

Copenhagen, November 2019

Aesthetics of the Anthropocene

And how they can challenge business ethics



Earth seen through the windows of the international space station on google.maps

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Keywords:

Anthropocene, Fossil Fuels, Climate Crisis, Contemporary Art, Aesthetics, Generic Singularity, Non-philosophy, Western Welfare Self, Community of Contribution

Abstract:

This article explores the question of ethical legitimacy in light of the Anthropocene as a new age in which humans have become geological agents and thus responsible for the ecological degradation of the Earth and the current climate crisis – threatening not only humans, but also all other non-human life-forms. For companies involved in pollution or the extraction and exploitation of natural resources – whether in the form of farmed animal products, plantations or minerals – these activities pose an especially huge challenge to business legitimacy. Contemporary art is proposed as a way of producing awareness of the Anthropocene, as well as examining its impact and ethical consequences through making visible the hidden costs of a Western lifestyle and opening up critical thinking and imagination about other life-forms inhabiting the earth. Various trajectories of such contemporary art production are mapped out. Lastly, some thoughts on a ‘community of contribution’ are presented as a new way to measure ethical actions by individuals and businesses in the Anthropocene.

CONTENTS:

- 1.
BUSINESS LEGITIMACY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**
- 2.
THE ANTHROPOCENE – A SEMANTIC VIRUS OR A NEW RESPONSIBILITY?**
- 3.
AESTHETICS, CONTEMPORARY ART, NON-PHILOSOPHY**
- 4.
AWARENESS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE**
- 5.
ARTISTIC TRAJECTORIES WITHIN THE ANTHROPOCENE**
- 6.
COMMUNITY OF CONTRIBUTION – AN ECOTOPIA IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**
- 7.
BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. BUSINESS LEGITIMACY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Within the space of just a few years, the **climate crisis** has become the central question in the public sphere due to the increasing changes in weather patterns caused by global warming. Extreme manifestations of hurricanes, droughts, flooding, melting ice-caps, rising sea levels and forest fires have become evidence that *'the Earth currently operates in a state without previous analogy'* (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2013). What the scientific community and the UN international committee for climate change (IPCC) have been warning about for decades is now a reality worldwide. One concept has proved able to capture this sense that the accumulated burning of fossil fuels since the eighteenth century is the cause of the climate crisis: the **Anthropocene**. This designation of a new geological epoch will be explored in this article from the perspective of **contemporary art** and how an aesthetics of the Anthropocene can challenge business ethics.

The term 'Anthropocene' places on humans the responsibility for what is happening to the Earth, its eco-systems and climate. It is humans who have burnt carbon stored in the depths of the Earth to the benefit of human civilisation while making the planet uninhabitable for the majority of other species that have evolved alongside us. We have *'destroyed nature to the point of hijacking the Earth system into a new geological epoch'* (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2013) – a hijacking involving not only non-human nature in all its multiplicity, but also future generations of humans who will be inheriting an Earth with destroyed eco-systems.

The ethical response to this catastrophe is an attempt to reverse or bring to a halt the many destructive processes unleashed by human activity in order to protect what is still left and allow for the re-emergence of wild nature. Such actions would represent atonement for past and present crimes against nature, admitting responsibility for having endangered not only human life but the conditions for life of a wide range of other species, and thereby making good the damage done.

To be aware of the Anthropocene – and to take an ethical position with regard to it – means that modes of production requiring natural resources to produce objects or services that can circulate on the free market are no longer legitimate. The fundamental problem is that capitalism needs nature, but nature does not need capitalism. In the Anthropocene this becomes an aporia in business legitimacy, depending on how many natural resources are needed for a product. Raising animal livestock (high impact on environment and suffering of sentient beings), to planned obsolescence (waste of materials and energy), extraction of rare earth minerals (high degree of pollution) to the excessive burning of **fossil fuels** (increasing carbon-dioxide to the atmosphere) are activities that are no longer ethically legitimate because they are adding to the problem, not attempting to solve it.

An extreme example of ethically illegitimate businesses is provided by those companies who actively engage in the destruction of the most fragile, bio-diverse and vital eco-systems on the planet: the tropical rainforests of Amazonas and Indonesia. Here, deforestation for the sake of growing soya, maize, coffee or palm oil plantations means that not only are thousands of species going extinct through loss of natural habitats, but the planetary benefits of the rainforests (such as carbon capture and production of oxygen) are also lost. The actions of these businesses are not ethically legitimate, because the destruction of the rainforest impacts on the natural habitat of million of species and the stabilisation of the planetary climate.

