothing to do with a withdrawal into 'aesthetic distance'. On the contrary, it involves an uncanny—uncontrollable, unmanageable—intimacy with things, in the midst of a world that is hypercomplex and multi-dimensional. The 'things' of the Anthropocene are too close to be objectified, too big to be pictured, too complex to be fully accounted for.

On this basis, we can distinguish three fundamental difficulties which an aesthetics of the Anthropocene must tackle: (1) *latency*, the withdrawal from perceptibility and representability; (2) *entanglement*, a new awareness of coexistence and immanence; and (3) *scale*, the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude (Clark 2015). This last issue, the clash of scales, in turn presents itself on different levels: temporally (the short frame of human time vs. the 'deep time' of Earth history but also the deep future); spatially (local life forms vs. planetary changes of the life system); and in terms of agency ('harmless' individual actions vs. the cumulative effects of their billion-fold multiplication) (see Ch. 10: Scales I: The planetary and Ch. 11: Scales II: Deep time). For artistic representation, what latency, entanglement, and scale have in common is that they cannot be addressed simply as topics or themes but only as *problems of form*.

It is remarkable how many of the efforts to formulate an aesthetic theory and an artistic practice for the Anthropocene revert to the concept of the sublime (Guténin 2016, Kainulainen 2013, Williston 2016). As we have seen, Kant's concept of the 'mathematical sublime' had already explicitly addressed the problem of incommensurable scales: the sublime is that which is not great relative to something else, not 'greater than' but 'absolutely great' (Kant 2000, 131). One could argue that the tendency in aesthetic approaches to the Anthropocene to reread this familiar conceptual ground betrays a failure of the theoretical imagination. However, the reference to the sublime serves as a starting point for a set of strikingly divergent arguments.

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, for example, has criticized the affinity between the Anthropocene and the sublime as the aesthetic signature of a relationship to the world that is characterized by a desire for demiurgic control and epistemic distance. The feeling of guilty pleasure, the penchant for violence (in the iconography of the catastrophic) and for displays of technological domination (in the modern phenomenon of the 'technological sublime'), which nowadays mark the experience of the sublime point to the apolitical,

technocratic ideology which, Fressoz argues, lies at the core of the concept of the Anthropocene: 'It seems more exciting to wonder at the dynamism of a humanity that has become a telluric force than to think about the regression of an economic system' (Fressoz 2016, p. 49, trans. EH). Fressoz sees evidence for this view in the tendency of many contemporary works of art, especially in photography, to depict their objects from a great distance.

Yet it is by no means clear that the view from a distance, from 'above' or 'outside', necessarily feeds into a technocratic ideology of the sort Fressoz excoriates. In some artworks, often explicitly devoted to the Anthropocene (consider e.g. David Meisel, Edward Burtnsky or Andreas Gursky), it is precisely the view from above or from a distance that makes tangible the magnitude of ecological destruction, the massive transformation of the landscape, or the excesses of human consumption. Such works appear less to present a stance of demiurgic dominance than an attempt to visually capture the almost incomprehensibly vast—in Kant's terms: 'absolutely great'—scope of anthropogenic impact. The distant, devastated, yet devilishly beautiful landscapes shown in these photographs are thus lifted out of the latency of marginality and oblivion. The view from above, which can only be achieved through elaborate technical means, is the condition for their becoming manifest.

Other theorists of the aesthetics of the Anthropocene understand the sublime not as a hallmark of the superiority of the observer but rather of their inescapable *entanglement* in the world. The overwhelming, affective terror of the sublime stages a blurring of the boundaries between subject and object, self and other, the necessary and the contingent, foreground and background. According to this view, the sublime of the Anthropocene dramatizes the involvement with a *non-natural nature* in which humans are profoundly implicated without, however, being able to gain an overall 'objective' perspective. The sublime thus discloses a condition of responsibility without mastery. Maggie Kainulainen writes: 'A sublime encounter with climate change is marked by uncanny and unwanted potency, as one finds oneself implicated in the complex web of interactions that will produce some level of global catastrophe' (2013, p. 113). The ecological significance of the sublime in the Anthropocene lies in the experience of these unpredictable processes of implication and interaction. Here, no aesthetic or epistemic distance of the sort occasioned by the Kantian sublime is possible. Rather, the aesthetic experience is one of radical immanence. The reflexive freedom once associated with sublime experience gives way to a disturbing intimacy with a world that can no longer be taken for granted.

