



TRACEY

Journal

ISSN: 1742-3570

Drawing Anthropocene 2024

Volume 17

Issue 1

DRAWING ANTHROPOCENE EDITORIAL

Sarah Casey and Gerry Davies

Lancaster University, UK
sarah.casey@lancaster.ac.uk
g.davies@lancaster.ac.uk

Drawing Anthropocene

This edition of TRACEY examines connections between drawing and the concept of Anthropocene.

The term Anthropocene, coined at the start of the new millennium by geochemist Paul Crutzen and freshwater researcher Eugene Stoermer, denotes a new period of geological time, reflecting the extent to which human activity is making its mark on geologic stratigraphy. Essentially, for geologists, the legacy of the Anthropocene will be the traces that our human existence will leave in the geologic record in times to come.

While there remains debate about the precise starting point of the Anthropocene (and it has yet to be formally acknowledged by the International Committee on Stratigraphy), the concept is now widespread and in common usage as a byword for human impact on the environment. As such, it has become an expansive and wide-ranging area, requiring the attention of many fields of study. As Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski have noted, “in diagnosing human activities as a force of geological or planetary significance, natural scientists have stretched and expanded the conventional terrains of scientific research” as it enters into questions of human activity, traditionally the preserve of the humanities (Clark and Szerszynski, 2021, p 7). For example, issues of capitalism, race and colonial violence (Yussof, 2018).

So, while in geology, the term is applied with technical precision, for humanities and social sciences and arts it has a useful flexibility, used to bring together thinking about the ways in which traces of human presence impact upon the earth, including implications for cohabitants (Simonetti and Ingold, 2018, p 20). In doing so, it affords a new way of thinking, bringing together concerns about human interactions with other “planetary creatures” and entities (Spivak, 2003, p 73) and our relationships and responsibilities within these human-more-than-human dynamics.

The motivation for this special edition of TRACEY was twofold. Firstly, there has been an explosion of literature from many different fields accounting for developments in relation to Anthropocene thinking. It is high time to acknowledge and bring together a selection of the many rich and varied research applications of drawing encompassed under this term. Secondly, we have a sense that, at its core, drawing is intimately connected to the concept of Anthropocene. Put simply, reduced to its basics Anthropocene is about trace, of action and its imprint. We might say the same about drawing. To expand beyond this, we might even see Anthropocene as a collaborative durational drawing spanning the development and demise of human existence! Take for instance the carbon deposit known as the KT boundary from the Chicxulub asteroid impact, registered in geological stratigraphy as a layer of fine carbon deposit, the mark of an equally devastating event in time. Essentially, this is a line of carbon on a support, which, excepting the differences geographical and temporal scale, is perhaps not so different from the charcoal line you made in your first life drawing class?

Whether we regard this as drawing or not is less important than acknowledging that thinking of it as drawing, affords a certain way of thinking, opening the subject up to fresh critical examination through the methods and processes of artists. It is a useful provocation, one that prompts questions about how drawing might function in relation to climate crisis and what knowledge it might produce. For example, drawing may examine areas of contention: petrochemicals and carbon release, resource extraction, more than human agency, migrations, or post-human and planetary futures. As such, *Drawing Anthropocene* is a particularly timely addition to the growing body of drawing research that looks beyond the borders of drawing to other disciplines and issues in the world (Garner, 2008).

Too Big to See: questions of scale in Anthropogenic humanities

In *The Great Derangement* (2016) Amitav Ghosh calls our attention to cultural representations and political situations that deflect creative anthropogenic thinking. This includes both scientific solutions and speculative fictions, any of which might motivate climate action. He notes inaction in 'meta' politics but sees encouraging signs in the teaching of world religions, with Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim leaders addressing issue of the Anthropocene. His hope is tempered, for, as he says of global political stasis, "even transnational groupings of transnational-states like the United Nations, seem unable to overcome it. This is partly due, of course, to questions of power and geopolitical rivalry" (Ghosh, 2016, p 160). Crucially for drawing, enfolded within this argument, is a case for creative arts as a tool for approaching future challenges.

Geopolitics, power and the Anthropocene all present difficulties of scale and representation. To address issues of visualization Mark Bould turns to Timothy Morton and the "hyperobject". He quotes and underscores Morton's problematization of scale in relation to epochal change when he says it is "so vast as to be almost impossible to hold in the mind" (Bould, 2021 p 14). Bould offers his own definition of the hyperobject "we can see rain, but not climate, a bank note but not the economy" (Bould p 14). In *All Art is Ecological* (2018) Morton uses the work of Olafur Eliasson to demonstrate how art, perhaps uniquely, can toggle between scales. In *Ice Watch*, Eliasson's 2015 installation of twelve great chunks of Greenlandic ice transported to Paris to melt in the sun, Morton demonstrates how the work engages with wildly differing climate scales and temporalities. Morton, points to the double meaning of "watch", as gaze and timepiece. He says, "part of the point of *Ice Watch* was an obvious visual gag: look, ice is melting and time is running out" (Morton, 2018 p 56). He goes on to unpack the work to bridge between global heating, precarity of Greenland ice sheets and human experience. Of the title he says, "But that was just the hook. What actually happened was much more interesting...and seriously stretched or went beyond prefabricated concepts...Watches are things that humans read. But they are also things that flies land on that lizards ignore, things...that the sun glints off" (Morton, 2018, p 57). For Morton the language and experience of "gaze and watch" is an "encounter" and "dialogue". Not only an intimate touch between "human and blocks of ice" but also our species entanglement with our time of anthropogenic change.

