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Socio and ecological design in the Anthropocene.

Comments at HKW, Berlin

Anthropocene Campus.

In contemporary English the verb to design means *to do or plan (something) with a specific purpose in mind*, which is exactly what we have delivered – piecemeal, drip fed, in fragments, bit by bit and effectively *blindly* in accordance with our short term-ist and capitalist impulses as we have stumbled towards the Anthropocene and particularly rapidly through the industrial and post-industrial ages of the last 250 years. In this context, to declare that ‘humanity forms nature’ (as on HKW website) seems by any estimation to be a demonstration of human hubris. The human capitalist project by all its constitutive initiatives has functioned precisely in evolutionary terms as a blind watchmaker.

The object Earth, with all its overlayings of man-made infrastructures, social and political eco-systems, has materialized as a design confirming human detachment, superiority and self-appointed excellence. For many though, there is something utterly uncomfortable and inappropriate about the word.

Donna Haraway in a recent lecture, talks about the problematics of the term. She proposes that we consider amongst others Capital and/or Cthulhu as alternative suggestions, the reason being that she considers capitalism to be profoundly active in the equation and that the cthonic epoch is approached through the impossibility of existing as an individual: instead we are defined by being inextricably bound up with other organisms. At the core of her thinking is species-ism. She says; “It matters to destabilize worlds of thinking with other worlds of thinking.”

Mark and I in our collaborative art practice have a specific and perennial interest in examining human behavior through the lens of specific human and non-human animal relations. We have recently completed a 2-year artistic research project currently exhibited at ASU Museum of Art in Phoenix. The project, was commissioned and hosted by the Global Institute of Sustainability at ASU and

prompted an art and science collaboration that would highlight and discuss issues of sustainability. A decision was made to focus on species conservation issues and the Grand Canyon National Park – an area designated as both Wilderness and National Park.

Early on in our research we were drawn to two conservation programmes designed to prevent the extinction of two selected species in the area. One of these was the Californian Condor – a native bird (vulture) and a cultural icon of the American Wilderness. It was known to have bred, in the Grand Canyon but after near-extinction has been the subject of an intense and continuing capture and release conservation programme. The biggest threat to the birds' survival was thought to have been poisoning – by the condor's consumption of lead when feeding at discarded gut-piles left by hunters. To cut a long story short a decision was made in the early 80's to capture all the 27 wild Condors alive and put them in captivity. From then on a programme of conservation involving selection processes and captive breeding was put in place in which humans (scientists and agencies officials) have become the caretakers of the entire species.

For 5 years condors were extinct in the wild. However, during its tenure in confinement the species thrived, and by 1992 the captive population had nearly doubled, from 27 to a total of 52 birds. In the years that followed, recovery team scientists would continue to produce chicks using a battery of approaches including intensive veterinary care, breeding techniques like multiple clutching, and DNA fingerprinting, which allowed biologists to genetically map the entire species and establish suitable mating pairs. The next, and more foreboding phase of the project – the reintroduction and reestablishment in the wild - required broad cooperation among numerous interest groups, generous funding, scientific research, and the establishment of a safe habitat for condors in the wild. This reintroduction is now considered a successful project although it continues to be monitored and – significantly – maintained by man. Each Condor in the wild is tagged, has a GPS attached to it, all its movements can be tracked and recorded, and each body of those that die is collected. Necropsies are conducted on each retrieved corpse to determine cause of death which are then recorded and the

bodies are preserved in refrigerated storage at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

The capture and release programme is high maintenance – not only does the monitoring and retrieval of live birds keep teams of biologists busy throughout the year but the recurrent poisoning of birds indirectly by humans goes on relatively unabated. This requires recaptured birds to undergo blood transfusions and long periods of rehabilitation in captivity. Scientists there in the field made it quite clear to us that if lead substitutes were used in the hunting of deer and other game the condor population, by and large would be self-sustaining.

