

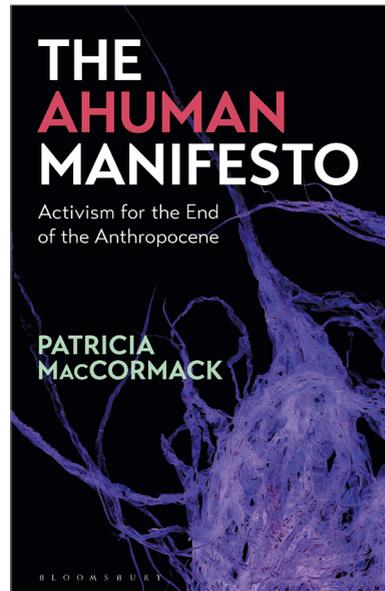
Daniel CLINCI

The Radical and Counterintuitive Way out of the Anthropocene

Review of:

MacCormack, Patricia. *The Ahuman Manifesto. Activism for the end of the anthropocene.*
London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

In 2019, a working group within the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the entity tasked with establishing the boundaries and characteristics of Earth's geological periods, agreed that the Anthropocene is a valid concept and placed its beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. However, the talks on the Anthropocene began more than twenty years ago, and quickly became the focus of both scientific discourse and critical theory. This interest gave rise to several approaches to the Anthropocene; for instance, the official intergovernmental organizations tasked with finding solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change; the various kinds of posthuman theory; what we might refer to as "transhumanist" approaches; Marxist critiques, etc. Obviously, the Anthropocene as the geological age in which human activity changes the Earth is mostly articulated with a powerful negative connotation. Since the "Green



Daniel CLINCI

Ovidius University of Constanța
daniel_clinci@yahoo.com

EKPHRASIS, 1/2021

COUNTERDISCOURSES AND
COUNTERPUBLICS IN CINEMA, ART,
MEDIA AND LITERATURE
pp. 156–162

Deals” and electric cars do not provide a suitable solution, at least as far as critical theory is concerned, the need to find a nexus between theory and praxis led to different and frequently divergent perspectives within the academia.

Within this labyrinthine environment of contemporary theory, Patricia MacCormack, Professor of Continental Philosophy at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK, stands as one of the most radical voices. In her previous work, such as *Posthuman Ethics. Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Ashgate, 2012) and *The Animal Catalyst. Towards Ahuman Theory* (editor, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), MacCormack outlined some of her ideas regarding human extinction as selfless activism for other species. *The Ahuman Manifesto. Activism for the end of the anthropocene* is fundamentally based on the same idea, although in the much more suitable form of the manifesto, itself part of a long genealogy which she acknowledges in her Introduction, “The End as Affirmation” (4–5). However, she immediately explains that hers is not a manifesto for human(istic) activism, or even posthuman activism, but “for the other at the expense of the self, nor as a form of martyrdom” (5). At the same time, the ahuman is radically anti-anthropocentric, circumventing some of the traps that activism may pose, such as the rhetoric of “the sacrifice” for some higher purpose. MacCormack also warns the reader that her manifesto is a life-affirming and optimistic approach to the current crises—political, ecological, social, in a word, “ecosophical” (Guattari 2000)—, claiming that “we must live the life we theorise” (x). The fact that philosophy should not merely remain in the domain of conventional academic analysis and criticism under the illusion of objectivity, rather it should become activism to be able to have some sort of worldly impact, is the refrain of the entire book.

