

Decolonising Landscape and the Entangled Visuality of the Anthropocene

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Through a Northern Lens: An Auto-ethnographic Turn

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Geo Cymatic Infiltrator (Phat Man & Tallboy) (2017)

This paper will present current and ongoing practice-based research on the category of the monument as contextualised by the discourse of the Anthropocene. The current focus of this research concerns the decolonisation of landscape as categorised under the monument, proposing nonlinear strategies of decoloniality to recalibrate current temporal planetary materialisms, where the act of observing the planetary is complicit with the current conditions of its precarity. It is essential to state in this introduction that this research focuses less on auto-ethnographic practices, but a current context for the monument against which the auto-ethnographic might be positioned.

It has been determined that we are occupying a recently nominated geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Under this designation, the human species has become a geological agent, moving “more sediment and rock annually than all natural processes such as erosion and rivers” (Gaffney & Pharande-Deschènes 2012). The irrefutable anthropogenic circumstances of climate change and resource depletion impact the lived present – and our increasingly precarious future – with responsibility arguably lying with a complexity of activities that include corporate industrialisation, colonialism and capitalism, rather than individual everyday human endeavour (Haraway 2015). However, as confirmed in T.J. Demos’ “Against the Anthropocene” (2015), it is the very systems that visualise and analyse climate change and other planetary processes that allows the Anthropocene to be made visible and designated such. Giving attention to a technological trajectory that includes the use of GPS, the World Wide Web, Geographic Information Systems, increased computational power and worldwide computer networks, accessibility to high resolution satellite photography, and the distillation of democratised globalised mapping such as Google Earth, the development of digital technologies simultaneously allows an expanded visioning the world which in turn shapes our relation to the world. Moreover, this postdigital condition is itself complicit with the circumstances of precarity that it scrutinises, and can itself be allocated a mineral or geological ontology under what media theorist Jussi Parikka describes as the “geology of media” (Parikka 2015). This underscores the aggressive extraction of mineral

resources and rare earth elements from the planet's crust and the contaminating industrial processes of refinement and manufacture that dispense the essential materiality of the postdigital, framing a contiguous techno-geological landscape, extending from the mineralogy of the earth to the highest satellite. Notwithstanding the geological ontology of the media that allows us to view the current sum of the planet, "the thin line that exists between observation and agency when it comes to sensing, surveillance and subjectivity" (Turan 2016) is brought sharply into focus, with planetary computing complicit with the fault lines on which it resides.

This inscription of the postdigital context for the Anthropocene reveals an *entanglement* in visibility. As the feminist theorist Karen Barad determines, an entanglement "is not simply to be intertwined with another [...] but to lack an independent, self-contained existence" (Barad 2007:i). The acts of planetary observation that are complicit in and entangled with the designation of the Anthropocene, are also entwined with the materiality of both the instrumentation of viewing – planetary-wide computing – and the elemental metals and extracted mineralogy of these instruments fabrication. To witness the visibility of the Anthropocene, implicates the viewer in the production of an onto-epistemological moment, a being-with-knowing, that itself promotes or corroborates position from which the world is viewed culturally and sociologically, as well as scientifically. As Demos states, "Anthropocene visibility tends to reinforce the techno-utopian position that 'we' have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging—and in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined" (Demos 2015:14).

The entangled conditions of the Anthropocene, and those of which this research paper is specifically concerned with, elaborate temporal and material circumstances where the deep time of geology is wrought against the compressed spatio-temporalities of globalised digital networking. Through this our inherited space-time frameworks are challenged and the traditional categories of scale and temporality are less confounded than suspended.

However, re-framing this problematic as a feature of entanglement, where “time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, [and] are iteratively reconfigured through [...] intra-action” (Barad 2007:i), provides ground on which alternative ontologies can be founded. Space and time are not inherited conditions, existing in priority to an event and subject to effect, but rather conditions of space and time *emerge* from particular material circumstances and intra-actions. The space-time sensibility emerging from the entangled visibility of the Anthropocene, contingent on the intra-action of human related geological actions and the planetary mediascape, is intertwined with a specific ontological capacity shaping a particular status for the human, both in the sensibility of space and time, and the actual continuing existence of the human as we know it. Under the challenge to our conception of space and time that the Anthropocene prompts, accountability should not be displaced onto an exteriority independent from lived experience, but credited to the evolution of a (post)human condition in which we are always already existing. Therefore, the authentic confrontation lies on the performance of our previous learned conceptions of space and time. Simply put, the problematic lies not in the actual circumstances of the Anthropocene, but the existing space-time conditions in which we locate ourselves.

