

Assembling the Anthropocene: How do museums engage with the global environmental crisis through objects, exhibitions and museum work?

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Human impact

The Anthropocene is a geological concept proposing that Earth has entered a new geological epoch, a period driven by the impact of human activity on the planet. The decisive influences humans have had on the planet are uncontested: growing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, accumulation of trash and pollution, unsustainable natural resource extraction, urbanisation and intensive agricultural activity are among the impacts that will undoubtedly leave a permanent mark in the geological record for unforeseeable future.

The vast human impact on the planet has complex and diverse ramifications not only for the environment, as they also have economic, political, cultural and social implications. People and communities are disproportionately affected by the global environmental crisis, hurting them the most that have contributed least to the crisis.

In recent years, museums have increasingly committed research, exhibition and educational resources to engage with the complexity of the environmental crisis. Museums approach these concerns in a wide variety of ways, from fostering knowledge and evidence-based understanding of climate change, collaborating with communities to stimulate public engagement, amplifying research and preservation efforts for biodiversity, and emphasising sustainable

futures, to contemplating the local implications of a changing climate and reflecting the interconnectedness of nature and culture. In my doctoral thesis I examined how the concept of the Anthropocene has emerged in museums as a framework to engage with these concerns. The concept has been enacted to think and act cohesively regarding the multifarious impact of human activity on the planet and to highlight the interconnectedness of nature and culture.

Assembling the Anthropocene

What kind of a framework is the Anthropocene for museums? Instead of looking at the Anthropocene as a readymade framework for museums to adapt their work to, my intention was to analyse how museums bring together different elements of museum work to assemble the Anthropocene in specific situated forms. For the thesis the overall question was how different museum practices, techniques, and methods contribute to assembling the Anthropocene? To account for the wide variety of practices, expertise, methods and techniques that contribute to how museums function, the theoretical framework drew inspiration from assemblage theory. Philosopher Manuel DeLanda developed this theory as a tool for social analysis in his book *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity* (2006). Based on the fragmented thoughts and writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on assemblages, DeLanda argues that analysing social entities as assemblages draws attention to the complexity of the social, and the contingency and malleability of how heterogeneous elements gather together to make wholes, therefore challenging essentialist arguments and analysis of intrinsic qualities of social forms. Museologist Sharon Macdonald has argued for the same

approaches toward complexity in heritage and museum studies. In her book *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (2013) she argues that museums as social forms are made up of diverse constituent practices, affects and materialisations.

In my research I analysed the concept of the Anthropocene as an assemblage rather than a predefined framework. I did so by looking at the diverse practices, expertise, objects and people that are involved in the process of assembling the concept. The findings were presented in three separate articles, each presenting specific cases on three different scales of analysis: two museum objects, an exhibition and a museum as an organisation. Together the analyses give an overview of how the Anthropocene emerges in particular ways, and highlights how museums actively materialise the concept instead of passively receiving it.

Anthropocenic objects

The first article highlighted the significance of the histories and agencies of diverse materials that come together in two museum objects, a plastiglomerate from Museon in The Hague and a fatberg at the Museum of London. The analysis examined the two objects as ‘anthropocenic objects’ to emphasise the vitality of living and nonliving matter. The objects are unintended consequences of consumer culture, assemblages of discarded matter that are made up of disposable goods, human waste, plastics, organic, and inorganic materials. Plastiglomerate is a conglomerate of melted plastic, beach sediment, basaltic lava fragments and organic debris, highlighting the presence of plastic waste in the environment and how it refuses to simply go away when disposed of by humans. At the exhibition

One planet at the MuseOn in the Netherlands, the plastiglomerate is presented in a display case along with rock samples covering billions of years of Earth’s history. The presence of plastic, as a manmade material, inserts human impact as a contributing force to recent development in the long history of the planet. Similarly, the fatberg at the Museum of London combines the acts of people flushing wet wipes and pouring oil and fat down the drains creating perfect conditions for fatbergs to form and grow by accumulating everything that runs through city sewage systems. The two objects escape easy categorisation, as they are not purely cultural artefacts or natural specimens, but they do materialise a sense of the Anthropocene in a way that highlights the interconnectedness of nature and culture, and the entanglements of human agency, living and nonliving entities and natural processes. The objects reveal how the discourse on the Anthropocene conveys the agency of presumably inert matter like waste and its impact on the planet. [Fig. 1]

Fig. 1. The Whitechapel fatberg at the Museum of London was kept in a sealed off case. Shortly after it was put on display the fatberg hatched flies, started sweating and changed color. Photo by Anna Sigríður Halldórsdóttir.