Timothy Morton, probably the most flamboyant theoretician of the Anthropocene, has turned this conception of an aesthetic experience which overwhelms and destabilizes the subject into an ontological category (Morton 2013). His amalgamation of object-oriented ontology and ecocriticism, philosophy and pop culture, presented in a playfully hyperbolic style, has made him one of the most popular authors on the topic (Blasdel 2017).

His most successful coinage, the 'hyperobject', takes up Kant's figure of the sublime, but turns it on its head. What for Kant had been an *experience of the subject* becomes, in Morton's account, the ontological *quality of an object*, albeit one that radically resists 'objectivity'. Hyperobjects, Morton writes, 'are things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans' (2013, p. 1). For Morton, anything that exceeds human sensory experience can be described as a hyperobject—a black hole, climate change, the Florida Everglades, or even the sum total of all the styrofoam in the world. Morton thus elaborates the experience of immanence disclosed by the sublime in the Anthropocene into an *ontology of uncanny, 'dark' coexistence*. The hyperobject shatters the categories of perception which define human access to the world—and thus the dimensions of the 'lifeworld' as such. 'The vastness of the object's scale makes smaller beings—people, countries, even continents—seem like an illusion, or a small colored patch on a large dark surface. How can we know it is real? What does real mean?' The threat of global warming is not only political, but also ontological' (ibid., p. 32). Thus the *epistemological problem* posed by the clash of scales in the Anthropocene—the challenge of mapping human and non-human scales onto one another—is turned into an *ontological problem*. This ontologization of the sublime replaces questions of epistemology and aesthetic representation with a fundamental 'darkness' and 'withdrawal' of the things themselves (Morton 2016). From this perspective, the challenges of an Anthropocene aesthetics no longer emerge from epistemic or aesthetic forms but from the very existence of things. Questions of *form* become questions of *being*.

Let us illustrate this with an example. The American artist Tara Donovan uses industrial materials and everyday objects (plastic cups, industrial tubing, paper or foil) to construct large installations (Fig. 7.2 and Fig. 7.3). Plastic cups, struck together by the thousands, are shaped into fractal objects that look like a frozen wave, a gigantic pile of foam, or cumulus clouds. On account of their massive accumulation, the translucent material of the cups becomes opaque and their conical shape is subsumed into the rounded surfaces. The resulting objects have the appearance of monstrously enlarged organic structures or natural forms.

Using some of the emblematic materials of the Anthropocene (plastic, polystyrene, cardboard, etc.) and the disposable articles produced from them, Donovan creates a new, entirely *post-natural nature*: forms that look like moss or mildew, vegetal growths, stones or clouds. Here is how Morton describes them: 'In massive piles, the cups reveal *properties hidden from the view* of a person who uses a single cup at a time, a viscous (in my terms) malleability' (Morton 2013, p. 114, emphasis added). Morton sees in Donovan's installations the revelation of a hidden property of the object itself. However, if we consider it in *aesthetic* rather than *ontological* terms, Donovan's operation can be understood primarily as a game of scales which reflects the cumulative scale effects of the Anthropocene: one plastic cup is just a flimsy shred of polystyrene, billions of them are an ecological disaster.

