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The Human Epoch

Abstract: The Human Epoch. We are living in a very special time when humans have caused global changes on Earth and many species, including ours, are endangered. We cause so much pollution that in the face of the growing pressure to take responsibility what we need is a questioning approach, reconsideration and initiatives. The most important question is what we are going to do about it to survive and scientists representing various disciplines have employed tools, methods and skills to carry out research, estimate the risk and opportunities and to recommend actions. Artists also have a say in it. I have collected this data from my anthropological point of view.

Keywords: Anthropocene, human impact, environment, pollution, humanism, anthropocentrism, science and art

On 26 August 2016, during the 35th International Geological Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa, scientists announced that we are now living in a new geological epoch. Through a vote, it was decided that the Holocene was over, thereby marking the advent of the Anthropocene – an epoch in which the major creator of geological changes on Earth is no longer nature but man. It is us – humans – who have transformed over half of the landmass, changing the composition of the atmosphere, water and soil. We have permanently and irreversibly transformed the living conditions on Earth, which has by no means been a natural process. What we are facing today is a realistic menace. Owing to human deep conviction of the veracity of the theory of anthropocentrism, mankind has become the dominant species, and nowadays we must rise to the challenge posed by this difficult situation and take responsibility for its consequences. After all, our activities do not only pose a threat to other species, but also, and primarily, to our own kind.

The term ‘Anthropocene’ has rapidly permeated from natural sciences into the humanities and social studies, and is currently being applied by researchers representing quite distant branches of science. This paper focuses on the Anthropocene as an interdisciplinary issue, which it has subsequently become, and presents the results of my research – a collection of opinions of geologists, biologists, climatologists, historians, and even artists, who all strive to decide whether we possess enough imagination to create a brand new vision for the future or maybe we should proclaim the inevitable arrival of the apocalypse.

The statement ‘man is the measure of all things’, propagated by Sophists, became the foundation of the anthropocentric vision of the world and has been present in the European worldview since the 5th century A.D. The current state of affairs is a direct consequence of this approach. We take pride in considering ourselves philosophers and perceive all things from the human perspective, following the biblical instructions to ‘subdue the earth’. And yet, the effects of our actions i.e., our living conditions and wellbeing, the situation of the

other species with which we share the planet impel us to revise our beliefs. As a result of experience accumulated in the 19th and 20th centuries, post-humanism emerged – a new philosophical trend which knocks the human being off its pedestal and deprives it of the status of the world's ruler and God's most perfect creation. Initially, 'the twilight of the idols' (Nietzsche) followed by 'the end of history' and 'the last man' (Fukuyama 1996 and 2004) were declared only to lead to the end of humanism and anthropocentrism (Zachariasz 2014: 15-17, 31-33). Simultaneously, the concept of transhumanism was created: the next level of evolution, advocating transformation of the human condition by means of science and modern technology (Braidotti 2014: 322). Anthropology, which studies humans in their natural environment and aims primarily at **understanding** them, is entitled to ask how humans define themselves in the 21st century and how they perceive their position and role in the world. Since the application of the above-mentioned geological term in humanities and social studies dramatically changes the research perspective, I shall focus closely on its meaning.

The term 'Anthropocene' (the Human Epoch) is attributed to Eugene Stoermer who – in the course of his research conducted in the 1980s on the population of diatoms – observed visible changes in the composition of the hydrosphere. For the purpose of his own research, he coined and started to apply the term in order to emphasize the impact of human activity on the natural environment. The concept was later popularized by Paul Crutzen. At a scientific conference held in Mexico in 2000, Crutzen – deeply agitated by other lecturers' speeches – erupted gruffly: 'We no longer live in the Holocene. We are already in the Anthropocene!' (Zalasiewicz 2016; Hołdys 2016). The prominent expert's highly emotional reaction could not have passed unnoticed and triggered off a vigorous debate in scientific circles, followed by development of research into the issue on the part of numerous experts. In the same year, Stoermer and Crutzen published an article in which they indicated that common phenomena like rapid depletion of fossil fuels, environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions were occurring on a global scale, result in a dramatic increase of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, nitrogen and phosphorus in soil, contamination and acidification of the oceans and mass extinction of species. The two authors suggested that the scale and irreversibility of the phenomena were signs that humanity had already initiated the advent of a new geological epoch. They also suggested that its onset should be established as 1800, the Industrial Revolution brought about by the invention of the steam engine (Bendyk 2016: 60). Nevertheless, the scientific community remained inconsistent on the subject, with various researchers presenting extremely diverse views regarding the possible naming of the period, the miscellaneous types of stratigraphic units (era, period, epoch) and its boundaries, as well as different research perspectives. Since the state of affairs called for unification of opinions, in 2009 Philip Gibbard – Chair of the Sub-commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy at the International Commission on Stratigraphy in the Geological Society of London – established the Anthropocene Working Group whose aim was to analyse the possibilities of registering a potentially new epoch dominated by human activities, to present a range of opinions on the main issues regarding the Anthropocene, including the group's recommendations, to develop the methods of formal proposal for registration, and to initiate actions that could lead to this registration.

