

III. Against the Anthropocene

By T.J. DEMOS | Published: 25. MAY 2015

On May 16th, 2015, the “Paddle in Seattle” demo unleashed its kayak flotilla, a mass direct action against Shell’s Arctic-bound Polar Pioneer drilling rig temporarily stationed in the west coast city’s port. Word and images of the “S(h)ell no!” protest spread widely online, accompanying reports in indie media and some mainstream press, distributed by environmentalist and Indigenous movements, adding momentum to the popular challenge to extreme extractivism in the far North.



‘Shell No’ protesters take to the water on Saturday heading near Royal Dutch Shell’s Polar Pioneer drilling rig near Seattle. (David Ryder/Getty Images)

These images visualize and energize the mounting antagonism between corporate industry’s pushing us into climate chaos, and grassroots campaigners’ opposition to the continued reliance on fossil fuel. As such, the action throws a wedge into the universalizing logic of the Anthropocene, a term that, as we have seen, suggests—falsely—that we’re all agents of climate change, sharing equally in its causes and effects.

“Our culture and livelihood is dependent on the bowhead, the walrus, the seal and the fish,” explains Inupiaq activist Mae Hank, as reported on the website of the First Nations movement Idle No More. “How can Shell go ahead with such a risky operation”—with a 75% likelihood of an oil spill with nearly impossible cleanup options, given extreme Arctic conditions—“when peoples’ lives are at stake?”^[1]



Indigenous Kayak activists: The Pacific Climate Warriors, 2015 (Twitter)

Hank's statement, and the photographic documentation of the kayak action, together belie the "Ecomodernist Manifesto" that makes the case that "we" must seize the opportunity to create (read: geoengineer) a "good Anthropocene," "decoupling" economic growth from environmental impacts. Bringing together eco-optimist luminaries like Stewart Brand, Erle Ellis, Ted Nordhaus, and Michael Shellenberger, the group argues that, despite environmental setbacks, "humans" must continue down the path of modernization, using "their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world."^[2] It's not surprising that techno-utopian Mark Lynas, author of *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans*, is among this group.

The "Ecomodernist Manifesto," however, is nothing more than a bad utopian suggestion, based on a form of magical thinking that renews misguided industry-friendly efforts to overcome an earlier "limit to growth" environmentalism, first articulated in the early 1970s. Sickly sweet with optimism, the manifesto is basically an apology for nuclear energy that allows its authors to reassert the imperative of economic development, as if such an energy system will have no impact on Earth systems (counter to recent experience in Fukushima). What's striking is that there's no mention of social justice and democratic politics in this account, no acknowledgement of the fact that big technologies like nuclear fusion reinforce centralized power, the military-industrial complex, and the inequalities of corporate globalization, rather than the distributed self-sufficient economies and egalitarian local governance that tend to accompany renewable energy paradigms.

The Anthropocene thesis tends to support such developmentalist globalization, joining all humans together in shared responsibility for creating our present environmental disaster. Exploiting further its universalizing logic, the Anthropocene concept makes it easy to justify further technological interventions in the Earth's systems via geo-engineering, as if the causes of climate disruption can be its solutions. In such narratives as these, *anthropos* distracts attention from the economic class that has long benefitted from the economic system responsible for catastrophic environmental change.

Even Bruno Latour, otherwise given over to adopting Anthropocene vocabulary (and liberally using its universalizing rhetoric of "human agency"^[3], recognizes its propensity to disavow the differential responsibilities of climate change: "Hundreds of different people"—such as Indian nations in the Amazonian forest; "poor blokes in the slums of Mumbai"; workers subjected to long commutes owing to lack of affordable housing—"will at once raise their voice and say they feel no responsibility whatsoever for those deeds at a geological scale," Latour notes.^[4] That is, even as he validates the concept so long as *anthropos* signifies—against its very terminological

implications—a differentiated “people with contradictory interest, opposing cosmoses,” even “warring entities.”^[5]

Yet we might challenge the viability of this conceptualization altogether. And visual culture against the Anthropocene is one reason why. For the growing photographic record makes clear how there exists significant rejection of the term’s conceptual bases in today’s social movements, particularly given the numerous images embedded in independent media that depict the destructiveness of the industrial fossil-fuel economy and its catastrophic impact on diverse “human” communities, including Indigenous people and rural working classes.