To approach the space-time conditions that are of concern to the trajectory of this research, it is essential to engage with some of the attempts to designate that date in which the Anthropocene came into being. Neither the International Commission on Stratigraphy (I.C.S) nor the International Union of Geological Science has officially approved the designation of the Anthropocene as a subdivision of geological time. While the I.C.S.-commissioned Anthropocene Working Group recommended the designation in April 2016, this has yet to be ratified, and as such, no specific date has been decided to mark its beginning. Those specific human events in history with measurable planetary impact range from the development of agricultural 12,000 years ago to the testing of the first nuclear weapon in 1945 and the subsequent ‘Great Acceleration’ in which the rate of impact of the human upon the planet increased significantly. The significance of these and others is the attempt to locate a so-called ‘golden spike’

marking a discernable point in the stratigraphy of the planet's crust that is definitively human in influence.

It is against this very anthropogenic compulsion to define and periodise time that this research paper will introduce the category of the monument to further explicate the ontological and ideological positions that are under review. A monument has a very particular temporal function. It operates like a type of time machine transmitting a version of the past into its own future, into our lived present. Acts of memorialisation are imbued with an ethical and 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). More pointedly, the monument is complicit with a linear and *progressive* conception of time, projecting from past through present to future, and the performance of a potential future greater than the past. Significantly, under the discourse of the Anthropocene the category of the monument intervenes in a temporal paradigm of the human in decline. The negative context of climate change and environmental mutilation disposes a precarious future for the human species.

Returning to the concern of when the Anthropocene can be said to have begun, it is essential to deliberate the specific events that are being contemplated. These include the development of agriculture, the industrial revolution, the exploding of the first atomic bomb and other events that in some way impacted upon the record of the planet. Arguably, what these events exemplify is progress, and can be emphasised by the current favoured date of 1950 that marks the start of 'The Great Acceleration', that has been related to not only human environmental impact but to socioeconomic trends as a whole. However, the concept of progress becomes troubled under the Anthropocene, and a period of anti-progress might be more appropriate to think about.

But let me first focus on a particular event that has been proposed as a marker, the so-called 'Orbis spike'. This spike in the atmospheric record shows a significant drop in greenhouse gases, enough to start a little ice age, and is attributed to carbon dioxide being absorbed by the regrowth of trees reclaiming the former farmland of the approximately 50 million native American's killed during the colonisation of the so-called 'New World'. This event accentuates the impetus of colonisation that underpins the anthropogenic agency of the embedded in the Anthropocene, signified through the planetary flows of people, natural resources, extracted minerals, manufactured goods, animals, plant life, bacteria, as well as cultural ideas and ideologies. The period of the Orbis spike corresponds with the circumnavigation of the globe and the capacity of humanity to distribute itself over the planet in totality, a distribution that is directed with a distinct purpose.

The significance of colonialism has been taken up elsewhere in the discourse of the Anthropocene, but its deployment in this research is aimed at the ideology of homogeneity prescribed under colonisation, emphasised more pointedly in the universalism of Modernity and further couched within globalism. The drive to homogeneity by what can be labelled Euro-Westernism was a function of the imperialistic desire to control and subjugate. In a task of deterritorialisation, the impetus was not simply to drive forth a specific univocity in a purely expansionist gesture, but to deploy strategies to designate, compartmentalize and universalise the territories and the inhabitants that were to be subjugated. Through the erasure of diversity and the imposition of 'civilisation', "an idealised version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland" was driven forward (Davis & Todd 2017). More essentially, universalism spurs the distinction of culture from nature, most brutally featured where the indigenous was considered sub-human, part of nature, whose disposal was of no moral concern. Conspiring with universalism is the notion of progress itself, both as lead architect and as a primary dimension. Temporality itself is homogenised under progress in the service of colonisation, (re)producing a space-time conditioning fixated on and by Modernity.

At this point, the category of the monument makes an incisive contribution. As stated earlier, the monument performs a linear and progressive conditioning of space-time, from past through a present to a future, motivated through ideological propagation. The essential function of the monument to colonise time and space, or more essentially, reproduce a particular conditioning of time and space. Put more simply, the monument deploys a material habituation in which a progressive status for temporality is cemented into our lived experience. With this conception of the capacity of the monument, we can now backtrack to the aforementioned problematic whereby the Anthropocene has suspended our current space-time sensibility. What can now be deliberated on is the opportunities of decoloniality that might be found within the entangled viscosity of the Anthropocene itself, where the challenge to the conditioning of space-time might be unfolded and universality itself suspended. This paper now looks to a specific artwork with which this research has itself been entangled, a material experience that itself seeks to expand the category of the monument.

