

Introduction

by Etienne Turpin

Who Does the Earth Think It Is, Now?

What amazed them more than anything was that earth, as an element, does not exist.

—Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881)

While the Anthropocene thesis has recently received significant attention in both the news media and academic scholarship—certainly drifting well beyond its original loci of consideration within the meetings of the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences—there remains a fundamental ambivalence about the value of the concept from the point of view of both cultural theory and design practice. Is the Anthropocene not just another assertion, typical of European society, of the ascendancy of man over nature? Is the Anthropocene, when read through the lens of cultural criticism, not just another appropriation of a properly scientific nomenclature for the purposes of provoking aesthetic or moral shock? Is the Anthropocene not an apolitical, even fatalistic idea, given that it implicates all humanity equally in the production of a geophysical stratigraphy that is, and has been—since the “beginning” of the era, which is also a matter of debate—asymmetrically produced according to divisions of class, race, gender and ability? Is there really any role for the theoretical humanities after the division between nature and culture is erased by a geological reformation?

The present collection of essays, conversations, and design projects and proposals responds to these questions by problematizing the very terms of their address. While each of the contributions in this volume operates on the Anthropocene thesis through the specificity of its own particular considerations and concerns, several important premises might first be summarized here. Regardless of the eventual conclusion arrived at by the geo-scientific community of experts considering the merit of this new era, the concept of the Anthropocene affords contemporary scholars, activists, and designers a unique opportunity to reevaluate the terms of theory and practice which have been inherited from modernity. Not least among these inheritances is the assumption of an ontological distinction between human culture and nature. The Anthropocene thesis not only challenges this inherited assumption, but demands of it a fatal conceit: with the arrival of the Anthropocene, this division is *de-ontologized*; as such, the separation between nature and culture

appears instead as an epistemological product mistakenly presumed as a given fact of being. If the will to knowledge characteristic of modernity provided the assurance that the fault line between human culture and nature was indeed factual, the production of the Anthropocene counter-factually relieves our contemporaneity the burden of perpetuating this epistemic illusion.

A second inheritance worthy of reconsideration in light of the Anthropocene thesis is the climate of the Earth System. The overwhelming and irrefutable evidence of planetary climate change has, so far, cast only the faintest shadow on planning and policy, this despite the notable increase in devastating weather events whose unprecedented intensity has become well known over the last decade. Climate is an outcome, not a given; it is the result of a vast co-production of forces, both human and nonhuman, which produce, through a complex series of interactions, the patterns we call weather. The predictability of these patterns, and the anticipation of regularized changes in their intensity, allows for the production of seasonal agriculture and attendant practices upon which the vast human population relies for survival. The aggressive and irreversible destabilization of these patterns—climate change—guarantees the disproportionate increase of exposure to weather extremes and their attendant risks for the planet's most economically and geographically vulnerable communities. Whether the response to this exacerbated vulnerability will be greater hostility, conflict, and violence, or more radical forms of political solidarity and mutual aid, the record of our planetary reaction to climate change is presently being written into the geological archive of the Anthropocene.

Not unlike climate, human societies also tend to inherit from previous generations any number of tools and techniques for the management, modification, and assumed emendation of their proximate natural environments. In this respect, architecture is a well-regarded tradition usually tasked with the organization of spatial adjacencies—inside and outside, sacred and profane, sick and healthy, natural and cultural. These organizational patterns can be leveraged to either reify distinctions and separations, or to complicate the divisive categories used to manage the assemblages of habit and settlement that we call societies. The establishment of distinction was thus a common concern for both philosophical modernism and its shorter-lived architectural double. But, as a practice just as capable of complicating divisions as securing them, architecture has tended to challenge ways of working, thinking, and relating in a given society with the help of historical, geographical, and speculative strategies: Have things always been done, thought, or produced this way? Are things done, thought, or produced this way differently in other places? And, can we imagine other ways in which things could be done, thought, or produced in the future? Such simple questions—whether posed by design or scholarship—can begin to undermine the assumed givenness of inherited situations and their intolerable circumstances. The Anthropocene thesis offers contemporary architects, theorists, and historians an occasion to encounter the urgency of these modes of inquiry and unfold their consequences with the effort and attention required by struggles for greater social-environmental justice.

