Deterritorializing the Future
Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene

Edited by Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling
Deterritorializing the Future
Critical Climate Change

Series Editors: Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook

The era of climate change involves the mutation of systems beyond 20th century anthropomorphic models and has stood, until recently, outside representation or address. Understood in a broad and critical sense, climate change concerns material agencies that impact on biomass and energy, erased borders and microbial invention, geological and nanographic time, and extinction events. The possibility of extinction has always been a latent figure in textual production and archives; but the current sense of depletion, decay, mutation and exhaustion calls for new modes of address, new styles of publishing and authoring, and new formats and speeds of distribution. As the pressures and realignments of this re-arrangement occur, so must the critical languages and conceptual templates, political premises and definitions of ‘life.’ There is a particular need to publish in timely fashion experimental monographs that redefine the boundaries of disciplinary fields, rhetorical invasions, the interface of conceptual and scientific languages, and geomorphic and geopolitical interventions. Critical Climate Change is oriented, in this general manner, toward the epistemo-political mutations that correspond to the temporalities of terrestrial mutation.
Deterritorializing the Future
Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene

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OPEN HUMANITIES PRESS
London 2020
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Chapter 6

Heritage as Critical Anthropocene Method

Colin Sterling

I worry that we’ve already swallowed the idea of the Anthropocene and stopped considering the importance of it; the profound shock that it should cause has already been diffused into just one more idea game that we play. (Robinson 2017a: 146)

The ‘profound shock’ of the Anthropocene, as science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson describes it here, has reverberated in multiple directions at once over the past two decades. From the almost quasi-mythical first utterance of the concept by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen at a conference in Mexico City in 1999, Anthropocene ripples have been felt in politics, philosophy, art, history, pedagogy, political theory and popular culture, not to mention the various fields of science concerned with coding, measuring, analyzing and interpreting the Earth System. While Robinson locates the shock of the concept in the sci-fi like premise that humanity now constitutes a geological force on the same level as volcanoes, earthquakes and asteroid strikes, others have registered a more profound disquiet with the term itself, which they see as alarming in its hubris and underlying occlusions. Alternative labels such as Plantationocene (Tsing 2015), Pyrocene (Pyne 2015), Necrocene (McBrien 2016), Chthulucene (Haraway 2015) and – the most prevalent – Capitalocene (Moore 2017; Haraway 2016; Demos 2017) document an obligation to constantly disentangle and qualify the ‘Anthropos’ of the Anthropocene (strangely the ‘cene’ – or kainos, ancient Greek for ‘new’ – is deemed less toxic in such thinking, as if the constant demand for novelty was not also intrinsic to the capitalist
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system). As Joanna Zylinska has recently argued, “even though we are nowhere near solving the Anthropocene’s climate issues, in some areas of critical theory we already find ourselves post-Anthropocene, it seems” (2018: 5).

These morphological transformations contain important lessons about the need for alternative histories and vocabularies to confront the Anthropocene as a material-discursive force in the world, but they also have something of the ‘idea game’ about them, positioning the Anthropocene as a chronotope (Bakhtin 1981): “a particular configuration of time and space that generates stories through which a society can examine itself” (Pratt 2017: G170). The idea of the Anthropocene seems always to invite this spatio-temporal reflexivity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the concept has given rise to a host of ‘thought experiments’ across the arts and sciences since the turn of the century. We might mention here Jan Zalasiewicz’s popular science book The Earth After Us (2008), in which extra-terrestrial geologists study the planet 100 million years from now to find traces of ‘our human empire’, or Daisy Hildyard’s lyrical account of the dissolving boundaries between all life on Earth in The Second Body (2017). The best work in this vein tests the very foundations of the Anthropocene hypothesis without losing sight of its wide-ranging ethical and ontological implications. More than simply ‘idea games’, the emergence of humanities and arts-based research focused on the Anthropocene is part of a wider move to open up scientific discourse to sustained critique, the aim here being to “disrupt specialist divisions, democratize debate and pose critical questions of political significance to discussions on environmental developments” (Demos 2017: 12). My aim in this chapter is to show how discursive and material formations common to heritage practice – including the museum, the monument and the ruin – are being leveraged to pose such critical questions, drawing together science fiction imaginaries and historical methodologies in exhibitions, artworks and wider critical-creative research. A small set of micro-examples is investigated here to sketch out the main attitudes and principles common to such projects, which range from philosophical experiments to spatial interventions. This approach repositions heritage as a critical method that seeks to challenge and potentially redirect the emerging Anthropocene chronotope.
Why focus on heritage in this way? Implicitly concerned with issues of preservation, memory, salvage and storytelling, heritage thinking and practice has chiefly confronted the Anthropocene as an existential threat: a new condition of Earthly survival that radically undermines civilizational processes of inheritance and renewal. It is in this context that Roy Scranton, writing in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, implores “humanity” to build biological and cultural “arks” to carry forward “endangered genetic data” and “endangered wisdom” alike (2015: 109). This biblical task has been taken up in various quarters in recent years, from the Austria-based ‘Memory of Mankind’ project (see Harrison et al. 2020) to the Arch Mission, which aims to disseminate human knowledge throughout the galaxy. As Claire Colebrook reminds us, however, the “unprecedented fragility” that many have expressed in the shadow of the Anthropocene is testament to nothing so much as the sudden precarious outlook of a small section of the planet that “draws its resources from elsewhere, transfers its waste and violence, and then declares that its mode of existence is humanity as such” (2017, original emphasis). The various biobanks and cultural arks, digital archives and messages to the future that constitute the ‘heritage’ of the Anthropos can only ever be seen as partial and highly contingent (see further discussion in Breithoff and Harrison, this volume). It would not be too much to say that this is heritage in capitulation with the Anthropocene – there’s nothing to be done, so let’s just make sure evidence of our existence persists in some form, ready to be ‘taken on’ and ‘passed down’ in some unspecified future scenario.

