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Boyd, Jean ORCID: 0000-0002-9343-6692 (2019) Techniques of Care: Art and the Neganthropocene. In: Art and the Neganthropocene, 7th - 9th June, Trinity College Dublin. (Unpublished)

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/6971>

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Techniques of Care: Art and the Neganthropocene

A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting gathers contributed fragments of place, of objects and of memories. These are traces of locations that may disappear under rising sea levels, flooding, glacial melting and coastal erosion. Sinking and melting evidence the entanglement of multiple agents and agencies, over many scales, frequencies and periods of time. An ongoing, participatory artwork initiated in 2011 by American artist Amy Balkin, the Archive exists as a physical collection – it was shown here in the Science Gallery (Dublin) in 2014¹ – and as an online site.²

Operating in a future conditional tense – addressing what may be lost – the Archive oscillates between presence and absence. Collected objects speculate on becoming the traces of no-place. As vectors of memory, they also witness our present moment and ask us 'did we think, did we act, were we care-less?'

A People's Archive might seem a slight gesture: gathering and cataloguing broken things, scraps of world. I will suggest that we try to *think with* the work: with its objects, with its frameworks, with its figures of sinking and melting. We can also consider how these material and conceptual frames intersect with the social formations produced through acts of participation and contribution. In a further step, I will put the work into dialogue with Bernard Stiegler's mobilisation of art as therapeutics: an ability to make available practices - of thought, action and imagination - that he names the *Neganthropocene*.³

First we should look more closely at the Archive and what it reveals.

The contributed objects join the collection as emissaries of scattered but threatened places: a tuna can from Cape Verde sits alongside confetti from Venice, a whale bone from an Alaskan island, a metal hook from Antarctica. Each is catalogued by date and location, some accompanied with a short text testifying to the circumstances of their finding, changes the contributor has observed, memories of place, or concern for its future.⁴

These contingent fragments assemble an emergent map of precarity. Each new contribution is thus *anticipated* by the Archive, latent within its structures, before it becomes visible. Under this fragile tracery, previously stable coordinates ground the Archive's classification of place: by country, longitude and latitude.

These are joined by newer forms of global positioning: the UN index of climate change resilience: Annex 1 and 2 industrial nations, non-Annex 1, more vulnerable, developing; LDCs,

¹ <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/strangeweather/peoplesarchive/>

² <http://www.sinkingandmelting.org/>

³ Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018).

⁴ See for example <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/post/44898447951/snap-hook-rusted-metal-micaela-neus-with-nandor>

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least developed and able to respond.⁵ Within this hierarchy of the resilient lie unacknowledged histories and responsibilities. These world pictures – of nation states, citizenship, territorial boundaries (and often the constituent violence of their founding) – underpin the hierarchies and inequalities legible in the UN index. Antarctica – having neither state nor citizens – is unlisted.⁶

The maps and territories of the Archive overlap: but they are lumpy and uneven.⁷ The surfaces of cartography, gridded space and delineated boundaries produce ‘the global’, smooth and homogenous. The objects, in their stubborn and contingent materiality, produce *locations*: differentiated, unpredictable, messy and absolutely specific. They have stories attached to them: this is an archive of the People.⁸ All of the objects, and their places, had to be *chosen*.

Between these lies the UN Index, mapping another kind of ‘world’: unequal, partial, fraught with complex legacies and real effects, on the ground. The textures of the Archive form its critical terrain. Sinking and melting, as forces of change, make visible the turbulences that compound in the term ‘Anthropocene’. They also act as allegories of a wider destabilisation of *thought* that the term has precipitated.

The range and implications of this have been widely rehearsed: I will only refer to some points that this project witnesses.⁹ Anthropocene marks

- both a *commonality* – ourselves as undifferentiated geologic sediment and a geomorphic *agent*
- and a *differentiation* of geologic debt and the agency this confers: from fossil energy, or from the mineral subsidies that enable our digital technosphere. Legacies of both,

⁵ <https://unfccc.int/parties-observers> ‘The Convention divides countries into three main groups according to differing commitments.’ Clear divisions are legible across categories, reflecting histories of colonialism.

