

The Anthropocene in Museums Workshop Minutes

3 - 4 December 2015

Thursday, 3 December

Number in attendance: 35

1. Welcome, introductions and opening remarks on workshop themes

Helmuth Trischler (Deutsches Museum / Rachel Carson Center) gave the welcome address and talked about the Deutsches Museum and the Rachel Carson Center (RCC). He explained how the Anthropocene could be researched and communicated to an audience through exhibitions in museums. He also made mention of how the Anthropocene exhibitions in museums could be used as a springboard both to research and to communicate the concept of the Anthropocene. He further briefed participants on the ongoing transitional phase (renewal and reconstruction) of the Deutsches Museum. He then introduced **Libby Robin (Board member of the RCC / Australian National University / National Museum of Australia (NMA))**, **Kirsten Wehner (RCC fellow / National Museum of Australia)**, and **Jenny Newell (American Museum of Natural History (AMNH))** as the co-conveners of the workshop.

Libby Robin introduced “The Anthropocene in Museums Workshop” by giving the timeline of events that led to the workshop and mentioned the three pillars behind the idea of the workshop: the international Museums and Climate Change Network (based at the AMNH), the RCC partnership with the Deutsches Museum which led to the 2014 exhibition, *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, and the Mellon Australia-Pacific Observatory, particularly the work Jenny Newell and Kirsten Wehner have been fostering around objects, museums and the Pacific. She spoke of the history of the enthusiastic and at times critical uptake of ideas about the Anthropocene by a range of environmental humanities institutions since 2011 (see Appendix 1: The Anthropocene events).

Libby also talked about the first “Museums and Climate Change Network” conference, held in 2013 at the AMNH, which led to the book entitled *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* (Routledge 2016: <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138658523>). For twitter users we recommended #MCCNet, #Anthropocene, #OWNMUSEUM as hashtags for the “Museums and Climate Change Network” conference news and updates.

Kirsten Wehner spoke about using the workshop as a platform to build a global community of people who can transform museums. She endorsed the term Anthropocene for its capacity to draw attention to the complex ways in which people are transforming the Earth’s environments. She reminded participants about the current ICOM definition of a museum and queried whether and how it might be re-shaped to develop more Anthropocenic concepts of ‘humanity’. She proposed that museums might focus on three trajectories in seeking new

modes of addressing the Anthropocene, developing new representational narratives, collaborative modes of engaging audiences and modes of exhibition design.

2. Guided visit to the Deutsches Museum 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' exhibition

The moderator for this session was Jenny Newell

Helmuth Trischler and **Nina Möllers (Deutsches Museum)** gave participants a guided tour of the 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' exhibition. They explained the decisions that led to what was included in the exhibition as well as the reason for the particular structure and design of the gallery. They also pointed out the flower garden structure that only serves as an element of public participation but also as an evaluation tool for the 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' exhibition, whereby visitors write down comments and these comments are collected later.

3. Presentation: Welcome to the Anthropocene gallery

Nina Möllers and Helmuth Trischler gave a presentation on the evaluation results of the "Welcome to the Anthropocene" exhibition. They discussed the main goals of the exhibition, the evaluation results, an overview of the educational program connected to the exhibition, and the perspectives of the exhibition. They gave the demographics of the visitors, their reasons for coming to see the exhibition, their likes and dislikes of the exhibits as well as their take home message. A discussion followed this presentation.

4. Presentation: Anthropocene challenges- Waste

Alexandra Johnson (Science Museum, London, UK) presented on the "Rubbish Collection", a Science Museum exhibition in summer 2014 which was a collaboration with artist Joshua Sofaer. She discussed the process involved in the curation and display of the waste materials. She also pointed out how by treating waste materials like historic objects, humans can reconsider its value. A discussion followed this presentation.

Jamie Furniss (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée' (MuCEM)/ University of Edinburgh) presented on 'Waste and the Anthropocene from an Ethnographic point of view', coauthored with **Matthieu Duperrex and Yann-Philippe Tastevin** (also participants in the discussion). They discussed collections of materials (waste) and the concept of waste in relation to their future exhibition on "waste". He asked whether the Anthropocene changed the waste problem and highlighted their approach to waste in their future Anthropocene exhibition (the idea of beauty in ugliness). A discussion followed this presentation.

