



Hito Steyerl.
How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking
Didactic Educational .MOV File.
2015. CC 4.0.

Art Writing and Allegory in the Anthropocene

LIZ LINDEN AND SUSAN BALLARD

It is early morning on a slow-moving Wednesday in 2018, in the middle of an undergraduate art-history lecture, and I decide it is the right time to screen Hito Steyerl's video work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2015). The video is divided into five numbered lessons, narrated by a robotic voice and illustrated with imagery of calibrated targets in the California desert, animated architectural renderings, and demonstrations of digital-imaging technologies including green screens, motion-capture suits, and registration grids by the artist herself. The video serves as a somewhat fantastical guide to avoid capture by the very real powers of military surveillance. After the lights come up, a student loudly complains, "Su, that is seven minutes of my life I will never get back." The work is fifteen minutes long. I start to wonder: Does this mean that for eight minutes he *was* engaged? Does it mean that in those eight minutes we were thinking together about shifting aesthetics and geographies within the context of the changing planet? In these eight minutes of engagement with the world beyond the personal, was he thinking about how the US Air Force's grayscale-resolution targets in the American West might connect to the satellites that track his temperature, his every movement, text, and tweet, or was he sensing something about scale, about zooming up and looking down and wondering how a planet transformed by humans has also transformed our familiar perspectives of the world?

Steyerl's complex film suggests a way of reading and being with images that continually shifts beyond the familiar. The year before I screened her video for my class, Steyerl—"artist-as-theorist, theorist-as-artist"—had been named at the top of *Art Review's* "Power 100,"¹ lauded for her allusive and fluid videos and texts that map the burdens of everyday life in the Anthropocene. *How Not to Be Seen* is particularly well suited to thinking about life in the Anthropocene because of its destabilizing interdisciplinarity and shifting scale. These are hallmarks of the Anthropocene itself, a term that, back then, was just emerging into popular consciousness despite the fact that the environmental effects it describes had already surrounded us for some time.

1. "2017 Power 100," *Art Review* (November 2017), https://artreview.com/power_100/2017/.

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The term “Anthropocene” was employed in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to name a new geological epoch, one marked by transformative human impacts on the planet that distinguish it from the previous 11,700-year period of relative planetary stability known as the Holocene.² After ten years of debate, in May 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), led by geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, under the auspices of the International Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, released the results of two binding votes. Using the standardized and formal language of geology, the first vote acknowledged the presence of the Anthropocene via “a persistent Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point or GSSP,” known colloquially by geologists as a “golden spike.”³ The second vote agreed that the “golden spike” denoting scientific consensus for the commencement of the Anthropocene should be identified after the release of atomic radionuclides in the mid-twentieth century. To determine the dates of the epoch, geologists had been searching for stable mineral signals in Earth’s matter that could be used to pinpoint when humanity’s effect on the planet became irreversible. Crutzen and Stoermer had initially proposed a golden spike associated with the rapid increase in greenhouse gasses caused by the industrial revolution in Europe. The more convincing golden spike, the AWG argued, was the chemical transformation of the Earth’s atmosphere due to the artificial radionuclides that encircled the planet in the wake of the atomic blasts of the mid-twentieth century.⁴ Like the golden spike in sediments of iridium from the meteorite that marked the end of the dinosaurs and signaled the chronological shift between the Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras, chemical evidence of the spikes of the Anthropocene are permanently stored inside ice, rock, tree cores, and atmospheric gasses.⁵

The AWG also noted that although “the currently informal term ‘Anthropocene’ has already proven highly useful to the global change and Earth

2. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *The IGBP Global Change Newsletter* 41 (May 2000), pp. 18–19; Victoria Jaggard, “Have Humans Really Created a New Geologic Age?,” *Smithsonian.com*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/have-humans-really-created-new-geologic-age-180952865/>.

3. Jan Zalasiewicz, “Results of Binding Vote by AWG Released 21st May 2019,” Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy Working Group on the Anthropocene (2019), <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>. Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Waters, Colin Summerhayes et al., “The Working Group on the Anthropocene: Summary of Evidence and Interim Recommendation,” *Anthropocene* 19 (2017), pp. 55–60.

4. Zalasiewicz et al., “The Working Group on the Anthropocene”; Zalasiewicz, “Results of Binding Vote by AWG Released 21st May 2019.”

5. Damian Carrington, “The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>.

System science research communities . . . its value as a formal geological time term to other communities continues to be discussed.”⁶ For the humanities, the ethical urgency of this discussion should be clear. The Greek root tells us with whom responsibility lies: It is a new geological epoch resulting from human activity on the planet.

One challenge of integrating consideration of the Anthropocene into existing disciplines within the humanities and social sciences is to think through historical and material frameworks that don’t rely solely on the “human scale.”⁷ Artist and new-media curator Joanna Zylińska has presented a clear articulation of the Anthropocene as a “political problem . . . that requires at least a minimal dose of ethical reflection.”⁸ Anthropologist Anna Tsing notes that although “humans have made a mess of our planet,” the Anthropocene is “not the result of our species biology.”⁹ Instead, she suggests that the concept is tied to modern capitalism and its ability to turn everything, humans included, into resources for exploitation. Digging deeper into the histories of resource extraction that form the disciplinary foundation of geology, geographer Kathryn Yusoff identifies the “legacies of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake.”¹⁰ Yusoff demonstrates how these historical divisions remain at the foundation of geology and thus the concept of the Anthropocene. Critical approaches like these, alert to moral, political, and material structures emphasizing diverse and multiple voices and relations over universality, are mapping useful strategies for those working within the humanities while countering anthropocentrism.

While art writing is a small subset in the much vaster field of the humanities, it shares this new, human time and is therefore subject to those same ethical imperatives articulated above. Further, the environmental changes that have occurred on the Earth, creating our new epoch, are, by definition, planetary. Now that “the Anthropocene has become our interlocutor,”¹¹ where do we see these changes in art writing, changes that may have been made subconsciously, or may only now be visible?

