

New sounds from things missing – Exhibition review of Listening in the Anthropocene

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In these strange times it shouldn't be a strange exercise to review an exhibition that exists as a website paired with a symposium that was staged via Zoom, but it is strange. Strange because both exhibition and conference were unhinged from the norm by the zoonotic virus that has sent the world into an unnatural spin. The COVID-19 virus appears to have crossed from a world being made increasingly unnatural as a consequence of being squeezed by opportunism driven by Capital's search for cheap profits and the one thing Capital has relied on for a long time is cheap nature. Plus it would seem to be strange and a challenge to review an exhibition that is about listening but their etymology makes sense of this. An exhibition is something that is 'held out' and to listen is to pay attention to. In this case the artists are holding out something to which we need to pay attention.

And as for listening *in* the Anthropocene, I wonder whether we aren't listening *to* the Anthropocene. After changing the world it is now changing us and all we can do is respond, a word that shares the same Latin root as the word responsible. It is an act of responsibility to respond and to respond and react appears to be all we can now do provided we do it responsibly. The *world-changing-us* is an *unthinkable-world* because it will eventually result in the *world-without-us*. Right now this doesn't mean a world devoid of humans but a world we project that continues to revolve around the sun but no longer revolves around us, and we need to get used to this.

Casting the exhibition and symposium as listening *in* is in itself interesting because *in* is a tricky component of the English lexicon – it is preposition, adverb, adjective, noun, plus both prefix and suffix.

- as a preposition *in* surrounds – i.e. the anthropocene is all around us
- as an adverb *in* encloses – i.e. we are shut in the anthropocene
- as an adjective *in* locates – i.e. we have found the anthropocene
- as a noun *in* designates influence – i.e. the anthropocene is fashionable
- as a prefix *in* negates – i.e. the anthropocene is not what it appears to be
- as a suffix *in* indicates a common purpose – i.e. the anthropocene is a shared design

Regardless of the trickiness of the word – *in* – I think the curators know how it fits into the title and logic of this exhibition. First, I think they intended there is listening *in* the time of, *in* the era of, *in* the period of. And second, there is listening *in* as opposed to listening out for something or someone. Which is what one of the artists, Michelle O'Connor, equates with gaining a deeper understanding of the familiar. But the familiar and the Anthropocene are complex characteristics to embrace in one idea – how is that which is disappearing familiar? It is of course not only the familiar that is disappearing, but also the unfamiliar that is appearing – strange weather and strange ecology – and the exhibition builds on both strange phenomena. That change is taking place is all too familiar.

The term *in* is also tricky to equate with a geological time frame. If we accept that Anthropocene is a proposal for the current geologic time replacing the Holocene, which

began approximately 11-12,000 years ago, then *in* probably has to encompass a long duration. When the Anthropocene began is contested but the scientist James Lovelock, exponent of Gaia, dates it to when Thomas Newcomb invented a machine to pump water from coalmines in 1712. According to Lovelock that simple machine unleashed both the energy that powered the industrial revolution and the carbon dioxide that is changing the planet's climate. Not only is when the Anthropocene began contested but what this new geological era should be called is also in contention. The sociologist Jason Moore says the conditions we now call the Anthropocene are better captured as the Capitocene because the coming extinction is a product of unlimited extraction by the Capital project, which began long before Newcomb's pump. Then Donna Haraway prefers the term Chthulucene, which she describes as the processes of re-worlding – building from what is left after Capital has exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet.

The idea of listening *in* the Anthropocene is also challenging because it is, as the works in the exhibition illustrate, primarily a 'scenic' rather than 'aural' phenomenon. Therefore and somewhat paradoxically the Anthropocene can only be made evident by images of what is disappearing. Paradoxical because how is it possible to make pictures of what is disappearing? Jeremy Adelman twists this paradox further exposing shortcomings with the makers of images of the Anthropocene. He writes:

“the Anthropocenic photographer has so far resisted calls to produce the ‘relatable image’ of human suffering. By relying on landscape techniques of breadth, distance and ‘framing the slow’, their commitment remains to visualize the unrelatable, the extreme—now training the viewer’s eye on the deformed, the world we would rather refuse to see with our own eyes” (Adelman, 69).