These commercial activities are all situated along an ethical spectrum where their relative legitimacy depends on how they use (or re-use) natural resources and interact with non-human nature. And once it is realised that the US, China and Europe are feeding their livestock (cattle, pigs and poultry) on soya-beans originating from previous rainforest land in Brazil, and that ice-cream, candy, cookies and chocolate snacks are dependent on the widespread use of palm oil from plantations in Indonesia, it becomes obvious how the patterns of the Western industrial-agricultural-food-complex are interconnected with the destruction of bio-diversity – and thus become ethically problematic.

The aim of this article is to explore the Anthropocene as a concept and as a horizon for the production of **contemporary art**. It will be shown that the concern of such contemporary art is to raise awareness of the Anthropocene and its impact on nature in all its dimensions. An **aesthetics** of the Anthropocene comes with an ethic: to allow wild nature to re-emerge and to explore new means of co-existence with non-human nature – both in their domesticated and wild state of being. This ethic poses a challenge to business legitimacy, because it questions the traditional view of human superiority and domination of nature as a resource to be exploited and manipulated for human needs.

2. THE ANTHROPOCENE – A SEMANTIC VIRUS OR A NEW RESPONSIBILITY?

Perhaps google.maps most clearly illustrates the meaning of **Anthropocene**: a new meta-awareness of global human collectivity as a geological agent. As a technology, google.maps allows its users to ‘spin’ the planet, to zoom in, zoom out, to go wherever they please. The stitched-together satellite images create a feeling of flying across the globe, a strange sense of being able to push the world according to our desires. Where there are blue lines or dots, the orange ‘streetview’ man can be placed on roads to view images of the urbanised and agricultural world. Google.maps has no fixed viewpoints – users can watch the world from the position of an astronaut in space or a pedestrian walking on a buzzing New York street. They are both inside and outside a globe that at once presents itself as an infinite totality to explore and as a solitary blue marble hovering alone in a vast dark universe. The clear-cut division between nature and culture (the man-made world inside nature) collapses from within this technology, being both a global address book and a surveillance and cartographic tool. On google.maps, nature can no longer hide from the gaze or be in direct opposition to the user. Nature is still ‘out there’, but not as an infinite wilderness. Google.maps makes this very clear: the ‘wild’ has been limited to parks, with agriculture, extraction of resources, infrastructure and urban activities encroaching upon it from all sides. Nature is still there, but as the effectuation of human systems ‘*with natural ecosystems embedded within them*’ (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2013).

Geological ages have been defined in terms of significant changes in the atmosphere, surface temperatures or mass extinctions. The time span between these ages is thousands to millions of years (e.g. the Miocene, Pliocene, Pleistocene and Holocene just to mention the four periods in the 23.8 million years leading up to the Anthropocene). With the **Anthropocene**, we are referring to the current geological age – that of the human intervention and transformation of all eco and Earth

System trends since 1784. Within the discourse of the Anthropocene there are disputes about where to place the starting-point of the period when humans became geological agents. Some believe it was the agricultural revolution 11,000 years ago (the beginning of deforestation, rice-cultivation and stock-raising), others that it was the imperial-colonial interconnection of the globe in the sixteenth century, and there are those who see the level of nuclear radioactivity from the testing of A-bombs in 1945 as the beginning. There is a strong argument, however, that the starting point was the burning of fossil fuels that began with James Watts's new patent for the steam-engine in 1784. It allowed coal and later oil to become the prime movers behind the industrial revolution (Malm 2016). In this light, the Anthropocene can be seen as a new way of conceptualising how humans enabled a specific transformation into modernity through fossil fuels and industrialisation.

As a term, the 'Anthropocene' is credited to atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen, who at an international conference for earth scientists in 2000, and in a scientific paper published in *Nature* in 2002, argued for the Anthropocene as a new geological age to signal: '*that mankind had become a force of telluric amplitude*' (Fressouz and Bonneuil 2013). That Crutzen is a scientist of Earth's atmosphere is important to the argument that we are currently living through a new geological age: the burning of fossil fuels (first coal, and later oil and gas) has increased the amount of carbon-dioxide in the air from 280 mmp (pre-industrial age) to 410mmp (current concentration). As a consequence, the Earth has seen an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius in median temperature since 1784, leading to global warming or what is generally referred to as the climate crisis. As such, Crutzen's definition follows one of the accepted ways of defining geological ages: significant changes in the atmosphere.

After a decade of use within the scientific world, the term Anthropocene began to spread as a 'semantic virus' to other cultural spheres. One of the first cultural institutions to use the term was HKW (Haus der Kulturen der Welt) in Berlin, which hosted a number of lectures and exhibitions around the Anthropocene and later published the magnum opus *Grain Vapor Ray*, consisting of theoretical and artistic material supporting the Anthropocene as a concept. Now, it is widely used in the humanities and in the broad general public, but is being supplemented by other competing concepts: the Capitalocene (the effect of global capitalism) and Plantationocene (the effect of agriculture, colonialism and capitalism). More recently, Donna Haraway has proposed the concept of the Chthulucene to designate an age in which 'knotted relations' between humans and non-human nature can emerge. The inventor of the Gaia-theory, James Lovelock, contributed with a new concept this year, stating that the future should be called the Novacene, in which super-AI will solve all the problems of the climate crisis.

