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## The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene by Kerry Oliver-Smith

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***The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*** edited by **KERRY OLIVER-SMITH**

Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, 2018.  
\$34.95 USD

Reviewed by **TRACY QIU**

*The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene* was published in conjunction with a major art exhibition of the same name at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida. Kerry Oliver-Smith, curator of contemporary art and collection editor, clusters forty-five contemporary international artists and five scholars to generate responses to our present era of “rapid, radical, and irrevocable climate change” (1).

Oliver-Smith briefly frames the contentious nature of the term *Anthropocene* in her introduction, where she uses it as a “nexus” to exchange thought, dialogue, and discourse. Paraphrasing Santiago Zabala, Oliver-Smith writes that contemporary art “has the capacity to meet [the challenge of the Anthropocene] by disrupting the status quo, energizing radical democratic action, making visible the invisible, and activating intervention” (1). The book is composed of three parts. The first is an essay from the editor outlining seven intersecting themes of the exhibition. The second consists of five essays ranging from deep time to feminist apocalypse narratives. The final section consists of thematically grouped plates of the artworks cited in Oliver-Smith’s essay.

In Part One (“Art and Ethics in the Age of the Anthropocene”), the themes of the exhibition are presented as Deluge, Raw Material, Consumption, Extinction,

Symbiosis and Multispecies, Justice, and Imaginary Future. Drawing from Laura Ogden, Oliver-Smith “rejects the inevitability of nature’s commodification and the dominance of neoliberalism” (5) and calls for a rethinking of relationships between human and nonhuman entities. The themes themselves are overlapping—artworks that belong in one theme blur into others, further tangling the threads of environmental change.

The theme of “Deluge” presents the question: what will we do when we are overwhelmed by water? The works in this section range from the macro (Sandra Cinto’s stormy seascapes), to the local (Gideon Mendel’s portraits of flood survivors). “Raw Material” challenges the “unalienable rights” of the “global assemblage”—development initiatives, corporate speculators, and multinational oil companies (7). (Covered in soot, Chinese artist Liu Bolin camouflages himself in front of a coal deposit). “Consumption” focuses on waste materials, accumulated items, toxic byproducts—30 trillion tons of humanity’s “stuff” (9), evoked by Yao Lu’s photo of tarpaulin-covered trash heaps in the style of classical Chinese watercolour landscapes. “Extinction” revolves around ecological mourning and grief, interrogating the supernatural, the fantastic, and the annihilatory—Chris Gordon eulogizes the grim remains of albatross chicks starved to death on a diet of plastic waste. “Symbiosis and Multispecies” borrows from Donna Haraway and other theorists to examine human/nonhuman interactions through fictitious stagings and identity questioning such as Gabriel Orozco’s symbiotic encounters that contrast with Pedro Neves’ android/agricultural entity dialogue. “Justice” is focused on the Amazon Basin and its inhabitants—a “silent war” between

local Indigenous resistance, resource extractors, and government military (15). Indigenous voices (marked by the government as terrorists) are provided a platform in Felipe Jácome's collaborative portraits that express their desires, fears, and determination. Finally, "Imaginary Futures" speculates on daunting future visions and the potential for technocratic abuses, juxtaposing fantastical dichotomous sculptures with images of CIA black sites and phantom outlines of migrant labour in transit.

Trevor Paglen's essay "The Ethics of Deep Time" opens Part Two by summarizing human/time relations over two centuries. The discovery of deep time (4.5 billion years of the Earth's history) is contrasted to absolute time and the resulting shrinking and breakage of space—centralized and synchronized for increased efficiency in profit-driven interactions. These space-time annihilations are measured against our galactic footprint: spacecraft, satellites, far-wandering exploration vehicles, artifacts that will likely outlive humanity. What are the ethical implications of this kind of lasting power and transformation? Can human rights frameworks and democratic production be applied to a process too vast to comprehend?

