

Pilgrimage: being in the end times

by

Kyle Terrence Appelt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Drawing and Intermedia

Department of Art & Design
University of Alberta

© Kyle Terrence Appelt, 2016

Kyle Terrence
Supervisor: Dr. Natalie Loveless
Jan 12, 2016

Pilgrimage: being in the End Times

“The gap between phenomenon and thing yawns open, disturbing my sense of presence of being in the world” –Timothy Morton



Terrence_001 Pilgrimage 2016 film still

In 1784 a fine layer of carbon was deposited onto the Earth’s crust as a result of human coal-fired industries; in 1945 the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima deposited a thin layer of radioactive material across the circumference of the earth (Morton, 5). Timothy Morton attributes these moments as the beginning of the Anthropocene: the moment when human history intersects with geological time. Whether we pull back to include the development of agriculture or not, ultimately “[w]hat we hear about climate change is that it

was set in motion long before any of us were born, before we were agents and in any position to make decisions about our actions,” (Ferguson, 36) a narrative that uncannily echoes the haunting concept of original sin. Frances Ferguson goes on to note that the ecological crisis is not an issue of individual gestures of conservation, even multiplied by the millions: “What we hear about climate change now is that the best efforts we can imagine now may delay its catastrophic effects but will not avert them” (Ferguson, 36). This sentiment continues the parallel with Abrahamic eschatology by placing our species in the position of what Augustine of Hippo would call *mass damnata*, or the condemned crowd. Lee Quinby claims that even secular-minded people harbour some kind of belief in divinity and metaphysical evil, which results in the belief of a kind of eschatology (Quinby, xii). As a person living in the beginning of the 21st century, I exist at the apex of this eschatological narrative, sandwiched tightly between the exposition of species-guilt, and the denouement of species-extinction.

Despite the potentially crushing burden of living in a geological era generated by human activity, as well as standing under the teetering shadow of the impending ecological collapse, I find it impossible to panic. At times I even find it impossible to care. As Slavoj Žižek notes in the film *Examined Life*, when we step outside, the sun still shines and the birds still chirp. Not only am I presented every day with images of the social and ecological clockwork running smoothly, but also running against the familiar background of banality. It is at this point that I make my first artistic inquiry: What is the psychological depth of being in the Anthropocene?

Previously imagined or endured apocalypses (the bubonic plague, the threat of nuclear exchange, the Abrahamic rapture, etc.) were characterized by pinnacles: moments of

explosive, and often anticipated, violence which left permanent and unalterable change to the current concept of world. The Greek etymology breaks the apocalypse down into a 'taking away' or 'uncovering' and ending in a 'revealing' or 'unveiling'. Both previous and recent popular culture has embraced this model of the apocalypse by producing representations that reduce this sudden violence to a sensationalized kitsch. However, the Anthropocene, and by extension, the ecological crisis, are objects situated in geological time, stretching violence and the potential for revelations over an unfamiliar vastness. This crisis instead functions more similarly to Timothy Morton's model of the Hyperobject. For Morton, Hyperobjects are vastly distributed across both time and space. Any manifestation of such an object can necessarily only be experienced as local and fleeting (warmer weather, draughts, tides rising, etc.). These attributes create a spectral presence that haunts the everyday and the banal by muddying the boundaries between what is accidental and what is the Hyperobject (Morton, 1). Scale, both physical and temporal, in relation to humans becomes the issue for the comprehensibility of this apocalypse.

Despite its ephemeral qualities, this apocalypse is not metaphysical, but hyperphysical. It is comprised of soot, plutonium, radiation, and carbon. Because of this difference, the pilgrimage I undertook was not one of eschatological inquiry, but rather a phenomenological one; How am I embedded in this World?

