

Not “An Ecological Hell”: Art for the Anthropocene Epoch (And Beyond?)

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The Anthropocene

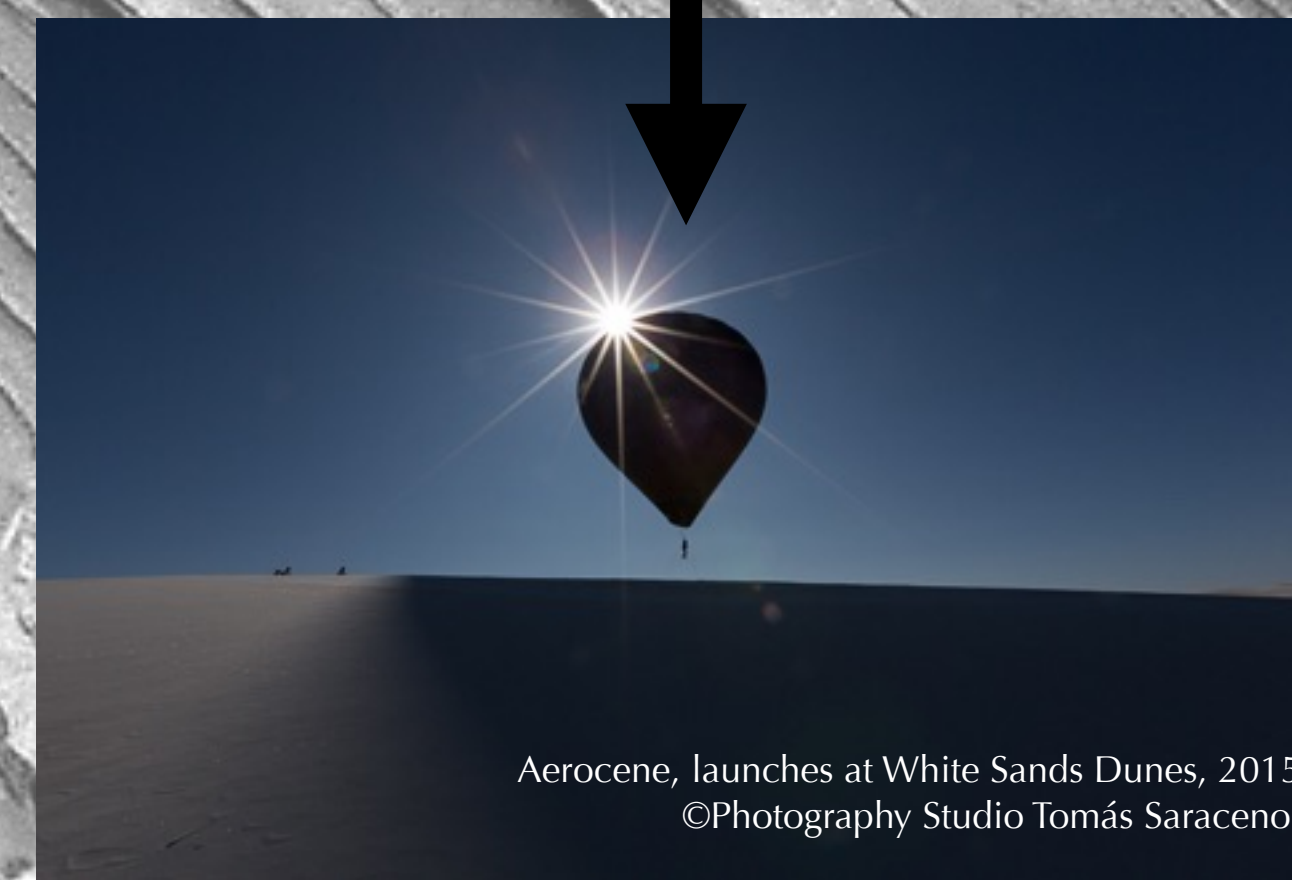
- A proposed new, geologic epoch proceeding the Holocene.
- Term first popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen, today has become a sort of “buzzword” in the humanities and environmental studies.
- Characterized by human impact as a significant and defining agent of change upon the planet.
- Official designation would come from the International Stratigraphy Commission, and has yet to be decided upon, but the word is still widely used.

“Yes, we live in the Anthropocene — but that does not mean we inhabit an ecological hell.” (Emma Maris et al.)

