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# How to See the Anthropocene

Climate cannot be seen directly, nor can it be shown directly. The same pertains to its change, its warming, or what we should actually call its catastrophe. Humankind is facing unprecedented challenges and threats while being unable to show itself the object of its anxieties. Does the new era of the Anthropocene therefore offer researchers, artists and citizens a new figure of unrepresentability, which they have only just learnt to discuss – and familiarised themselves with – in the context of atrocities perpetrated by humans against other humans? Has the time come to confront the Shoah in a broader global dimension that already affects – with no exception whatsoever – all species of living creatures?

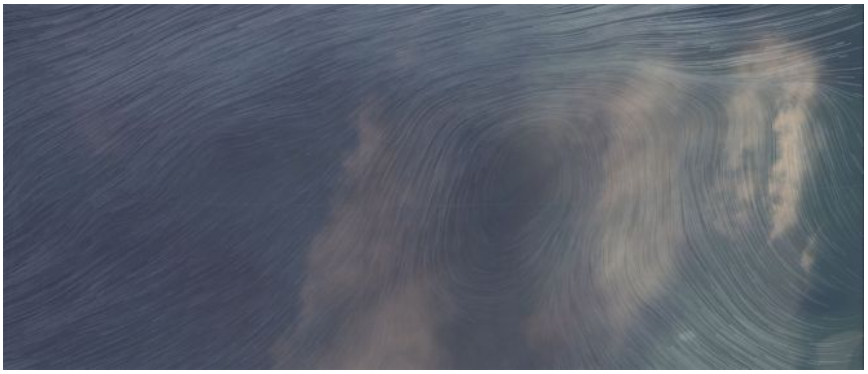


Susan Shuppli, *Atmospheric Feedback Loop* (2017). Excerpt from the film.

Eva Horn, the author of the monumental study *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age* (devoted to transformations in the apocalyptic discourse and visions of the end of the world in visual culture) evokes the differentiation between climate and weather, thus seeking to make readers realise the trap which our senses have fallen into.

> Climate today is defined in terms of averages, duration and regularity, probability and recurrences. Weather and the climate thus exist in a state of epistemological tension: the event versus the average, the short versus the long term, singular events versus regularity, manifestation versus latency.[1]

Yet, the difficulty in representing climate – and its catastrophic transformation – does not result solely from its abstract character in relation to perceptible, albeit short-lived, weather phenomena. For climate is a peculiar type of object which is both entirely ungraspable and yet strongly felt at the same time, both abstract and extremely specific, remote and closer than everything else that can be deemed close. We feel it when hit by an unbearable heatwave and during a downpour, while a shortage of water or a failed harvest expose us to real, palpable and concrete suffering. Such an object, suspended between known theoretical categories, has been called a hyperobject by Timothy Morton, who recognised global warming as one of the most prominent examples of this kind of peculiarity. "While hyperobjects are near, they are also very uncanny. [...] The more I struggle to understand hyperobjects, the more I discover that I am stuck to them. They are all over me. They are me".[2] In an attempt to focus on climate Morton therefore encounters himself, thereby discovering that difficulties in representing a hyperobject do not result from its detachment or abstraction but – quite the opposite – from its having too strong a connection with the observer.



Susan Shuppli, *Atmospheric Feedback Loop* (2017). Image from the film.

We can therefore see the Anthropocene only when we recognise it as an era of hyper-connections, contiguity and mutual dependencies between phenomena, scales, aspects and fields that we usually separate from each other. Susan Schuppli believes, for example, that dramatic climatic changes not only do not escape representation, but they are even a source of a new type of "extreme aesthetic products".[3] In an article devoted to the effects of the oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, she remarks that oil slicks mixed with seawater refract sunlight in a peculiar way, producing fascinating color effects. The ruthless exploitation of the earth by the extractive industry therefore has its own color and the violence of capital should be understood as "fundamentally imagistic". "Anthropogenic matter is relentlessly visual in throwing disturbing images back at us from which we should recoil, were we not part of this same obscene metabolic order" – writes Schuppli. And she adds that humans have transformed planetary systems into "vast photosensitive arrays that are registering and recording the rapid transformations induced by modern industrialization and its contaminating processes".[4]