Armed with a multitude of cameras, a furry mammalian costume, and a vehicle, I began this pilgrimage. Uninterested in carving out a nature-culture divide, I designed the mammalian suit as a way to refute the romantic idea of a return to “nature.” As a nod to the kinship I felt with the naïve 14th century physicians of Black Death, and as an embracement of the kitsch that surrounds the depictions of each apocalypse, I donned a symbolic plague doctor’s mask. Unlike theological pilgrimages concerned with specific destinations, this secular quest was interested in every landscape, every soundscape, and every surface. By driving, swimming, sprinting, scraping and crawling across my environments, I attempted to shift the relationship in question from one of global scale to one of intimacy. Ron Broglio notes when thinking about animal phenomenology that he uses the limit of knowing as a site of productive inquiry (Broglio, xiii). Instead of bumping into the impenetrable Other, my quest pressed me against the humid texture of soil, the sunlit asphalt, and the swirling abyss of the boreal swamp. By creating these points of physiological engagement, as well as moments of a particularly intimate sight, I ask: what can be discovered at the friction points between these surfaces?

By strapping a camera to my head as well as dogmatically erecting tripods around me at all times, I began to collect footage from this journey. As the footage accumulated, I realized that it claimed two visual literacies at once: performative as well as documentative. This hybrid language allowed me to begin constructing an assemblage of my journey that described a two-fold experience: While using my senses to interact with phenomena, I was also simultaneously attempting to think about the noumena behind the surface.

Lured to these surfaces, my gestures began to act as a process towards healing. In the 20th century Joseph Beuys built his life's work and research around the concept of healing. He "...recognized the whole Social Body as a wounded body, a traumatized body requiring treatment..." (Strauss, "between dog and wolf"), and took on a symbolic role as shaman to begin administering his various techniques. Unlike Beuys, I don't see myself in the position of leadership. I think through the concept of healing (making whole) not as a quest for spiritual completion, but rather as an attempt to close the gap between phenomenon and thing.

By working between these disparate elements my documentation was necessarily requiring some kind of suture. Borrowing from Jeff Wall's constructed photographs, I created controlled distillations of the spaces I encountered by discarding or selecting fragments to collage together. This process involved blending memory with photograph to shape a heterotopic space that rests on its own precarious architecture. Underlying this architecture is the triptych format from theological aesthetics: A format that allowed me to create a heterotopic space that was not only placeless, but timeless, in the sense that linear chronology is replaced by a simultaneous inhabitancy. Trapped between two massive surfaces, the celestial and the earth, I turn back to the question of my relationship to physical scale.



Terrence_002 Precarious Architecture 2016 photo-collage light box 9 x 9 x 3 feet

As a final gesture, much like how cutting into animals attempts to serve as a lifting of nature's veil (Broglio, 4), I cut a recess into the earth deep enough to lower my body beneath its surface. From this viewing position, I could visually compress my perception of the Burkian storm above (potentially violent and fatal, yet safely distant) with the material earth below.

Pilgrimage: being in the end times is an exhibition built for a specific way of seeing in the Anthropocene. Like bifocal vision, this work attempts to bring together two disparate focal planes, the kitsch and the sublime. In theology, if transcendence or enlightenment is not found, and the material not discarded, the pilgrimage may be considered failure. For my pilgrimage, I

embrace materiality and its failures; it is in these moments of material tension that I could begin my inquiries of being.



Terrence_003 Noumenal Artifacts 2016 costume and support 10x10x10 feet

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open*: California: Stanford University Press, 2004. Print
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*: London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977. Print
- Broglio, Ron. *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Print
- Examined Life. Dir. Astra Taylor. Zeitgeist Video, 2009. Film.
- Ferguson, Francis. "Climate Change and Us." *Diacritics* 41, 3 (2013): 34-37
- Hatcher, John. *The Black Death*: Philadelphia: Decapo Press, 2009. Print
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of world*: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Print
- Quinby, Lee. *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism*: Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1994. Print
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*: Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Strauss, David Levi. "between dog and wolf, essays on art and politics." *Autonomedia*, 1999. Web. 10 Jan. 2016.
- Zizek, Slavoj, *Living in the End Times*: Brooklyn: Verso, 2010. Print
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Violence*: New York: Picador Press, 2008. Print



Terrence_004 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_005 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_006 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_007 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_008 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_009 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_010 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_011 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_012 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_013 Pilgrimage 2016 film still



Terrence_014 Pilgrimage 2016



Terrence_015 Pilgrimage 2016 film still