Acceleration. Address. Anthropocene
Ecopolitics. Edited by Cymene Howe
Eschaton. Expenditure. Exposure.
Installation. Interstellar. Leviathans.
Quotidian. Recalcitrance.
Stability. Steps. Suburbs. Surprise!
Surreal. Sustainability. Terrain.
Thermodynamics. Thresholds. Timely.
ANTHROPOCENE UNSEEN
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Vive la Open Access.

Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)
Anthropocene
Unseen: A Lexicon

Edited by Cymene Howe & Anand Pandian
This book is dedicated to the young climate activists in the streets and in our communities who are demanding a better future yet unseen.
Contents

Introduction 17
Acceleration 25
Address 31
Anticipation 35
Apocalypse 41
Appreciation 47
Bloom 53
Business 59
Carbon 65
Care 71
Cloud 77
Conditions 83
Cosmos 89
Death 95
Dispossession 99
Distribution 105
Dog 111
Dream 117
Dredge 121
Drone 127
Earths 133
Ecopolitics 139
Ends 145
Environing 151
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eschaton</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extinction</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flatulence</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flock</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluten</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyposubjects</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrialism</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interstellar</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leviathans</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melt</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miracles</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monoculture</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissus</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nemesis</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petroleum</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photosynthesis</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenitude</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predation</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probiotic</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotidian</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recalcitrance</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riddle</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivers</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruin</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeds</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shit</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slavery</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smugglers</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steps</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburbs</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise!</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surreal</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrain</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thermodynamics</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thresholds</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtle</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknowns</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unseens</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildness</td>
<td>523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoonosis</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Figures            | 535  |
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Gratitude

Iza Kavedžija

Considerations of the Anthropocene and its changing landscape are urgent and unsettling. They have to be. But is there a way to help people consider the current state of affairs while preventing the impulse to disavow responsibility, or to at least diminish an escapist urge to change the topic? I would like to suggest that gratitude, as a particular mode of attunement, might be fruitful in this regard and is ripe for cultivation.

Gratitude combines generosity and humility. It allows for a recognition that what we have and what we deserve are not the same. It encourages us to recognize the importance of others in making our lives liveable. Even the most autonomous individuals will have to admit that we all owe a great debt of gratitude to a great many people, for all kinds of favors, support, and kindness throughout our lives. During my own fieldwork with older Japanese in Osaka, I was repeatedly struck by the extent to which the involvement of others and serendipitous encounters were woven into people’s life stories. One can easily recount a certain sequence of events in terms of one’s own choices and decisions—but equally, like my older interlocutors, one could consider carefully the roles that other people, situations, and events have played in those choices.

Their stories reminded me that gratitude, while bringing out the role of others in our decisions and actions, does not make
us feel as though our life choices have been made for us either. It could be said that gratitude makes acting in the world possible, by making us aware of the interconnected nature of life. Becoming attuned in this way, one sees the involvement of others not as a limit to our freedom, but as enabling, facilitating, protecting.

My senior acquaintances and friends expressed gratitude, to me and in conversations with each other, even in relation to challenging events which were, upon reflection, seen to have been valuable opportunities for learning. In this sense they transformed negative experiences into sources of value—gratitude here underpins the sense of living well. This reminded me somewhat of naikan, a therapeutic practice developed in Japan, sometimes compared to a form of psychotherapy (Reynolds 1989). It can be seen as an example of the powerful effects gratitude can have for the way we inhabit the world. As Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (2006) writes in her insightful ethnography, naikan’s roots in Buddhist thought draw on the insight of “interdependent selfhood”: we are not independent actors in this world, but are here thanks to others. The person undertaking naikan (literally “inner-looking,” an introspection), guided by a practitioner’s questions, is asked to quietly recollect their past while reflecting on three specific themes in relation to a significant person in their life: what they received from this person, what they returned to this person, and what trouble they caused to this person. The interviewer guiding the process visits them every few hours in a semi-secluded space and inquires about their recollections over the course of seven days, reconstructing or rearranging the memories of their life. This frequently results not only in an altered perception, but also in intense feelings of guilt and gratitude in relation to the care and favours received from others, which are seen to constitute one’s life (Ozawa-de Silva 2006). While naikan is far from widespread, what captured my attention in its description was the emphasis on the efficacy of gratitude, and how strongly this resonated with my own interlocutors’ discussions of living well.
If gratitude fosters attention to relationships, these need not be limited to people. Gratitude enmeshes human and non-human actors in subtle ways. My older friends were thoughtful in relation to their possessions and to the environment around them. They often passed on the things they were no longer using as part of the eternal, incessant, and extensive gift giving network. Grateful for a favor they received, they tried to offer something that might in turn be useful to the receiver. Many older women told me they preferred passing on their kimonos and precious possessions to people around them while alive, not waiting for them to be redistributed after their passing: “That way, you can see things being used and get so much more joy out of them.” When handing things to others, they would often express the hope that something might be of use. If disposing of something, with reluctance, they might think how well the thing had served them. In this way gratitude involves non-human beings and material objects.

