View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.

Persistent Looking in Times of Crisis

Nicholas Mirzoeff in conversation with Magda Szcześniak

Magda Szcześniak: Your latest book, *How to See the World* (2015), presents the reader with a visual kit for understanding the contemporary world. Approximately twenty years after the establishment of visual culture studies as an academic discipline, do you consider it one of the modes of understanding the contemporary world, its conflicts and complexities, or would you rather say it is a crucial tool for examining the nature of the contemporary?

Nicholas Mirzoeff: Actually, I don't think visual culture should be called a discipline. I think it changes too rapidly and it doesn't center around a canonical set of objects. That's what has actually become clear over the last two decades. There was an attempt, which you can date up to the early 1990's, to set up a canonical project around visual culture, a set of agreed texts and objects. We never actually did that and I think rightly so. Visual culture does propose a critical way to understand the contemporary moment of globalization, which is characterized by a radical proliferation of images, a proliferation that transgresses our capacity to know or assimilate the quantity of imagery there now is: a trillion photographs were taken in 2014, which constitutes a quarter of all photographs ever taken; 400 hours of YouTube videos are posted every minute, 700 million Snapchats are exchanged every day. So we can't really persist any more with the formulation of visual culture as a history of images. If we ever could – that's another question. To me the sheer scale of things means that we are dealing with a dramatically new phenomenon. It's a symptom, which we can interpret as a response to people's anxiety about the overwhelming sense of change.

Facing the symptom of the mass proliferation of imagery visual culture offers a way to understand the changes that are happening around us, and a way to use visual materials to make social change. Instead of being simply a critical practice, it is also
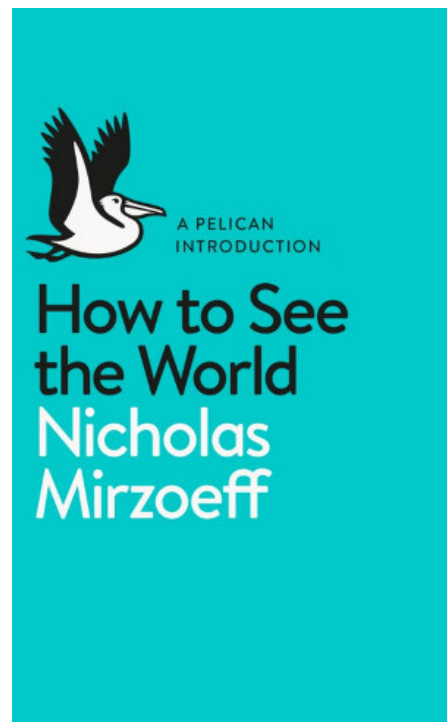
an activist practice. This is a marked tendency in the field, visible through the intersections between activists, artists and academics that now seems constitutive of what we call "visual culture." If we wanted to reinvent the name, we could call it visual activism or just activism, because most activists do not separate thinking and visualizing, working with media is part of their job.

When visual culture was first being conceived as a project – at Rochester and Irvine in the USA, at Middlesex in the UK – nobody was thinking about the Internet. In the first edition of the *Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999), I defined the Internet as a visual medium and I got taken to the woodshed for that. Over and again people were saying to me: "No, it's not a visual medium, it's a textual medium." Back then people were examining the Internet by thinking about the hypertext novel, analyzing e-mails as an epistolary form, and proposing all these rather romantic ideas, which have since been disproved. I also got all kinds of criticism for saying "modern life is lived on screen." And I'm looking at a screen as we're talking right now (points to an iPhone recording the conversation). There is never a moment in young people's lives when a screen isn't close by; not only in developed societies. We have been experiencing a noticeable acceleration of the connectivity of the planet in the past five to ten years. 45% of people world-wide now have access to the Internet. A significant – larger than the US – portion of its users come from Asia. Yet, there are still areas of weakness, like Sub-Saharan Africa, which remind you that a digital divide persists, and we shouldn't pretend that it doesn't. But we also shouldn't pretend there we're not dealing with a new global phenomenon. Visual culture thus seems both a way to understand globalization and a way to criticize as well as hopefully change it.

