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Art in the Periphery of the Center

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Epistemologies of Art in the Anthropocene

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Activities of bodies of geology, in particular of the Working Group on the "Anthropocene," created in 2008 upon request of the Subcommission of Quaternary Stratigraphy at the International Commission on Stratigraphy and directed by Jan Zalasiewicz and Mark Williams, are met with considerable excitement in the humanities today.[1] On the occasion of the thirty-fifth International Geological Congress held in 2016 in Cape Town, South Africa, will the Working Group actually recommend the Anthropocene to be designated the current geological epoch—replacing of the "Holocene," which the second International Geological Congress in Bologna had once identified as the hitherto ultimate Quaternary interglacial, covering roughly the last 12.000 years of Earth history? That was in 1885. And if they recommend it, will the Anthropocene also survive the subsequent procedures of formal admission, passing not only the Subcommission of Quaternary Stratigraphy and the International Commission, but also the International Union of Geological Sciences itself,[2] thereby finally making it official: "We are living in the Anthropocene"?

On the other hand, one may ask, what happens if the procedure fails? Are we then "not" living in the Anthropocene? But how could an institution like the International Union, founded in 1961 and located in Beijing, China, cause an ontological event of global proportions on a geologic timescale to come into being, or not? How could it bring about a geological epoch of whose stratigraphic record the International Union itself will be a part, however miniscule and likely unrecognizable its trace in the stratum? Because it seems that the concept of geological epoch is not itself a geological object. Surely an institution declaring a new geologic epoch does not actually bring about that epoch: as you can not produce geology by means of a performative act of speech, the declaration is not itself a geological event.—Or is it?—It is precisely the fact that we can not be sure about these questions that indicates a change might have occurred on Earth; a change some try to capture by talking of the Anthropocene, fully aware that the reality of its inauguration itself might already be a case in point for its observational content, and that the occurrence of the formal installment of the Anthropocene might prove to be the best—if not the only—indicator of its conceptual accuracy.

Take an analogous case, Marcel Duchamp's submission of Fountain to the Society of Independent Artists based in New York City for its First Annual Exhibition in 1916. Would R. Mutt's readymade proposition be officially accepted as a work of art? The Society was not even meant to have a jury. Still, the work was excluded from the exhibition at Grand Central Palace, voted down by an emergency meeting

1 See e.g. the third of Bruno Latour's Edinburgh "Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion," entitled *Facing Gaia, Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature* (2013), www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour/lecture-four.

2 According to Jan Zalasiewicz, in a personal communication with the author on September 14, 2014.

of the board of directors.[3] In a reaction orchestrated by Duchamp for the magazine *The Blind Man*, the concealed artist interpreted this as a conflict over the concept of art: "It was a sad surprise to learn of a Board of Censors sitting upon the ambiguous question, What is ART?"[4] But despite the negative vote, *Fountain* has in fact turned out to be a paradigmatic piece of twentieth-century art, proving that institutions can be wrong at times. Per analogy it seems that an Anthropocene could also exist in spite of a potential negative vote of the geologic clergy.—The assumption however is complicated by the fact that although *Fountain*, as work of art, has indeed long outlived the Society of Independent Artists, it has retained its status as an artwork not through some essential properties (the "original" work even got lost immediately), but indeed through continuous institutional and discursive acclaim, with its "unsuccessful" submission being regarded as a foundational act of Conceptual art. In a strange way, this institutionalism seems to apply to the Anthropocene and its relation to the bodies of geology as well. Because like Duchamp, who, being a member of the Society of Independent Artists, took on a pseudonym to conceal his identity and play a double role operating both inside and outside of the Society, the same humans that make the Anthropocene take on a pseudonym: acting as if it was not them who make it, they render the Anthropocene an objectivity to be discovered, thereby under pseudonym applying before the very commission in which they themselves are presiding.

Given this peculiar entanglement, is it at all conceivable that a situation could arise in which the Anthropocene continues, while the International Union of Geological Sciences or its remote institutional successors would no longer exist? Imagining such state of affairs leads to scenarios so dystopic—or simply: so different—that it is doubtful they could still be counted as Anthropocene (if the term becomes official, after all). The same applies to the remote successors of the institutional frame of Contemporary Art. Only as long as they exist can that enamel urinal be that *Fountain*. But it appears that the conditions under which it could not possibly be a work of art anymore would, due to the institutional breakdown the impossibility implies, again be so dystopic or different that they surpass anything reasonably called Anthropocene.

To clarify the operations of these deeply anthropocenic institutions, then, and to develop the epistemic topologies brought about by the Anthropocene concept for artistic practice to settle and draw upon, in what follows I will look at the genesis of the concept in conjunction with some aspects of the history of Conceptual art. Critically affirming Peter Osborne's understanding of Contemporary Art as Post-Conceptual, while also considering the specific materiality of thought, I want to get

3 William A. Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917," *Dada/Surrealism* 16, no. 1 (1987): 64–94, here 71.

4 P.B.T., *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (1917): 6.

a handle on that conceptuality which is degeologizing the Earth like a meteor impact as we speak.