6. Zalasiewicz et al., “The Working Group on the Anthropocene: Summary.”

7. Noel Castree, “Speaking for the ‘People Disciplines’: Global Change Science and Its Human Dimensions,” *The Anthropocene Review* 4 no. 3 (2017), pp. 160–82; Noel Castree, “An Official Welcome to the Anthropocene Epoch—But Who Gets to Decide It’s Here?,” *The Conversation*, August 30, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/an-official-welcome-to-the-anthropocene-epoch-but-who-gets-to-decide-its-here-57113>.

8. Joanna Zylińska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 124.

9. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 19.

10. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 22.

11. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 83.

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The art writing of this epoch is increasingly and unapologetically interdisciplinary. It is perhaps logical, given the transgressively domain-scrambling effects of the Anthropocene—where, for example, tornadoes in Oklahoma rearrange after-school child-care plans as far away as central Texas,¹² a virus that spreads by droplets leads to increasingly accurate seismometer readings,¹³ and wild fluctuations in the price of a house in Perth, Australia, are comprehensible only in light of large-scale construction projects in mainland China¹⁴—that so much work (from scientific research to agriculture, from energy production to blue-carbon futures, from sound design to self-help books, from smart textiles to transport engineering) is becoming interdisciplinary.¹⁵ This interdisciplinarity is indeed demanded by the context of the Anthropocene; surely one lesson humankind can draw from the gradual sedimentation of this new geological epoch is that we can no longer regard human activities as restricted to one area or another; the effects of our activities always bleed through. In 1972, Robert Smithson declared himself a “geologic agent,”¹⁶ a statement that, by today’s standards, is practically tautological—*of course* we are geological. So, if interdisciplinarity is one hallmark of the intellectual output of our time, what other qualities in art writing would flag it as “Anthropocenic”?

In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote an allegorical fable in which definitions of nature, ecology, and the environment were shown to be central to political and social understandings of what it means to be human. Her text, *Silent Spring*, influenced the development of the field of literary ecocriticism, in which concepts of nature are addressed and challenged through critical questioning

12. Timothy Chipp, “Severe Weather: List of Abilene, Big Country Closings and Cancellations,” *Abilene Reporter News*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.reporternews.com/story/news/education/2019/05/20/abilene-wylie-isds-dismissing-early-threat-severe-weather/3744154002/>.

13. Robin George Andrews, “Coronavirus Turns Urban Life’s Roar to Whisper on World’s Seismographs,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/seismographs-lockdown-coronavirus.html>.

14. Government of Western Australia, Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation, “China,” accessed July 9, 2019, <https://www.jtsi.wa.gov.au/about-the-state/asian-engagement/china>.

15. Kerry Lee Rogers et al., “Wetland Carbon Storage Controlled by Millennial-Scale Variation in Relative Sea-Level Rise,” *Nature* 567 (2019), pp. 91–95; Michelle Voyer and Judith van Leeuwen, “Social License to Operate’ in the Blue Economy,” *Resources Policy* 62 (2019), pp. 102–13; Christine Eriksen, “Coping, Caring and Believing: The Embodied Work of Disaster Recovery Workers,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 32 (2019), pp. 100592-1–100592-9; Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing* (New York: Melville House), 2019; Zita Joyce, “‘We’re Looking Out through a Window to a Field of Weeds and Sand and Stones’: The Stadium Broadcast, a Radio Memorial,” *Space and Culture* (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1206331217752620>.

16. Robert Smithson, “Conversation in Salt Lake City: Interview with Gianni Pettena,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.

of the role and definition of the human.¹⁷ Until very recently, these ecocritical modes have remained absent in art history despite the fact that foundational texts like John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* centered on J. M. W. Turner's artistic treatment of geology as the "sum of valuable, essential and impressive truth," and influenced landscape-painting traditions well into the twentieth century.¹⁸

At times artworks have been employed by art historians in a search for artifacts, or proof, of the changing climate's effects: Jonathan Lopez's reading of Hendrick Avercamp's festive studies—e.g., *Winter Landscape with a Peat Boat* (ca. 1608)—as evidence of Europe's Little Ice Age is one example.¹⁹ Other art historians have looked to art as evidence of changing *human* mores; Lucy Lippard, for instance, has written about the environmental impacts of America's postmodern Land artists, who excavated the same deserts that many geologists seeking environmental evidence for the Anthropocene's golden spike are studying.²⁰ Yet in the absence of an established canon of ecocritical art writing, we need to turn to a broader set of texts to begin to identify the emergence of Anthropocenic art writing, writing that is not *about* the Anthropocene but that takes its cue from the operations and outcomes that characterize the epoch, that instrumentalizes it to better understand it, including its flagrant disregard for boundaries (disciplinary and otherwise).

This disregard of boundaries does not only take the form of an interdisciplinarity in which knowledge of technological, physical, and biological sciences is as important as an ability to describe visual and aesthetic structures and priorities; it also extends to *voicé*. Anthropocenic art writing often shifts modalities mid-sentence or pulls together multiple voices, leaving the reader uncertain as to who is writing: the one or the many? These texts play with the poetics and aesthetics of storytelling. Such art writing, resisting the human scale, acknowledging geological perspectives and time frames, merging geographic information with a critical aesthetics of the planet, has repeatedly engaged the Anthropocene as an allegorical model all its own.

17. Anna Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017); Malcolm Miles, *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* (London: A&C Black, 2014); Gry Hedin and Ann-Sofie Gremaud, *Artistic Visions of the Anthropocene North* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

18. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1834), p. 138.

19. Jonathan Lopez, "Hendrick Avercamp: The Little Ice Age," *Apollo: The International Magazine for Collectors* 171, no. 578 (2010), p. 84–85.

20. Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: New Press, 2013). See also our discussion of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in the Great Salt Lake as a possible "golden spike" for art history. Susan Ballard and Liz Linden, "Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene," *The Anthropocene Review* 6, no. 1–2 (April 2019), pp. 142–61.

