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Art Addressing the Anthropocene

Wolfgang Welsch

Abstract

The current diagnosis that the era we are living in ought to be conceived as anthropocene has two implications: 1. Human activity is changing the superficial as well as the deep structure of our planet to a formerly unknown degree; and 2. The foreseeable catastrophic consequences of our impact on life on this planet command a fundamental change of our technological-consumerist attitude. How can the arts address this situation?

One relatively superficial option is ecological art. But, despite all its good intentions, it often just contributes to the widespread sedation procedures that prevent us from taking the necessary measures. A different option consists in exploring a possible future of the planet that no longer counts or relies on humans, who, due to their activities, might disappear anyway in a few decades. Nature might then take its own way again. How can art picture a no longer human-based future state of our planet? This is what this paper tries to elucidate, along some examples from the arts. In the end, however, depicting a possible vanishment of humans also stimulates efforts to avoid this.

Key Words

Anthropocene; contemporary art; earth without humans; ecological art; future; nature invading museums; novel life forms; tsunami boulders

1. The modern way of thinking and the problem of the Anthropocene

"If man or the thinking, observing being is banished from the surface of the earth, this moving and sublime spectacle of nature is nothing but a sad and silent scene. The universe is dumb; silence and night overtake it. Everything changes into a vast solitude where unobserved phenomena occur in a manner dark and mute. It is the presence of man that gives interest to the existence of beings [...] Man is the sole point from which to begin, and to which all must be brought back." [1]

This is an exemplary formulation of the modern, anthropocentric way of thinking. It stems from Diderot, from his article about the *Encyclopedia*, published in 1755.

Fourteen years later, in 1769, a very different author writes: "Who knows the races of animals which came before us? Who knows the races of animals which will come after ours?" "Every animal is more or less a human being, every mineral is more or less a plant, every plant is more or less an animal. There is nothing fixed in nature . . ." "Everything changes, everything passes away." [2]

Of course, this other author is Diderot again but a Diderot who, in the meantime, has adopted the perspective of evolution and thus has become a strong critic of the modern way of thinking that he had proclaimed fourteen years earlier. The last quotation is to be found in his essay, *D'Alembert's Dream*. Now, humans are no longer the leading figure, according to whose "unique concept" everything is to be understood. Instead, they are only one of many phenomena in the series of evolution and neither its last nor its highest phenomenon. Now, it would be foolish to try to understand the world from a human perspective. The new measure is the "general flow" of evolution. [3] And this one no longer gives any honoring to humankind. [4]

These two statements from the beginning of modernity still characterize the problem of the Anthropocene that we are currently living through. [5] On the one hand, there is the modern dogma of human sovereignty, but it has led us, especially through its technological effects, to the brink of the collapse of our living conditions. On the other hand, there is the thought of evolution. From that point of view, the end of human civilization could even be seen as a natural process. As in the course of evolution, ninety-nine percent of species ever originated have died out, so why should it be any different for our species? We are dependent on nature but nature is not dependent on us. Nature will continue to exist even without us humans and will produce new species without being disturbed by human intervention.

2. Positions of art

How do the arts address this critical situation? There are three options.

The first and quite current one is ecological art. It makes us aware of ecological interdependencies and demonstrates possible ways of healing. There is no doubt that ecological art has great merits. But, over the last few years, two concerns have come to my mind. One is external. The ecological interventions have become part of a sedation industry that prevents us from taking the necessary measures. The artworks urge such measures but, in their reception, they often serve as substitutes for measures that do not take place. The other concern is internal. Often, although certainly not always, ecological art looks like a documentary report. It illustrates a good intention and a ready-made opinion. To be sure, all this is aesthetically arranged but does that already make it art? "Well meant," Gottfried Benn once stated, is the opposite of art.[6] In the field of ecological works, one finds just too much good intention and definiteness, whereas art always requires uncertainty, ambiguity and irritation.[7]

The second option is not environment-centered but human-centered. It does, however, imagine a shift of the human to the post-human. This way, it bypasses the question whether the earth will continue to be a place for humans or, through humans' activities, become an inhuman terrain. It rather imagines a transformation of the human condition that would make us independent of any terrestrial conditions. Artificial Intelligence and virtualization technologies are supposed to do the job.[8] So the technologically caused problems of the Anthropocene are to be countered by new technologies. This is obviously queer, per se, and, in addition, there are serious doubts whether these techno fantasies will ever be anything other than reveries.

