

Conversation Anthropogenic Markers,

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Salome Rodeck is doing her doctoral research at ZfL Berlin on the concept of symbiosis as a transdisciplinary ontological category, with a particular focus on the work of Lynn Margulis and Donna Haraway. Since 2019, she is a visiting predoctoral fellow in the Anthropocene Formations group at MPIWG Berlin.

Matthew C. Wilson is a visual artist, filmmaker, and researcher.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Salome Rodeck: Maybe we could start with how your project relates to the theme of anthropogenic markers. I had the feeling that you both take up the notion of a marker as a distinct object, but at the same time you play with the stabilizing quality it has. How did you approach thinking about what a marker is, or what it can do for your project?

Matthew C. Wilson: My project takes markers seriously but at the same time also resists their, for the of a better word, “discreteness.” That relates to my general interest in what constitutes an object of study—and more specifically, *where* is that object?

If the marker is always a kind of proxy for something else, to me that means that it’s always already distributed across different physical processes as well as inter-social entities, meaning there are also non-physical things and processes that produce markers, such as certain kinds of human knowledge. So, the markers themselves are just a physical point upon which multiple agencies and degrees of materiality coalesce. And then, by virtue of their function of “marking” or demarcating, markers are always already involved in semiosis—in sign production. They have this existence within the semiosphere. And that relates back to the question of knowledge production. The same way

that the biosphere and the geosphere are not static, the semiosphere is also dynamic; it is involved in a kind of churning of meaning, if you will. Science ordinarily proceeds quite incrementally, with new discoveries inserted into existing knowledge frameworks. Once in a while there is a so-called paradigm shift. Even though the impact of not only life but also human knowledge on planetary processes was articulated almost a hundred years ago by Vladimir Vernadsky, the very act of defining the Anthropocene seems to constitute a challenge to geology. From my outsider's view, geology seems only able at this time to articulate the Anthropocene within its existing framework, to relate to it as a geological epoch, a unit of time, rather than an effect of an ongoing, emergence of a new planetary sphere—an evolutionary extension of the biosphere in which the Earth's crust changes its "face."¹

S.R: I remember you said somewhere how we are "still making policies as if the systems we look at are homeostatic, while they actually are in flux." I guess that's a dilemma of knowledge production, especially in the sciences. Scientific knowledge production requires freezing things in time, so to speak, to render them tangible and communicable. Whereas art, on the other hand, can play more freely with this ambiguity between the static of science and the more speculative nature of this ongoing process that reality actually is.

In your project you suggest a sort of speculative taxonomy of planetary agents. Taxonomy is an interesting example of what we were just discussing. I was looking into its history and was struck by how contested the different proposed categories—families, kingdoms, domains etc.—still are, even to this day. But the classic notion behind it is really this idea that everything has a fixed place or state of being, which is a kind of Holocene thinking.² And what you're presenting here, in my mind at least, is a proposal for a kind of Anthropocene taxonomy, in the sense that things are considered relationally rather than materialistically, and (you just touched upon this as well), analyzed for what they can do—in other words for their agency, instead of through

¹ Vernadsky called this the "Noosphere."

Giulia Rispoli. "Between 'biosphere' And 'Gaia': Earth As A Living Organism In Soviet Geo-ecology." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014

² Christian Schwägerl, "All hail the Anthropocene, the end of Holocene thinking." *New Scientist*, March 13, 2015: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27162-all-hail-the-anthropocene-the-end-of-holocene-thinking/>

the ontological question of what they really are. This means that objects can be in different categories, which I really liked in your project, but it of course also makes things a lot messier. With accepting the multiple agencies of humans and non-humans, we are giving up a sense of certainty that Holocene thinking gave us. This feels liberating and scary at the same time. I wonder how we can work responsibly and productively with this ‘messiness’.

M.W: Definitely, the desire or ambition was indeed to think about an alternative way of organizing markers—a way that could suggest relationships between the markers, but in a structure that was more made to order, so to speak. This structure would have to account for the ways in which objects and especially phenomena—which are even more slippery—in the Anthropocene very often do not easily fit into categories. Things are hybrid or multiple, and there can be a mismatch between material and form; I think of this as the surrealist logic of the Anthropocene, where things can be multiple. Fordite, for example, looks like some kind of gemstone but it’s enamel car paint that’s dripped on the same place for years. Plastiglomerate, a sort of plastic-rock hybrid, is entering the geological record. Or we can take an even more surreal example: a large portion of all living bodies have a certain percentage of plastic inside of them.