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Anthropocenic art writing takes an allegorical form that reflects the age we live in. These allegorical forms are not merely analogous to the qualities we associate with the epoch; they are *compelled* by the conditions of our time, in which it is impossible to write about art, nature, and the environment without acknowledging the presence of humans, and in which it is impossible to write about humans without shifting scale in order to address the errors, assumptions, and inequalities that define being human today.²¹ These enforced dislocations, these jumps from one frame of reference to another, are the allegorical at work. They are texts that employ metaphors, chains of signification, and acknowledge the messiness of lived experience to point to the prospective incompatibility of subjective truths.

These qualities are often associated with certain kinds of writing by artists. For example, in their essay “Undisciplined Knowledge,” artist Allan deSouza and curator Allyson Purpura ask:

How might art-writing enable its subject to flourish between, rather than languish within, the categories of art history? Is there a way to keep knowledge “undisciplined,” that is, free from the academic or ideological frames that define and promote it? What would it look like, what would it mean, and who would it benefit?²²

DeSouza and Purpura are not writing *about* the Anthropocene, but it is present in the multidisciplinary layering of their writing, their strata of questions. When looking for critical art writing that “flourishes between”—that adopts experiential, transdisciplinary approaches to living on this planet, writing in polyphonic, Anthropocenic modes—we most often find it being done by artists.²³ This may be because artists are, by virtue of their “particular cultural position—[that] of simultaneous marginality and authority,” especially empowered to write in a way that emphasizes contemporary relevance, and thus cultural reverberations and resonance, rather than disciplinary orthodoxies.²⁴ In *Blasted Allegories*, his 1987 anthology of writing by artists, Brian Wallis suggests that texts written by artists often push at the boundaries of critical and theoretical forms: “[t]hat is, they afford a way of creating new models, new identities, and new options for

21. Susan Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene: Planetary Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 28–30. See also Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

22. Allyson Purpura, in Allan deSouza and Allyson Purpura, “Undisciplined Knowledge,” in *African Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work*, ed. Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 164.

23. Artists who contribute to the textual worlds of the Anthropocene include Hilton Als, Laurie Anderson, Judith Barry, Victor Burgin, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Moyra Davey, Tacita Dean, Liam Gillick, Dan Graham, Peter Halley, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe, Jill Johnston, Constance de Jong, Chris Kraus, Nicolas Mangan, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Sarah Sentilles, Robert Smithson, Hito Steyerl, among many others.

24. Brian Wallis, *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. xiii.

movement.”²⁵ Wallis argues that by employing “ambiguous, complex, and experiential forms of knowledge,” artists’ writings resist established modes and contain multiple allegorical levels of meaning.²⁶ Wallis explains that “the important question [for artists who write] . . . is not how to gain access to the accepted forms of literature, but how to recognize the language which is relevant to the issues of their particular community.”²⁷

It is not only artists who write Anthropocenic-ly; other writers employ these polyphonic or interdisciplinary approaches through structural means, both by collaborating with others and/or working across disciplines themselves.²⁸ Because the Anthropocene operates through multidisciplinary forms, layering cause and effect—producing outcomes that are both self-contained and public and events that are both political and personal, until they start to become indistinguishable—authors writing in this Anthropocenic mode respond in kind, allowing internal contradictions to pile up. The approaches modeled in Wallis’s anthology offer a guide for a form of Anthropocenic writing that maintains its allusiveness and synecdochic fluidity while at the same time mapping onto the actual and very real threats of the Anthropocene. Further, if this is indeed a revisionist exercise in which we identify Anthropocenic modalities in earlier works, then the essay form itself is potentially a key site of investigation.

In his book *Essayism*, Brian Dillon calls for a kind of art writing that is “a species of drift or dissolve, at the levels of logic and language, that time and again requires the reader to page back in wonder—how did we get from there to *here*?”²⁹ Dillon cites as an inspiration poet William Carlos Williams’s own essay on the form, in which Williams writes:

Each essay rings the changes of its range, the breadth, the penetration moving inward about the fashionable brick of all styles, unity. Unity is the shallowest, the cheapest deception of all composition. In nothing is the banality of the intelligence more clearly manifested. There is no less significant matter for the attention. Every piece of writing, it matters not what it is, has unity. Inexpert or bad writing most terribly so. But ability in an essay is multiplicity, infinite fracture, the intercrossing of opposed forces establishing any number of opposed centers of stillness.³⁰

25. Ibid., p. xvii.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. For polyphony in collaborative Anthropocenic art writing, see, in addition to deSouza and Purpura, the work of Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle, and Brian Kuan Wood; Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig; and Michael Marder and Anaïs Tondeur. For interdisciplinary art writing embodying transdisciplinary practices, see, alongside Dillon and Lippard, Dodie Bellamy, Donna Haraway, Maggie Nelson, Molly Nesbit, Rebecca Solnit, Lesley Stern, Lynne Tillman, McKenzie Wark, and Laura Watts. Though many of these authors would perhaps not consider themselves art writers, all of them are engaged in writing alongside art.

29. Brian Dillon, *Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Function* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018), p. 9.

30. William Carlos Williams, quoted in Dillon, *Essayism*, p. 14.

Dillon maps his own model for the “multiplicity” of an essay onto an alluvial plain. But he begins with etymology:

Imagine a type of writing so hard to define its very name should be something like: an effort, an attempt, a trial. . . . Imagine what it might rescue from disaster and achieve at the levels of form, style, texture and therefore (though some might cavil at “therefore”) at the level of thought. Not to mention feeling. Picture if you can its profile on the page: from a solid spate of argument or narrative to isolated promontories of text, these composing in their sum the archipelago of a work, or a body of work. The page an estuary, dotted at intervals with typographical buoys or markers. . . . An uncharted tract or plain. And yet certain ancient routes allow us to pilot our way through to the source, then out again, adventuring.³¹

In short, the Anthropocenic modes we have described sound strikingly like the allegorical and geoaesthetic modes that Dillon is calling for, which he simultaneously models and invokes.

