

Monuments in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Troubling Time Conference

University of Manchester

1 – 2 June 2017

The contemporary discourse of the Anthropocene implicates a geological agency for the human, entangling her in temporalities that exceed human experience. Initially proposed by Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in the 1980's, this geological epoch is the "reunion of human (historical) time and Earth (geological) time, between human agency and non-human agency" (Bonneuil 2015). The paradigm of the Anthropocene manifests space-time aesthetics that disrupt our conventional conception of scale, the human a geological actor stratified in deep time, occupying a topology at a planetary resolution. More acutely, the Anthropocene delivers a condition where the very existence of the human comes into question; both as a continuing species in a precarious future and as an anthropocentric entity privileged over non-human materialisms.

The discourse of the Anthropocene has become actively animated all disciplines including the humanities; however a notable under theorised exception is the category of the monument, traditionally cast within the scope of memory studies. The term monument is eternally interchangeable with memorial, its purpose to enact a memorialisation, "a function to recall, to animate the past, whether an event, person or other significant occurrence, in order to visualise the future" (Ashton 2015). Such acts of memorialisation can and are typically imbued with an ideological status, through what it is that is remembered, how it is remembered and how that remembering acts upon the present and the future-to-

come. A monument enacts a narrative of history through the (re)telling of a past, deploying fact and/or fiction, to make visible a state's ideology and story of nationhood; the cementing of a mythology for the future citizen "to guarantee origin and stability as well as depth of time and space" (Huyssen 1996). However, the very task of writing and re-writing history, with fact or fiction, or the inevitable mixture of both, makes apparent that the content or narrative of monument is not the critical factor, but rather it is the temporal trajectory – of past-present-future – where the authentic authority of the monument resides.

It is the convergence of the material conditions and temporal arrangements of monument and Anthropocene where this paper proposes the new category of the post-monument. This category seeks to provoke the recalibration of spatial and temporal scales presented by the discourse of the Anthropocene, to be instrumentalised in ontological strategies deployed by material practices of monument making. Such a paradigm posits the monument as a temporal device, contingent on its own materiality, and resolves the human to come in exclusion of its own history.

An alternative category of the monument, that of the counter-monument, as expounded by James E. Young has already proposed a typology that actively undermines and disrupts the ideological capacity of the traditional monument, with strategies of dematerialisation and negative forms in which the spectator becomes "an active participant in the formation and transmission of memory" (Harris 2010) [Figure 1]. However, this monumental paradigm fails to give any account for a future-to-come, other than one contingent on the memory of its own negation. This proposal of the post-monument does not specifically target the ideological status of these material practices, but rather foregrounds the capacity of the monument as a temporal object, a type of time machine that is orientated towards the future to come and the possibility of the human who might reside within that future.



Figure 1 – Horst Hoheisel, *Ashrott Fountain* (1985) Kassel, Germany

Material monuments of the Anthropocene are already with us. They can be observed directly in the physical relation we have with the planet, through the violent industrial processes that inscribe and are inscribed by our species upon the earth's geology. These activities and the detritus that accompanies them are already projected in to a future and even our attempts to guard against catastrophe will mark the planet for millennia. Located within these many futural materialisms are the nuclear waste storage facilities documented via the *Perpetual Architecture* archival project by the Centre for Land Use Interpretation [Figure 2]. These landscape forms might be framed by the category of the ruin or the unintentional monument as posed by Alois Reigl's 1903 essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments", but their deliberation to stand against time delivers a very specific intentionality. Constructed to avoid ruin and degradation, a guarantee of stability and security is required in addition to a clear message communicated to the future. This desire to speak directly to the future is exemplified by the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (or WIPP for

short), a purpose built underground facility in New Mexico for the storage of spent nuclear fuel and waste from the U.S. nuclear weapons industry. The first and only permanent deep geological waste dump, this facility is designed to house radioactive matter securely, forever. However, while some of the material stored here will remain at lethal levels in excess of 200,000 years, it is only the first 10,000 years that is of direct concern to the architects of the project. It is in this timeframe, modest in geological terms, where the builders must account for the possibility of human intrusion into this lethal environment. This requires some type of warning that must be put in place, a warning that must last for 10,000 years.