All these different concepts point towards various approaches and possibilities for critical assessments of the most pertinent challenges of our age. Yet the Anthropocene has the advantage of ascribing both agency and responsibility to humans. The Anthropocene acknowledges that humans, in the year 2020, are in charge. No one can escape their responsibility – even though this responsibility and the margins of actions for each individual, business or nation-state is unevenly distributed.

The Anthropocene must be seen in relation to the generalised framework of the industrial revolution, which made it possible for the digital revolution to emerge in the twentieth century. However, the digital age did not surpass the industrial age: the world is still shaped by the

aftereffects of the industrial revolution, even though most Westerners have immersed themselves in the digital realm of social media-platforms, smart-phones, laptops and algorithms that govern newsfeeds, consumer habits and help find the easiest way through rush-hour traffic. This reality is taken for granted because it has established itself as an infrastructure for the lives of humans, who tend to forget how the industrial revolution transformed the world.

The burning of **fossil fuels**, together with the scientific revolution, increased yields from crops (through fertilisers and pesticides), improved health care through vaccines and antibiotics, and enabled humankind within just 220 years to increase its population (from one billion in 1800 to 7.6 billion in 2019) and to increase its energy-consumption by a factor of 40. This exponential and partly uncontrollable increase in the human population (and its energy consumption) has led to a shift in the balance between land-living vertebrates, and domesticated animals and humans. The latter now make up 96% (32% humans, 64% cattle, pigs, sheep and poultry), while the remaining 4% consists of approximately 32,000 species. This imbalance can be seen in the fact that 84% of the ice-free land surface is under direct human influence. Thus there is the looming ecological crisis with regard to bio-diversity and the sixth mass extinction (currently one million species are in severe danger of going extinct, according to the UN). In the words of philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, the Anthropocene: *‘Conveys a message of almost unparalleled moral and political urgency. Put explicitly the message reads: humankind has become responsible for inhabiting and managing the Earth as a whole’* (Sloterdijk 2014). The following is an attempt to delineate the contours of an **aesthetics** of the Anthropocene and how it critically challenges business legitimacy. It is written from the position of being both a contemporary artist and a non-philosopher, terms that will be explained below.

2. **AESTHETICS, CONTEMPORARY ART, NON-PHILOSOPHY**

To propose an aesthetic of the **Anthropocene** is a complex operation. If aesthetics in its modern form is the philosophical attempt to define rules and principles for not only the creation but also the reception of artistic objects (understood as works of art presented, circulated and archived in art institutions) an aesthetics of the Anthropocene would concern itself with the question: how does the artwork raise our awareness of the Anthropocene? Such an awareness points towards a range of critical questions in relation to the impact of human activity upon wild nature, our relation to non-human nature, our ethical responsibility for present and future generations and how to inhabit the world in a different way. These critical aspects challenge business legitimacy, questioning the current hegemonic forces of Neo-liberal capitalism, Humanism and Welfare-state ideology powered by **fossil fuels** – a totality of social systems through which businesses have traditionally sought (and been granted) legitimacy.

Aesthetics belongs to a philosophical discipline that began with Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century (drawing upon the Greek understanding of ‘aisthesis’ as sensation and seen as a way of knowing) and received its proper place in the critical transcendental thinking of Immanuel Kant (as the autonomous sphere mediating between the sensuous and the intellectual).

After Kant, a number of philosophers of German Idealism in the nineteenth century – especially Schiller and Hegel, but also later Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – gave considerable attention to defining principles for art and the role it played in human cognition, education and as a life-enhancing force. During the twentieth century, thinking on art followed the division between Continental and Analytic Philosophy, between an Idealistic-inspired tradition (art as a specific access to reality, a way of being or a heterogenic liminal space) and an Institutional Theory of art (partly inspired by the late Wittgenstein and the pragmatic understanding of language-games). The word ‘aesthetics’ thus comes with a whole range of understandings and preconceptions. Depending on who is speaking and who is listening, it means very different things. Some contemporary artists abstain from the use of ‘aesthetics’ regarding their own work, because it is associated with a bourgeois ideology of art as autonomous, dependent on a genius for its creation and presupposing an elite of good taste for its judgement.