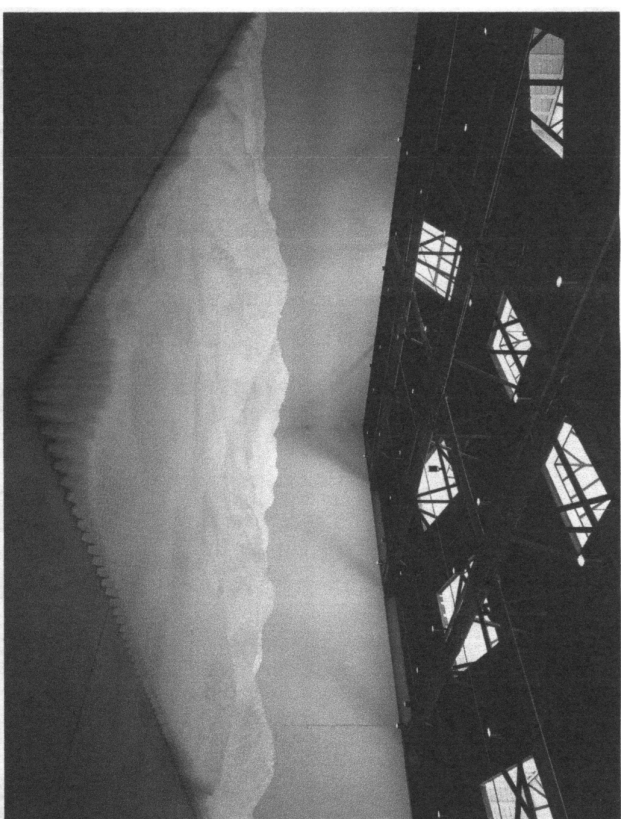


Figure 7.2 Donovan, T., 2006. *Untitled (Plastic Cups)*. Installation (plastic cups). Art: New York: Pace Gallery. © Tara Donovan, courtesy Pace Gallery. Photo: Kerry Ryan McFate, courtesy Pace Gallery.

In their thousand-fold multiplication, the transition from the small to the enormous, and in their arrangement into structures that cite organic forms, a new object emerges which solicits an entirely different experience of the everyday object, even as it inflates microscopic organic structures to unfamiliar magnitudes. Morton emphasizes the plasticity or 'malleability' of Donovan's works, but he overlooks the *form of the installation*—a form that twists the toxic plastic cup into the figure of a fascinating, shimmering natural object. Donovan's work thus both *amplifies* and *erases* the material properties of the object: out of industrially produced, mass-consumed waste, she conjures an illusion of organic growth and spontaneous emergence. The structures of her installations mimic those generated by natural processes of self-organization. Deliberately and with great precision, Donovan plays with the *form-giving processes of nature*, pulling them out of latency through a translation in scale. She does nothing other than what nature itself does, e.g. when grains of sand pile up into a dune, molecules arrange themselves into crystals, or birds into an undulating flock.

In contrast to Morton, who believes that an aesthetics for the Anthropocene must start with an inquiry into *modes of being*, we therefore argue that it must above all concern itself with questions of *form*. The visual arts have developed a panoply of different strategies for translating the transformative

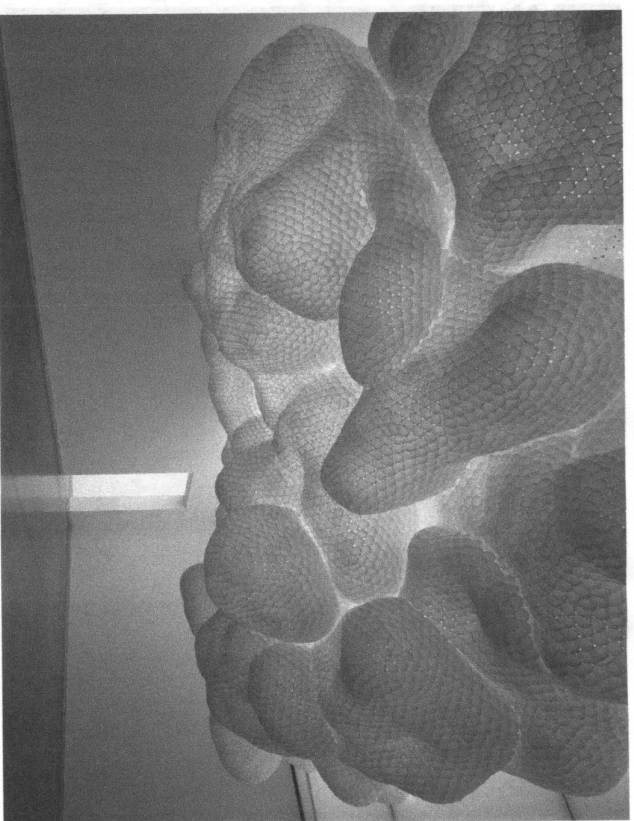


Figure 7.3 Donovan, T., 2003/08. *Untitled (Stryfoam Cups)*. Installation (stryfoam cups and glue). Art: Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2008–2009. © Tara Donovan, courtesy Pace Gallery. © Photo Charles mayer photography.