With the scale of the planet as the spherical horizon for such activities, it is not surprising that problem-formations are, within the condition of the Anthropocene, necessarily multi-disciplinary. How might architecture encounter this multi-disciplinary, multi-scalar, and multi-centered reality? This question is the core concern of this book. It is my conviction that by discovering affinities and alliances with both the sciences and the theoretical humanities, architecture as a practice can begin to reassess its privilege, priorities, and capacities for inscription within the archive of deep time. In what remains of the introduction, I explain the editorial organization of the contributions to this volume and very briefly describe their content. I then conclude these introductory remarks by considering how strategies of *problematization* used to approach the Anthropocene thesis enlist philosophy, politics, science, and architecture to engender an ecology of practices adequate to the contemporaneity of deep time.

Encounters

This collection is arranged according to a rhythm of interaction among the three types of contributions which comprise it—essays, conversations, and design projects and proposals—each of which produce distinct encounters through their specific concerns and their textual adjacencies. The essays, which help produce new ways of navigating the interconnected trajectories of deep time and design, as well as the history and theory of architecture, offer a range of concerns, narrative strategies, and politics positions, each of which attends to a particular perspective elicited by the Anthropocene thesis. The essays begin with “Three Holes: In the Geological Present,” a text by Seth Denizen, which endeavors to provoke the pragmatic and speculative questions of geological contemporaneity. By asking how the soil of the earth becomes evidence—both of other processes and, eventually, of itself as a process—Denizen invites the reader to travel with the question of contemporaneity as a political and epistemological problem accessed through the manifold technologies of vision and taxonomic classification. Following these considerations, Adam Bobbette’s essay “Episodes from a History of Scalelessness: William Jerome Harrison and Geological Photography,” offers a reading of the singular history of the geological photograph, noting how the forces of photographic production suggest a minor repetition of cosmic forces which are inscribed throughout the solar economy into the archive of deep time. In her contribution to the volume, “Architecture’s Lapidarium: On the Lives of Geological Specimens,” Amy Catania Kulper considers the role of the geological specimen within the history of the architectural imaginary. According to Kulper, this collection of specimens affords us a glimpse into the entangled history of architecture and vitalism—strangely operative on even the most static objects—that also connects to biographical and philosophical conceptions of “a life.” In “Erratic Imaginaries: Thinking Landscape as Evidence,” Jane Hutton analyzes the political landscape of contingency, mapping the diverse modes of appropriation that have produced the theory of glaciation and its attendant social effects. What we encounter here is the peculiar refrain of geological time which

marks its place, however obliquely, within practices of leisure and science. Mark Dorrian's essay, "Utopia on Ice: The Climate as Commodity Form," offers another approach to the leisurely landscape and its architectural ambitions by examining the history of climate modification as a manifestation of utopian design. The current commodification of the climate, in Dorrian's estimation, is thus suggestive of a longer history of architectural projections which imagined social emancipation to be inherently tied to the emendation of the natural environment. The distinction between the human and non-/in- human is then taken up by Eleanor Kaufman in her essay "The Mineralogy of Being," which argues for a reevaluation of the philosophical lineage that refused to admit any continuity between the registers of the animate and inanimate. Kaufman here contends that this denial of continuity may actually be *more* attentive to the obdurate inertia of inanimate objects than contemporary theoretical trends promoting their continuity, whether as thing-power or object oriented-ontology. The social and cultural valences of metal—that peculiar "thing" which obeys its own rules of transformation—is taken up in Guy Zimmerman's essay, "In the Furnace of Disorientation: Tragic Drama and the Liturgical Force of Metal." Zimmerman considers the theatricality of material transformation, which he examines through the historical emergence of the deities of the stage whose role was that of mediating the radical revelation of the inner life of metal revealed by ancient smelters. Finally, in his essay on the history of cultivation and conflict in Amazonia, Paulo Tavares contributes a series of remarkable insights on the politics and violence which have produced the Anthropocene. His essay, "The Geological Imperative: Notes on the Political-Ecology of Amazonia's Deep History," is a provocation to rethink the terms with which nature is constructed as well as the policies and planning that manifest the ideology of political regimes, because, as he contends, "nature is not natural."