Anthropocene Axes

The notion of Anthropocene, first introduced into geological discourse in a 2000 article by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer[5] while drawing upon conceptual predecessors reaching back to the latter half of the nineteenth century,[6] is an artifact of today's "interdisciplinary" technoscience, and as such of genuine heterogeneity. Observing and quantifying an exponential increase of the imprint of humany's activity into the Earth's biosphere since the industrial era and particularly since around 1950,[7] the Anthropocene could, in many regards, be phrased in purely ecological terms. For most practical and political purposes it is indeed about negotiating ecology in a situation where the environment has ceased to be. What led the concept to emerge in geology (and not in ecology or political science), however, is the causal depth of the ecological imprint in question: not only does one have to dive into geologic time to reasonably compare and model today's changes in the Earth System, but these changes also alter the sedimentation patterns of the Earth in a way that will foreseeably leave behind a distinct geological record in the layers of stone currently in the making.[8] These geologic timescales also inspire geologists to deliver accounts of human history, which, focusing on agricultural and technological advances, energy use, population growth, and the like, manage to cover the entire human enterprise within a few paragraphs.[9] Besides its ecological, political and geological facets, the Anthropocene thus also engages in a kind of historiography somewhat akin to "Big History."[10] As I can not deal with the whole range of these issues here, I will focus on two axes or registers of the concept and attempt to push, for purposes of clarification, the relevant features to the extreme.

(1) *Absolute Interiority.* While the exponential growth of humanity's impact on the biosphere, the diagrammatic display of which is a common feature in Anthropocene publications, may be a striking observation in itself, it is conceptually not particularly significant. Because no matter how rapid a given increase, the range it

5 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000): 17–18; see Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind: the Anthropocene," *Nature* 415 (2002): 23.

6 See Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 369, no. 1938 (2011): 842–867, here 843ff.

7 Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?", *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614–621, here 617.

8 Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Alan Haywood, and Micael Ellis, "Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?", *GSA Today* 18, no. 2 (2008): 4–8.

9 Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?", 614ff.; Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," 845.

10 See e.g. David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

covers may still be miniscule compared to the background upon which it figures, namely, the space of all possible values of that parameter. The crucial Anthropocene observation is not that of exponentiality, but that of an increase to the effect that the distinction of foreground and background with regards to the terrestrial parameter space itself has become obsolete. The dimension of humanity's actions is now of the dimension of the Earth itself. "30–50 % of land surface has been transformed by human action"; "more nitrogen is now fixed synthetically [...] than fixed naturally in all terrestrial ecosystems";[11] "[t]emperature is predicted to rise by 1.1 °C to 6.4 °C by the end of this century, leading to global temperatures not encountered since Tertiary" (more than 2.58 million years ago);[12] "[t]he sum effect of anthropogenic soil, rock, and sediment movement in the terrestrial realm has been estimated to exceed, currently, those from natural processes, perhaps by an order of magnitude."[13] The numbers are not relevant here; land use may at some point amount to 20 % or 100 %, and the rise in temperature may be 1 °C or 10 °C and find precedence in climatic events some 100 thousand or 100 million years ago. The important thing is rather to understand the ultimate consequence of these examples, namely the idea of an anthropogenic coverage of the entire parameter space of the Earth. The Anthropocene may be called that terrestrial regime in which any possible value of any possible parameter characteristic of the Earth System as a whole as well as of its nested ecosystems and biogeochemical circles, can in principle be brought about anthropogenically. This amounts to an absolute geological performativity of the Earth, or the absolute interiority of the Earth to a biosphere in which humanity plays a key role. An example of this would be the much-noticed Rockström et al. 2009 proposal to manufacture a "safe operating space for humanity" by making sure not to cross certain critical values of the Earth System to retain the overtly beneficial Holocene characteristics of the Earth. A successful Anthropocene, in this sense, is then to be defined precisely as a *manufactured* Holocene.

(2) *Absolute Exteriority.* Geologic time encompasses the process of the Earth from its inception 4.7 billion years ago to its absorption into an expanding sun some 7.5 billion years from now. Framing the Anthropocene geologically amounts to a contextualization of the present in geologic time. Note that such contextualization can likely occur under anthropocenic conditions only, as the scientific culture it presupposes can hardly come about without becoming performative in the way indicated above. It appears that the Anthropocene, being a terrestrial regime of absolute synchronic interiority, is also that terrestrial regime which produces, within itself, an absolute diachronic exteriority, that is, a knowledge of those vast areas of terrestrial

11 Crutzen and Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," 17.

12 Zalasiewicz, Williams, Haywood, and Ellis, "Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?", 5.

13 Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Richard Fortey, Alan Smith, Tiffany L. Barry, Angela L. Coe, Paul R. Bown, et al., "Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (2011): 1036–1055, here: 1039.

space-time that can be thought but not accessed. This is true for all geologic history until now, including those extended parts that, with a term of Quentin Meillassoux, can be termed "ancestral"[14]—temporally preceding the emergence of the consciousness that would later form an idea of them. But it is also true for "descendant" parts of terrestrial spacetime constituted by Earth's remote future, which some geologists, in a breathtaking turn towards geofuturology, happen to be interested in today: the anticipated stratigraphic signals in the strata that will have formed by the time of the Anthropocene's completion—be that in thousands or millions of years—, are pure objects of thought. No anthropocenic creature will ever be able to physically engage with them. However *as* objects of thought, they shed some light back on the "event layer" of the present, rendering the human habitat an inverted geological excavation site, that is, an "incavation" site of becoming sediment, becoming unliving.[15] The unliving is indeed the "truth" of geologic time; it connects pre-life Earth to post-life Earth through a succession of strata in rock. Allowing the absolute diachronic exteriority of geological time to emerge, the Anthropocene is also that terrestrial regime which carries within it an unprecedented idea of the spectacles of the unliving.