And yet allegory is itself a much-maligned term in both modern and contemporary art history. For example, in his writing about the work of Robert Smithson in 1979, Craig Owens points to a then-unpublished essay by Smithson in which the artist acknowledges that “the very word ‘allegory’ is enough to strike terror into the hearts of the expressive artist; there is perhaps no device as exhausted as allegory.”³² Smithson then goes on to cite Jorge Luis Borges’s self-conscious warning that “for all of us, the allegory is an aesthetic error.”³³ Owens aligns Smithson’s interest in such “aesthetic errors” with his interest in “entropy” and “his attraction to both prehistoric and postindustrial ruins,” pointing out that the ruin was Walter Benjamin’s analogue to allegory itself.³⁴ In Owens’s explanation of how Smithson entwines ruin, entropy, and aesthetics with the geological, we can, in 2021, start to identify Smithson’s work as an early example of geoaesthetic and allegorical writing within the Anthropocene.

Owens explains some of the threat of allegory, which makes artists hesitant to engage with it, through its utter incompatibility with the foundations of modernism.³⁵

31. Ibid., p. 11.

32. Robert Smithson, cited in Craig Owens, “Earthwords,” *October* 10 (Autumn 1979), p. 128.

33. Smithson, cited in *ibid.*

34. Ibid.

35. If such uses of allegory, as a “dissolution” of boundaries between categories and disciplines, are exemplary of postmodernism and also intrinsic to Anthropocenic modes of art and art writing, then it is implicit in our argument that the emergence of postmodernism signals the emergence of the Anthropocene in the field of art. This emergence is in line with the shift in scientific markers for the Anthropocene, where at first scientists looked for signs of the industrial age in the geological record as a possible golden spike for the epoch but later shifted their search to the decades after the mid-century release of atomic radionuclides into the atmosphere. Postmodern art and writing—meaning works that creatively engage in interdisciplinary, intertextual, or polyphonic modes—are therefore, by our definition, Anthropocenic.

He writes:

Allegory marks the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts; by proposing the interchangeability of the verbal and the visual, the integrity of both is compromised. . . . Allegory is traditionally defined, following Quintilian, as a symbol introduced in continuous series, the temporal extension of metaphor.³⁶

That allegory is such a useful metaphor here, a metaphor for metaphor itself, used by Smithson, Owens, Benjamin, and Quintilian, points back to its productive complexity. Allegory results in a multivalence of meanings and matter; it implies shifts in scale of the sort also experienced in many of Smithson's works, from his massive site-specific earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) to his photographic and text-based documentations of the same, all of which, Owens asserts, were effectively interchangeable.³⁷ At the same time, allegory indicates a potential endlessness of equivalences that seem, by definition, imprecise and therefore unresolved.

Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens's onetime teacher, also wrote about the critical challenges raised by such postmodern equivalences and interchangeabilities in her seminal essay on the role of context in sculptural practice, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." There Krauss reconceives of sculpture as continuous with its context rather than as a discrete entity in a pristine white cube. While Krauss doesn't mention allegory in this context, she does touch on a related discomfort of some art critics at the time with in-discrete practices like those voiced by Smithson and Borges. In describing such a critique of postmodern artists, working across many formats and contexts, she explains:

[While] this continual relocation of one's energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious of such movement, calling it eclectic. . . . But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from another.³⁸

Thus, we can now understand the "terror" of the artist drawn to allegorical modes of practice to be that of a fear of being "eclectic." The dilettantism and frivolousness implicit in such a label are obvious. And so the question for artists and art writers inclined to working with and through such associations, equivalences, and interchangeabilities is how to mobilize allegory to incisive and critical ends, how to use eclecticism to clarify, rather than muddy, the waters.

The question of writing, within the question of allegory, loops us around to where we began. Until art writers can write about a work like, say, Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen* as a tongue-in-cheek infomercial for camouflage technologies and a

36. Ibid., p. 129.

37. Ibid., p. 122.

38. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), p. 42.

piece of blue-chip video art *and* publicity for ex-military tourist curios *and* a feminist incursion into legacies of Land art without prioritizing one characterization over the other, art writing will struggle to admit the Anthropocene.³⁹ *How Not to Be Seen* operates through a plurality of voices and a multiplicity of subjectivities that speak not only to planetary ecologies but also alongside the other texts that are now in constant circulation around us all. In the same way that a lazy five-minute surf on the Internet flicks us between scenarios that are at once desperate geoengineering propositions to either make it rain or make it stop raining, unsurprising revelations of mass surveillance via the Five Eyes alliance, paralleled by self-referential fact-checking Twitter feeds and bankrupt ministers in charge of drought diverting essential water to coal mines, *How Not to Be Seen* offers the unsuspecting viewer a seemingly haphazard sequence of insights collected together by the algorithmic logic of surveillance capitalism.⁴⁰ There is a warning contained in the Anthropocene's very name: We view any human action as isolated within one system at our peril; everything *Anthropos* is connected to everything *cene*. Like Steyerl, we need to associate freely, strategically, and eclectically.

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Sometimes in Anthropocenic writing allegorical relationships are established via shifts in scale, or changes in narrative points of view. Wallis describes the artists' writings he has collected in his anthology as employing

appropriation and reinscription of existing voices, styles, and genres; in place of the coherence of the conventional text, they favor a form which is fragmentary, inconclusive, digressive, and interpenetrated with other texts; in place of the omnipotent author, they acknowledge a collectivity of voices and active participation of the reader; in place of the new or the original, they accept an understanding of language and stories as "already written" and shaped by social and political conditions.⁴¹

These are qualities that extend our search for Anthropocenic art writing. They are easily identifiable in the leap from photographic theory to political theory to activism and advocacy in the writings of Martha Rosler, in the merging of personal

39. Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 44.

40. Jonas Anshelm and Anders Hansson, "The Last Chance to Save the Planet? An Analysis of the Geoengineering Advocacy Discourse in the Public Debate," *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (May 2014), pp. 101–23; Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Adam Kerezy, "Queensland Risks Running the Well Dry by Gifting Water to Coal," *The Conversation*, December 1, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/queensland-risks-running-the-well-dry-by-gifting-water-to-coal-34752>.