Mad Max: Fury Road by George Miller, 2015 (Kennedy Miller Productions/Warner Bros.)

One obvious example is the rebellion taking place around the Albertan Tar Sands and its related Keystone XL oil pipeline. This example is significant not only because it represents a massive befouling of the environment, but also because this is not a case of industrial accident or oil spill, as was Exxon Valdez in 1989 or BP’s Deepwater Horizon in 2006.^[6] Nor is it yet another instance of the corporate media’s many spectacles of post-apocalyptic futures reveling in the “bad” Anthropocene, as in the drought-ravaged, violence-obsessed, and resource-scarce scenario of *Mad Max: Fury Road*.^[7] Rather than focusing on the failures of industry and those dystopian visions, which serve only to divert us from the real problem at hand, Tar Sands development concerns the normal, accident-free running of petro-capitalism that is itself bringing disastrous effects on us—with some affected more than others—in the present.

As explains Eriel Deranger, activist and spokesperson for the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, tar-sands oil extraction represents a mode of strip-mining that produces a viscous, dirty crude, or diluted bitumen, and is considered the most ecologically destructive project on the planet.^[8] Indeed, the industrial ecocide has rendered Fort Chipewyan, home to Indigenous people living in the Athabasca river region and its boreal forests, a toxic wasteland. Likewise, minority and low-income communities living on the edges of the massive petrochemical infrastructure in Houston—which stands to be connected to Tar Sands extraction by Keystone XL—suffer greatly elevated risks of contracting leukemia and cancers owing to oil industry exposure.^[9]



An aerial view of the Alberta tar sands development (The Pembina Institute/Chris Evans)

The Anthropocene, the geological epoch driven by vaguely generalizing “human activities,” fails to capture the divisions and antagonism at play here. Instead we might consider adopting a term like the “Capitalocene,” which appears more exacting. Proposed by Donna Haraway, the latter refers to the geological epoch created by neoliberal corporate globalization, and has the advantage of naming the culprit beyond climate change, thereby gathering political traction around itself.^[10] It is not native peoples, or impoverished communities, or underdeveloped countries who are subsidizing fossil fuel companies to a degree of \$10 million per minute (\$5.3 trillion a year) worldwide so that they can run their Capitalocenic enterprises, driving us all toward climate catastrophe, but rather the governments of over-developed nations, as reported recently by the IMF.^[11] Or, as Naomi Klein puts it in *This Changes Everything*, “We are stuck because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe—and would benefit the vast majority—are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets.”^[12] It’s not that most of us are not implicated in one way or another—many of us, for instance, drive cars and live in energy-consuming homes. Rather, it’s the agents of the Capitalocene who are doing everything possible—including using their tremendous financial resources to manipulate governments through corporate lobbying—to remove sustainable energy options from even entering the discussion. “Ours is the geological epoch not of humanity, but of capital,” as Andreas Malm cogently argues.^[13]

In this regard, photography at its best plays a critical role in raising awareness of the impact, showing the environmental abuse and human costs, of fossil-fuel’s everyday operations, encouraging a rebellious activist culture, like that currently taking place in Seattle’s port, around which diverse communities and transnational organizations are building political alliances. Such imagery invites us to participate in what Isabelle Stengers terms the cosmopolitical present, alluding to the progressive composition of a common world, where commonality insists on thinking “in the presence of” those most negatively affected by governmental policies.^[14] In this regard, contemporary cosmopolitics necessitates thinking critically about the Anthropocene thesis in the company of “those who are so impacted by out-of-control, psychotic, bottom-of-the-barrel resource development, not just here in Canada, but globally,” as Deranger insists. “Indigenous people have become the canary in the coal mine. I don’t want my children to have to be the sacrifices for humanity to wake up.”^[15] Photography can help to show why.

[1] Reported in Idle No More, the Indigenous resurgence movement in Canada that supports “the peaceful revolution,

to honour Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water”: http://www.idlenomore.ca/shell_no.

