PROPOSAL

UHON 351: “Arts of the Anthropocene: Living on a Damaged Planet”

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Overview. We need to understand that we are in a new era, which some specialists now call The Anthropocene, and that we need to acknowledge momentous problems. “Anthropocene” defines a time when the work of humans has devastatingly altered the environment. The results are unnerving enough to demand innovative approaches. This course examines the power of artworks in a variety of formats (music, photography, painting, verse, dance, drama, fiction) to register the threat of a catastrophic future by engaging us both intellectually and emotionally. These artworks may also carry within them clues, hints, and promptings that offer alternative approaches to help us confront the crisis before us.

Summary and Central Problems. While the exact name for the current phase of global geography that we are immersed in is still in question, the title recently coined – Anthropocene – was recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary in 2014: “The era of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth.” Since America is one of the few western countries where climate change is thought controversial by some, this course begins by considering the positions of those who have denied or resisted what others find as a scientific consensus. We’ll consider proposals for addressing deniers whose tactics follow the guidelines of previous naysayers such as those who offered proof that cigarette smoking was harmless. This analysis can form a basis for considering how to change resistant, and it lets us turn toward the responses that emerged after such 21st century global disruptions as the 2005 hurricane that devastated New Orleans. We’ll evaluate the effectiveness of the artworks, photography collections, musical documents, and dramatic presentations that Katrina generated. We’ll pause to evaluate the public monuments that were erected so future generations would remember the event and evaluate their effectiveness by proposing alternatives. Consideration of Katrina will open out onto a wider variety of materials designed to alert us to impending catastrophes, including a science fiction “documentary” that looks back to the present from 2100, an imaginary reconstruction of a future play emergent in an era of social collapse, and a sequence of murals that portray the Great Lakes as embodying a ravaged history of human interventions. In a final segment, we’ll turn toward works that force us to envision alterations and operations (both practical and conceptual) that we might begin to embrace in an effort to curtail such a negative future. The Anthropocene is, in fact, only one of a set of names that have been proposed for the impending crisis. Two others – the Capitoline and Cthulhucene – envision more the necessity for seriously radical changes if we are to meet the challenges that loom before us.

Objectives. Students who take this course will be preparing for innovative ways to register the threat of a future that will call for considerable changes in attitude and understanding. The students will grapple with tactics for persuading others to look more openly at current dilemmas. They will consider ways they can use their talents to propose or develop imaginative projects that clarify the outlines of a crisis, all while experiencing artworks in a number of different but related media events in both screen culture and print culture. They will have an opportunity to consider how they might use examples from their own backgrounds to produce work in a medium they find suitable. Finally, they will have the chance, in a discussion course, to question and critique and attend to the ways in which artists, most of whom are living today, construct materials that call for a public awareness and a group response to a threat that exists in common.

Grading. Students will be graded upon their work in a final presentation that proposes a project designed to engage others in comprehending environmental change as a threat that demands our involvement at many levels. That presentation will grow out of two short critical studies: one that evaluates the monuments erected to a major national event, the destruction of New Orleans after Katrina, and another
that critically compares two artworks that portray climate change, indicating why one might be more successful than another. Finally, students in groups of two will be charged with summarizing for the seminar essays or chapters of books assigned to cover aspects of universal carbon pollution. While students will acquire experience working in small groups, they may opt to make their presentation of either critical study as individuals or as members of a group. The emphasis in the course will fall on discussion and analysis; an exchange of a variety of viewpoints will be encouraged.

Distinctive Traits of This Course. This course introduces artworks as powerful documents that provide intellectual understandings that carry emotional weight. While artwork in general in the last fifty years or so has increasingly involved itself in issues of social and political justice, the artists and writers, as well as the producers and filmmakers, who have been drawn toward the environmental crisis have faced complex issues that resist simplification and require keen attention from an audience. Their works depict environmental deterioration as a problem with many moving parts, and dominated by feedback loops whose solutions may generate new problems. Innovative perspectives are required for their comprehension. This course moves from public monuments that offer a cultural memory of familiar catastrophes to very recent works that move into new areas, most of which have not yet been fully examined by critics.

Five Questions.
1. What is the “Anthropocene,” a term some specialists use to describe our era?
2. Why is the term relevant to the moment we are in now?
3. When artists and writers place the global environmental crisis at the center of their work, what should we expect to take away?
4. How do some artworks present themselves as “arts of living” – encounters that serve both to explain and guide?
5. Where can we find artworks that serve us both intellectually and emotionally?

