

Kelly Richmond
kbr42@cornell.edu

2 July 2021

CATR/SQET 2021 - Crisis & Recovery

Access Paper

(*) marks moments when slide will change

Please do not cite this paper without permission of the author

“A Ritual Without Bodies: Performing the Ecological Uncanny in *The Anthropocene Project*”

(*Image: An art gallery space displaying large landscape image)

A separation. A cut, a mark, a boundary. An exit from the world of the everyday, and an entrance into a space of heightened meaning, mattering, symbolism, and affect. An edge. I stand at the edge of the gallery, my body is on edge, as I peer at, over, and through the edge between human and nature that demarcates: *Anthropocene*.

A transition. A change, an alteration, a transformation. A liminal period in which boundaries dissolve, rules no longer apply, relations reorient. A crossing. I cross the room, my attention anchored to one image, then suddenly propelled to another, dizzy, disoriented, my senses unable to make sense of the cross between and among human, inhuman, natural, unnatural.

An incorporation. A merging, a mattering, a possession, an exorcism. A release that remains, as the ghosts that have been raised fade away, their mark only a memory. A haunting. As I approach the exit of the gallery, the unnatural and inhuman ghosts of the Anthropocene incorporate even as they fail to embody.

A separation, a transition, an incorporation. These three stages of ritual are familiar to us as performance scholars, coming to performance studies from anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep

through the work of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. While the three stages of ritual are familiar, what is unfamiliar is how we might imagine such rituals in the absence of human bodies, performances that can fill an empty gallery with a host of unnatural and inhuman ghosts. This classic version of ritual is anthropo-centric, but not quite yet anthropo-scenic.

(*Image: Book cover of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Frozen pond on left, webbing on right.)

Nils Bubandt writes: “In the Anthropocene, life is already geologic. In this geological ghost vision, the present proceeds from the future, because the possibility of co-species survival depends crucially on what we humans are going to do now, in the midst of an increasingly given fate of ruination and extinction” (G136). Haunting their past from our future, the ghosts of the Anthropocene draw our attention to what we would rather ignore, insisting with spectral presence that we work to prevent their material absence.

(*Image: A large mining vehicle, like the offspring of a construction crane and ocean liner mixed, floating in the clouds. Screenshot of *The Anthropocene Project Website*.)

Conjuring such a geological ghost vision is the task at hand for Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, the artists behind *The Anthropocene Project*, which includes *Anthropocene: The Exhibition*, a multimedia touring visual installation that debuted simultaneously at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in September 2018, as well as the accompanying documentary film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*. In *The Anthropocene Project*, Burtynsky, Baichwal, and de Pencier make visible the effects and affects of human activity at geologic scales, depicting scenes that capture landfills, urban sprawl, open pit mining, deforestation, sea wall construction, coral bleaching, species extinction and more, through a mix of photography, video, augmented reality,

and virtual reality displays. Although the project's visual aesthetics are striking in scale and composition, I will argue what is most powerful about *Anthropocene: The Exhibition* emerges from its performative dimensions. As I walked through installation at the Art Gallery of Ontario in October 2018, I was overwhelmed by feelings and swept up in behaviors that I associate most closely with performances, rituals, and hauntings. A ritual was taking place, but the only human body participating was my own. In this presentation, I will describe how *The Exhibition* enacts what I call the "ecological uncanny," a performance phenomenon troubling the edges between human, inhuman, natural, unnatural, lively and spectral.

(*Image: Grey, green and brown vertical lines, swooping so that the viewer feels pulled into the image. Unclear if abstract design or landscape.)

When first entering the *Anthropocene* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, spectators are welcomed through a small threshold space. On the left-hand wall is an extended linguistic description of the project, including a dictionary-style definition of Anthropocene: "From the Greek anthropos, meaning 'human being' and kainos, meaning 'new' or 'recent.' (n) The proposed current geological epoch, in which humans are the primary cause of permanent planetary change." On the right-hand wall is a large inkjet print of Burtynsky's "Basque Coast #1, UNESCO Geopark, Zumaia, Spain, 2015" (Fig 1.), which depicts vertical streaks of exposed sedimentary rock or "flysch." Spectators moved to read the exhibit's accompanying text will learn that embedded in these layers of rock is the physical evidence geologists use to define "the boundaries between two geologic ages, the Cretaceous-Paleogene and the Paleocene-Eocene" (*Anthropocene* 60). However, as will be the case throughout the exhibit, the aesthetic qualities of the image overwhelm logocentric pedagogy of the text. The depth of field of "Basque Coast #1" draws the spectator into the image, and once enveloped, a spectral-yet-tactile relation forms with

the patterned stripes of rock. A combination of the large scale of the print and minute details rendered in high contrast colour create the impression the image must be rendered through some form of three-dimensional medium – however close inspection reveals only the two dimensions of ink and vinyl. Texture, ghosting the hands and mind of the spectator, proves to be an optical illusion.

