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## A REVIEW OF “THE ANTHROPOCENE PROJECT”: TREACHERY IN IMAGES

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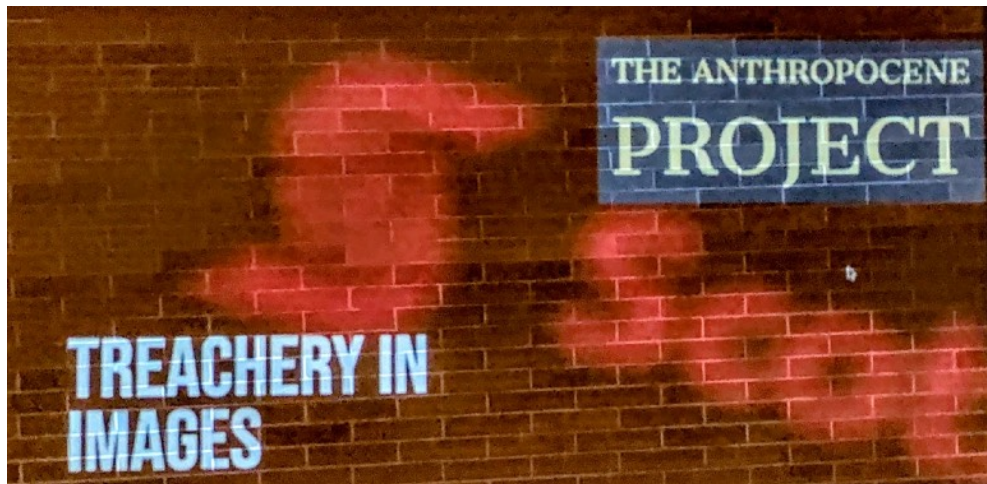
**Abstract:** Here, we engage *The Anthropocene Project*: a 2019 art event that features photographic exhibits in art galleries and museums, both across Canada and internationally. The project also includes a feature length film, augmented reality, and a proposed curriculum. *The Anthropocene Project* thematically addresses one of the most pressing, yet controversial, matters of our age: the deleterious effects of human activity on the earth. As a proposed geopolitical epoch, the Anthropocene marks this specific time in history whereby human activity has more significant environmental impact than

all other factors combined. The photography that depicts scenes of ecological cost and environmental devastation are deceptively, *seductively* appealing. We resist the lulling effect of the *Anthropocene Project's* visually stunning images that engender a sense of awe at these demonstrations of human engineering achievements on such a large scale. We are left wondering at our species' prospects of survival when we can become entranced by images portraying events so counterintuitive to our survival as omnivores, as mammals, as oxygen dependent creatures.

**Keywords:** The Anthropocene Project; Posthuman; treachery of images; thanatourism

**Figure 1**

Projected in Kamloops, BC: The Anthropocene, Treachery in Images, (2020).  
Photo Credit: Richard Wainwright.



“The sooner governments move to allow additional pipeline capacity to be built, the better off Canada will be” ([Scotiabank](#), 2020a, p.5).

“Soon the Gypsy Queen  
In a glaze of Vaseline  
Will perform on guillotine  
What a scene! What a scene!”  
Lyrics to Karn Evil 9 (Emerson, Lake, & Sinfield, 1973)<sup>1</sup>

Recounting the Colorado Territory’s Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, George Bent stated, “White Antelope, when he saw the soldiers shooting into the lodges, made up his mind not to live any longer. He stood in front of his lodge with his arms folded across his breast, singing the death song: ‘Nothing lives long,’ he sang, ‘only the earth and the mountains’” (Ives, 1996).

### **The Anthropocene Project**

The world is replete with natural features that humans find visually pleasing. For example, humans confer much aesthetic value on mountains: towers of igneous protrusion formed at points of contact between tectonic plates. Mountains compose artistry alongside plant life, waters, and animals, in assemblage. They express

themselves creatively as their crevices and grades determine waters' courses and flows, while these waters reciprocally act on mountains by slowly eroding contours into their surfaces.