Therefore I will deal with the third option only. Instead of appeasing us or bypassing the hard question of an end of the Anthropocene, it devotes itself to exploring a possible future of the planet that no longer counts or relies on humans but takes its own way, as nature always did. So, in the following, my question is: How do contemporary artists picture a no longer human-based, or human-contaminated, future state of our planet?

3. Early visions of an ending of the Anthropocene

When one addresses this perspective, one may, however, before looking at contemporary art, remember some artistic endeavors

from the twentieth century.

a. Max Ernst (1891–1976): decaying cities, airplane traps, novel hybrid creatures

Some of Max Ernst's paintings, for example, can be seen today as suggesting that humans will, due to the consequences of their technology, disappear from the earth and that non-human nature will recapture the areas of civilization and, in the future, develop undisturbed by humans. Certainly, Max Ernst did not know the term 'Anthropocene,' nor did he have in mind the effects of climate change that make us shudder today. Nevertheless, artists are sometimes visionaries. They make something tangible that they themselves only suspect but cannot yet identify. In this sense, some of Max Ernst's paintings seem to point in the direction of an end of the Anthropocene.

First, there are huge deserted cities: such as *Die ganze Stadt*, 1936/37 and *Die ganze Stadt*, 1935/36. One sees only solidified and decaying architecture but no people. Instead, the vegetation begins to overgrow the cities, to retrieve its space.

Second, there are paintings showing traps that catch airplanes, such as the two versions of *Jardin gobe-avions*, 1935. [Version One][Version Two] Gluttonous vegetation devours airplanes, the proud symbol of technological civilization.

Third, there are paintings, *Die Horde*, 1927, and *Zoomorphes Paar in der Schwangerschaft*, 1933, that show new creatures, semi-anthropomorphic hybrids, as they may populate and dominate the earth after the end of human civilization.

Finally, there is a mysterious and too-little-known painting from 1955, entitled *The Twentieth Century*. In an unusually gloomy vision, the deserted earth is covered with encrusted structures. Life is frozen; even the moon above it points in the direction of lifelessness. No more life-giving sun stands above the earth but only a dead star, itself another witness of torpidity and death.

Once again: Nobody spoke of an Anthropocene at that time. The occasions for these works lay in the twentieth century, not the twenty-first. They lay in the lifetime of Max Ernst. One might think of the World War I or of a premonition of the World War II; or of experiences with the Moloch metropolis and the destructive consequences of technical civilization. Max Ernst had probably such things in mind when he created these works. But their potential reaches, as is often the case in art, beyond that. Such visions of an end of human civilization and of a future in which nature will go on without humans and regain dominion

on this planet are highly relevant today in view of the Anthropocene.

b. Richard Oelze (1900–1980): end expectation, novel organisms

Let us take one more trip into the past. Some of Richard Oelze's paintings today can also be related to the Anthropocene. They seem like representations of a vaguely anticipated end of mankind or like visions of novel organisms that will subsequently populate the earth.

First of all, there is the famous painting, *Die Erwartung*, 1935-36, a group of people look out into a landscape that has threatening features; we almost inevitably think of gigantic smog or another catastrophe eclipsing the earth.

Then there are paintings, *Eine Landschaft (Fernen)*, 1935, and *Ausserhalb*, 1965, that show novel mythical or hybrid creatures as they may populate the earth after the disappearance of man. Vegetation seems to be on the way to becoming animal-like, or one sees chains of strange figures or new intermediate creatures between fish and other life forms, organisms as they could develop on earth after the disappearance of man.

4. Contemporary artistic works considering an end of the Anthropocene

Let us now turn to contemporary thematizations of the Anthropocene and its possible end.

a. Oldest things will survive

A first option points out, conservatively, so to speak, that some of the oldest forms of life will continue to exist after we humans have disappeared.