Extended Description

Unit One

Introduction; photographs of a vulnerable environment; the politics of the Anthropocene; climate deniers and countering their influence; historic success in altering rigid cultural attitudes; and four “archetypes” that sketch an Anthropocene future

This unit opens with a TED talk by Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky in which he guides us through a selection of his dramatic images of damaged landscapes. “Anthropocene” is the simple term under which his latest photos appear when circulating through museums, and his images have always been committed for registering the deep (perhaps cutting) impression that the signs of industrialized thinking make on the natural setting. We’ll read an essay by Andrea Konard, “The Art Museum and the Anthropocene,” that emphasizes the deliberately disruptive (yet highly personal) impulse behind many of his photographs. They successfully convey a “planetary crisis that is still in dispute,” in Konard’s words, and with his example in mind, I’ll ask the class to spend time before the next meeting to take photographs that convey their sense of a natural world that is newly vulnerable, under stress. (Unless you have access to an airplane you won’t be able to duplicate Burtynsky’s approach, but you should be able to find marks of stress on a more local level.) One photo should be selected to discuss at the next class meeting. The assignment is based on discovering the power of the image to convey an urgent vision, and the description of the Anthropocene that covers it politics, in Chapters 7 and 8 of Erle C. Ellis’s Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction, helps us see why we would need an energetic strategy to advance successfully in the face of the challenges of the future.

One blockage for such an advance would consist of the minority of people who insist that climate change is no more than a hoax. We continue this opening unit by turning to experts who are quick to expose the ways in which the debate over the environment has been deliberately
distorted. World Bank economist Nicholas Stern explains how a number of economic analyses have erroneously diminished and minimized climate change issues in a chapter from his 2005 book *Why Are We Waiting?* By contrast, psychotherapist and activist Paul Polak authoritatively establishes a link between poverty and deteriorated landscapes in a chapter from *Out of Poverty: What Works When Traditional Approaches Fail* (2009). We’ll also read a useful chapter from Andrew J. Hoffman’s 2015 study, *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate,* that shows how previous cultural attitudes once thought to be unshakeable – slavery is ethically appropriate, cigarette smoking has nothing to do with cancer – were challenged and effectively destroyed. Hoffman’s expertise in practical solutions has led him to describe several “archetypes of the Anthropocene” – four approaches that address the crisis of universal carbon pollution, the last of which he especially endorses in his study *Re-engaging with Sustainability in the Anthropocene Era.*

I’ll ask the class to form four groups, each one of which will read the pages describing an archetype and present a summary to the class. The first three “archetypes” we can recognize as options we readily consider for handling this crisis: collapsed systems (the emergency version), market rules (the slow-go version), and technology fix (the invent-us-out-of-this version). The fourth, however, called “cultural re-enlightenment,” is a variant that is especially attractive in its visionary reach, but to attain it would require a series of adjustments that call for considerable energy. The last, though, leads us out of our first unit with a strong sense that the Anthropocene should be met with powerful imaginative presentations.

**UNIT ONE ASSIGNMENTS.** There are two: students present to the class photographic examples of the Anthropocene in the spirit of Edward Burtynsky, and students, broken into four groups, each summarize plausible responses to climate change developed by Andrew J. Hoffman.

**Unit Two**

**Studying the Aftermath of Disasters; Katrina and New Orleans in photography, graphic novels, verse, and dance; monuments to devastation designed to memorialize**

The catastrophic event is never far from the center of examining the forthcoming climate change. We’ll discuss the experience members of the class can bring to this unit, recalling emergencies in which they were unwilling participants. The main focus here, though, is the extraordinary range of response to hurricane Katrina in 2005. New Orleans has particular resonance for extreme weather issues because it is a city uniquely vulnerable to rising waters. Moreover, the storm disproportionately targeted the black and the poor. We’ll sample this diverse material after being introduced to an objective characterization of the storm, which will contrast sharply with a personified version in which the hurricane merits the name “blood dAZzler.” The personification is the work of African American poet Patricia Smith and it makes personal her own relation to the storm in a book-length work of the same name (2008). We’ll look at the Harlem Dance Theater’s performance of several segments, and we’ll examine *In Katrina’s Wake,* Chris Jordan’s photographic record of the storm’s aftermath. We’ll listen to a 2007 musical setting by Ted Hearne, *Katrina Ballads,* that preserves the storm’s focus on color and class by basing all its musical lyrics on actual statements about Katrina by Kanye West, George W. Bush and Barbara Bush. Josh Neufeld’s 2009 graphic novel *A. D.: New Orleans After the Flood* (2009), a tale of six individuals whose experience of the hurricane varied greatly according to their background and race.

These efforts to portray the aftermath of a calamitous storm culminate in a study of monuments that have been erected in commemoration of this disaster; in fact, the monuments are remarkably few, and with one exception, quite modest. We can see most on a single website: https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/article_704bc03a-c512-11e9-8269-e39b7ccd255c.html

For a brief paper, class members will be asked to evaluate one of these monuments with regard to its effectiveness as a memorial to an event that will be one of the earliest examples of the
Anthropocene. Alternately, for those who wish to do so, members individually or as a group can submit a design for a memorial that recognizes the importance of remembering aspects of this destructive event that may not have been registered by other memorials.

