

THE LAST WORD



ANJA CLAUS

ART IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Center has been probing the role art, and aesthetics in general, can play in exploring and promoting human responsibilities in relation to nature — the whole community of life. As part of this investigation, we began featuring in our publications artists who have a passion and mission focused on the humans and nature relationship. For example, the Winter 2019 issue of *Minding Nature* highlighted the collaboration with students from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) on the theme of the Anthropocene.¹ Following the publication of that issue we organized an evening of readings from their essays by the SAIC students and presentations by SAIC faculty that was held at the school on February 15, 2019.

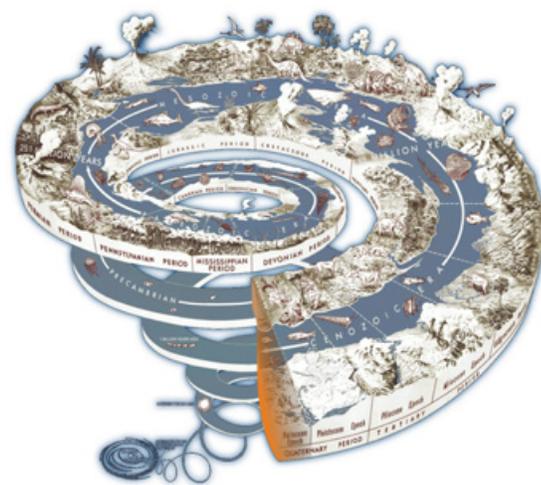
The Center also understands the importance of attending to and amplifying the voices of the next generation, probing how they understand themselves in nature in these times. Thus, the collaboration with the teachers and students of the SAIC offered an important opportunity to share the insights and concerns of our future thought leaders and creative artists via essays and scholarship as well as via the audio and visual arts. SAIC faculty members Andrew Yang and Jeremy Bolen provided a background and overview of the work they and their students are confronting:

Geologists have proposed that the Earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Distinct from the Holocene, which started 11,650 years ago at the end of the last ice age, the term “Anthropocene” suggests that human beings have made an indelible mark on the Earth—that our species has become a predominant planetary force. What do we do with such an awareness of how nature and culture have become so inextricably and precariously entwined, emotionally, politically, or aesthetically?

These are some of the questions we have been asking in our course, “Anthropocene: The Future Is Now,” at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A unique hybrid class combining studio art and the natural sciences, it is modeled on a Berlin-based project called “The Anthropocene Curriculum,” in which we both have been active since 2014. Organized by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the project’s goal has been to create an open, globally relevant set of educational resources that are explicitly transdisciplinary in scope and planetary in scale.²

As part of the February 15th evening discussion, I highlighted additional themes (to the students’ contributions) within the current Anthropocene discourse. These included the following reflections.

An important point to keep in mind as we re-imagine the human project going forward is that, although the term has been embraced by general media outlets and referenced to by some in academia, scientists haven’t officially determined that we are actually in a distinctive new geological epoch in Earth’s history, officially marking the close of the current epoch, the Holocene. The “Anthropocene” (an epoch marked by the emergence of humans as the global geological force) is the term that has been proposed, but it has not been officially accepted as a subdivision of geologic time by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, nor by the International Union of Geological Sciences.



Geolspiral

Philosophers and environmentalists generally acknowledge that human activities have had widespread even global effects on natural ecosystems and the biophysical systems of the Earth, but many are skeptical about the term Anthropocene. This nomenclature both evokes scientific facts—concerning anthropogenic influence—and may affirm ethical values—concerning anthropocentric superiority. The latter is problematic; such human-centeredness is at the root of our ecological predicaments and must be overcome if we are to move ahead in a truly sustainable direction. Many feel we still have an opportunity to re-imagine our path out from under this anthropocentric position, but naming our new time the Human epoch will hinder this effort. Alternative names suggested for our new geologic epoch include the Symbiocene (emphasizing the interdependence and mutuality of living things) and the Ecozoic (also emphasizing the Earth’s integral living human and more-than-human community).

More specifically, Eileen Crist has provided the following criticisms of the notion of the Anthropocene:³

- The Anthropocene seems to focus mainly on technological and managerial approaches to make human dominion sustainable versus challenging the concept of human dominion of Earth in the first place.
- The Anthropocene discourse veers away from environmentalism’s dark idiom of destruction, depredation, rape, loss, devastation, and deterioration of the non-colonial human and natural world into tame vocabulary that humans are changing, shaping, transforming, or altering the biosphere, and in the process creating novel ecosystems and anthropogenic biomes. This vocabulary that we are simply “changing the world” secures the colonial anthropocentric ontological ground by silencing the displaced, killed, and enslaved whose homelands have been assimilated and whose lives have, indeed, been changed forever—erased, even.
- This merger between the social and the natural that is at the heart of the Anthropocene discourse may not be about mutual

integration. This merger looks more like a takeover, wherein the powerful have wiped out and reconstructed the indigenous human and more-than-human world for purposes of appropriation. This form of merger might not signal the “coupling” of society and nature; rather, it breeds scarcity for both.