While these experiments in existential survival continue apace, a different mode of thinking with *heritage* has emerged in relation to the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Chthulucene (Haraway 2015). Whether implicitly or explicitly, the tools and aesthetics of heritage – from museums and archives to ruins and memorials – have been deployed by various artists and writers to help (re)conceptualize the historical formation and future implications of the Anthropocene across disciplinary boundaries. We find this mode of critique in texts by Anna Tsing (2015) and Bronislaw Szerszynski (2017), for example, where the ruin and the monument respectively are reimagined for the Anthropocene epoch. The creative work of Tomás Saraceno, FICTILIS and Gustafsson & Haapoja
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meanwhile brings new historical-curatorial configurations to bear on issues of climate change, territorial boundaries and nature-culture relationships: all central questions for Anthropocene research beyond the narrow confines of geology and stratigraphy. Working in diverse media and without a specific manifesto or agenda, such critical Anthropocene projects play with the discursive and affective potency of heritage to imagine alternative ways of living and acting that are inherently oppositional to the apocalyptic motif of the ark. Rather than emphasizing stasis, preservation and continuity, much of the work I take up here resonates with Rodney Harrison’s characterization of heritage as “collaborative, dialogical and interactive, a material-discursive process in which past and future arise out of dialogue and encounter between multiple embodied subjects in (and with) the present” (2015: 27). Moreover, these thought experiments build from a widespread recognition that the material geographies of the Anthropocene – including “waste sites, mining shafts and extraction zones” – may in themselves constitute “the new museums of humanity” (Yusoff 2017). Just as the Anthropocene historicizes the present by imagining humanity’s descendants (or some alien equivalent) interpreting Earth’s strata to locate the exact point at which ‘we’ began to transform the planet, so critical thinking has increasingly framed the Anthropocene concept itself as a museological problem, with all the questions of history, narrative, collecting, display and power this categorization implies.

As Bruno Latour has argued, the critic “is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles… not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (2004: 246). It is in this spirit that the uptake of heritage as a methodology for peeling apart and reconfiguring the work of the Anthropocene interests me. To understand ruins, memorials, museums and other lieux de mémoire (Nora 1989) as ‘gathering spaces’ for critical Anthropocene thinking is to recognize the renewed vitality of institutional frameworks and aesthetics which are always somehow backwards looking and forwards facing. In this sense the projects and proposals I focus on in the present chapter – some realized, some hypothetical – are more-than thought experiments, both in the way they design and develop fully embodied moments of encounter, and in the creative worlds they
call into being: spaces for imagining alternative subjectivities, ecologies and social formations (Guattari 1989). Heritage in this context cannot be reduced to a set of processes or specific agendas for engaging with the past in the present. It is rather a fluid and emergent phenomenon gesturing towards an unstable future – a future, that is, in which the things, stories and places currently categorized as ‘heritage’ might well be discarded, vilified or fundamentally reimagined. The projects I am interested in here thus pose vital questions about what heritage is or might be; a task that goes far beyond policy and preservation to touch on issues of time, identity and the inevitable historicization of the present (Jameson 2013).

What is a museum?

In the heady world of cultural masterplanning and urban regeneration, the idea of placing a ‘museum’ at the heart of any new development has been viewed with suspicion since at least the start of the new millennium, when a spate of projects sought to reimagine civic architecture and design. This is especially true of the ‘old world’, which gave birth to the museum as a form of control and a display of power (Bennett 1995). Keen to demonstrate their forward-facing, post-industrial, post-modern credentials, city planners, developers and architects have pursued various alternatives to the museum model, from ‘cultural hubs’ and ‘urban forums’ to ‘history centres’ and ‘heritage laboratories’. This is not to say that no new museums have been built over the past two decades (a quick glance at China and the Arabian Gulf would soon undermine this argument), only that the confidence and certainty with which museums were imagined, designed and constructed in the nineteenth century has, in many places, given way to a more indeterminate cultural-historical landscape.

At the same time, within the back offices and display rooms of established museums, a minor revolution has taken place. The idea of exhibiting an anthropological or social-historical artefact in a glass case with a singular and uncontested narrative would now be unthinkable to most museum professionals. There must be layers of interpretation, multivocal perspectives, questions not answers (Vergo 1989). Processes of collecting, curating, conserving and exhibition making have emerged as key testing grounds in post-colonial, feminist and anti-hegemonic critique,
with museums often positioned as catalysts and lightning rods for wider discussions around identity, history and collective memory (Macdonald 2013). As Fiona Cameron has argued with specific reference to the problem of climate change, unpicking the ontologies and assemblages of the museum offers a valuable technique for addressing issues of social relevance in a more immediate and engaging fashion (Cameron 2015).

