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## Time out of Joint – Temporality and the Anthropocene in Contemporary Art

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Transl. Silja Kudel

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A large rock rests upon one of two blue seats. Another waits on the floor. When the viewer enters the room, they might observe a crack in the first rock – or not. A flickering light bulb wrapped in a plastic bag is attached to a metal railing above. *Time is out of Joint 1* (2018), by Sari Palosaari (b. 1974), emulates the atmosphere of an anonymous waiting room, possibly in a hospital or railway station. The static environment belies a hidden tension. Inside the rock is a silent cracking agent that does its work with simple efficacy: a hole is drilled, the cavity is filled, and the agent slowly expands, eventually splitting open the rock.

This article looks at issues of temporality raised by works in the 'Coexistence' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki – exploring perspectives on the past, present and future, and also ideas about decelerated and accelerated time. The notion of accelerated time is associated with a modernist faith in progress, yet also, to a growing degree, with a rising concern about climate change and discourse on the Anthropocene that raises salient questions about the future and the role that humans will play in it.

### On slowness

One of the most urgent questions facing us today is how, within a short time span, humankind has left a footprint so deep in the planet's sediment as to trigger an unstoppable chain reaction that is so vast in its implications that we are only now beginning to grasp the immensity of the calamity. Discourse on the Anthropocene – the term for the current geological age which takes its name from the word *anthropos* (Greek for 'human'), denoting the epoch during which human activities have had a marked environmental impact on Earth – dates back to around 2000.<sup>1</sup> The term was first used by geologists and has subsequently been

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1 The 'Anthropocene' is a term widely used since it was coined by Paul Crutzen at a meeting of the Scientific Committee of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) in 2000. The International Commission of Stratigraphy (ICS) subsequently appointed the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) to critically analyse the case for formalising this definition of the present geological epoch.

espoused in the humanities and social sciences. The Finnish science journalist Mikko Pelttari asks: '[...] what constitutes "nature" in the Anthropocene, who exactly is the cited *Antropos*, and how has the Anthropocene come about, from which social forces has it evolved?'<sup>2</sup> The universalised notion of the Anthropocene subject is an issue of controversy. Are all humans equally to blame for Earth's calamitous state – or is Western consumerism the main culprit? Would there be a better term for naming the present epoch? As the literary scholar Karoliina Lummaa observes: 'A number of alternative terms have emerged alongside the Anthropocene, such as the Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Sociocene, Econocene, Anthrobocene and Technocene, all of which, with varying accents of emphasis, point to the technical, industrial, commercial and consumerist aspects of Western culture.'<sup>3</sup>

Palosaari's installation at the Kiasma exhibition illustrates a process that is triggered by humans, yet unfolds at its own unpredictable pace. We have no choice but to bide our time, waiting for the rock to crack. *Time is out of Joint 1* places focal emphasis on a rock, a durable material that has been indispensable to humans since prehistoric times. I interpret Palosaari's slowly cracking rock as an allusion to the Anthropocene. Political scientist Tero Toivanen and science reporter Mikko Pelttari summarise the epoch thus: 'According to the proposed concept of the Anthropocene, humanity's impact on Earth is so overwhelmingly profound as to be comparable to elemental, geological forces akin to a colliding asteroid or earthquake.'<sup>4</sup> The title of Palosaari's work, *Time is out of Joint*, is a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. 'Time out of joint' expresses the idea of a world unhinged and disconnected.

Unlike explosives, the silent cracking agent inside the rock produces no vibration, noise or dust, much less shockwaves. This is convenient for clearing rocks from a small backyard, but originally the cracking agent was invented for use in Asia's densely populated urban areas. Its only drawback is fittingly conveyed by its Finnish name, which literally translates as 'snail cement' – the process is tortuously slow. In today's industrialised societies, time is a precious commodity. There is no time for waiting and unpredictability in contemporary society. Time is money.