5. Presentation: Anthropocene challenges - Energy

Christina Geyer and Sarah Kellberg (Deutsches Museum) presented the exhibition project “Energy.transitions” which aims to discuss pathways to sustainable energy systems. They talked about the Anthropocene topic of energy transition and the issue of the use of energy and its sustainability, which would be the focus of their future exhibition to be opened in late 2016. They discussed how the exhibition would show conscious energy transitions and how it would challenge visitors to make these transitions a reality. A discussion followed this presentation.

Jennifer Martin (TELUS Spark, Canada) presented on ‘But oil pays my mortgage and feeds my family’. She gave a history on the oil sands bitumen deposits and pipelines (Keystone XL) in Alberta and described how mining oil sands is carried out. She discussed how residents are responding to change in the oil price in relation to energy sustainability. A discussion followed this presentation.

6. Presentation: Transforming museum institutions in the Anthropocene

Emlyn Koster (North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, USA) presented on ‘Navigating the museum’s purpose towards the needs of the Anthropocene’. He mentioned the massive challenge facing museums in their need for greater external relevance and discussed how to meet this challenge from a field perspective whereby museums combine usefulness and popularity to attain relevance and further combine relevance and renewal to attain sustainability. A discussion followed this presentation.

7. Public lecture and discussion

The moderator for this session was Kirsten Wehner.

Jenny Newell (American Museum of Natural History) presented on ‘**Activism, Art and Atolls: Communicating the Oceanic Anthropocene**’. She looked at activism and art in relation to climate change in the Pacific environment and talked about how Pacific Islanders are using art to respond to this situation through art; being not just by-standers but strong activists who create the concept of hope in the face of climate change. A discussion followed this presentation.

Rebecca Hofmann (Rachel Carson Center / LMU, Munich), discussant, gave a presentation based on her work in the Pacific. She talked about the effects of climate change in the Pacific region and how residents were responding to these changes. A discussion followed this presentation.

Friday, 4 December

Number in attendance: 30

1. Welcome

Kirsten and Helmuth welcomed the participants.

2. Presentation: Anthropocene markers- tools and materials

The moderator for this session was Helmuth Trischler

Siobhan Starrs (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution) gave a presentation on Deep Time Context for the Future: The Anthropocene as Future Fossil. She mentioned the exhibitions in the museum in general and presented demographics of visitors and their reasons for visiting. She discussed the design evolution and the challenges in the planning of an Anthropocene Gallery within the newly renovated National Fossil Hall and asked for suggestions on how to approach these challenges. A discussion followed this presentation.

Sabiha Keyif (ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany) gave a presentation on Man-made Exo-evolution. She gave the history of ZKM and the demographics of the visitors. She mentioned the Globale project in the Man-made Exo-evolution which features exhibits of how the environment has been shaped by new discoveries as well as the solutions for problems of the twenty-first century by showing pictures of these exhibits. A discussion followed this presentation.

Chris Wingfield (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge) gave a presentation on Transforming the Earth: Exploring the roots of the Anthropocene. He talked about the new project “Shared World, Shared Museum” of the MAA by giving the timeline for this project and the feedback they have received from the gallery in terms of the content, comparisons and the connections. He discussed the types of materials (which includes stones, ceramics, metals, and plastics) which the gallery will focus on and their significance in the exhibition. A discussion followed this presentation.

3. Presentation: Imaging the Anthropocene

The moderator for this session was Jenny Newell

Alison Pouliot (Australian National University) gave a presentation by showing images from her work on the subject The Accidental Museum. She talked about how these images draw our attention to nature as a “dominant” curator thereby asking the question of whether museums have to be in buildings and whether curators have to be humans. A discussion followed this presentation.

Alexsandra Jach (Museum Sztuki, Lodz / Warsaw University) gave a presentation on her research on Art practices in the Anthropocene where she discussed how the notion of the Anthropocene is transforming art practices and models of cultural institutions. She pointed out how the limits of imagination were the limits of possibility. A discussion followed this presentation.

Viveca Mellegård (Stockholm Resilience Centre) gave a presentation on her project Making craftsmanship visible as a source of social-ecological resilience: From the Swedish Arctic to the Stockholm Archipelago: Sami duodji and Baltic small scale fishing. She talked about her motivation for undertaking this project and the importance of craftsmanship, where she noted the importance of making craftsmanship visible as a source of social-ecological resilience. She further shared insights from her project. A discussion followed this presentation.

