Speculative experiments for an everyday Anthropocene

ABSTRACT

In this article I turn to creative practice as a way to focus attention on Anthropocene unsettledness within more mundane and everyday circumstance, what I frame as the "everyday Anthropocene." For this I explore the potential of generating sensibilities helpful in attuning to ongoing uncertainty and distress. Drawing on existential philosophy and mindfulness practices, I employ a speculative design framework to formulate everyday artefacts with troubling qualities. Such work, I suggest, demonstrates the "polyarchic" capacities of creative experimentalism in devising quotidian strategies within ongoing vicissitudes of Anthropocene dwelling.

Keywords: Anthropocene, everyday life, experimentation, speculative design

TEXT:

Introduction

While yet to be officially endorsed, the Anthropocene thesis continues to stimulate debate and discussion not just within academia but percolating through wider public discourse. Emerging from within earth and physical sciences, supported by evidence of planetary bio-physical disturbances, the idea of a human-induced epoch has profound social, cultural, and political implications (see: Davis and Turpin 2015; Lövbrand et al 2015; Demos 2017). Anthropocene arguments unsettle key tenets of modern Western thought and disrupt established ideas of what it is to be human (Steffen et al. 2011, 862), troubling the human-nature nexus and rendering a fundamentally different worldly composition: one both unfamiliar and disturbing in which humans must reorient themselves.

In this article I turn to creative practice as a way to focus attention on ongoing Anthropocene experience within more mundane and everyday circumstance -- what I frame as the "everyday Anthropocene." I explore the psychotherapeutic potentials to be found though mindfulness interventions, and the aesthetic generation of sensibilities that can aid humans attune to ongoing unsettledness and uncertainty. The work aligns with expanded interest in everyday practices, embodiment, emotion, and affect (see Highmore 2002), and more specifically research exploring quotidian and affective Anthropocene dimensions (see: Head 2016; Mickey 2016; Rose et al. 2012; Scranton 2016; Phillips 2018).

Concern with more mundane and everyday Anthropocene entanglements is an emerging interest. For example, Vine (2018) explores localised innovation responding to Anthropcoene conditions, while LeManger (2017) discusses the everyday Anthropocene through literary fiction. Here I draw on existential psychology and design theory and practice.

Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated vulnerabilities of social and political systems alongside global infrastructures, bringing to the fore a sense of shared existential risk as humans struggle to manage a potent yet intangible non-human agency. COVID is argued to be an Anthropocene event: a "disease" of Anthropocene dwelling (Skórka et al.

2020), having impacts signalling Anthropocene disturbance (Heyd 2020), and evoking subsequent "Anthropocene anxiety" (de Kirby 2020). It is also an event noticeably felt at the everyday level, impacting all aspects of people's social, personal, and intimate lives. Where COVID became for many a forced and ongoing everyday constituent such an event is a reminder of the capacity of planetary perturbations to disrupt human affairs at both global and individual scales, and that we may be well advised to prepare and attune for continuing Anthropocenic influence.

