

## Editorial

### Creative Writing and Art Population, Ecology, and the Malthusian Imagination

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This is not the first time that I begin an editorial with Italo Calvino. I did so for the special issue on “Urban Ecologies,” and I do so again now, since the topic, “Population, Ecology, and the Malthusian Imagination” resonates convincingly with the creative algorithms of my favorite writer. In his *Invisible Cities*, in fact, Calvino provides us with a perfect example of how “Malthusian imagination” works. “Each year,” Marco Polo says to the Khan, “I stop at Procopia and take lodging in the same room in the same inn.” Regularly, from the same window of that same room, Marco lingers to look outside. The first year, what he sees is a typical countryside landscape: “a ditch, a bridge, a little wall, a medlar, a field of corn, a bramble patch with blackberries, a chicken yard, the yellow hump of a hill, a white cloud, a stretch of blue sky shaped like a trapeze” (131). This landscape is also distinctive, at first glance, for the total absence of inhabitants. Year after year, however, things change. Little by little, strange people appear. Silent, round-faced characters now dwell in the fields, in the ditch, in the chicken coop, on the trees... Gnawing an ear of corn or chewing a leaf, they look polite, even friendly—only a bit odd. Still, they are there, and they are many: sixteen, twenty-nine, forty-seven... and the more you count, the more they multiply. By the end of the tale, these bizarre figures have become *really* many. So many, that they even cover the sky. And they are not only outside the window. Closing his story, Marco adds: “There are twenty-six of us lodged in my room: to shift my feet I have to disturb those crouching on the floor. I force my way among the knees of those seated on the chest of drawers and the elbows of those taking turns on the bed: all very polite people, luckily” (132). Even though Calvino’s invisible cities are unreal by definition, few accounts of what overpopulation looks like could be more realistic than the story of Procopia. Here, you can find the math of the Malthusian mind: within a determined timescale, space, resources, and population result in ever-growing disproportion. The only non-realistic element of this fictional episode, perhaps, is the kindness of these round-faced figures smiling with freckles on their cheeks and their lips tinged with blackberries.

Overpopulation is one of the triggering themes of the environmental debate. It was 1968 when Paul and Anne Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, and another path-breaking and highly debated volume, *Limits to Growth*, appeared in 1972—the

same year as *The Invisible Cities*. Responding to an inquiry from Aurelio Peccei and the Club of Rome, in that report a group of MIT scientists made a genuinely Malthusian forecast: given a “business as usual” scenario, by 2072 the combination of unlimited growth in population, resource extraction, production and consumption of material goods, would in the long run result in a crash of the planet’s systems. Today this predicted picture, based on statistical data and computer simulations, has been updated and in some respects disproved. But the problem remains, and “Anthropocene” is the name we are giving to the confluence of these factors with the dynamics of planetary cycles. As the essays included in the scholarly section brilliantly edited by Margarita Carretero González and Hannes Bergthaller demonstrate, science and statistics are not the only terrain where the Malthusian imagination is cultivated. Literature, film, and art are privileged grounds where it grows and flourishes. In our section, we will explore this topic relying in particular, although not exclusively, on the contribution of visual art.

The first of our artists—and also author of the cover of this *Ecozon@* issue—is cinematographer, photographer, and digital developer Mario Amura. A native of Naples, but internationally active and renowned, Amura’s work has always demonstrated his triple vocation: that of a photo-reporter, an *engagé* documentarist, and an aesthetically visionary artist. The images selected for our art section emphasize this last vocation, showing, however, how all three are seamlessly interwoven with one another. They come from *Napoli Explosion* (2007-2017), a live-performance photographic project consisting of the dynamic combination of pictures and music, based on a technique called *StopEmotion*®.<sup>1</sup> The setting is the spectacular view of New Year’s Eve fireworks on Mt. Vesuvius. Spectacular, but simultaneously grim: Mt. Vesuvius, as we all know, is an active volcano. Its radial extension is home to nearly 3,000,000 people, 800,000 of whom live under direct threat of an eruption in the so-called “red zone.”<sup>2</sup> Shot by Amura and his troupe over eleven years, *Napoli Explosion* reproduces the literally detonating combination of our overwhelming human presence and the hidden power of a seemingly dormant nature.<sup>3</sup>

