

## REVIEW

# Aestheticism Meets Environmental Ethics — Anna Lerchbaumer and Kilian Jörg (eds.), *Toxic Temple: An Artistic and Philosophical Adventure into the Toxicity of the Now* (2022) Berlin: DeGruyter

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*Toxic Temple* pursues an interdisciplinary approach to anthropocenic issues in criticism and the arts. By integrating aesthetic and educational perspectives, the book offers new approaches for understanding the cultural and environmental ramifications of the Age of Extinction.

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Anna Lerchbaumer and Kilian Jörg's volume pursues an interdisciplinary approach to anthropocenic issues in criticism and the arts. Emerging from a multi-day, performance-heavy event held in Vienna, Austria, in February 2020, the book features three different strands of inquiry. While the whole project lifts off from the springboards of speculative philosophy, the book also features scholarly articles sourced from New Materialism and cultural studies. There are also contributions that rely upon visual art to advance their own aesthetic agenda. To render this heterogeneity agreeable to the eye, the editors have relied on sophisticated typesetting and layout by Theresa Hattinger. The volume forms part of similar explorations into the arts and the Anthropocene, such as Bill Gilbert and Anicca Cox's *Arts Programming for the Anthropocene*, which investigates 'how the arts can contribute to strengthening cultural resiliency in the face of rapid cultural and environmental change' (Gilbert and Cox 2019: 1). Susan Ballard's *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene* (2021) also pursues a similar programme. The visual opulence and speculative vigour of *Toxic Temple* suggests that Lerchbaumer and Jörg see the arts in a less subordinate and functional role.

Jörg's introductory essay, 'Ecology beyond Numbers', is programmatic for the volume. Drawing on Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share (La Part maudite, 1949)*, in which the French poet and philosopher recasts wastefulness and decay in positive terms, the co-editor conjures the transformative power of death. As an alternative to the rationalism of the *homo oeconomicus*,

he uses this approach to reject the relentless reference to numbers and statistics in Anthropocene research, a methodological proclivity that he deems more damaging than helpful. Instead, Jörg proposes quasi-religious forms of worldmaking, namely a speculative religion that embraces 'a certain joyful lure to waste, to pollute, to destroy, mutate and disfigure' (33). This said, *Toxic Temple* is 'not a project that gives in to nihilism and defeatism. [...] We do not seek the beauty and lust in this hugely dangerous, apocalyptic problem because we have given up' (34). In fact, the the essay closes with a utopian hope: '[T]he worlds that will come after might be more beautiful, more thriving, more colourful and more plural than the ugly Anthropocene with its uniform highways, shopping centers, shipping ports or plastic products' (38).

The essay's provocative gesture cannot quite conceal its inner contradictions. Because such disagreements are quite relevant for the volume at large, they deserve special scrutiny. On the one hand, Jörg makes a case for the aesthetic fascination of the destructive power of the *anthropos*, a stance that reminds the reviewer of French symbolism, exemplified by the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. This poetic worldview is characterised by ethical irony and ambiguity (Kaplan 2006: 89), to the effect that compassion and care are rejected as philistine and bourgeois. Recently, Clint Burnham and Paul Kingsbury's volume *Lacan and the Environment* also ventured to avoid the moralism endemic to environmental studies, reimagining the environment as 'a site of play, of a flutter of jubilant activity' (Burnham and Kingsbury 2021: 3). On the other hand, Jörg attributes an educational quality to this artistic approach to destruction, a view he shares with Ballard's and Gilbert and Cox's recent books. The hope is that such aestheticism also rekindles



utopian impulses. As a reviewer, one cannot fail to take note of a potential pitfall: What if the 'joyful lure to waste' fails to generate the desired moral effects? How might the amoral stance of aestheticism be reconciled with conventional posthuman ethics, such as Donna Haraway's oft-quoted appreciation of sympoiesis or multi-species entanglement?

The book's co-editor Anna Lerchbaumer belongs to the camp of the aesthetes. 'A Panda a Day Keeps the Sorrow Away' puts forward a meditation on the pop-cultural appeal of pandas. She notes a discrepancy between their endangered status as wildlife and their pictorial proliferation in consumer culture. What is more, the animals' popularity on video sharing platforms exacerbates the problem, as energy-intensive technologies like streaming further aggravate global warming and the erosion of wildlife. Considering such drivers of extinction, Lerchbaumer wonders: 'Do images become a kind of sanctuary for endangered animal species?' (70). Indeed, such conundrums emblemise the great originality of *Toxic Temple*. In a congenial Zen cult of the future, such questions could serve as *kōan*, think pieces to unsettle one's sense of normalcy.

