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Contamination as Collaboration

Creating a Collaborative Archive in *Frames of the Anthropocene*

Abstract

Frames of the Anthropocene is a collaborative digital exhibition launched by the Virtual Museum of the Anthropocene in 2021. Envisioned as a work-in-progress, the exhibition simultaneously archives and performs the memory of the ongoing anthropogenic changes in different environments. It is argued that many of the photographs, while seemingly focusing on various kinds of human-produced waste, in fact represent multifarious constellations and collaborations, as the waste is gradually integrated into divergent green spaces. The article foregrounds the vibrancy (Bennett, 2010) and processual character of these groupings, viewing them as depictions of temporal and spatial negotiations involving multiple actants that orient the viewers' gaze towards both human and other-than-human modalities and agencies. By bringing into focus

“nonhuman beings and unfamiliar timescales” (Morton, 2017), the author interprets the exhibition as a way of engaging the viewers and potential contributors alike in a reflection on various modes of collaboration discovered through the archive-in-progress. Finally, the article analyses the ways in which *Frames of the Anthropocene* explores the dynamics of “contamination as collaboration” (Tsing, 2015) both in its content and its processual, collaborative formula, thus attempting to transgress anthropocentrism in our understanding of the current epoch.

Keywords

Anthropocene, archive-in-progress, vibrant matter, thing-power, contamination/collaboration

Abstrakt

Kontaminacja jako współpraca: Współtworzenie archiwum w *Kadrach Antropocenu*

Kadry Antropocenu to wieloautorska wystawa cyfrowa zapoczątkowana w 2021 roku przez Wirtualne Muzeum Antropocenu. Zaplanowana jako projekt cykliczny o otwartej formule wystawa jednocześnie dokumentuje zmiany zachodzące w szeroko pojętym środowisku oraz performatywnie konstruuje pamięć o nich. Choć większość fotografii pozornie koncentruje się na różnych rodzajach produkowanych przez ludzkość odpadków, można zauważyć, że w rzeczywistości wystawa ukazuje rozmaite konstelacje i kolaboracje, w których wyniku odpadki stają się integralną częścią naturalnych przestrzeni. Autorka skupia się na żywotności (Bennett, 2010) i procesualnym charakterze tych zestawień, postrzegając je jako część ciągłego procesu negocjacji rozgrywających się w czasie i przestrzeni, angażujących wiele podmiotów. Wysuwając na pierwszy plan „istoty nieludzkie i nieznane skale czasu” (Morton, 2017), postrzega *Kadry Antropocenu* jako próbę zainspirowania widzów i potencjalnych przyszłych twórców do refleksji nad różnymi odsłonami współpracy odkrywanymi w ramach powstającego na bieżąco archiwum. Artykuł przygląda się sposobom, w jakie wystawa *Kadry Antropocenu* eksploruje dynamikę „kontaminacji jako współpracy” (Tsing, 2015) – zarówno poprzez swoją treść, jak i procesualną, opartą na współpracy formułę, dzięki którym wykracza ona poza perspektywę antropocentryczną w rozumieniu trwającej epoki.

Słowa kluczowe

antropocen, archiwum w procesie powstawania, *vibrant matter* (żywa materia), *thing-power* (moc rzeczy), kontaminacja/współpraca