In accordance with the accepted terminology, we live in the Cenozoic Era (which started with the extinction of dinosaurs), in the Quaternary Period (characterised by advancement and retreat of glaciers, domination of mammals and evolution of the human race), in the Holocene Epoch which began approximately 11,700 years ago, after the last glacial period, at a time when the Baltic Sea was formed and the development of human civilisation began. According to geologists, each layer of the Earth's crust consists of unique sediments and differs substantially from the adjacent rock. The Cenozoic Era is marked, for example, by a layer of meteoric iridium, remains of a meteorite which hit the Earth 66 million years ago,

causing massive infernos, floods and air pollution, preventing sunlight from penetrating the atmosphere and reaching the surface of the planet for many years. The effect was an ice age, extinction of giant reptiles and vegetation typical of the period, as evidenced by the fact that subsequent rock layers show no traces of the fauna and flora. If the scientists from the Anthropocene Working Group can substantiate that the geological indicators within the current layer are sufficiently large, clear and different from previous ones, and that the new term is accepted by the scientific community, they will have grounds for submitting before the International Commission on Stratigraphy a proposal to introduce changes to the International Chronostratigraphic Chart. Officially approved by the commission, the Anthropocene would become a scientifically recognised epoch, and humanity would formally be considered a geological factor.

Formed by professor Jan Zalasiewicz, the Anthropocene Working Group consists of prominent geologists from the University of Leicester, including Mark Williams, Colin Waters, the aforementioned Paul Crutzen, climatologist Will Steffen and archaeologist Matt Edgeworth. During the International Geological Congress held in Cape Town, the group demonstrated the following results of its research. First of all, the concept of the Anthropocene is real from a geological point of view, i.e. the phenomenon appears to be global enough to consider its introduction into the International Chronostratigraphic Chart. What is more, the changes that characterise the potential epoch are irreversible since human activity has left a permanent impression in the sediment layer, in the form of plastic, aluminium and emission particles from combustion of fossil fuel, radioactive particles from nuclear explosions, and other solidified bio-sediments. The natural circulation of oxygen, carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus has been disrupted. The erosion and sedimentation of rocks have greatly accelerated. Vast areas have been transformed for the purposes of urban expansion, transport, tourism, industry and large-scale farming. Humans are responsible for significant changes in the climate and sea levels, for an unprecedented interference in the Earth's deep layers, for massive deforestation which leads to the extinction of numerous plant and animal species and for environmental pollution. Even though some traces of human activity can be traced back to the bedrock preceding the Holocene (which geologists refer to as the Palaeolithic), it has been proven that such traces intensified dramatically in the 20th century. The group recommends that the Anthropocene be recognised as the third epoch of the Quaternary, following the Pleistocene and the Holocene (which is regarded closed) within the Cenozoic Era, nominating the mid-20th century as the most actual beginning of the epoch due to the extensive presence of plastic and radioactive sediments in the soil layers. An environmental study was commenced to search for stratigraphic indicators, i.e. most typical traces (analysis of sediments within sea and lake beds, annual growth of corals and glaciers, and cave microclimates) required for a comprehensive description of the Anthropocene. A network of sampling spots has been established on a global scale where scientists can obtain material for further analyses; this is expected to take approximately three more years. The study will be the basis for an official recommendation for changes to the International Chronostratigraphic Chart. The group's findings were so convincing that the participants of the 35th International Geological Congress (held in Cape Town between 27 August and 04 September 2016) agreed that the Anthropocene was stratigraphically tangible (34 votes for) and should be registered (30 votes for, 3 – against, 2 – abstained). In other words, experts recognised significant evidence in favour of stating that humans are playing the role once reserved for nature and that humans have caused considerable and permanent changes to the environment as a result of which we are facing a new geological epoch in the history of the Earth (Bendyk 2016: 60; Turek 2016).