As the most exuberant textual output of the volume, the collaborative piece by Sabrina Bühn, Demi Spriggs and Jörg, 'Producing the Afterlife', imagines a future ethnographer who traces the rituals of the *Toxic Temple* and reports: 'The cult fervently negates that anything on the earth may be static/survive other than the trinity of plastic polymers, sacred plutoniumid creations and heavy metal legacies' (215). According to the ethnographer's inflections, the Templars made pilgrimages to the wastelands left behind modern societies, 'waiting for necrosis to ensue, to allow their bodies to be consumed by the dead-zone' (222). Their aim was to be reborn 'as pure life, pure energy, paradise: fossilization' (223).

Amid so much speculative fancy, Heather Davis's article, 'Life and Death in the Anthropocene', leads back to the original question of accountability. She delivers a classic portrait of the 'inadvertent aesthetics' of plastic. According to Davis, plastic 'is the materialization of the horror of identity, of the stability of form, of a futurity without change' (97). While the suffocation of the planet under synthetic polymers conjures apocalyptic images, Davis prefers to conceive of the relationship between humans and their environment along the idea of extinguishment: 'This civilization may die, but within that death is the possibility for a reconfiguration with what may be left' (100). This idea connects to Jörg's 'worlds that will come after', yet Davis' ideas remain difficult to incorporate within the *Toxic Temple's* amoral toxophilia. In fact, Davis strikes a moralizing tone when she advocates the 'acknowledgment of biological, technological and social limits' (100) and wraps up her argument with an imperative: 'We must finally break free of the logic of plastic' (102). Here, the Toxic Templar interrupts her pilgrimage to slip into the role of the itinerant preacher.

The same is the case with Julieta Aranda and Eben Kirksey's 'Glossary of the Oceanic Undead', which

lists seven maritime themes in which the biosphere and globalization are linked. What do dramatic oil spills, drowned refugees and the Great Pacific garbage patch have in common? Since the inner connection between these themes is left uncommented, the authors apparently bank on the effect of indignation to provide a common denominator. Measured against Jörg's dialectics, this approach skips the aesthetic phase altogether.

Finally, Julia Grillmayr's 'It's Getting Late to Give You Up' and Samuel Hertz's 'Hounding' explore toxicity in urban life. Grillmayr elaborates on the unexpected fertility of abject material, including snake poison and tomato seeds in sewage sludge, then switches to an edifying conclusion, in which she recommends food fermentation as a 'hopeful practice, an investment in the future' (120). Samuel Hertz's loosely argued paper on the connections between doom metal, extractive practices and bioacoustics also concludes by encouraging 'non-fatalistic ways of sensing slowly changing environments' (177). Clearly, there exists a discrepancy between allowing oneself to be fascinated with degraded life-worlds and the urge to condemn such practices and to preach about how best to abandon them.

The overall tone of the volume is edifying and hopeful, thereby compromising the conceptual afterlife of Bataille's celebration of wastage. Have the Toxic Templars already witnessed their first religious schism, as the utopian camp has won an early victory over the aesthetes? While this impression indeed applies to the arguments featured in the volume's textual contributions, the book's visual abundance indeed strengthens the case of those who embrace the 'joyful lure to waste'. The photographs of Anna Lerchbaumer's *objets trouvés* show disposable consumer goods and appliances reassembled as exquisite sculptures, such as the groundhog made up by a glue stick, a fragment of a MacBook charger and the plaster cast of a set of dentures (see 131). There is also a charming still life, consisting of an extension cord, plastic bottles, lilies and something resembling the tip of a plastic spear or the end of a curtain rod (see 110). In such assemblages, the cycles of consumption come to a temporary, if only symbolical, rest even as these objects do not hide their status as metonymic signifiers of soil degradation and microplastic pollution.

Despite the book's initial claim that a quasi-religious approach to anthropocenic issues renders the 'historic divide' between science and art obsolete, the reviewer finds that the volume reveals a dichotomy that is emblematic of the environmental predicament of the present. The commitment to do justice to the world, unidealized, in all its wretchedness, clashes with the moral mission to make it a better place. While the arts appear better equipped to deliver on the former approach, critical discourse cannot sustain a disinterested gaze for long without articulating prescriptions for a better future. Possibly, the *condition humana*—or if you will, *conditio posthumana*—is perfectly illustrated by this divide, as we remain deeply ambivalent about the world we inhabit and the drastic choices we face. Sometimes, the allure of toxicity yields to indignation, but

also the opposite can be true: moral outrage is drowned out by detached jouissance.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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