Unintentional aesthetics of the Anthropocene: a textual-photographic précis

Etienne Turpin
University of Wollongong, eturpin@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/eispapers

Recommended Citation
Turpin, Etienne, "Unintentional aesthetics of the Anthropocene: a textual-photographic précis" (2012). Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences - Papers: Part A. 2995.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/eispapers/2995

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Unintentional aesthetics of the Anthropocene: a textual-photographic précis

Abstract
Our major cultural artefacts, or at least those endorsed by dominant culture, such as museums, monuments, statues and the like, suggest through their passive advocacy of stainlessness a paradoxical commitment to both permanence and progress. Not unlike their iron predecessors in the late-nineteenth century, whose Jugendstil organicism created a metallic imaginary that provided Baudelaire with the title for his most well known collection of verse, Les Fleurs du Mal, the evils of our shiny, contemporary wish images remain obscure, not least because their capacity to reflect cultural values is necessarily distorted. Whether one is pacing the promenade leading to Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Music Hall in Los Angeles, cautiously approaching Ned Kahn's undulating kinetic façade that skins the Technorama Science Centre in Zurich, or finding one's bearings among the gluttonous consumption of Michigan Avenue beneath Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate in Chicago's Millennium Park, we witness how our current epoch reiterates a pernicious but pervasive value: metallic surfaces are synonymous with progress. The more polished, refined, expansive and contiguous these metallic surfaces, the greater the representational carrying capacity for our most lauded but least considered civilizational fetish- stainlessness.

Keywords
unintentional, textual, aesthetics, photographic, anthropocene, pr, cis

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/eispapers/2995
INTRODUCTION TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

Our major cultural artefacts, or at least those endorsed by dominant culture, such as museums, monuments, statues and the like, suggest through their passive advocacy of stainlessness a paradoxical commitment to both permanence and progress. Not unlike their iron predecessors in the late-nineteenth century, whose Jugendstil organicism created a metallic imaginary that provided Baudelaire with the title for his most well known collection of verse, Les Fleurs du Mal, the evils of our shiny, contemporary wish images remain obscure, not least because their capacity to reflect cultural values is necessarily distorted. Whether one is pacing the promenade leading to Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Music Hall in Los Angeles, cautiously approaching Ned Kahn’s undulating kinetic façade that skins the Technorama Science Centre in Zurich, or finding one’s bearings among the gluttonous consumption of Michigan Avenue beneath Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Chicago’s Millennium Park, we witness how our current epoch reiterates a pernicious but pervasive value: metallic surfaces are synonymous with progress. The more polished, refined, expansive and contiguous these metallic surfaces, the greater the representational carrying capacity for our most lauded but least considered civilizational fetish—stainlessness.

What force compels this aesthetic of mineralization? How did our proliferation of stainlessness (as a quality) take place so rapidly, reaching an almost unthinkable ascendency in its contemporary ubiquitous dispersion? Most importantly, what precedents within a ma-
terialist history of the Anthropocene could help orient our attempt to think the force of the human species, which has proven itself more than capable of antagonizing the vast scale of the earth through the mineralization of its surface? To answer these questions, we examine the remains of the architecture of extraction as it persists in the Sudbury Basin, where the world’s most strategic nickel deposit is mined along the irruptive rim of a massive astrobleme to be converted into stainless steel. (1) Through our reading of the denuded landscape of the Basin and its toxicosis, we discover questions of cosmic contingency, labour unrest, and aesthetic meditation (in the sense Georges Bataille, following Nietzsche, gives to the term). As we are entangled in these questions, we try to imagine, with both text and image, the history of this most pernicious fetish – stainlessness – by reading the remainders of its refinement. In order to do so, we need to first locate the site of our inquiry within the broader arc of modern industrial activity.