[2] Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger et al., “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” (2015):

<http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto/>, 6. See also Jeremy Caradonna et al., “A Degrowth Response to an Ecomodernist Manifesto” (May 6, 2015), at www.resilience.org, which points out that in addition to presenting factual errors, “Ecomodernism violates everything we know about ecosystems, energy, population, and natural resources. Fatally, it ignores the lessons of ecology and thermodynamics, which teach us that species (and societies) have natural limits to growth. The ecomodernists, by contrast, brazenly claim that the limit to growth is a myth, and that human population and the economy could continue to grow almost indefinitely. Moreover, the ecomodernists ignore or downplay many of the ecological ramifications of growth. The *Manifesto* has nothing to say about the impacts of conventional farming, monoculture, pesticide-resistant insects, GMOs, and the increasing privatization of seeds and genetic material. It is silent on the decline of global fisheries or the accumulation of microplastic pollution in the oceans, reductions in biodiversity, threats to ecosystem services, and the extinction of species. Nor does it really question our reliance on fossil fuels. It does argue that societies need to ‘decarbonize,’ but the *Manifesto* also tacitly supports coal, oil and natural gas by advocating for carbon capture and storage.”

[3] See for instance, Bruno Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* vol. 45 (2014), 1-18.

[4] Bruno Latour, “The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe,” in *Facing Gaia:*

Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature (2013):

http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/wakefield15/files/2015/01/LATOUR-GIFFORD-SIX-LECTURES_1.pdf, 80.

[5] Latour, “The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe,” 81.

[6] See also Antonia Juhasz, “Thirty Million Gallons under the Sea Following the trail of BP’s oil in the Gulf of Mexico,” *Harper’s Magazine* (June 2015). Her exposé traces the ongoing impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion, which, in 2010, gushed over 100 million gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico. After accompanying a team of scientists as they collect animal, plant, water, and sediment samples from the seabed’s fragile ecosystem, she contests BP’s claim that there has been “very limited impact from the oil spill on the seafloor.” “If you short-circuit the bottom,” Dr. Samantha Joye, a biogeochemist at the University of Georgia, tells Juhasz, “you threaten the entire cycle. Without a healthy ocean, we’ll all be dead.”

[7] Amelia Urry et al., “Mad Max: Fury Road may be the Anthropocene at its worst—but it makes for pretty sick cinema,” *Grist* (15 May 2015): <http://grist.org/living/mad-max-fury-road-may-be-the-anthropocene-at-its-worst-but-it-makes-for-pretty-sick-cinema/>

[8] See the Gaia Foundation’s report, “Canada, Alberta Tar Sands—The Most Destructive Project on Earth,” at <http://www.gaiafoundation.org>. Also, see Eriel Deranger’s presentation at the “Rights of Nature” conference at Nottingham Contemporary on January 24, 2015, which accompanied the exhibition in 2015 that I co-curated, available at <http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/event/rights-nature-conference>.

[9] As explains Juan Parras, founder of the group Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (<http://tejasbarrios.org/>): <http://bridgethegulfproject.org/blog/2012/houston-residents-worry-about-burden-keystone-xl-pipeline-local-neighborhood>; <http://www.gaiafoundation.org/canada-alberta-tar-sands-the-most-destructive-project-on-earth>; and Wen Stephenson, “Keystone XL and Tar Sands: Voices From the Front Lines,” *The Nation* (February 4, 2014): <http://www.thenation.com/blog/178224/keystone-xl-and-tar-sands-voices-front-lines>.

[10] See Haraway’s presentation at *Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, the conference at University of California, Santa Cruz, May 8, 2014: <http://anthropocene.au.dk/arts-of-living-on-a-damaged-planet/>.

[11] Nadia Prupis, “Governments Giving Fossil Fuel Companies \$10 Million a Minute: IMF,” *Common Dreams* (May 18, 2015): <http://www.commondreams.org>.

[12] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014), 18.

[13] Andreas Malm, “The Anthropocene Myth,” *Jacobin* (3.30.15): <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>.

[14] Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed., Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe and Cambridge: ZKM and MIT Press, 2005).

[15] Stephenson, “Keystone XL and Tar Sands: Voices From the Front Lines.”