Next, "A World of Our Making" by T.J. Demos explores the potential of the "Good Anthropocene" and technological advances as solutions to environmental degradation. While the technological optimism of geoengineering is one possible direction, Demos critiques the current technocracy as elitist, ungoverned, anti-democratic, and unregulated, conveniently overlooking geological histories of capitalism in relation to imperialism and slavery. As such, options and solutions are then created within the Anthropocene's own biases, under the

limitations of profit margins and neoliberalism. Demos implies (both sarcastically and fatalistically) that geoengineering the Earth's atmosphere may be an easier task than reducing our dependence on fossil fuels: "Under no circumstances can we consider alternatives that involve transforming ourselves instead of altering Earth's climate" (29).

In "Uncommoning Nature," Marisol de la Cadena outlines the power structures and geopolitics at play in the Amazonian lowlands, where citizens of the Awajun-Wampis Indigenous groups protested illegal concessions of territory to oil speculators. These events are part of her "anthropo-not-seen," the simultaneous obeying and disobeying of the dominant world-making division between human and nonhuman. This "unseen" force represents the destruction of heterogeneous cosmologies and ways of knowing, but at the same time signifies the impossibility of destruction as Indigenous communities continue to recognize these undivided worlds. In the end, Cadena calls for a complex "entanglement" of shared interests alongside uncommonalities as a way to find similarities between different groups. This "commons" does not require a universal nature/human divide—more of an "uncommoning" of nature that serves heterogenous worlds across their divergent cosmologies, challenging the legitimacy of current world-making paradigms.

Joanna Zylinska, in "Feminist Counter-Apocalypse," analyzes the apocalyptic narratives associated with the Anthropocene: masculine-centered subject-redemptions through the act of conquering and disavowing nature. Zylinska offers a feminist "counter-apocalypse" influenced by Catherine Keller and Anna Tsing: a way of living in the shadow of the Anthropocene

that celebrates relationality rather than separating human subject from the rest of the non-human world. While not necessarily an ontological “species switch” or a denial of human modes of perception, this “counter-apocalypse” shifts human observation to the margins without relieving humanity of its accountability. Zylinska concludes with an interpretation of Gaia (from Isabelle Stengers) as the “adoption of [a] form of philosophical humility” that embraces precarity (50).

Finally, “How to Grow Livable Worlds,” by Natasha Myers, provides another perspective of the Anthropocene: the Planthroposcene. Her ten-step essay reads as a manifesto for decentering, decolonizing, and demilitarizing the Anthropocene through a plant-centered world-making, refusing “disenchantments” that invalidate other ways of knowing. Myers begins by questioning the “we” of the Anthropocene, a universal figure that ignores “five hundred years of colonial violence, extractive capitalism, white supremacy, and the hubris of human exceptionalism” (53). Steps four and five name plants as our allies, and us as “of the plants,” introducing the Planthroposcene as an aspirational way to “see and seed plant/people relations” grounded in the present (55-56). Step ten creates art for the Planthroposcene, taking away space from “ruin porn” and reappropriating it into a platform for “intimate relations between plants and people” (58-59).

Overall, Kerry Oliver-Smith brings together diverse and global perspectives on the Anthropocene as controversial subject, geological epoch, environmental disaster, and connecting nexus. The collection reminds readers of the “messy” relationality between human and nonhuman entities. The thematic groupings of artworks force

viewers to face environmental consequences from both macro and micro perspectives, insisting that one is “staying with the trouble,” to borrow a quote from Donna Haraway (1). The exhibition opens up potential for further explorations, including the myriad different naming conventions and the intimations that accompany them (Planthroposcene, Plantationocene, Capitalocene, Anthropo-not-seen, etc.). Topics such as plant kinship and allyship, Indigenous resistance and self-determination (particularly from Indigenous artists), disability and environmental change, urban environmental justice, and Anthropocene discourse could all benefit from further interrogation and exploration through contemporary art.

#### WORKS CITED

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

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