4. Presentation: Re-shaping museum disciplines in the Anthropocene

The moderator for this session was Kirsten Wehner

Malin Huber (FASAD film) gave a presentation on Portraying the Anthropocene in transmedia experiences. She talked about the production company, Fasad and their productions as well as the research that goes into producing these feature films and documentaries. She then showed excerpts of their project Aeterna which is a two-part feature consisting of one part a cinematic study of how humans have become the dominant force shaping the earth and the other part an art animation which weaves multiple knowledge sources to communicate this in the context of the Big History. A discussion followed this presentation.

Tahani Nadim (Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, Germany) gave a presentation on Post-natural troubles in a natural history museum: The exhibition *Tote Wespen fliegen länger/Dead wasps fly further* at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. She talked about the exhibition which was based on her ethnographic work, describing the items used, and how she had to dress up like a wasp while giving visitors a guided tour. She made mention of some institutions which collaborated with the museum in relation to The exhibition *Tote Wespen fliegen länger*. She discussed the struggle the natural history museum faced in giving shape to issues on biodiversity loss. A discussion followed this presentation.

5. Presentation: Anthropocene as/through people and environment in place

The moderator for this session was Libby Robin.

Liisi Jääts (Estonian National Museum) gave a presentation on ‘The challenges of addressing global environmental topics through site-specific stories’. She talked about the cultural history Gallery “People and Environment” which is part of a permanent exhibition of the new National Museum of Estonia opening in Autumn 2016. She addressed the

environmental topics in the future exhibition, the content of the exhibition in relation to the site of the museum and gave a permanent exhibition outline for the gallery in the national museum which is still under construction. She further mentioned the concept of the exhibition, the topics to include as well as a theme island design for the exhibitions. A discussion followed this presentation.

Daniel Oakman (National Museum of Australia) gave a presentation on ‘Making environmental history at the National Museum of Australia’. He gave the history of some of the museum’s collections, focusing on how they expressed stories about how people have engaged with Australian species, places, and natural systems. He discussed how exhibitions drawing on these collections could foster ecological literacy and sensitivity.

Nathalia Sofie Brichet and Frida Hastrup (University of Aarhus / University of Copenhagen / Moesgård Museum, Denmark) gave a presentation on ‘Mild Apocalypse: Exhibiting an Anthropocene Danish Landscape’, which was co-authored with **Mathilde Højrup**, who joined the discussion. They talked about a future experimental exhibition at the Moesgård Museum which will be based on a transdisciplinary fieldwork in a former industrial brown coal mining site located in the middle of Jutland in Denmark. They gave a history of the mining site and how it has been shaped by extractive activities that has created it and discussed how this exhibition would portray a “mild apocalypse” of the Danish landscape.

6. Round table discussion on building museum networks in the Anthropocene

The moderator for this session was Jenny Newell

Libby Robin gave an introduction to the Museum and Climate Change Network and explained the aim for forming such a network. Jenny Newell then talked about the Museum and Climate Change Network website and encouraged participants to share their ideas and stories about their museums there. Jenny then gave a presentation on the climate museum, its history and its current state. She talked about the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI), which is a collaborative initiative of some institutions with the goal of establishing a national network of professionals skilled in communicating climate science to the public.

In the discussion session that followed:

Participants asked if the name climate change be changed to Anthropocene as this term was a broader concept that captures the idea of the current environmental situation. It was suggested that the Anthropocene should be a leading theme in museums not just on the website. Also, the topic of the Anthropocene should be discussed at forums within big conferences in order to draw attention to the subject.

On the issue of meetings (in relation to conferences), participants said it would be better to meet every two years in addition to sharing information on the Museum and Climate Change Network website.

Participants were urged not to see this conference and the discussions as a cliff hanger but to see it as a valuable learning experience and to look forward to future conferences as an

opportunity to learn. Participants asked about the next step after this conference and how to make this conference a valuable event. Participants were encouraged to communicate and share with other participants about their upcoming exhibitions. It was suggested that participants could undertake field visits to other museums as part of future activities.

It was also mentioned that a recent poll in the United States showed that environmental issues were important topics when discussing the state of the economy.

Emlyn drew participants' attention to an upcoming Science Centre World Summit 2017 in Japan.

It was also noted that it was important to revisit the definition of museum as well as the museum profession.

Libby again made mention of the forthcoming book *Curating the Future*.

Participant Charles Savage made mention of sharing with his class what he has learnt from the conference.

Participants further shared thoughts on what an ideal mix might be in relation to how to communicate the idea of the Anthropocene in their museums.

7. Closing remarks and appreciation

Jenny thanked the Deutsches Museum, the RCC, Helmuth, Libby and Kirsten for making the workshop possible.

Kirsten thanked the participants for being part of the workshop.