In the following approach to an aesthetics of the Anthropocene, the term will be used in a way that combines insights from both Idealism and Institutional Theory, because it refers here to both the aesthetic dimension of the Anthropocene as a geological age (how it manifests itself as a perceptual reality, as something to be seen, felt, heard, experienced by an individual in a phenomenological fashion) and as a condition in which to produce contemporary art (the Anthropocene as a field of exploration and ethical engagement on behalf of non-human nature within an institutional context). Thus, the concept of an aesthetic of the Anthropocene means a production of **contemporary art** that works from within an awareness of the Anthropocene with the aim of raising critical questions to the impact of the Anthropocene.

What is contemporary art as a phenomenon and institutional reality? First of all, contemporary art designates a plurality of artistic practices manifesting themselves all over the world. It can be seen as a form of ‘Nonimalism in action’: it does not have a fixed essence (in terms of the objects, experiences or events to which it refers), but is constituted as a linguistic game by its users and those institutional frameworks that support the game of art. This philosophical condition has, since the late twentieth century and well into the twenty-first, been called ‘the death of art’, because contemporary art only has validity as long as somebody designates ‘whatever’ as art. This can be expressed in the following paradox: contemporary art does not exist; only the specific instances of artworks proposed by artists to institutions exist. The contemporary artwork does not derive its existence from participating in an essence, but from being proposed with the assumption: *this could be art*. This act of proposing becomes central to contemporary art, because it demonstrates the radical ‘*emptiness or blankness of the aesthetic itself*’ (Osborne 2013). This is the core insight behind the institutional theory of art that dominates the contemporary art world today, because it allows for the greatest freedom for art and is the most stable in a systemic sense: it can allow the most critical art project to become real and still remain intact as a social system.

Here, there is at once a great freedom (everything can be designated as art), but at the same a constraint: in order for a contemporary artwork to be real, it needs an institution, as in a community of users (most commonly, the art world) who play the game of contemporary art. In order to become a contemporary artist, the person in question must participate in the **contemporary art** world. Artists need other people to play the game with them: proposing, viewing and responding to that which is perceived as contemporary artwork. Anything can in principle be proposed as an artwork: a shop, a dinner, a breath, a waterfall or a burial site, not just traditional

media such as painting, sculpture or drawing. Within the already established discourse of the contemporary art world, a myriad of art projects have already taken place, expanding and challenging any concept of a fixed essence of what contemporary art should or could be. This would of course also hold for any ideas about contemporary art that we could ascribe to an aesthetics of the Anthropocene. These cannot be defined by any one medium or way of doing art, but must be seen as propositions made by the contemporary artist.

What does it mean to be a contemporary artist (the person who proposes works of art adhering to an aesthetics of the **Anthropocene**)? It means to become a **generic singularity** who thinks as a *non-philosopher*. Here, an inspiration from the Idealistic tradition (Phenomenology and Existentialism) is at work, in an attempt to synthesise insights from both Continental and Analytic philosophy in the proposal for an aesthetics of the Anthropocene.

First, the contemporary artist exists, like all other humans, through the metaphysical knot defined by the dimensions of the body (own being), the social (given being) and temporality (final being) (Havsteen-Mikkelsen 2014). These are transcendental aspects of being human and cannot be escaped. Each human is forced into having a relationship to them, but can decide what the content of these dimensions should be. It is possible to exist and live a life in a myriad of ways. Yet a number of social categories cluster around contemporary artists, such as age, gender, nationality, interests, social position, used as labels by artists and the art world to describe them. This is the generic aspect of being a human (e.g. being white, male, a Dane, educated, a citizen in a democracy, but also a neighbour, a father, husband, painter, intellectual etc.). Against this generalised background, a singularity stands out: the name that accompanies an artist's work, together with the interests and artistic output that give the artist a certain identity within the contemporary art world. By committing to doing art, as in proposing, showing and circulating artwork, the artist has become known to a wider public. S/he has become a singularity upon a background of the generic, because s/he has actively transformed his/her relationship to the body, the social and time. S/he has allowed a certain talent of the body to grow, has engaged in a social context and has attempted to respond to a certain point in time. S/he has become a generic singularity through relating to the dimensions of own, given and final being.

But how does a generic singularity in the form of a contemporary artist think? This can best be described as **non-philosophy** in action, because contemporary artists think, but not in an academic sense of following strict rules of argumentation and verification (Havsteen-Mikkelsen 2015). They think from their embedded position in life, which means that they *invest* their own way of being into the thoughts they think. French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty – from whom this understanding of **non-philosophy** is derived – expresses most clearly what non-philosophy is: ‘*No human being can receive a heritage of ideas without transforming them through the sole act of knowing them; without injecting into them his own, always different, way of being*’ (Merleau-Ponty 1960). Non-philosophy is the act of transformation: to inject into a mode of thinking a personal understanding. This happens because contemporary artists allow the experiences of the world to change them, and they search for ideas and theories that resonate with them, but take from them only what they can use. And this is in a very literal fashion. In the words of Witold Gombrowicz: ‘*Theory is no problem for the artist. Theory only interests him in as much as he can make it run in his blood*’ (Gombrowicz 2007). To think as a non-philosopher is to displace official philosophy, to distort or even misunderstand a theory. Once it enters the mind of the contemporary artist, it is

dissolved and allowed to flow in new directions. This is one of the great forces of **contemporary art**: the audience never knows exactly what is going to happen.