Figure 2 – CLUI Perpetual Architecture Archive (2012) Mexican Hat Disposal Cell, Utah

During the development of the WIPP program a series of studies were undertaken by anthropologists, archaeologists, engineers and linguists to explore how such a marker might be manifested to prevent future generations from digging, inhabiting or planting this poisoned landscape. These proposals, investigated recently through the 2015 film *Containment* by Peter Galison and Robb Moss, show a variety of possible responses, but

most relatable being extensive land structures that are meant to incite fear and dread [Figure 3]. Generally agreed is that any form of linguistic solution faces the risk of becoming illegible or untranslatable, its meaning lost in the 10,000 years when someone of something may encounter the marker. The WIPP program probably represents the most applicable and functional use of a possible nuclear monumentalism, yet also reveals the difficulties of attempting such.

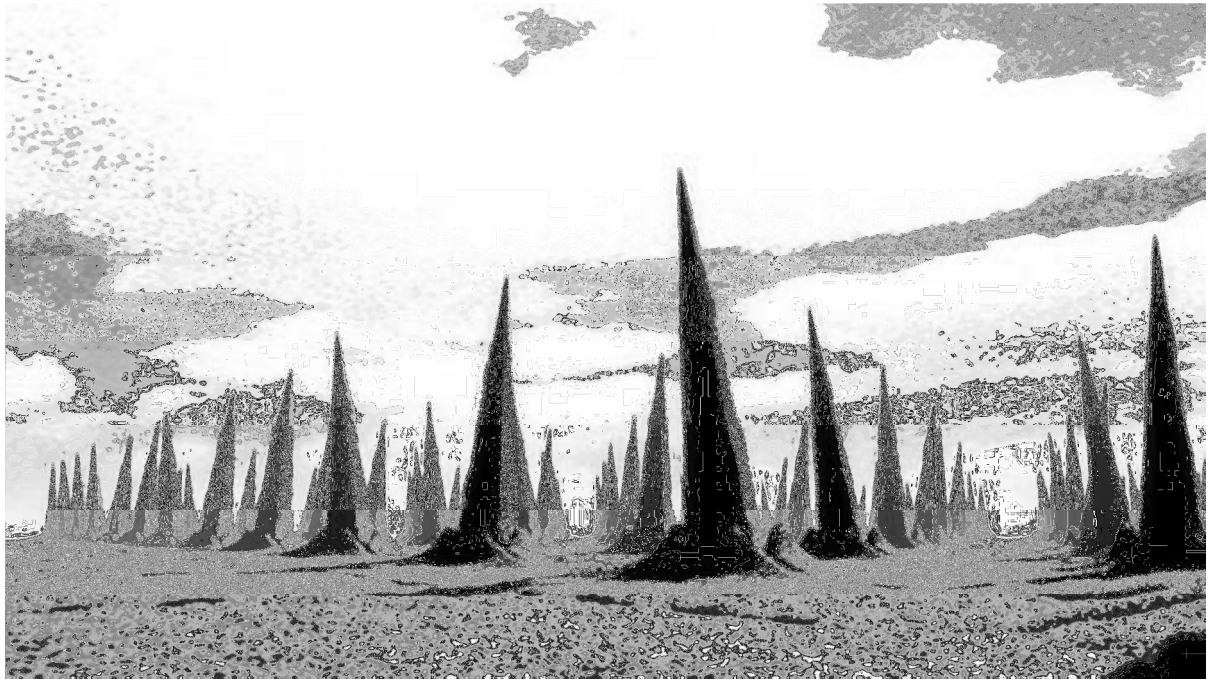


Figure 3 - Peter Galison and Robb Moss, *Containment* (2015)

Notwithstanding the incapacity of a linguistic expression to remain valid for 10,000 years, it is no less legitimate to consider the intention of what has been termed nuclear semiotics from a linguistic and therefore linear perspective. Or more precisely, if the problematic is identified as the confines of linearity, it is prudent to contend the position of the nonlinear in both monument and Anthropocene. In a manner of speaking, the nonlinear might collapse of all moments of past and future into the present, teasing the possibility whereby the future can be viewed from the present. This appears a fantastical proposition as pondered in Denis Villeneuve's 2016 film *Arrival*, but a more useful consideration of this temporal aptitude lies not in the collapse or reconfiguration of the temporal, but rather its omission as a relative value [Figure 4]. This presents a model that instead of pulling the past

and future into some type of continuity or simultaneity with the present, the present is allowed to expand to occupy everywhere and everything. To distinguish between the two might seem a minor or pedantic turn of phrase, but it is essential to note that while the first state continues to maintain the values of 'past' and 'future', for the second temporality ceases to be a contingent value. Under this paradigm the hierarchical function structured by linearisation is dissolved, emancipating any experienced present from the weight of history. In this, the present is not determined by the past, nor does it reproduce the past, and the very conception of history and its ideological influence ceases to be reductive of the present moment.