41. Wallis, *Blasted Allegories*, p. xiv.

history with pop-cultural and political autobiography in the memoir work of Hilton Als, and in the zooming in and out between micro and macro views of the natural and built environment in the texts of Steyerl. Such Anthropocenic art writing frequently reads like a collage of fragments assembled by the author, even when written in the first person, because the act of collecting such things constitutes an assertion of the continuousness of the world.

Take, as an example of leaps in scale and subjectivities, artist Laurie Anderson's "Words in Reverse," a short essay about cultural collisions and misunderstandings anthologized in Wallis's *Blasted Allegories*. Anderson's text jumps from an assertion about detective novels written in the second person ("you must put the hero together yourself") to a third-person account of "an ancient Japanese pot" to a first-person description of air travel to a dialogue between "you" and the italicized collective voice of unidentified foreigners ("*In our country . . .*").⁴² Such intertextuality and shifts in scale effectively announce the assertions of the Anthropocene as a planetary space. Humans feature as simultaneously historical and geographical beings, as narrative heroes and unidentified collectives, as *part of* an interconnected ecological and geological system instead of as discrete entities.

With these shifts in scale of both space and time—the narration veering from a bird's-eye view to the narrator's "I" and from the skittering pace of the imagination to the lackadaisical slog of the day-to-day to the quasi-stasis of geologic time—the vista of the white cube is eclipsed. Art becomes a matter of a much bigger (or smaller) picture; it becomes, simply, matter. Recontextualized by scale, writers are freed to approach the previously sacrosanct with disciplinary irreverence. Think of how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote extended lyric essays, poems, and critical texts. In her collection of poetry *Fat Art, Thin Art*, disciplinary boundaries, bodies, and "proper" ways of speaking fall away.⁴³ Not long after it was published, in the mid-1990s, the poems were passed around classrooms like forbidden texts. We whispered to each other, "Can she do that? Can she write like that? What kind of world does she live in?" The questions continue to haunt Sedgwick's later critical lyric *Touching Feeling*, where she describes multiple ways of living outside of binaries, depicting a non-dualistic self within sequences of hopeful spaces, moving and twisting across time. "Wish? Somewhere, at least, liberated by both possibility and impossibility, and especially by the relative untetheredness to self."⁴⁴ Biography and "theory" ensnared in a wish. Sedgwick, like Anderson, does not stick to the individual voice, as the words themselves reverse us out of the tricky parking space of isolated subjectivities.

Another way such Anthropocenic polyphony is achieved, a polyphony that is also mobilized politically through the aggregation of an abundance of sources

42. Laurie Anderson, "Words in Reverse," in Wallis, *Blasted Allegories*, pp. 68, 69, 71.

43. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

44. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 195.

from a variety of registers and disciplines, is by writing multiple subjectivities into the narrator's voice directly. Chris Kraus's 1997 novel *I Love Dick* is often celebrated as an early example of autotheory, and in Kraus's writing a multitude of voices, sources, and ideas emerge from the seamless, stream-of-consciousness-seeming narration of her main character, a "39-year-old experimental filmmaker" named Chris Kraus.⁴⁵ (Kraus's novel is a lightly fictionalized account of a love triangle she was involved in, all the characters sharing names with their real-world counterparts except for the titular "Dick —," a gesture of coy demureness that did little to anonymize the British critic Dick Hebdige.) The novel unfolds over a series of letters, faxes, and transcripts of conversations and voicemails involving Kraus; her husband, Sylvère Lotringer; and Dick, occasionally stitched together by her first-person narration. Kraus's voice is hilarious and startling because of the banal truth of it; she allows the reader to watch her grapple with the questions and concerns of her life, seemingly in "real time," as they flow from personal finances to philosophical concepts to thoughts on the artistic practices and personal lives of her peers to mid-1990s politics to feelings of boredom, ambition, and so on.

The polyphony in *I Love Dick* is thus structurally intrinsic to the book both in the way Kraus brings allusions and influences into her own narration⁴⁶ and in the way the novel is composed of multiple voices. Indeed, even Dick's final plea to be left alone, a letter in which he writes that whatever "talent [Kraus] has as a writer . . . I do not share your conviction that my right to privacy has to be sacrificed for the sake of that talent," becomes subsumed into Kraus's novel as the penultimate page.⁴⁷

Despite its obvious ambition, creativity, and craft, *I Love Dick* was greeted upon publication by the art and literary worlds with confusion and contempt. David Rimanelli, writing in *Artforum*, called it "a book not so much written as secreted."⁴⁸ And yet, when the work was republished in 2006, Kraus notes that "it was received as a new book. . . . This time the book was championed, not reviled."⁴⁹ Kraus reflects on this changed reception, contextualizing it within broader shifts in perceptions of women's writing in an essay published in her recent book of criticism, *Social Practices*. There, Kraus quotes Karolin Meunier's *Return to Inquiry*: "What I am interested in here is the model of writing and talking about oneself as a means of abstracting one's own experience."⁵⁰ This kind of self-observation, which takes personal experience and defamiliarizes it by shifting perspective to a more distant, perhaps bird's-eye, view, is one more way of side-

45. Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext[e], 2006), p. 19.