Through the artworks proposed and realised, the positions taken and developed, an artistic project arises as that 'content' that is produced but also transformed through the artist. The artistic project can be seen as a system of competing interests through which the artist comes to know something about the world, but also takes a position in regards to the knowledge obtained through the research. The artistic project is non-philosophical in the sense that it is private, non-institutional knowledge that is embedded into the existence of the artist: a double mode of taking a position and developing a knowledge of how to produce art in relation to a context.

After these reflections regarding the use of the aesthetic, contemporary art and the thinking of the contemporary artist as that of non-philosophy it is time to clarify what an awareness of the **Anthropocene** means and how it can influence an aesthetics of the Anthropocene within the space of contemporary art.

3. AWARENESS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

How can an awareness of the Anthropocene influence the making of contemporary art? The nature of this awareness is crucial in understanding the artistic positions that engage with the aesthetics of the Anthropocene as a concern for contemporary art practices. In the following, some indications of what this awareness entails will be given, as well as how it manifests itself and changes the self-perception of what it means to be human.

First of all, to become aware of the **Anthropocene** is to understand the Earth System trends of the last 70 years that surround a Western human existence as a generalised framework. It is to see those aspects of an individual life that are conditioned by social systems governing the production of that reality. The generalised form of what enables 'me to become me' can be designated as a '**Western welfare self**' – referring to a mode of being produced by the Western welfare states emerging after WWII in the northern hemisphere, especially the US, Europe and Japan. The Western welfare self is a variance of being, a self that is based on a lifestyle of material affluence depending on a high carbon footprint (approx. 17 t carbon dioxide per Dane). It is a lifestyle protected and supported by the infrastructure of the welfare state in a broad sense (transportation, health care, education, leisure, food and the availability of goods transported to the consumer from all over the world).

It is important to understand that the **Western welfare self** is a conceptual person, as defined by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari 1991). It is a person who exists in a conceptual space in order to trace out dangers and possibilities, a way of creating existential movements within a space of thinking. It does not refer to a specific individual, but to a life-form in which a human life becomes possible. A Western welfare self refers to a human existence that profits from the acceleration of energy-consumption that took place after 1945. This acceleration is part of several exponential growth tendencies designated as the 'Great Acceleration' of all Earth System trends: in primary energy use, urban

population, transportation, telecommunication, international tourism, public infrastructure and fertiliser consumption just to name a few (Bonneuil and Fressouz 2013).

Thus, to become aware of the **Anthropocene** means to no longer see the world as a manifestation of structured phenomena constituted through a transcendental subject, but as the intertwining of both historical and systemic forces working simultaneously upon the perceptual organism of the body. Not only are all living people now dependent on these forces, but also the physical urbanised worlds that we experience on a phenomenological level. Walking through the streets of Copenhagen, for example, there is evidence of the Anthropocene everywhere: the cars (in which fossil fuels explode in a combustion engine), the asphalt pavement (consisting of residue from petro-chemical diffusion that is hundreds of million years old), the facades of the buildings (different historical ages intertwined), the people (a global mix of various ethnicities) and all the different shops (often presenting objects produced in Asia and transported with the help of **fossil fuels**).

Understanding what the Anthropocene means (as the transformation of the world through the burning of fossil fuels) alters the phenomenological mode of consciousness. The actions that a Western individual takes happen in a man-made environment that was produced through the consumption of energy – an energy whose polluting effects have accumulated in the atmosphere (leading to global warming) and the oceans (leading to ocean acidification).

The awareness of living in the **Anthropocene** is not the same as the awareness of living in postmodernity or a society of singularities. It is to be aware of living in a new geological age based on fossil fuels as the prime mover that effectuates a certain way of being modern (whether this modernity is Socialist, Democratic, Liberal or Communist, it is still within the Anthropocene). Once a consciousness begins to see the effects of fossil fuels as conditioning the ‘givens’ of its life-world, it will see the Anthropocene everywhere as a force permeating all dimensions of Western life worlds. The Anthropocene is visible as a phenomenological experience.

To see oneself as an individual existence through the conceptual framework of the **Anthropocene** is to establish a double-perspective: being positioned in the world right now at this point in life and in this specific context, and yet simultaneously understanding the systemic causes behind one’s own existence. Systemic causes are the already established framework of infrastructure that support traffic, telecommunications, housing, health-care, education, energy-supply and food-products, such as the objects needed for bodily metabolism, which are intersections points for a huge number of logistic activities coordinating production and transportation of goods so that they are available to the consumer.