⁶ <https://unfccc.int/process/parties-non-party-stakeholders/parties-convention-and-observer-states> List of categorised nations, also see LDC list here <https://unfccc.int/topics/resilience/workstreams/national-adaptation-programmes-of-action/ldc-country-information>

⁷ Stuart Elden has argued that territory is a political technology that troubles concepts of land, terrain, boundaries and space, see *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) and ‘Land, Terrain, Territory’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 34 no.6, 2010, pp799 – 817.

In her keynote address at this conference Anna Tsing described the ‘patchy Anthropocene’ witnessed in the Feral Atlas project (7/6/19)

⁸ This recalls a previous project of Balkin’s (with Kim Stringfellow, Tim Halbur, et al) Invisible-5, that explored the disproportionate absorption of environmental toxicities by poor, migrant and marginal communities along the I5 Highway corridor <http://tomorrowmorning.net/invisible5>.

⁹ Anthropocene literature is extensive, but the following witness the trans-disciplinary nature of these studies: Colebrook (2015), Davis + Turpin (2015), Demos (2017), Haraway (2016), Hörl, E, ed (2017), Morton (2013, 2016), Povinelli (2016), Reiss, J.ed, (2018), Tsing (2017), Yusoff (2018).

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and their differential impacts, are written across bodies and territories now and into the future: (UN index is such a text.)

- Compressions and expansions of time: deep time, indifferent – and the urgent present, fraught with responsibility, so little time between now and too-late.

The Archive registers these morphologies of earth and thought, and operates in their temporalities. To think back and forth across the thresholds the Anthropocene marks, requires extending our *sensibility*, an aesthetic and political task. The catalyst for this are the figures of sinking and melting.

The impacts of sinking and melting are profoundly entropic.

They *undo* territory, its surfaces, boundaries and visibility: categories foundational to nation state, or resource claims, are left undifferentiated, unavailable.

Ice, when melting, is measurable only in the disappearance of its definable form: it is no longer *somewhere*. In turn, locations that are ‘*somewhere*’ (*here now*) submerge and are ‘lost’ together with all they currently support and account for, time no longer passes for them. Icy regions themselves, so inhospitable, tend to remain abstractions, never quite fixing into a form: wildernesses, mineral or strategic assets, *inhumane*.¹⁰ Ice, neither land nor water, challenges legal and territorial categories.

The protean qualities of sinking and melting both acknowledge and unsettle geologic thought of the Anthropocene: imagining ourselves as writers and stratigraphers of own fossil records still conjures an inscribable *surface*.

The ‘geo’ root of knowledge disciplines refers to earth: usually understood as terra, terrain, territory, what can be mapped, mined, built upon. Geology founds our image of time, human and inhuman, and standing reserves of resources as inert matter to be worked upon.¹¹

These ground our imaginaries, political, economic, technological.¹²

In accounting for the oceans, geodesy and bathymetry register the submerged ocean floor and its vertical depth, commensurate with *landscape*: earthly containers for the immeasurable heaving waters and their unceasing flows. If objects, like these in the Archive,

¹⁰ The incapacity of political infrastructures and jurisprudence to acknowledge ice is addressed in the Ice Law research project <https://icelawproject.org/>. See especially Stuart Elden’s ‘Dynamic Territories’ <https://icelawproject.org/wheredoesicefitin/reflections-2/dynamic-territories/> and Timo Koivurova’s ‘Law’ <https://icelawproject.org/about/subprojects/legal-instruments/>

¹¹ The contributions of Steno, Agassiz, Hutton, Smith and Lyell, amongst others, to concepts of deep geologic time are well documented in the history of the discipline. Gould examines shifting temporal imaginaries in Gould, S.J *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*, (Harvard, 1988).

¹² Kathryn Yusoff and Elizabeth Povinelli both point to distinctions within the biopolitical (in terms of race for instance, whose lives matter more) as being already founded upon the separation of life from non-life in the geopolitical, see especially Yusoff (2018).

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enter these flows they emerge sea-changed, on other shores, barnacled, no longer themselves.¹³

Ice, water, vapour: expressed as rains, floods, winds: these are agents of change not stability. Local touches global in these movements and cycles; **relational** but not necessarily **proximate**. In this flux, a flooded German railway station touches an eroded coastline in Cuba.¹⁴

But here we might start to glimpse an imaginary, suggested by the Archive, that could capture these confluent intimacies. Sinking and melting, their watery dynamics, require geo-political concepts that acknowledge forces of *flux and change*.