Despite mountains' self-expression, there is also potential for their human exploitation and they have long been co-opted, commodified, and monetized in service of humanity's various projects. An art exhibition that was unveiled in 2019, *The Anthropocene Project*, showcases the extent of human activity's impact on planet earth. Truly a *project* in its many components, it includes photographic displays in art galleries and museums both across Canada and internationally, a feature length film (*The Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*<sup>2</sup>), an illustrated catalogue<sup>3</sup>, a book of essays<sup>4</sup>, a lecture series, educational programmes, a proposed curriculum, virtual/augmented reality, a podcast, and smartphone applications.

As doctoral students, we bring ontological curiosities to the topics raised by *The Anthropocene Project*. We view, review, experience, and critique its offerings vis-a-vis the things that make us think, how we think about them, and what we might do with thinking about them. Exploring what the exhibition is doing becomes the preoccupation of this museum "in-review" (Wainwright & Stevens, 2017). We attempt to redirect our gaze from aesthetically pleasing images of global destruction to what actually *drives* proclivities that risk calamity. In doing so, different relationships, forces, and concerns come into relief.

## Thanatourism

Mountains' biomes are collections of physiological adaptation, which include mosses, fungi, grasses, plants, insects, and animals. These combinations demonstrate artistry independent of mind and human involvement. Viewed through an anthropocentric lens, mountains are natural wonders and visual masterpieces; however, their images belie significant environmental impacts sustained within their ecosystems. While admiring their majesty from a distance, humans simultaneously scheme to access mountains' hidden treasures: their vast potentials for tourism and resource extraction by mining and drilling. Although mountains have always been obstacles to the easy conveyance of humans and resources, Herculean feats of human tunneling—assisted by the mighty force of dynamite—have been increasingly successful in conquering such challenges. Like rock, glaciers' ice may also be tunnelled as touristic sites. Mountains host all manner of recreational venues as theme parks for winter play and sport. At their highest and most inhospitable elevations, mountains can become

sites of macabre spectacle. Climbers litter detritus that becomes preserved in the snow through generations: including, at times, their corpses.

Touristic industries that visit upon the macabre and unseemly have long existed. These direct the human eye and body to visceral experiences, while stirring emotions when one is in physical proximity to sites “associated with death, disaster, acts of violence, tragedy, scenes of death and crimes against humanity” (Walby & Piché, 2011, p. 451). This genre’s offerings are variously called “dark tourism”, “shock tourism”, or “thanatourism”— “thanatos” meaning death in Greek. Making excursions to this touristic genre’s theme parks and museums, visitation is engineered as an immersive experience that may employ enhanced use of sound effects, audio recordings, videographic presentations, and sensory events to heighten grisly experiences (Walby & Piché, 2011).

Human desire may give rise to a double articulation that both fetishizes destruction and makes palatable its cinematic representation. As a multi-mediated exhibition co-created by Jennifer Baichwal, Nicolas de Pencier, and Edward Burtynsky (2018a, 2018b), *The Anthropocene Project*<sup>5</sup> thematically addresses these pressing, yet controversial, matters of our age: climate change and the effects of human activity on the earth. The project comprises multiple sites that each warn against the spectre of ecological calamity, while perversely showcasing the visual appeal of rubbish tips, pools of polluted water, and topographical scarification. During the project’s capstone feature length movie, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (Baichwal, 2018), its filmmakers use photography to “document evidence and experience of human planetary domination” (The Anthropocene Project<sup>6</sup>, 2018b). *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* has played in cinemas internationally, on Air Canada flights, on CraveTV, and is available for purchase on DVD. *The Anthropocene Project*’s multiple approaches (film, exhibit, books, curriculum, merchandise, etc.) all become part of a cultural conversation on, and of, questionable ethics. *The Anthropocene Project* performs something wholly curious, disturbing, and informative in its presentation of images. We are spectating a triumph of human-will which allows the aestheticization of the colours, textures, and sounds of environmental disaster. The viewer is seduced by lingering scenes and compelling images of ecological destruction.