James Darling & Lesley Forwood, *Living Rocks – A Fragment of “the Universe,”* 2019 Video installation, Collateral Event at the 58th Art Biennial Venice 2019 Photo: Wolfgang Welsch

In their video installation, *Living Rocks – A Fragment of the Universe*, at the 58th Venice Biennial in Venice, Australian artists James Darling and Lesley Forwood presented a landscape full of rock-like thrombolites. Thrombolites are living fossils that have existed for about three million years. They are called “living stones” because they look like stones. Yet they are not stones but living organisms. They have all along been responsible for the charging of our atmosphere with oxygen, and thus for making possible all higher forms of life, including human life.



James Darling & Lesley Forwood, *Living Rocks – A Fragment of the Universe*, 2019 Videoinstallation, Collateral Event at the 58th Art Biennial Venice 2019 Photo: Wolfgang Welsch

These thrombolites, so the work suggests, will persist even after the end of the Anthropocene, just as they have survived many other catastrophes before. But the human timescale is different from theirs. It is quite natural that we who arose long after them will disappear long before them.



Rimini Protokoll, *win >< win*, 2017–18
© CCCB Martí E. Berenguer, 2017

Another example: The theater installation *win > < win*, by the group Rimini Protokoll, shown in 2017–18 as part of the exhibition, “After the End of the World,” in Barcelona, aims in a similar direction. It makes clear that jellyfish are enormously robust in contrast to the fragility of human existence. Jellyfish have been floating in the oceans for at least 670 million years, and almost everything that damages today’s ecosystem seems to do them good: overfishing of the oceans and plastic waste reduce their predators and, in warmer waters, the jellyfish blossom while many fish perish.



Rimini Protokoll, *win > < win*, 2017–18
© CCCB Martí E. Berenguer, 2017

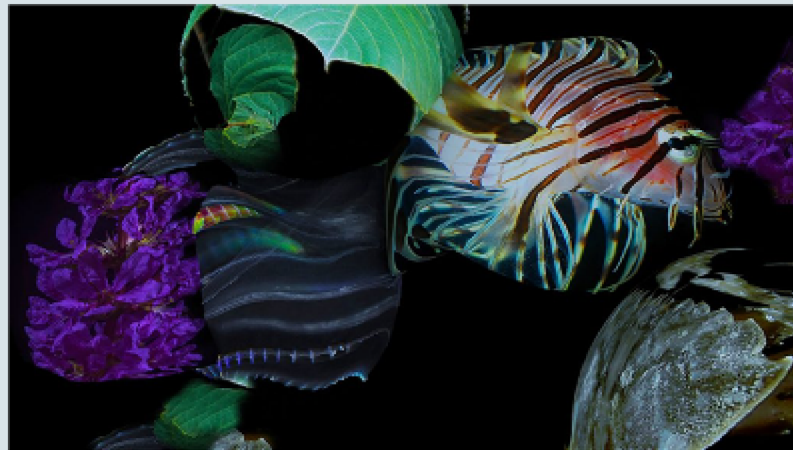
Developed together with marine biologists, this installation suggests jellyfish, “will be the last to be extant when everything else decays.”[9]

Let me mention, in this context, that some creatures, unlike jellyfish, that we highly value are capable of withstanding the

worst of civilizational devastation. In Hiroshima, the first new life to stir again after the nuclear catastrophe was a mushroom—and not just any mushroom but a matsutake, one of Asia’s most valuable edible mushrooms. It grew up on the city’s nuclear-contaminated rubble. This mushroom is also special in the fact that it cannot be cultivated but only grows wild. So not only comparatively primitive creatures, like jellyfish, but also some that enjoy the highest cultural esteem are apparently able to continue to exist unaffected by the end of our culture.