Everyday Anthropocene is an experiment in drawing the profound unsettling of the Anthropocene to the surface in somewhat mundane ways, staging a troubling aesthetic that amalgamates deeply discomforting themes with familiar and commonplace artefacts. Such objects retain their everyday functionality but additionally perform as liminal interfaces to a dark geoaesthetic; palpable reminders of existential and ecological disturbance and anxiety, as well as the broader contradiction and paradox found in contemporary existence.
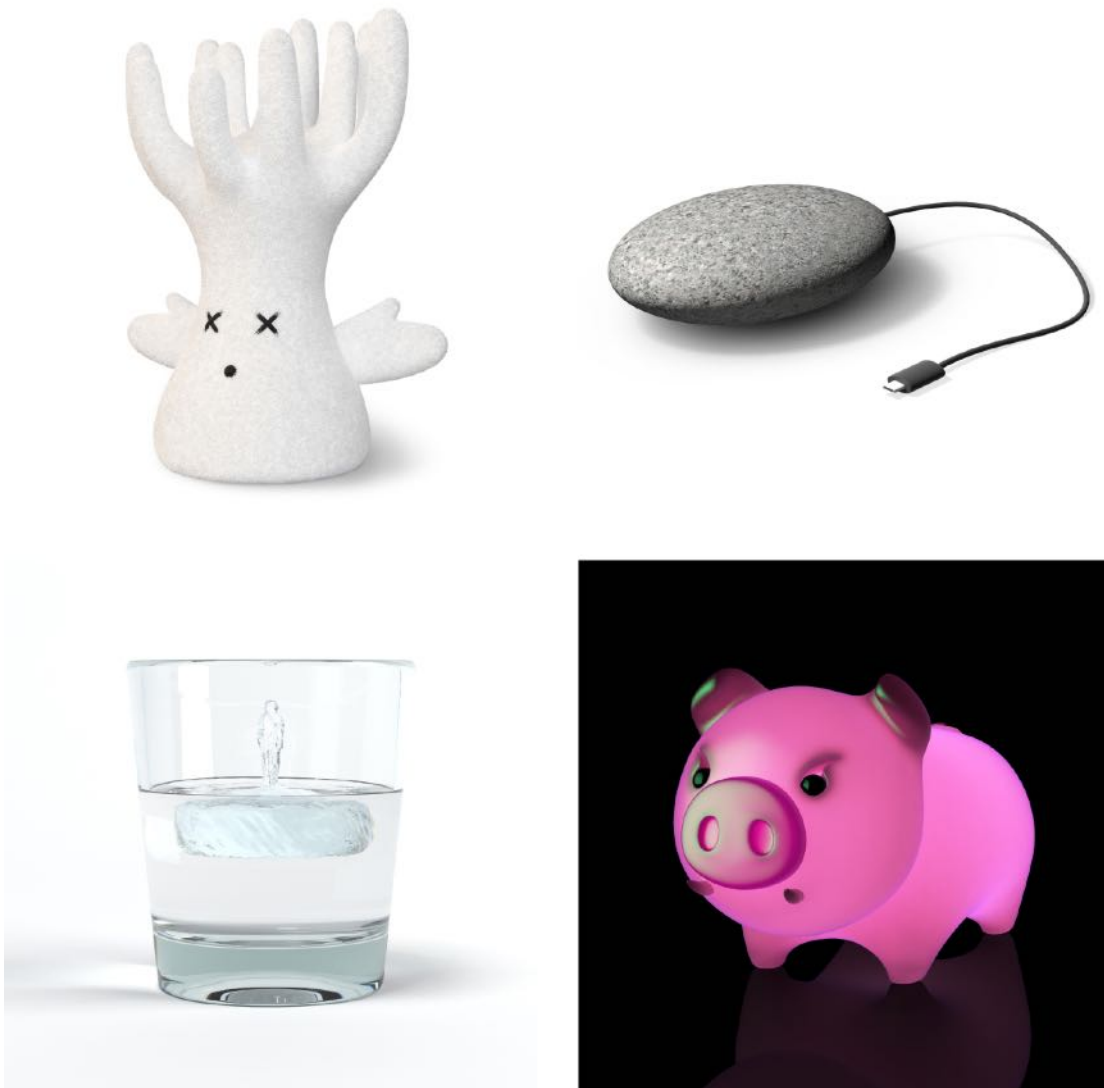
Figure 1: Digital prototypes of everyday Anthropocene artefacts, from top left, clockwise: Dead coral plush toy, draws on the theme of loss of coral reefs and species due to warming oceans; Rock drive, amalgamating geological sensibilities with digital memory storage; Glowing "radioactive" boar nightlight, inspired by wildlife contamination from the Fukushima nuclear disaster; Human ice cube, a reminder of anthropogenic global climate impacts and melting ice. Source: Author.

Figure 1 shows a series of digitally rendered objects which test the concept and methodology. Drawing on key themes, namely ecological emergency, extinction, climate change, nuclear disaster, and geologic time, I devised items that could easily reside in my

or my wider family's homes. Far from being shocking or alarming these items exude a disquieting normalcy, and I can visualise where they might sit: the plush coral toy on my young niece's bed, or fabricated as a cushion on my living room couch; the rock drive on my work desk alongside other storage media and assorted cables; the glowing "radioactive" boar as a night light in my young nephew's bedroom (he's half Japanese, with his mother's family living just south of Fukushima, the Prefecture impacted by the 2011 tsunami and subsequent nuclear power plant accident); the human ice cube mould in the kitchen, used in warmer weather and when entertaining. Each item is not only an unsettling reminder of distress, damage, death, and wider Anthropocene vicissitudes but an everyday prompt to be mindful about the complex entanglements of life, systems, and temporalities, and to act attentively.