When one looks into the ‘eatable’ products that appear in shops and later on our plates, one realises the violence against non-human nature that has taken place in order to put them there: first, the clearing of land for mono-cultural fields to grow (no insects or weeds that could sustain other life-forms), and secondly, the violence exerted on the farmed animals who yield the products that most Westerners eat: milk, butter, cheese and meat products. The reproductive cycle of the cow has to be manipulated (and violently distorted) in order to enable lactosis, and the cow is later killed to obtain its beef or skin. The pig or chicken is often kept in inhumane conditions, and then slaughtered to become meat. But, for the consumer of the end-product, obtaining in this way of the energy needed for the metabolism of the body, this violence is externalised to the farmer or butcher. The urban consumer has no direct contact with the growing of crops, the sentient beings

or with the actual slaughtering of the animal. This externalisation has made such violence invisible in ordinary city-dwelling life. It goes unnoticed and is mostly taken for granted by the **Western welfare self**.

Awareness of the Anthropocene is an understanding of the global impact made on the planet by humans since 1784 through **fossil fuels** and of how life is conditioned by these systemic transformations that took place in all areas of human society, accelerating after 1945. Awareness means seeing the other side of these Earth System trends, which have led to the destruction of natural habitats for non-human animals and are driving the climatic changes towards global warming and extreme weather manifestations. It is this awareness that feeds into the position of the contemporary artist working and thinking (as a non-philosopher) within an **aesthetics** of the Anthropocene. The awareness leads to a new positioning of the artist against the ideology of unlimited economic growth and the exploitation of non-human nature by the industrial-agricultural-food-complex.

4.

ARTISTIC TRAJECTORIES WITHIN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In order to understand the complexity of an **aesthetic** of the Anthropocene, some indications will be given of which directions such a **contemporary art** could take. At least eight possible trajectories seem obvious within the space of contemporary art (as that social system to which artists propose their artwork) and they are vectors that can overlap, mix and become hybrids (several vectors can be present within one artwork). The following is not a hierarchical list of what is most important; rather, each trajectory can be seen as a way of accessing the **Anthropocene** and displaying a consciousness of what is possible to do from the embedded position of a contemporary artist.

A) Working with the ‘skin of the earth’. Artworks in this category incorporate, deal with or explore minerals, vegetation, trees, microbes, insects or water – all materials that are located within 30 metres below or above the crust of the earth. This thin layer, from which we get most of our nutrients to survive, is a huge research field for contemporary artists. Here, the central issue is to shift a human-oriented perspective towards other forms of life that co-exist with humans – and were around long before humans entered the historical stage. This line of work attempts to reveal the ‘symbiotic real’, as leading ecological theorist Timothy Morton calls it, by allowing it to unfold on its own terms, interacting in ways that are indifferent to humans (Morton 2017). An example is the public art project by Matthew Ritchie, *This Garden at This Hour* (2014), a permanent installation in front of the United States Food and Drug Administration, in White Oak, Maryland, that mixes sculptural and organic elements. The latter are various kinds of invasive vegetation that enter into a competition with each other. Thus, Ritchie has created a stage for an ever-changing landscape of interaction between life-forms taking place within human-made structures.

B) Exploring the ‘knotted relations’ between humans and non-human nature, also labelled ‘interspecies encounters’. This line of work is especially inspired by the theoretical texts of Donna Haraway such as *Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Haraway 2016). Here we find engagements with animals in order to investigate the evolutionary continuity between the human mind and other forms of consciousness. As art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud has stated: ‘*Contemporary art plays host to a productive entanglement between the human and nonhuman, a presentation of coactivity as such*’ (Bourriaud N 2019). An example is the installation *Untilled*, 2011 – 12. *Living entities and inanimate things made or not made* by Pierre Huyghe for documenta 13 in Kassel, where he established a garden of exotic and intoxicating plants, containing a dog whose leg was spray-painted pink. Centrally located was a marble sculpture of a classical nude, but with the head transformed into a humming bee.

C) Explicitly attempting to make visible the negative or hidden impact of the mineral extraction process connected to the digital industries, or of the industrial-agricultural-food-complex upon the environment and land-degradation through deforestation. Within a smartphone or a laptop there are at least nine rare earth minerals (such as cerium, neodymium and lanthanum) that have been dug up, transported and refined somewhere in the world. This process leaves a devastating trail of pollution and toxic radioactive waste material. Artists Anu Ramdas and Christian Danielewitz, for example, travelled to a mineral waste dump in China and exposed film negatives that when developed showed the shimmering effects of radioactivity from thorium (a waste product from rare earth mining). Within this trajectory we also find artists working with the negative impact of the industrial-agricultural-food-complex upon the environment and land-degradation through deforestation. This kind of artistic activity works along the lines of ‘forensic architecture’ – through the extensive use of research, maps and scientific data presented to the public as evidence of the human transformation and destruction of geographical land sites. Google.maps is an often-used tool in these projects.