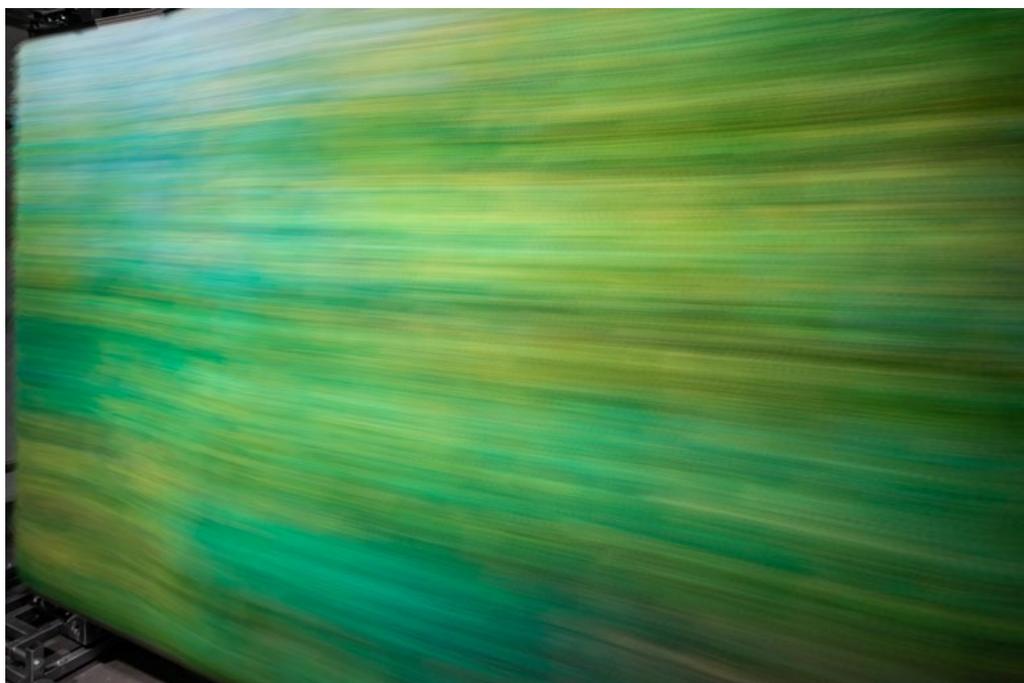
Sari Palosaari,  
*Time is out of Joint 1*, 2018:  
 By your Side, stone and  
 double seat, and  
 Atmospheric #1, railing,  
 pole, light, poly bag, light  
 and colour sensor; stone,  
 soundless cracking agent  
 Finnish National Gallery /  
 Finnish State Art Deposit  
 Collection

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Pirje Mykkänen

## Accelerated time

It often feels like we exist in an age of accelerated time. This speeded-up reality is convincingly evoked by Pia Männikkö (b. 1971) whose work, *Landscape Machine* (2016), in which a rotating woolly rug swiftly passes by our eyes, creates an illusion of perpetual motion. Männikkö has said that this work was inspired by her train journeys between Glasgow and Edinburgh, when

- 2 Mikko Pelttari, 'Mihin uutta aikaa tarvitaan?', *niin & näin* 3/2018, 19.
- 3 Karoliina Lummaa, 'Antroposeeni: ihmisen aika geologiassa ja kirjallisuudentutkimuksessa', *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti Avain* 1/2017, 68. See also Donna J. Haraway's critique of the Anthropocene: 'Anthropocene is a term most easily meaningful and usable by intellectuals in wealthy classes and regions.' Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016, 49.
- 4 Tero Toivanen & Mikko Pelttari, 'Tämä ihmisen maailma? Planeetan hätätila, antroposeenikertomuksen kritiikki ja antroposeenin vaihtoehtoinen historia', *Tiede & edistys*. 1/2017, 7.



**Pia Männikkö, *Landscape Machine*, 2016,  
 rug, steel, electromechanics, 245cm x 430cm x 48cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

she would watch the landscape whoosh past in a blur of green foliage. Männikkö reflects on this accelerated experience of the landscape, and how, when we move rapidly, ‘the landscape looks virtually identical, no matter which country or continent you happen to be in’.<sup>5</sup>

One of the key points of controversy linked to the question of the Anthropocene is when, precisely, the epoch officially began. Various different start dates have been proposed. As explained by Toivanen and Pelttari, it depends on one’s perspective: for the stratigraphologist, the evidence rests in the layers of geological sediment, whereas a historian would focus on interactions between human communities and nature. The various proposed start dates range from ‘[...] the Agricultural Revolution and the advent of European colonialism to the invention of the steam engine and the Industrial Revolution, all the way to the Great Acceleration, the post-war period marking a time of rapid global economic expansion’.<sup>6</sup>

The historians Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, citing Paul Crutzen, propose 1784 as the start date for this new era, this being ‘the year that James Watt patented the steam engine, symbolic of the start of the Industrial Revolution and the “carbonification” of our atmosphere by the burning of coal extracted from the lithosphere’.<sup>7</sup> The Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain in the late 18th century, when Glasgow was a key hub of industry alongside London, Liverpool and Manchester. With the advent of industrialisation, the world switched to ‘industrial time’. The slow pace of the agrarian era was supplanted by the fast, regulated tempo of factories. The Industrial Revolution, moreover, coincided with the construction of railways, which, as theorised by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, resulted in the disappearance of time and place, as it would have been