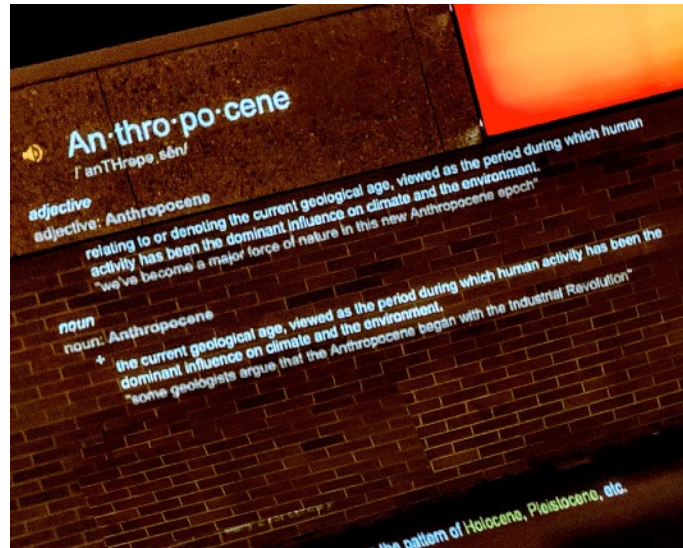
What is it about these times, our sense of aestheticism, and our personal taste for nihilism that a CBC news article about *The Anthropocene Project* can apply such an improbable term as “apocalyptic beauty” to the project’s film aesthetic (Tremonti, 2018) and we can imagine the truth in this juxtaposition of words? We are convinced that having never enjoyed proximity to whales we would rush to view one stranded, among

dozens of its species washing ashore onto coastal lands each year. Almost analogous to our curiosities about beached whales is a human propensity to zoologically display all types of animals and insects, both in life and death. Humans nobly attempt to address our species' role in hastening other species' displacement and depletion by protecting their remaining numbers. However, zoos are problematic, too. Zoos regularly *keep* animals wholly unsuited to the climates of their host institutions (polar bears in Mexico, camels in Canada). Attempts to anthropocentrically *care* for animals by displaying them has perpetuated a worldview that wildlife exists for human entertainment. We fetishize their exoticism, as we lament their near extinction. Visiting a zoo is a childhood rite and initiation that early normalizes our domestication of wild species. In a futuristic version of a zoo that need not be physically visited, *The Anthropocene Project's* photographic catalogue<sup>7</sup> (Baichwal, de Pencier & Burtynsky, 2018) features an augmented reality (AR) display of the last remaining male northern white rhinoceros (now deceased).

As visitors to the project's locations, we are thanatourists who pay admission fees to experience the physical museum exhibits, browse the project's collections in printed catalogues, and peruse its website. As online attendees, our participation in the exhibition, and all that surrounds it, is disorienting. This is not simply "a world for us" (jagodzinski, 2018, p. 16). We are jolted by the exhibition's affect. If we find ourselves awed by aesthetically pleasing portrayals of human and technological achievement among displays of environmental ruin, what does this betray about our personal collective desires? Burtynsky, the project's photographer and cinematographer, employs light and chemical properties with skills that render work sites, quarries, mines, and garbage dumps as works of art to a degree far beyond what our mind's eye typically summons. Given both the project's title and premise, we enter its sites prepared to submit to education by grim spectacle. Instead, we find ourselves seduced by the elaborate photographic treatments that the images have received. We wonder why we haven't previously recognized this beauty in a landfill or an excavator? We attempt to confront our disconcerting tendency to champion anthropocentric achievement. In what ways are we becoming complicit in a treachery of images by appreciating aesthetically beautified photographs that anaesthetize viewers in order to regulate their exposure to anthropocentric scenes of horror?

## Figure 2

Projection: Anthropocene Definition, Kamloops B.C., 2020. Photo Credit: Richard Wainwright. Projected image contains a snippet from the online Oxford (Lexico) Dictionary (n.d.)



“Scotiabank affirms their support of the Paris Agreement and that matters related to the Anthropocene are of critical importance” (Scotiabank, 2020b).

### anthropoScene Card

The sixteenth century Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel<sup>8</sup> created busy scenes of peasantry engaging in the rituals and festivities of agrarian society. *The Anthropocene Project's* photography often adopts a bird's eye view perspective that evokes Bruegel's approaches and subjects: depictions of distant elevated landforms, foregrounded by villagers and buildings viewed from on high—presumably viewed from hills and mountains. The artist portrayed nature and humanity in relationship, centuries before the Industrial Revolution, and explored darker themes suggesting the degree to which these relationships can go awry.

Burtynsky elevates his camera's viewpoint using airplanes, helicopters, and drones to achieve vantage points that only mountains and hills have historically provided<sup>9</sup>. Receiving Burtynsky's attention, details become indistinct and colours come to the fore. Skilled photography creates beauty in scenes of lithium ponds captured many hundreds of metres above ground, a result that would seem impossible to achieve in a human held glass of these same ponds' murky, poisoned waters.