UNIT TWO ASSIGNMENT: A 3-5 page paper that critiques a current memorial to Katrina or that propose a design for a new commemoration in keeping with this disaster’s centrality at the outset of the Anthropocene.

Unit Three

Speculative artworks that imagine a climate crisis undermining the future: a catastrophic “history” of our time from 2100; a future with an archive drawn from mass media; a future of social collapse written in 2100; a future with its archive rooted in mass art; and a future dominated by mega-corporations

This unit opens by recalling the four “archetypes” discussed earlier by Hoffman and Jennings, for Peter Fance also considers four variations in his study Four Futures: Life after Capitalism (2016). Each of his four projections postulate a future that unfolds along clear economic lines; two of these are positive, two negative. Such speculative projections are useful for understanding how extreme weather is a function of interrelated assumptions and decisions. In a similar way, speculative artworks that look into a future that is generally dystopic educate us to see how problems are entwined within problems, and in such a situation, solutions to problems may only generate further problems.

Benjamin Kunkel describes “universal carbon pollution” as a problem that is “clear enough when you can stand to look.” Being able to stand and look is itself a challenge. That pollution “is distempering the seasons with bounding extremes of hot and cold, and magnifying storms and droughts; it will spoil harvests, spread tropical diseases, and drown coastlines” along with “the threat of more frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.” Such a world is fully emergent in artworks in this unit. We begin with The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future (2014) by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. This fictive history imaginatively projects itself in to the opening of the 22nd century to look back at the opening years of the 21st century. It features maps that display the ocean’s rise, and it refers to details of an economy that has withered under market failure. An even sharper look into a similar future is Anne Washburn’s Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play (2014) in which a massive disruption of the power grid has thrown survivors back into a primitive setting where one of the few cultural artifacts that survivors have in common is their collective recollection of a 1993 episode of The Simpsons. “Cape Feare,” one of the recurring episodes in which Bart is stalked by the vengeful Sideshow Bob, can only be haphazardly recalled. In the play’s three acts, each decades apart, portions of that episode are fragmentarily reshaped into a distorted narrative that, in its shifting formats vividly reflects a society of scarcity and violence. In conclusion, we’ll examine the massive panels in Alexis Rockman’s Great Lake Cycle (2018), murals that depict, in considerable detail, the stratified history of each of the Great Lakes. The murals consolidate different time frames and effectively dramatize the animal life that evolves to co-exist with a destructive industrialization that is in the process of being assimilated to the larger time scale. An artwork based on intensive research with specialists including scientists, historians, anthropologists and ecologists. the suite of five murals portray different roles that the lakes have played – from pioneers to cascades to spheres of influence to watershed to forces of change. We’ll examine some of Rockman’s works that preceded his magnum opus, recognizing his art as thoroughly committed to exploring the delicate (though sometimes destructive) relation between human and nonhuman life.

UNIT THREE ASSIGNMENT. A 3-5 page paper that evaluates the work by either Oreskes and Conway, Washburn, or Rockman; or, an artwork in a speculative mode (faux history, invented story, short play, analytic mural) that reflects aspects of the distress briefly described by Kunkel.
Unit Four

Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulhucene; monsters and ghosts of a damaged planet; interfacing with humans and wolves; genetically-modified seeds and corporate control; the lost art of speaking to others and remembering ancestors

The course culminates in a consideration of artworks that offer tactics for anticipating the disruptions we might expect in the future by considering radical changes that will be called for. This segment draws heavily on the fourth “archetype” described by Hoffman and Jennings and the second of the four future stages (“socialism”) described by Frase. It draws on material from short stories in relation to the essay collection by Anna Tsing and others, The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet (2017), which discerns traces of a forthcoming landscape that is marked by “ghosts and monsters”: ghosts that represent traces of lost opportunities and monsters that represent evolutionary advances of species that are inhuman. We begin by looking at “For Our Common Home” (2019), a brief animated film by Jesse Bohmer on the website of the Canadian group Development and Peace. We’ll read an essay on wolves by Carla Freccero and set it alongside short stories by Jeff Vandermeer (“A Heart for Lucretia” and “Balzac’s War” from Veriss Underground [2005]) and Karen Russell (title story from St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves [2006]); an essay on intertwined species by Peter Funch set alongside a short story by Olivia Butler (“Speech Sounds” from Blood Child [2005]; and an essay on shimmering by Deborah Bird Rose set alongside two short stories by Paolo Bacigalupi (“Yellow Card Man” and “The Calorie Man” from Pump Six and Other Stories [2008]). We’ll end with a viewing of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film Spirited Away (2002). These projects all resist the tendency to move in sweeping and dramatic gestures, focusing instead of small-scale increments that may be easier to accept in our present circumstances while also laying a groundwork for more radical shifts in attitude (in line with the descriptions by Frase and Hoffman and Devereaux).