The liminal space of the exhibition’s entryway presents the conceptual and physical tensions that define *The Anthropocene Project*. The “natural” of untouched rock contrasts with the “culture” of linguistic definitions; the human becomes entwined with historical and technological cognitive contexts, while nature is experienced as embodied and sublime; the impossibility of capturing artificial concepts of incomprehensible scale, such as “epoch,” is juxtaposed against a compressed and frozen in a visual image. These tensions begin to generate a tactile, affective experience for the spectator. The small space performs the work of *The Anthropocene Project* in microcosm, posing what initially seem to be stark dualism only to question the processes by which boundary lines have been drawn. This questioning occurs not solely in the text or image, mind or body, exhibit or spectator, but in the exhausting affect that comes from moving between them.

(*Image: Anthropocene book cover. Arial shot of open pit mining, rust coloured sand.)

The uncanny and sublime feelings generated by Burtynsky’s signature photography aesthetics are often the preoccupation of conversation and criticism that surround his work. Andrea Kunard, curator of the National Gallery of Canada installation, describes how the images exert themselves on the spectator:

(*)

“In many of Burtynsky’s works, a lack of horizon accentuates the image’s two-dimensional formal qualities, transfiguring specific, geographical elements into visual puzzles. The predominant temporal experience is one of pause created by the force of the image that demands concentrated viewing” (223).

(*Image: Two images of the *Anthropocene* gallery. On top, shadowy spectators fill the art gallery where landscape images are illuminated. On bottom, arial photograph of an urban centre.)

This capacity to transfix the spectator is harnessed for maximum impact by Burtynsky, Baichwal, and de Pencier’s and their curatorial collaborators in designing the layout of the exhibition. The floorplan of the exhibit’s main room encourages this demand to dwell, concentrate, and interact. To navigate the gallery, spectators must physically “zoom” in and out from each image, reorienting their embodied perspective to account for the incomprehensible scales depicted. This dizzying dance creates shifts in states of conscious-embodiment; throughout the gallery I found myself lost in time and trance, only to experience sudden shocks of intense presence. Sophie Hackett, the curator of the Art Galley of Ontario installation relates the demanding quality of the work to the greater phenomenon of aerial photography, a technique often employed in *The Anthropocene Project*:

(*)

“The potent mix of abstraction and information in these [aerial] photographs continue to fascinate, as the viewer absorbs and then recognizes the information, a move from the unfamiliar to the familiar” (16). At large, the gallery proves to be physically, emotionally, and cognitively absorbing, overstimulating and exhausting.

(Image: vertical lines - Basque Coast #1)

The constant interplay of familiar and unfamiliar, sublime and uncanny described by Kunard and Hackett contribute to the experience I am calling “the ecological uncanny.” The uncanny as a more general phenomenon consists of three components: first, sudden striking embodied sensations of fear, confusion, arousal, and awe; second, the critical cognitive analysis that arises in recognition of the familiar-made-strange; and third, an excessively spectral and queer something-else-ness, that most often defies description.

(*Image: The Uncanny Book cover – painting of a hooded figure reading a manuscript)

Nicholas Royle articulates this spectrality as performative:

(*)

“The uncanny is never simply a question of statement, description or definition, but always engages a performative dimension, a maddening supplement, something unpredictable and *additionally strange* happening in and to what is being stated, described or defined” (16). In naming the ecological uncanny, I focus on those instances when the excessive spectrality arising from an uncanny encounter works to denaturalize the human and/or the natural. Moments of the ecological uncanny make explicit how, as Royle describes, uncanniness is:

(*)

“a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world” (1). In ecological uncanny encounters, weird feelings arise as we suddenly lose the ability to distinguish between the human, inhuman, natural, and unnatural. Setting us adrift, the performative ghosts of the ecological uncanny then force us to dwell in the chaotic aftermath of this undoing.

(*Image: Ghostly Matters book cover, black and white edge of beach)

Avery Gordon describes the magnetic power of ghosts in a manner akin to that of the ecological uncanny thus imagined and of *The Anthropocene Project's* images:

(*)

“Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (8).