46. For example, in the space of a few sentences, she likens the appeal of Dick's face to the ironic account of attraction in the Ramones' "Needles and Pins" and then associates it with Kierkegaard's concept of "the Third Remove." Kraus, *I Love Dick*, pp. 29–30.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

48. David Rimanelli, "I Love Dick," *Artforum*, March 1998, p. S7.

49. Chris Kraus, *Social Practices* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e]/Smart Art, 2018), pp. 89–90.

50. Karolin Meunier, *Return to Inquiry* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012), as cited in Kraus, *Social Practices*, p. 85.

stepping human-scale narration of intimate life events. Kraus goes on to describe a number of qualities she is drawn to in writers, speaking from her position as editor of the Native Agents series, an imprint founded to “explore American, primarily female, voices and issues of subjectivity” at Semiotext(e).⁵¹ For example, Kraus writes that she began editing the series because she wanted to publish the writing of

some friends in New York, all of them women, who could best be described as post–New York School writers. That is—they wrote about all kinds of things in the first person with a disinterested, but always interesting, candor.⁵²

Later in the essay, Kraus explains that “the books we’re drawn to are more conceptual than experimental; more warm than cold; more discursive than lyrical; often queer, never conventionally male heterosexual; more autobiographical than not.”⁵³

But this does not really address the shift that occurred between the publication and republication of *I Love Dick*. Over the course of this decade, the world changed. Expectations of what writing is, and could be, were transformed as academic departments in women’s studies gave way to gender studies, film studies morphed into media and communications, and art history became visual culture—or simply vanished. Across multiple disciplines, a previously abstracted experience was rendered simultaneously immediate and multiple, and writing such as Kraus’s was understood to reflect the world as it actually was.

Thus, if the autobiographical and allusive qualities of *I Love Dick* proved a challenge at the time of its original publication, the modes of writing Kraus elaborates are, increasingly, finding an audience in this next phase of the Anthropocene. At a 2006 roundtable discussion with editors from both American and European publishing houses, participants were notably open-minded about increasingly interdisciplinary and subjective approaches to art and art-history writing. One editor explained:

I’m much more interested in publishing books that deny the idea of discipline than those that embrace or reinforce it. The most interesting books are not only blurring but actually denying the idea of disciplinarity and challenging the premise of subjecthood.⁵⁴

51. “Semiotext(e) / Native Agents,” Series and Imprints, Semiotext(e), accessed December 30, 2020, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/semiotexte-native-agents>.

52. Kraus, *Social Practices*, pp. 85–86.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

54. Roger Conover, quoted in Michael Ann Holly et al., “Art History and Its Publishers,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 4 (2006), p. 46.

Another acknowledged, “I work a lot at the intersection of art, science, and natural philosophy, and there’s an enormous amount of information and insight that those several fields can generate for each other.”⁵⁵ In short, while *I Love Dick* emerged into a late-1990s field of readership that was not prepared for the irreverence, intimacy, and transgressiveness of her writing, these are modes that within a decade became sought-after by the publishing industry, a shift that has hastened the development of the Anthropocenic mode we see increasingly celebrated today.

If Kraus’s writing is considered an early example of the autotheory genre, an even earlier, more radical ancestor would be the work of dancer and art critic Jill Johnston. In the 1960s, Johnston developed a mode of writing “at once,” as she put it, “poetry, prophecy, criticism, history, and self-revelation.”⁵⁶ As art historian Liz Kotz writes,

Someday, whenever the tangled histories of the interdisciplinary sixties art scene, of new journalism and experimental female/feminist autobiographical writing, of lesbians and the avant-garde, get written, Jill Johnston’s life and work will receive key billing. She was at the center of a lot of messy, boundary-breaking and hard-to-categorize activities that have been tremendously influential.⁵⁷

Johnston’s writing parallels the move towards intermedia, in which dance, happenings, painting, and sculpture dissolved into an intertextual, personal, and occasionally mythological language. (Indeed, in a 2018 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Johnston’s book *Marmalade Me* was exhibited as demonstrating “an understanding of criticism as embedded in personal life and an art form in its own right.”)⁵⁸ In the preface to *Marmalade Me*, Johnston describes how she “developed a passion for ‘found’ fragments—statements and exclamations heard or read—and for arranging them in the bizarre continuity of the non sequitur linked by some personal need or system of association.”⁵⁹ In practice, a reader finds herself spending time inhabiting a narrative free fall:

The torso and head thrown back, held there a moment, the arms angled, bent at elbow and wrist, up over the face, to reinforce the ecstatic arch. The romantic attitude is nowhere so clear as in the fall from that effort, for while the legs take the weight of the body into the

55. Susan Bielstein, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.

56. Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), dust jacket.

57. Liz Kotz, “Marmalade Me,” *The Women’s Review of Books* (July 1998), p. 19.

58. Wall text, excerpt from *Marmalade Me*, in exhibition *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, October 19, 2018.

59. Johnston, *Marmalade Me*, p. 14.

floor, the arms remain stretched, the gaze follows the arms, and the torso sinks to one side, still hoping for the impossible. Advance token to the nearest railroad. Is this the way the world will end? I didn't get kissed nearly enough.⁶⁰

Here, the model of modernity's embedded sexism, Charcot's hysterical woman, finds herself dancing and falling alongside railway tracks. She is located within the meeting of body and machine, dancing the grief and loss of the end of the world. Without typographical distinctions, Johnston blends passages of thought together so that the reader is forced to stop and restart for fear she too will run out of breath. If Johnston and Kraus do indeed represent identifiable strata in our geology of art writing, then their characteristic style, in which an individual voice is spiked with found fragments, must leave a persistent record. The allegorical transformations, therefore, of Kraus, Johnston, Sedgwick, and Smithson do more than unite them stylistically so that they may share a shelf in the library; they also preserve artifacts of the lives we led at the onset of this age, incidental details with the potential to become poignant later on, bugs suspended in amber.

Such digressions in voice are also instrumental in more recent writing by Maggie Nelson. Her book *The Argonauts* typographically asserts these jumps in speaker by setting passages by other writers apart and in italics, adding the author attribution in the margin. These insertions serve as disjunctive shifts in scale and voice both to underscore how personal subjectivities and insights are formed out of an abundance of cultural sources (Nelson quotes Judith Butler, D. W. Winnicott, and Lucille Clifton, among others) and also to point to how a single voice alone is insufficient to rise to the challenge of . . . anything. In the case of *The Argonauts*, this is a particularly poignant and political assertion, because the entire text serves as a meditation on the failure of language at the point where it must be conceived of as both personal and social, as in the expression of such concepts as "love" or "gender," where what and how they mean affect both our internal lives and how we participate in community. The book begins, geoaesthetically, with "the Santa Ana winds . . . shredding bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes,"⁶¹ and the start of a romance with an opposition at its core: that Nelson had spent "a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed"⁶² only to fall in love with someone who "had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough."⁶³ Amidst the sadness and pain are moments when the planet appears. The shredding proceeds.