UNIT FOUR ASSIGNMENT. The final project will ask for each student’s (or student group’s) sense of what kind of adjustments in expectations and temperament might be, though small, a serious step forward that would alter the proportion of larger problems.

Assessment. Because Honors seminars draw on students from a range of disciplines, the LEAP rubrics selected for evaluating the course will apply three out of the four following rubrics: Inquiry and Analysis, Problem Solving, Ethical Reasoning, and Creative Thinking. Which of these to apply as an evaluating tool will rest on the approach taken by each individual student.

Grading and Requirements. The group presentations in unit one will account for 20% of the final grade, the two studies in units two and three will each be worth 20%, and the final project will be worth 30%. The last portion of the grade (10%) will be in-class contributions to discussions.

Texts. The following will be main texts. (I will supplement these with material made available on discs or in photocopy).

- Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life after Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016)
Syllabus

Week One (Unit 1)
Vulnerable Earth: Edward Burtynsky’s Epic Photography

- **Film and Photography** (shown in class): A TED talk by Edward Burtynsky, with an overview of his photographs of damaged environments
- **Video:** Edward Burtynsky’s Manufactured Landscapes (2007)

Week Two (Unit 1)
Photographs and the Anthropocene

- **Essay:** Urs Stahel, “Adams, Adams, Balz, Burtynsky: The Role of Landscape in North American” Photography”
- **Photography:** selected images of Ansel Adams and Robert Adams
- **Photography:** student contributions of photographs (nature as vulnerable)

Week Three (Unit 1)
Examining the Resistance to “Global Warming”

- **Essay:** “Poverty and the Planet,” Chapter 10 in Paul Polak, Out of Poverty: What Works When Traditional Approaches Fail (San Francisco: Barrel-Koehler, 2009)
- **Essay:** “How Some Economic Analyses Have Distorted the Issues,” Chapter 4 in Nicholas Stern, Why Are We Waiting? The Logic, Urgency and Promise of Tackling Climate Change (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2015)
- **Essay:** “Historical Analogies for Cultural Change,” Chapter 5 in Andrew J. Hoffman, How Culture Shapes the Climate Debate

Week Four (Unit 2)
Katrina as Early Warning Catastrophe

- **Verse:** Patricia Smith, Blood Dazzler (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008).
- **Dance:** Harlem Dance Theater, excerpts from “Blood Dazzler”
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luWEemF6rE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luWEemF6rE)
- **Photography:** Chris Jordan, in Katrina’s Wake: Portraits of Loss from an Unnatural Disaster (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007)
- **Comics:** John Neufeld, A. D. New Orleans after the Flood (New York: Pantheon, 2009)

Week Five (Unit 2)
Monuments and Katrina (1)

- **Music:** Ted Heame, “Brownie, You’re Doing a Heckuv Job,” Barbara Bush” and “Kanye West” in Katrina Ballads (New Amsterdam Records, 2010)
- **Newspaper Article:** Doug MacCash, “14 years after Katrina, Monuments and Mausoleums Are Mute Testimony to Storm’s Devastation” New Orleans Times Picayune, August 26, 2019
Week Six (Unit 2)  
Monuments and Katrina (2)  

- Students Presentations (either critique of monuments or creative designed monument)

Week Seven (Unit 3)  
Speculative Futures (1)  


Week Eight (Unit 3)  
Speculative Futures (2)  


Week Nine (Unit 3)  
Speculative Futures (3)  


Week Ten (Unit 3)  
Speculative Futures (4)  

- Student Presentations: Speculative Futures (evaluating Oreskes or Washburn or Rockman, or alternately, creative material in the mode of the speculative)

Week Eleven (Unit 4)  
Arts of Living (1)  

- Review of essays by Frase and by Hoffman/ Jennings (see earlier entries)
- Animation: Jesse Bochner, “For Our Common Home,” Development and Peace (Canada)

Week Twelve (Unit 4)  
Arts of Living (2)  

- Essay: Carla Freccero, “Wolf or *Homo, Homini, Lupus*” in *Arts of Living: Monsters*
Week Thirteen (Unit 4)
Arts of Living (3)

- **Essay**: Deborah Bird Rose, “Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed” in *Arts of Living: Ghosts*
- **Fiction**: Paolo Bacigalupi, “Yellow Card Man,” “The Calorie Man” in *Pump Six and Other Stories* (San Francisco: Night Shade, 2006)

Week Fourteen (Unit 4)
Arts of Living (4)

- **Animated Film**: *Spirited Away*, dir. Hayao Miyazaki

A final examination will consist of papers or creative projects that address this unit’s emphasis on arts of living in the Anthropocene. Due final exam week