This is the current state of affairs in natural sciences. And yet, the geological term discussed here is also applied in humanities and social studies. While initiated by natural sci-

entists, the debate on the Anthropocene has inspired philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and historians to such an extent that that it is now relevant in various spheres, including art which is an area I will attempt to scrutinise in the subsequent part of the paper.

Post-humanistic philosophy is dominated by a belief that we should perhaps verify the philosophical assumptions on which our tradition is based. A questioning approach to the concepts developed by our prominent predecessors leads to certain findings which cannot be ignored. The education system in which we participate since early childhood introduces Europeans to the tradition of the Mediterranean and Judeo-Christian cultures which we recognise as our own. Pupils learn that ancient Mesopotamia, India, and Egypt were the cradles of our civilisation but Greeks and Romans were the creators of culture, setting the standards of what we consider man-made. Let me begin with ancient Greece.

Sophists are regarded the forerunners of anthropocentrism since they claimed that humans learnt about the world from their own perspective and that reality existed in relation to humans and for their benefit. Many years later, similar ideas were produced by Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre for whom the human being was an exclusive subject and perspective of cognition. According to Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, humans take a special place in the world and are superior to other creatures. We are familiar with these statements and can easily find them acceptable but only when accompanied by some questions: Who do philosophers consider human? Whose perspective do we actually adopt? For ancient Greeks, the concept of a 'human' referred exclusively to an adult male. Obviously, a slave, a woman or a child could not be perceived as humans – citizens enjoying the right to have a name, property and a say in a debate. A slave had neither name nor property, and had no right to his/her own history (once bought by another owner, he/she would be given a new name and his/her story would start anew). A child was only a 'candidate' for a human. The contemporary term 'pedagogic' originates from the Greek word *paidagogos* meaning 'someone who escorts and looks after a boy' since *paidos* stands for 'a boy'. A rhetoric teacher and a sage called Solon prepared young men for public life; the list of his disciples includes Sophocles, Euripides, Isocrates, and Thucydides. No one would have even thought of doing the same for girls. Thucydides, who argued that the foundation of all happiness lies in liberty, claimed that the best woman is the one least spoken of. Solon introduced state-governed brothels and a law which allowed a father to sell his daughter as a slave if she had lost her virginity before nuptials. Aeschylus believed that a mother is not a parent but merely a carrier and a nurturer of a sowed seed. According to Aristotle, it was not the mother who gave life but the father, while a woman was just a defective man without genitals. Demosthenes shamelessly admitted that 'we keep shrews for pleasure, concubines are to take care of our bodies on a daily basis, wives must give birth to legitimate children and look after the house'. Socrates claimed that 'we wed women young (12-15 years) so that they could not see and hear too much'. Plutarch compared the common death of a young mother in labour to a noble life sacrifice given by a warrior in battle. In her book entitled *The Reign of the Phallus*, Eva Keuls – an American professor of classical Greek – examined the problem profoundly (Keuls 1993). She formulated a radical statement that the phallus is reigns whenever the society is dominated by men who isolate their wives and daughters at home, diminish the female role in procreation, erect monuments for male genitals, have sex with their peers' sons, sponsor brothels, develop a methodology of rape and love to shake their weapons fiercely. According to Keuls, classical Athens was that type of society, and the classical and Christian culture which evolved from the Athenian pseudo-democracy, allowed for slavery, reduced women to the role of supine objects handed over to husbands by fathers (cf. walking the bride down the aisle). The thesis may appear controversial and yet even today the classical terms describing 'man' (*homo, antropos*) do not

have their feminine equivalents. The word 'female' stems from the Romanic root 'fe-' which means 'fertility', and the Polish 'kobieta' comes from a noun 'kob' that stands for 'pigsty' or 'augury' (Kochan-Mikołajczyk 2007: 39-60). In our culture, despite their similar construction, the words 'anthropologist' and 'gynaecologist' describe people who do completely different things. How did it happen?