Implicitly evoking the famous “Plinian” eruption of 79 AD, so named after the description recorded by Pliny the Elder, these fireworks act like a gigantic

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<sup>1</sup> *StopEmotion* is now developed by Emoticon s.r.l. as Phlay, a digital application for live-editing real-time videos from sequences of pictures played on music, internationally patented by Amura. *Napoli Explosion* is one of many experimental projects of the artist’s based on this technique.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zona\\_rossa\\_del\\_Vesuvio](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zona_rossa_del_Vesuvio). On Vesuvius as “Europe’s ticking time bomb,” see Katherine Barnes’s article in *Nature*, which is preceded by the following editorial caption: “Vesuvius is one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world—but scientists and the civil authorities can’t agree on how to prepare for a future eruption” (140).

<sup>3</sup> From 2007 to 2015 the photos for *Napoli Explosion* were shot solo by Amura. Since 2016, a “polyphonic” photo-ensemble was formed, which includes Christian Arpaia, Claudia Ascione, Eleonora Grieco, Raffaele Losco, Marco Rambaldi, Marco Ricci, Armando Serrano, and Maurizio Valsania. Original music by Louis Siciliano. See <https://mario-amura.com/stopemotion/>.

synchronized exorcism of the “violently inhumane” forces (Cohen 271) coming from the underground. Dancing with this exorcism every year in a different way, *Napoli Explosion* reveals a number of stories: stories of people, of animals, of chemical violence. To my eye, these pictures also document how high real estate speculation has climbed on the slopes of Vesuvius: as it appears distinctly from these images, houses almost verge on the crater. Black and silent behind the blasting colors, the volcano is the unspoken referent of all this, a very concrete threat dysfunctionally but inseparably tied to the “Malthusian imagination” of this place. John Berger has written: “What makes photography a strange invention—with unforeseeable consequences—is that its primary raw materials are light and time” (85). In this project, unpredictability is not only due to the intersection of light and time. It is due to the fact that what would seem to be a repetitive experience actually changes every year. In conversations, Amura has told me that *Napoli Explosion* is not simply about an aesthetic experience, but also intrinsically an anthropological and psychological project. It is so, because it investigates how the volcano constantly, but in always-different ways, enters the fears, the hopes, and the convulsive emotional dimension of generations of people caught between the land and the sea as if between a womb and a trap. Beyond folkloristic discourse, these fires express periods of crisis, the desire to forget or to rebuild, and, paradoxically, the need to resist—while at the same time remaining part of a place whose mind is and can be “violently inhumane.” Standing with his team on a cold mountaintop facing the volcano, Amura is like Pliny the Elder. And the story he tells has two faces: the face of a dark nature that might swallow our human presence, and the face of this incontrollable humanity, whose unspoken desire is, perhaps, just to be swallowed by this landscape of inhuman forces.

The second selection of artworks, titled *Climate Art Projects*, also comes from Italy. Its author, Andreco, is the protagonist of a large number of exhibits and performances across various continents. A native of Rome, Andreco has a “Leonardesque” feature: besides being an artist, he is also a scientist. The holder of a PhD in environmental engineering, he specialized in sustainability and green technologies, with collaborations that involve Columbia University, Bologna University, and NASA. Inspired by American Land Art, his works lie at the intersection of scientific research and artistic expression (see Andreco, *Climate Art* 83). This explains the ideal subtitle that, in our e-mail exchange, he suggested for his contribution: *Art, Science and Ecology at the Time of Climate Change*. Natureculture is at the core of Andreco’s works. At center stage in his eco-artistic and scientific research we find the human impact on natural systems, the sustainability of our footprint given the planet’s limited carrying capacity, the way we shape the environment, and a host of symbols representing our relationship with the more-than-human world. These topics are explored with various techniques, which include public installations, videos, wall paintings, and drawings. The connection with the ecology of overpopulation is the distinctive feature of his creations: as curator Andrea Lerda notes, Andreco’s art clearly stresses the fact that “anthropic

