//Gwendolin Lehnerer

Critical Zones

An exhibition meets an unstable earth

The extraordinary show *Critical Zones. Horizons of a New Earth Politics* *(1) (2020–2022), at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, is both an exhibition and a curatorial-anthropological research project at once. More specifically, it is a matter of two exhibitions that unfold, staggered in time, in both physical space and digital space, inviting the visitors in each medium to experience and explore the earth anew from a geocentric point of view.

The thematic starting point of this exhibition project are the "critical zones" *(2) of the earth, as part of the larger context that the visitors move through and constantly transform. The physical exhibition, by the philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour and his longtime collaborator Peter Weibel, presents different "observatories" that offer the visitors the possibility to look at "Gaia" from different perspectives and to do "earth science" themselves. In six thematic stations, *STARTING TO OBSERVE: A CRITICAL ZONE OBSERVATORY* (I), *WE DON'T LIVE WHERE WE ARE: GHOST ACREAGES* (II), *WE LIVE INSIDE GAIA* (III), *EARTH TIDINGS* (IV), *REDRAWING TERRITORIES (*V) and *BECOMING TERRESTRIAL* (VI), the exhibition invites visitors to take part in interdisciplinary and multimedia observations of the earth that address the critical zones of our planet. These stations are composed of artistic interventions, installations, insights into ongoing laboratory situations, discursive elements, or research. They form a transdisciplinary exhibition or research laboratory in which the new geocentric situation can be observed, experienced, and investigated artistically, discursively, and scientifically, with the aim of becoming "terrestrial" through it. The theoretical background of this transdisciplinary and posthuman exhibition is James Lovelock's and Lynn Margulis' "Gaia thesis" (*1), which is the discursive heart of the exhibition in text excerpts and video interviews. Everything is intertwined with everything else, and so the exhibition also becomes a culmination of multi-perspective and multi-media considerations. As a result, a visit to the exhibition should probably be planned over several days, because a single experience is not enough to familiarize yourself with everything – but it is worth it!

Start with the *Fieldbook*!

Equipped with the exhibition brochure *Fieldbook*, visitors can follow the orientation guide or find their own way around the three floors of the ZKM. The first station is the *Critical Zones Observatory Space*, where for example the weather station or the *spruce trees station* are located. The second station is lined with two works by Swiss artist Julian Charrières: the video installation *An Invitation to Disappear* (2018) and the spatial installation *Future Fossil Spaces* (2017), which take you to another or a future world with poetic and fossil landscapes. In *WE LIVE INSIDE GAIA*, Gemma Anderson shows her work based on drawings made in collaboration with scientists. With *Forensic Architecture's Cload Studies* (2020) and Petra Maitz's *Lady Musgrave Reef* (2007), visitors learn about endangered territories, political interventions, and a different way of drawing borders. How many participants are actually involved in the exhibition is unclear during this museum visit.

Intervention from outside: the critical zones strike back!

Before the *Critical Zones* exhibition could open in May 2020, posthuman reality met

its human representation: the Covid-19 pandemic, as an immanent consequence of the imbalance of the "critical zones", prevented the physical opening of the exhibition and postponed it to summer 2020. In response, the exhibition team designed a second standalone exhibition in the digital sphere within only five weeks: "They didn't want to mimic the physical exhibition but do a complementary experience, to start within the possibilities of the digital […]." *(3)

The digital exhibition, which opened with a streaming festival, consists of a "reactive interface layer" and responds to all the information that flows into it: Artworks, video works, instructions, and texts are counted as entities here, as along with the website's visitors. It represents a simple form of co-presence that adapts to the conditions of the posthuman age and makes a new exhibition experience possible. The digital exhibition thus becomes a plane of immanence in its own unique way; a platform on which human and non-human actors and actants are entangled: "You are not alone. There are 65 entities here with you," *(3) the website tells me as one of its features right at the first visit. Afterwards, you click through the website and encounter ever new paths through the digital exhibition area, which is constantly transforming. You start the field trip by choosing a thematic path: today "lab", "holobiont", or "instruments" are suggested to me, but other paths are also available. The website is always evolving; it is subject to constant change and is folded in on itself. It never shows the same thing twice – entanglement and constant recomposition.

Chaos or chaosmosis?

As fascinating as this may seem, it is also disorienting. The digital visitors lose their anthropocentric subject position and have to find their way through the diversity as part of the posthuman condition. The digital exhibition requires a lot of spirit of discovery and post-anthropocentric will, but it is rich in material, inventiveness, and composition. The artists, together with the exhibition team, have also adapted to the digital otherness. They show other perspectives of the works, recompositions, or archival materials, such as the sections from *WE LIVE INSIDE GAIA* tagged "symbiosis", "cycles", "coevolution", and "microbes", drawing on Lynn Margulis. You can also find this in *My Memory* (2017), in which Cemelesai Dakival recounts in drawings his experience with a strange Taiwanese disease. Here, visitors can follow the traces of the earth and its critical zones for hours, losing themselves in the kaleidoscopic perspectives.

Both exhibitions, physical and digital, are related to each other through the artists, spectators, and contributors. In the pandemic year of 2020, no other exhibition has captured both the zeitgeist and the response to it, without foregrounding the pandemic itself, as well as *Critical Zones*. Latour and Weibel and all the other contributors to this curatorial research and exhibition project make clear just how much we will need to work together in the future to observe, understand, and keep the critical zones in balance: for in the posthuman condition we need transdisciplinary ways of working that combine artistic and aesthetic as well as scientific expertise with experiential and everyday knowledge. *Critical Zones. Horizons of a New Earth Politics* is therefore not only an exhibition, but also a curatorial research project in which the visitors can learn to become terrestrial despite a slight disorientation.

//Zur Person

Gwendolin Lehnerer

Gwendolin Lehnerer studierte Theater-, und Kulturwissenschaft sowie Philosophie an der LMU München und absolvierte im Jahr 2018 den Lehrgang „Kuratieren in den szenischen Künsten“ in Salzburg. Hierfür erhielt sie ein Teil-Stipendium der Kulturstiftung Allianz. Seit 2019 ist sie Doktorandin im Doktoratskolleg „Die Künste und ihre öffentliche Wirkung: Dynamiken des Wandels“ an der Universität Salzburg und dem Mozarteum und arbeitet als freie Dramaturgin in Berlin und Wien.

//Literaturnachweise

*1 *Lovelock, James/Sagan, Lynn (1974): Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis. In: Tellus. Series A. Stockholm: International Meteorological Institute. Vol. 26 (1–2), 1974, pp. 2–10.*

//Fussnoten

*1 *Critical Zones. Horizonte einer neuen Erdpolitik, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, ZKM Karlsruhe, 23 May 2020 to 9 January 2022.*

*2 *https://zkm.de/de/ausstellung/2020/05/critical-zones (15 July 2021)*

*3 *Bettina Korintenberg about the digital exhibition, in Critical Zones Streaming Festival, https://zkm.de/de/critical-zones-streamingfestival (20 June 2021)*

*4 *Critical Zones Digital, https://critical-zones.zkm.de/#!/ (13 June 2021)*