According to Jean Shinoda Bolen a psychiatrist inspired by Jung's works, Greek mythology is patriarchal since it emerged from historical events. It reflects the fact that peoples with religions based on the maternal element were conquered by invaders worshipping male gods and professing the theology of fathers (Bolen 2016: 35). Bolen shares opinions of Marija Gimbutas in regarding the theory that the matriarchal culture of Old Europe which glorified Mother Earth and was settled, peaceful, agrarian, attached to the land and sea, and populated by a classless, egalitarian life- and art-loving society – was conquered and **exterminated** by nomadic Indo-European warrior tribes from the north and east who were mobile, patriarchal, warlike, indifferent to art, and worshipped the war-monger god of heavens. The Great Goddess – a cosmic female principle connected with nature and fertility, responsible for creating and taking away life (symbols: water, earth, snake, dove, tree, moon) became a submissive wife of the god worshipped by the invaders. Her attributes were stripped away and distributed among male deities. For the first time, myths began to include rape and stories about a hero's struggle against a dragon or a serpent. Initiated by Indo-European peoples, the dethronement of the Great Goddess was continued by the Hebrew religion, Islam, and Christianity. A male god took a central position, replacing female deities. Women were given a secondary role in the society, which replaced their former importance in rituals and rights. Both authors believe that these men adopted exactly the same attitude towards the Earth – agriculture was considered culturally inferior to the art of war (farmer Cain kills shepherd Abel, for which he is stigmatised and driven away). They conquered territories as they conquered women, taking them as possessions, treating them as their property, and using them at their discretion. Where has this led mankind? The answer is: to the reality in which we are living.

When using the term 'Anthropocene', professor Ewa Domańska is well aware why debates conducted by geologists and climatologists have permeated humanities and social studies. She argues that it is not the human impact on the environment itself that poses the problem but the enormity of its scale (the intensity and scope of the changes). She echoes Foucault (Foucault 1977 and 2000) in saying that history is the discourse of power, and from this perspective, it is human pressure. She notices that historical sources as we know them were created by certain people for specific purposes which means that we do not learn from history but from historians who are therefore burdened with exceptional responsibilities. In research into memory and heritage, she recommends abandoning history which is a tool for de-culturation, domination and colonisation. She believes that it is difficult to think about the future when history is perceived as **the science of wars** waged by people throughout centuries. After all, this is only a part of our history and too much of a simplification. Domańska created the concept of 'affirmative history' in which one stops comprehending history as a story about conflicts and begins to stress the discourse of co-operation. She claims that any announcements of an impending apocalypse would be premature and unnecessary. Instead, she recommends a participative model of generating historical knowledge where opinions on what – from our perspective – is scientific, legitimate, and logically justified are suspended. She postulates that humanities should be combined with the knowledge of life and ancestry in order to generate a new kind of knowledge which would enable us to co-exist in conflicting circumstances. She wishes to create a new moral imagination that would allow us to **resolve conflicts** instead of merely describing them. Local knowledge is considered to be particularly valuable heritage of humankind which is, by all means,

worth utilising, since the so-called primitive cultures displayed an exceptional respect for nature, perceiving humans as a significant yet not the most important part, an element connected with other creatures by bonds of cognation and correlativity. This gave humans a sense of belonging, security and responsibility – which we greatly lack today. Domańska is aware of the crucial role that modern art plays in the process of changing human self-perception in the world. During a lecture entitled *Prefigurative Art as a Realistic Utopia*, conducted in the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art on 10 November 2016, she presented projects by Nandipha Mntambo which demonstrate the modern South-African artist's vision of human nature in the Anthropocene.