The world in the era of the Anthropocene therefore abounds in images, but these images no longer function in the traditional frames of representability, they are not objects that fit within classic divisions, oppositions and categorizations. They originate from "nature-image-hybrids"[5] and function akin to a network of "image-matter",[6] both closely linked with weather

phenomena and belonging to the category of "highly technical images"[7] generated by state-of-the-art devices used in geophysics, meteorology and other branches of science. Yet, according to Schuppli, images of the Anthropocene are primarily "slick", while the ambiguity of the word illustrates very well the peculiar manner in which they operate. "Slick" means "smooth" like the surface of the sea covered by an oil slick, impossible to separate and flattened into a single substance. The word also bears reference to the extractive industry, since as a noun it simply means an oil spill, such as the one that contaminated the Gulf of Mexico nearly a decade ago, bringing about what was simultaneously a climate, social, political and economic catastrophe, not to mention a human (and animal) disaster. But the images described by Schuppli are also "slick" in the sense of their cunningness: they are hidden behind a layer of complex data, inconspicuous, not always spectacular, they grow deep into the system to the extent that they are difficult to differentiate from its participants, or even its victims. They are "images of capital itself", which means that they offer an insight – akin to an oil slick on the sea that reflects its surroundings – into the complex mutual dependencies of today's world that lie at their foundation.

In her short film *Atmospheric Feedback Loop* (2017), Susan Schuppli elaborates on the question of tight, but also extremely varied, connections that offer a framework for the discussion on the representations of the Anthropocene today. Schuppli presents a structure that serves to investigate such connections: a 200 meter tower with various kinds of recording devices on the premises of the Cabauw Experimental Site for Atmospheric Research near Amsterdam. According to one of the scientists employed at this research center, all the devices gathered in one place seek to "distinguish a signal of climate change from among the noise of cyclical changeability". They therefore register minute changes in the density of the atmosphere, the movement

of the clouds, the humidity of the soil, etc. in order to locate anomalies and distortions that will be able to generate a vision of the changes occurring from the broad perspective of long-term measurement. On the lookout for sound and image traces of Anthropocene-related transformations, the scientists therefore reach towards the very center of the film's titular "feedback loops" between events, data and qualities of a completely different kind, scale and meaning.

There is, however, another layer in Schuppli's otherwise seemingly simple, almost instructional film, or rather another, barely visible, level at which a peculiar kind of drama unfolds. Despite our knowledge, which speaks to the imagination, of the connections that surround us, we receive nothing but metonymies, we are still at the level of weather, and not climate. The artist presents a myriad of visualisations showing the complexity of the phenomena that the Cabauw scientists encounter on an everyday basis, and yet they do not seem to make the Anthropocene any more visible in its own right. The impressive panoramic shots of the tower, the almost poetically-sounding names of the recording devices installed therein, and even the suggestion that modern-day meteorologists can investigate climate change on the basis of the images of clouds in 17th century Dutch paintings, are unable to bring us closer to the Thing that gives us sleepless nights. This is not the filmmaker's fault, but a characteristic of the very Thing, whose proximity is distance, and whose familiarity is strangeness. The images of climate catastrophe are still around us, but at the same time they are so minute, smooth or powerful that we are unable to see them unless we tap into completely alienating and highly specialised technologies.

