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Otobong Nkanga, *The Weight of Scars*, 2015, polyester, linen, mohair, cotton, viscose, ink-jet prints on ten Forex plates, 8' 3 5/8" × 20' 1".

"Critical Zones"

ZKM | CENTER FOR ART AND MEDIA

Curated by Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, Martin Guinard-Terrin, and Bettina Korintenberg

SO NOW IT'S THE CRUST, the skin, the rind: There's a new metaphor for the object of ecology, a new slogan for a new epistemology, a successor to the "blue marble," "Whole Earth," "Spaceship Earth," Gaia, the Anthropocene, and all the rest. "Critical Zones: Observatories for Earthly Politics" is the title of the show that Bruno Latour, a dependable coiner of epistemological metaphors and neologisms, and Peter Weibel, acting as usual as the pandisciplinary authority on all fields and topics, organized for the ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany (the exhibition is their third collaboration at this venue), with staff curators Martin Guinard-Terrin and Bettina Korintenberg. "The best way" to map our beleaguered world is to "see it as a network of CRITICAL ZONES," according to the exhibition materials. "Generated over eons of time by various life forms, these CRITICAL ZONES form a surface only a few kilometers thin." The organizers connect their title to the claim that they are taking a fundamentally new approach to the thinkability of life on this planet.



View of "Critical Zones: Observatories for Earthly Politics," 2020–21. Hanging: Peter Fend, *Algae Rig*, 1992. Floor, from left: Anita Thacher and Dennis Oppenheim, *Back Track*, 1969; HA Schult and Ulrich Herzog, *pilze im schloss. ha schult lässt farben wachsen* (Mushrooms in the Castle. HA Schult Makes Colors Grow), 1969; Peter Fend, *Ocean Earth*, 2003–2006. Photo: Tobias Wootton.

At first, their overarching concept seems counterintuitive. When we think of a zone, we usually imagine a bounded surface, a mapped area conceived as two-dimensional, in which special conditions obtain, from Baghdad's "Green Zone" to the poetic "Zone" of Guillaume Apollinaire. Red-light districts, free-trade zones. This "critical zone," by contrast, is primarily characterized by its depth. That depth may be modest in relative terms, but nevertheless, those "few kilometers" are generally understood and experienced as a horizontal space extending from the sea floor to the stratosphere. In any case, the goal, for Latour, is "to give the visitors . . . a preview of the critical zones on which . . . they will have to land for good." Arranging for this landing is the principal concern of the exhibition's forty-some works/interventions/documents, sorted under six rubrics: "Starting to Observe," "We Don't Live Where We Are: Ghost Acreages," "We Live Inside Gaia," "Earth Tidings [*Erdkunde*],"

"Redrawing Territories," and "Becoming Terrestrial." We are asked to creep like worms through the habitable zone. This zone, the only portion of our planet we can sensorially perceive, is threatened, in need of intensive care, for which the exhibition seeks to be a model.

Here, one of the most vertiginous issues at the crux of art and ecopolitics comes to the fore—the question of whether something like form can still exist at all when every use of materials has become precarious or can in any event no longer be taken for granted.

What does it mean for the visitor to "land" in this intensive-care unit? The enormous halls of the ZKM, which was originally founded as a media-art venue and shares a complex with a fine-arts academy and other cultural institutions, greet the visitor with one of the most peculiar museum shops in the world. On the center table when I arrived were twenty-one books, thirteen of them written or edited by museum director Weibel himself. In a bookcase behind it were another thirty or so publications he had edited or somehow brought into being, and above these were two shelves devoted to the works of his close friend Peter Sloterdijk. Leaving the shop, one immediately encountered two panels with slogans and watchwords Weibel has formulated. There was no question: We had landed in something like the North Korea of media art. We were informed that our dear leader, with Latour, had organized a "special combination of thought experiment and exhibition." Quite an eccentric combination.

In his *Terrestrial Manifesto* (2017), Latour turned toward the kind of political partisanship that is missing from his earlier, always thought-provoking but seldom confrontational proposals for freeing the construction of knowledge from intellectual habits and the institutions built on them. Growing economic inequality and the destruction of the planet have the same roots, he stressed. For roughly forty years, those in power have shown no interest in a program that would make survival on Earth possible. Their only agenda, Latour declared, is to look out for themselves. And yet very little of Latour's transition to politically antagonistic positions can be found in the exhibition itself.



View of "Critical Zones: Observatories for Earthly Politics," 2020–21. James Lovelock research and engineering archival materials, 1970s. Photo: Elias Siebert.