I agree with you that science, to do its work, very often needs to decontextualize in order to isolate things down to the one variable. But of course, we know that in context, single factor causal mechanisms are comparatively rare. Very often, things are what they are as a result of their interactions. Taxonomies, historically at least, do not capture those interactions in themselves. Interaction is a kind of ephemeral, emergent thing. Where does that interaction “live”? Both in the world, and then again in a taxonomy. So, a taxonomy that seeks to approach interactions needs to have this distributed character or approach. Science, for all it does successfully, is not up to the challenge of the present without recontextualizing knowledge, as Donna Haraway calls it, “situated knowledge,” to include socio-political aspects and reflexivity regarding epistemology.³

³ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1988): pp. 575–599.

S.R: Indeed. Since you also like to think with or alongside technology and AI, I was thinking how this other way of knowing or ordering, so to speak, is only enabled through the network thinking of computer sciences and the Internet, like hyperlinks and hashtags. In that sense as well, knowledge is very situated, speaking from a history of technology standpoint, as we indeed first needed to have these technologies to be able to see and work with the complexity of systemic change. Does that resonate with you?

M.W: The short answer is yes. There's no reason anymore for things to occupy only a discrete location. If you have a search function you don't necessarily need to think about files as living in a particular folder structure. Obviously, there's some benefit to keeping a folder structure. If you're working with other people and they don't know the search terms you use, for instance. Historically taxonomies were crucial for sharing information among scientists.

What interests me is the idea of the cross-reference, which does go back to early library systems. There, a book would live in one physical place in the library, but nonetheless, you have the catalogue of the library, which can be a kind of fluid parallel logic to the physical, spatial logic; new categories can be created that would point to different physical locations in the library. So, there's certainly a strong pre-Internet mode as well, which is interesting seeing how this becomes a dominant way of thinking in parts of academia and art in the present, notably with Latour and company's actor network theory—with actors operating in multiple networks simultaneously. However, ways of organizing the world relationally have been around much longer, in various forms of Indigenous and traditional knowledge so many of which were erased, obscured, or marginalized during the Enlightenment and by colonialism.

S.R: For me, Karen Barad comes to mind. I mean her call away from a fixed ontology towards what she calls agential realism, where you're looking at what things do and how they only come into being through relating to the rest of the world.⁴ To me it kind of ties together both the technological that we just discussed, but also this larger idea of what

⁴ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2003): pp. 801–831.

the planet is doing. Like Isabelle Stenger's idea of Gaia intruding, meaning that the system we live in is indeed alive in unpredictable ways and—to come back to your project—messes with the stable state categories we try to put it in.⁵

I am often surprised by the long discussions about how humans cannot understand their agency within the larger system because they cannot experience themselves as a species. To me, it does not really matter whether we are a species or experience our species being. It's not because we're a specific kind of mammal or primate that makes us a threat to the planet, it's not a species quality that does that, it's really an agency, a very particular situated one, that causes problems.

M.W: What this species way of looking misses, and of course this is the kind of political erasure of forming this category of the Anthropocene in the first place, is that it doesn't include culture. What constitutes the human is always contingent on how subjects are formed by their culture. And so, there is a subset of humans with a particular culture that has been driving the Anthropocene. Depending on how you want to look at that, they are the industrialized humans, they are the humans that were involved in formulating and spreading capitalism and they were the imperialists, as well as all the neo-imperialists still operating in the present.

S.R: The way you were presenting the “finding” of the flooded servers, with a sort of detached voice, it kind of indicates that in becoming Anthropocene subjects, the possibility of demise is already included. In your project, the people who created this taxonomy seem to be absent. The person reading it seems to feel very detached from that kind of knowledge—they could as well be an alien. At the same time, of course, “the human” is very present as an agent of destruction, because the flooding is a threat related to climate change. In this context, I was thinking of how specific human actions ruin not only a certain way of living, but also their way of rendering what is happening understandable to themselves. This double ruination reminded me of the posthumanism debates on this strange ambiguity between the

⁵ Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. London: Open Humanities Press, 2015.

hyper presence of the human in the Anthropocene concept, and at the same time, the foreseeable absence of the human as well.