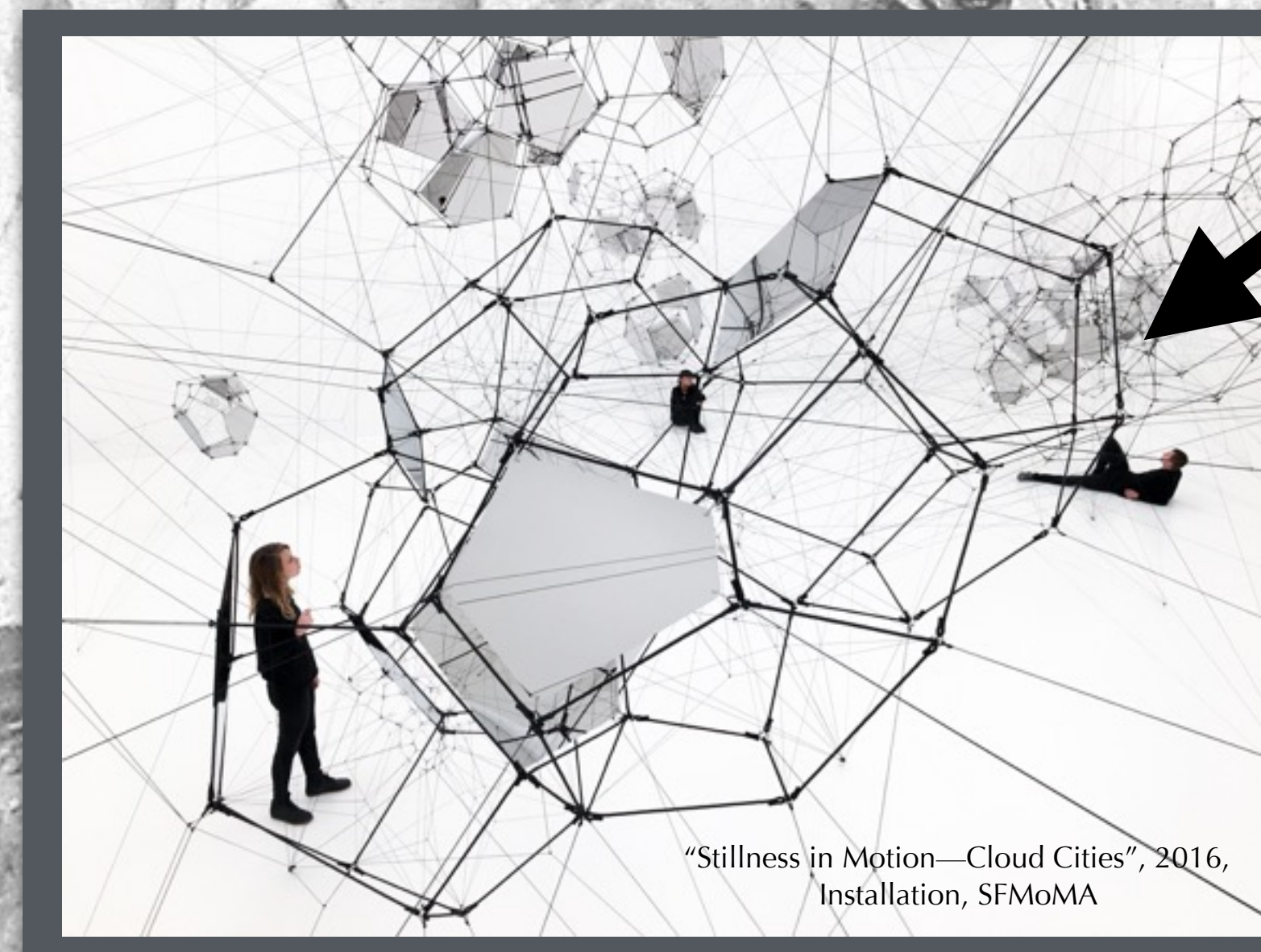
How can art **help** people to **understand** and/or **process** complex and controversial topics?

- Art practice as research
- “Art as the vehicle of *aesthesis*... central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene”
Aesthesis: “the perception of the external world by the senses”
- Much of how we perceive the Anthropocene has been presented to us through visual means of expression.
- Art as a “site of experimentation”, where practices and strategies are not limited by the “regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression.” (Davis and Turpin, 2015)

A test in 2015 of a solar balloon carries a human into the air using only wind and sunlight



Aerocene holds a message of simplicity, creativity and cooperation for a world of tumultuous geopolitical relations, reminding us of our symbiotic relationship with the Earth and all its species.
-aerocene.org



Stillness in motion refers to how it feels to float in the air, condensing the gap between our perception and experience of the ocean of air at the bottom of which we dwell.
-Tomás Saraceno

Aerocene is a project about friendship, about the relationship between air, universe, humans, sun, animals, plants, planets. It is a project showing how shared enthusiasm becomes the common ground to shared dreams. Where time becomes different, where energy and inspiration are endless resources. I can only hope that this family will grow even bigger.
-Tomás Saraceno

Tomás Saraceno’s work on Cloud Cities and project Aerocene aligns most closely with the key Anthropocene concepts, though the artist often talks about his work as “beyond the Anthropocene”. Both projects are creative proposals for a new era in which people take to the sky as a new dwelling place and for means of fossil fuel-free transportation. Designed with MIT meteorologists, Saraceno’s work is highly interdisciplinary.

