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Cur(at)ing the Planet—How to Exhibit the Anthropocene and Why

The Anthropocene is a geological hypothesis and a conceptual framework that is currently being probed for its phenomenological and epistemic relevance in a wide array of scientific disciplines. As a unifying concept giving a name to manifold problems and environmental challenges, it has both proponents and opponents. Still open for discussion and interpretation, the Anthropocene requires us to think hard, reflect, and debate in order to develop mechanisms, structures, and values for shaping and living in this “epoch of humans.” Its undeterminedness makes the Anthropocene an unfamiliar and challenging topic for several reasons. Because the Anthropocene’s temporal boundaries are still unclear, it contests the somewhat comforting periodization of history, depriving us of anchors for interpreting our past and asking us to look anew at the relation between human and Earth history. It focuses on human beings as *dramatis personae*, but situates them firmly in and of the natural world, bringing up not just scientific, social, and cultural, but also fundamental philosophical and ethical questions.

Regardless of whether the Anthropocene is formalized at some point by international scientific bodies as a new current geological epoch, there is already a large amount of agreement in academic communities as well as in politics and the media that humans have substantially altered planet Earth in the last two centuries on a hitherto unknown scale. Yet, while the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences give us a reasonably good picture of how this came about, we are as of now not yet sure how to understand the implications of the Anthropocene. We may argue that the Anthropocene clearly manifests itself in the nature that has been changed by human intervention, in our cities, in the communication worlds that we have created, and in our consumptive lifestyles, but it is only now beginning to find its aesthetic, artistic, and literary voice. Because the Anthropocene fundamentally tests so many assumptions, interpretations, and historically sedimented concepts, among them linear interpretations of history and progress and the promise of control that we have found in science and technology, we find its indeterminacy troubling. However, it is exactly this fuzziness that makes the Anthropocene concept so intriguing and highly promising for creative renderings and negotiations, particularly in the realm of exhibitions.

The concept of the Anthropocene does not automatically provide answers. In fact, its main merit may be that it forces us to ask new questions. On the surface, these may seem familiar: What do we eat? How do we get from place to place? What will our cities look like? Are machines slowly taking over control in our highly automated world run by invisible algorithms? From the Anthropocene perspective, these seemingly typical questions of modernity gain new relevance in view of the growing importance of systemic relationships between natural and social spheres, of interactions between global and local phenomena and actions, and of the relatedness of our present to the deep past and future. This new understanding of the *longue durée* challenges not only many academic disciplines, particularly the humanities, but also (historical) museums with their traditionally retrospective perspective. Aside from the temporal aspect, the Anthropocene forces us to leave our comfort zone in many respects, asking us to think in unfamiliar connections and to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. To be able to do so, we need to develop a common language across disciplines and cultures—a challenge on its own—and to open our ears and eyes for new verbalizations and views. Museum exhibitions can help us to develop the necessary skills, as they allow for thinking in three-dimensional space, circumventing mental barriers, and offering opportunities for shortcuts and detours without ending up in dead-ends.

These great opportunities are of course coupled with similarly great challenges. The Deutsches Museum has decided to tackle these head-on and become the first museum to create a major exhibition on the Anthropocene. The exhibition is a joint venture of the Deutsches Museum and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, covering 1,400 square meters and opening in the fall of 2014. The Anthropocene fits squarely into the museum's tradition and unique founding philosophy while carrying it into the twenty-first century. The choice of the Anthropocene as the subject of an exhibition not only reflects the museum's established interest in the interfaces and feedback between the natural sciences, technology, and social and cultural contexts, but also its strong concern for timescales spanning the past and present and reaching into the future. Furthermore, the museum has always been built on the strong belief that its galleries serve as spaces for reflective, interactive, and participatory involvement with current and controversial issues, providing visitors with the knowledge needed to form their own opinions.