Image caption:

Anu Ramdas & Christian Danielewitz.
*Thorium 232/Weikwang VI, Against
The Grain & Black Square* / Photo by
Hannes Wiedemann

D) Making artwork concerned with the catastrophes immanent to the temporal horizon of the **Anthropocene**. This is art that concerns itself with dystopian visions of the future, with apocalyptic images of what is going to happen when the Earth becomes uninhabitable (Wallace-Wells D 2019). Here, artists stage future scenarios where civilisation is a faint memory, where

humans are forced to live underground, or exist in environments without any relation to the world as it is known. It is human civilisation as a fossil record. Much recent film production explores these imaginings of a warmer world of forests fires, droughts and floods, where large numbers of climate immigrants cross territorial borders. An example is the recent contribution by Larissa Sanssour to the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019: a dystopian film of people living in the aftermath of a catastrophe, telling stories from the time before the world broke apart.

In this trajectory we also find the criticism that humanity is not doing enough or not acting fast enough to prevent the estimated climatic tipping points from taking place. This causes a mental state of being: *climate depression*, designating the awareness (especially among climate scientists) that the estimated increase of temperature will unleash a wave of unprecedented extreme weather conditions with feedback loops that no one can predict. I myself have contributed with several works to this aspect, both in painting and installation. In 2018 I presented *Flooded Modernity*, a 1:1 scale mock-up of a corner of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye from 1929, partly submerged on the shore of a Danish fjord – a portent of the impending *climate crisis* where floods, hurricanes and extreme weather will become the new normal. (The project was originally conceived as a critical response to the meddling in democratic elections in the US and UK through the use of psychometric profiling and targeting specific voters by Cambridge Analytica. I now see it in a different light: that of the impending climate crisis. This re-writing of my own interpretation and intention behind my artwork illustrates a future task for art history: to re-think artistic projects of the twentieth century in light of the Anthropocene and the trajectories that are proposed here).



Image caption:

Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen,
Flooded Modernity, Vejle
Floating Art Festival, 2018.

E) Creating art projects pointing towards 'deep time'. These are works that attempt to undo the fixation on the present, and instead view human history as part of a much larger temporal horizon extending back millions of years to a geological time when humans were not even present in the world. Developing deep-time sensibility can be seen as a critical stance against an accelerated time-horizon, because it forces viewers to extend their imaginations to other ways of inhabiting the earth, to see beyond the phenomenological appearance of the present towards a different time. The sculpture *A Bullet from a Shooting Star* (2015) by Alex Chinneck is an example of this type of work. An inverted 35-metre-tall electricity pylon, appearing as if shot from deep space, and pointing like an arrow towards the ground that sustains us and from where we extract its material

traces, the artwork made visible how the electricity running in the power lines is produced from energy millions of years old, thereby making visible the deep time behind the present.

F) Finding practical ways to inhabit the Earth differently, by for example, restoring bio-diversity and original mega-fauna to current agricultural mono-cultural land. Here, artists present installations featuring permaculture or hybrids of high-tech solutions and non-human nature as a new way of envisioning co-existence. An example is the art project *Silicon Prairie* by Matthew Darmour-Paul, who ‘*visualises a post-agricultural midwest through the transformation of key typologies*’ (Darmour-Paul M 2019), or the Danish art-collective N55 , who present their works as ‘manuals’ for radically inhabiting the Earth in a new way, from a walking house or floating platform to an urban free-habitat system. People are at liberty to implement these open-source projects in their own lives.

G) Creating art projects that through their installation and material quality (such as sound) aim to bring about a new state of being within the viewer, a ‘cosmic consciousness’, an awareness of the **Anthropocene**, and a new way of engaging with nature. John Luther Adams, for example, aims through his compositions to create a music ‘*grounded in space, stillness, and elemental forces*’ (Adams JL 2019). As he states about his own art: ‘*A deep concern for the state of the earth and the future of humanity drives me to continue composing. I believe that music can serve as a sound model for the renewal of human consciousness and culture*’ (Adams JL 2019).

H) Exploring ‘other imaginations’ – all the marginalised modes of inhabiting the Earth outside the dominating Western discourse of the secular scientific-capitalistic ideology. Here, artworks give voice to the imagination of indigenous and native people living on the periphery or outside the blue lines of google.maps. By doing this, they open viewers’ minds to existing modes where nature is lived with and not against, as something to be domesticated and exploited. This category also includes artworks that explore the spiritual worlds of primitive religions by mixing them with technology and science fiction from Western culture. Artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen, for example, in the video animation *Terratic Animism* (2017), presents a shamanistic figure who moves between post-apocalyptic landscapes of ice, snow and sci-fi spaces.