(*Image: Basque Coast #1)

The initial unfamiliarity of Burtynsky’s landscapes generates this process; obscuring horizon line of either sea or sky, “Basque Coast #1” does not conform to the visual patterns normative to a beach or mountain scene, nor does the depth of focus suggest an abstracted aerial. Only after dwelling does scenic spatiality emerge.

(*Left, book cover *Gender Trouble*, photograph portrait of two young girls; Right, book cover of *Bodies that Matter*, Bronze age painting of partially nude person with breast holding fabric)

As a form of haunting, ecological uncanny performances flip the usual script of performative acts. As articulated by Judith Butler, performative acts foreground citation, repetition and un-transformative recognition:

(*)

“The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (527).

(*)

While there is “the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of... style” (520), normative performatives hinge on being read by spectators as

sufficiently recognizably repetitive in order to function. Performatives primarily reiterate and reinforce, and only secondarily work in subversive or transformative modes. In contrast, I suggest that for uncanny performatives, disorientation necessarily precedes recognition. Spectators notice the strangeness of the image, the weirdness of the act, the chill of the ghost, before they are able to recognize the familiarity of the transformed script.

(*Two images of the *Anthropocene* gallery space.)

In the *Anthropocene* gallery, as each image grabs the spectator's attention with a spectral force, it exerts that there is something inhuman and unnatural at play. The images confound the spectator's capacity to draw a normative boundary between humans and nature, while haunting us with our already entangled extinctions.

It is not only the individual encounters with each image that take on such a ghostly performative structure. The overall flow of moving through the gallery takes on a ritualistic rhythm. To conceive of the experience of *The Anthropocene Project* as limited to a visual-cognitive encounter is too limited;

(*Basque Coast #1)

if it were a solely visual experience, looking at a digital print of "Basque Coast #1" on the Project's website, or on your screen now, would have the same impact as visiting the gallery. Having attended both *The Exhibition* and theatrical screenings of *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, the contrasting affects between the two experiences are striking. The film emphasizes the sublime qualities of both its images and subject matter, presenting human destruction of the nonhuman world as totalizing and unstoppable to a filmic observer rendered passive.

(*Two images of the gallery space)

In contrast, the gallery is structured as an ecological uncanny performance, enacting unnatural inhuman hauntings that depend on a lively and ritualistic interaction between spectator and environment. Moving from the liminality of the threshold, a separation which explicitly focuses our attention on the human-nature boundary; into the disorienting trauma of the main room, a transition that disturbs and disorients with un/natural and in/human entanglements; and closing with a distinctly spectral encounter, one that incorporates the ghosts without ever embodying them; the exhibition, experienced as an event, re-enacts the ritual process, to haunted inhuman ends.

(*Image: Two large pyramids of elephants tusks on fire.)

If the ghosts of the Anthropocene could be dismissed as weird feelings or aesthetic illusions in the first two spaces of the *The Exhibition*, the final room makes their absent presence undeniable. Entering the room, sound immediately draws attention to a large video mural placed near the exit, depicting a bonfire. Gazing into the digital smoke, the pattern of tusks slowly emerges. In front of the video installation, is a small awkward black and white box, depicting cropped images of large piles of elephant tusk. Spectators tend to give the box a wide berth, attending first to the images of more hopeful Anthropocene-adaptation that make up the front half of the room.

Approaching the exhibit's exit, sits the box delineating "AR#2, President Kenyatta's Tusk Pile, April 28, Nairobi, Kenya, 2016" (Fig 2.) one of four augmented reality pieces included in *The Anthropocene Project*. The exhibition's text explains the immaterial memorial:

(*Image: Man holding tablet up to the AR box in the gallery.)

On April 30, 2016, the largest ivory burn in history took place in Nairobi National Park in Kenya. For decades, the Kenyan government had been stockpiling elephant tusks and rhino horns that had been confiscated from poachers. They decided that a dramatic public incineration of this cache would make a bold statement to the world that there is no

market for ivory... This photographic archive was achieved by taking more than 2,500 high-resolution stills of the three-metre-tall pile with a custom-built parallax DSLR rig from every angle possible. These images were then stitched together using specialized software into a highly detailed 3D mesh and texture map. (*Anthropocene* 184)

Spectators can download an application onto their smartphones or use tablet devices provided on site to experience the virtual sculpture. Looking through my phone's camera, at first, I seemed to be looking at the same gallery, tracking the background movement of spectators and the mural in real time - but when the camera was held at the correct angle, the same pile of tusks I was watching burn materialized. Scale was once again the most striking quality of the virtual sculpture, the tusks expanding to take over a much larger space of the gallery floor than the small physical box suggested. As I observed the AR, the strange energy keeping spectators away from the box instantly transformed and charged, generating a vibrant absent-presence - a tangible ghost. When another spectator chose to ignore the charged presence that almost instinctually kept others at bay, I shuddered involuntarily. As he passed through the frame, the virtual statue glitched, quickly switching angle and scale, disappearing, and just as suddenly returning. None-the-less, from the tingling in arms, it was as if my body, not his, had touched the statue.