Documenting the Legacy of the Anthropocene

The debate concerning the Anthropocene, the “era of man,” is currently shifting towards transgressing this label, which has long been an object of criticism. With its strong grip on popular imagination, tight enough to earn it the status of the “new grand narrative” of our times,¹ the Anthropocene has been blamed, for instance, for representing a complex reality of multiple simultaneous crises as something homogenous, and thus suggesting that the situation can be amended by applying a single universalizing strategy—which, as Claire Sagan shrewdly points out, can hardly “bode well for the prospect of a truly democratic or genuinely ecological approach to environmental justice.”² For this reason, a plethora of alternative labels have been proposed in order to draw attention to various aspects of geological, biological, and economic forces at play.³ Others suggest that although the name may have been valid in the past, we have now entered into the next geological period, marked predominantly by elevated global temperatures.⁴ But the most outspoken criticism of the Anthropocene is grounded in its inherent anthropocentrism, whose side effect is the tendency to overlook what Donna Haraway describes in her frequently quoted appeal as “myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus.”⁵ As Patricia MacCormack argues in her *Ahuman Manifesto*, the Anthropocene, due to its anthropocentric focus, transforms the entire other-than-human world into the “nonhuman, nonincluded other who cannot speak or cannot be heard,”⁶ and the ending of that geological era is a necessary prerequisite for opening up multiple new “voices, trajectories, relations and necessary activisms.”⁷

With such repeated postulates for transgressing the Anthropocene and entering into a new, less anthropocentric era, there emerge initiatives aimed at

¹ Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 9, <https://doi.org/10.14619/016>.

² Claire Sagan, “Ending the Anthropocene,” *Public Books*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.publicbooks.org/ending-the-anthropocene/#fnref-25947-14>.

³ In his article on the topic, Franciszek Chwałczyk includes an appendix listing ninety-one names proposed as alternative labels for the Anthropocene. See Franciszek Chwałczyk, “Around the Anthropocene in Eighty Names: Considering the Urbanocene Proposition,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12114458>.

⁴ This view is advanced, for instance, in Andrew Yoram Glikson’s, *The Plutocene: Blueprints for a Post-Anthropocene Greenhouse Earth* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.

⁶ Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 1.

⁷ MacCormack, *Ahuman Manifesto*, 1.

documenting the influences of the Anthropocene and its active role in shaping our (human and other-than-human) futures. This perspective is reflected in such initiatives as the Anthropocene issue of *The UNESCO Courier* (2018)⁸ with contributions by, among others, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Jan Zalasiewicz, or the multidisciplinary Anthropocene Project, bringing together artists and academics from the Anthropocene Working Group. The latter consists of a documentary film, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018),⁹ by award-winning Canadian filmmakers Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, and Edward Burtynsky, as well as a series of photograph exhibitions shown in galleries in Canada, Argentina, Sweden, Italy, and the Netherlands (2018–2023), and a book published by Steidl (2018) with contributions by the scholars Jan Zalasiewicz and Colin Waters as well as the novelist Margaret Atwood.¹⁰ Explaining the rationale behind the project, Baichwal declares that the creators' intention was not to become engaged with activism; instead, they assumed a more "experiential, meditative approach"¹¹ in order to document the planetary impacts of the current epoch precisely as they are today.

A similar goal of documenting the impacts of the Anthropocene is pursued by the Polish online institution named the Virtual Museum of the Anthropocene (VMA)—a collaborative digital project aimed at the documentation of the "environmental changes triggered by human activity."¹² The museum collective describe it as "an ephemeral institution which emerges in all the places where it is worth stopping to examine the traces left by humans," investigating the legacy of the Anthropocene as if "examined through the eyes of a being from the future."¹³ Still, the approach taken by the VMA is very different from that of Baichwal and her colleagues. While the Canadians favor a bird's-eye view and vast frames, visualizing the extent of human impact shaping the surface of the planet through images of large-scale mining and agriculture, urban landscapes, or massive landfills, the VMA aims for personal engagement through interactive projects, such as *Frames of the Anthropocene*, as well as focusing on the local and zooming in on details. Additionally, in contrast to the creators behind the Anthropocene Project, the contributors to the VMA consciously combine

⁸ *The UNESCO Courier: Welcome to the Anthropocene!* April–June 2018, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261900#>.

⁹ *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, dir. Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, and Edward Burtynsky (Canada, 2018).

¹⁰ Edward Burtynsky with Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, *Anthropocene* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2018).

¹¹ Jennifer Baichwal, "Documenting the Anthropocene," *St Antony's International Review* 15, no. 2 (2020): 90–91.