What are the consequences of such an orientation in ethical terms? Political theorist William Connolly proposes an ethical orientation of immanent naturalism, in other words, an ethics not grounded in a transcendental field, acknowledging that many of our ethical reactions originate in the visceral and “infrasensible.” To temper this tendency, he calls for a cultivation of a “nontheistic gratitude for the rich abundance of being amid the suffering that comes with being mortal” (Connolly 2002, 105) as a source of ethical inspiration. While not necessarily available or suited to everyone, in Connolly’s pluralist framework, this kind of orientation can be likened to a Foucauldian technology or “tactic” of the self (Connolly 2002, 107) — one among many. In his recent work, Connolly links this orientation of gratitude explicitly to the increasing recognition of complex interactions of global capitalist processes and non-human geological processes in the Anthropocene. He suggests an orientation of existential gratitude as one of the ways to “face the planetary” and the reality of climate change (Connolly 2017). If existential gratitude seems somewhat abstract, taking a cue from Japanese elders might make it seem more palpable and practical: small gestures...
and daily objects all figure differently around one when received with gratitude.

References


Figures

Address Dear Climate #M13.

Acceleration A biodiesel plant in agro-industrial Amazonia. Photo by the author.

Anticipation Larson C Ice Shelf Rift In Motion. Courtesy of NASA.

Apocalypse “The Fourth Horseman” from the Apocalypse of Angers, from the workshop of Nicolas Bataille, ca. 1373–1382.

Appreciation The spaces of global capital in which sustainability is defined and made valuable. Photo by Sebastiaan ter Burg.

Bloom Gelatinous Future Food, Chitra Venkataramani. Courtesy of the artist.

Business Workers carrying solar panels for Masdar City rooftops, 2010. Photo by author.

Carbon Still from an infrared video published by Environmental Defense Fund. Invisible to the human eye, the Aliso Canyon methane plume released an equivalent of about 2 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in 2015–2016. Used with permission.

Care Students of herbal medicine “garbling” goldenrod blossoms by pulling them off their dried stems. The blossoms will be used in medicinal tincture and teas. Photo by Charis Boke.

Conditions  Hannu I. Heikkinen fixing his skis on a day with good keli for back-country skiing in northern Finland. Photo by Franz Krause


Death  “Far from my home” Still from video 24” × 36” printed on backlit film. Exhibited Urban Video Project, Multimedia Arts Initiative with Syracuse University, Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York.

Dispossession  Papua New Guinea Forest Cover. Photo by Paige West.

Distribution  “Untitled,” photograph of two men, trucks, road, and dust in Peru. Photo by Stefanie Graeter.

Dog  “Dog house, animal shelter grounds” Photo by author.

Dream  A worn out vacuum. Photo by Alf van Beem.

Dredge  Dredging focuses our attention on the fact that global economic connection depends on situated environmental modification and maintenance. Drawing by Pearson Scott Foresman.

Drone  A NOAA technician with the Coyote drone, just before launch. Photo by NOAA/Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory.

Earths  Spiral Galaxy captured by the Hubble Telescope. Photo by ESA/Hubble & NASA. Acknowledgement: Judy Schmidt (Geckzilla)


Eschaton  The Doomsday Clock. Image courtesy of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.
Expenditure  Nur Hashem shouts “Go!” Photo by Naveeda Khan.

Exposure  Bodily Exposure, Mexico City, 2015. Photo by author.

Extinction  Activists in dinosaur costumes protested a planned freeway expansion project by “haunting” a BC Liberal Party campaign stop in Tsawwassen, British Columbia, 2 May 2009. Photo courtesy of StopThePave.org.


Fire  A more explosive fuel upends the détente between trees, birds, and burning grasslands. Photo by Daniel Fisher.

Flatulence  Mountain cows grazing in a meadow in Uttarakhand, India. Photo by Radhika Govindrajan.

