



ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ART AND VISUAL STUDIES

# ART AND NATURE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

PLANETARY AESTHETICS

SUSAN BALLARD

ROUTLEDGE

# Art and Nature in the Anthropocene

This book examines how contemporary artists have engaged with histories of nature, geology, and extinction within the context of the changing planet. Susan Ballard describes how artists challenge the categories of animal, mineral, and vegetable—turning to a multispecies order of relations that opens up a new vision of what it means to live within the Anthropocene. Considering the work of a broad range of artists including Francisco de Goya, J. M. W. Turner, Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Yhonnie Scarce, Joyce Campbell, Lisa Reihana, Katie Paterson, Taryn Simon, Susan Norrie, Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, Ken + Julia Yonetani, David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, Angela Tiatia, and Hito Steyerl and with a particular focus on artists from Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, this book reveals the emergence of a planetary aesthetics that challenges fixed concepts of nature in the Anthropocene.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, visual culture, narrative nonfiction, digital and media art, and the environmental humanities.

**Susan Ballard** is an Associate Professor of Art History at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.

If transformed with colour, the feathered grisaille floorboards would be dripping red. Hammond's work is a picture of interspecies domestic violence that anticipates future atrocities. Unable to prevent the destruction of an earlier time, Hammond documents a colonial mortuary that is at once a newly settled home for one species and a site of death for the other.

For Australian environmental historian Deborah Bird Rose, thinking about extinction without collapsing into despair involved turning to the categories of recuperation rather than restoration.<sup>30</sup> Rose framed her work with two questions: What is the fate of the unloved? What does it mean to write in a time of extermination and extinctions? New Zealand born, Australian artist Hayden Fowler offers one answer by mapping the sorrow of New Zealand's bird extinctions onto his own body. In 2007, Fowler staged the installation and performance event *Call of the Wild* (2007, Figure 3.3). In a sanitised street-front boutique, and under the gaze of the passing public, Fowler had a pair of huia on straggly branches tattooed on his back. The choreography of the event took three days, during which human skin was irreversibly transformed into a new organic form. The performance was neither about human or bird suffering, nor was it some kind of Frankenstein-ian reanimation of the bird (as this would presume some gift of life held by the artist). Instead, by offering his own body as a site for mourning and remembrance, Fowler held out a lifeline to the huia. For Fowler, this was not a simple process of remembering a loss, it was one in which the trace of dead bodies could be given a new life. The blank white surface of the environment, the sterile white clothing and custom furniture highlight the flesh of the canvas upon which the tattoo artist etched his lines. On live human skin, in a purified white tank, the huia found a way through the cracks.

Fowler's work suggests that we reconsider the position of the animal within extinction, and instead embody an ethics that counters restorative modes. This ethics is embodied, and vital. It develops the second mode of working identified by Rose, what she calls "recuperative work", work that begins from the conviction that:

there is no former time/space of wholeness to which we might return or which we might resurrect for ourselves ... Nor is there a posited future wholeness which may yet save us. Rather, the work of recuperation seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims toward engagement and disclosure. The method works as an alternative both to methods of closure or suspicion and to methods of proposed salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Caring is difficult. It has a cost. Amidst structured relations and control are the very different reasons that species continue to live and die on this planet. The Anthropocene continually reminds us that the persistence of life, any life, may be due to human effort: the effort to stay away and leave things alone, as much as the effort to intervene. Fowler takes care to avoid restorative work. Instead, in his recuperative practice, he directly engages with the ghosts of extinction whilst creating worlds in which humans form kin with birds, rats, dingoes, and wolves. In the video installation *New World Order* (2013, Figure 3.4), Fowler examines the process of making kin, by excluding humans.<sup>32</sup> Here, animals form communities from the bits and pieces humans have left behind. Fowler documents a new kind of natureculture, a unit of survival that includes technology. On screen is a dull grey environment inhabited by pedigree mutations (chickens who have been bred by human amateurs as much as for scientific need).