5 Pia Männikkö’s email to Paula Korte, 11 October 2018.

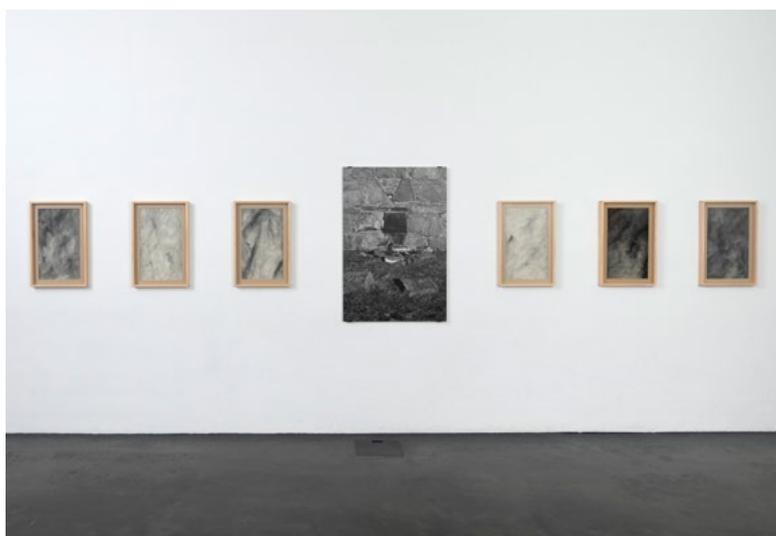
6 Toivanen & Pelttari, ‘Tämä ihmisen maailma?’, 7.

7 Christophe Bonneuil & Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. Transl. David Fernbach. London & New York: Verso, 2016, 3.

impossible to synchronise a nationwide rail schedule if every locality adhered to its own local time. ‘The regions lost their temporal identity in an entirely concrete sense: the railroads deprived them of their local time.’<sup>8</sup>

The advent of railways also marked the loss of the landscape, as trains now zoomed through the land at the velocity of a speeding bullet. ‘The loss of landscape affected all the senses’, writes Schivelbusch.<sup>9</sup> When we look at Männikkö’s installation, we feel we are moving, even though we are standing still – it is merely the landscape that speeds past our eyes in a non-stop identical loop. The artist has revealed that the spinning rug was inspired by historic theatre sets and the backgrounds of early animations designed to produce the illusion of movement. The landscape is nothing more than scenography that flies by in a hazy blur.

In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, the philosopher Paul Virilio asks: Where exactly are we when we travel? Do we exist in that extra day included in the itinerary of Phileas Fogg, the famed protagonist of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*? The day never actually exists for his friends back in London, for it is an imaginary day fabricated by modern means of transport on Fogg’s accelerated journey around the globe.<sup>10</sup>



Lauri Anttila,  
*Ragnhildsholmen,*  
*Göteborg, from the series*  
*'Carbo', 1991,*  
charcoal paintings,  
photography, text,  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Pirje Mykkänen

## Stopping time

Whereas time is accelerated in Männikkö’s installation, the opposite approach is taken by Lauri Anttila (b. 1938). *Carbo* is based on his long journeys on foot in southern Sweden. *Ragnhildsholmen, Göteborg* (1991) consists of paintings executed in charcoal and water, and photographs of old castle walls and a campfire discovered among the ruins. The art historian Hanna Johansson describes the piece as follows: ‘Anttila produced an image of the site by taking a chunk of charcoal from the campfire, water from the river, mixing them together, and then using the dark pigment to produce a sketch on watercolour paper. His paintings record the gesture of the artist transferring the site to paper.’<sup>11</sup>

Instead of capturing the site in a photograph, the *genius loci* has a material presence in the work.<sup>12</sup> A photograph is taken in the blink of an eye, and its relationship with place is a fleeting one, while in Anttila’s charcoal painting, the site has a material presence: it is something lived and experienced – yet also something that ultimately eludes perception. The various mediums in Anttila’s work invoke different planes of temporality: the split-second photograph is juxtaposed with campfires of ancient times and charcoal as an early art-making material and emblem of life’s basic necessities.

8 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of Berkeley Press, 1986, 42–43.