In the same lecture, Domańska also referred to Joanna Rajkowska's socially-engaged project called 'Oxygenator' and the installation of a live sculpture in a disused transformer station. The artist presented there a new approach to the perception of art as a tool for changing human perception of reality. In Rajkowska's works, humans are no longer the centre of attention but become a constituent entity responsible for the entire world. 'Oxygenator' is a conceptual site, created **in collaboration with local residents**, which allows people to 'inhale' in the very centre of the city while turning the transformer station into a live sculpture is an attempt to bring the abandoned relics of human activity back to nature.

To my mind, modern art is capable of completing this mission by revealing that critical consideration and a change of conduct are always possible but open to choice.

Nowadays, numerous artists consider this issue relevant and pressing and take up the challenge of presenting the scale of human impact on the environment and its potential consequences. A perfect illustration of this is BioArt using new technologies and interested in natural sciences: biology and biotechnology, as well as genetics, genetic engineering, neuropsychology, cloning, tissue and bacteria cultures, medical testing (Zawojski 2015: 6). While Eduardo Kac, Joe Davis, Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr, Marta de Menezes, and Marc Quinn often come across their audiences' queries and concerns, they are undeniably taking an active part in the debate on the effects and consequences of creating artificial life and genetic experimentation. Their hybrid projects and installations show that an anthropocentric worldview must be confronted with a post-humanist approach in order to determine what humans actually live in an era of rapidly expanding new technologies and if humans should really be allowed to do anything they desire. We cannot escape the consequences of our actions; to an even greater extent this justifies questions such as: How far do we dare to go? What can eventually stop us? By employing the language of art, their creators seek new solutions and innovative means of expression and communication. They may try to shock and shake which is not an easy task in this world where nothing seems to move any longer because we have seen it all.

Let me return to the philosophical issue: a contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims that humans create themselves through their own activity and 'profane' i.e. make common use of something that once belonged to the sacred sphere (Agamben 2006). What is, however, the effect of this activity? In post-humanism, humans have transformed their approach to the fundamental issue of life and death. As highlighted by the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, we no longer believe that we die as a result of God's will or because a tall hooded figure has grabbed our neck and is unrelentingly dragging us into darkness. We maintain that a human heart stops or the lungs cease to pump air which means that the key to immortality is at our fingertips – all we need to do is prevent the heart from stopping! Today, death is neither a dramatic end nor a passing to a better world but a problem to solve. And modern human can resolve it – after all, he/she has state-of-the-art technologies and scientific expertise (Harari 2017). Harari applied the term 'homo deus' which stands for a human being endowed with powers hitherto attributed to gods such as the ability to decide on life and death. Actually, he is not a human being any more but an

AI-supported (or not) bio-electronic hybrid. This implies that we have reached the end of the evolution process and in the near future, humans as we know them will cease to exist while biotechnology will enable us to enjoy eternal life. Skilfully combining elements of history, anthropology, psychology, religious studies and philosophy, Harari asked Who or what are we? Where are we heading? While these questions are disturbing, they are essential. He was not afraid to provide the answers. In his opinion, immortality is predestined – a ‘perfect’ life will be reserved for the elites. He also asked if Dataism – infinite and thoughtless faith in information, data and statistics – is to become a new global ideology. With so much power in our hands, we must find out how to protect the fragile life of which we are part, and how the ‘divine cyborg’ can keep his human nature after he has created a new ‘existence’, **saving** some forms of life while condemning to death others considered worthless. It is truly marvellous that biotechnology enables us to ‘provide’ someone with a lost sense, a lost body part or organ but where are the limits? Are you still human when you amputate your own healthy limb only to replace it with a more ‘dexterous’ bionic one or when you undergo a series of plastic surgeries to make yourself reminiscent of a specific animal?

I would like to close my deliberations with a quotation from Carl Gustav Jung who years ago wrote: ‘Man has achieved a wealth of useful gadgets, but, to offset that, he has torn open the abyss, and what will become of him now – where can he make a halt? (...) The most vital task of civilisation should be to rescue him from unconsciousness, which is his greatest sin. (...) All the outward tinkering and improvements do not touch man’s inner nature, and that everything ultimately depends upon whether the man who wields the science and the technics is capable of responsibility or not’ (Jung 1968: 253-254).

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