Once again, the curators of the symposium and exhibition appear to have predicted this problem when they ask “How might we listen out, or tune in, to the small, the subtle, the unnoticed?” So how does one listen in to what has disappeared and/or is disappearing? Donna Haraway speculates that “theories of the Anthropocene rely too much on what should be an 'unthinkable' theory of relations”, and echoing the symposium brief she says “it is not an idiomatic term for climate, weather, land, care of country, or much else in great swathes of the world, especially but not only among indigenous peoples” (8).

The artists exhibit various means to propose answers to these questions and criticisms in various ways, but it is not easy to categorise the scope of the works in this exhibition. While they all deal with the call in similar ways – similar because the very idea of the anthropocene is a narrowing of focus, which is, as mentioned, paradoxical. But differently paradoxical, because just as we develop the technology to get closer to seeing our birth in the cosmic big bang the conditions for planetary life appear to be dying (well before we are eventually burnt by the sun), and its this accelerating 'end' the idea of the “Anthropocene” appears to catalogue.

Three projects document the irony of a businessman's final project. But if one's final project is the object that escorts them into the afterlife the artists – Jen Bervin & A Published Event; Ted Hendrickson; Nancy Kuhl & Margaret Woodward – seem to sense the anticipatory nature of this eccentric project. Perhaps in the era of the Anthropocene we are already tasked with taking into the afterlife all that has gone missing.

There is a lot of the new materialism in the projects in this exhibition; working in/from/with/of nature; observing nature/nature observing us; adapting to

nature/nature adapting to us...and so on. And like new materialism all matter matters and matters for increasingly urgent reasons.

Bärbel Ullrich works in *collaboration* with, and has created images *from* and *with/within* the landscape. And when Jack Randell asks “who looks at who in the zoo?” he asks a deeply material question.

“Who listens to who?” might have been Jacqui O’Reilly’s question as she documents the increasing volume of the Silvereye song. Which is similar to Jan Osmotherly’s project of “snapshots” of what she listens *to* in her backyard. While Marg Leddin depicts the noise *of* the Anthropocene in cicada photograms. All of which supports Tracy Sorenson project where she asks us to listen beyond our bodies to the structure and support for our lives and that of fellow creatures. And as a listener *of* radio Michelle O’Connor documents her exploration of “mediated bodily world travel”. Nicole Welch expands the scope and scale of listening via her interest in remote monitoring and sensing techniques and satellite and infrared mapping technologies to record landscape, and to extend and collapse time. She shows what Karen Golland might call “smears in time”, which opens us to the dreaming of a vast sky, and the stars at night that speak of Leanne Lovegrove’s dreaming.

Jenni Munday brings us back to earth (or what’s left of it in the Anthropocene) via postcards that contrast how we once concentrated mental anguish in picturesque places but now places (possibly the whole planet), no longer picturesque, are concentrating “widespread mental illness in the form of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress”.

Perhaps the planet’s project (surely this sentient planet has a project) in what we have dubbed the Anthropocene (the planet might know it differently) might be what Perdita Phillips does when she asks “what does it mean to be attentive to things heard and things lost in local places? In particular, in these times of ecological unravelling, is it possible to re-ravel stories from a place of loss?”

Above all, the artists who have been Listening in the Anthropocene all depict what Jan Osmotherly warns “*To change – you have to CARE*”.

The works in this exhibition leave me asking what might the very idea of the Anthropocene mean since artists can so varyingly and sensitively respond to its existence made evident only by *what-might-not-become*. I turn to Donna Haraway who aligns herself with feminist environmentalist Eileen Crist when she writes that the Anthropocene discourse “is not simply wrong-headed and wrong-hearted in itself; it also saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds, both those that exist precariously now (including those called wilderness, for all the contaminated history of that term in racist settler colonialism) and those we need to bring into being in alliance with other critters, for still possible recuperating pasts, presents, and futures” (8).

Looping back to the beginning of my review – a review of an event made virtual by a virus – as Elettra Stimilli writes:

The virus is a test of truth, which reveals existences without the thousand loopholes that, year after year, have preserved the untenable. Without realizing it, we had never really moved from our own existences to feel part of life on earth. And now that we have had to keep in touch with ourselves, we had the opportunity to realize it (392)

This exhibition puts us in touch with the sense of listening *in* a world in which for too long we have not cared to listen *to*.

References

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