Flock  Melvin and me. Photo by Anne Galloway

Generation  Finland’s nuclear regulatory authority Säteilyturvakeskus. Photo by Vincent Ialenti, 2013.

Gluten  Freshly cut wheat, Egypt. Photo by Jessica Barnes.

Gratitude  Women praying. The same gesture is used to express gratitude for a favour. MK Photography.

Heat  A pesticide bag, mounted on a branch, marks the corner of a Nicaraguan cane field, July 2017. Photo by Alex Nading.

Hyposubjects  Virus Particles. Image by Carl Fredrik

Industrialism  Composite image by Craig Campbell


Interstellar  Artist’s visualization of Earth’s magnetosphere, courtesy of Conceptual Image Lab, NASA/GSFC, and “StarshipSPIDER” by Frederik de Wilde.

Leviathans  Detail from the frontispiece to a manuscript version of Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan. Attributed to Abraham Bosse, 1651. Digital image from Wikimedia.

Melt  Listening to the sounds of a melting Arctic, with Aimee Smith, Eva la Cour, and Wendy Jacob.

Models  The Chesapeake Bay Hydraulic Model, 1977. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station.

Monoculture  Indian teas lined up for tasting in Kolkata. Photo by author.

Mood  Shadow Lines. Photo by Sandeep Banerjee.

Narcissus  “Narcissus, becoming-flower.” Painting by Caravaggio.

Nature  Low pressure system off the southwestern coast of Iceland, September 4, 2003. Image from NASA’s Aqua/MODIS satellite.

Nemesis  “He made me in the Orkney islands, off the northern coast of Scotland, at the edge of the world.” Image by Laura Watts.

Ocean  Short beach at dawn. Photo by Steve Mentz.

Petroleum  Draft pages from *The Inheritance*, by Elizabeth A. Povinelli.


Plenitude  Population to plenitude? Photo by Rob Curran on Unsplash.


Predation  The river Ganges in flood partially submerges a Shiva idol in northern India.

Preparedness  Exercise of simulation of an avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong, January 2009. Photo by Frédéric Keck.

Price  Potato cultivation in Lahore, Pakistan. Photograph by Abdul Razzaq.

Probiotic  Forest regrowth at the Knepp Wildland Project in Sussex in the UK. Image courtesy of Charlie Burrell.

Quotidian  Architectural renderings of a Bangkok canal-side community hang above the high water mark of the 2011 floods. Photo by Eli Elinoff.
Recalcitrance  Kirby-Bauer antibiotic sensitivity test. Photograph by author.


Relationships  Moss on pavement. Photo by Zoe Todd.


Seeds  Seed samples prepared by Seed Savers Exchange for backup storage at Svalbard and Fort Collins. Photograph courtesy of Tracey Heatherington.

Shit  A tractor hauls a large mound of biosolids (treated sanitation sludge) across a field near Mansfield, Washington (USA). Photo by Nicholas C. Kawa.


Smugglers  Migrant Trail, Pakal Na, Chiapas, Mexico (Nikon F3, Ultramax 400). Photo by Jason De León.

Species  A scanning electron micrograph of MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant bacteria that has generated new human categories as practitioners grapple with difficult-to-treat infections. Image courtesy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).


Steps  sono, Sion, 2012, The Land of Hope [film still, 55.27].

Suburbs  Post-capitalist suburb? Photo by RCB.

Surprise  Frontispiece to the 1906 edition of The Coal Question by Stanley Jevons, showing the remarkable rise in coal consumption per capita.

Sustainability  Maize dries on a rooftop in highland Guatemala. Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr.
Surreal  Negative space of a removed warning sticker on the window of a former FEMA trailer. Photo by Nicholas Shapiro.

Terrain  A windy day in Salta Forestal, province of Salta, Argentina. Photo by Gastón Gordillo.

Thermodynamics  Energy at Work, circa 1870. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.


Timely  Glacier. Fláajökull, East Iceland. Photo by author.

Turtle  Eve. Photo by Zach Stone.

Trump  Artifact of the Trumpocene. Photo by R. Nial Bradshaw.


Unseens  Photo and artworks by Luke Jerram.

Vulnerability  A typical Sophia home. Photo by author.

Wildness  Lichen growing on a brick wall in Massachusetts. Photo by Dana J. Graef.

Zoonosis  Child receiving a rabies vaccination after a dog bite at Moramanga Hospital, Madagascar. Photo by Genese Sodikoff, 2015.