Translating a theoretical concept and its underlying arguments into an exhibition space is always ambitious. Exhibitions construct their arguments in space, using a multitude

of communication tools ranging from original (historical) collection objects to images, films, graphics, texts, installations, lighting, and scenic spatial arrangements. The Anthropocene as a geological hypothesis and new framework of thinking lifts these curatorial demands of translation onto yet another level. At the same time, however, the Anthropocene's main challenges—its doubleness as both a geological theory and a philosophical concept, its openness and reflexivity, its spatial and temporal totality—make the exhibition a very suitable medium for negotiating its content and meaning.

Despite this duality, which complicates a clear conceptualization and concrete operationalization of the Anthropocene as a research tool, the geological basis of the Anthropocene concept is of importance. It frames and feeds our current discussions about human interventions into nature, starting with industrialization and leading to globalized and globalizing cause-and-effect relationships connecting producers and consumers, profiteers and needy, perpetrators and victims, and a growing blurring of these categories. Because of their use of space, exhibitions provide an excellent way of creating “contact zones” where the two aspects of the Anthropocene concept—geological and philosophical—and categories usually constructed in binary opposition, like nature and culture, can meet and mix. Instead of following a linear narrative structure, an exhibition allows for spatial juxtapositions, creating surprising connections and tensions that enable us to see current phenomena in the context of geological development. Throughout the exhibition at the Deutsches Museum, the geological stratigraphic element will highlight the geological aspect of the Anthropocene concept while also reconnecting topics such as nutrition, urbanization, and mobility to the question of what the Anthropocene will leave in the geological record for coming generations of humans and other species.

A very clear connection between the geological aspect of the Anthropocene and its relevance as a new framework for conceptualizing human influence on the surrounding bio-, geo- and sociospheres are the material objects that we produce, consume, and collect. Museum objects represent in and of themselves specific points in time and their particular social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental contexts. In their materiality, they conserve history, traditions, knowledge, and usage while simultaneously being wrested from their original contexts. In museological terms, objects in exhibitions constantly oscillate between actualization and latency, speaking to a temporal differentiation between the present time of the here and now and other time(s) embedded in the object (Vedder 2005, 183). In the exhibition, this inherent characteristic of museum

objects may actually help us in imagining and understanding the great and manifold, often overlapping temporal dimensions of the Anthropocene.

As material manifestations of our human actions, objects also provide us with the necessary spatial presence and anchor points from which to explore the promising, but at times frightening openness of the Anthropocene as both a physical phenomenon and a philosophical framework. One of its most unique traits is the fact that we are discussing, researching, and shaping it as it happens. Not only for geologists, but also historians and other scholars as well as the general public, this is new, intimidating, and to the minds of some, even dangerous. The openness of the Anthropocene confronts the museum, the curators, and exhibition-makers, as well as the visitors with new challenges. While exhibitions are always selective representations of specific interpretations of our world, the quality of uncertainty that surrounds the Anthropocene particularly challenges the traditional perception of museums as agencies and mediators of knowledge where people can learn how things “really are” and “how they work.” In the Anthropocene, the museum cannot (and maybe no longer should) offer this assurance of certainty. Instead, the museum should become what has often been demanded of it but rarely realized: a forum for reflection, discussion, negotiation, and even controversy. Museums of science and technology in particular can no longer pretend to authenticate knowledge, nor can the public continue to expect this. What museums and exhibitions can accomplish and should be called upon by the public to do is to create space—literally and figuratively—for free thinking, discussion, and visualization of the Anthropocene.

This does not mean that the museum loses its credibility, its scientific methodology, or its function as a space for lifelong learning and entertainment. On the contrary, it means that museums and exhibitions become more self-reflective, acknowledging what has been the case all along, namely that the sciences, and with them the spaces where they are represented, discussed, and translated for the wider general public, are also spaces of uncertainty, fragile knowledge, ambivalence, and controversy. What may at first seem like a complication, maybe even a loss, turns out to be a necessity, even an asset in the Anthropocene, as it supports and aims to produce the informed and critical, yet enthusiastic citizenry that is needed if the transformations called for in the Anthropocene are going to take place. Along the lines conceived by Sigfried Giedion, who demanded as early as 1929 that museums should become a “lively chronicle of time showing the things while they are in flow and not when they start to lie in their historical

coffins” (Giedion 1929, 103–4), museums and exhibitions need to present topics, issues, and controversies while they happen. Especially in terms of technological solutions to environmental problems, museums of (historical) technology are in a superb situation to contextualize technology both historically and systematically in a way that individual research institutions, political and economic agents, and even the media cannot. For this reason, the ambivalence of technology both as part of the problem and part of possible solutions will play a major role in the Anthropocene exhibit, because a democratically participatory assessment of technologies and their potentials, risks, and usefulness is needed for the shaping of the Anthropocene.