processes of the Anthropocene, such as climate change, from their latency into something tangible and manifest. This is the case in the massive scales employed by contemporary photography; in the post-natural installations of a Tara Donovan or of the British artist duo Ackroyd & Harvey; in the artistically constructed atmospheres of Philippe Rahm or Olafur Eliasson; or in such experimental installations and experiments as Thomas Saraceno's *Aerocene* project. Works in other media, sound installations for example, seek to make the inaudible audible, the non-perceptible perceptible. Felix Hess's infrasound installations make it possible to *hear* fluctuations of atmospheric pressure across the Atlantic (Hess 2001), while John Luther Adams's light-sound installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen* translates seismicological, geomagnetic, and meteorological data from Alaska into electronic sound (Adams and Ross 2009).

Peter Sloterdijk uses the term 'explication' to refer to such strategies of making manifest that which is latent, of making explicit that which is implicit, of bringing to the fore a background which otherwise goes unnoticed. Historically, such explanations were made possible by the disruption or destruction of tacit background conditions, such as breathable air, drinkable water, or the regenerative force of nature:

The background only breaks its silence when foreground processes exceed its burdening capacity. How many real ecological and military disasters were needed before it could be said with juristic, physical and atmotechnic precision how one can set up humanely breathable air environments? (Sloterdijk 2016, p. 63)

As it grapples with problems of latency, entanglement, and the clash of scales, an aesthetics for the Anthropocene ultimately is not concerned with a world of objects that altogether resist representation, but rather with 'explication' in precisely this sense. It involves an analytical, often experimental and highly knowledge-based making-explicit of processes, objects and practices which are murky not for ontological, but rather for epistemological reasons. It addresses our inability to get these obscure zones of latency into proper focus, and the difficulty of casting them into a form which would allow us to deal with them—aesthetically, epistemologically, and also politically.

In the narrative arts—literature and film—the same problem arises, albeit in a medium which is always already culturally coded. Because it involves patterns of coded signs and cultural conventions, literature does not easily lend itself to ontological approaches such as Morton's, nor to the new materialisms advocated, for example, by Iovino and Oppermann, who attribute 'narrative agency' to matter itself (2012). As in the other arts, the task of a 'literature for the Anthropocene' is not so much a question of addressing particular themes (e.g. climate change, ecological disasters, species loss, etc.), as many critics have argued (Trexler 2015, Goodbody 2013, Kaplan 2016, Houser 2014), nor is it about producing certain affects in the audience, as Claire Colebrook suggests when she writes that 'climate change should [...] awaken us from our all-too-human narrative slumbers' (2013, p. 60). Rather, the challenge for literature lies first of all in the development of poetic and narrative forms which are adequate to the problems of latency, entanglement, and scale that the Anthropocene confronts us with.

In narrative, however, the formal problem of the 'explication' of the latent presents itself in a very different way. Narratives are always highly coded cultural projections which not only represent, but organize reality. They give structure to temporal sequences and causal relationships, distinguish between active protagonists and passive backgrounds, and they cannot but employ established symbolic systems; they establish a spatial order and boundaries that define the narrated world through which the characters move; and they determine the perspective from which phenomena can be observed and events narrated. The ways in which narratives structure their world reflect the aesthetic and social values of the societies in which they arise and circulate. Narratives are thus defined by laws of genre which prescribe what material is to be in- or excluded, which settings, characters and action can be described, and in what literary form. Literary texts which seek

to narrate climate change are now frequently relegated to a distinctive genre: 'cli-fi', short for climate change fiction (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018). However, the vast majority of these texts would otherwise be categorized as science thrillers, science fiction, or dystopian fiction. For Amitav Ghosh, the fact that a subject as momentous as climate change is mostly confined to genres which many critics still consider 'sub-literary' points to a deeper problem with our conception of what constitutes 'serious' fiction.