The pseudonymously named force known most commonly as *Homo sapiens* is expanding its territory of influence, or, perhaps more correctly, that force is beginning to recognize its reflection within the expanded field of its operations. No longer confined to the organic register of biology – although by no means freed from it as a limit condition – humans are a geologic force with an impact now comparable to the asteroid that ended the Cretaceous period by annihilating the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago. To grasp this force of the human, to be capable of understanding the consequence for our biological species-being as it manifests a geologic reformation, the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences are currently debating the relevant scientific merits of the Anthropocene, which would allow them to recognize a geo-diachronic shift from the epoch of the Holocene (since the last Ice Age receded almost twelve millennia ago), to our current “epoch of man.” To determine whether or not the Anthropocene satisfies the necessary criteria, stratigraphers and geologists consider various anthropogenic effects, that is, those changes most precisely associated with so-called *Homo sapiens*. These changes include, but are certainly not limited to: the rise of agriculture and attendant deforestation; coal, oil and gas extraction, and their consequences; the combustion of carbon-based fuels and attendant emissions; coral reef loss producing so-called “reef gaps” similar to those of the past five major extinction events on the planet; a rate of extinction on Earth happening at tens of thousands of times higher than in most of the last half billion years; and, perhaps most significantly, a rate of human propagation—an unrestrained explosion in population growth—which, according to the biologist E.O. Wilson, is “more bacterial than primate.”

Even from this truncated list, the evidence suggests a dramatic human impact; still, among the various processes that most emphatically characterize the Anthropocene, the most consequential for its role in the proliferation of positive feedbacks that continue to expand exponentially, is the process we call mineralization. While the exo-skeletal mineralization of the earth’s surface – most especially the production of steel as a form of building material – is the decisive process of the Anthropocene, this process is preceded, as the philosopher of science Manuel DeLanda has noted, by the endo-skeletal mineralization that allowed organisms to achieve locomotion (more than mere movement) at the end of the Ediacaran period millions of years ago. Just as bones, teeth, claws and shells allowed soft, fleshy plantlike animals to free
themselves from the constraints of localized photosynthesis, the exo-skeletal mineralization of steel allows human actors to achieve new possibilities in building types, transport, the mass production of goods, and the development of nearly all subsequent forms of technology, including the processes which later allow for the introduction of plastics and other synthetic materials. In the long parade of human activity that incessantly transforms mineral deposits into redistributed qualities of surface level stainless steel, we are just beginning to comprehend the impact of these human labors as they intrude on geologic processes; it is precisely for this reason that we must reconsider the ‘purpose’ of these activities and interrogate the driving force which modulates the mineralization of our exo-skeletal projections.

PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY

*Humanity is, at the same time — through industry, which uses energy for the development of the forces of production — both a multiple opening of the possibilities of growth, and the infinite faculty [facilité infinie] for burn off in pure loss.*

— Georges Bataille

At least since Vitruvius’s treatise in the first century BCE, architecture has been defined as more than mere building, and architecture as a practice is uniquely placed on the cultural horizon between purposeful activity and ambiguous ornamentation. Yet, the act of distinguishing between these two sides – building as utility and architecture as more than just utility – requires
a set of the criteria imported from outside the building or architecture under consideration. “Because all things are equally material,” writes Keith Mitnick, “the notion that one form of architecture may appear more abstract, immaterial, or neutral than another is a consequence of how it is discussed rather than a property of its material features.” (2) Culture conditions aesthetic commitments. As an aesthetic construction that exceeds the requirements of building, architecture seems to retain the enigmatic connection between an aesthetic pleasure and a purposive end. In the Sudbury Basin, aesthetic inversions undermine the logic that distinguishes purpose and ornament, leading into a vertiginous aesthetics of confusion. But, before we consider the site and its visual sleights, several brief remarks regarding Kant’s aesthetic regime are necessary.

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant considers the relation between aesthetic experience and the possibility of these experiences becoming meaningful. It is precisely this consideration which allows him to reintroduce Man’s capacity for Moral reason as the end or telos of Nature. In his analysis, the non-conceptual apprehension of aesthetic beauty (the beautiful) and natural force (the sublime) is given an a priori principle by the very fact that it is incapable of subsuming empirical experience under any conceptual rubric; that is, our ambiguous aesthetic relations suggest, for Kant, the necessity of meaning that would make them possible. This meaning can only be, for Kant, the purposiveness of nature which, by way of each individual organism and by way of their multitudinous expression, returns us back to Man and his Moral reason as the necessary and ultimate end of Nature. The *a priori* principle at stake in the analysis of reflective judgment is thus the necessity of or the insistence on purposive existence. [3] While this incredibly expedited summary must here suffice, our point is nonetheless clear: Kant makes a fetish out of the assumed natural ascendancy of Man over Nature; Man is literally the supernatural iteration of purpose that makes Nature meaningful by the very act of not being capable of understanding his experience of it. This fetish of Man as the meaning of Nature is the prerequisite for the second order fetishization, namely, Man’s capacity to transform the world, to render it beyond the changing, physical cycle of birth and decay, and instead arrest his constructions with quality the stainlessness.