In addition to the doubleness and indeterminacy of the Anthropocene concept, it confronts the exhibition curators with a complexity on all levels. The Anthropocene basically comprises thousands of years, the entire globe, and a multitude of phenomena, topics, and issues that are systematically and spatially interwoven. Again, material objects intentionally or inadvertently created by human action serve as superb crystallization and junction points where relations, applications, experiences, and opinions towards certain issues meet and have become material, waiting to be decoded. Although objects in museums are taken out of their original contexts of production, usage, consumption, or adaption, they still bear traces of their origins that tell us, according to Anke te Heesen, a lot about ourselves, our rationalities and emotions, our expectations, and our fears (te Heesen 2012, 176). Because museum objects are simultaneously close and remote, present in the here and now while also anchored in the past, and embedded in a global network of things while being charged with personal and local meaning, they are particularly well suited to concretize the Anthropocene, make it imaginable and even tangible, and thus provide a focal point and base for reflection and discussion of Anthropocene phenomena and effects.

A final challenge for an exhibition on the Anthropocene is the criticism that, beyond the strict geological discussion, the concept offers little concrete guidance about how to turn discourse into transformative action. Here again, museums and exhibitions may rediscover old strengths by focusing on yet another unique characteristic that they have: spatiality and the opportunities it offers for new and unexpected perceptions and movement and participation. Only exhibitions can build their arguments in space, visualize them, and offer them for the public to engage with, reflect upon, and debate. In the multi-perspective and nonlinear exhibition space, visitors get the opportunity to make

their own decisions, form their own experiences, and thus come up with different interpretations. The Anthropocene exhibition at the Deutsches Museum will reflect this participatory element not only by including interactive elements throughout the gallery, but particularly by integrating visitors' reactions into the design of the exhibition. In the last section, which is concerned with scenarios of the future, the visitors themselves will decide which scenario they find most probable and/or most desirable, thereby directly speaking to the visitors as agents in the shaping of the Anthropocene.

In museum studies, the Enlightenment has often been emphasized as a formative period for the history and development of museums. It was in these confusing times of awakening, change, and social transformation, so the story goes, that museums developing out of aristocratic collections and cabinets of wonder served as agents of validation for social orders and worldviews. Along similar lines, museums have been interpreted as spaces of compensation where the loss of traditions and resulting disorientation caused by a developing bourgeois society and the modern industrial nation-state could be balanced (Ritter [1963] 1974). The times that we live in and the future ahead of us, whether we call it Anthropocene or something else, share important elements with past periods of transition and transformation. Today's globalized world, increasingly marked with the traces of humans and their technological power, calls for a transformation on an unprecedented scale. In this process, museums and exhibitions are no longer mere agencies of remembrance and musealization, working against oblivion. Rather, they have become active scientific, social, and public spaces, offering a unique approach to the Anthropocene. With their ever-growing collections of objects that have produced the Anthropocene and are being produced by it and their representation in spatial arrangements, the exhibition floor offers a unique space for creating a three-dimensional experience of the systemic interconnectedness that characterizes the Anthropocene. Allowing for visualized connection, juxtaposition, and opposition, the spatiality of exhibitions provides for multi-perspective approaches to Anthropocene phenomena, encouraging interaction, participation and discussion in a multimedia and multidirectional way. While curating an exhibition, we also tackle the question of how to "curate" the planet in its literal sense of taking care of it and curing it. The exhibition at the Deutsches Museum will offer a first step in this endeavor by creating an open, informative, and inspiring space for reflection and participatory discussion about the Anthropocene and how to live in it.