Figure 4 - Denis Villeneuve, *Arrival* (2016)

To elucidate and draw out these patterns, this paper will draw upon a number of art works that coincide with the recent geological turn in contemporary art. The first of these is Trevor Paglen's *Trinity Cube* [Figure 5]. This artwork was constructed from two types of glass; the first irradiated glass collected from the Fukushima Exclusion Zone, the second is Trinitite, a mineral created from scorched and fused desert sand from the site of the world first atomic bomb test in New Mexico. This minimalist sculpture has been installed back into the Fukushima Exclusion Zone, and will be without an audience until the zone is re-opened, any time between 3 and 30,000 years henceforth. The artwork occupies a space and time that is

outside the lived human present. There is no public for this artwork, only the public of the future, the human to come. Through its irradiated materialism, this monument has instrumentalised the debris and fallout of nuclear development and nuclear catastrophe, reconfiguring a history of beginnings and endings to manifest a temporality referenced only as outside the immediate present.



Figure 5 – Trevor Paglen, *Trinity Cube* (2015)

A second artwork is Katie Paterson's *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007) [Figure 6]. Sound recordings were taken of the movements of the three glaciers of the works title and pressed into records, which were cast and frozen using meltwater from each of corresponding glacier. The discs were then played on turn tables simultaneously until they

completely melted away. The artwork is documentation of melting entropy in process which has instrumentalised its own decay to invoke a temporality forever lost. The materiality of the Anthropocene has again been reconfigured to become accessible to the viewer, albeit in a fragmented and precarious immediacy.



Figure 6 - Katie Paterson, *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007)

The final artwork is a purely sonic piece though no less material in experience. Again by Katie Paterson, *As The World Turns* (2010) is a record player is synchronised to the rotation of the earth, revolving once every 24 hours [Figure 7]. Playing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, it would take four years to play in its entirety, rotating so slowly it is imperceptible to the naked eye. The artwork implicates a temporality at a planetary resolution, scaling up the viewer to watch or listen to the world turn from an almost theocentric position. Hearing must be slowed down to listen to the velocity of the planet. The tectonic motion of the earth under our feet is eternally dynamic; the artwork is no less stimulated by such glacial speeds.



Figure 7 - Katie Paterson, *As The World Turns* (2010)

These are only a few contemporary monuments that recalibrate our conventional temporal aesthetic, both in the experience of the artwork as it is viewed in precarious decay before our eyes, or as an experience that is forever outside our lived immediacy in a future-to-come. The monuments invoke nonlinear events, spontaneous in eruption that, rather than drawing significance from an exterior or prehistory, involute or unfold significance from their own interior outward. The artworks instrumentalise the temporal – the absence of the human and artwork or the prolonged listening to the earth – in order to reconfigure an atemporal present; to draw or involute the present of the viewer into the speculative future history of the monument. In doing so the viewer is implicated as the human to come, the non-human.

The post-monument as proposed in this paper was conceived in the context of Northern Ireland. The year 2021 will be the centenary of the formation of the state, an event that anticipates commemoration yet for a post-conflict society, there are inherent problems in remembering an unresolved and contested history. However, there is an opportunity to move forward, to attempt to speak directly to the future like WIPP and speculate on the future of the state's public, the human to come. It is therefore essential to reflect on the potential ideological capacity of the post-monument. As stated earlier, it is the foregrounding of the post-monument as temporal object that is of concern rather than its ideological status. Nonetheless, the capacity for temporal recalibration is essentially an ideological activity. The monument in the Anthropocene has not been discussed here under an ecological or ethical motif, but as a tool for nonlinear experiences. The possibilities for such nonlinear material experiences must be further explored and human to come's relation to ideology untangled.