According to Ghosh, the modern novel treated nature mostly as an aspect of 'setting'—a part of the background against which the narrative unfolds—rather than as an actor in its own right. Furthermore, the genre conventions of the novel require that the narrative be situated in a recognizable time and place and cover a time span no longer than the lives of a limited cast of characters. The focus lies on the psychological development of these characters, who exemplify a particular social milieu, and the plot must be plausible, i.e. reflect common assumptions about the world. As Ghosh writes:

In novels discontinuities of space are accompanied also by discontinuities of time: a setting usually requires a 'period'; it is actualized within a certain time horizon. Unlike epics, which often range over eons and epochs, novels rarely extend beyond a few generations. The *longue durée* is not the territory of the novel. Novels [...] conjure up worlds that become real precisely because of their finitude and distinctiveness. Within the mansion of serious fiction, no one will speak of how the continents were created; nor will they refer to the passage of thousands of years: connections and events on this scale appear not just unlikely but also absurd within the delimited horizon of a novel. [...] But the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast.

(Ghosh 2016, pp. 59–62)

In this passage, Ghosh addresses the problem of a narrative aesthetics of the Anthropocene: the difficulty of casting the *longue durée* of geological time, imperceptible transformations and catastrophic breaks, hyper-complex entanglements, and non-human forms of agency into narrative form. As an alternative to the strict limitations imposed by the modern novel, Ghosh proposes a return to older and non-European genres—especially the epic.

However, we believe that this argument both underplays the flexibility and capaciousness of the modern novel and puts too much stock in the contemporary relevance of the epic. Indeed, novelists have always experimented with the conventions of their genre, for example by unsettling narrative perspectives and introducing unreliable narrators, playing with narrative chronology, and introducing non-human actors. On the other hand, it is questionable whether a literary form that was as tightly embedded in traditional forms of life as the epic can actually be updated for a literary aesthetic

of the Anthropocene (Berghaller 2018). Is not the epic ultimately a genre that is profoundly bound up with the living conditions and value systems of the Holocene? To narrate 'global weirding' can only mean developing narrative forms that take up and continue the formal experiments which shaped the modern novel—but to do so in a way that responds to the specific challenges presented by the Anthropocene.

Such a poetics can pursue many different strategies. The hyper-complexity of the ecological relationships in which humans are implicated can be translated narratively into a de-centered, multi-layered web of narrative. This is the case, for example, in David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), whose interwoven plotlines unfold over centuries into a distant future, while the text incorporates a wide variety of literary genres, from diaries and letters to thrillers and science fiction (Baucorn 2015). It can also take the shape of a narrative excavation, digging into the layers of deep time sedimented in a particular landscape, as in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010) or William Least Heat Moon's *PrairieEarth* (1991). An Anthropocene poetics can furthermore attempt to locate the human being in the deep time of geological history, as in Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* ([1979] 1980). Employing the technique of literary collage, Frisch's short novel combines the reflections of an unreliable narrator with encyclopedia entries about paleoanthropology and geological history in order to reflect on humankind's precarious position as an observer of nature (Malkmus 2017). Alternatively, such an experimental poetics might indeed explore what an 'epic' might be in the Anthropocene—for example in David Brin's science fiction novel *Earth* (1990; Heise 2018) or in Allison Cobb's book-length poem *Green-Wood* ([2010] 2018), which turns a fabled cemetery in Brooklyn into a cosmological metaphor for the modern conquest of nature and its ruinous consequences.

In all of these literary experiments, the protagonists and their inner worlds, and the narrator as observer and organizer of events, lose their central significance in the text. The traditional placeholders for the 'human' in the text, the 'anthropomorphisms' of narrative, take a back seat. The background or 'setting' becomes the actual protagonist of the narrative, while the human actors function merely as nodes in the entanglements and transformations of a world that extends far beyond them. Anthropocene narratives will, we believe, continue to interrogate such anthropomorphisms and perhaps leave them behind as they expand the space of possibility for storytelling. The formal inventiveness of modern and postmodern literature—the many self-imposed interdictions, the experiments with focalization and narrative time, the intertextual and metafictional games, and the programmatic distrust of narrative—testifies to a desire for forms of representation that can stand up to the complexity of the world we find ourselves in. Whatever else they may be about, such texts also speak to the importance of not allowing ourselves to be taken in by our desire for a good yarn.

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