Conceptualism Globalized

A stale but correct consequence to draw from Absolute Exteriority is that the Earth, in its extreme and extremely violent historic dynamism can not reasonably be framed as a "nature" that would serve as universal model of equilibrium, stability, order, harmony, and the like. An equally stale but correct consequence to draw from Absolute Interiority is the inadequacy of the distinction of nature and culture, of the cascade of derivative distinctions following from it, and of any aesthetics based on these. There is no "humans" and their "environment," and no "indoors" and "outdoors"; an industrial site is as "natural" as a breed of crop is "cultural," and a slice of rainforest stands on the same ontological footing as the deforested slice of former rainforest; conservationist approaches to environmentalism commit a logical error by thinking they could preserve a piece of land in its "natural" state while it is precisely them preserving it that makes it an artifact.[16] I believe such issues and observations,[17] which scholars like Bruno Latour and others have worked on for some time now

14 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009), 10.—Perhaps I should note that while Meillassoux' notion of the ancestral can be connected to Absolute Exteriority, the Anthropocene's Absolute Interiority on the other hand marks a sharp contrast to his project of breaking the "correlation" of thought and its object. The Anthropocene is practical correlationalism pushed to the utmost. This suggests that Meillassoux would have to delimit the domain of his project.

15 Zalasiewicz, Williams, Fortey, Smith, Barry, Coe, Bown, et al., "Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene," 1047.

16 Of course, this constitutes no argument whatsoever against conservationist practices, which will have to play an important role in a meaningful Anthropocene governance; but indeed against some of the conceptual misunderstandings attached to it.

17 This is still the matrix for some contemporary activities in the context of art and nature. E.g. the 2013 exhibit "Nature after Nature" at Fridericianum in Kassel, featuring artificial stones and birds nests partly made of plastic, seemed to almost entirely draw upon the insight that "no natural materials exist." This is something one might already see in the practice of someone like Tetsumi Kudo (*Pollution—Cultivation—New Ecology*, 1971), or even in a Post-Minimalist Robert Morris piece like *Untitled* (1968)—made of felt, asphalt, mirrors, wood, copper, tubing, steel cable, and lead.

and which have led to the claim of "The Long Death of Environmentalism,"[18] would have to come into play to distinguish Ecological Art from Art in the Anthropocene. Drawing a line from "nature" in romanticism to the aesthetics of environmentalist activism to the notorious "greenness" of contemporary eco-consumerism (a visual ideologeme found in a documenta 13 catalog as much as in a McDonalds logo), the analysis of Ecological Art would set its epistemology against the epistemologies of Art in the Anthropocene. As I can not pursue this analysis in the present context (although this is itself an issue of interest), however, I will just focus on the task of clarifying some crucial aspects of the latter.

The Anthropocene is a heterogeneous conceptual object escaping immediate visibility. You can not go outdoors to find it. You can not take a picture of the whole Earth to see it. Every sighting remains inadequate. Although derived from most sophisticated empirical means, the object escapes sensuality as defined and delimited by the surface of individual human bodies and their capacity to take in data.[19] This circumstance poses the question of aesthetics specifically to Art in the Anthropocene. Because where Peter Osborne postulates that "[t]here is no critically relevant pure "aesthetics" of contemporary art, because contemporary art is not an aesthetic art in any philosophically significant sense of the term,"[20] this seems true even more for Art in the Anthropocene.

The place to look for anesthetic practices in the arts is of course 1960's Conceptual art. "It is necessary to separate aesthetics from the art," writes Joseph Kosuth; the aesthetic properties of an object "have no bearing" whatsoever on its "*functioning* in an art context," because they are "conceptually irrelevant to art."[21] They are conceptually irrelevant because the artwork, in this understanding, is nothing but a conceptual operation in itself. Kosuth: "The actual works of art are ideas."[22] Lewitt: "Ideas alone can be works of art."[23] It is interesting to note that propositions like these, which lead Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler to speak of a tendential "Dematerialization of Art" (not without facing immediate objection, of course), occur virtually at the same time in which people like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson produce artworks by moving hundreds of thousands of tons of earth and rock around (*Double Negative*, 1969) or pour truckloads of asphalt down

18 Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, "The Long Death of Environmentalism," speech at Yale University, February 25, 2011.

19 Aesthetic experience could, in provisional terms, be understood as any experience prompting judgements implicit to sensuality itself. Aesthetic experience reigns in animality, in the selectivity of animal organisms towards their environments, and it brings about the beauties of sexual selection. And as it turns out that the "spontaneous" character of the judgements of aesthetic experience can be very easily be fabricated while remaining forceful in moving human action, aesthetics today reigns in fashion, design and in marketing more generally. With regards to philosophical aesthetics as theory of the arts, however, since the demise of the beautiful as a useful category of art analysis, also aesthetic experience itself has been rendered problematic.