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IV. Capitalocene Violence

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“Climate change is global-scale violence against places and species, as well as against human beings, writes Rebecca Solnit. “Once we call it by name, we can start having a real conversation about our priorities and values. Because the revolt against brutality begins with a revolt against the language that hides that brutality.”^[1] One way to “call violence by name” is to opt for the Capitalocene—the geological age of capitalism—rather than the misdirected Anthropocene—identifying “human activities” as the agency behind environmental change.^[2] The terminological distinction invites a critical analysis of Anthropocene imagery, especially in regards to popular photography.

Take *National Geographic*, and science journalist Elizabeth Kolbert’s 2011 essay “Enter the Anthropocene—Age of Man,” which accepts and thereby legitimates the Anthropocene thesis in its opening lines: “It’s a new name for a new geologic epoch—one defined by our own [sic] massive impact on the planet.”^[3] Kolbert’s text accompanies a photo gallery including images of Edward Burtynsky, a photographer whose large-scale prints of industry are as seductive as they are horrific, as revealing as they are aestheticizing—and aestheticizing in an extremely disturbing manner.



Burtynsky’s *Oil Fields #19ab, Belridge, California, USA, 2003*. Courtesy of the artist

Consider Burtynsky’s *Oil Fields #19ab, Belridge, California, USA, 2003*, a diptych that shows the San Joaquin Valley desert landscape overtaken by an expansive network of oil rigs. Captured from a low aerial perspective with an elevated horizon line, the petroscape appears patterned by extraction machinery, extending nearly as far as the eye can see. “Discovered in 1911, this field pumped on as cities were rebuilt for cars and as ancient petroleum molecules were spun into household products such as plastics, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals,” *National Geographic*’s caption explains. “South Belridge today produces 32 million barrels a year—enough for nine hours of world demand.”^[4]

The photographer’s explanation, found on his website, opts for the sanguine: “When I first started photographing industry it was out of a sense of awe at what we as a species were up to. Our achievements became a source of infinite possibilities.^[5] Such is typical of Burtynsky’s tendency to make monumental, awe-inspiring photographs from scenes of environmental violence—violence defined not only locally in terms of the damage to regional landscapes, but also globally in relation to the contribution of industrial fossil fuel production to destructive climate change.

It’s true that the photographer goes on to signal his own concern with such images, adding the following: “But time goes on, and that flush of wonder began to turn. The car that I drove cross-country began to represent not only freedom, but also something much more conflicted. I began to

think about oil itself: as both the source of energy that makes everything possible, and as a source of dread, for its ongoing endangerment of our habitat.”^[6] Yet his images, in my view, are less about staging that ambivalence, and more about dramatizing in spectacular fashion the perverse beauty of a technological, and even geological, mastery devoid of environmental ethics. While Burtynsky is right to point out the complexity of the consumer-based complicity in the oil economy, that frequently made observation is also part of the ruse that universalizes responsibility for climate disruption, diverting attention from the fact of petroculturalism’s enormous economic influence on global politics that keeps us all locked in its clutches (total oil and gas lobby spending in 2013 in the USA, for instance, was an astounding \$144,878,531, according to the Center for Responsive Politics,^[7] which makes sure that renewable energy is kept off the table).



Burtynsky's *Oil Fields #27, Bakersfield, California, USA, 2004*. Courtesy of the artist.

Consider also Burtynsky's *Oil Fields #27, Bakersfield, California, USA, 2004*, which depicts a nearby hydrocarbon geography where the oil infrastructure appears woven into a gold-bathed chiaroscuro that unifies this hilly topography. Here too technology merges with nature, unified aesthetically, composing a picture that is, monstrously, not only visually pleasurable, but also ostensibly ethically just, an image of American “freedom” whose historical progression is necessary, inevitable, even—as pictured here—beautiful.

What the photographer constructs is the petro-industrial sublime, emphasizing the awesome visuality of the catastrophic oil economy founded in obsessive capitalist growth, which “we as a species,” as Burtynsky says, have created. The problem is that such images tend to naturalize petroculturalism, with a photography mesmerized by the compositional and chromatic elements of the very infrastructure responsible for our environmental destruction. Which reminds me of Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted insight about fascist aesthetics: “Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.”^[8] Part of that alienation, in this case, is the perverse enjoyment the photographs afford of our own destruction. Yet another function of Burtynsky's imagery is to generalize responsibility for that destruction to species-being—a key ideological trope of the Anthropocene.