¹² Virtual Museum of the Anthropocene (VMA), VMA website, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://vma.museum/>.

¹³ VMA.

reflection with activism, organizing online events and using their platform to educate and encourage viewers to use more environment-friendly solutions or to support selected charities. In the present article, I analyze the implications of such an approach and its potential for both documenting and actively shaping the legacy of the Anthropocene.

Frames of the Anthropocene

One of the major events curated within the Museum is the digital exhibition titled *Frames of the Anthropocene*, first launched in 2020 and planned as a cyclical event (at present [February 2023], the second edition of the exhibition being available for viewing on the museum's website). The initiators and curators of the inaugural exhibition, Karolina Raczyńska and Natalia Skoczylas, thus explain the motifs behind their initiative:

We've been present on Earth for a very short time, but *our impact* on the ecosystem and geological system of our planet is so significant that it will be visible in layers of rock and soil for centuries to come The aim of the exhibition is] to show the fragmented and symbolic perception of *our presence*. Because sometimes it is really important to stop for a moment and *contemplate the traces of us, human kind*.¹⁴

As can be seen from the excerpt above, the short curatorial note accompanying the exhibition prompts the viewer to focus specifically on the traces of human presence, thus establishing a clearly anthropocentric perspective for the entire project. A closer inspection of the exhibition itself, however, suggests a different reading of the collected images.

To begin with, despite the ostensibly anthropocentric premise, the images included in both *Frames of the Anthropocene* exhibitions hardly involve any representations of humans,¹⁵ which again differentiates this project from Baichwal, Burtynsky, and de Pencier's portrayal of the Anthropocene, where small human figures occasionally provide contrast for the massive landscape transformations. In contrast, the human body in *Frames of the Anthropocene* is depicted only through human-shaped objects, fabricated representations

¹⁴ VMA (emphasis A.K.).

¹⁵ The exception is a photograph by Jaśmina Madej in the second edition of the exhibition, in which a woman's bare hand is presented against a pile of logs harvested from the forest.

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made of plastic: mannequins and dolls, or plastic dummies—as if to stress the status of the human as the Anthropocene’s *homo plasticus*. The living human body, naturally engaged in a constant exchange with the environment through the basic life processes of breathing, eating, and excreting, is here replaced by its unrelenting, immanent plastic counterpart. Since the plastic human body is a body which does not conform to the ordinary cycle of life and death, it can exceed the biological human lifespan by millennia. In this aspect, it reflects the impacts of the Anthropocene itself, whose consequences will continue long after the bodies of the humans who are responsible for its occurrence have turned to carbon particles.

But not only this: through equating the status of the plastic representations of the human body with that of the remaining surrounding objects (mostly miscellaneous rubbish), the exhibition actually opens up a different, non-anthropocentric perspective. In a photograph by Doris Arent, for instance, a naked plastic doll lies rejected on dry twigs by an untidy bin shelter with litter piling up outside. There are pieces of broken furniture and plastic buckets, an old plastic chair, and an empty beer bottle. The doll, made of the same material and having the same status as the other objects, links the human form with the plastic debris filling the back of the frame. The same

association is suggested by another photograph by Arent, where neat piles of plastic mannequins are stashed on a closed market booth, vaguely reminiscent of a factory assembly line and the endless cycle of production, usage, and disposal of plastic waste.