While the institutional foundations of the museum have thus been called into question over the past two decades, the very concept of the museum as a critical-creative framework has simultaneously gained considerable traction (James Putnam’s 2009 book *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* provides an excellent overview of this trend in the art world). Rather than see these two developments as paradoxical, I think it is better to understand them as mutually reinforcing: questioning what a museum is means opening up the ontology of the concept to experimental configurations. There are many examples to draw on here, from the Museum of Broken Relationships – an online collection of objects associated with doomed love stories, now with a permanent physical presence in Zagreb and Los Angeles – to Orham Pamuk’s remarkable Museum of Innocence – a collection of ordinary objects amassed by the author as he developed a novel of the same name; the two narrative forms feeding into one another through a dialectic of prose and artefact, curated ‘thing’ and imagined story. This category of the non-museum might also contain the itinerant outsider art installation the Museum of Everything, or indeed the Museum of Failure, ‘a collection of failed products and services from around the world’. A complete genealogy of such institutions is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we might locate an early ancestor in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, founded in California in 1988 by husband and wife David Hildebrand Wilson and Diana Drake Wilson. Described as ‘a museum about museums’, the Wilsons’ esoteric collection uses familiar tactics of lighting, labels and scholarly references “to inspire wonder not just at the objects (real or invented) but at the nature of museums themselves, the way they select items from the world and allow us to recognize them as strange and wonderful” (Rothstein 2012). Outside of a formal philosophical programme, Pamuk’s ‘Modest Manifesto for Museums’ offers some indication of the wider project towards which these and other similar institutions contribute. Here the
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writer suggests that “the measure of a museum’s success should not be its ability to represent a state, a nation or company, or a particular history. It should be its capacity to reveal the humanity of individuals” (Pamuk 2012: 56). Although marginal to the mainstream work of museums, it is worth noting that both the Museum of Innocence and the Museum of Broken Relationships have been recognized for the novelty of their approach, with the former named European Museum of the Year in 2014 and the latter receiving the Kenneth Hudson award for ‘Europe’s Most Innovative Museum’ in 2011.

The critical force of such counter-institutions lies in their subversion of a familiar cultural apparatus, which is quite different from rejecting such practices outright. Where the laboratories, hubs and forums of the early twenty-first century seemed to accept Adorno’s characterization of museums as “family sepulchres” (1981: 175) – and thus sought to invent new models of ‘heritage engagement’ to replace these dusty relics – the museum that is not a museum acknowledges the complex history of such institutions as a first step towards marking out a space of critique inside this tradition. The very nomenclature of ‘the museum’ is vital to this work, immediately invoking a set of spatial, discursive and aesthetic conventions against which a counter-proposal may be registered. As several artist and activist groups have recognized in recent years, the reflexive nature of the Anthropocene concept shares many points of reference with this museological re-framing – an overlap that offers fertile ground for rethinking the spatial-discursive form of this strange cultural artefact.

The Museum of Capitalism is a case in point here. Responding to the well-worn assertion that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, the artist group FICTILIS sought to imagine a prospective museum that might educate current and future generations on the ideology, history and legacy of this particular world system (Figure 6.1). As their ‘mission statement’ affirms, the Museum of Capitalism (which held its inaugural exhibition in Oakland, California in 2017), strives to

broaden public understanding of capitalism through multifaceted programs: exhibitions; research and publication; collecting and preserving material evidence, art and artefacts related to capitalism; commemorations, reenactments and
other events; distribution of education materials and teacher resources; and a variety of public programming designed to enhance understanding of capitalism and related issues, including those of contemporary significance.

The vocabulary of ‘public understanding’ and artefact accumulation here situates the museum within a familiar tradition of hegemonic cultural institutions designed to educate the masses about a culture, place or historical moment fundamentally different from their own. In this context, however, such a viewpoint is initiated from within the system or society to be displayed – a form of ironic detachment that is necessary for the critical work of self-analysis to unfold. As the curators ask in the accompanying catalogue: “What better form than a museum to call progress into question, and how better to reorient ourselves in the present than with an institution we already use to orient ourselves toward the past?” (FICTILIS 2017: 14).

This deconstruction of the museum model is played out in numerous ways. The catalogue for example opens with a satirical exegesis on the museum’s discursive foundations, moving from a selection of mission statements from comparator institutions such as the Museum of
Communism in Prague and the Museum of Apartheid in Johannesburg, to a lengthy inner monologue on the thorny issue of how to even define a ‘Museum of Capitalism’. The interpretation meanwhile enacts another mode of defamiliarization, viewing common objects (a baseball cap, a mug, a coin) as if they are the remnants of a now defunct culture, or recontextualizing everyday things in strange settings, as in Evan Desmond Yee’s *Core Samples* series, which shows modern artefacts encased in geological strata (Figure 6.2). Photographs, artworks, toys, archival documents and personal effects all have a role to play here in mapping out and redirecting visitors towards an embryonic post-capitalist future.

Figure 6.2 — Evan Desmond Yee, Core Sample #1, 2017. (Photograph by Museum of Capitalism).
This sense of reorientation also surfaces in the Museum of Nonhumanity, a multi-channel video installation created by writer Laura Gustaffson and visual artist Terike Haapoja, which presents the history of ‘animalization’ over the past 2,500 years. Using text, archival images and sounds, this immersive work – first shown in Helsinki in 2016 – explores the construction of humanity and animality as ‘binary moral categories’: a boundary distinction which, the museum argues, has provided the foundation for exploitation and abuse across human and non-human worlds (Figures 6.3 and 6.4). Against this backdrop, the museum becomes a “utopian institution and an initiative for imagining future narratives,” performing a backwards glance from a reality in which society has “moved forward from the oppressive and destructive human-animal divide” (Gustaffson and Haapoja 2016). The museum in this context again serves as a kind of memorial to a system and form of living the curators wish to move beyond. This historicizing impulse questions the logics and ontological formations of the present from an anticipated future. Here it is worth noting the close relationship the Museum of Nonhumanity establishes between animalization and capitalism, which Gustaffson and Haapoja describe as “the mechanism through which

Figure 6.3 — Museum of Nonhumanity, Installation view. (Photograph by Terike Haapoja, MONH).
bodies of all species become available to exploitation as resources, as disposable, or something to control” (2016). “It is not possible to fight for a systemic change without fighting against the notion of animality,” they maintain, “because the logic of animalization forms the foundation of racist, imperialist, patriarchal capitalism” (ibid).