Exploring the Anthropocene

The second article examined the exhibition *Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in our Hands* (2014–2016) at the Deutsches Museum, in Munich Germany. The examination revealed how the exhibition created different versions of the Anthropocene by bringing together various objects and display technologies. In the analysis I present three impressions based on my own visit, the exhibition catalogue and articles written by the curatorial team. Each of the impressions describes different version of the Anthropocene, from a display presenting the history of the Anthropocene through objects from the museum's collection, an exploratory space to investigate the condition of life in this geological epoch, to presenting the concept as a tool to show the uneven interplay of forces shaping the relationship of human and nonhuman beings.

Inside the exhibition, a wall was constructed out of cardboard encasing a selection of objects from the museum's collection. The wall presented a history of the Anthropocene tracing its origins to the industrial revolution, a specific history told through milestones of technological advancements, with the added emphasis on environmental impact. [Fig. 2]

As you entered through the wall, the visitors were faced with six platforms representing different themes intended to reflect the current situation of living in the Anthropocene. Differing from the wall's historical approach, visitors could walk from one platform to the other in no particular order, explore and experience a variety of topics and concerns of the present and future condition of the planet, through diverse objects, artworks and displays. The spatial exploration highlighted a distinctive



Fig. 2. The Wall of Anthropogenic Objects at the Deutsches Museum exhibition featured objects from the museum's collection. Paper flowers made by visitors in the foreground. Photo by the author.

character of exhibition spaces, the visitor's performative encounter with diverse media and material. The design and layout of the platforms emphasised an exploratory approach to the Anthropocene, so instead of presenting a single narrative the display design enabled exploration of the world's current situation of rapid changes and uncertain futures. The examination revealed the different methods and techniques museums have at their disposal to engage with the challenging and vital task of rethinking the relations between nature and culture. Locating three versions in a single exhibition reveals the complexity of the Anthropocene as a framework for museums and also highlights the possibility of addressing it in different ways simultaneously.

A situated and flexible framework

The third article analysed how the Carnegie Museum of Natural History embraced the Anthropocene as its 'major theme', weaving the notion into the whole fabric of the organisation, affecting collection and research practices, and communication activities. The article described six accounts of activities and initiatives within the organisation revealing how institutional change takes place on many levels simultaneously, where different elements connect, overlap, and even contradict each other. Using assemblage theory the concept emerged as a situated, open, and flexible framework that holds together elements that engage with questions about the interconnectedness of nature and culture, and human impact on the planet. The six accounts included the strategic plan for the museum and deliberations of senior management on the concept, an exhibition on the Anthropocene, an educational initiative that emphasised community engagement, col-

lecting activities from outside the museum, a research project in botany at the museum, and new means of extracting data about anthropogenic change through the interpretation of artworks. Tracing the contributing processes provided an insight into the assembling of a major theme that is intended to set a new trajectory for the museum to research, interpret and communicate the multifarious impact of human activity on the planet. While the strategic plan for the museum introduced the Anthropocene in simple unproblematic terms, the different actions and ideas described in the article unveiled nuanced perspectives contributing to a flexible and situated Anthropocene at the museum. The Anthropocene assemblage at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History appears to hold together diverse approaches, activities and actions that engage with environmental issues in numerous ways, on different scales and through multiple sets of analysis. Using assemblage theory to analyse the museum provided a better understanding of the fluidity of museum work. Seeing museums as complex sites where different disciplines, methods and practices meet, is an important step to take when analysing how museums take up the imperative task of engaging with the global environmental crisis.

Many different Anthropocenes

The thesis concludes that the Anthropocene emerges as a flexible framework enabling museums to rethink their approaches and combine different types of objects, research, collections, and educational activities. The flexibility can be contributed to the ongoing discussion on the concept's temporal scope and significance. It is not yet an official time period of the Geological Time Scale and the Anthropocene discourse stretches the concept across disciplines and takes many

forms, from reinforcing notions of control and stewardship of nature to questions of environmental justice and recognising nonhuman vitality. This opens up for innovative approaches, as the cases presented in the thesis show. The analyses have revealed that the concept enables museums to establish a synergy between artistic initiatives, natural and cultural history, reunite nature and culture in their work, and put emphasis on the agential capacity of museum objects. In one way or another, the museums assembled the Anthropocene adapting pre-existing material and discursive elements to new ones brought forth from the discussions surrounding the concept. The Anthropocene emerges as a situated form and by revealing the heterogeneous elements behind the assembling processes the articles contribute to the field of museology with the analysis of museums as complex sites where different disciplines, theoretical approaches, and practices meet.

Throughout my research I found that the more diverse resources museums invest in assembling the Anthropocene, the more nuanced the assemblage becomes. The Anthropocene has rightly been criticised for foregrounding human impact as a species act, ignoring the complex structural and cultural power relations that lie behind the disproportionate contribution to the global environmental crisis. Grasping the complex implications of climate change, the effects of human impact can take museums in different directions. Connecting the heterogeneous elements of diverse expertise, from researchers, educators and curators, museum practices of collection management and display design, and objects and ideas can lead to innovative assemblages that challenge traditional assumptions and open up for fruitful dialogues about the complexity of life in the Anthropocene.