MacCormack proposes death as a way out of the Anthropocene in a two-fold sense: firstly, as “deceleration of human life,” slowing down reproduction and ultimately stopping it; secondly, as the end of the anthropocentric webs of signification that entangle all living organisms and relations (1–2). She notices that other discourses, which may seem radical, are plagued by anthropocentrism. One example is identity politics. In MacCormack’s account, identity politics is not trying to change the entire signifying system. Instead, it is trying to employ the same “techniques of the self” (36) in order to reproduce the same “narcissistic,” anthropocentric discourse, changing the subject (various minoritarians), but not the system. On the other hand, MacCormack criticizes posthumanism’s fluid identities because these seem to exclude the history of oppression. Of course, for her to develop a convincing argument, she needs to construct a “human,” and she does so by resorting to the struggle for power: “the dominant *and* the oppressed human other, in their infinite and specific manifestations [...] aspire to the anthropocentric pinnacle of signification through wealth or power or even self-identification [...]” (42, original emphasis). Having done away with humanism, she is able to posit “the ahuman” as the subject of her manifesto and as an alternative to the Anthropocene.

For MacCormack, posthumanism perpetuates the same humanistic lexis of “species,” “individuals,” etc., even if it does so by changing the background, speaking of “relations,” “interactions,” and “symbiosis.” One example of such an approach is Haraway’s conglomerate of concepts: companion species, sympoiesis, tentacularity, and compost. MacCormack argues that there are some fundamental problems: on the one hand, concepts such as these continue the work of demarcation, naming, reduction of that which is irreducible, in order to construct subjects; on the other hand, the unknowable is forced to enter a non-consensual relation with the human (13). Similarly, animal rights movements are characterized as “flawed” because they posit that the importance of animals stems from their equality with the human (14). MacCormack argues that abolitionists, which she considers to be “ahumans,” believe that the rights are not a result of what animals are, but of the simple fact that they exist. Thus, the ahuman abolitionists (and this *Ahuman Manifesto*) advocate against the use of animals for any purposes and the language thereof, such as “food,” “entertainment,” or “research,” which she translates as murder and theft, enslavement, and respectively torture. Also, she advocates against what she calls “fetishization of nonhumans in posthuman becomings.” (15) There is an “old speciesism,” the humanist-Cartesian one which states that only humans are endowed with reason or “soul” (*res cogitans*), and everything else is “nature” (*res extensa*). Let us remember that this idea was put into practice by Europeans throughout modern history to also legitimize exploitation and oppression of minoritarian human groups whenever it was convenient. This allows MacCormack to state that “structuration of life itself is anthropocentric,” (53) that is, it works with hierarchies based on criteria like species, genus, race, ability, sexuality, etc. However, there is also a “new speciesism,” exemplified by Latour’s and Haraway’s (which are not mentioned by name) ideas about the need to speak for those who cannot (nonhumans). Via Zipporah Weisberg, she also criticizes flat ontology (and its kin, object-oriented ontology) for its premise that every “thing” has an equal ontological value, which would render activism impossible (56–57). Instead of identity politics and all the philosophical acrobatics of recent theory and politics, MacCormack proposes *queer*, but not in the relatively common sense associated with LGBT+ communities. Rather, she uses the term *queer* as activism that refuses to become subjectified by power structures and hierarchies. In her account, queer is not individual, so it does not fall prey to the same systems of signification that govern, for instance, identity politics; queer is counter-discursive in that it undermines any established “self,” and also, quoting Serres (1995), it promotes rethinking the role of the philosopher in contemporary societies, which is not that of a protector of truth, but that of a protector of the world, a move “from philosophy as a kind of narcissistic luxury adventure in metaphysical searches for a vague abstraction tentatively known as ‘truth’ to philosophy as necessary to liberate certain real bodies from the truth of suffering, death and a life which can often be harder to live than no life at all” (61).