- The Anthropocene ideal accepts the humanization of the Earth as a reality, even though this is still contestable, partially reversible, and worthy of resistance. We are capable of inspiring a different vision.
- Perhaps the global predicament we find ourselves in calls for drastic pulling back and scaling down of the human presence—welcoming the limitations of our numbers, economies, forms of habitation, and uses of land and sea so that humanity may flourish together with the entire breadth of life.

On the other hand, a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past may lurk behind the skepticism concerning the term Anthropocene. It is hard to admit that the Holocene is over. But looking to history, honoring and respecting the past does not have to be nostalgic. It can actually be a necessary component in how we re-imagine ourselves going forward. Remembering Deep Time, geology’s amazing contribution to the sciences, while looking forward to Big Time,⁴ beyond political timelines and our own generation, might be just the vision that can help us rebound.

Consider the following set of ideas offered by geologist Marcia Bjornerud, author of *Timefulness: How Thinking like a Geologist Can Help Save The World*, who is interviewed in this issue.⁵

- Most humans have no sense of temporal proportion—durations of the great chapters in Earth’s history, the rates of change during previous intervals of environmental instability, the intrinsic timescales of natural capital like groundwater systems. We tend to be time illiterate. This ignorance of planetary history undermines any claims we may make to modernity. We are navigating recklessly toward our future using conceptions of time as primitive as a world map from the

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fourteenth century, when dragons lurked around the edges of a flat Earth.

- One begins to understand that rocks are not nouns but verbs—visible evidence of processes: volcanic eruption, the accretion of a coral reef, the growth of a mountain belt. Everywhere one looks, rocks bear witness to events that unfolded over stretches of time. Little by little, over more than two centuries, the local stories told by rocks in all parts of the world have been stitched together into a great tapestry—the geologic timescale, or the map of Deep Time.
- “This brave new epoch is not the time when we took charge of things; it is just the point at which our insouciant and ravenous ways started changing Earth’s Holocene habits. It is also not the ‘end of nature’ but, instead, the end of the illusion that we are outside of nature. Dazzled by our own creations we have forgotten that we are wholly imbedded in a much older, more powerful world whose constancy we take for granted. As a species, we are much less flexible than we would like to believe, vulnerable to economic loss and prone to social unrest when nature—in the guise of Katrina, Sandy, or Harvey, among others—diverges just a little from what we expect. Averse to even the smallest changes, we have now set the stage for environmental deviations that will be larger and less predictable than any we have faced before. The great irony of the Anthropocene is that our outsized effects on the planet have in fact put Nature firmly back in charge, with a still-unpublished set of rules we will simply have to guess at. The fossil record of previous planetary upheavals makes it clear that there may be a long period of biogeochemical capriciousness before a new, stable regime emerges.”⁶
- “Our problem is that we lack both the appetite and political-economic infrastructure for intergenerational thinking. This habit is hard to break. But a group of time-transcending art projects may serve as inspiration... their purpose is to reframe the way we

think about ourselves in time. They may even provide templates for how we might design infrastructures for intergenerational governance.”⁷

The arts are an essential part in re-imagining new modes of adaptation and participation by expanding our conversations, as well as offering alternative and tangible ways of re-doing our political and day-to-day actions. We do not need to wistfully long for days gone by, but we do need to uplift the past and present stories of Others, especially those stories that have been neglected and intentionally repressed; stories not just of the human but of the more than human. Uplifting these stories creatively may offer Earthlings a wealth of insight and wisdom for traveling into the long future. Creative imagination is what we will need to rely on to shift our current unsustainable direction.

As Senior Editor of *Minding Nature*, Anja Claus manages the publication of the journal. She also writes and searches out stories that help us reimagine our relationship to each other and to planet Earth as a whole.

NOTES

1. Minding Nature essays by SAIC students: A. Quick, A. Segel, E. Rosario, and R. Speakman, “A New Nature,” *Minding Nature* 12, no. 1 (2019): 50-55, <https://www.humansandnature.org/a-new-nature>; D. Disciglio, G. Saucedo, N. Muratore, and T.L. Mitzel, “New Ecological Practices of Making Space: The Great Lakes System,” *Minding Nature* 12, no. 1 (2019): 56-64, <https://www.humansandnature.org/new-ecological-practices-of-making-space-the-great-lakes-system>; and D. Woods, E. Schierbeek, L. Reif, and Z. Ter-Zakaryan “Diachronous Markers, Violent Spaces” *Minding Nature* 12, no. 1 (2019): 65-72, <https://www.humansandnature.org/diachronous-markers-violent-surfaces>.

2. A. Yang and J. Bolen, “Unseen and Anthropocene: Unearthing Chicago as Second Nature,” *Minding Nature* 12, no. 1 (2019): 48-49, <https://www.humansandnature.org/unseen-and-anthropocene-unearthing-chicago-as-second-nature>.

3. E. Christ, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129-47.

4. Big Time references future time that is longer than a few political generations, approximately fifty years, yet still within the timeline that humanity lives on Earth as a cohesive species.

5. M. Bjornerud, *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

6. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. *Ibid.*