60. Ibid., p. 167.

61. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 3.

62. Ibid., p. 3.

63. Ibid., p. 4.

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In other humanities disciplines such as geography, literary studies, and political ecology, the fragmentation and de-centering of the human subject is presented as an essential first step in the accurate assessment, and mitigation, of humankind's impact on the planet.⁶⁴ Likewise, Anthropocenic art writing has embraced the de-centered human subject, by shifting scale again and again, extending its concerns to the political, social, ethical, and environmental traumas of the Anthropocene. And it is this hyperextension of thought that returns us to Steyerl's multidimensional networks of postproduction: the Anthropocenic self as revealed within ecologies of technology and capital. Steyerl, like so many of these Anthropocenic voices, builds complex arguments on the backs of a great diversity of influences and references. As with Kraus, Steyerl's references tend to be woven into the fabric of her narration rather than standing apart within it. She writes in accelerating cascades of referentiality, a technique simultaneously exciting and elliptical.

The astonishing lengths of Steyerl's chains of signification make an explicit and political argument about our experience of the world; they admit the Anthropocenic, and the nonhuman, into her field. Steyerl makes her case through changes in scale, zooming in and out of contexts that are simultaneously microscopic, social, and engaged with the planet, starting her essay "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" with a command to "imagine you are falling. But there is no ground."⁶⁵ She then toggles between philosophical ideas of "groundlessness"⁶⁶ and discussions of the perceived weightlessness of falling—"paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating"⁶⁷—ending with the visual effects on the faller. She writes:

As you are falling, your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries. Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft. While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.

64. David Matless, "The Geographical Self, the Nature of the Social and Geoesthetics: Work in Social and Cultural Geography, 1996," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997), pp. 393–405; Harriet Hawkins, "Geography and Art: An Expanding Field: Site, the Body and Practice," *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 1 (2013), pp. 52–71; Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

65. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 12.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

This disorientation is partly due to the loss of a stable horizon. And with the loss of horizon also comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity. In falling, the lines of the horizon shatter, twirl around, and superimpose.⁶⁸

One criticism frequently leveled at Steyerl is that her changes in scale are too dizzying, her analogies too ambitious. Hal Foster, writing in the *London Review of Books*, characterizes her writing as “a kind of Wiki-crit in which smooth prose sutures big jumps in the argument,”⁶⁹ while Saul Anton, in *Artforum*, maintains that Steyerl’s abundance of analogies “enables critical overreach,” and that “critical theory must avoid becoming as totalizing as the systems it seeks to oppose.”⁷⁰ The challenge for Steyerl, as for others producing Anthropocenic art writing, is to ensure that one’s abundance of analogies and metaphors neatly maps onto the thing one wants to describe. For an analogy to be sufficiently transformative, it must be apt; as in science, for a metaphor to be useful, it must *clarify*.⁷¹

Foster’s and Anton’s criticisms of Steyerl’s prolific referentiality also point back to the trickiness of scale when working in and with the Anthropocene. What if the system you seek to capture in your work is *always* bigger than any net of associations you can weave to catch it? How could anyone’s critical theory be as totalizing as the Anthropocene? Steyerl’s point is that the linking together of macro and micro, the global and the local, the political and the personal, is a necessity of our times.

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In *Art Review’s* “2017 Power 100,” Steyerl was accompanied by French artist Pierre Huyghe at No. 2 and American feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway at No. 3. Huyghe probably held the spot thanks to the sensation caused by his living ecosystem, *After ALife Ahead*, at Skulptur Projekte 2017, or perhaps, more banally, the award of the international Nasher Prize for sculpture. Huyghe creates worlds that are often impacted by mysterious ecological relations. His work is as close to an art-human-nature amalgam as the Anthropocene might allow. Haraway was a surprise entry. Her critical philosophy has long been a favorite of graduate students, but its reception within the art world shifted with the publication of *Staying with the*

68. Ibid.

69. Hal Foster, “Smash the Screen,” *London Review of Books* 40, no. 7 (April 2018), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n07/hal-foster/smash-the-screen>.

70. Saul Anton, “The Whole Is the False,” *Artforum*, March 2018, p. 69.

71. Keith J. Holyoak and Paul Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). For example, Robert Smithson’s embrace of geology in his work succeeded, in part, because he recuperated that analogy’s failures in his strategic embrace of entropy, which is equally a geologic description of breakdown and failure.

Trouble in 2017. Subtitled *Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Staying with the Trouble* rethinks the Anthropocene as the “Chthulucene”—a tentacular epoch in excess of the *Anthropos*.⁷² Spiraling from science fact to science fiction to speculative feminism to string figures to speculative fabulation, Haraway enacts a scalar transformation that begins under the sea and ends with the entangled life story of five characters named Camille who are all organic human-animal symbionts born between 2025 and 2425. *Staying with the Trouble* models an abundance of figuration, paired with polyphonic leaps in scale and subjectivity, as a means to approach an ethical commitment to “think with.”⁷³ In 2017, the Anthropocene, refigured via a multi-perspectival, many-dimensional “Chthulucene,” offered a welcoming and friendly allegorical respite from the endless chains of capitalist image exchange.

By 2018 a hashtag had displaced all three: #MeToo took the third spot; Steyerl had dropped to No. 4, Huyghe to No. 12, Haraway to No. 67. In 2020 there was another swing toward collective action with Black Lives Matter at No. 1, while #MeToo remained at No. 4. The impact and relevance of the numbers are dubious, and yet they represent another golden spike in our field: when Anthropocenic thinking, making, and writing met the commercial concerns of the art world.