20 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 10.

21 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writing 1966–1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 16, 19.

22 Ibid., 3.

23 Sol Lewitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, end. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 107.

some landfill (*Asphalt Rundown*, 1969). I believe this superposition, allowing some artists even to figure prominently in both Conceptual and Land art, constitutes an emblematic onset of Art in the Anthropocene, and that its configuration, including its seemingly reversed vectors of ideatization and materialization, has to play a crucial role in any analysis of Anthropocene art. I am tempted to define the Anthropocene, in art terms, precisely as that terrestrial regime in which Conceptual art and Land art become one and the same, that is, in which their respective materialities converge. And I thus feel we are (already) living in a "long present" with regards to Art in Anthropocene, meaning that for example a 1968 Hans Haacke or Robert Smithson piece stands virtually on the same epistemological grounds as a piece you may encounter at the 2014 Taipei Bienniale, which under the heading "The Great Acceleration" chooses the Anthropocene as its emblem. Advances, within that "long present," appear decoupled from the vector of real time.

Osborne introduces his notion of Post-Conceptual art partly as a reaction to an alleged failure of Conceptual art (not artistically, but in terms of its self-understanding), which he regards an "ironical achievement of the strong programme of "analytical" or "pure" conceptual art": "to have demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a necessary, though radically insufficient, component of the artwork through the failure of its attempt at its elimination: the failure of an absolute anti-aesthetic."[24] Thus Post-Conceptual art realizes that "[a]ll art requires *some* form of materialization; that is to say [*some* form of] aesthetic—felt, spatio-temporal—presentation."[25] Although this sounds like a truism, Osborne's account could in some respect be misleading. Because its initial assumption that exponents of "pure" Conceptualism like Kosuth had attempted to eliminate the artworks' "materialization" by way of making the material setup of an artwork recede into imperceptability is incorrect. Kosuth precisely criticizes such focus on the "apparent 'immateriality' or 'anti-object' similarity amongst most 'Conceptual' works of art" as dealing just with a "very superficial aspect" of these works. Because such "morphological characteristics" could "only be important if one assumes that objects are [at all] necessary to art." But for Kosuth this is not the case: "objects are conceptually irrelevant to the condition of art."[26] He thereby renders the artworks' "materialization" irreleveant simply by definition. This of course opens up the (much explored) possibility of art operating with low-materiality setups such as written sentences or virtually empty gallery spaces—but only because the artwork itself is, in this view, always already

24 Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 49.

25 Ibid., 48.

26 Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, 26.

ideational anyway:[27] and it by definition remains ideational irrespective of how materially elaborate or "heavy" its material setup may become; hence Conceptual art implies no imperative whatsoever to dematerialize that setup. As Osborne's account rests on this assumption and thus continues to affirm the habitual association of conceptuality and immateriality, it does not contribute to the analysis of the specific materiality of the conceptual. But this is what we have to focus on when looking at Art in the Anthropocene.

It is a peculiarity of Conceptual art that it starts investigating conceptuality at a time when the conceptual itself is undergoing a major anthropogenic transformation. Conceptual art witnesses a mega-event in the natural history of terrestrial Conceptualism. Looking at early Anthropocene reasoning conveys a sense of this. As early as 1873, Antonio Stoppani understands humanity's intellectual and conceptual abilities to have become "a new telluric force that for its strength and universality does not pale in the face of the greatest forces of the globe." This circumstance necessitates a paradigm shift in geology: "[I]f current geology, to understand finished epochs, has to study nature irrespective of man, future geology, to understand our own epoch, should study man irrespective of nature. So that future geologist, wishing to study our epoch's geology, would end up narrating the history of human intelligence."[28] Such radical becoming-geologic of thought, addressed above as the Anthropocene condition's Absolute Interiority, testifies to the fact that nothing is more materially powerful than Conceptualism. Vladimir Vernadsky in 1945 affirms Stoppani's finding by stating that "man, under our very eyes, is becoming a mighty and ever-growing geological force,"—to the extent that mankind has become "a single totality in the life of the earth." This entails the necessity of having to deal with "the problem of the reconstruction of the biosphere in the interests of a freely thinking humanity as a single totality. This new state of the biosphere, which we approach without our noticing it, is the nousphere," or Noösphere (as it was spelled later). Succeeding both Geosphere (inanimate Earth) and Biosphere (animate Earth), the Noösphere is the "new geological phenomenon on our planet," which is thus essentially characterized no longer by the properties and dynamics of life, but of mind (Greek *nous*).[29] That ecology and geology coincide with the history of the "single totality" of intelligence on Earth finds its contemporary expression in the idea of the Anthropocene entering "Stage-3," "in which the recognition [brought about by Anthropocene reasoning itself] that human activities are indeed affecting the structure and functioning of

27 And not, that is, because the artwork would somehow automatically "gain" in conceptuality what it "loses" in materiality: such "anaesthetic transubstantiation," although it may have its place somewhere in the realm of associations connected with Conceptual art, is of course bogus —although it resonates even in most prominent statements on the matter: "Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized.'" Lucy Lippard, *Six Years. The dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), vii.