In this context, what is the human's (as non-nonhuman animal) position within the ecosophical flux of relations? MacCormack proposes some solutions: the use of art to create new ways of understanding the world, the cessation of reproduction, and a different manner of thinking about death. In her attempt to redefine art as activism on a larger scale, or on a personal one, she notices that postmodern art has become an increasingly difficult concept. However, postmodern art, even if it divorces the artist from the work, perpetuates the modern understanding of art as an exclusively human activity. On the other hand, even if art is glorified as the highest accomplishment of anthropocentrism, the academic field known as "the Arts" is becoming extinct with the advent of the more lucrative STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] subjects. The destruction left behind by what Guattari called Integrated Global Capitalism needs to be addressed through activism as decentralized, polyvocal, and unstructured praxis (71). But, generally speaking, activism reduces its praxes to a binary opposition—the example that MacCormack gives here is minoritarian vs. corporation, but we can think of many others, especially in the current context of political violence, homophobia, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, etc.—, thus remaining within and reinforcing the anthropocentric system of signification that constructed the opposition. However, this two-player game is not entirely accurate because it misses something decisive, a third player, which Serres calls "the world itself [...] Biogea" (*Times* 31). And so, for MacCormack, ahuman activism is the symbiosis between art and activism for Biogea—"art without being an object, activism without a goal or endgame" (74). While anthropocentric art is based on the capitalist system of signs and is relegated to the art market, ahuman art-activism is for "the earth," "life," for the mesh or the entanglement of all life forms, perhaps Lovelock's Gaia, and definitely Serres' Biogea. If the twentieth-century avant-garde attempted to create art *as* (everyday) life, MacCormack sets out to do the same, but with an expanded concept of "life," one that is not limited to human, Western, bourgeois life.

The second part of *The Ahuman Manifesto* is dedicated to a radical reimagining of the concepts of "occulture" and "death." In the current context, the author notices the rise of "old-fashioned religious thought" (101) as yet another anthropocentric paradigm which legitimizes exploitation of the earth and dominion over women, races, sexualities, and so on, by positing a divine hierarchy. Ahuman activism in the form of occulture is presented as a collection of non-anthropocentric practices focused on dismantling the power that forms these hierarchies, the cult of the self/ego (reinforced by contemporary self-help approaches), and the promise of a "next world." In keeping with the general task of the book, the most important aspect of ahuman occulture is the dissolution of individuality and the end of subjectivity. MacCormack's occulture is queer because it acknowledges the age of post-truth and tries to work within its framework using "belief," "fiction," "falsity," and "fabulation," managing to escape the traps of the modern hard sciences' Cartesian search for truth, but also doing away with capitalism's truth as value (110).

The historical connection between the occult and feminism is not a recent discovery. Federici explained that the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the means by which capitalism took over women's bodies as reproductive labor (Federici 2004); among others, the radical ecofeminist of the 1970s–1980s, Susan Griffin, analyzed the way in which “nature” and “woman” are similarly described in Western historical discourse as “chaotic” (Griffin 1979). MacCormack tries to rehabilitate this line of thought using the concept of “cunt” (116). Since “human” is really a phallogocentric designation, the monstrous feminine, the “cunt,” is an instrument against anthropocentrism. Echoing (and citing) Irigaray's work, her “cunt chaos rituals” are a form of ahuman activism which aims to obliterate the ego, in opposition to the contemporary practices of self-reinforcement promoted by capitalism. The “cunt” is chaos because it is not outside, nor inside, it is not a thing, it is merely a threshold, a “conceptual gate” (122) that acknowledges Nietzschean perspectivism (hence, post-truth) and ethical ambiguity. It is opposed to the vagina, because it is not subjected to (re)production within the confines of capitalism or the family, to chastity, or subjugated by the state. When Haraway spoke of “tentacularity” and “the Cthulucene,” she too evoked images of humus, compost, and chaotic inter-species alliances (Haraway 32). For MacCormack, this happens not in the domain of the biological, but in that of the occult—she offers examples such as the Biblical Leviathan and Lovecraft's Cthulhu (126–130).