In the remainder of this paper I outline key ideas and practices employed.

Scrapbooking found curiosities

Experience of disaster and emergency conditions was a focus for a wider research project, and in seeking to canvas potential case studies I undertook to collect a broad range of materials around each example. This included formal outputs such as journal papers, official reports, and news articles, but also encompassed more mainstream material -- often images relating to a topic but rendered through a more everyday lens. Such finds often did not easily fit into clear categories but nonetheless were highly interesting, revealing uncanny slippages between familiar everyday encounters and ideas of an affectively unsettling Anthropocene. For example: images of a birthday cake in the form of a nuclear waste dump (Figure 2); a shark-shaped tea bag (Figure 3); a Cthulu soft toy (Figure 4); a custom Lego disaster-scene build (Figure 5).

Figure 2: Nuclear waste dump birthday cake. Source: Centinel4, Reddit.

Figure 3: Shark tea bag. Source: Shota Takahashi, YouTube.

Figure 4: Cthulu stuffed toy. Source: StitchdWhimsy, Etsy.

Figure 5: Disaster Lego custom build. Source: Heikki Mattila, Flickr.

Not wanting to discount the potential of such "data" I did what any good creative practitioner would do: collected it in scrapbook fashion. At first this was in folders on my computer, but soon after as a way to make this collection more visible I created a visual blog, a Tumblr site allowing easy aggregation of imagery. Scrapbooking itself is a common everyday practice, initially evolving as a pastime often by women to chronicle family lives it has become a staple for creative practitioners and is being increasingly enrolled for professional and research purposes (see Walling-Wefelmeyer 2020). I had no plan to

formally code or analyse the scrapbooked collection, it was intentionally diverse and eclectic. Rather, items acted as creative prompts, helping spur additional ideas in relation to an everyday Anthropocene.

Speculative-existential practices

As broader research continued and the scrapbooked collection grew, ideas emerged for application drawing on existential philosophy and speculative design practice. Existentialism is a broad philosophical category whose roots can be traced back to the beginnings of Western philosophical thinking, to the ancient Greeks and Socrates, and development of ideas about "care of the self." However, it is later ideas developed by the likes of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, dealing with themes of alienation, anxiety, despair, and death that are commonly associated (Crowell 2016). And, while existentialism may be envisaged as deeply introspective it is better understood through application or praxis. This is best exemplified by post-WWII existentialists, spurred by Sartre and his contemporaries, who sought to express and *perform* existential ideas through creative forms: literature, art, theatre, film, and the like.

Such thinking influenced political proponents of the day. The Letterist International and Situationist International groups brought the philosophy of the situation to the experience of living authentically within everyday life, seeking to jolt people out of capitalist-induced reverie. The May 1968 Paris uprisings were the culmination of the Situationist movements, and while less effective than intended, the influence of disruptive practice remained significant (Clark and Nicholson-Smith 1997). It influenced 70's punk sub-culture and in turn "culture jamming" (see Lasn 1999), popularised in the late 80s by *Adbusters* magazine using hoax and parody as tactics to ridicule rising brand commercialism, and later The Yes Men political activist group who similarly employ pranks and hoaxes to perform pointed political commentary.

A problem with Situationist-inspired practices, however, is becoming captured within postmodern irony. Here something may be cynically mocked, intended *not* to be taken seriously, and at the same time may incorporate elements *meant* to be taken seriously (Di

Martino 2014), rendering inconsistencies, confusion, and potential cynicism. Late-twentieth and early-twenty first century popular culture has been ravaged by such irony, fuelled in no small part by personal computing and the internet with increased access to tools of cultural production, sharing, and meme-ification. While some argue for development of a reflexive "environmental irony" (Szerszynski 2007), this may be impeded by lack of control over how intended messages are interpreted by postmodern audiences.

Figure 6: "Last chance" Great Barrier Reef marketing images. Source: Author.