Burtynsky's *Oil Fields* can be productively compared to Richard Misrach's *Petrochemical America*, an exhibition and book project put together with landscape architect Kate Orff, which hones in on the damaging socio-environmental causes and effects of oil industry development, imaged as a pollution-filled apocalyptic landscape. Check out one photograph entitled *Abandoned Trailer, Mississippi River, Near Dow Chemical Plant, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998, showing the mighty river dishonorably reduced to a sewer, depopulated ostensibly from the toxic emissions of industry likely dumped directly into the water, leading, thanks to this noxious chemical freight, to the enormous hypoxic dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.



Richard Misrach, *Abandoned Trailer Home, Mississippi River, near Dow Chemical Plant, Plaquemine, Louisiana*, 1998. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

This image, unlike Burtynsky's pictorialism, rejects the Anthropocene's terminological obfuscations and disavowals of culpability. Instead, Misrach's photograph invokes the Capitalocene's insistence on linking the current political economy to geological alteration, showing the "cancer alley" of Southern oil development as part of a necropolitics of ecocide. It thereby gathers criticality and encourages viewers to participate in the growing antagonism between petrocapiatalism and its environmentalist opposition—a political relationality otherwise absent in Anthropocene discourse.



Armin Linke, *Museum of Evolution of Life*, Chandigarh, India, 2014 | © Armin Linke/ Anthropocene Observatory

In this regard, I remain irked by the methodology of the Anthropocene Observatory, a project by Territorial Agency (John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog) in collaboration with artist Armin Linke and curator Anselm Franke. Presented at the House of World Cultures in 2013, the project investigates the genealogy of the Anthropocene thesis, focusing on the scientifico-mathematical calculations of global Earth-making processes, and archives its findings in the form of texts and videos shown in exhibitions and websites. As Palmesino explains in an interview in the book *Architecture in the Anthropocene*, the Observatory practices a form of “neutrality” toward its subject, a “politics of non-action”—“not to take a position, not to engage with conflicts, not to partake in territorial conditions and the reorganization of factions and parties”—according to which it advocates simply witnessing and studying the unfolding of the Anthropocene.^[9] Yet, as we’ve seen, the Anthropocene itself is far from neutral. As such, I find such calls for neutrality to be inevitably complicit in the very non-neutrality of Anthropocene ideology. If we are to survive the Anthropocene, what we need is activism, not neutrality. What’s required is “a revolt against brutality,” and against the violence of climate change, as Solnit contends, not the neutral observation of the fossil-fuel-driven destruction of planet earth.

[1] Rebecca Solnit, “Climate Change Is Violence,” in *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2014), <http://truth-out.org/progressivepicks/item/28933-climate-change-is-violence>.

[2] Haraway credits Andreas Malm and Jason Moore with the earliest usages of “Capitalocene,” in Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* vol. 6 (2015), 161. The “Chthulucene,” for her, designates the post-anthropocentric and post-anthropos age of multispecies assemblages—named not so much after sci-fi writer H.P. Lovecraft’s monster Cthulhu, but rather the “diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa...” suggesting “myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages, including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus”—the basis for Haraway’s additional rejection of the Anthropocene. No doubt any single term is ultimately inadequate.

[3] Elizabeth Kolbert, “Enter the Anthropocene—Age of Man,” *National Geographic* (March 2011), <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/03/age-of-man/kolbert-text>

[4] <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/03/age-of-man/anthropocene-photography>.

[5] www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/Oil.html.

[6] www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/Oil.html.

[7] “Oil & Gas,” OpenSecrets.org, Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org> and <https://www.opensecrets.org>; cited in Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014), 149, which breaks this lobbying down further into the figure of \$400,000 per day.

[8] Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: 1938-1940*, ed., Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 270.

[9] Etienne Turpin, “Matters of Observation: A Conversation with John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog,” in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 23.

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