

Monument to the Anthropocene

The concept of “island” has long been in the artistic and literary imaginary—especially a desert island.

Increasingly, human-made islands serve as a strategy of urban expansion, economic development, and material reuse. As such, these islands can be considered a living example of the colliding forces of two disparate interests: global commerce and non-human activities; though opposing, the economy and environment are inextricably bound to each other. This entanglement—and the strategies to address it—exists in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through sites such as Abu Dhabi’s Habitat Compensation Island, and manifests in systems and initiatives to desalinate water, cultivate global trade, protect flora and fauna, and create new approaches to sustainability in a challenging climate.

As artists committed to exploring the effects and affects of environmental issues in the Anthropocene, we suggest that the artificial island is a specific new form of the island imaginary, deserving critical speculation. Thus, our focus on Habitat Compensation Island.

An island is many things: a tabula rasa, an interruption in the mesh of waves, a Darwinian petri dish; it is a romantic destination, a stranding, and a paradise lost. So what then is an artificial island? What about “island” shifts when it’s human-made? If an island has symbolic and real value, how then, does the symbolic agency of artificial islands differ? Can the act of constructing an island be considered the creation of a monument? A monument to what?

As Bronislaw Szerszynski suggests in “The Anthropocene monument: On relating geological and human time,” monuments join distinctly different temporal and spatial registers (Here, Now, There, Then) and they are realized to imbue value (Commemorative Value, Historical Value, Age Value, Art Value, Newness Value), which might collapse a variety of temporalities, including the Geologic, Human, Cultural, and Technological.

Habitat Compensation Island inspired us to ask several questions, which we hope this publication begins to address. How can artificial islands serve as monuments to entangled nature-culture assemblages and offer ecological reparations amidst the tug of human-centered interests? How do the “geologic programs” of artificial island-building cut through the binary divides of natural/unnatural and natural/cultural? What new imaginaries can artificial islands produce? Can they inspire more connectedness, rather than create more “wicked” systemic problems? And when we talk about connectedness, between whom or what?

Monument to Habitat Compensation Island is a research project that starts with this tiny artificial island in the Arabian Gulf and addresses its implications and relations within the global landscape. It brings together regional and international creative practitioners and thinkers to consider Habitat Compensation Island as a focusing device through which we might approach the convergence of culture, commerce, and environmental reparations and the tensions their particular interests produce, amplified in the shadow of rapid climate changes.

The contributors to this publication offer multiple perspectives and contexts from the hyperlocal to the global, from the specifics of the rapidly developing emirates to rapidly melting sea ice. The essays include a regional context through urban planning, Emirati history, and culture. They explore the island imaginary, the Anthropocene, what constitutes “success” on an artificial island, and consider islands as recipes for disaster as well as salvation. We hope to share our affections for the possibilities this speck of an island suggests, and offer a platform for meditation on who, how, and what gets to speak as we literally and figuratively form a set of new geological relations.

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