In his book *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, Jean-Luc Nancy shows that today's catastrophes are no longer natural or man-made, but result from connections characterized by a global reach and almost endless complexity. Such

phenomena as the oil slick in the aftermath of the explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon or the disaster at the nuclear plant in Fukushima resonate strongly in different areas of life, and their ultimate consequences – however predictable – still seem undefined. The images of those catastrophes are also inexhaustible – although not necessarily directly visible – as it is impossible to convey all their consequences, it is impossible to trace the threads that lead in all possible directions. Today's world is too complicated for that, because, as the philosopher argues, it is based on "the regime of general equivalence",[8] in which the exchange of meanings and connections between functions and feedback loops are an everyday reality. They generate changes with catastrophic consequences (such as global warming), or they are actually those changes themselves. "It is this equivalence that is catastrophic"[9] – writes Nancy. To imagine that we can simply leave it behind is to desire to see the Anthropocene face to face, akin to one's own mirror reflection.

In this 22nd issue of *View*, we have decided, as a point of honor, to trace some of the inter-dependencies manifested by visual research into the Anthropocene. That is why the **Close-up** section contains as many as seven articles devoted to extremely varied topics that nevertheless collectively relate to the eponymous issue. In his essay *Deep Times of Planetary Trouble*, Jussi Parikka argues that the visual media cannot be studied today without reference to geology, a claim that seems very much justified. Ana Varras Ibarra follows the activities of the international media-artistic-research collective World of Matter, whose goal is to trace global relations between social, political, environmental and economic processes. Henning Arnecke reflects on how the theoretical, ethical and visual status of the witness has changed in the era of successive climate crises, while Monika Stobiecka, inspired by the work of Robert Smithson, ponders how our era has changed the status of heritage. Kamila Gieba reads *Plutopia* by Kate Brown in an attempt to reconstruct

the traces of the Kyshtym disaster, which did happen and yet failed to crystallise in any recognisable imagery (such as for instance Chernobyl or Fukushima) and has remained in a sphere of double invisibility: initially related to the intangibility of nuclear radiation, and later as a result of having been forgotten. Texts by Rachel Magdeburg and Sylwia Borowska-Kazimiruk prove that questions of ecology can also be combined with a "traditional" artistic medium, such as painting (the cycle of paintings *The Expedition* by Alexis Rockman discussed in the former essay) and film (*The Trees* by Grzegorz Królikiewicz – in the latter).

The **Snapshots** section is also characterized by comprehensiveness and problematization. In his review of Andreas Malm's book *The Progress of This Storm*, Łukasz Moll demonstrates the tensions and links between various schools of thinking about the Anthropocene, primarily between the Marxist tradition and Posthumanism, calling for connections between the two instead of radically opposing them, as Malm postulates. Aleksandra Brylska discusses the photogenic appeal of a nuclear disaster using the example of a herbarium from Chernobyl. Polish exhibitions devoted to climate disaster are covered by Aleksander Kmak, while Adam Robiński presents some Polish publications (as well as those translated into Polish) devoted to the topic.



Jacob van Ruisdael, View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields (1670).

In **Viewpoint**, artworks related to the principal topic of the issue are accompanied, as usual, by original commentaries. Once again in this issue – after Jacob van Ruisdael, Robert Smithson and Grzegorz Królikiewicz – we return to the question of

landscape. Firstly, a historical and theoretical review by the CUCO collective from Berlin presents and comments on their exhibition about the relationship between photography and the Anthropocene. Secondly, Joanna Bednarek discusses Diana Lelonek's work *Seaberry Slag Heap*, which convincingly shows that the Anthropocene has already reached Poland.

Finally, **Panorama** features a study by Agata Koprowicz – somewhat remote from the main topic but highly detailed – devoted to the representation of peasants in the 19th century on the basis of photographs by Feliks Boroń.

**We hope you enjoy the issue!**

1 Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*, trans. Valentine Pakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 60. Horn borrowed the differentiation from a brochure released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the United States.

2 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 28.

3 Susan Schuppli, "Slick Images," in *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, ed. Minhea Mircan, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, (Antwerp: Extra City, 2015), 430.

4 Ibid., 431.

5 Ibid., 436.

6 Ibid., 438.

7 Ibid., 442.

8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 5.

9 Ibid., 6