28 Antonio Stoppani, "Corso di Geologica" (excerpt), trans. Valeria Federighi, Étienne Turpin, in *Making the Geologic Now. Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, ed. Elisabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 34–41.

29 Wladimir Vernadsky, "The Biosphere and the Noosphere," *American Scientist* 33, no. 1 (1945): 1–12, italics removed by the author.

the Earth System as a whole [...] is filtering through to decision-making at many levels."[30] I agree with Borislaw Szerszynski's suggestion that such feedback is constitutive of a substantive Anthropocene condition and of the Absolute Interiority that will have characterized the longest part of it (while the last decades or centuries will have appeared as a still unregulated and merely factual prelude).[31]

There are several implications of Conceptualism closing in on a single terrestrial totality. Protagonists of early Conceptual art themselves had inevitably been haunted by specters of disembodiment,[32] fashioning ideas like the purely cerebral existence of the Conceptual artwork—"The piece need not be built"[33]—, or the notion of a clean, unilateral relation of concept and instantiation.[34] Against such atavisms, Anthropocene reasoning states the inevitable extra-cerebral agency of the conceptual. The conceptual has become the fate of the planet to an extent that its specific materiality today is nothing less than the whole Earth.[35] Furthermore, one can not but acknowledge the material heterogeneity of the conceptual forces shaping the Earth System today. Material setups (a written sentence, or a geological stratum, or a memory, or an ecosystem) are always the location of conceptual operations and *vice versa*—as in laboratory experimentation, or in Earth Systems experimentation. It is impossible to draw the whole of science from just one particular experiment or domain of observation; rather, one has to range through the whole Noösphere, the conceptual vibrancy of which resides precisely in a material heterogeneity of the sites of conceptual operations. But just as this brings about a vast array of experimental setups in the sciences, which later on become multiplied as nicely packaged "technology," the advent of explicitly conceptual approaches in the arts—from Dada onwards—brings about a vast array of unprecedented material setups of artworks, whose transmediality in the end as well converges with that of the whole Earth. Art in the Anthropocene, then, is any artistic practice that succeeds or fails in attempting to trace the globalizing paths, wanderings and errands of the unfixable and uncontainable materiality of the conceptual, that maps its terrain, and dwells in the topologies emerging.

30 Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?", 618.

31 "[M]aybe the Anthropocene in all its geohistorical specificity really starts when humans become aware of their role in shaping climate, and this awareness shapes their active relationship with the environment," Bronislaw Szerszynski, "The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human," in *The Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 171.

32 In the Platonic rendering, this is a world of inert ideas prefiguring the material world; in the Cartesian rendering, this is a mind figuring out the basis of its existence seemingly without having to pass through corporeal action.

33 Lawrence Weiner, "Statement of Intent," first published in the catalog of the exhibit "January 5–31, 1969" (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1969), n.p.—More explicitly, Sol Lewitt writes in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art": "The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product.," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 14.

34 See e.g. the early Kosuth, who assumes the material setup of the Conceptual artwork to be a "model" for the "actual work" (which is the conceptual operation it performs), thereby evoking Plato's distinction of idea and instantiation ("model"), including the implied likeness of one with the other, the primacy of the former over the latter, as well as their essentially static relation. See Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, 3.

35 It follows that the habitual distinction of "immaterial" vs. "material" labor no longer makes sense in the Noösphere. But then the narrow association of Conceptual art with mimicking processes of informatization and administration taken in isolation, as has been said of Art & Language and others, is also called into question. See Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed. Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012), 38ff.

The Long Present of Absolute Interiority

The image of the whole Earth is incomplete in that it does not include the device by which it was taken as well the image itself. While this appears to be a negligible detail at first, it turns out to be crucial to understanding an Anthropocene that points to such imagery in search of self-understanding.[36] Firstly, as there is no image of the Earth or any terrestrial object that would not itself be Earth, we have to speak of images "from"—and not "of"—the Earth, thereby trivially implicating the image in the thing it depicts. Secondly, the implication is severed (non-trivially) by the observation that far more significant than what the image of the whole Earth depicted was the very fact that it was shot. The fact that the image itself was taken contains much more information about the historical state of the Earth than the "blue marble" it put before our eyes. The picture does not show the Earth in the Anthropocene, and is not primarily a "symbol" of the anthropocenic Earth, but it *expresses*, or *testifies to*, the Anthropocene's existence through the fact of its own occurrence. But the same is true of the notion of Anthropocene itself. In what follows, I can only hint at some aspects of this.

The observation of representational systems becoming indistinguishable from their objects, once a local exception but endemic and augmented to global proportions in Anthropocene conditions, is explored early on by artist collective Art & Language, whose experiments with cartography lead to the auto-identical *Map of an area 12"x12" indicating 2,304 ¼" squares (Map of Itself)* (1967). Joseph Kosuth, drawing on J. L. Austin's 1962 book *How to do Things with Words*, had already gone down a similar path in his nondescript wordpiece *Five Words In Blue Neon* (1965). But while the equation "Earth stating the Anthropocene concept" = "Earth being in an Anthropocene state" likely depicts the ultimate outline of the domain of definition of Heinz von Foerster's performativist dictum "The map is the territory,"[37] the conceptual nature of Anthropocene Earth can be explored in a multiplicity of ways below the level of tautological ultimacy.