TO BE DONE WITH THE SUBLIME

*Stricken with the malediction attached to acts, the violent man does not force his nature, does not go beyond himself, except to furiously re-enter, as aggressor, followed by his enterprises, which come to punish him for having raised them. There is no work that does not return against its author: the poem crushes the poet, the system the philosopher, the event the man of action.*

– E.M. Cioran

From our reading of Kant’s overestimation of Man as the purpose of Nature, it becomes evident that invoking the sublime as a condition of aesthetic apprehension – when we encounter a natural force incommensurate with our own ‘scale,’ or, in a relation of magnitude inconceivable by the human mind – can only be deployed as a means of reinscribing the human as the purposeful outcome of nature. While this reinscription is philosophically problematic, it also leads to a shorthand thinking about allegedly natural processes. More than this, however, the concept of the sublime simply cannot bear the force of the human and its
tremendous, unintended aesthetic consequences. We offer two complimentary and especially instructive examples examined during our preliminary research on the Sudbury Basin; these examples are suggestive not least for the way they indicate the two aesthetic poles of the Anthropocene: fantastically-scaled diversions and partially-sorted detritus.

Thrusting skyward from the irruptive rim of the Sudbury Basin, the exaggerated monumentality, minimal geometry, and specious utility of the Superstack – a 380-metre high industrial chimney completed in 1972 in an attempt to disperse the pollution produced in the refinement processes – defies any reinscription by way of the aesthetics of the sublime. Despite its magnitude as an object, what is most confounding about its presence throughout the city is its peculiar inability to achieve its purpose; it haunts the Basin, its unsettled accounts a testament to its object-life as a diversion. A brief history of the chimney helps us clarify its defiance of purpose. The architecture historian Kenneth Hayes has noted that the Superstack was constructed to address the industrial malfeasance and widespread denudation of the landscape resultant from the practice of opening bed roasting, a practice that, according to Hayes, "seems almost unbelievable now that it is obsolete." He explains, "The pentlandite or iron-nickel sulphide ores found in Sudbury contain as much as 25 per cent sulphur, and this level must be reduced as the first step in smelting." (4) During the first forty years of Sudbury’s mineralizing activity, "at least seven roast yards with a total of up to 65 beds were used in the initial processing of ore. The primitive procedure consisted essentially of building a wood pyre the size of a city block and up to a couple of meters tall. Pulverized ore was piled on top and the whole mass ignited. The roasting lasted from 35 to 40 days for an 800-1,000 ton heap, and could run well beyond a hundred days for a heap of 2,500 tons. The wood was simply tinder to ignite the ore itself." (5) Because of this, Hayes reports, "The four decades from 1890 to 1930 saw an estimated 11.2 million tons of sulphur released into
the immediate environment at ground level,” and the Superstack can thus be seen as “the last major effort to ameliorate emissions by the traditional expedient of dispersing them.” (6) The Superstack here presents the exemplary condition of the fantastically-scaled diversion, one of the two aesthetic poles orienting the visual economy of the Anthropocene. Significantly, the taste of ground level sulphur that still fills the mouths and nostrils of the city’s inhabitants suggests that this instrumental structure, in its failure, passes beyond mere building into the ornamented canon of architecture proper. In the meso-space north of architecture, where aesthetic inversions call attention to the unintended consequences of the aggregation of human activity and its anthropogenic effects through the unintended aesthetics of mineralization, the civilizational fetish for stainlessness finds its other exemplary state in the heaps of detritus that dutifully accompany its production.