This interaction demands live presence in the exhibition, not only in order to engage with the augmented reality technology, but to experience the carefully curated rhythm of uncanny sensations, transformative recognitions, and moments of spectral weirdness that allow the ghosts of the Anthropocene to become not known but felt.

(*Image: Two pyres of tusks on fire.)

The pyre mourns more than elephants, celebrates more than the end-of-poaching. This closing interaction with the exhibit marks the end of an imaginary, the collapse of the delusion that

humans are able to act without permanent, devastating consequences for other beings on the planet, the dissolution of the possibility that a boundary, material or spectral, exists between humans and nature at all.

As an ecological uncanny performance, *Anthropocene: the Exhibition* plays with all the affective, embodied, cognitive, defamiliarizing, repetitive, transformative, material and spectral potentials of the live event; revealing the haunting and destructive force of human/nature dualism, while ritually surrogating its ghosts with other unnatural inhuman hauntings. Within the contained, curated, cultural walls of the gallery, nature reaches out, touches, and fuses with its human spectators. Through ecological uncanny performances such as *The Anthropocene Project*, we can come to understand the ghosts of the Anthropocene as not merely convenient or dramatic discursive metaphors for comprehending absence, destruction, extinction, and ruination, but begin to recognize them as unnatural and inhuman forces that enact, stage, ritualize, repeat, perform, transform and do with and among human actors. These performed hauntings help us feel how, as the authors of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* suggest:

(*)

“Our ghosts are the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade” (G1). Making, unmaking, disturbing, demanding, these ecological, uncanny, performing ghosts won’t let us settle into old patterns. They haunt not only from the past, but also from the future. They resonate at strange frequencies; they disturb before they delight. They are following a script we haven’t experienced quite yet. They ask us to recognize them anyway, they demand we respond to their presence before we reinscribe their absence. They ask: if Anthropocene is filled with ghosts, blurred by ghosts, performed by and with ghosts, how will we respond?

Image Credits

Slide 1, 6, 13, 19: *Anthropocene: the Exhibition* at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Author's photos.

Slide 2: *Arts of Living on a Damage Planet* book cover.

Slide 3: Screenshot of *The Anthropocene Project* website.

Slide 4,7,10, 13: Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier.

“Basque Coast #1, UNESCO Geopark, Zumaia, Spain, 2015.” Photograph. Courtesy of the artists.

Slide 5: *Anthropocene* book cover.

Slide 8: *The Uncanny* book cover.

Slide 9: *Ghostly Matters* book cover.

Slide 11: *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble* book cover.

Slide 14, 16: Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier. “Elephant Tusk Burn, Nairobi National Park, Kenya.” Film still. Courtesy of Anthropocene Films Inc.

Slide 15: Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier. “AR #2, President Kenyatta's Tusk Pile, April 28, Nairobi, Kenya, 2016.” Photogrammetric augmented reality (AR). Courtesy of the artists.

Works Cited

- Anthropocene*, edited by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier. Goose Lane Editions Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018.
- Bubandt, Nils. "Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene." *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elan Gan, Nils Bubandt. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. G121-142.
- Burtynsky, Edward, Baichwal, Jennifer and de Pencier, Nicholas. *Anthropocene*. 28 September 2018 - 6 January 2019, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no.4, 1989, pp. 519-531.
- Gan, Elaine, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, and Nils Bubandt. "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene." *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elan Gan, Nils Bubandt. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. G1-G16.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Hackett, Sophie. "Far and Near: New Views of the Anthropocene." *Anthropocene*, edited by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier. Goose Lane Editions Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018, pp 13-34.
- Kunard, Andres. "The Art Museum and the Anthropocene." *Anthropocene*, edited by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier. Goose Lane Editions Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018, 221-230.
- Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny: An Introduction*. Manchester University Press, 2003.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theatre & Anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.