In fact, garbage is the undisputed main theme of the entire exhibition. Observed through the lenses of the contributors' cameras, the Anthropocene is defined by its rubbish. Out of the sixty-two photographs included in *Frames of the Anthropocene 2*, for instance, twenty-nine depict waste, debris, random pieces of rubbish, or wastebins. The crucial role of waste in documenting the Anthropocene can hardly be questioned; as Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains in her book *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019), "Waste is a remainder, a remnant of history, a ruin, and *might be understood as an unintended archive*."¹⁶ Rubbish allows us to trace our ways of living, our aspirations, and our decisions but at the same time compels us to face the often unacknowledged consequences of our actions: bringing attention to waste "generally foregrounds a concern with ends, outcomes or consequences, and the recognition of waste indicates a need for attention to what usually remains unknown."¹⁷ The curators of *Frames of the Anthropocene* make it their goal to transform these unintended archives of rubbish into an intentional archive of a documentary exhibition. Accordingly, the contributors to the exhibition persistently spotlight dumpsters and impromptu waste dumps. One of the photographs presents the unsavory remainder of someone's home renovations; a recreated home space is here reflected through abandoned pieces of furniture and furnishings, broken tiles, rejected cleaning utensils. Some of the waste appears recyclable (paper and cardboard, plastic containers); still, it is all jumbled, not sorted, and clearly not intended for reuse or recycling. Most of the photographed waste, not surprisingly, is plastic.

And understandably so—plastic is so dominant in our culture and economy that some scholars have argued that the name adopted for the geological era should be the Plasticene rather than the Anthropocene,¹⁸ considering that plastic not only creates an entirely new ecosystem known as the "plastisphere," but also given that its deposits will likely become "embedded in the geological

¹⁶ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2019), 103 (emphasis A.K.).

¹⁷ John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 22.

¹⁸ Christina Reed, "Dawn of the Plasticene Age," *New Scientist* 225, no. 3006 (31 January 2015): 28–32. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079\(15\)60215-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(15)60215-9).

record,”¹⁹ thus indefinitely becoming part of our planetary history. Plastic is both the symbol, product, and main propeller of world consumerism; its impact as the enabler of mass handling and distributing commodities across the globe is immense. According to current estimates, the amount of plastic produced worldwide is projected to increase to 33 billion tons annually by 2050.²⁰ But that is not all: as Heather Davis explains in her essay “Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” the relationship between humans and plastic is unlike our ties with other types of material. “Its role in our life,” she writes, “unlike the more abstract relationship that we have with other oil products, such as gasoline or electricity, is intimate. We use plastics to eat, clothe ourselves, as sex toys, as soothers for babies. Our computers and phones, those objects we seemingly cannot do without, could not exist without plastics.”²¹

The images included in *Frames of the Anthropocene* expose this “intimate” connection as monstrous. The mythology of plastic—“the promise of sealed, perfected, clean, smooth abundance,” which “encapsulates the fantasy of ridding ourselves of the dirt of the world, of decay”²²—is hereby countered by the image of plastic as the dirt of the world, evoking the feelings of horror and disgust through the obscenity of its excess and (non)decay. The “unintended archive” of the Anthropocene created through the images of plastic garbage dumps and random plastic waste in urban and natural spaces shows precisely the “dirt of the world” in its most unappealing, frightening guise. In this respect, *Frames of the Anthropocene* could not be more different from the images presented as part of the Anthropocene Project, impacting the viewer through their eerie, disconcerting beauty. (Admittedly, Burtynsky’s early photographs were “less about environmental concerns than aesthetics.”²³) Rather, the contributors to the VMA exhibition focus on the abjective quality of human-made waste in order to provoke emotional response. The photographs in the exhibition do not depict neat recycling garbage bins; rather, they focus on the unruly, uncontrollable heaps of rubbish spilling over the bins and designated areas, seeping into public and natural spaces.

¹⁹ Reed, „Dawn of the Plasticine Age,” 31, 32.

²⁰ Heather Davis, “Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic,” in: *Art in Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 349.

²¹ Davis, „Life and Death in the Anthropocene,” 349.

²² Davis.

²³ Kimberly Bradley, “The Anthropocene Project: The Deformation of the Earth,” *Nomad*, no. 5 (2018), <https://www.the-nomad-magazine.com/the-anthropocene-project/>.