The sound sculpture *Geo Cymatic Infiltrator (Phat Man & Tallboy)* (2017) was commissioned for the *Tiny Deaths* exhibition curated by Alissa Kleist and Matt Packer that opened in March 2017 at the Centre for Contemporary Art, in Derry-Londonderry. The main elements for this artwork are a paired set of custom-built tapped trumpet speakers, through which was 'broadcast' a digital audio element. This audio element was developed from the seismic recording of the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi earthquake, a sonification that was achieved by speeding the data up one thousand times. This audio data was subsequently infected with the STUXNET, arguably the world's first digital weapon (Zetter 2014). This computer virus was reputedly developed by the C.I.A. with the purpose of sabotaging the Iranian nuclear refinement program, to specifically target the software that controlled the centrifugal equipment essential to the refinement process. The audio data was then stretched, restoring its geological duration, with further refinement to streamline the specific frequencies 16Hz and 19Hz, which corresponded to the material resonance frequencies of the two fabricated speakers. The sonic experience was something that was less heard than felt, functioning at an infrasonic level. What is heard is the vigorous

vibration of reflective mylar which has been folded in segments around the speakers. This also has a visual effect with the quivering reflective surface seeming to 'phase out' and confound perception. Further materials used in the fabrication of the artwork included anti-static carpet, electromagnetic absorbent foam and paint. These propose the status of a militarised 'stealth' object, further emphasised by the gesture of a dazzle camouflage inspired pattern for the carpet.

Attention should also be directed toward the title of the artwork and the manner in which the speakers have been individually named. This draws from the tradition of Jamaican sound systems and provokes a distinct intentionality for the sculpture. More specifically, *Tallboy* is a reference to the codename of *Little Boy* for the first nuclear weapon that was ever used in warfare, dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945. *Phat Man* echoes the codename of *Fat Man* for the second nuclear device exploded over Nagasaki. The codename *Tallboy* was used by the Royal Air Force for the 12,000lb earthquake class conventional bomb used against various underground targets in Nazi-held Europe. Finally, the cymatics of the title is a subset of modal vibrational phenomena, which is essentially the visualisation of various vibrational phenomena. An additional dimension that echoes Jamaican sound systems is specificity of the audio being designed for a particular speaker or set of speakers, delivering an intimacy that binds the aural with the mode in which it experienced or, more pointedly, materialised.

Contextualised by the previous research this paper has expounded, several elements that contributed to the creation of this artwork are of clear significance. Most immediate is the sonic experience that is the primary performance of the artwork. The manipulation of the seismic data and its infected condition brings into simultaneity the postdigital and the geological, enacted through a temporal processing through the stretching and compressing of the data. The virality of the STUXNET agent has been contingently actualised through the seismology of the Fukushima earthquake, and speculates a procedure where the planet itself

might be subject to a contagious circumstance. The postdigital, in the form of a viral entity, gains the status of a geological activity that participates in deep time.

The nuclear context that underlies the Fukushima earthquake through the ravaging of the nuclear power plants by the subsequent tsunami, as well as the targeting of the STUXNET virus against the Iranian nuclear refinement program and further emphasised by the naming conventions drawn from the Manhattan project, conceives a particular contagious materialism. This significance is brought to bear through the embodied comportment of the artwork and the infrasonic presentation of the sonified data. In this embodied experience the viewer's body is subjected to a viral condition at a planetary resolution, a sensibility of planetary postdigital and the virality of STUXNET and the digitised seismology of geology.

It is the intention of this research to locate the artwork within the category of the monument, with attention directed to the space-time conditioning of the artwork. As can be testified, the artwork unfolds a space-time paradigm that engages the entangled visuality of the Anthropocene. But the potential monumental praxis gives priority less to a dis-entanglement than to a reconfiguring of already established hierarchies. The artefact synthesises the complexity of constituents that are entangled, but brings these together in a singularity that proposes an intra-action from which emerges an alternative space-time sensibility. Specifically, the decolonisation of existing space-time conventions, is the un-making of progress and its linear conditioning, and makes present as an embodied experience the non-human, planetary experience that is the core agent of conflict embedded on the Anthropocene. Universalism, in the linear projection of progress, is itself suspended, with the present unfolding itself to colonise both the past and the future.

To conclude, this paper reflects on the potential for these and further practices to contribute to and potentially expand or even redefine the category of the monument. The practices of decolonisation when positioned against the contemporary problematics of colonial era monuments deliver a rich and critical

ground on which the research can be located, and brings a pointed efficacy to the discourse of the Anthropocene. Where the tradition of the monument is well versed in making concrete a past in the present, this research seeks to concretize the futurity that underlies the Anthropocene in the present.