Because it would be unbecoming to merely eject our waste from industrial processes into just any haphazard form, industrialized human societies have developed the compositional trope of the pile, or heap, to both preserve the semblance of order of materials, in the even they could be reinscribed with utility at a later moment, and to hint at this possibility of reinscription as an imminent order to come. Neither disturbingly disordered nor perceptibly punctilious, the heap operates at the aesthetic limit of purpose: heaps and piles take on the mechanical dimensions of their becoming-piled (the size of the train car that dumps them, the capacity of the loader that pushes them, etc.), but in so doing they outstrip there instrumentality by revealing the strange mobility and stalled momentum of the earth itself. As Lisa Hirmer has written in a recent essay about piles, “There is a fickleness to the surface of the earth. It is something that can be opened up, turned inside out, piled up.” She continues, noting that “here, in the contemporary world, the ground plane is not a stable reference point” because the pile, a partially-sorted heap of yet-to-be-completed anthropogenic process, “is a de-formed landscape, a landscape that has been taken apart and reassembled into a heap. A sense of disorientation, even an ungroundedness, surrounds it.” (7) The Sudbury Basin, despite the epeirogenic connotations of its name, is a slag heap, and in fact a closer cousin to the orogenic diastrophism of mountain building, even if the mountains of slag produced have now been redirected, by common commercial usage, from their pile forms toward such mundane tasks as driveway and parking lot surfacing, as well as other ubiquitous landscape strategies commonly reserved for gravel or other relatively fine granular material. If slag is re-appropriated into a condition of instrumental utility, then its standing-in-reserve as pure aesthetic objects or processes – partially-sorted detritus piles that occupy an ambiguous relation to value and purpose – suggest the other aesthetic pole of the Anthropocene. The promise of purpose, signalled by the orderly disorder of the heap, holds in abeyance any judgment regarding the consequences of mineralization. If the fantastically-scaled dispersion suggests a spatial deferral, the partially-sorted heap operates as a promissory temporal signal; in this regard, perhaps more than poles, these exemplary aesthetic compositions intersect by way of an orthogonal articulation, creating the perplexing space-time matrix of Anthropocene aesthetics as we witness them today. Still, heirs to Kant that we are, our aesthetic biases persist; and, we get the feeling that to escape this reified condition of aesthetics and enable art practice to advance toward an unrestricted general economy of the Anthropocene, it is not enough
to reconsider the pile and the parking lot as a new aesthetic repository; the museum too must be re-sited. To help think the necessity of a terrible (post-sublime) aesthetic of the Anthropocene, we turn now to several premonitory practices that evince the human as tellurian hyperforce through their singular assaults on the visual economy of the unseen.

ANONYMOUS NONSITES

In this book we show objects predominantly instrumental in character whose shapes are the results of calculation and whose processes of development are optically evident. They are generally buildings whose anonymity is accepted to be the style. Their peculiarities originate not in spite of, but because of the lack of design.

– Bernhard and Hilla Becher, *Anonyme Skulpturen*

Among the premonitory practices that anticipate the Superstack and the slag heap as the aesthetic poles of the Anthropocene, we could surely do worse than to return to the work of Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher. This is not least because Smithson’s array of nonsite works, produced in the final years of the 1960s, have as their point of aesthetic departure a field trip in December, 1968, with Bernd Becher and gallery owner Konrad Fischer, who took the visiting American artist to Oberhausen, twenty miles outside of Düsseldorf where Fisher’s gallery had recently opened. According to the curator and critic James Lingwood, in his magisterial essay “The Weight of Time” [composed for the catalogue of his *Field Trips* exhibition], Oberhausen was “one of the largest industrial complexes in the Ruhr district, itself some of the most concentrated areas of industrial production in Western Europe at that time.” [8]

As suggested in the epigraph above, Bernd and Hiller Becher’s practice was concerned with addressing the industrial aesthetics that dominated the landscape with their peculiar, instrumental yet somehow aesthetic forms. Their photographic practice captured the decisive images of this aesthetic, yet the question of anonymity remains paradoxical because ‘artist’ of these anonymous sculptures is both no one and everyone; Oberhausen is an instrumentality pushed to such a degree of assertion that it crosses the threshold of the aesthetic. [9]

Following his field trip with Bernd Becher, Smithson, for his part, developed a sculptural installation addressing the illusion of the discrete object (the art) and a sealed container (the gallery), while simultaneously indicating the complicity of production and waste. With the aid of an industrial manufacturer, Smithson constructed a series of five steel containers, each increasing in height by linear geometrical intervals toward the wall of the gallery, accompanied by five identical maps with varying photo-documentation of the industrial sites from which the contents of the containers were retrieved. The contents of the linearly perforated stainless steel bins are chunks of slag – the waste product of the refining process.