If such eco-disasters are the cost of doing business, then should we feel anything but dissonance when peering at the digital cinematic photography yielded by alchemical potions of disaster capitalism? Presumably, newspapers would not publish descriptions of a human crime scene showcasing “the murderous beauty of the mass shooter’s skill.” Yet, here, views of nature stripped, poisoned, and mutilated elicit our attention for their seduction.

Aesthetically pleasing portrayals of disaster desensitize—denervate—us as viewers, thus, stymieing meaningful considerations of that which remains ontologically unseen and unexplored. *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* is billed as a “cinematic meditation” (2018b). Its effect reassembles our felt horror at what is going on in the world. Viewing skilled filmmaking (sets, script, lighting, soundtrack, editing) provides impetus to structure visual, auditory, and cognitive narratives about what we need to take back into the world as affect.

Like Bruegel’s village scenes of workers centuries ago, this pictorial study similarly features site workers, salaried machine operators, and unskilled labourers busy at their tasks. In the film, employees populate various scenes; however, we don’t see images depicting the matrix of relationships between public and private stakeholders, nor the historicities of how these relationships came to be. Anonymizing bureaucratic and corporate structures in *The Anthropocene Project* serves to obfuscate the relationships between what incentivises human activity and the capital motivating it. Notably, most every scene’s depiction of the Anthropocene—photographic and cinematic—has been seemingly purged of most indications of corporate ownership, including logos that normally brand companies’ names. These have been obscured by light, fog, distance, or absence (possibly by removal). In this manner, *The Anthropocene Project’s* unscripted narrative is analogous to showing the enormity of Hiroshima without mentioning America’s development of nuclear technology and its willingness to deploy it.



### Figure 3

Projected in Kamloops, BC: Banking on the Anthropocene. 2020. Photo credit: Richard Wainwright.



“The *Anthropocene* exhibition, presented by Scotia Wealth Management, documents how humans have changed the face of the planet” (Scotiabank, 2020c, Para. 3).

### Capitalocene

When viewing *The Anthropocene Project's* feature film and books, we grow concerned that depictions of the role of corporations in resource extraction, the manufacturing of goods and services, distribution processes, consumption, and ultimate disposal have ended up on the cutting room floor. Perhaps this excision results from the filmmakers' attempts to chronicle anthropic effects on ecologies, while dodging capital's significant role in driving them. We are curious about the tenuous relationships that the filmmakers maintain and the fine lines they tread in this pursuit. *The Anthropocene Project* gives us pictures of the anthropocentric problem, while avoiding disruption to shareholders' profits. For example, in *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, the segment about the German Tagebau Hambach open-pit coal mine makes no mention of the RWE Power company, its connection to the German government and to European private security firms; nor that it has been accused of waging a low level war against

those who oppose its activities (Brock & Dunlap, 2018). Curiously, despite being the focal point of its images, the mine's mammoth excavators are positioned at considerable distance, in already small photographs. In one of these images, the machine's logo hangs suspended on its frame, but is inexplicably blurred and illegible. Were these omissions the conditions to which the filmmakers submitted in order to secure entrance to the worksite and its impressive machinery's inclusion in the motion picture?

Overall *The Anthropocene Project's* thrilling presentation fails to contextualize a geo-political crisis that is framed in capitalist exploitation. There is an alarming paradox between *The Anthropocene Project's* subject and its corporate sponsors' business dealings. Scotiabank provides key funding, while investing in environmentally controversial projects worldwide that include fossil fuel mega-projects (Banktrack, n.d.). Various Canadian telecom providers also financially support *The Anthropocene Project* and we are intrigued by the nature of the contributions they make through the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) *Certified Independent Production Funds* programme. The CRTC requires that Canada's cable television providers contribute 1% of their annual gross revenue to independent drama productions (Government of Canada CRTC, 2013). Hence, the funding of this film has been at least partially operationalized by corporations' inclination to receive tax breaks and financial incentives from government mandated programmes, more so than pursuing editorial truths or engaging meaningful altruism.