These are themes that designate the content of an **aesthetics** of the Anthropocene. They do not specify any material support or way of exhibiting contemporary art. They can manifest themselves through performance, video-installation, painting, text, sound, photography, found objects, land art, sculpture, guided tours, participatory actions etc. Yet they invite both artists and viewers to re-think their own positions and attitudes towards the Anthropocene as a man-made world with devastating consequences for non-human nature. This re-thinking through re-positioning is the non-philosophical aspect that takes place in contemporary art as a thought-space.

6.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY OF CONTRIBUTION – AN ECOTOPIA IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

How to confront the challenge of the **Anthropocene** as a fundamental crisis affecting humankind and nature in all its evolutionary multiplicity? Is it possible to stop or even reverse the socio-economic trends that are leading to the destruction of the planet? A solution could be to establish an ethical ground where individuals and businesses can become legitimate: a framework that could measure the ethical value of their actions. The following is a proposal for such an ethical framework, deriving from a **community of contribution**.

A community of contribution is a concept for thinking a community, including non-human nature, based on generosity as the fundamental ontological principle. The manner in which a human or a business gives itself to the world is a means of becoming a phenomenon in the world. By giving ourselves differently in the way we consume, interact and relate to nature, it could become possible for wild nature to re-emerge. This kind giving would be an act of withdrawal: to withdraw from actions that have a negative impact on nature. This entails first and foremost: a rejection of the conventional products of the industrial-agricultural-food-complex (products from farmed animals and plantations in former rainforest land) thereby reducing the impact on bio-diverse nature. It is estimated by scientists that a global vegan diet could reduce the land needed for agriculture by up to 75%, thereby freeing space for wild- life parks (Poore J, Nemecek T 2018).

A **community of contribution** is not based on a territory, a religion or an ethnic belonging, but on an ethos of generosity towards non-human nature. In order for businesses to become ethically legitimate within a community of contribution, they must consider all the aspects of their activities, and see how they can stop or minimise their interference or destruction of non-human nature. Ethically legitimate actions aim at the re-flourishing of wild nature. It is a regulative idea in a Kantian fashion: a *focus imaginarius*.

To ensure this movement away from destruction, a new concept of the state is needed: a sustainable state instead of a welfare state, based on a different relation to non-human nature and a reduction of carbon emissions through the taxation of polluting activities. A sustainable state will challenge the power of the industrial-agricultural-food-complex and force it to reduce its negative impact on farmed animals, the environment and the health of the population.

The concept of the community is not without problems or conflicts. The community has, since the industrial age, been seen as a redemptive phenomenon and returned in various forms in an attempt to overcome alienation within industrialised societies. From the Communist utopia to the Communitarian gated community, it was experimented with in the twentieth century based on either ethnic, universal equality, religious or nationalistic essences, and failed on a disastrous and monumental scale. All the pitfalls embedded into these varieties of the community must be avoided. By grounding the ontological principle of the community on generosity, it becomes possible to avoid the excluding and violent tendencies of the community.

A **community of contribution** is based on the capacity of humans to give: we have been given life and we give ourselves over to life by manifesting our presence to the world. Our way of becoming visible is a manifestation of givenness, of how a self decides to become a visible phenomenon to

itself, the other and non-human nature. To participate in a community of contribution is thus an ethos for a life based on generosity towards that world that has given one life. Acting from within a community of contribution is a way of giving whereby a human exists differently in the world through the gift of minimising its destructive impact on non-human nature.

A community of contribution is an ecotopia within the **Anthropocene**: an ecstatic way of existing, intensely communicating with non-human nature, seeing human existence as part of deep time inside and outside of the body. It is a way of living as atonement for the destructive impact of the Anthropocene upon animals and wild nature.

Flying through the world on google.maps the user sees a 'bleached' world where all the remaining forms of life are non-existent. No wild animals are visible, nor bacteria or microbes, and there are no sounds of nature: no wind howling, nor water falling. The user sees a 'flat' world reduced to an image without the phenomenological depth it knows from its bodily interaction with the world. In this way, google.maps also presents the natural world of the future: extinct of all forms of life except for humans and their few livestock species that have been domesticated. Thus google.maps is a warning, a wakeup call to do things differently in the world as businesses and individuals. A **community of contribution** is a new ethical way of taking action in the **Anthropocene**: to enhance life-conditions for non-human nature by restoring present monocultural nature to wild nature. An aesthetics of the Anthropocene contains artworks that present possible steps towards the realisation of the community of contribution.

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