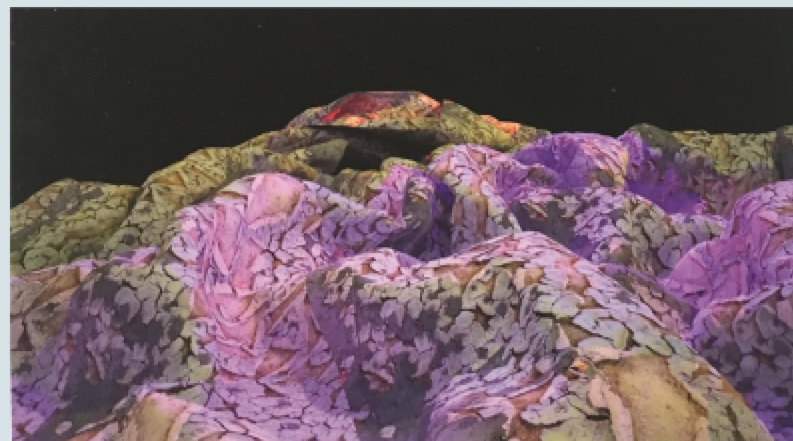
b. Novel life forms

A second option suggests that, after our time, completely new forms of life will emerge that are perfectly adapted to the new conditions through which we have put ourselves out of business. Some artists try to imagine and visualize such future critters.



Eva Papamargariti, *Precarious Inhabitants*, 2017
© Eva Papamargariti

In 2017, in a video entitled, *Precarious Inhabitants*, Eva Papamargariti showed new forms of life that may arise when fish or frogs pick up plastic and thus mutate, literally incorporating the plastic components.



Or she created, as another prospect into a possible future, amorphous cell surfaces that elude any solid formation and identification.



Diana Danelli, Memoria Botanica (2019)
© Diana Danelli

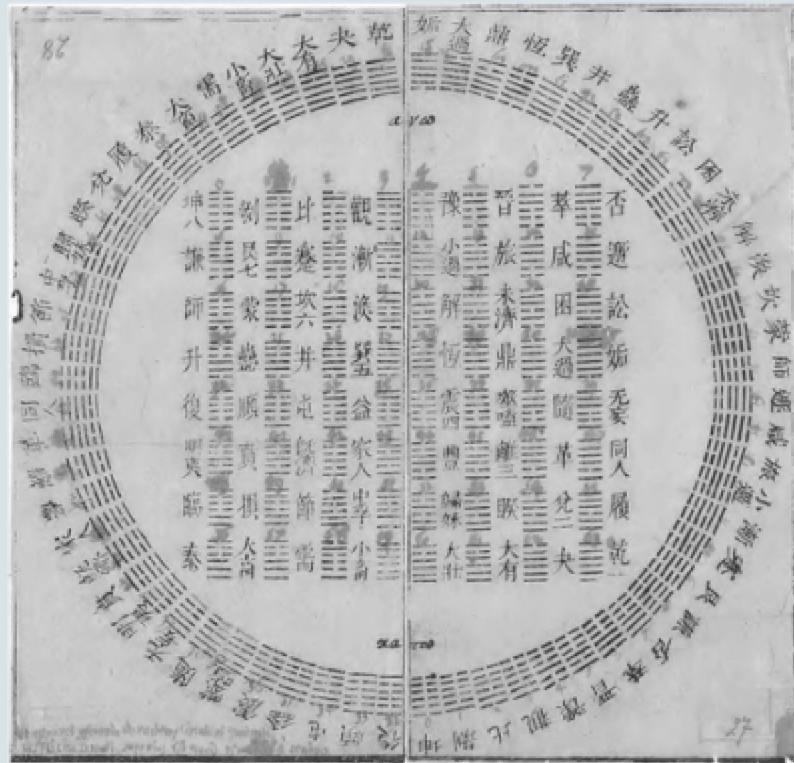
In a similar and yet different way, Diana Danelli considered an interesting transformation of plants in her work, *Memoria Botanica*, from 2019. Plants, she thinks, will certainly survive the end of our civilization. They account for a good eighty percent of the earth's biomass anyway, and they are far more adaptable than we are.

