

KIMBERLY COULTER

Mediating Ecologies

Cultivating Diplomacy, Destabilising Paradigms

At the invitation of anthropologist Carsten Wergin, I traveled from Munich to speak as a panelist at the June 2016 *Media Ecologies*¹ workshop at the University of Heidelberg. The goal: to discuss how concepts from digital and environmental humanities could “foster a more sustainable engagement with human and other-than-human spheres in a globalized world in crisis”. As part of the workshop, participants took a field trip to visit the concurrent exhibition *Reset Modernity!* at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe.² This essay, drawn from two posts published in *Ant Spider Bee*,³ considers the panelists’ efforts to cultivate diplomacy, amplify serendipity, and destabilise paradigms, and reflects on my experience of the exhibition in light of these expressed hopes.

The Media Ecologies Workshop

The aim of the June 2016 *Media Ecologies* workshop at the University of Heidelberg was to discuss how concepts from digital and environmental humanities could “foster a more sustainable engagement with human and other-than-human spheres in a globalized world in crisis”.⁴ While the crisis is indisputably environmental, its framing in terms of ‘ecologies’ goes beyond what is commonly regarded as the natural environment. Implicit in this framing is Bruno Latour’s relational ontology approach, which encourages the examination of the material and conceptual relationships among human and nonhuman actors/actants, the ‘assemblage thinking’ or actor-network theory (ANT) that shook up the humanities and social sciences in the 2000s. Ecology, Latour writes, is a “new way to handle all the objects of human

- 1 Poster of the *Media Ecologies* workshop, https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/md/iwh/angebot/poster_mediaecologies_web.pdf (accessed 13/9/2023).
- 2 The exhibition *Reset Modernity!* ran from 16/4/2016–21/8/2016 at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie ZKM|Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Exhibition homepage, <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2016/04/globale-reset-modernity> (accessed 13/9/2023).
- 3 An earlier version of this essay appeared in part as *Ant meets ANT: A gathering on ‘media ecologies’*, <https://www.antspiderbee.net/2016/10/07/ant-meets-ant-a-gathering-on-media-ecologies/> and *Exit counselling for the Modern?*, <https://www.antspiderbee.net/2016/10/07/exit-counselling-for-the-modern/>, both published in *Ant Spider Bee*, 7/10/2016 (accessed 13/9/2023). Many thanks to Ana Luisa Sánchez Laws for the constructive feedback on this version.
- 4 Poster for the June 2016 *Media Ecologies* workshop at the University of Heidelberg.

and non-human collective life ... Nature is here considered as what assembles all entities into one whole” (LATOURE 2007, 249 incl. fn.).

Media ecologies, it follows, may illuminate not only such relationships, but also the mediated nature of connections, representations, and engagement opportunities. Or as John Durham Peters succinctly puts it, “natural facts are media, and cultural facts have elemental imprint” (PETERS 2015, 48). In any case, the brief is broad. Yet as the diverse panelists reflected on their experiences, the focus congealed further: we shared common ideas about what our projects should achieve. Addressing the event’s aim to ‘foster sustainable engagement’, we described ways we have witnessed digital or environmental humanities succeeding (destabilising paradigms, allaying fears, cultivating diplomacy, and amplifying serendipity) or failing (reinforcing power, fueling anxiety, or stoking resentment) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Panelists at the 2016 *Media Ecologies* Workshop. Pictured from left to right: Haidy Geismar, Kimberly Coulter, Werner Krauss, Christophe Leclercq, Donato Ricci, Carsten Wergin.

Haidy Geismar, director of the Digital Anthropology program at University College London, drew attention to projects’ community engagement and political effects. In one example of a digital archival object, a Maori cloak scanned to resemble a landscape and presented as being of a place – maybe even placelike – found more resonance within its aboriginal community than a common 3D digital simulacrum. Such sensitivity is endangered, she cautioned, when universities focus on technical skills at the expense of critical ones, pointing to a polemical article (ALLINGTON/

BROUILLETTE/GOLUMBIA 2016) alleging that digital humanities hype is being exploited to displace progressive projects. Geismar called for a reclaiming of ‘digital anthropology’ by academic Anthropology in order to safeguard it against anti-interpretive and uncritical applications.