Postmodern philosophy is in no shortage of deaths: that of art, of history, of truth, etc. Its extension, posthuman philosophy, embarked on several paths to criticize the “human,” and eventually call upon its death. *The Ahuman Manifesto*, on the other hand, speaks of a literal death, the extinction of the human species. While it is far from the only approach to deal with this issue, the others (mostly environmentalist movements such as Extinction Rebellion) see it as a current or future danger (that is, in an anthropocentric manner). MacCormack does not. Instead, she believes that the only way to escape the Anthropocene and end human exceptionalism once and for all is by voluntary extinction. Again, she is not alone in this proposition. Malthusian arguments about overpopulation, depletion of resources, and the urgent need to control human reproduction appear periodically. One of the radical organizations promoting such practices, cited by MacCormack, is the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement [VHEMT]. However, ahuman ethics is not negative; it is an affirmation and a celebration of life on Earth (144). In the end, MacCormack is what Fisher called a “capitalist realist” (2), incapable of envisaging an end of capitalism other than human extinction, accepting that human reproduction is the reproduction of the Anthropocene and that any hope of change within human society is only wishful thinking (146). In her defense of practices such as suicide, euthanasia, refusal to breed, and cannibalism, she takes Haraway's concept (and practice) of compost a step further, trying to find ways in which to affirmatively reintegrate the (human) body in the great entanglement of Biogea. Stripped of

all the illusions of ideology, extracted from the network of power, reduced to bare life within the politics of nature, the human body achieves freedom.

The Ahuman Manifesto chooses this radical path, which sets it apart from some variations of posthumanism in which overcoming “the human” would happen through mutual aid, symbiosis, and so on, in short, by overcoming integrated world capitalism. As a capitalist realist, MacCormack does not focus on capitalism as the main determinant of the Anthropocene. Instead, she equates capitalism with humanism. However, not all members of the genus *Homo* are humanist-capitalists, as defined by classical European thought. Even if it seems that the literal extinction of the genus *Homo* is more likely than the end of capitalism, and the alternatives are either naïve or utopian, in keeping with Fisher and Guattari (among others), activism as criticism is a valid line of thought, albeit less radical.

When MacCormack dismantles the hierarchies of species in order to introduce Nature (Biogea, Gaia, etc.) into the equation of activism, she creates a “flat biology” focused on the concept of “life.” However, throughout the manifesto, her focus is not actually on life in general, only on animal life. This zoocentrism ultimately constructs another hierarchy: animals are valued more than life-forms such as plants, bacteria, or viruses, which is exactly what Haraway avoided by saying “we are all compost, not posthuman” (101). For MacCormack, nature and culture are two very different things. The posthumanist argument is that there is no way to solidly differentiate between these two, hence “natureculture.” If we must still use the concept of “species,” then we must also mention that the human is integrated with other species in the webs of the Earth. Issues such as these are extremely difficult to navigate philosophically and politically, which makes *The Ahuman Manifesto* not only a radical act facing the Anthropocene, but also a testimony of a certain need to “philosophize with the hammer” in the Nietzschean manner. In spite of these apparent inconsistencies, MacCormack’s manifesto is a much-needed alternative to the contemporary tiresome and anxiety-filled eco-discourses. It is also a welcomed attempt to criticize posthumanism; in this respect, MacCormack shares Haraway’s dismay with the term. “Making kin, not babies” (Haraway 103) seems to be the ahuman alternative to the Anthropocene.

Works Cited

- GUATTARI, Félix. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: Athlone Press, 2000. [*Les trois écologies*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1989].
- HARAWAY, Donna J. *Staying With the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- LATOUR, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. [*Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essais d’anthropologie symétrique*. Paris: La Découverte, 1991].

- SERRES, Michel. *Genesis*. Translated by Geneviève James and James Nielson. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995. [*Genèse*. Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1982].
- . *Times of Crisis*. Translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014. [*Temps des Crises*. Paris: Editions Le Pommier, 2012].
- GRIFFIN, Susan. *Woman and Nature. The Roaring Inside Her*. New York: Harper&Row, 1979.
- FEDERICI, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. New York: Autonomedia, 2009 [2004].
- FISHER, Mark. *Capitalism Realism. Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, UK and Washington, US: Zero Books, 2009.