The particularly interesting point in this work is the following: After the end of our civilization, humankind will not be completely over. To be sure, humans will no longer physically exist but some plants will have integrated parts of the human genome into their DNA. Such integration (endosymbiosis) is nothing unusual in evolution. More than two billion years ago, some eukaryotes absorbed oxygen-consuming bacteria; this is how the mitochondria were formed that today still represent the power plant of every animal cell. And other eukaryotes have ingested oxygen-producing bacteria, such as cyanobacteria, and thus created the basis for the later plant world. Similarly, Danelli believes, plants could also absorb some human genes and use them for their purposes.[10]

Let us look back for a moment. With Max Ernst, the vegetation had taken over after the disappearance of humankind, with nothing human remaining. Human civilization was to decay, and a vegetation that has nothing in common with our civilization

was to shape the earth. It's different with Diana Danelli. Humans continue to exist in some fragments that the plants have incorporated, and these human remains help the plants to new growth and variety. Humans live on as a service provider to the plant world.

In *Memoria Botanica*, this genetic immigration of humans into the genome of plants, in this case, peonies, is illustrated by the integration of a highly cultural product: a diagram of the *I Ching*, owned by Leibniz, the great theorist of continuity from the smallest to the greatest.



Leibniz' diagram of hexagrams of the I Ching Source: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover, LBr 105, Bl 27 r u. 28 r

The lines of the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, projected onto the plant leaves, look like gene sections. Maybe that is scientifically questionable. But it's beautiful and comforting. Something of human culture lives on: as a stimulation for plants or—Hegel would have liked this—as a spiritual impulse that now flows through the vegetable world. So, in the end, we humans were still of some use after all.

c. Anthropocentric narrowings in film and television

Let us now take a brief look at a completely different field, the film industry. In several blockbusters and fictional documentaries, it is shown how an end of humankind might occur and what might happen afterwards.

But these fictions imagine the disappearance of humans in a quite insufficient manner. It is supposed to be caused either by the invasion of aliens or by a deadly virus or one simply assumes, without naming a cause at all, that suddenly all humans disappear from earth. Far too little attention is paid to the fact that people could disappear because they have ruined their own livelihoods by destroying nature. Moreover, what seems to be of interest alone in these movies is what will happen to our superb civilizing artifacts after the catastrophe: floods of water break in over New York, roads and tracks are overgrown by vegetation, animal hordes invade the cities.

All this is impressively or bombastically staged, but all of these stagings suffer from the anthropic disease. They only care about what happens to our valuable achievements but not about how things go on with earth and nature beyond our human worries. In this respect, unlike the examples discussed before, these productions are rather unimaginative.

d. Helmut Wimmer: *The Last Day*, 2018

In contrast, I would like to present a series of photographs that depicts the return of nature to the space of culture far more intelligently than those blockbusters do. I refer to twelve photographic tableaux that Helmut Wimmer exhibited in 2018/19, under the title, *The Last Day*, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.



'The Last Day' 03 Preis auf Anfrage, C-Print, 134 x 100 cm auf Aluminium, Auflage 4 ©Helmut Wimmer

Helmut Wimmer, *The Last Day* 10, 2018 ©Helmut Wimmer

We see some familiar interiors of this famous museum but something very unfamiliar has happened: The museum has been invaded by live nature.

In the hall with Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow*, brushwood and snow have spread.



'The Last Day' 10 Preis auf Anfrage, C-Print, 134 x 100 cm auf Aluminium, Auflage 4 ©Helmut Wimmer

Helmut Wimmer, The Last Day 03, 2018 ©Helmut Wimmer

Cranes strut through other halls and, in a gravitational posture, compete with the Spanish Infante or, in a pecking pose, with the turmoil of battle paintings.



'The Last Day' 11 Preis auf Anfrage, C-Print, 100 x 134 cm und 142 x 100 cm auf Aluminium, Auflage 4 ©Helmut Wimmer

Elsewhere, rocks and a swath of water burst into a room, yet the museum visitors, oblivious to all this, continue to gaze at the paintings or, their feet having been immersed in water for a while, keep staring at their smartphones.