The condor cycle you see here is only one component of an exhibition, which focuses on the *complexity* of conservation strategies in this environment and on how one of the most consistent problematising factors, is the inconsistency of human behaviour (the behaviours exercised by those in hunting, water management, angling, tourism, biologists and in conservation itself).

The ‘we’ we so customarily deploy in our discussions in respect of matters environmental, is misrepresented implicitly as a singular discrete phenomenon because ‘we’ are irreconcilably divided in our desires and behaviour. Other components in the installation, for instance, clearly place the human species as an equal constituent within a very specific and complex ecology of others – or otherwise attempt to bring human temporal myopia into focus and speculate on the effects of the short-sightedness of a young species with a short life/attention span and the hubris to believe that technological problems will have technological fixes.

Whatever our abilities as a species, it is clear that whilst we appear to mobilise design in our every action, because of our inability to see and think and behave ecologically, to design ourselves out of an anthropocene which seems to spell our own doom and the doom of many thousands of others is, from this position, a highly unlikely prospect.

One of the key dynamics of the project and the exhibition for us was the management and attempted reconciliation of two otherwise apparently oppositional components of biologists’ work in the field– those of data and affect.

There is no place, we are accustomed to accept, in science for the recording of affect – of excitement, of sadness, anger, joy, imperative, desire in response to what is observed... and yet what is it that drives and sustains field scientists to maintain their practice – their enthusiasm and drive for discovery and delivery on their respective programmes? In this pursuit so much of what they observe has no scientific destination or proper place consigned as it is to the mere anecdotal – in this context therefore, it can be argued that much of their unique experience – in being disallowed – is lost.

It is here that I'd like to return to Donna Haraway and her words ...

“It **matters** to destabilize worlds of thinking with other worlds of thinking.”

The important words here are ‘other worlds of thinking’ and ‘destabilize’. Design is such an integral part of our being – we use design not only in our own everyday lives but also in our individual and collective approaches to progress and technology and in navigating in our physical and psychological worlds. The question is; how can our processes in designing and managing our worlds (our being and environment) be constructively destabilized. How can the linear processes of planning in accordance with a perceived status quo be disrupted? The cultural theorist Boris Groys tells us the “goal of design is to aesthetically improve the status quo – to make it more attractive, seductive and appealing to the user.

Art **also** accepts the status quo – but it accepts it as a *corpse* after transformation into a mere representation”. (On Art Activism – Eflux)

When working on a project in the early 2000s entitled *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, we conducted an artist survey of taxidermic polar bears in the UK. In assembling a number of those specimens into a gallery setting, we stripped them of their museum dioramas and informational signage. Hitherto in their respective collections, they had each been used as a representation for an entire species. In our installation we created a situation in which the audience was obliged to observe them as individual beings. Later, this individuation was

further reinforced in our photographic archive from the project by placing the provenances or histories of each bear integrally with its image.

The disruption or destabilization active in this work was not only the dislocation of their historic status as trophy or colonial acquisition and perhaps of their contemporary cultural use as icons of a declining environment. This latter can be seen as an indicator of a human approach to environmental fragility – its framing, its design. But even more poignantly was that we discovered that it was in the conspicuously 'bad, or imperfectly-stuffed polar bears, it was possible to find a glimpse of a life having been lived. And that the vulnerability triggered by this destabilisation of our making, allowed us the ability simultaneously to reflect and foretell. And here it enables a simultaneous conflation and unravelling of the epistemologies of many of the concepts connected here to the anthropocene – such as; measurement, scale, time... If the process was to be shown diagrammatically a cyclical or a circular model would emerge enabling us to reconfigure our perceptions of these conditions, which act I would argue, aligns and corresponds with the creative processes of art offering us in turn the chance to enter the cycle differently with heightened sensibilities and more responsive capacities to act.

The imperative here is to seize the opportunity to recalibrate – and to do this, we first need to disrupt a continuum of perception, belief and consequent behaviour...