According to Lingwood, “Different kinds of evidence rubbed up against each other – hard geological facts, photographic impressions and cartographic description – in a display which mirrors Smithson’s own restless mind as it oscillates between microcosm and macrocosm, scientific specimen and imaginative projection.” [10] This is because, in Lingwood’s analysis, “The sequences of prosaic black and white snapshots
do more than describe an industrial wasteland. They conjure up an almost apocalyptic vision of an exhausted world. Oberhausen isn’t so much documented as it is subjected to a temporal transformation, characteristic of Smithson’s penchant for dramatic mental leaps in time and space, from the prehistoric (before anything had emerged from the primordial soup) to the post-historic (where everything would return to a similarly undifferentiated state).” (11) For Smithson, the creation of stable systems of meaning is always gratuitous because these systems are constantly plagued by a loss of order – a condition known as entropy. The futility of systems of organization (i.e. differentiation) is concentrated in Smithson’s *Nonsite* [*Oberhausen*] where the aesthetic relationship – the tension between use and ornament – offers a semblance of the ineluctable burning of sulphur and pouring of slag that constitute the smelting process of pentlandite in the fetishized campaign against corrosion in the Sudbury Basin. As in Smithson’s *Nonsite*, in the Basin refinement and entropy are just two sides of the same coin; the lauded coin that commemorates this aporia is, in Sudbury at least, a nickel.

END

*Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude.*

– Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*

Produced from the smelting and refinement of Nickel sulphide, the addition of the Ni – nickel is represented in Dmitri Medeleev’s Periodic Table of the Elements with the letters Ni and the atomic number 28 – to the composition of steel adds a higher corrosion resistance and a greater overall strength to the final prod-
uct. Stronger and more resistant steel is an indicator of a cultural fetish that can be mapped across the diverse materiality of our world and its objects, but these indicators also bleed through the social field of the Anthropocene. Because rust never sleeps, operating relentlessly by way of corrosive contagion on the fabric of our built world, the positive feedbacks of mineralization are enlisted in the moral struggle for a stainless civilization. Stainlessness becomes, within this arms race of endurance and decay, the fetishized image of our civilizational capacity to order the world in our own image, where architecture and infrastructure organize the elemental properties of Ni in a war against corrosion that has left us exhausted.

In the Sudbury Basin, where the slag heaps constitute the horizon of industrial modernity as consistently as the Superstack delivers up a properly global dispersion of fantastically-scaled malfeasance, we find a place to pause and consider the aesthetics of the Anthropocene. Whether or not the acephalic human species will endure its self-identity as the meaning of Nature and the attendant remaking of the world as a metaphysical project of arrest in keeping with this identification, the ultimate consequences of an industrially rapacious mineralization remain to be seen. As geologists and stratigraphers debate the science of the Anthropocene, what is evident for us is that despite our credulous pseudonym Homo sapiens, the aggregate hyper-force that we are is a long way from any twee reference to or recuperation of the aesthetic of the sublime. Anonymous and unintentional, the aesthetics of the Anthropocene allow us to glimpse the our own force which, like the work necessary to recognize, if not entirely mitigate the consequences of our fetish for refinement, is tremendous.
NOTES

[1] My reading of the astrobleme – a tellurian formation created as the result of the impact of a massive asteroid – is largely indebted to the work of architecture historian Kenneth Hayes, especially in his essay, “Be Not Afraid of Greatness, or, Sudbury: A Cosmic Accident,” Sudbury: Life in a Northern Town (Guelph and Sudbury: Musagetes Foundation and Laurentian Architecture, 2011), 16-25. Although I fundamentally disagree with Hayes’ unfortunate reading of the Basin through the aesthetic of the “sublime,” I nevertheless attempt to refashion several aspects of Hayes’ inquiry regarding the astrobleme in what follows. Contrary to Hayes, I argue that the force of the human is tremendous, that is, a force beyond the recuperative logic of the sublime. See Nick Land, The Thirst for Annihilation (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); and, more recently, Nick Land, Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987-2007 (Windsor Quarry and New York: Urbanomic, 2011), especially “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” 55-80.


[3] For a prescient analysis of both Kant’s separation of the noumenal and phenomenal registers as required by his aesthetic analytics and the consequences of this philosophical parsing, see Iain Hamilton Grant, “Prospects for Post-Copernican Dogmatism: The Antinomies of Transcendental Naturalism,” Collapse V, edited by Damian Veal (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2009), 415-454; for an analysis of the problematic division between natural and human history, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” Critical Inquiry 35 (Winter 2009), 197-222.


[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.


[10] Lingwood, 70.