In their *Survival Piece #2*, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison set up an array of four extended water basins with different degrees of salinity, into which a color-producing algae is introduced (coloring the basins in different shades) before an algae-eating breed of brine shrimp is added, visibly removing the algae, to be harvested in the end.[38] Entitled *Notations of the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp* (1971), the piece constitutes a diagram in or of

36 See Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," 843.

37 Heinz von Foerster and Bernhard Pörksen, *Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners. Gespräche für Skeptiker* (Heidelberg: Carl-Auer, 2013), 82.

38 See Jack Dunham, *Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art* (New York: G. Braziller, 1974), 163ff.

itself—not because of its overt "diagrammatic" visual properties,[39] but it represents a highly controlled set of relations that in full epistemic transparency can be monitored and manipulated as easily as a set of equations or diagrammatic features on a blackboard or screen.[40] Material diagrams like agricultural facilities and experimentational setups were explored in the 1960s and 1970s by artists like Haacke and David Brainbride,[41] as well as in the Harrissons' subsequent farming and breeding activities. And still decades later, e.g. documenta 13 plainly features a piece of optical experimentation by physicist Anton Zeiliger.

As a corollary to this, it may be noted that visibility and techniques of visualization are of crucial import in any conceptual activity whose experiments reach beyond the resolution of human sensibility and whose objects of insight can not be discerned without detection devices and epistemic constructions. Look at Robert Barry's *Radiation Piece* (1969), but also Art & Language's early *Temperature Show* (1966), an infrared photo of a meadow "affected by soil heaters." It is interesting to find that gas, air and atmospheres become the object of particularly heavy investigations. Barry's *Inert Gas Piece*, but most importantly Art & Language's *Air Show and Air-Conditioning Show* (1966–67) as well as, for example, Haackes *Wind Room* (1969) and *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1969) set the precedent for contemporary activations of air, temperature and pollution inside and outside the gallery by artists such as Ryan Gander,[42] Tue Greenford, and Amy Balkin.

Visibility is at issue as well in conceptual endeavors dealing with classification, archivization, and musealization. For example, Artist Mark Dion in his work refers to modes of visualization common in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century Natural History, thereby making visible the prehistory of ecology as a science and, by drawing on earlier works of Marcel Broodthaers, posing the question of museum and archive as sites of anthropocenic permeations of the Earth.[43] However one has to grasp that in the Anthropocene, the museum escapes its architectural confinement. A species that threatened to go extinct but is saved through concerted efforts of biodiversity activism quietly enters into an outdoor natural history museum. More broadly, if a desirable Anthropocene is defined as a manufactured Holocene, it will also be identified as a Holocene Museum that proves beneficial as habitat and is characterized by ecological relations as transparent as the floor plan of the American Museum of Natural History at Central Park West on 79th Street, New York.

39 These it shares e.g. with the material diagrams of some of Robert Smithson's "non-sites," or with a Robert Morris piece like *Untitled* (1969) for the "Earth Art" exhibit at the Andrew Dickson White Museum, featureing a display of heaps of earth, anthracite and asbestos in a virtual grid system.

40 See Annemarie Mol and John Law, "Notes on Materiality and Sociality," *Sociological Review* 43, no. 2 (1995): 274–294.

41 See Brainbridge's *Lecher System* (1969–70), or Haacke's *Chickens Hatching* (1969).

42 See Ryan Gander, *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorize (The Invisible Pull)* (2012).

43 Other instances include Mariana Castillo Deball's critical investigation and re-presentation of ethnographic collections, or Camille Henrot's recent excursions into the archives of the Smithsonian Institute (*Grosse Fatigue*, 2013).

That sets of relations can be conceptualized into "systems" is an insight probably most explored by Hans Haacke.[44] Although his pieces in the periphery of *Condensation Cube* (1963) appear as closed Plexiglas containers, Haacke insists they are "open systems" in the sense of systems exchanging energy with their (viewer-) environments,[45] and hence are "real-time systems"[46] that sometimes do open up to the whole gallery space and become physically accessible (*Symbiotic Weather Transmission System*, 1969).[47] However while some Haacke systems are "so open" that their system-status is rather questionable (e.g. *Live Airborne System*, 1965–1968), on the other hand there *are* some Haacke systems that are closed in the substantial sense of representing systems to viewers rather than forming systems with them (e.g. *Circulation*, 1969). Coming in multiple forms, such closed systems can be found in artists like Tetsumi Kudo, Ajay Kurian or Pierre Huyghe.[48] Standing before one of Huyghe's aquaria like *Zoodram 4 (Recollection)* (2011), one realizes that what is wrong with them is not the beautifully curated, sublime, psychoactive and nostalgic piece of artificial nature inside, but the fact that one is standing before it. In the Anthropocene, such a viewer position does not exist; nor do "otherworldly" enclosures.[49] Huyghe's piece is very helpful in unmistakably showing the Earth what it lost by becoming anthropocenic.