This is visual Art's gift: the capacity to make the scalar shift between the macro and microcosms we inhabit, from the vastness of deep time to the fleeting split second. Following from Morton, Ghost, Bould and other scholars, the articles in this volume all draw attention to what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of Anthropocene (Nixon, 2011). Catastrophe is not, as George Perec frames it, sudden and abrupt (Perec 1999, 209). Not always vivid and newsworthy, or even visible. In *Drawing Anthropocene* the need to give attention recurs throughout. We see two types of anthropogenic alertness and representation. One position uses imaginative intra-action and seeks to 'join with' earthy elements and evolutionary processes. For example, to imaginatively experience carbon extraction as Rachel Bacon does, or to speculatively project us into post-human worlds as Charlotte Gould does. The other position takes drawing to be aligned with the data of materials and events. Examples are Serena Pollastri and her team teaching the next generation of designer climatologists to see and record local change or Virginia Mannering's analysis of the role of drawing in colonial expansion. While opposites, each approach relies on extreme attention. Attention to drawing's possibilities, and once a project is underway to exactness, rigor and, to use another Timothy Morton-ism, to be "ecologically explicit" with and through drawing.

Returning to Drawing

It has been argued that art history has been slow to establish its own ecological framework (Patrizio, 2019). As this framework becomes established, it feels imperative to look at drawing within this. Patrizio makes a convincing argument that while artists have for years engaged with issues of environment, developed activist practices, used drawing to think about the world, our theories of drawing remain relatively intact. It follows, that a changing world requires a changing framework and points of reference, or at least a critical examination of these in light of current dialogues of Anthropocene.

In arriving at final selection for *Drawing Anthropocene*, we were mindful of the need to avoid entrenching an "aesthetics of Anthropocene". Unsurprisingly many approaches to the subject of Anthropocene lean towards process, subordinating the authorial gesture of the artist to exploring shared agency with non-human forces. After all, drawing is an activity of tracing, layering, erasure, the drawn mark often belies the process of its making. It has been called a "trace fossil" (Halperin, 2015, p 22). Over the course of the twentieth century tenets of drawing - arguably the trace of an action made over a surface - have been tested, stretched and exploded as artists embraced performance, land art, soundscapes as forms of drawing. Drawing now has many identities, from lines in sand, footprints in the snow, or vapor trails in the sky (Dexter, 2005, p 6). As drawing researchers, we benefit from a rich resource of examples of artists 'drawing' by leaving trace on the earth - readers will be familiar with the work of Richard Long, Atsuo Tanaka, Robert Smithson, Ana Mendieta. Moreover, in contemporary debates about non-human agency, drawing may seem ahead of the curve - a longstanding history of artists engaged strategies to co-opt non-human agents into making, questioning the authorial gesture. Just as Long lets the qualities of the mud form his drawing, Tanaka's identifies the drawn/erased action of the sea. This trajectory initiated in the twentieth century finds continued applications in contemporary drawing. For example, in Tim Knowles's drawings determined by the action of tree branches, Peter Matthews' by the movement of the ocean, Ilana Halperin's collaboration with mineral agents. Lucia Cunningham's article approaches this tradition head on, using her camera to documents instances of non-human drawing and traces in the land. Casey converts drawing into a device, measuring the intensity of the sun's heat in precarious glaciated landscapes. These practices remind us that matter acts as recording devices (Eyal & Wiseman, 2021, p 50). Drawing offers a means of investigation, a means to highlight these agential forces through interpretation and sense making. What matters here is not the capacity for drawing to be co-produced with non-human agents, but that in recognizing this potential, we are alerted to new realities and responsibilities.

As editors, knowing the expansion of drawing, and the long history of artists collaborating with agents of wind, weather etc., we were not surprised to see the submissions leaning towards process-based drawing. We were, however, surprised by the lack of figurative and narrative work. Given the prominence of storytelling as a mode used in the humanities, were surprised not to see this in drawing. We recognize that this is not due to a lack of projects - for example, as we see in the work of Susan Turcot, or Kulrada Phenchaoren. As with any open call, the responses act like a temperature gauge, revealing not simply what is hot or trending, but what do researchers in drawing feel is important and worth researching, and by what means, or if you like, by which drawing language. So, this in itself has been a useful exercise - highlighting an area for future research and development.

The approaches represented in the articles in this special edition are conspicuously varied. As editors, we took a decision to afford a generosity to different approaches, some conventionally academic, rigorously underpinned, others more personal and speculative. Each, in their own way, highlights a relationship

between drawing and Anthropocene. In some cases, this is direct, for instance in Pollastri's use of drawing to engage students with markers of climate change, or Samantha Lynch's speculative future spaces. In others the connection is more mediated, such as Gunn's use of process-led drawing reminiscent of Sol Le Witt's wall drawings reapplied as a means of focusing our attention, or in the authors words "attentional modalities". This approach encompasses a sense of excavating drawing's past to recover methods and processes that can be repurposed and redeployed, shifting from a studio-centric modernist endgame to an entry point to reflect on environmental change.