Thesis Statement

Many pieces from artists discussing the Anthropocene do not fully demonstrate or align with key Anthropocene concepts, indicating a disconnect between humanities scholars and artists regarding the Anthropocene. With artistic practice as a research process and mediator to work through ideas, this disconnect may reflect the newness of the subject (especially outside the humanities discipline) and indicate a lag; as a more general population we have not yet made this perceptual transition or shift.

What are some of the **key characteristics** of the Anthropocene, and how are they being represented or seen in art?

Through analysis and synthesis of scholarly work from key thinkers on the Anthropocene, I extracted several points which I found to be indicative of the Anthropocene. These points were then applied as a framework to artworks. Through narrative analysis and interviews I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the artist’s practice, and to evaluate the pieces and practices based on these key principles.

Anthropocene Framework

- Challenge to the nature/culture binary
- Relinquish idea of returning to some original state, relinquish idea of the “pristine”
- Scale— humans as a geologic force
- Interdisciplinary

Results

Artist//Piece	Overview of Project	Scale	Nature/Culture Binary	Return to previous state	Interdisciplinary
Jeremijenko// Tree X Office	Built structures in and around trees serve as work spaces available for booking by the hour. All Tree X Offices are equipped with wifi, chairs, tables. Revenue generated goes to landlord: the tree. Tree “invests” in organizations/projects that benefit it and its offspring short and long term.	Somewhat. Power scales, distance scales (trees sending offspring to colleges)	Yes, references the Bolivian constitutional amendment giving “rights” to “Mother Earth”, however still symbolic towards a binary through use of a structure in a tree to reference synthesis between “natural” and built environments, which still perpetuates a binary.	The work seems mostly about reform, celebrating a more mixed world of humans and non-humans. Tries to imagine what this might look like in its most inclusive and efficient form.	yes, economic, power, engineering, environmental concerns, art. Also research based and tries to make connections to institutions of higher education
Mattingly // Triple Island	Collaborative piece located on bank of East river in NY city. 3-part structure has water harvesting, energy & food growing capabilities, small living space & kitchen. A proposal and experiment for living communally in more simple ways, potentially after a disaster.	Somewhat. Most notably these pieces work to imagine what life would be like in the event of a major catastrophe, disaster or collapse.	Self-sustaining practices within urban setting, but still symbolizes environmental practices through differences with built environment. Slightly apocalyptic.	Somewhat. Still relations to classic environmental thought, such as promotion of more “simple” ways of living such as rainwater harvesting, gardening, etc. However, structures meant not as completely self sustaining, still require interaction with urban environments and the conveniences that come with it.	Yes, such as working with technical processes for self-sustaining energy, water collection, gardening, and urban renewal. Research-based project.
Saraceno // Aerocene/Cloud Cities	This project is ongoing over the past decade and has multiple parts. Installations in galleries intend to demonstrate existing above the ground in collective, sustainable environments. Balloons as experiment in flight for humans that does not require fossil fuels.	Yes, in a big way! Not only limited to earthbound environment, wants to create/inhabit entirely new environments, where humans live and travel through/in the air— “Aerocene”	Some tropes, e.g. takes inspiration from “natural world” (such as spider webs and cloud/water formations). Transcends the symbolic qualities better than others. Inspiration to inform/create highly technical structures, does not use physical elements of the “natural world” in the product.	All about moving forward in big ways! Often bypassing smaller ideas of reform with a desire to recreate the entire system. Saraceno backs up his shocking claims by actually creating some of the structures and technologies that he proposes.	Yes! Saraceno works not only as an architect and researcher himself, but partners with other research and engineering groups, such as a meteorology unit at MIT.

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“Stillness in Motion— Cloud Cities”. 2016. Courtesy the artist; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; Pinksummer contemporary art, Genoa; Andersen’s Contemporary, Copenhagen; Esther Schipper, Berlin. © Photography by Studio Tomás Saraceno, 2016