This is all a continuation of the complex, but compromising, relationships between humans and nature compellingly depicted in the project. We are witnessing the "consequences of environment-making" (Moore, 2016b, p. 78). Haraway (2016a, 2016b) recalibrates the Anthropocene from prospective *aeon* (that proceeds the Holocene), to a phenomenon of far shorter duration: a boundary event. Additionally, Haraway (2016a, 2016b) introduces the Capitalocene as a concurrent boundary event to the Anthropocene. The Capitalocene recognizes capital as being the force compelling relentless resourcing of the earth by means of "exterminationist extraction" (Haraway & O'Neil-Butler, 2016). The Capitalocene marks the era when "nature became a factor of production" (Moore, 2016b, p. 91). Some five hundred years ago, a new economic system—an ideology—was born from supplementing the agrarian concerns of land productivity with those of labour productivity at lowest cost. The emergence of anthropocenic capital explains even the historical reluctance of landowners to assert personhood to slaves: humans' value was only fully optimized once their labour could be so fully exploited. In environmental realms, capital's existence explains why earth's *bounty* is communicated by using terminologies that

bespeak the manner in which humans readily commodify nature: fish become “fisheries”... “[...] animals ‘livestock,’ trees ‘timber,’ rivers ‘freshwater,’ mountain tops ‘overburden,’ and sea coasts ‘beach front’” (Crist, 2016, pp. 28-29).

Altvater (2016) asserts:

“Nature” has been transformed into capital asset. Nature has been reduced to something that can be valued and traded and used up just as any other asset: industrial capital, human capital, knowledge capital, financial claims, and so forth. (p. 145)

Perhaps it is not the mandate of an exhibition called *The Anthropocene Project* to overtly explore or portray these relationships of capital, but herein lays a treachery. Capital suggests why all the humans depicted in the film show up at those worksites. Capitalism indicates why the earth’s crust is being relentlessly scraped and scoured. The Anthropocene “sounds the alarm—and what an alarm it is! But it cannot explain how these alarming changes [allegedly to planet earth, purportedly by human activity] came about” (Moore, 2016a, p. 5). The Capitalocene invests in strategies nearly exhausted; always cost shifting to a future of increasingly doubtful longevity. We had best develop “capacit[ies] to forge a different ontology of nature, humanity, and justice” (Moore, 2016b, p. 114). How do we achieve this without being as financially, editorially and aesthetically compromised as *The Anthropocene Project* appears to be?

## Curations

In Bruegel’s 1562 work, *The Triumph of Death*<sup>10</sup>, we witness suffering and desolation across a smoke choked landscape of scorched earth, deadly waters, dying trees, beached fish, emaciated animals, and distraught humans that are being dispatched, irrespective of their social status, by malevolent skeletons. This is an apocalyptic vision; we observe its tableau from an elevated viewpoint that permits us to more easily behold the extent of its ghastly proceedings.

Thanatouristic narrations abound in the Anthropocene. “In darkest tourism, museum cyberguides and curators will take their virtual-tourist on real time tours of active detention camps, killing fields, death rows, and execution chambers” (Miles, 2002, p. 1177). There is a certain moral superiority that is implicit to the thanatouristic experience, as we gape at the barbarity of human activity through the ages. The thanatourist feels a sense of relief at the privilege of not having to remain in these curated spaces after business hours. The nature of the Anthropocene is different.

Whence is our escape from this macabre theme park? Who and what beings are exempt from its grave portent? *The Anthropocene Project* tests our efforts to resist our tendencies towards representational thought. We are disciplining ourselves by attempting to look past images of human endeavour and their capture, so that we might ask questions of a different nature: ones layering those typically asked of the content as epistemology, rather than ontology. We are, therefore, hopeful that the act of viewing artistic images in an exhibition such as *The Anthropocene Project* will serve to galvanize new thinking and understanding. We enfold Deleuze's (1985/1989) caveat concerning over-reliance on the representational: "When grandeur is no longer that of the composition, but a pure and simple inflation of the represented, there is no cerebral stimulation or birth of thought" (p. 164). This informs a suspicion about the "inflated" representation of striking images of destruction included in this project. The photographic production, and its curation, has been intentionally preserved as other worldly and devoid of context. The photographic representation detaches us from the true ugliness of the depicted scenes. The skills and resources dedicated to beautifying these images are considerable—why should this be a priority to the creators of *The Anthropocene Project*? How do our appetites inform what we want to view, and not see?

Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2014) suggest that "for all of time, painting has had the project of rendering visible, instead of reproducing the visible..." (p. 346). Photography is doing likewise throughout the Anthropocene Project. As cameras are pulled back farther and flown higher, colour diffuses across space and shifts the appearance of what lays between. The catastrophe must look aesthetically pleasing, not interfere with stock values, not provoke disruption to work sites, not attract protesters. The capitalist aesthetic is to make everything for sale. This is the banality born of a socio-economic system: Its negotiation takes place when citizenry is held hostage to an inevitable course, whatever form that may take.

## Closing

Mountains thoroughly preoccupy humans, they are relied on for their beauty, resources, and recreational uses. Mountains, however, exist independently of humans' conceptions of them and intentions for them. Mountains do not depend on humans for either their beauty or artistry. Their composite is not intended for human use. Flags of patterned fabric planted on their summits are irrelevant to their being. Anthropocentrism asserts belief in "mountains for us," however mountains long precede us, and the future of humanity will be predicated on a rapidly forged ability to reimagine relationships with our physical environments, including with mountains.

#### Figure 4

Projected in Kamloops, BC: Edward Burtynsky. 2020. Photo by Richard Wainwright.



“Photographer Edward Burtynsky and Scotiabank’s CONTACT are requesting submissions for the 2020 Burtynsky Grant—a \$5,000 annual grant to support a Canadian artist in the creation of a photobook” ([Scotiabank](#), 2020d, para. 1).

Haraway (2016a, 2016b) suggests that alongside the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, a third timescape of Chthulucene spans past, present, and future. It comprises mutually reciprocal relationships that are entwined, *tentacular* existences of all species in a reconfigured world (Haraway, 2016a). “The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (Haraway, 2016b, p. 61).

Describing “precarious times, in which the world is not yet finished and the sky has not fallen—yet,” Haraway (2016b) further asserts:

We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is rather reversed: human beings are with and of the earth . . . (p. 59)

*The Anthropocene Project* is a defining moment rather than an epochal one about environmental catastrophes. *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* features a human vocal narration that sings a gentle song, and scores violently calm images that lull us in our eerie state of dissonance. The project co-creators, individually and jointly, are masters of their crafts and seemingly stress the aesthetic of the distant and surface, rather than the affective and intellectual. If the planet's future is to be determined by the interests of capitalistic investors and the cinematic images they fund, as in the case of *The Anthropocene Project*, then the planet's future looks frightfully amazing.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karn\\_Evil\\_9](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karn_Evil_9)

<sup>2</sup>Feature film: Baichwal, J. (Director). (2018). *Anthropocene: The human epoch* [Film]. Mercury Films.

<sup>3</sup>Exhibit catalogue: Burtynsky, E., Baichwal, J., de Pencier, N., & Boettger, S. (2018). *Anthropocene*. Steidl.

<sup>4</sup>Hardcover book: Hackett, S., Kunard, A., & Stahel, U. (Eds.). (2018). *Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, de Pencier*. AGO/Goose Lane Editions.

<sup>5</sup>According to its homepage, “The Anthropocene Project is a multidisciplinary body of work from world-renowned collaborators Nicholas de Pencier, Edward Burtynsky and Jennifer Baichwal. Combining art, film, virtual reality, augmented reality, and scientific research, the project investigates human influence on the state, dynamic and future of the Earth.” See <https://theanthropocene.org/> Given its multiple forms, platforms, and creators’ functions, we variously reference and cite de Pencier, Burtynsky and Baichwal across this in-review as they indicate in their credits.

<sup>6</sup>Here *The Anthropocene Project* refers to the legal entity and corporate author of the webpage <https://theanthropocene.org/>

<sup>7</sup>This refers to the museum catalog

<sup>8</sup>See Bruegel painting that depicts peasant life:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter\\_Brueghel\\_the\\_Elder\\_-\\_The\\_Dutch\\_Proverbs\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Brueghel_the_Elder_-_The_Dutch_Proverbs_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

<sup>9</sup>See <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>

<sup>10</sup>See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The\\_Triumph\\_of\\_Death\\_by\\_Peter\\_Bruegel](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Triumph_of_Death_by_Peter_Bruegel)