Alongside their visual-spatial form – the one object-oriented, the other predominantly digital and immersive – both the Museum of Capitalism and the Museum of Nonhumanity place considerable emphasis on programming as part of a measured attempt to rethink and repurpose the common tropes of modern museum practice. The Museum of Capitalism for example hosts regular ‘artefact donation events’ and – more broadly – aims to bring artists, educators and activists together through a range of public events focused on different manifestations of the capitalist system, from gentrification to the links between oil and tourism. As the museum website states, such occasions invite audiences ‘to inhabit an indeterminate, imaginary future in order to better recognize the historical specificity, idiosyncrasy and contingency of the present’. The Museum of Nonhumanity takes a similar approach with
seminars that seek to ‘re-imagine the future through the past’ and others that aim to ‘decentre history’ via artistic interventions. To paraphrase Latour, these gathering spaces provide active lessons in the critical power of the assembly, drawing on a multiplicity of voices to generate new ways of being and acting in the world that constantly question and reconfigure the inheritances ‘we’ have been left with. There are clear resonances here with Ursula Biemann’s posthumanist vision for the museum, which acknowledges the difficulty but also the necessity of imagining a more-than-human ‘common world’ heritage in the age of the Anthropocene:

For a future where human-nonhuman relations are less violent, less destructive, the past will have to be reassembled. This sort of rewriting of history resembles somewhat the rewriting of post-colonial history. Only this time, it is not a matter of admitting formerly excluded groups of human populations to the theatre of significance, it means to radically decentre the human figure altogether. It is difficult to imagine such a place and yet this is what is at stake now. What we can already say is that a common future that we share with everything else would be equally rooted in cultural and natural narratives; the collections of this common world, our heritage, would necessarily include at once cultural and natural histories. Perhaps from there, we can envision a less divided future that can harbour a post-human way of being in the world (2016: 60–61).

While both the Museum of Capitalism and the Museum of Nonhumanity are built around an embodied sense of encounter and assembly, the performative nature of the counter-museum finds its radical apotheosis in the Museo Aero Solar, an open source international community initiated by Tomás Saraceno in 2007 which is dedicated to the transformation of airborne travel. The museum itself is many things in this instance: an evolving balloon-like sculpture made from thousands of reused plastic bags, which – when heated by the sun – will float in the air free of any fossil-driven propulsion; a gathering of individuals and ideas focused on a single goal yet distributed across time and space, connected via social media and digital collectives; a mode of recycling as collection that transcends territorial boundaries, both ‘in the air’ and ‘on the ground’,
with branded plastic assembled from multi-national chains and hyper-local companies alike. At the core of this work lies a commitment to reconfigure the imprint of humans on the Earth: a form of deterritorialization that questions the seductive nature of twenty-first century ‘hypermobility’ and the socio-material realities any form of fossil-fuel powered travel relies upon. Museo Aero Solar transforms one of the most emblematic traces of the Anthropocene – the plastic bag – from an object of disdain to a transversal symbol of hope and possibility. In the words of architect Pierre Chabard, the floating “museums” created as part of this project are “ambiguous, dynamic, less subversive than transgressive…sublime parasites or radical enterprises of diverting our inherited world” (2015). Here we find an echo of the Museum of Jurassic Technology and of the museum enterprise as a whole, which has always depended on isolating objects from the world so that they might be seen and understood in a new light.

Although tackled separately, capitalism, nonhumanity and the politics of air collide in these new museological imaginaries. The Anthropocene is both a backdrop and a rallying point for this work, framed differently through the logics of the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene and the ‘Aerocene’ – Saraceno’s wider artistic project which aims to generate a new ethics with and for the Earth’s atmosphere. This demarcation avoids what Richard Pell, curator of the Center for Postnatural History, has called the “fuzzy rhetoric” of the Anthropocene (2015: 314). Better to assemble “core samples”, Pell argues (ibid), building collections and archives one object at a time. Rather than see such projects as museological silos separating nature from culture, and history from the ongoing present, I think it is more useful to understand their emergence as part of a transversal reckoning with the Anthropocene as a totalizing concept and inescapable reality. Just as Comte de Buffon implored early geologists to “excavate the archives of the world” and “assemble in one body of proofs all the evidence of physical changes that enable us to reach back to the different ages of Nature” (quoted in Szerszynski 2017: 116), so the material-discursive idea of the museum is now increasingly deployed to disentangle and recombine social and natural histories across different registers. The separations necessary to grasp and ultimately challenge the Anthropocene must always be offset by this ongoing interconnectivity (Braidotti 2013).
By linking the German word *museal* (‘museumlike’) to the mausoleum, Adorno sought to emphasize the deathly atmosphere of the traditional museum, a place where culture could be ‘neutralized’. The museal in this reading “describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present” (1981: 175). The projects I am interested in here seem to reverse this polarity: their museality is founded on the ambiguous and emergent status of things and narratives, rather than on familiar notions of stasis and obsolescence. This is because the stories of capitalism, atmospheric pollution and animalization are not dead or dying but rather constantly unfolding (an argument could be made that many of the supposedly ‘complete’ stories we find in contemporary museums are far from resolved, including colonialism, racism, conflict etc, but this would take another essay to work through in detail). The temporality thus evoked is one of the future anterior: looking forward to look back, the present becomes history in the new museums of the Anthropocene, which operate as progenitors of *what might be* even as they adopt a viewpoint that is at once historical and memorializing. This temporal and political complexity is
not a convenient by-product of their self-designation as museums, but rather an integral property of their status as anticipatory mechanisms. They drag the capitalist, anthropocentric, territorialized present kicking and screaming into a near-utopian future which looks back with no small degree of incredulity at the madness of ‘our time’. As Robinson writes, “we are the primitives of an unknown civilization” (2017b: 150).