M.W: This definitely resonates. The Apocalypse kind of comes back to the imperial source, from which it emitted, it's like a wave that hits a wall and then washes back. And that wave already swept over many parts of the world, ending ways of life, ending many cultural adaptations to local environments, provoking the movement of people away from their home environments, the movement of animals and new crops into distant biotopes—ultimately transforming and homogenizing ecologies. So, in order to make a world, there was another world—or worlds, more accurately—that had to be destroyed. And this is really what modernity—as a historical time in the typical Western historiography—was all about. It was about the annihilation of worlds in order to form a particular kind of world with the white European in the center, and, of course, the white male property owning subject at the center of that. And to do that, the humanity of other people had to be denied. So, there is, I'd say, almost a return of the repressed, in a kind of psychoanalytic way, but it is also a bit like what Michael Taussig talks about when he describes the way certain histories can “acquire the role of the sorcerer.” A sort of “evil wind,” returns to “bewitch the living.”⁶ Even though Taussig discusses the idea in the specific history of conquest in the Amazon, I sometimes feel like something analogous is happening now with respect to climate change—as if the legacy of industrial modernity, and its ongoing fossil energy regimes, blows around in the atmosphere, bewitching subsequent generations. What I really think is interesting in the present is, rather than a process that started in previous generations whose consequences only play out in subsequent generations, we are now at a point where the feedback loop is tight enough that we'll also bewitch ourselves. We'll see the impact of decisions made within the same generation, as a result not just of the rapid acceleration of both geoclimatic and technological processes, but also of the political and social repercussions. That kind of acceleration also means that certain knowledge becomes obsolete within a generation. Each generation is destined to inhabit a new planet which they'll have to make sense of again.

⁶ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 373.

S.R: This notion of inhabiting a new planet for every generation is very fascinating to me. For my research, I was looking into the history of the entanglement of NASA and the Gaia theory, and was struck by how this idea of the planet as our home really came into public awareness in the 60s and 70s, with the space age and the search for life on other planets—and the subsequent understanding that, in all likelihood, a living planet is a fairly unique phenomenon, at least in our cosmic proximity. You often hear how this collective experience of looking back from space towards planet Earth had this lasting impact on how we see the world, this sense of uniqueness and fragility of “our home.” In your project, too, everything is related to the one common singularity: the moving planet.⁷ I feel one new sense of the planet that has been emerging more recently—which is also reflected in the idea of an anthropogenic marker—is a combination of the macrolevel understanding of the planet as a whole, and the micro perspective of the many agencies that are shaping it. Instead of being this sublime object, “the planet” becomes a sort of emergent or bottom-up entity in this view. You know I am especially interested in Lynn Margulis’s contributions to the Gaia theory. What I specifically like about Margulis’s perspective is how she ties this large scale thinking of the planetary to the smallest and most primal components of life, bacteria and the microbial mats they form. This bacterial view positions the human agency discussed in terms like “Anthropocene” or “Technosphere” in the larger context of life in general. It underlines the influence of humans, but at the same time counterbalances the anthropocentrism of these ideas.

M.W: I also appreciate Margulis’s interscalar sensibility and awareness of accumulation, of the many small things producing a larger phenomenon or event. I think this kind of awareness is what many people are struggling with right now, trying to figure out if they should stop eating meat, or take this flight or not take that flight. I recall in *Hyperobjects* Timothy Morton writing about the cognitive challenge of recognizing how certain seemingly-innocuous choices are indeed

⁷ Latour, taking inspiration from Michel Serres, contrasts Galileo’s moving Earth with Lovelock’s and Margulis’s Earth, which is moved by the many biogeochemical cycles that we depend on.

Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. See especially Lectures 2 and 3; see also the 2019 “Moving Earths” Lecture [IS THIS THE RIGHT LINK: https://www.idehist.uu.se/office-for-history-of-science/hans-rausing-lectures/hans-rausing-lecture-2019/](https://www.idehist.uu.se/office-for-history-of-science/hans-rausing-lectures/hans-rausing-lecture-2019/)

statistically or even morally inconsequential, but nonetheless, millions or billions of inconsequential choices become highly consequential.⁸ Those decisions can then contribute to slow violence. Regardless of the ideology or intention of the person starting an internal combustion engine, the material impact is the same; it's built into the system. (This should, by the way, then call attention to the agencies embedded in technologies—as ideological effects, both intentional and unintentional, but often obscured.) But back to the thread, its moments like this where we become much more like bacteria, where our status as “special,” which is what a lot of people like to claim about humans, is just the scale and speed at which industrialized humans have modified the atmosphere. Everything else may become a kind of footnote relative to that. Volcanos, bacteria, mosses, and other plants created the atmosphere through cumulative processes, rather than intention, but nonetheless opened new pathways for life. So this is also what I am trying to point to with the taxon of the self-suffocating agents; industrialized humans are not unique in the history of the planet by any means. Some of the questions that remain for me are: who and what will we industrialized humans take down with us, in the case of a runaway warming/collapse scenario? And what new social formations—as well as, ultimately, what novel lifeforms—will emerge in the aftermath?

⁸ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.