Agencies and Assemblages

The horror and disgust provoked by these images match the affective response characteristic for the category of the “hyperabject,” proposed by Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjering as a blend of Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects and Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The Scandinavian scholars explain that hyperabjects are distributed on a massive scale and impossible to grasp “cognitively as well as affectively”;²⁴ at the same time, they remain abjective due to their aura of being “us and no longer us,” something which has been excreted and rejected.²⁵ Yet the chief characteristic of hyperabjects is their capacity for “inertness and the clogging of economic and ecological circulations produced by this inertness.”²⁶ The hyperabject, as Frantzen and Bjering explain, “is nothing but lack of agency.”²⁷ For this reason, rejected plastic is the emblematic substance of the hyperabject.

The abject, as Kristeva describes it, is revolting precisely due to its potential for reminding us through our bodily secretions that our boundaries are not fixed and may be more fluid and permeable than we would like to imagine. The garbage depicted in *Frames of the Anthropocene* photographs certainly displays similar potential. Revealing traces of the private lives of the people who disposed of it, garbage transforms that intimate connection which Davis writes about and turns it into exposure; the bodily closeness has been terminated through the act of dumping and yet traces of garbage’s links to the most private and essential dimensions of human lives still remain. Garbage in *Frames of the Anthropocene* exposes those intimate aspects as abjective, and lays bare the ugly nature of people’s seemingly attractive pursuits—redecorating one’s home, for instance, can no longer be represented solely as the act of rendering space more beautiful, since the repulsive pile of trash linked to the very same action cannot be removed from sight and consciousness.

Yet although garbage in *Frames of the Anthropocene* certainly is presented as abjective, at the same time it cannot be perceived as inert. On the contrary, it is depicted as mobile and penetrating, entering various habitats and becoming part of various constellations. It does not necessarily remain in those places

²⁴ Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste: From Hyperobject to Hyperabject,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 37, no. 6 (2020): 88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420925541>.

²⁵ Krause and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste,” 88. See also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3ff.

²⁶ Krause and Bjering, “Ecology, Capitalism and Waste,” 89.

²⁷ Krause and Bjering, 90.

where it was abandoned by humans; carried by water or wind, or animals, or pushed over or entangled by growing plants, it acquires a posthuman mobility and agency which questions its categorization as garbage. As Andrzej Marzec points out, garbage as a category exists solely in the human world; from the non-human perspective everything that exists is useful in one way or another.²⁸ Yet although garbage comes into being in the relationship with humans, it further becomes involved in various relationships with other-than-humans, “entering their reality and transforming it.”²⁹ Consequently, the pieces of garbage in *Frames of the Anthropocene* become habitats for living organisms, entering into assemblages and continuing their existence in a way entirely independent of humans. Rather than displaying inertia, they are becoming vibrant matter in the manner discussed by Jane Bennett.

In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett describes objects she encountered during her walk in Baltimore—a plastic glove, a mat of oak pollen, a dead rat, a white plastic bottle cap, and a stick of wood—as items that oscillate between debris and things, exhibiting their thing-power through impacting one another, the environment, and Bennett herself.³⁰ The “energetic vitality”³¹ of these items revealed through their assemblage persuaded Bennett to perceive them “as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”³² In her materialist theory, Bennett differentiates between living organisms and inorganic matter; as she explains, “thing-power arises from bodies inorganic as well as organic.”³³ She proposes an extended definition of agency, including not only undertaking action or responsiveness, but also different modalities of inherent capacities for reception and self-organization.³⁴ The photographs in *Frames of the Anthropocene* show garbage as both “acting” and being “acted upon.” Placed among plants, for instance, plastic garbage may impact on their absorption of light or water (while serving to retain water for other organisms); in certain conditions it may also act as a micro-glasshouse. Depending on the size and weight of a piece of garbage, plants may change their shape in order to overpass it or use it for support. Various

²⁸ Andrzej Marzec, *Antropocień: Filozofia i estetyka po końcu świata* (Warszawa: PWN, 2021), 112.

²⁹ Aleksandra Brylska, “Życie zaczyna się na wysypisku: O niechcianych mieszkańcach miast”, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 4, no. 42 (2019): 565. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843860PK.19.029.11925>.

³⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

³¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.

³² Bennett.

³³ Bennett, 6.

³⁴ Bennett, 33.

species of animals, in turn, can use garbage as a place for hiding, hibernating or laying eggs. In one of the photographs in the first edition of the exhibition, for instance, we can see an old cigarette package which has become a hunting ground for ants eager to prey on an earthworm and a snail.

In *Frames of the Anthropocene*, there is no single agency at play; instead, the photographs depict assemblages, which, as Bennett explains, owe their “agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute” them.³⁵ These materialities and agencies are pointedly nonhuman and display communicative potential: not only are the individual elements of the assemblages engaged in constant communication (and communion) with one another, but also their very existence is a kind of message, an indication of their capacity for commanding agencies on their own, regardless of their anthropocentric contexts.

In this aspect, some of the photographs included in *Frames of the Anthropocene* bear resemblance to Diana Lelonek’s project *Centre for Living Things* (2016–). From 2016, the artist has been collecting and photographing waste products of the capitalist economy, which have (been?) transformed into vital elements of living, thriving ecosystems. Lelonek’s description of the origins of her project corresponds closely to Bennett’s sensation of being the object of agency exerted by the items she came across while walking in Baltimore: “Waste-plants (*śmieciorośliny*) came to me themselves; I started to encounter them often while walking in the forests.”³⁶ In her own words, Lelonek’s project stems from the desire to “transcend nature–culture dualism.”³⁷ While the artist admits that garbage-based habitats are characteristic of the Anthropocene, she insists that these phenomena should not be approached from the anthropocentric perspective. Garbage, as Lelonek explains, has the potential to transform itself as well as the organisms with which it enters into assemblages. The same mechanism can be observed in *Frames of the Anthropocene*, where garbage becomes part of various configurations including plants and mushrooms. In a photograph by Jaśmina Madej, a bolete mushroom grows from a tuft of green moss right next to two pieces of broken rooftile having exactly the same shade of brown color as the mushroom cap. As a result, the tiles not only impact water retention by the moss and create a potential habitat for insects and other small animals that can find shelter underneath them, but also provide camouflage

³⁵ Bennett, 34.

³⁶ Diana Lelonek quoted in: Anna Wandzel, “Sztuka roślin,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2018): 273 (trans. A.K.), <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2018.2.17>.

³⁷ Diana Lelonek, “Sztuka nie-ludzkich aktorów,” *Przestrzenie Teorii*, no. 31 (2019): 136 (trans. A.K.), <https://doi.org/10.14746/pt.2019.31.6>.

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for the growing mushroom. Another image (by Karolina Raczyńska) shows a strange kind of Anthropocenic hybrid: a tree stump connected with fungi but also with an artificial daffodil tucked into it. Combining both organic and artificial matter, as well as various modalities of being alive (living fungi and an inorganic flower, as well as a decaying tree stump, no longer alive and growing as a tree, but still enriching the habitat through its decay), the hybrid plant becomes an active assemblage negotiating impacts between various participants of the configuration as well as impacting the surrounding habitat. In addition, through its ambiguous status it embodies Anthropocenic tensions between organic and inorganic matter, and presents an emergent form of creation that is constantly shifting and evolving.

Finally, many photographs in *Frames of the Anthropocene* juxtapose different temporal modalities of various forms of creation. A green shield bug sitting on a plastic bag in a photograph by Natalia Skoczylas draws the viewer's attention to the contrast of lifespans, which can be measured in months or millennia. Another image by Skoczylas, a photograph of a glass bottle in a tree, presents two different potentials for achieving lifespans far exceeding a single human