As a practitioner working to engage both scholars and publics outside academia, I spoke about affordances of digital media to enhance (and complicate) environmental understanding through access, aggregation, and discovery in my projects *Ant Spider Bee*⁵ and the *Environment & Society Portal*.⁶ The blog, a curated reflection on digital environmental humanities on which I collaborate with Finn Arne Joergensen and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, we named *Ant Spider Bee* in reference to Francis Bacon’s metaphor about ways of ‘handling’ science:

The men of experiment are like the ant; they only collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobwebs out of their own substance. But the bee takes a middle course; it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own. (Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1620, 288)

Our nod to Bacon is an appeal to the essential human power of reflection in creating and using media. Yet data can ‘amplify serendipity’ in information acquisition by facilitating unexpected connections: metadata-driven discovery interfaces, such as the *Environment & Society Portal*’s map, timeline, and keyword explorer, offer new and potentially surprising paths to content. To illustrate this, and share lessons learned about the importance of usability, I showed early iterations of the Portal’s (at the time freshly updated) interactive timeline.⁷

Werner Krauss of CliSAP,⁸ the excellence cluster on Integrated Climate System Analysis and Predication at the University of Hamburg, reflected on his work in light of ‘diplomacy’, understood as the ability of an anthropologist to speak well to someone (i.e., a research subject) about something that really matters to that person (LATOURE 2013). As a participant observer in a world of climate science, he has engaged in diplomacy himself, publishing his discursive exchanges with climate skeptics in the blog he co-edits, *Die Klimazwiebel*.⁹

Together, Christophe Leclercq and Donato Ricci of the SciencesPo Médialab¹⁰ described their co-management and co-design of Latour’s ambitious ERC project

5 Project homepage, <https://www.antspiderbee.net/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

6 Project homepage, <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

7 Timeline of the *Environment & Society Portal*, <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/tools/timeline> (accessed 13/9/2023).

8 Homepage of the Excellence Cluster CliSAP, <https://www.cen.uni-hamburg.de/about-cen/clisap.html> (accessed 13/9/2023).

9 Blog homepage, <https://klimazwiebel.blogspot.com/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

10 Médialab homepage, <https://medialab.sciencespo.fr/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

*Inquiry into Modes of Existence*¹¹ (AIME). The project developed a protocol to investigate what our mode of existence has been, if not ‘Modern’. In augmentation to network-tracing, this protocol follows ‘connectors’ that “provide those networks with their specific tonalities”. Some 200 ‘co-enquirers’ were invited to collaboratively digitally annotate an interim report by Latour and, through comments and marginalia, inquire into discrepancies between Moderns’ experiences and their accounts of it.¹² These notes were then analyzed by tracing ‘clues, anomalies, and understanding’ (RICCI ET AL. 2015). The project fell short, they reflected, in cultivating ‘correspondence’ with contributors due to lack of clarity regarding contribution and terms of attribution. Contributors did, however, receive invitations to events like the final exhibition *Reset Modernity!*,¹³ a parallel project which, perhaps due to its comparatively accessible format and companion field guide, would successfully disorient (COULTER 2016) a broader audience, including the workshop participants.

Environmental destruction is fueled by imperatives of growth, ‘progress’, and a false nature/society dichotomy – the oft-taken-for-granted tenets of Modernism. The exhibition *Reset Modernity!* at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe aims to disorient visitors and ‘reset’ their paradigms of (ecological) observation and representation. Co-curators Bruno Latour, Martin Guinand-Terrin, Donato Ricci, and Christophe Leclercq, all of the SciencesPo Médialab and its digital project AIME (*An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*), suggest that our observation sensors require a gentle recalibration:

Modernity was a way to differentiate past and future, North and South, progress and regress, radical and conservative. However, at a time of deep ecological mutation, such a compass is running in wild circles without offering much bearing anymore. This is why it is time for a reset. Let’s pause for a while, follow a procedure and search for different sensors that could allow us to recalibrate our detectors, our instruments, to feel anew where we are and where we might wish to go.¹⁴

To get recalibrated, *Media Ecologies* workshop participants set out in a bus for Karlsruhe.

11 Project homepage, <https://medialab.sciencespo.fr/en/activities/aime-an-inquiry-into-modes-of-existence/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

12 See *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/252>, accessed 13/9/2023).

13 *Reset Modernity!* Pressemitteilung, <https://zkm.de/de/pressemappe/2016/globale-reset-modernity> (accessed 13/9/2023).