The vector of Haacke's work on "real-time systems" is exemplary in quickly turning to social systems, thereby directing the attention of artistic practices towards the peculiar institutional ecology constituting their site—while Art in the Anthropocene understands the global regime of political, scientific and economic institutions to be the "backbone" of the Earth System in its ecological and geological functioning (and hence to be as much the specific site of art as the Earth itself is). This circumstance is the source of the institutional perplexities staged at the beginning of this essay. Pieces like Tue Greenforts *Exceeding 2°* (2007/2014) not-withstanding, Amy Balkin's work today seems most consistent and sharp in addressing the Anthropocene's institutionalism. Balkin trades emission certificates, exhibits her failure to register the world's atmosphere as UNESCO world cultural heritage, or attempts to establish an extended piece of land in Tehachapi, California, as a common space

44 But theorist Jack Burnham is probably right in employing the notion "Systems Art" for a wider range of conceptual practices. See Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (1968): 30–35.

45 Hans Haacke, *Untitled Statement* (1969).

46 Jack Burnham, "Real Time System," *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (1969): 49–55.

47 Haacke also drafted a never realized weather chamber called *Weathercyclical Simulation* (n.d.), in which the visitors could enter a system of evaporation, condensation and rain (see Hans Haacke, *Werkmonographie* (Schauberg: Verlag M. DuMont, 1972). Visitors immediately becoming part of the system is also a characeristic of Tomas Saraceno's climate piece *On Space Time Foam* (2012), consisting of multiple layers of transparent membranes over a huge volume of air; for a comment by Bruno Latour on the piece, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjas5vqtsgQ.

48 See e.g. Tetsumi Kudo, *Cultivation by Radioactivity in the Electric Circuit* (1970); Ajay Kurian *Master Slave Complex (Proleptically Speaking...)* (2013).

49 The only "outside" existant is that of *alternative paths* in the modelling of this Earth. See e.g. Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

for humanity.[50] Because at the heart of the scientific problem of understanding the Anthropocene lies the political problem of finding the institutional setup that could realize it. In other words, the experimental setup for investigating the Anthropocene is the global institutional regime.

Once "understood," things become displays or diagrams of themselves; the living cell becomes the visualization of the cell, geologic strata the display of its formation in geologic time etc. Per analogy, once the Anthropocene fully realizes Stage-3, implying the full political transparency of humanity to itself, the whole Earth becomes a diagram, a map of itself, a "purely" conceptual object in the strictest sense. The Earth becomes its globe, its animation. Artist Timur Si-Qin: "The digital age has taught us that digital materials behave and are as real as physical materials, and vice versa, and that matter and reality is programmable, i.e. "the hackability of everything." So what it comes down to, what's really happening to our generation is maybe an expansion of the idea of materiality, one that counts everything, from Spanish to aluminum to Samsung as a material, each with its own manipulable properties and capacities."[51] One does feel, indeed, that the conceptual (read: *geological*) fabric and plasticity of Earth in the Anthropocene is both captured and performed in the datascapes of a Steina and Woody Vasulka video-work like *C-Trend* (1974), or in an early digital landscape animation like Loren C. Carpenter's *Vol Libre* (1980)—while today it is probably the primitive Earth heaps of Ian Cheng,[52] the seamless control of scale in Rachel Rose's work,[53] or the digital reflections of an Ed Atkins piece—"A certain earthmover named 'The Dispassion'"—, in which the animated Earth is starting to materialize.[54]

Ancestral and Descendant

The concept of Anthropocene irritates by employing heterogeneous registers. While above I attempted to browse through some practices of Art in the Anthropocene that I think are related to a fundamental transformation of conceptuality itself, brought about by the emergence of Absolute Interiority, the Anthropocene's other register poses a whole different—even opposed, though not symmetrical—set of challenges that follow from the situation conceptuality faces *vis-à-vis* Absolute Exteriority.

In the one register, conceptuality becomes performative and ultimately converges with the whole Earth. But in the other register, which lines up geologic time from the emergence to the end of the Earth, conceptuality remains locked into present Earth,

50 See Amy Balkin, *Public Smog* (2004–) and *This is the Public Domain* (2003–).

51 "An Interview with Timur Si-Qin" (2013), retrievable on www.aqnb.com/2013/11/18/an-interview-with-timur-si-qin.

52 See Ian Cheng, *Entropy Wrangler* (2013), or Ian Cheng, *Thousand Islands Thousand Laws* (2013–14).

53 See Rachel Rose, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013).

54 Also look at Chuan-Lun Wu's *Coastal Mining* (2014), in which he practices the translation of plastic waste shaped by the forces of the sea into digital plastic waste; or at Marina Zurkow's *Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK)* (2009).