In his recent book The Great Derangement, Amitav Ghosh asks how climate change and the sixth mass extinction will be perceived by future audiences:

When readers and museum-goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they – what can they – do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? (2016: 11).

This line of inquiry brings the inherent reflexivity of the Anthropocene narrative closer to home. Rather than looking to the geological strata of a post-human Earth one hundred million years from now, Ghosh imagines a future scenario in which historical knowledge is still paramount. What the museums of capitalism, nonhumanity and the aerocene do is slightly different, however. Instead of waiting for the present to be past – and thus suitable as a topic for musealization – they critique this future inheritance from within, “experimenting with what life can or might be in both its virtual and future anterior modes” (Yusoff 2017). Such a “geoaesthetics... allows life to surpass itself” (ibid). Not predictive or speculative so much as hopeful, the museums of the Anthropocene bring difference into being, seeking worlds beyond “the farthest points our own thought can reach” (Jameson 2013: 308). What needs underlining here, however, is that this utopian gesture does not leave us in a banal future gazing back at the present as the past, but rather situates heritage as a vital component in the messy work of disentangling the Anthropocene at the moment of its very emergence. The museum in this context is a space for sensing, breathing, tasting, smelling and touching the Anthropocene (Zylinska
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2018: 64): a familiar space made unfamiliar to better question the fragile uncertainties of an unfolding present.

Ruin redux: After the end of the world

The notion of living with rather than gazing at heritages in the making can be elaborated further with specific reference to the Anthropocene ruin. Following the work of Claire Colebrook and Anna Tsing, there are two main points to develop here. The first concerns the absence of ‘readers’ in the post-human future that the Anthropocene forces us to confront; the second relates to the possibility of ‘livable collaborations’ in the precarious spaces generated by late capitalism. Both of these threads take us away from a narcissistic, anthropocentric view of a world ‘gone to ruin’ to consider alternative perspectives on decay, abandonment, vulnerability and entanglement: all central to the emergence of ruination as a core theme in modernity and post-modernity (Hell and Schönle 2010; Dillon 2014). This tracks the growth and spread of heritage as a mode of relating to the past in the present – an historical connection which implies a certain level of reciprocity beyond mere temporal coincidence. As with the museological experiments outlined above, the Anthropocene ruin thus gestures towards the central role that heritage more broadly might play in reconceptualizing this new geological epoch, as well as turning a critical lens back on the work of heritage itself.

I would not be the first to note that an apocalyptic zeitgeist has gripped much of popular culture and the humanities in recent years (Berger 1999; Germanà and Mousoutzanis 2014). Within this context, ‘end of the world’ narratives have been given a “new sense of direction after becoming linked to the Anthropocene” (Zylinska 2018: 4). The prospect of mass extinctions, floods, scorched earths and civilizational collapse is played out with grim regularity in films, graphic novels, works of literature and mainstream television (streaming services driven by algorithms report that apocalyptic horror is among the most popular and therefore lucrative genres). Heritage is generally allotted either a hopeful or a satirical role in such works. The zombie-infested world of The Walking Dead, for example, shows survivors banding together to visit a museum holding pre-industrial technology in the hope of bringing certain objects back
into use – items that may finally allow humanity to ‘rebuild’. In the 2009 film *The Age of Stupid* meanwhile a future archivist views ‘historic’ news footage from the early twenty-first century to understand why humanity failed to address climate change when it had the chance. Both future worlds treat the residues of the past as vital resources for understanding and/or transforming the present, but there is little space in these imaginary settings for viewing the contemporary world – our world – as anything more than the prelude to catastrophe and collapse.

In this sense there is something almost refreshing about the post-apocalypse, which emphatically denies the memorial veneration that so much of heritage strives towards. Indeed, I do not think it would be too much to claim that much of what we take to be ‘heritage’ is a form of narcissism, most commonly founded on a desire to see some aspect of one’s self or one’s culture taken forward into the future. Searching for ancestors and building museums are both inherently future-oriented processes: they actively produce a world in which the narratives and things of today (which include those aspects of the past that the present currently cares about) will matter to the people of tomorrow. Past and future generations are bound together in this unfolding assemblage, but it is the present that sets the terms of reference. To some degree this has always been the case. Why else would emperors, kings and tyrants of all persuasions build vast mausoleums, or inscribe their names in stone and bronze, other than to ensure that the future acknowledges their existence in some capacity? We need to be careful here, however, not to conflate this desire for immortality with the self-referential attitude of our current time. As Boris Groys puts it,

> Our contemporary age seems to be different from all other historically known ages in at least one respect: never before has humanity been so interested in its own contemporaneity. The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is primarily interested in itself (2016: 137).