Outline of the Exhibition

The exhibition's main goal is to inform visitors about the Anthropocene as a scientific hypothesis and a currently debated global vision of the role of humans on Earth. It shows the effects of humans intervening as a biological and geological actor, increasing awareness for both the temporal and spatial extent of human-invoked environmental changes. By translating the multifarious topics and approaches to the Anthropocene into a three-dimensional space, the exhibition offers to a wider audience the unique opportunity to experience the Anthropocene and to learn about the state of current knowledge (as well as knowledge gaps) and ongoing discussions. The exhibition stands at the beginning of a global, democratic, and participatory debate about the Anthropocene. It therefore will not provide final answers to all questions, but rather encourage reflection and discussion, helping to turn insights into action.

The exhibition aims to:

- raise visitors' awareness about the interconnected phenomena of the Anthropocene and illustrate the magnitude of the geological, chemical, and biological effects—both spatial and temporal—of human actions through selected examples.
- examine the ambivalent role of technology, which contributes to many problems but also offers possible solutions, as well as humans' relationship to nature as mediated through technology.
- emphasize the openness and malleability of the Anthropocene.
- make visitors excited about the manifold opportunities for shaping the Anthropocene while simultaneously highlighting and debating the challenges and risks connected with it.
- raise awareness for the responsibility of the individual and the implications of this, especially the interconnectedness of individual actions and global consequences.

The exhibition is structured into three parts, roughly following a chronological focus. The first section provides a comprehensive introduction into the Anthropocene both as geological hypothesis and new conceptual framework. Its central questions are “What is the Anthropocene?” and “Which questions and new thinking result from it?” They are discussed in relation to historically and culturally different definitions of nature, focusing also on the history of humans’ desire and methods to measure, understand, and alter their environment. The introduction visualizes the importance of industrialization and the “Great Acceleration” since the 1950s that created and sped up many phenomena of the Anthropocene that are now found around the globe and challenge our planet’s ecosystemic balance.

The second part of the exhibition consists of seven thematic areas that present selected phenomena of the Anthropocene, looking particularly at systemic connections, global and local interdependencies, and temporal dimensions. The themes covered are urbanization, mobility, nutrition, evolution, human-machine interaction, nature, and communication/awareness. The urbanization topic plays with how cities function as an organizational principle of the Anthropocene world, serving as nodes in the global networks of goods, raw materials, and waste. The Anthropocene also changes patterns of mobility, as humans move around the world in increasing numbers and with increasing speed as travelers, transporters, and refugees. As both carriers and barriers, humans (im)mobilize other organisms and travel companions such as germs and invasive species. Global interactions also play an immense part in today’s nutrition. The eating habits of industrialized societies are expanding worldwide, creating a mammalian super-organism (Flannery 2010). The topics of evolution and human-machine interaction revolve around the human ability to alter life forms—first through domestication and selective breeding, then through genetic manipulation, and nowadays through synthetic biology—and the interface between human beings and their growing population of machines, which they are equipping with ever increasing autonomy and power. The second-to-last topic asks whether there is any nature left unaffected by human activity and

how we might envision nature in the Anthropocenic future. Finally, the last theme explores the question whether the Anthropocene brings about a global consciousness based on fast-developing communication technologies, possibly creating an open “sphere of human thought”—or “knowosphere,” as Andrew Revkin (2012) has called it—that facilitates the transformation processes necessary for creating a sustainable future for the planet.

The final section of the exhibition turns towards the future. The initial display looks at past visions of the future, emphasizing their transformative potential while simultaneously highlighting their fragility and ambivalence. The final installation will evoke several scenarios of the future in the Anthropocene, inviting the visitors not only to direct the future through a participatory steering tool, but also to consider the likelihood and desirability of the different scenarios, calling upon each individual to reflect upon their role and wishes in the Anthropocene.

The exhibition will be supplemented by a wide variety of activities ranging from classical formats such as lecture and film series to artistic forums related to the Anthropocene, children’s events, and writing, film, and photo workshops. In addition to teaching materials and worksheets for children of various ages, the exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalog in German and English, including a comprehensive essay unit and a section presenting the conceptual and creative background of the exhibition.

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