A previous project which draws on ecological emergency and the situational irony of the Great Barrier Reef is a case in point. It was spurred when undertaking fieldwork on the Reef during an unprecedented coral bleaching event (2014–2017). Alarming reports of the Reef's "death" followed (Carr 2016), along with an increase rise in "last-chance" tourism (Piggott-McKellar and McNamara 2016). Representation of the Reef was discordantly bi-polar: portrayed as dead and dying by scientists and environmentalists, while vibrant and inviting within tourism marketing. I subsequently devised a creative experiment in the form of speculative online tourism marketing campaign drawing on this

conflict (Figure 6). Messages were not intended to be expositional but rather prompt the viewer to reflexively decode them, however, I found this approach ineffective. On the one hand I felt the images may not be unsettling or shocking enough, but perhaps also too close in style to actual tourism promotions. Additionally, I was concerned with engendering cynicism. Engaging feelings of anxiety and unease can beneficially prompt movement and change, but a danger lies with becoming stuck and possibly acclimatised to a seemingly hopeless situation.

Contemporary design practice continues to expand Situational strategies. Critical and speculative design, and design fiction are amalgams of literature, art, design, science, and future studies (Dunne and Raby 2013), influenced by the storytelling conventions of movies and television (Bleecker 2009) enrolled to performatively construct imaginative and provocative worlds. For Dunne and Raby, key exponents of speculative practice, the purpose is pointedly to "unsettle the present rather than predict the future" (2013, 88). For them, speculative design work:

> strives to overcome the invisible wall separating dreams and imagination from everyday life, blurring distinctions between the "real" real and unreal... whereas it is accepted that the present is caused by the past it is also possible to think of it being shaped by the future, by our hopes and dreams for tomorrow. (p160)

Being less about "hopes and dreams," and more about unsettledness, for this project I further looked to practices that seek to remind us of life's inescapable existential condition. Camus' (1955) reinterpretation of the myth of Sisyphus introduced a philosophy of the absurd. The myth describes the fate of a self-aggrandising mortal punished for eternity by the gods to a cyclical existence of pushing a boulder uphill: an unending, seemingly futile task. The story distils the poignant idea that we need to learn to live with, and indeed welcome, the frustration and ambivalence that is an inescapable aspect of being human.

Such thinking resonates through multiple philosophical schools, where cognizance of life's futility was brought into mindful practices. The Stoics of Ancient Greece used self-dialogue and meditative practice to focus attention on the present, along with contemplation of death (Sellars 2006). Buddhism's Four Noble Truths follows the

philosophy that all life has suffering, which is caused by human desire; happiness is freedom from desire; moral restrain and self-discipline are pathways to this freedom (Powers 2007). Japanese Samurai subscribed to *Bushido*, following *hagakure* -- the code of the warrior (Tsunetomo 1906) -- which included meditating daily on one's inevitable death. To focus on one's death is not to fetishise it, or to want to give up living. Rather, contemplation of one's essential "limits" is helpful for attending to the present. Haraway's (2016) Chthulucene follows similar thinking by asking us to "stay with the trouble" -- to remain mindful of the deep ontological unsettling that comes from engaging with both the Anthropocene's material and conceptual implications.

Terror Management Theory provides a psychological framework for understanding the benefits of such practices. Led by the idea that awareness of human mortality is commonly avoided via escapism and cultural beliefs (Greenberg at al. 1986), it investigates the benefits in dismantling such defences. Experiments in which mortality salience is expanded are shown to discernibly bolster individual self-esteem, reduce worldview defences, and boost affinity with different others (Harmon-Jones et al. 1997). Mindfulness interventions may then be an effective mechanism aiding people developing coping strategies against existential anxieties and externalised threats.

For this project, such principles led me to experiment with bringing existential awareness through to everyday experience via common object forms. In place of Stoic or Samurai ritual or meditative practices I looked to symbolic reminders of mortality. Memento mori is a symbolic and artistic tradition prompting awareness of one's mortality. The term comes from the Latin, "remember that you have to die," and originates from a common practice in Ancient Rome, where, as a general returned victorious from a battle, during his celebratory parade a slave stationed behind him would remind him of his mortality to offset potential self-aggrandisement (Brennan 2014). The concept resurfaces later from the medieval period onwards, used within Christian tradition as well as finding expression in art, literature, music, and architecture. During the Victorian era memento mori found more everyday expression through objects such as clocks and personal jewellery: mourning rings, pendants, lockets, and brooches (Taylor and Scarisbrick 1978).

Figure 7: Concept development sketches within the rough typology developed. Source: Author.