While questions of imminent climatic, civilizational breakdown seem to undermine the memorializing capacities of the future – and thus resituate the present as prologue – the longer geological temporalities of
the Anthropocene turn attention back on to the here-and-now by pre-emptively monumentalizing humanity as a “future fossil” (Yusoff 2013). The problem here however is that the Anthropocene as strata “asks us to think and perceive as if our world would be readable in the absence of what we now take to be readers” (Colebrook 2014: 34, original emphasis). As Colebrook continues, “all our traces (literary and otherwise) would remain but without human context or concept. The archive would be a dead letter... The people would be missing, leaving something like a maximal force of dissemination that would also be a maximal force of inertia” (2014: 37-8). Here we are in the realm of Eugene Thacker’s world-without-us, a “spectral and speculative” planet that we can never experience and that seems to act “as a limit that defines what we are as human beings” (2011: 5). Where the Romantic cult of ruins liked to imagine future travellers exploring the cities of London and Paris in an advanced state of decay, the Anthropocene ruin is denied even this gaze, separated as it must be from any such readers or visitors that we might recognize as human. Here it is worth noting that Zalasiewicz’s Earth After Us makes an explicit link between these two memorializing outlooks: looking far into the future, Zalasiewicz declares, “the remains of our human empire should soon crumble away and decay, leaving scarcely a footprint on the sands of geological time. Our legacy would be as pitiful as that of Ozymandias’ mighty kingdom in Shelley’s poem, reduced to a shattered statue amid the boundless desert wastes” (2008: 2).

As the reference to Shelley indicates, picturing the contemporary world in ruins is a persistent trope in modernist and post-modernist literature and aesthetics – one that draws together heritage and science fiction imaginaries. The constraint of such future ruins, however, is that they tend to rehearse a familiar set of assumptions about the value of material-semiotic formations as they decay and collapse. Most commonly, prophecies of London, Paris, New York or any other emblematic modern space in an advanced state of decay simply project Alois Riegl’s early twentieth-century categorization of monument types into some unknown future. Such ruins may be assigned “historical value” – that is, treated as documents that can reveal something about the time in which they were created – or more often “age value,” which involves “an affective pleasure in signs of natural processes of disintegration and decay” (Szerszynski 2017:
Thinking with heritage after the end of the world, in the framework of what I have been calling a critical Anthropocene method, means looking beyond such tropes. A new theory and imaginary of the future ruin is needed, one founded not on art history or ‘cultural’ memory, but on a transversal and posthumanist conception of more-than-human unravelling and recomposition. Colebrook underlines the problem with discovering such an imaginary in the Anthropocene strata:

At first the capacity to view ourselves as if from a post-human future, seems to diminish the self, creating a sublime distance whereby we annihilate ourselves for the thought of a life and readability to come. The reading of a past that is not ours (or our capacity to touch and reach out to what is not ourselves) seems to open the self to the not-self, to a radically post-human future. But the same gesture of alterity is also auto-archiving and auto-affecting. We now, narcissistically, imagine the tragedy of the post-human future as one in which death and absence will be figured through the unreadability of our own fragments, as though our self-alienation through archive and monument yields some sentiment that we ought to remain as readers of ourselves (2014: 40).

Building on this ‘sublime distance’, I think there is cause to ask what alternative forms of prospective decay and unravelling might be leveraged to rethink heritage as a critical apparatus? This would need to acknowledge that processes of inheritance are to some extent inescapable, binding together past, present and future in an affective embrace, but also that the project of heritage is contingent and malleable. To think with heritage in the face of the world’s ending should not mean aligning oneself with a self-absorbed quest for immortality, but instead asking what the inherent alienation offered by this scenario might offer to our evolving sense of history, of memory, of vulnerability and of inheritance.

For a historical culture built on narcissism, the prospect of the end of the world can be difficult to accept. Perhaps this is why, in many quarters, the spectre of systemic collapse and mass extinction has been greeted not with fierce opposition but with something approaching reflexive panic. What place does memorialization have in a world where human life is
no longer tenable? Or – somehow even more difficult to stomach – how might a culture fundamentally different from our own engage with the legacies ‘we’ bestow? Such questions have come to dominate discussions of the Anthropocene amongst memory scholars, with Richard Crownshaw in particular developing the framework of speculative memory to understand dystopian literature that deals with the future anterior of climate change: “these fictions are useful not only for their rememorative disposition but also for their melancholic orientations towards the fossil-fuelled worlds they imagine untenable or in ruins” (2018: 501). This notion of remembrance beyond or in excess of the human dovetails with a broader ecological turn in the discipline (Groes 2016; Rigney 2017), bringing Jameson’s work on ‘historical futures’ into dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the assemblage and the sympoietics of Donna Haraway for a broader picture of memory across human and more-than-human worlds.

The apocalyptic tenor of the Anthropocene debate clearly owes much to earlier visions of civilizational collapse, but there is an added environmental twist to these discussions in the face of the sixth mass extinction. While such debates are often criticized for denying or occluding previous and ongoing catastrophes of ‘world-ending’ scale – from the decimation of Indigenous populations as Western modernity spread around the globe, to previous extinction events in the Triassic, Pleistocene and Devonian eras – the current moment of existential crisis is marked by a realization that both these worlds now seem on the verge of cataclysm: the Earth System and Integrated World Capitalism are intimately bound in the historical formation and future unravelling of the Anthropocene epoch (Guattari 2009; Moore 2017). As a result, transdisciplinary dialogue has grown exponentially, with artists, political economists, historians, geologists, biologists, cultural critics and many others contributing to an increasingly public conversation about the past, present and future of the planet and its human and non-human inhabitants. Academic symposia, popular media, contemporary art and activist interventions collide in this new arena, which implicitly questions the separation of nature from society in the pursuit of a new relationship for and with the Earth. The most interesting work in this emerging space of critical utopian-dystopian-apocalyptic thinking engages with an expanded sense
of precarity drawn from feminist and post-colonial literature while also questioning the dominant anthropocentricism of humanist philosophies (Braidotti 2013).