"The Last Day" 08 Preis auf Anfrage, C-Print, 134 x 100 cm auf Aluminium, Auflage 4 ©Helmut Wimmer

Helmut Wimmer, The Last Day 08, 2018

©Helmut Wimmer

And a massive tree stump, several branches and a carpet of leaves populate a hall but the solitary visitor, unaware of the intrusion of nature, remains engrossed in the contemplation of a work of art.

Nature returns to the realms of culture, even to an art temple par excellence. The paintings that hang there have often fed on nature, and they have shaped our perception of it. But they have also paved the way for some non-perception and oversight and fostered many a cultural blindness. Now, undomesticated nature returns and, unabashed, enters the sacred halls of art. And people, these cultural beings and art lovers, do not even

notice. With all our respect for nature and all our reflection on it, we have become blind to elementary natural phenomena.

This leads us back to the Anthropocene. For this epoch implies as its cause not only the human disregard, exploitation and destruction of nature. It could also include, as a consequence and final development, the fall of a human culture that still continues to ignore the signals sent out by nature. And then, in the end, a nature that in no way cares about humans might come to dominate and determine the further fate of this planet.

d. *Cosmo-Eggs* – lucky exit?

But there are also (gently) more optimistic perspectives. Maybe we'll make tracks again. A look back at history can give some boost to this hope.

The last work I am discussing here is *Cosmo-Eggs*, displayed in the Japanese Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennial. It is the joint work of an artist (Motoyuki Shitamichi), an anthropologist (Toshiaki Ishikura), a composer (Taro Yasuno) and an architect (Fuminori Nousaku).



Shitamichi / Ishikura / Yasuno / Nousaku, *Cosmo-Eggs*, 2018
Photo: Wolfgang Welsch

The starting point of this work were tsunami boulders, as they can be found on some Japanese islands, and elsewhere in Asia. They stem from the seabed and have been washed ashore by tsunamis that have occurred in these regions for thousands of years. These boulders are attractions; some are revered; and they provide nesting places for birds.



Shitamichi / Ishikura / Yasuno / Nousaku, Cosmo-Eggs, 2018 Photo: Wolfgang Welsch

The artist Motoyuki Shitamichi was fascinated by these boulders and wondered what they could tell us about our history and future. He contacted Toshiaki Ishikura, an anthropologist, who set out to study ancient myths and tales relating to tsunami boulders, and finally, from these materials, he compiled an impressive story.



Shitamichi / Ishikura / Yasuno / Nousaku, Cosmo-Eggs, 2018 Photo: Wolfgang Welsch

Here is its first part that describes the initial situation:

“A long time ago, sun and moon descended to earth and laid a single egg. A snake came and swallowed the egg, and so sun and moon visited earth once more to leave behind three eggs that they hid: one inside earth, one inside stone, and one inside bamboo. The eggs soon hatched, and born were the ancestors of three islands. Once grown up, they each built a small boat and travelled to different islands: one in the East, one in the West, and one in the North. The tribes of these islands visited

each other by boat, and despite occasional fights, they overcame pestilence and poor harvests to live in peace for a long time. Each island passed down its own language, its own music, its own traditions, its own festivals. They each possessed the power to speak with the animals: the earth tribe spoke with the worms and the insects, the stone tribe with the snakes, and the bamboo tribe with the birds.”[11]

Then three similar stories follow that describe the next period, each story about one of the three islands. Here is the one from stone island:

“A youth slept and in his dreams saw a flock of white birds drop giant boulders down from the skies and into the fields. On the seashore the next morning, he caught a fish that knew the language of man. It begged him not to be eaten, and so the youth made return it to the sea. But the father who had watched the youth took the rare fish from him and, as a lesson, decided to eat it. The fish cried out for help, and from the sea arose a tremendous tsunami. Like a swan spreading its wings the tsunami swept over the island, and the enormous wave swallowed all living creatures. It left behind boulders covered in corals, and the animals it had drowned became hermit crabs. The youth, however, had fled with his sister to the island’s highest mountain and, clinging to a rock, the two barely survived. They were able to overcome starvation, and brother and sister coupled and gave birth to new offspring.”[12]

So there was an initial situation that was not simply paradisiacal because there occurred also fights and poor harvests, but the people came to terms with the difficulties and lived full of respect for each other and for nature. But then a rupture and a disaster happened on each of the three islands. The existence of humans was extremely threatened. And these catastrophes were, in all three cases, not caused by nature but, as today in the Anthropocene, by humans. Finally, however, people managed once again to escape the catastrophe and to find a new balance with nature. Co-existence, of humans with nature and of humans with each other, is the key concept of work. I would have awarded it the main prize of the Biennale. It gives us some hope.