Conceptually employing Anthropocene themes -- including climate change, nuclear contamination, ecological disturbance and collapse, feralness and species hybridity, and geologic sensibilities -- I began to ideate permutations based on commonplace objects. To do so I canvassed my own apartment jotting down congruous ideas and developing a basic typology (Figure 7). This included:

Food: decorative cakes provide a versatile visual format. Themes might include natural disaster or more visible geological markers such as volcanoes (indeed, a web search revealed a genre of such cakes). However, any plate can be treated as a canvas. Japanese "decorative bento" is the art of creating unique and colourful lunch boxes which could be directed towards more existential themes.

Containers: the shape of such can take myriad forms; and there is potential to actively employ content qualities -- even better when these are dynamic. For instance, the shark teabag example suggested a flexible format with a dynamic component. One idea was with having the bag in the shape of waste barrel with tagged with a nuclear radiation symbol. The colour of tea could also be adjusted to suggest different types of threat of contamination. The medium of water lends itself ocean-related themes/threats but could also be used to stage atmospheric interactions, for example, a car-shaped bag could leach "air" pollution. Similarly, the human-shaped ice cube is the output of a dynamic-style container employing water's material qualities poignantly amalgamated with wider human entanglement.

Light/shadow: following the container theme I considered the shape of light bulbs and how these could reflect power generation, such as coal or nuclear. But further plays could be had with projecting (or blocking) light: "shadow" elements created by some lens or filter. This could be from the light source itself but also via a window or even window shade such as venetian blinds. This led to considering concealed messages: images only revealed in inactive or alternate states, such as on fogged glass or mirror surfaces.

Toys: a highly adaptable format, especially for connecting with a young audience -- although possibly having the danger of diluting a theme's impact by rendering it cute or fun. The earthquake Lego example spurred further disaster-type iterations, as well as Lego sets with blank instruction sheets -- the idea being Anthropocene response requires novel, possibly unthought-of responses. Other themes could quite easily be encapsulated in unsettling toy figures, acting as reminders of dying or disturbed species, such as the dead coral plush toy and glowing radioactive boar.

Natural materials: more a meta-theme. Use of natural materials could work to trouble the human-nature boundary, displacing normative man-made objects/materials aids with

human-cultural disassociation. Stone looked to be a particularly poignant medium, having linkages with the Anthropocene's geologic material and conceptual entanglements. For example, the "rock hard drive" encases a computer storage in a river stone, bringing geologic time into play and calling attention to ephemerality of one's collected memories.

To be clear, such everyday Anthropocene objects are not intended as *solutions* to Anthropocene conditions any more than Samurai practices of meditating on death helps to avoid its eventuality. Rather, objects serve as visceral-existential prompts, reminding humans to connect both conceptually and affectively to the difficult-to-discern planetary conditions unfolding around them; conditions that can be easy to forget when attention is captured by life's more immediate distractions.

Coda

I have argued here that, rather than rushing to transcend Anthropocene disturbance, we should pause and bring attention to the troubling, visceral dimensions of this experience and learn to dwell with unease. Everyday Anthropocene is a methodological invitation to experiment at small and personal scales. Significantly, art practices open up polyarchic sites for experimentation for "living in a damaged world" (Tsing 2014, np). To be experimental calls for an openness to exploration and risk: a responsiveness to novel approaches; receptivity to a wide range of sensibilities; and an openness to the assembly of revised world-making narratives.

We can look to the global COVID-19 pandemic both as an example of Anthropocene disturbance and an event provoking everyday creativity (Kapoor and Kaufman 2020), evident in examples such as customised facemasks and costumed dress-up protective gear, creative household window displays, distanced creative events such as neighbourhood or online concerts. However, where COVID manifested as a clear and immediate danger the Anthropocene remains uncertain and nebulous. Yet, as climate events, ecological disruption, species decline, and the like continue to play out -- events ultimately beyond individual ken and control -- we might look for helpful coping and attunement strategies.

Drawing on existential philosophy and mindfulness practices, everyday Anthropocene invites personal creative responses that may help cultivate beneficial attitudes and orientations. Such speculative practice does not stand as conclusion or outcome but rather as experiment in sense-making, and commitment to remain exposed to deep disturbance, contradiction, paradox, and unsettledness emerging within ongoing Anthropocene experience.

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Endnotes