The correspondence of the entropic exhaustion of resources (of all kinds and scales, including psychic and attentional) with the Anthropocene has become a central figure in the thought of philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler.¹⁵

Stiegler triangulates the concept of thermodynamic entropy: back to the burning of fossil fuel that gives rise to the concept's inception, across the impacts of automation and algorithmic governmentality on knowledge, environments, bodies, imagination, and forward to the entropic outcome we name Anthropocene. The urgent challenge is to counter these **multiple, chronic toxicities** and orient towards the *Neganthropocene*.

To *take care* towards a liveable future means addressing all of these entangled ecologies: it is a methodology, a theory and a practice of the *curative*. Thus a pharmacology: an evaluation of what is health-giving, or diminishing, life-expanding or limiting; entropic or negentropic.

The Pharmakon: poison and cure, is in the first instance that of *writing and memory*. Socrates warned writing was a technology of memory *and* forgetfulness. Perhaps in the last instance too, as we write ourselves across the surface of the planet, a text with no reader.

For Stiegler memory, as retention, is inscribed in and by every technology.¹⁶

To Husserl's categories - primary retention in the unfolding present, secondary retention of recalled memory¹⁷ - Stiegler adds the tertiary retention of technical objects, organised inorganic matter, of all kinds and affordances. 'We' exist within the structures of thought, of

¹³ <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/post/151352520794/plastic-ring-plastic-with-barnacles-and-nylon-rope>

¹⁴ <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/post/60479239105/german-train-ticket-cash-receipt-13-june-2013> and <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/post/159622235129/photos-of-playa-herradura-digital-photos-neri>

¹⁵ See especially the Technics and Time series, (1998, 2008, 2010), Symbolic Misery series (2014, 2015) and <http://www.arsindustrialis.org/>.

¹⁶ See also Jacques Derrida 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25, no.2, (1995) p17.

¹⁷ Edmund Husserl, trans. J.B. Brough, (2011) *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time (1893-1917)*. edn. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

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knowledge, they enable: what any one of us ‘knows’ operates between these three retentive categories.¹⁸

Technical retention exceeds the limits of an individual’s life, and often that of the collective. It precedes us and outlives us, carrying memory forward. It is archival.¹⁹

These archival objects may be *intentional* in their capture of memory, *hypomnesic*: such as writings, photographs, films, art works, sound recordings.²⁰ Machines that retain and replicate the gesture of the weaver, the baker, the mechanic, the sniper. Technologies that capture data.

Or they may be *unintentional* vectors of memory: some more ancient than writing – prehistoric artefacts– or more recent: a grubby dollar bill from a NY basement, flooded by Hurricane Sandy.²¹ Expressive of moments in time, lives lived, tasks undertaken, beliefs held. They retain testimony of their distribution, the forces that dispersed them, ascribed value to them, discarded them.

A People’s Archive exploits the power of both these forms of retention in its polemic of memory and forgetting. The diachronic structure of the Archive is both *promissory* - of perpetuation, and *in default* - the future it anticipates is one where loss has not been prevented.

Our ‘pharmacological condition’, observes Stiegler, forms ‘what, in our epoch, presents itself to us as what we are causing *within* ourselves, *around* us, and *between* us, as projections of a becoming that we are no longer able to trans-form into a future.’²²

This is the blockage of the Anthropocene.

To think care-fully,²³ is to think *beyond* our current impasse: a ‘leap capable of piercing the blocked horizon’.²⁴

Addressing care, Stiegler activates an ancient variant of the French verb ‘to think’, *penser*, but spelt with an ‘a’, meaning to heal, to dress a wound.²⁵ To *think of* a time to come is to take care of the possible. And to care for thought itself, against what limits it.²⁶

In this he advocates the task of Art, as ‘the highest form of care, as the power to model, sculpt

¹⁸ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time Pt 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. R. Beardsworth and G. Collins, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp140 - 142, p212, pp246 - 7.

¹⁹ Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, p233.

²⁰ Stiegler, *Technics and Time Pt 1*, p142.