*

All the artists I have discussed are convinced that life on earth will continue after the disappearance of man. Is this proof of pessimism? No. These artists take joy in imagining new forms of life, some leaving humankind completely behind, others carrying on some traits of the human. But in the end, there is a flipside to

this attitude. By presenting the fertility of new forms of life, these artworks also bring to mind our fragility and thus make us think anew about our condition and possible fate. Indirectly, they stimulate a sense of loss. Lamenting the decline of biodiversity is certainly justified, but aren't we humans also a species worth surviving? Depicting a world beyond the human implies an incitement to avoid its coming.

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Endnotes

[1] Denis Diderot, "Encyclopedia" [1755], in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, transl. Philip Stewart (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2002), vol. 5, pp. 635–648A, here p. 641.

[2] Denis Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream" [written in 1769, first published in 1830], transl. Ian Johnston, Vancouver Island University, 2014 (<http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/diderot/diderottofc.html>).

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 452.

[4] Cf. in more detail on the modern form of thought and its transgression, my *Homo mundanus – Jenseits der anthropischen Denkform der Moderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück

Wissenschaft 2012, 2nd edition 2015), and also *Mensch und Welt – Eine evolutionäre Perspektive der Philosophie* (Munich: Beck 2012).

[5] The term ‘Anthropocene’ is certainly not unproblematic. Nevertheless, I use it here, as it is in circulation. Cf. to a more detailed discussion, my essay, “Wohin treibt das Anthropozän?,” in *Wer sind wir?* (Vienna: new academic press, 2019), pp. 144–163.

[6] Gottfried Benn, “Roman des Phänotyp”, in *ibidem*, *Gesammelte Werke in vier Bänden*, ed. Dieter Wellershoff, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1958), pp. 152–204, here pp. 161 f.

[7] This, my aesthetic critique, could be complemented by Timothy Morton’s conceptual critique, according to which ecological thinking is still based on the categorical distinction between nature, on the one hand, and civilization, on the other, that, however, is typical of modern thinking and therefore co-responsible for the problems we face (cf. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 2007, and *The Ecological Thought*, 2010). Already in the 1970s, artist Robert Smithson had stated: “The ecology thing has a kind of religious, ethical undertone to it. It’s like the official religion now, but I think a lot of it is based on a kind of late nineteenth-century, puritanical view of nature. In the puritan ethic, there’s a tendency to put man outside nature, so that whatever he does is fundamentally unnatural and there’s no need to refer to nature anymore.” (Robert Smithson, quoted after: Calvin Tomkins, *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art*, New York, 1976, p. 144).

[8] Cf. the ideas of extropianism (Max More) and postbiological evolution (Steven J. Dick).

[9] <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/project/win-win>. Accessed 11/19/2019.

[10] By the way, Eduardo Kac has demonstrated such an insertion of human genes into the genome of plants by means of genetic engineering. In his work, *Edunia* [2003-2009], he implemented some of his own genes responsible for the red color of the blood into the genome of a petunia that now, as a plant-human hybrid, has red veins. Cf. author, “Fluchtpunkt Natur – Zur ästhetischen Situation der Gegenwart”, in: *ibidem*, *Ästhetische Welterfahrung – Zeitgenössische Kunst zwischen Natur und Kultur* (Munich: Fink, 2016), pp. 35–48, here p. 47.

[11] Exhibition catalogue *Cosmo-Eggs* (Tokyo: Case Publishing, 2019), p. 1.

[12] *Ibid.*

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