Figure 3.3 Hayden Fowler, *Call of the Wild i* (2007). Mounted chromogenic photograph, dimensions variable, performance documentation. Photograph Sarah Smuts-Kennedy. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Fowler has gifted these exotic birds new techno-voices that they use to call to one another. They arrive on screen alone or in small groups. These are seductive birds co-produced by both nature and culture. But there is no call and response. Just a call, repeated. Mediated and transformed into technological ringtones, the chickens pierce the environment with their search for one another. Fowler's constructed environment conjures an immediate response from viewers; in the constant activity, the air is full of hope. The work documents a new world order layered with colonial, social, and economic relationships. Occupying a desolate universe where, very literally, nature has taken on the voice of the machine, Fowler suggests that the initial moment of the Anthropocene includes habitation rather than isolation. Nature is revealed to be a human construct. The humans who established this sanctuary (if it ever was one) have long gone and the bush has taken on the patina of the petrified concrete that used to mark the spectacular skyscrapers of the past. The trees are the twisted and rusting steel of towers that appear no longer fit for life, and yet the whole environment is alive. Fowler highlights how an Anthropocenic unit of survival is not fixed in time and space. Fowler's birds evolve together with their environment as a constantly transforming ecosystem. Fowler does not cast judgment on the spaces occupied by the



Figure 3.4 Hayden Fowler, *New World Order (production still ii)* (2013). Colour pigment print on cotton rag art paper, 54 × 75 cm, unique edition. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

chickens, nor on their ritual behaviours. They offer instead their own ways of telling the story.

Discussions of species (and their extinction) stretch beyond the usual comfort zones of art history, and contribute to the specificity and activity of what it means to be human. Fowler's *Anthropocene* (2011, Figure 3.5) is a temporary construction of a post-earth settler island where Fowler lived with lab rats; a multispecies cohabitation.<sup>33</sup> Installed in a large industrial gallery space, *Anthropocene* is a 6 metre round floating island containing a small group of geodesic caves, a fetid pond, grass, and rocks. The whole environment is built on a platform that is lifted off the floor of the gallery, so that from afar it appears to be a recently arrived (life) capsule. During the opening hours of the gallery, Fowler and a small colony of lab rats occupy the island. The space is under 24-hour video surveillance and anyone who doesn't want to approach too closely can view the inside of the cave on CCTV monitors set a modest distance away. On screen, we witness Fowler as he sleeps, eats canned food, and fends off any rats that come too near. They all seem adapted to some kind of post-technological catastrophe. The island grass is musty but not desolate, and there seems to be a water source nearby. The white plaster of the cave environment has the feel that soon it will grow moss and blend into the island environment. Emerging from the cave at random times, the animal skin-clad Fowler does not communicate across the distances of his world; his silence and isolation are in stark contrast to the everyday comings and goings of the gallery space.



Figure 3.5 Hayden Fowler, *Anthropocene* (2011). Mixed-media installation, 5 × 6.5 × 6.5 metres. Photograph by Joy Lai. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

*Anthropocene* is situated in some ever-after time, a reconfigured and dynamic refuge inhabited by exotic fauna, including a future-human. It is not clear if at one time this environment was part of a city, a new urban habitat, or something else not made by humans at all. Fowler imagines the future of this catastrophic space as a new world island where technology, humans, lab rats, and nature are bound together in full view of a startled audience. *Anthropocene* is not just an encounter formed from things, or objects; this is an assemblage of animals, minerals, and vegetables. Like any good science fiction, *Anthropocene* is a sympathetic ecology of matter as flow.

Perhaps in this space of island-becoming-refuge, Fowler allows us to stay alert to the kinds of behaviours and forms of communication we need to adopt to confront future species extinctions. Despite its depleted state, this corner of a future world is currently living. It is neither romantic nor nostalgic, but it is breathing. There is always a need for fresh air. It is disturbed and remade by the lost bodies of a new kind of cohabitation. Fowler and his island rats are survivors, but without bees to pollinate the grass, and rain to fill the pond, their small green eco-sanctuary may soon rot. Already some children have begun to throw sticks at the island inhabitants. Fowler shows that animals can indeed adapt to new Anthropocenic environments, but the environments themselves also need to adapt. Understandings of multispecies relationships counter deterministic and restorative models of the world. *Anthropocene* is an ethical pointer towards the recuperation of a future nature.

Understanding the mass extinctions of many diverse species raises questions about the definitions of species but also the uncomfortable way in which humans are facing