The work of Anna Tsing is exemplary in this regard. In her 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing explores entangled landscapes of precarity and ruination – states of the world which are seen as symptomatic of late-capitalist modernity. Precarity, it is argued here, is now “an earthwide condition” (2015: 5): “in contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end” (2015: 2). The failure of progress narratives is central to this picture. Where previously the promises of modernity seemed to align with a progressive politics of emancipation, freedom and security, progress in the age of climate breakdown and mass extinction seems less clear, less ... progressive. Constant growth is no longer reasonable let alone sustainable. Without a sense of progress – even in its patchy and unequal form – the ruins of the world become more apparent; indeed, they assume a pivotal role in what Tsing calls “collaborative survival” (2015: 19). These ruins are inherently natural and cultural: they emerge through a combination of ecological collapse and capitalist exploitation. The question of collaboration meanwhile crosses social and natural domains to focus on issues of racism, sexism, imperialism and environmental justice alongside and in conjunction with concerns around biodiversity and conservation. Survival for Tsing can only occur if we acknowledge that “staying alive” requires “livable collaborations ... working across difference” (2015: 28). Ruins in this context are spaces of precarity and of potential resurgence not simply because they lie outside the typical frameworks of capitalist control, but also because the very processes of ruination force us to imagine and negotiate “life in human-damaged environments” (2015: 131). As Tsing concludes,

> Without stories of progress, the world has become a terrifying place. The ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment. It’s not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction. Luckily there is still company, human and not human. We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes (2015: 282).
Responding directly to Tsing’s desire for liveability in ruins, Zylinska has recently put forward an “alternative microvision” for a “feminist counterapocalypse that might take seriously the geopolitical unfoldings on our planet while also thinking our relations to and with it precisely as relations” (2018: 53, original emphasis). As well as opposing the seductive fantasies of the post-apocalypse, this framework seeks liberation from the competitive and overreaching masculine subjectivities of the present (2018: 59). “If unbridled progress is no longer an option,” Zylinska asks, “what kinds of coexistence and collaborations do we want to create in its aftermath?” (ibid).

This question leads us back to the inherent precarity of the ruin – always on the verge of collapse, always entangled with a multiplicity of forces and materialities. While the pre-Anthropocene future ruins imagined by artists and writers such as Hubert Robert and Alfred Franklin evoked the grandeur and mystery of the present as history (Figure 6.6; Franklin 1875), Tsing’s revised conceptualization seems to lead us in a very different direction. Living with ruins means more than simply acknowledging that decay might provide an aesthetic backdrop to our
lives: it requires a fundamental reorientation towards decomposition and the complex multispecies worldings likely to emerge in spaces of neglect and despair (Haraway 2016). There are clear points of overlap here with Caitlin DeSilvey’s theorization of ‘curated decay’ (2017), which pursues a form of more-than-human, anti-egotistical heritage built around entropy rather than preservation. This alternative imaginary occupies a critical juncture between the dystopian satire and the forgetful future, suggesting a mode of speculative ruination better suited to the work of heritage in the Anthropocene epoch.

Antinomies of the Anthropocene

In the summer of 2010, as part of the dOCUMENTA(13) arts festival held in Kassel, Germany, artist Amy Balkin launched an initiative to inscribe Earth’s atmosphere on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This would be done on “an emergency basis, consistent with the aims and goals of the World Heritage Convention” (Balkin 2015: 341). Balkin’s goal here was straightforward enough: to highlight the “outstanding universal value of Earth’s Atmosphere” in the hope of finding a “common interest” for the international community in protecting and preserving the atmosphere for “present and future generations” (ibid). The World Heritage ‘site’ in this context would transcend territorial boundaries, stretching around the entire planet, from sea level to the Kármán Line – an altitude around 100km above sea level which commonly represents the border between the Earth’s atmosphere and outer space. As Balkin soon discovered, however, the process of inscribing a new site on the World Heritage List requires backing from a specific nation or coalition of State Parties. As host of dOCUMENTA(13), Germany was first invited to lead such a coalition – this was rejected by the Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature, Conservation and Nuclear Safety. A different approach was then taken, with 186 invitation letters sent to all UNESCO State Parties. The only positive response came from Dr Ana Maui Taufe’ulungaki, Minister of Education, Women’s Affairs and Culture for the Kingdom of Tonga, who said the country unfortunately lacked the resources to initiate and lead a nomination process (2015: 345). Two years later, 90,000 signed postcards calling for the Earth’s atmosphere to be listed as a World
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Heritage Site were shipped to Peter Altmaier, Germany’s new Federal Environment Minister. A letter of reply re-confirmed that Germany would not lead a coalition for inscription.

Balkin’s experiment vividly demonstrates one of the key tensions in the fight against climate change: namely, that the political structure of the nation state and the international systems that have grown out of this, including the UN, are incapable of addressing the crisis on their own. Ghosh identifies this as the main obstacle to reversing the “Great Derangement” we currently find ourselves in, with climate change representing, “in its very nature, an unresolvable problem for modern nations in terms of their biopolitical mission and the practices of governance that are associated with it” (2016: 160). Protecting and preserving heritage sites within the UNESCO system is beset by the same problems (Meskell 2018), exacerbated by questions of identity, ownership, memory and strong connections to certain territorial spaces. As Ghosh makes clear, however, the contagion of climate breakdown and the Anthropocene “has already occurred, everywhere”:

> the ongoing changes in the climate, and the perturbations that they will cause within nations, cannot be held at bay by reinforcing man-made boundaries. We are in an era when the body of the nation can no longer be conceived of as consisting only of a territorialized human population: its very sinews are now revealed to be intertwined with forces that cannot be confined by boundaries (2016: 144, original emphasis).