14 Cited from the exhibition homepage: ZKM Karlsruhe, *GLOBALE: Reset Modernity!*, <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2016/04/globale-reset-modernity> (accessed 13/9/2023).

The Exhibition *Reset Modernity!*

Accessible yet smart, playful yet serious, the *Reset Modernity!* exhibition displays tableaux of natural and social phenomena together with critical analysis of their ecologies – the material and social environments, including their infrastructures, patronage, and discourses.

A *Field Book* orients the exhibition around six procedures designed to denaturalise visitors' Modernist assumptions. The first three, 'relocalizing the global'; 'without [outside] the world or within'; and 'sharing responsibility: farewell to the sublime', are about raising awareness of one's positionality. The visitor is shown how 'scale' is not a reified, inscribed area, but actually a relational and representational concept; visitors are instructed to notice how all views are perspectives requiring a positioned viewer, and that this viewing makes him not just a spectator, but a responsible participant (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The exhibition *Reset Modernity!* (2016) seeks to challenge visitors' (ecological) assumptions about how they represent and perceive the world. Procedure two, 'without [outside] the world or within', deconstructs globes as created within ecosystems of materials and power relations. *Reset Modernity!* ran from 16 April 2016 – 21 August 2016 at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

The fourth procedure, 'from disputed lands to territories', included an installation by a collective called Folder, in collaboration with the Italian Glaciological Committee, that revealed the ephemeral nature of the watershed-defined Italy-Austria

border.¹⁵ Thanks to a cartographic robot arm and data transmitted from the melting glacier, I could set into motion the nearly real-time mapping of the changing boundary. One hears a lot of talk about the ‘global’, so it is refreshing to see a reminder of territorial boundaries, along with their complex genesis and ephemeral nature (Media 1).

In these first four procedures, I felt a surge of reverence for the tenets of my academic training: deconstruction, and the examination of material and conceptual relationships among human and nonhuman. It was a thrill to find the pillars of my intellectual values so beautifully materialised, like the stations of the cross. Hallelujah!



Media 1 (Videostill): printing a map with real-time data, the author engages with the installation *Italian Limes* (2014) by the collective Folder, as part of the exhibition *Reset Modernity!* (2016), <https://www.antspiderbee.net/2016/10/07/exit-counselling-for-the-modern/>.

Thus, for me the exhibition only began to feel disorienting when I reached the fifth procedure, ‘secular at last!’ Through film clips blaming religion as perniciously political, this procedure argues that to be attentive to the earth, we must be *mundane*; it seems to conflate the need to ‘resist the violence of iconoclastic passions’

15 Homepage of the installation, <http://www.italianlimes.net/> (accessed 13/9/2023).

with a requirement to be secular. This overlooks not only the homogenisation and violence of imposed secularism, but also the environmental values and practical engagement of faith communities.¹⁶ As Pope Francis argues in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*:

Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it. (FRANCIS 2015, §63).

Francis seems to acknowledge a need for 'diplomacy'. Why not offer a view of religion attentive to the imagined, constructed, and political nature of all communities, including national – or even academic – ones, including the violence latent in all 'group' imperatives?

A sixth procedure, 'innovation not hype', encourages visitors to look behind facades of objectivity to become aware of the complicated material and social projects that yield shiny new technologies. This echoes messages of procedure two, 'without [outside] the world or within', which deconstructs globes as created within ecosystems of materials and power relations. Perhaps the distinction is one of 'new' versus 'old' technologies. Yet to present future technologies as constructed under radically different terms from the technologies of the past, is also to create hype.

A playful presentation of didactic content, the exhibition has been criticised for being closed to unexpected outcomes. Writing for *Seismopolite*, Mylène Ferrand Lointier asked Latour:

But you also deliberately chose to make a dogmatic exhibition?

Dogmatic is a positive term for me! Because it is provocative. You give the directions, and after that, people do as they want. This is not dogmatic in the sense of imprisoning, but in the sense where you construct an itinerary [the field book]. ...[w]hat is expected of intellectuals, is that they make a coherent proposition, and after that each and every one make their own decisions and actions. Concerning the question of modernity, there are points about which we can say that they are not to accept or refuse, rather they need to be negotiated. In any case, before knowing what needs to be negotiated, the point needs to be made.