Instead, what dominates here—in a bloc encompassing a solid third of the exhibition—is a decorous hybrid of research and art intended to document and observe the landing and to facilitate it with recommendations and strategies. There are a number of screens, many of them occluded by elaborately designed and awkwardly located pieces of furniture: chests, specially constructed elongated display cases, little one-person booths. Over almost every moving-image-based component of each installation, a classically somnolent essay-film voice can be heard commenting with an air of cool detachment, though sometimes one can detect a structurally offended undertone, a note of dismay. Quite a bit of water trickles onto closely observed wet biotopes, and the wall labels are filled with long lists of supporting institutions and funding foundations and universities. In addition to the schools where the artists or team members teach and study, the institutions regularly acknowledged include the ZKM itself and its affiliate, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Foundation. As unqualified as I am to judge the scientific value of the studies collected here (is there someone in Canada who is doing the same thing much better? Is this a long-awaited breakthrough in the study of Central European floodplains?), I was willing to make an earnest attempt to absorb the knowledge on offer, but this effort was hindered by a lack of political and other nonscientific social context

—a lack that stands in contrast to the exhibition's often empty virtuosity of presentation and design. And yet many of these pieces are the work of full-time artists who have long operated in research contexts in which the harvesting of information makes up the core of their practice. The fruits of such endeavors seem to not necessarily lend themselves to any particular form or artistic interface.



Sarah Sze, *Flashpoint (Timekeeper)* (detail), 2018, wood, stainless steel, acrylic, ink-jet prints, ceramic, tape, digital video projections. Installation view, 2020. Photo: Elias Siebert.

Artists who engage with research but still acknowledge the parameter of form make up the second third of the exhibition. Here, one of the most vertiginous issues at the crux of art and ecopolitics comes to the fore—namely, the question of whether something like form can still exist at all when every use of materials has become precarious or problematic or can in any event no longer be taken for granted. Otobong Nkanga's *The Weight of Scars*, 2015, which combines textiles with photographs of Namibian landscapes devastated by mining, is one of

the more haunting meditations on this problem. And Sarah Sze contributed one of her highly detailed immersive spaces, *Flashpoint (Timekeeper)*, 2018, whose immanent instructions for its own reception ("layer upon layer, veil upon veil, reflection upon reflection") the curators posit as a model for dealing with critical zones. Other works in this third of the show, like Julian Charrière's very long landscape-meditation video *An Invitation to Disappear*, 2018, thematize ecopolitical issues by way of allusions to something that once informed every discussion of art's relationship to nature—the category of the sublime. Of course, however much one might enjoy the spatial aesthetics of Stanley Kubrick, this reading of the sublime is not necessarily tenable if one's aim is to leave behind the old parareligious nature/culture dichotomy along with the old planetary metaphors. But at least this new/old aesthetic relationship to landscape as subject matter and as genre should have been identified explicitly as a problem that has not been solved so far, certainly not by the aesthetics of research.



Julian Charrière, *Future Fossil Spaces*, 2017, lithium brine deposit, salt lumps. Installation view, 2020. Photo: Elias Siebert. © Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

The last third of the show gathers together materials dealing with historical antecedents to the contemporary work on view, such as the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Here, the exhibition makes questionable use of the German notion of *Erdkunde*. Usually translated into English as "geography," *Erdkunde* is kitsched up here as "Earth Tidings," framed as a kind of listening, a patient willingness to coax *Kunde* (that is, deeper knowledge) from the Earth (*Erde*). The organizers attribute this posture to German Romanticism (as a counteragenda against evil, rationalistic French positivists?). Their illustrations range from historical landscape studies, a number of them highly entertaining, to Gustave Courbet. As has been the case in some of his publications since 2017, Latour's terrestrial turn is here traced to the somewhat more recent but still not quite dew-fresh Gaia hypothesis of Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock. Although the uncritical recuperation of *Erdkunde* mars the historical portion of the show, the gallery of material on the work of Margulis and Lovelock and other precursors is one of its most successful parts. Also welcome is the highlighting of artists, such as Peter Fend, who did important early work on systemic and political ecology. Here, too, however, one was still left wishing for less separation between the aesthetic and the cognitive, the representative and the interventionist, the presentational-technical and the argumentative. And when a pertinent interplay of practices *is* achieved, as in Forensic Architecture's study of cloud formation in connection with the use of tear gas—a work with an at once quite refined and quite practical aesthetic dimension—it seems only obliquely connected to the show's stated concerns.

Above all, after a lavish exhibition that is rich in materials but relatively unstructured despite all its chapter divisions, signposted slogans, and manifesto-like curatorial prose, the question remains: Why is there so little discussion of the decolonial ecological perspective that is exploding right now among a younger and more confrontational generation—particularly when theorists of the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene have long insisted on identifying and naming the responsible structures, economies, or classes, as opposed to merely identifying epistemological and systemic problems? The curators of "Critical Zones," within the precincts of an institution that is removed from the tumult of the world and one that is clearly the beneficiary of an opulent financial endowment, have put together a show that feels something like a comfortable scholarly workshop gently inviting people to belatedly open their ears.

"Critical Zones: Observatories for Earthly Politics" is on view through August 8.

Translated from German by James Gussen.

Diedrich Diederichsen is a writer and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. With Oier Etxebarria, he curated "The Cybernetics of the Poor," on view at Kunsthalle Wien until the end of April.

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