²¹ <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/post/44899395929/one-dollar-bill-united-states-currency-paper>

²² Bernard Stiegler, ‘General Ecology, Economy and Organology’, trans. D. Ross, in *General Ecology*, ed. by Erich Hörl, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p146.

²³ Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, p206.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p210.

²⁵ *Penser* à, to care about, has its equivalent in English ‘thinking of’, as in ‘I’m thinking of you’. ‘Panser’, to think of the wound, carried the implication of caring and healing. <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/panser> The word ‘dispensary’, a pharmacy, shares a common root from Latin, ‘to weigh out’, with thinking as ‘to weigh up’.

²⁶ Care that extends beyond human ontologies and ecologies has been theorised within feminist ethics for some time in the work of Joan Tronto, Donna Haraway and others; see also Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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and shape' what he calls the Neganthropocene.²⁷

As a performative action, art might transform 'projections of becoming' into liveable futures.

The digital exponentially extends technologies of capture, retention, retrieval and transmission. Our digital pharmakon both supports and undermines: not just as knowledge *retention* and therefore *knowledge loss*. Perhaps more significant are technologies increasingly concerned with *protection*.²⁸ Tertiary protections pre-empt, forestalling the indeterminate. The reduction of possibility is entropic.²⁹

Here we can see that *care of the possible* has particular significance and ethical charge: the ability to manoeuvre in the space between *now and not-yet*, exactly the space that the Archive mobilises.

But A People's Archive is also a product of digital technologies as much as it a physical collection of objects. Its communication, dissemination, documentation and retrieval are digitally enabled. More than this it is a product of, and witness to, a digital imaginary, gathering and synchronising what may be spatially and temporally dispersed.

It is an open work, unfinished, an ongoing database.

It is a platform for contribution and participation, which registers a commons of shared concern, a relation that is independent of proximity.

Stiegler suggests 'There are all kinds of ways of thinking and these amount to so many ways of caring – *functionally* dependent on tertiary retentions, that is *pharmaka*, of which the thinker takes care, and *with which* he thinks care-fully,'³⁰

The memory-objects that the Archive curates demonstrate just such techniques of care: an attentiveness to place, change – to following these along their lines of entanglement and across the scales they traverse.

I will conclude by suggesting that A People's Archive could be seen as *diagrammatic*: an exploratory mapping of techniques of care.

Outlines of gestures and practices of the Neganthropocene also emerge across its forms of attention, connection and care *towards* the possible.

Social sculpture and relational art practices provide precedents for a neganthropic role of art: the Archive suggests how these might extend across dispersed sites and political contexts. Sinking and melting are forces that *loosen* and *let slip* fixed geographies. In their ruin other possibilities might take shape.

Proximities and intimacies of local and globally dispersed are legible in the gathering together of the Archive's contingent objects, their histories and scattered locations.

²⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *Sculpting and Cultivating the Neganthropocene*, Hangzhou Seminar, 9 April 2018.

²⁸ See also Mark B.N.Hansen, *Feed Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁹ Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, p240.

³⁰ Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, p246.

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And there are intimacies *between* object, location and contributor - a disposition towards searching for these interactions and dependencies. Each collected object has been picked up and turned in the hand: a tactile *material* encounter, a care-ful thinking-with all that clusters in that material object: that little paper boat, that muddy slipper.

This is what the Archive invites its contributors to do, and its viewers to think.

The project traces outlines of what has no form, yet; what reveals itself in the act of its tracing. And just as the function of a diagram is to sketch out what is not yet, but can now begin to be imagined, it must be *speculative*. The project uses its future anterior tense to prise open the value of the time, of thought and action, between *now* and *not yet*. It asks not to be foreclosed, not to be inevitable.

Stiegler comments that 'Neganthropology can be constituted only within a speculative cosmology... by conceiving the cosmos as a process within which localities are produced that give rise to various feedback loops'³¹

These 'localities' and the exchanges of caring-towards and thinking-with that they catalyse can be understood as diversions, openings, the '*deferral of entropic and anthropic deadlines by pansée*.'³²

We might consider this artwork as producing just such a locality of the neganthropic.

With thanks to Amy Balkin for kind permission to use images from A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting in the paper's presentation.

³¹ Ibid, p239.

³² Ibid, p239. Emphasis in original.

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