¹⁶ See search results for 'religion' in an environmental history context in the *Environment & Society Portal*, https://www.environmentandsociety.org/search?search_api_views_fulltext=religion (accessed 13/9/2023).

This is what the version of the AIME project does: one cannot make diplomacy between different worlds, if one has not already defined the world one belongs to oneself. The problem of the moderns is that they do not know which world they belong to. They have a vision, for explainable reasons, so it is necessary to help them identify which instrument(s) their world is built upon. (FERRAND LOINTIER 2016)

Helping visitors identify the instruments on which their worlds are built is a formidable task. The curators distilled the concepts without jargon or condescension. The exhibition's use of a print and digitally accessible *Field Book* (LATOIR 2016) guides the visitor to 'reset' (in the sense of replacing a dislocated shoulder) her metanarrative about the modern condition (with the assumption that not all that is modern is to be jettisoned). Products of the European Enlightenment, field guides prescribe a way of viewing, possibly narrowing focus at the expense of a larger ecology (MATTEEN 2016). Here the medium is cleverly turned upon itself, using Modernity's own toolkit to point out its conceits (Fig. 3).

Yet I'm not sure the exhibition fully achieves its aim.¹⁷ For me, the exhibition felt like a refreshment rather than a recalibration. If it is intended to be a deprogramming of unexamined Modernist paradigms leading to the destruction of the

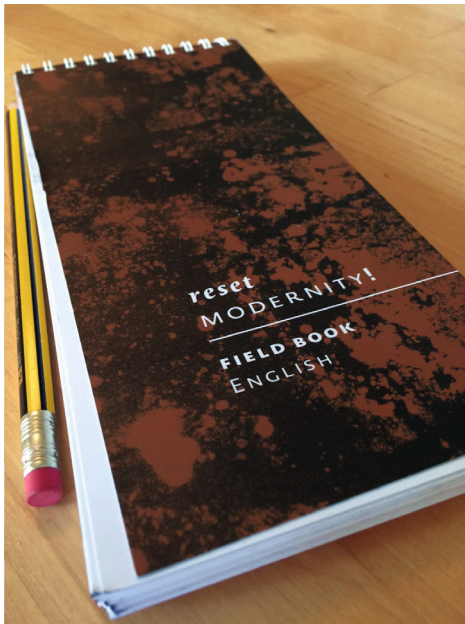


Fig. 3: Latour, Bruno (2016), *Reset Modernity! Field Book*, ed. by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Christophe Leclercq, Caroline Jansky and Ulrike Havemann, trans. by Christiansen & Plischke, Karlsruhe (ZKM Publications).

17 For a discussion of possibilities for digital and online storytelling in exhibitions, see Paul Longley ARTHUR and Isabel SMITH: *Digital Representations of Slavery in Australia*, pp. 47–62 in this volume.

earth, how to command the attention of those in need of recalibration? Of course such an exhibition is not ‘exit counseling’ – we cannot compel visitors to complete these procedures any more than we can leave our Modern world. But I admire the assemblage of exhibition objects and the brilliant field guide. I expect its visitors will continue to reflect on it for a long time to come.

In a “globalized world in crisis”, it is easy to become paralyzed, to blame, to want to build fences to protect what we value. Yet by sharing our successes and failures, and acknowledging the anxieties and efforts that underlie them, we become more mindful of our goals and paths to them. It was a delight to attend the exhibition and participate in the *Media Ecologies* event, and especially to engage with the insightful audience. Remarkably, this was the only occasion I have ever witnessed an audience member respond in improvised song. At the workshop’s conclusion, Prof. emer. Fletcher DuBois, reflecting on Francis Bacon’s ant¹⁸ and Latour’s ANT, calls upon us to “be the bee”.



Media 2 (Audiofile): at the *Media Ecologies* event, University of Heidelberg on 2/6/2016, Prof. emer. Fletcher Ranney DuBois, reflecting on Francis Bacon’s ant and Latour’s ANT, calls on us to “be the bee”. Spontaneous song by Prof. emer. Fletcher Ranney DuBois, <https://www.antspiderbee.net/2016/10/07/ant-meets-ant-a-gathering-on-media-ecologies/>

18 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1620, 288.

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