These eight essays are organized in relation to another series of conversations and a series of design projects and proposals which clarify, extend, and intensify each other. "What is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?" In the conversations gathered together for this collection, architects and theorists offer insights into how their practices have encountered the Anthropocene thesis, and, more importantly, how this encounter affords architects, activists, and theorists the opportunity to transform, through design, narration, and interference, the trajectory of the Anthropocene. The multiplicity of these matters of discussion are intended to signal a certain intensive variability among architecture practices; between matters of fact and matters of concern, we are exposed to a heterogeneous meso-sphere where strategy and speculation become complimentary modes of inquiry. In conversation with John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog of Territorial Agency, we are encouraged to consider the practice of architecture with a more precise, historical specificity; in so doing, we discover that architecture does not require an expanded field or a new imperialism, since, "The object of research and practice is architecture, and the means is architecture." In the subsequent conversation with Eyal Weizman—"Matters of Calculation: The Evidence of the Anthropocene"—Heather Davis and I take up the question of architecture research

in relation to calculative violence and the production of evidence. Understanding more precisely how these asymmetrical co-productions operate can help us avoid the philosophical and political pitfalls of both actor-network theory and object-oriented ontology; where the former approach valorizes the connectivity of the network, and the latter position emphasizes the irreducibility of nodes as the primary constituents of the network, a more coherent and politically operative analysis requires a multi-scalar and multi-centered approach, where agency is negotiated as a co-production among vertical pressures (from both above and below) and heterogeneous lateral affinities. In this discussion, we discover new approaches to the urgent problems of multilateral violence as it is modulated by international humanitarian law, environmental law, and non-human rights. These approaches are, of course, inevitably marked by the fundamental philosophical problem of temporality. In conversation with Elizabeth Grosz—“Time Matters: On Temporality in the Anthropocene”—Davis and I attempt to further interrogate the *chronotope* of the Anthropocene by engaging the question of evolutionary time. Throughout this discussion, Grosz offers a series of insights that compel our reconsideration of the emergence, futurity, and precarious duration of the human species. The precarity of the human species is likewise at stake in our conversation with Isabelle Stengers. In “Matters of Cosmopolitics: On the Provocations of Gaïa,” Davis and I question the role of the human in relation to Gaïa as a force, which, for Stengers, both suggests a way out of the “reign of man” and “intrudes upon the use of the Anthropocene in trendy and rather apolitical dissertations.” How then to fabulate the narratives capable of carrying the human species beyond the limited horizon of reactionary architecture culture? In “Matters of Fabulation: On the Construction of Realities in the Anthropocene,” I discuss this question with François Roche of New-Territories, R&Sie(n), and [elf/bat/c], who suggests that architects should not attempt to work directly with concepts; instead, architects can benefit from a dosage of vulgarity, deception, nostalgia, and the forbidden, all of which allow for expressions of human pathology and emotion that have been largely excluded from architecture in recent decades.

In addition to these conversations, the book includes a series of design projects and proposals which attempt, as Aby Warburg suggested, to “abolish *de facto* the distinction between accumulation of knowledge and aesthetic production, between research and performance.”¹ These projects and proposals respond to and extend the content of the essays and discussions, suggesting productive adjacencies and disjunctions. In Michael C.C. Lin’s exhibition project *AnthroPark*, we are invited to imagine a menagerie of primate visions that question the hierarchical ordering of nature as a linear line of (evolutionary) progress. Likewise, in Lisa Hirmer’s photo essay *Fortune Head Geologies*, we encounter the park as a planetary condition, where stratifications of meaning are extracted from the heaps of refuse and debris that accompany our human will to progress. Yet, such stratigraphic mixtures are not only of the earth; they are also atmospheric, as the projects by Nabil Ahmed and Emily Cheng make especially clear. In Ahmed’s video installation, *Radical Meteorology*, we are beckoned to consider the politics