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life. There are also several photographs representing plastic items, plants, and mushrooms, combined together in forest environments. Both plastic and mushrooms hint at temporal perspectives extending far into the future. Plastic, due to its petroleum origins, is both rooted in the geological past and projects millennia ahead due to the virtual indestructability of its particles;³⁸ similarly, though individual mushrooms are ephemeral, the mycelium—according to current scientific knowledge—can potentially live indefinitely. These differently measured lifespans and temporal modalities are radically dissimilar from the human perception and experience of time, which in turn encourages the viewers to reflect on their anthropocentric perspective on the Anthropocene and shifts the narrative of *Frames of the Anthropocene* away from “the traces of us, the human kind.” Instead, a different kind of agency takes over, one emerging

³⁸ See Monika Bakke, “Pandemiczne wspólnoty przenoszone drogą plastikową,” in: *Pandemia: Nauka, Sztuka, geopolityka*, eds. Mikołaj Iwański and Jarosław Lubiak (Szczecin: Akademia Sztuki w Szczecinie, 2018), 147.

from the juxtapositions and collaborations between diverse entities exercising their “thing-power” through assemblages.

The view of the Anthropocene as recorded by VMA’s exhibition stems from the combination of different agencies enacting their powers. On the one hand, there are photographs taken by human contributors, focusing on the human-made residue visible in various kinds of spaces. On the other, the photographs depict various kinds of unexpected assemblages emergent through multifaceted exchanges between other-than-human actors, often transgressing human perception (such as chemical exchanges between garbage and plants, occurring in the soil) and temporality (plastic and mycelium). In addition, it can be argued that these other-than-human assemblages exercise their thing-power by compelling human contributors to the exhibition to document them; akin to objects encountered by Bennett during her walk in Baltimore, they “issue a call” and “provoke affects.”³⁹ Even if we do not quite understand their message, we are responding to it nonetheless.

Collaborative Archive

As a result, *Frames of the Anthropocene* clearly expands beyond the goals defined by its curators, whose declared aim is limited to contemplating “human traces” while creating an archive-in-progress of the “human era.” Instead, the exhibition confronts the viewer with traces of both human and other-than-human actors and assemblages, all coexisting and sometimes collaborating in ways which could not possibly be predicted or controlled. The photographs become an exercise in the logic of contamination as collaboration, or collaboration as contamination. As Anna Tsing explains in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, livable collaborations are the undisputed condition of survival in the late capitalist, Anthropocenic reality: “staying alive—for every species—requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die.”⁴⁰ Contamination as collaboration compels us to abandon the way of thinking rooted in the belief in self-contained individuals and acknowledge our vulnerability to others—where “our” refers not only to human but also other-than-human modalities of existence.

³⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4. About the “provocative” capacity of waste see also: Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), ix–x.

⁴⁰ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 31.

A great potential of *Frames in the Anthropocene* lies in its open-ended, collaborative character. The VMA and the curators describe their project as a work-in-progress and the curatorial note ends with the promise: “*Frames of the Anthropocene* will come back in a few months. If you’d like your photo to be part of this exhibition just contact us. We’ll happily see and share your view on our epoch.” Consequently, *Frames of the Anthropocene* becomes a collaborative archive in progress, growing out of an intricate network of collaborations and contaminations between human and other-than-human participants and contributors, exercising their agencies while also being acted upon by others. Due to this collaborative, open-ended approach the VMA project advances a very different documentation of the Anthropocene than Baichwal, de Pencier, and Burtynsky’s Anthropocene Project. Instead of stunning wide landscape shots and planetary impacts, *Frames of the Anthropocene* focuses on a close-up view of human–other-than-human contaminations and configurations. Rather than recording inert hyperobjects, the photographs document living, interacting assemblages, exercising their thing-power in shaping the biosphere and establishing organic–artificial hybrids.

As a result, *Frames of the Anthropocene* manages to transgress an oft-criticized reliance upon the problematic Anthropos in theorizing the Anthropocene. Rather, it encourages us to think in terms of precarity and potentialities of various collaborations. It can be argued that in the act of creating a collaborative archive the contributors are actively shaping the memory of the Anthropocene as well as potentially carving pathways for future post-Anthropocenic and post-anthropocentric frameworks.



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