This sense of conceptual excavation characterizes Rachel Bacon's approach, who explores dialogue between drawing and mineral extraction. In doing so, an argument is made for "drawing as a counterweight to economic imperatives" (Bacon, this volume). This advocacy for drawing as positive force for change recurs in many of the papers. There are suggestions that drawing offers a more responsible, caring approach to our more-than-human cohabitants of the earth. Building on the work of Donna Haraway, Lucia Cunningham's exploration of more-than-human agency, foregrounds themes of care, kinship. Here, sharing agency is couched in positive terms, offering a challenge to the anthro in Anthropocene, and drawing as an antidote to human power. A similar ethos informs Charlotte Gould's "Chuthlucene Hekateris" which takes a more radical application of Donna Haraway's thinking on kinship and collaboration to envisage a speculative future of human-non-human hybrids (Haraway, 2016). Speculative futures also characterize Samantha Lynch's "Enfolding the Garden". The article presents experimental architectural drawing practices as a means to negotiate environments that we might need to learn to live in as climate effects cascade.

While these examples speculate on futures, Virginia Mannering's art historical article highlights drawing's role in the colonization of present-day Australia, revealing drawings' engagement with ideas of Anthropocene didn't begin in the twentieth century. "Drawing is Complicit" presents a compelling demonstration of how drawing was used as a tool of colonial expansion, the exploitation of land and peoples. This argument serves to remind us that drawing is not inherently good. It is a check and balance to us as researchers, reminding us of our responsibility to examine our assumptions and practices and the hegemonic legacies that underpin them. Her argument foregrounds what Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yussoff term "Geosocial formations". These are encounters that "require us to acknowledge that human history and politics can no longer be considered as an epilogue, divorced from the vast history of the earth that precedes them. Knowledge of deep time depends on sociality which in turn grows alongside ecological forces" (Simonetti, 2019, p 49).

This geosocial entanglement is made vivid in the context of glacial archeology, the focus of Sarah Casey's article. Casey demonstrates how drawing's facility for negotiating polarities of absence and presence offers a language to articulate the challenges of valuable human heritage emerging at the cost of lost ice. Moving from theoretical speculation, to practical application, her wax drawings of archaeology exposed to the sun's heat, suggest possibilities for how drawing might be deployed as a device in climate measurement.

Yet perhaps the most practical approach of all is that of Serena Pollastri, Liz Edwards, Joseph Bourne and Suzana Ilic in their case study highlighting the educational potential of drawing to engage teenagers in observing changes in their environment. Their approach could be seen as unfashionable— it pushes less at theories of drawing and it doesn't seek to challenge, extend or invent established theories of drawing. While this situates it as an outlier among the other contributions to *Drawing Anthropocene*,

instead it seeks to put theories into practice to generate real world examples that test how hypotheses stand up, providing valuable evidence for the application of drawing as a tool to combat climate challenges. While other authors highlight the importance of care, here we are presented with drawing as a means of empowerment for young people to equip them to better contribute to decision making about the future.

Finally, and with a last observation, we acknowledge the limits of our reach as editors of *Drawing Anthropocene*, that is, in the main the articles focus on the symptoms rather than the causes. Returning to earlier discussions of scale, it remains a challenge to the drawing community to formulate drawing practices which can analyze and depict the globalized extraction of Gazprom, Shell, Rio Tinto, etc., and the geopolitics of carbon emissions. *Drawing Anthropocene* does not adequately represent the voices of those most affected by these activities, cannot claim to be comprehensive survey. What follows is less a definitive last word, more a tentative opening of a door, an exploratory foray into the places that drawing might explore.

References

- Bould, M. (2021). *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*, London: Verso Books.
- Clark, N. and Szerszynski, B. (2021). *Planetary Social Thought : The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dexter, E. (2005) *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, London: Phaidon
- Fuller, M. & Wiseman, E. (2021). *Investigative Aesthetics, Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth*, London and New York, Verso Books.
- Garner, S. (2008). Introduction. *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Ghosh, (2016). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Halperin, I. (2015). "Between Formation", in Sawdon, P. and Marshall, R. (eds.) *Drawing Ambiguity: Besides the Lines of Contemporary Art*, London and New York : IB Taurus.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Morton, T. (2018) *Thinking Ecologically*, London: Pelican.
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Patrizio, A. (2019). *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Perec, G. (1999). *Species of Space and Other Pieces* ed. John Sturrock, London: Penguin.
- Simonetti, C (2019). "The Petrified Anthropocene", in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36 (7–8) pp 45–66
- Simonetti, C and Ingold, T. (2018) *Ice and Concrete: Solid Fluids of Environmental Change*, in *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 5.1 pp 19–31.
- Spivak, G. C. (2003). *Death of a Discipline*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Yusoff, K. (2018). *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.