of a tropical cyclone that struck the Bay of Bengal, connecting it forever to the “genocide and war of national liberation for present-day Bangladesh.” In Cheng’s mixed media work, *Inquiries and Interpretations Concerning the Observations and Findings from Atmosphere-Investigating, Landscape-Exploring, Universe-Tracking Instruments, Their Experiments, Studies, Etc.*, drawings and models suggest how the hygienic, anesthetized architecture of the weather station might be appropriated and inverted to produce sensual, embodied rituals for physio-knowledge production. The production of knowledge is then also examined from the perspective of landscape literacy. In her illustrated field guide to San Francisco’s shoreline, *Bay Lexicon*, a project developed in collaboration with the Exploratorium of San Francisco, Jane Wolff creates “a nuanced, place-based vocabulary that makes the hybrid circumstances of San Francisco Bay apparent and legible” to a range of audiences concerned with the future of this postnatural landscape. Similarly, in her speculative mixed media design proposal, *Amplitude Modulation*, Meghan Archer imagines how design interventions could offer other narratives to the southern coal towns of Appalachia, where the industrial and geological scales have already become indelibly intermixed. Finally, projects by Chester Rennie and Amy Norris and Clinton Langevin of Captains of Industry both suggest, through a kind of speculative pragmatism, modes of adaptive reuse that challenge the hierarchies of traditional redevelopment. By focusing on a derelict iron mine long abandoned by its former owners, Rennie suggests—with rhetoric reminiscent of the later land art proposals of Robert Smithson—that by *Swimming in It*, a leisurely reappropriation of the site would also afford a space of aesthetic meditation on the violent legacies of our industrial heritage. For Norris and Langevin, their proposal for a *Tar Creek Supergrid* is supported by extensive research on landscapes disturbed by human industry, which carry with them the latent potential for new patterns of human settlement and innovation.

Among the three series of inquiries—scholarly essays, contemporary conversations, and design proposals and projects—the potential of the Anthropocene thesis as both a discourse to embolden design and theory, and as a condition within which these practices must struggle for social-environmental justice, begins to emerge. While the work collected here does not exhaust the many new vectors of research animated by concerns regarding climate change, environmental crises, political ecology or land use interpretation, it is nevertheless exemplary of how the Anthropocene thesis encourages a mode of *problematization* that is especially valuable for design practice in our all-too-human era.

Problematisation

A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site.

—Georges Bataille

If the Anthropocene can be understood as a *chronotope* specific to the moment when the human species begins to recognize its impact not only on spaces of settlement and habitation, but also on the scale of geological time, then we might conclude these introductory remarks by speculating on how the strategies of *problematisation* used to approach the Anthropocene thesis can generate collaborations among philosophy, politics, science, and architecture. In his essay “On the Earth-Object,” Paulo Tavares remarks: “‘Global nature’ is therefore and above all a space defined by a new socio-geological order in which the divisions that separated humanity and the environment, culture and nature, the anthropological and the geological have been blurred.”² The *problematisation* made possible by this blurred reality is one that undoes the givenness of our inherited assumptions about the earth as an object of knowledge; that is, the confusion created by the act of *de-ontologizing* the separation between humans and nature allows contemporary theorists, activists and designers to develop problem-formations adequate to the politics of hyper-complexity that accompany our postnatural inhabitations of the earth. In nearly every book he wrote, including those he co-authored with Félix Guattari and Claire Parnet, Gilles Deleuze managed, in one way or another, to integrate his favored refrain: *problems get the solutions they deserve according to the terms by which they are created as problems*. The varied repetition of this notion is certainly not meant as a slogan; for Deleuze, the work of producing problems, that is, of problem-formation, is a fundamental task of philosophy. With the provocation of the Anthropocene thesis, philosophy can produce new constructions that transform trajectories of thought; by developing affinities and collaborations through multi-disciplinary, multi-scalar, and multi-centered approaches, architecture too can discover its unique capacity to transform the present and future condition of the Earth System. In the Anthropocene, designers, activists, and philosophers will all have the earth they deserve; we hope this collection contributes to the conversation about how it might be constructed.

Notes

- 1 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 229-230.
- 2 Paulo Tavares, “On the Earth-Object,” in *Savage Objects*, edited by Godofredo Pereira (Guinarães, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 2012), 219.