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While Anton’s critique of Steyerl’s Anthropocenic mode of writing was related to “critical overreach,” Martha Rosler, much earlier, had obliquely identified another, more troubling quality that could be attributed to Anthropocenic modes, explaining in 1977 that comprehensive interconnectedness inevitably contains its own critique. Rosler, one of the artists who pioneered allegorical modes in her early work by merging personal narratives with larger political questions,⁷⁴ cautions in her essay “For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life” that “narrative can be a homey, manageable form of address, but its very virtue, the suggestion of subjectivity and lived experience, is also its danger.”⁷⁵ She writes:

The rootedness of an I, the most seductive encoding of *convincingness*, suggests an absolute inability to transcend the individual consciousness. And consciousness is the domain of ideology, so that the logic of at least the first-person narrative is that there is no appeal from ideology, no *metacritical* level. Given the pervasive relativism of our society, according to which only the personal is truly knowable and in which all opinions are

72. Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (May 2015), pp. 159–65.

73. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 3.

74. See, for example, Rosler’s film *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), as well as her “Constructing a Life,” in Wallis, *Blasted Allegories*, pp. 134–37.

75. Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 6.

equally valid outside the realm of science, the first-person narrative suggests the unretrievability of objective human and social truth. At most, one or another version of the dominant ideology is reinforced.⁷⁶

It is strange to refract Rosler's insights from the postmodern age through the lens of our present day. The phrase "outside the realm of science" arrives now like a kick in the guts, a sickening reminder of how rapidly things have changed and how, in the present day, science is no longer considered an unassailable island of fact surrounded by a sea of subjective realities. What Rosler could not have predicted at the close of the 1970s, when she was writing her essay, was that in less than fifty years science too would become a matter of "belief."⁷⁷

Rosler's warning against uncritically celebrating "individual consciousness" should be considered in light of our construction of a writerly Anthropogenic "I." It points to the imperative of fostering an Anthropogenic, allegorical, and personal mode of art writing that also operates on a metacritical level. Further, Rosler's critique of the "pervasive relativism" of her time also points to the intrinsic role of such discontinuous subjectivities in creating the Anthropocene in the first place. Such a mode of writing, naturally, contains all the same qualities—ideological, scientific, economic, ethical, and individual—through which the age is defined. By acknowledging and complicating the individualism inherent in our subjective observations, by joining them to other accounts of the world, Anthropogenic modes of writing, we hope, have the potential to embody and enact a self-reflexivity *without* moral relativism, in which our fictions do not swamp our facts.

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Over fifteen years ago, when I was just out of college and had first moved to New York, a scientist friend called and said, "Liz, you should come with me!," explaining that the aged (and now deceased) Benoit Mandelbrot, "father of fractals," was giving a talk at her research university. She knew I was a fractal enthusiast; I had taken a class on fractal geometry when I was in school. (The course had a reputation as "math for artists" because of the interdisciplinarity of its assignments. I had always been fascinated by the repetition of forms in fractals and needed another math credit to graduate.)

76. Ibid., pp. 6–7.

77. Lisa Friedman, "'I Don't Know That It's Man-Made,' Trump Says of Climate Change. It Is," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/climate/trump-climate-change-fact-check.html>; Katie Rogers, "Trump's Scientists Push Back on His Claim That Virus May Not Return This Fall," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-fall.html?searchResultPosition=2>; Ishaan Tharoor, "Bolsonaro May Be the World's Coronavirus Skeptic in Chief," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/07/bolsonaro-may-be-worlds-coronavirus-skeptic-in-chief/>.

The room was packed. Mandelbrot came across as alternately authoritative and shy, with drifts of white hair floating sweetly around his head like clouds. He spoke generally of fractals and their properties, and of how he came to “discover” them, but what stuck with me most was a story he told about scale.

Mandelbrot explained how, during World War II, when planes were shot down and their pilots forced to bail out midair, they found themselves in yet another predicament. Often free-falling over landscapes that were undeveloped and vast, with the ground rushing up at them at fifty-three meters per second (and potentially under fire as they fell), they had no way of knowing how close to the ground they were and therefore when it would be safe to deploy their parachutes. Everything looked the same at eight thousand meters, at four thousand meters, at four hundred. The same repetition of colors and patterns and textures. The pilots had a geoaesthetic problem: They were experiencing, Mandelbrot said, “scale invariance.”

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Perhaps one solution to the problem that faces us as art writers in the Anthropocene is to take scale invariance as both a warning and a model for our writing. It could serve as a warning because the threats of allegory, of undisciplined eclecticism and of imprecise assertions of equivalences, have not gone away. It could serve as a model because—as we embrace an emerging mode of critical art writing that is engaged and engaging, personal and polyphonic, perhaps radically digressive, and always interdisciplinary—scale invariance gives us another useful metaphor for allegory, and for our argument itself. Scale invariance is one way of thinking about concepts, or themes, or materials that recur and reformulate again and again, self-reflexively, through a text, keeping time, marking progress. It allows us to conceive of metaphors that operate on multiple valences, creating a dimensionality through their connections and insights out of which we can conceive of new passages forward, new solutions to the pressing problems of our age that are created only through the interaction of art *and*—.⁷⁸

At the same time, Mandelbrot’s scale invariance tells us something about the dangers of synecdoche uncoupled from a sense of distance, or perspective, or scale. The chains of signification are not, strictly speaking, endless because—as Rosler, Foster, Anton, Krauss, and others have warned—that would render them meaningless (and the Anthropocene makes clear that there is no such thing as “infinite,” anyway). We must, as art writers in this epoch, ensure that each link in our chains of reference, metaphor, allegory, and allusion joins clearly and logically to the next for our arguments to have the reach and resonance that will allow each individual “I” to link to another. The point here is to make *connections*. The ground *is* rushing up at us; like the falling pilots, our time is running out.

78. Marjorie Perloff argues that the embrace of “and” (endless interdisciplinary chains of imagistic and allegorical connection) also performs a negative ekphrasis: “the verbal evocation . . . being intentionally incommensurate with the visual object and vice versa so as to problematize the process of perception itself.” Marjorie Perloff, “The Demise of ‘And’: Robert Smithson’s Mirrors,” *Critical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1990), pp. 81–101.