While the (proposed) act of listing a planetary wide heritage ‘site’ opens up this messy tension to renewed critical scrutiny, it cannot account for the uneven historical responsibilities and distributed consequences of an emergent Anthropocene epoch. Indeed, as the lack of responses to Balkin’s request illustrates, it is precisely an unwillingness to take responsibility for a global phenomenon that stifles action at the level of the nation state. I think part of the problem here lies in the supposed finality that listing, protecting and – crucially – stewarding a site of heritage classically implies within UNESCO’s bureaucratic framework (a framework that is similar though not entirely comparable to the UN’s approach on climate change). Over 1,000 sites are now included on the
World Heritage List, and while the reasons for their inscription will differ from country to country, and from site to site, once added to the list they are bound by an international set of rules around care and conservation. Discord, debate, collaboration and uncertainty are problematic within a system that demands ‘outstanding universal value’ to be demonstrated and consistently upheld.

In the shadow of the Anthropocene, then, we are confronted by the antinomies of a certain conception of territory, akin to Fredric Jameson’s antinomies of realism: a “historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution” (2013: 6). The stronger such a concept becomes – think walls, Brexit and the so-called migration ‘crisis’ – “the weaker it gets; winner loses; its success is its failure” (ibid). Such contradictions are intrinsic to the ‘wicked problem’ of climate change. Seen through the lens of the Anthropocene, this territorial paradox is matched by various other antinomies, including those of remembrance and of the subject. Where I depart from Jameson, however, is the claim that these contradictions represent “the farthest points our thought can reach… the opposition beyond which we cannot think” (2013: 308). The microexamples I have put forward in this chapter demonstrate precisely the continued importance of thought experiments that attempt to overcome such antinomies. One final case study may help to underline this point.

In 2014 Bronislaw Szerszynski, Bruno Latour and Olivier Michelon launched the Anthropocene Monument project at Les Abattoirs Museum of Contemporary Art in Toulouse, comprising an exhibition and colloquium bringing together twenty artists from around the world to imagine what form a monument to the Anthropocene might take (Figures 6.7 and 6.8; see Szerszynski 2017). Many of the ideas put forward for the exhibition incorporated emblematic markers of the Anthropocene as a geological series, including “minerals derived from plastics, or contemporary artefacts that might be disinterred and interpreted by future archaeologists” (2017: 126). Others sought to follow the logic of the Anthropocene and “blur the distinctions between natural and cultural entities” by “playing on the monumentalizing effects of decay and
Figure 6.7 — Anthropocene Monument, les Abattoirs. Installation view. (Photograph © LesAbattoirs by Sylvie Leonard).

Figure 6.8 — Anthropocene Monument, les Abattoirs. Installation view showing *Terra-Forming: Engineering the Sublime* by Adam Lowe and Jerry Brotton. (Photograph © LesAbattoirs by Sylvie Leonard for Factum Arte).
ruination” (ibid) – a nod to the future anterior temporality of this inherently reflexive concept. What is most useful, however, for understanding the extent to which a new monumental system might undermine the antinomies of the Anthropocene is the resistance to certainty found across many of the proposals. As Szerszynski records, most of the artists seemed implicitly to navigate away from the traditional realm of the static monument and opt instead for “Gegendenkmäler, counter-monuments, which were variously mobile, dispersed, transient or demanded interaction, and that thus served not to consolidate cultural memory but to provoke communicative memory, debate and action” (ibid). I am reminded here of Chantal Mouffe’s call for an “agonistic museum,” one that might “facilitate the expression of dissent, helping people to better understand the contradictions of the world” (2017: 79), and also of Michael Landzelius’ “politics of dis(re)membering”, which – following Deleuze and Guattari – aims to supplant the lineage mentality of heritage with the “rhizome of disinheritance” (2003: 210). While I do not believe that we can ‘disinherit’ the Anthropocene in the sense that we ignore its material legacies or hope its consequences dissipate, we might imagine an alternative framework through which the concept is taken on and passed down. An Anthropocene monumental system here would have to, challenge the viewer to wrestle with the paradoxes and responsibilities involved in being a member of a species that, albeit unevenly, is achieving geological consequentiality...

any monumental system for the Anthropocene would need to signify that this epoch-in-the-making will be actively woven from multiple stories and diverse imagined futures distributed around the globe (Szerszynski 2017: 128).

I want to end on this image of an epoch-in-the-making to stress the openness that still clings to the Anthropocene concept. Whether looked at in terms of museology, ruination or memorialization, heritage is valuable here for the way it forces us to confront the sticky inheritances of the past in the present – legacies that ‘we’ have a differential responsibility for, but that also provide an opportunity to (re)shape the future. The reflexive mode of the Anthropocene epoch aligns with the cyclical temporalities of heritage: the past is somehow always more present than the present,
while the future is both a projection and an attractor, shaping how we think and behave in relation to the contemporary world. Building on this, heritage as critical Anthropocene method means imagining new modes of preservation, new forms of curatorial practice and new processes of monumental-territorial inscription. Each of these gestures will inevitably give rise to key questions around subjectivities, social formations and material ecologies (Guattari 1989), but they are also vital frameworks through which to transform the work of heritage itself. A familiar, narcissistic, human-centred view of heritage is slowly giving way to this new imaginary, the contours of which we might begin to discern in strange encounters with floating museums, and uncertain monuments to a time still to come.

**References**


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