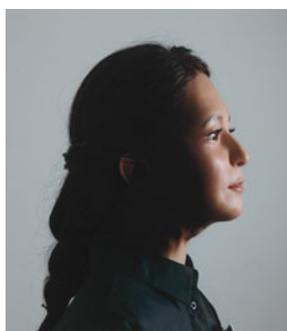
9 Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 55.

10 Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Transl. Philip Beitchman. NY: Semiotext(e), 1991, 62.

11 Hanna Johansson, ‘Viivattomasta piirroksesta: piirtämisen sokeudesta ja potentiaalisuudesta’, in Martta Heikkilä and Hanna Johansson (eds.), *Viivan filosofia*. Helsinki: Fine Arts Academy of Finland, 2014, 151.

12 Kaija Kaitavuori, *Nykytaiteen museon opas*. Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, 1993, 260–61: ‘Traces of the site’s *genius loci* are embedded in the materials. [...] Anttila conceptually returns to the Classical era, restoring a utilitarian connection with art that has become estranged from everyday life.’

## On the future



One commonly voiced critique of the Anthropocene relates to how it emphasises human agency – it fosters the illusion that humanity will once again overcome the current crisis with the marvels of technology.<sup>13</sup> *Eclipse* (2017), by Felipe de Ávila Franco (b. 1982), features a globe of light that is gradually swallowed up by oil dripping from above. Finnish philosophers Antti Salminen and Tere Vadén analyse the significance of oil in the modern way of life, specifically what economics describes as ‘the oil curse’: ‘The discovery of oil reserves often leads to the ecological, social and economic destruction of the country or territory in which it is discovered, while the resultant “gains” and prosperity are enjoyed elsewhere – again, oil unites us by dividing us [...].’<sup>14</sup> A driver tanking up at a service station might be indifferent to where the oil comes from, but no form of energy is conjured out of nowhere. Salminen and Vadén argue that fossil fuels alienate us from reality: we become blind to the connections between oil and familiar everyday commodities, their sources in faraway lands, the giant rafts of microplastic pollution floating in our oceans, and the alarming amount of plastic particles found in the stomach contents of fish and other marine creatures.<sup>15</sup>

De Ávila Franco’s work alludes to a solar eclipse, a celestial event once believed to be an ill omen in many cultures. Ancient astronomers were highly valued for their ability to predict eclipses: seeing the future and foretelling the movements of the sun was important to the fate of the ruler. De Ávila Franco’s eclipse is unrelated to celestial movements, however: the ‘sun’ is a light bulb slowly engulfed by sticky oil. *Eclipse* urges us to contemplate what lies at the extreme conclusion of the Anthropocene – humankind’s self-constructed trap, a hopeless dystopian future in which every invention is perpetually eclipsed by another, leading to a dead end from which there is no escape.<sup>16</sup>

**Maija Tammi,**  
*One of Them is a Human*  
1–4, 2017,  
two photographs from  
a series of 4 photographs  
(4 and 1),  
each 63cm x 68cm  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Museum of Contemporary  
Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery  
/ Pirje Mykkänen

## Meditations on fragility

What, then, are our options on the brink of this crushing, bleak vision of the future? We are stuck in the waiting room and have no power to decide when the rock will crack. The philosopher Donna Haraway argues that the need for broad-minded thought is all the more urgent during this era of crisis: We must stay in the moment and tolerate distress. ‘Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future.’<sup>17</sup> Rather than plummeting into despair or lulling ourselves with false hope, we must reflect deeply on the present moment, foster human and non-human alliances, and throw ourselves willingly into the midst of the compost heap.

Otobong Nkanga (b. 1974) wanted to come up with her own term to describe her meditations on fragility while working on *Fragilologist’s Predicament* (2011).<sup>18</sup> Nkanga’s weaving visualises the complex ways in which humans and nature are enmeshed. Trees and water form a tangled web with human settlement and industry, yet the fragile network can collapse any moment if even one rope breaks.

Nkanga’s tangled network brings us to a key metaphor used by Haraway: string games, using one’s fingers to create images such as the cat’s cradle. Haraway describes the old game of string figures as a form of story-telling – it is about giving and receiving patterns, the string being passed from one player to another, from one narrator to another, each one creating new patterns of entanglements. ‘Staying with the trouble’ entails that we pause, truly look, and meditate upon the fragility of the knottings.

13 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, 21

14 Antti Salminen & Tere Vadén, *Energia ja kokemus*. Tampere: niin & näin -kirjat, 2013, 34–35.

15 Antti Salminen & Tere Vadén, *Energia ja kokemus*, 54

16 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 3

17 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 1

18 ARS 11 artists’ interviews. Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Finnish National Gallery, 2011.