categorically blocked from getting in touch with, or performatively intervening into, the Earth's remote past and future (at the time they occur), hence being confined to a pure representation of its object. This renders interestingly problematic the one emblematic figure of geology, the stratum. As geology constructs (past) geologic time through the analysis of strata, it seems natural to point to strata when referencing geologic time. But the reflex of pointing to some deep-down stone upon hearing "Triassic" is misleading, because the Triassic (at the time it occurred) is a purely conceptual object today: it makes no sense, in localizing it, to point anywhere. The layers of rock that geologists are analyzing belong to contemporary Earth, *to the Anthropocene*, not the Triassic. Conversely, it is correct to think of strata when hearing "geologic record of the Anthropocene,"—but one should not forget that now *these strata* are purely conceptual objects (which is of course true for the remote future of the Earth generally), constructed through an analysis of the geologic activity of today's Earth.[55] While the conceptual object of a past Earth is constructed upon today's strata, the conceptual object of future strata is constructed upon today's Earth. So indeed both past Earth and future strata as conceptual objects both exist *only* on contemporary Earth: they exist only in the Anthropocene. But while the strata geologists analyze today to construct the Triassic have been around for millions of years, the respective cognitive structures are new. The aforementioned conceptual objects are themselves material structures on Earth, structures in brains (and textbooks, and observational devices etc.) that correspond to the strictly propositional content of pure representations of geologic time. They may be thought of as little sterile marks in the fabric of the Earth, things that don't allow for any conduct in the objects they evoke and which, on today's Earth, produce nothing but themselves. The material structures that bear the pure representations of geologic time on today's Earth are utterly "secondary" structures; but as such, they are as novel and perplexing as the Anthropocene in which they emerge.

The register of Absolute Exteriority opens up a horizon of purely conceptual objects, upon which—along with the techniques and sites of their construction—artistic practices can draw and dwell. This sometimes takes the form of repeating, as it were, the process of conceptualization by immediately figuring types of strata, or sedimentations, or fossil intrusions, as in some of Marina Castillo Deball's work (*Uncomfortable Objects*, 2012), or in the picturesque work of Laura Moriarty (*Subduction into Trench*, 2010).[56] Robert Smithson is an early exponent of an artist whose work seems informed by an awareness of the geologic timescale, the range of which he covers with sedimentation pieces (*Mirror Stratum*, 1966); *Strata,*

55 Of course the Earth's remote future generally is constructed in recourse to not only geologic, but also astronomic observations and astrobiological observations. See Peter D. Ward and Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe* (New York: Copernicus, 2000).

56 Moriatry's pieces are prominently featured in Ellsworth and Kruse (eds.), *Making the Geologic Now.*

A Geophotographic Fiction, 1970–1971)[57] as well as with pieces straight-forwardly considering the end of the Earth (*The Domain of the Great Bear*, 1966).[58] Generally, then, it can not go unnoticed that geologic time is also the ultimate frame of art history. The latter being comparably short, contemporary art finds itself in immediate proximity to early forms of artistic expression (see e.g. the prehistoric lute-play in *Raptor's Rapture*, 2012, by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, or the transtemporal encounter of Nathaniel Mellor's *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview*, 2013–2014) and, as geologization appears as the ultimate form of "naturalization," may generally tend to kinds of ethnographic appeal and oversight (see again Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013).[59]

But such a spectrum of works (which I can not properly acknowledge here) can not hide the fact that the Absolute Exteriority of geological time is in fact a dead end of conceptuality, and hence a dead end for Art in the Anthropocene. This is the case because of geologic time's purely propositional nature: because propositionality marks a point zero of material heterogeneity. The set of propositions the conceptual object "geologic time" will ever have amounted to requires, I believe, nothing but a comparably minimal amount of space on a storage device of any kind of information processing system on Earth, human or other. And essentially *it is* nothing else, and produces nothing else on Earth, but the material configuration of that storage device. Hence, *correctly understood*, Art in the Anthropocene will never be able to make more of it.—But Absolute Exteriority is the dead end of conceptuality also in the very literal sense of leading to the temporal margins of the production of concepts, but also of life itself, guiding us—as mentioned above—to the dead ends of the unliving of ancestral and descendant Earth.[60] Nietzsche, and with him Ray Brassier and others, realizes that "[t]he living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type."[61] That is true. It is of the type of the objects of Sam Lewitts *Fluid Employment* (2012), small concrescences of ferrofluid set in motion by turning magnets on a bed of waste liquid; or indeed of the type of the cheaply illuminated steam sensations of Pierre Huyghe's *L'expédition scintillante, Act 2, Untitled (Light Box)* (2002), unfolding upon an unliving piece by Satie.

57 Robert Smithson, *Strata, A Geophotographic Fiction, Aspen, no. 8* (1970–71).

58 Mel Bochner, Robert Smithson, *The Domain of the Great Bear, Art Voices* 5, no. 4 (1966): 44–51. The function of geology for Smithson is a rich issue which I can not touch upon here; see Étienne Turpin, "Robert Smithson's Abstract Geology: Revisiting the Premonitory Politics of the Triassic" in *Making the Geologic Now*, ed. Ellsworth and Kruse, 173–178.—Contemporary examples of the coverage of deep time would include e.g. Timur Si-Quin's *Premiere Machinic Funerary: Prologue* (2014) and Nicolas Mangan's *A World Undone* (2012).

59 Exploring this issue further, one would have to read Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

60 For the latter, see Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth After Us: The Legacy That Humans Will Leave In The Rocks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

61 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §109. See also Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 205.