interference is the primary cause of environmental harm: from the constant rise of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, the pollution of land and sea, climate change, and cementification.” His works, however, never take the form of “propaganda,” but rather “offer reflections on alarming subjects that the viewer can discover and analyze” (232). Programmatically site-specific, the works displayed here situate themselves perfectly along these lines. Pictures 1 to 3 are wall paintings, respectively displayed in Paris (*Climate 01 – Climate Change – Causes and Consequences – Paris*) and Venice (*Climate 04 – Sea Level Rise – Venice*). They are part of a tetralogy on climate that also includes *Climate 02 – Emissions – Bologna* and *Climate 03 – Desertification – Apulia*, all of which are conceived to be in direct conversation with the places where they are installed. In our particular case, Paris and Venice perfectly represent the political and material aspects of climate change with its connection to overpopulation: *Climate 01*, in fact, was painted in the French capital on the occasion of the Paris Climate Agreements in 2015, whereas *Climate 04*, exhibited in the Venice Art Biennale, bear witness to the alarming situation in the Lagoon’s ecosystems: a paradigmatically endangered ecosystem threatened by global warming, political mismanagement, and the overwhelming influx of tourists who daily invade Venice, often on board gigantic cruise ships. Picture 4, *The End – Anthropocene Parade* testifies to a collective action performed in 2017 at the Centro Pecci for Contemporary Art in Prato. A group of actors carrying black flags with graphic illustrations of CO<sub>2</sub> particles enacts a funeral cortège, which is at the same time an admission of guilt toward the Earth and an exorcism against its death. Inspired by Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s *The Ends of the World*, *The End – Anthropocene Parade* also stages the end of the Holocene and the arrival of this new geological epoch dominated by the footprint of our species. The last three pictures, a painting from *Back to the Land*, *Rockslide*, and *Total Black* (both 2016) embody Andreco’s Anthropocenic narrative and “mineral aesthetics,” representing the apparently abstract geometry of elements that enter the very core of our materiality (See Andreco, *Climate Art Project*).

This creative section has concentrated on visual art for its explicit bond with the special focus topic of this issue of *Ecozon@*. Interestingly, however, its literary component explores other populations: nonhuman or more-than-human beings that live alongside us. Their stories come from two poems. The first one is “Costume Shop” by Canadian author Terry Trowbridge. This “meditation about distributive justice, belonging” and habitats materializes in the author’s own backyard, where human food scraps are interlaced with co-evolutionary companionships and animal creativity. With the force of its ironical humbleness, a “subversive” human-nonhuman complicity takes the shape of an open vision of the future: “I leave the compost open / because birds can sew. / I eat lemons so to seed / a subversive justice.” In perfect conversation with “Costume Shop” and, remarkably, with the visual art selection is the second poem, “After the Cyclone” by Australian author Louise Boscacci. Concerned to explore “affect and atmosphere in the more-than-human Anthropocene,” Boscacci’s verses portray the strange but ordinary

interlacements of the Anthropocene, where extreme climatic phenomena, “formalin-fixed” insect specimens, and the solitude of a scientist in her lab virtually communicate with the biosemiotic stubbornness of newborn birds. Here, like in a multiple blast (“atom bomb / carbon bomb / bomb cyclone”), poetry emerges from the confluence of human words and more-than-human voices that articulate the resilience of the world.

All these contributions have, I think, something in common, namely, the sense that reality, whether in human or more-than-human forms, has a “Malthusian imagination.” This is the ever-growing imagination of matter that expresses itself in the chemistry of volcano eruptions and fireworks, in carbon particles and rising seas, in human food for bird seeding, in verses and magpie voices rising “after the cyclone”—and, also, in the odd round-faced characters that add silent kindness to the landscape of Calvino’s *Procopia*.

I would like to conclude these few pages on a personal note. This is my last editorial. To serve as *Ecozon@*’s Creative Writing and Art Section editor has been one of the most inspiring experiences for me. In the last four years I have had the opportunity to approach artists and writers from whom I received stimuli and ideas that enlarged my horizon as a critic. My profound gratitude to all of them. This exciting experience would never have been possible without the exceptional editorial team of *Ecozon@*, and in particular Carmen Flys Junquera and Axel Goodbody: thank you for providing me with a “pass” to approach these amazing people who give a creative form to our theories and struggles. And, even more, thanks to all our *Ecozon@* readers. These undisciplined conversations continue. Keep following!

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