MSz: In your recent writing you concentrate on moments of crisis or conflict, and pose questions concerning the relation of these crises to images. I find it interesting that many of these crises are overwhelmingly large, such as the Anthropocene and recent migration, or the vulnerability of black lives in the U.S.A. and beyond, and thus exceed our usual understanding of a crisis – which we would hope has a limited time frame. The contemporary crisis is long and systemic. In order to soothe this realization, most mainstream media produce images, which simultaneously seek to accustom us to this ongoing state of crisis, and to cast it outside of our vernacular lives, portray crisis as external.

NM: That's a very rich question and I'd like to frame it in a number of ways. One of them is a 1936 quote from Walter Benjamin, which says that we're living in a permanent state of emergency. By bringing this up, I would like to suggest that

when thinking of contemporary crises, we continue to reference some hypothetical, stable and secure past. I'm not sure such a moment has ever really existed, at least in the past century. We do experience the flows of global culture in a different set of formulations now than we did in the 1990's, when we talked about mediascapes and technoscapes and financescapes. At that point bodies were largely staying where they were. The difference that we see at the moment is that bodies are in motion. And I mean this in all kinds of senses.

First of all the refugee crisis, which we can frame in several ways: the visible refugee crisis caused by the Syrian war and other Middle Eastern/North African conflicts; the refugees from Central West Africa, who are moving through North Africa into Italy sometimes, but also within Africa; the Palestinian refugee crisis; and the Central and Southern American crisis caused by the narco-regimes, resulting in migration of mostly very young people within the Americas and particularly to the United States. Secondly, I would point to the Black Lives Matter movement as a coming to visibility of a segregation and racialization problem that has been fundamental for the constitution of the United States as a republic. Thinking about this in terms of visual culture, it's important to stress that we have a very clear connection between the state of crisis and a vernacular technology that's making it visible. To take the most recent example of Laquan McDonald, who was filmed by one of the six dash cams surrounding that young man during his interaction with police in Chicago. McDonald was shot to death by police, while clearly not posing any threat to them. Five of the six dash cams were carefully pointed away from where he was. Accidentally, one recorded the moment of his death. And so we know that the textual records, the formal deposition given by police, were entirely fictional. What I think we're witnessing is not so a much a change in the imagery, or even a change in what's happening, but a change in what gets recorded and circulated.

This brings me to an idea that the state of emergency has always been – as I stress it in my *The Right to Look* (2011) – something that came from the global South to the global North. The panic that can be observed in North America and Western Europe right now derives from the sense that globalization stopped being only a means for the North to continue extracting maximum value out of the rest of the planet, but that there is actually some kind of reordering of how we are living now.

In the context of the ongoing climate disaster, which is another engine behind the migration crisis – you can see the Syrian crisis as a response to the prolonged drought in that country between 2006 and 2010, which moved an enormous number of people into Syrian cities, setting off a chain of reactions that we're now witnessing. One of the advantages, it seems to me, of an analysis undertaken from the point of view of visual materials – let's just call them that, because what they actually are is computations – is that they at least provide a set of data, which can be worked with: from recognizing them as a symptom on. Despite all the things that have been said about the work that I do, I wouldn't want to privilege visual material. I don't even necessarily like it. But I can't ignore it. As a set of human collectivities we've made choices about how we produce technologies, how we live, how we exchange ideas, emotions and so on. And we have overwhelmingly chosen to do this in forms that, for better or worse, are primarily visual. My question is: why? What does it say about us? Of course, this may be temporary, it may be that we find this image flow ceasing due to a more censorship oriented moment, but we can't tell yet.

I agree with what you say about the temporality of the crisis. How long does it have to be before we stop calling it a crisis and start seeing it as a condition of global inequality? In the frame of the Anthropocene you mentioned earlier, we might want to think about the entire Anthropocene as a crisis. There are debates about when the Anthropocene started: ranging from 1610 to 1964, some people point to 1784, others even say that we should pinpoint its beginnings in the moment when human civilization settled, about 5 thousands years ago. What if we think of that entire period, which in the geological sense is still not even a blink of an eye, as a permanent crisis? That seems to be a useful way to question the present moment.

MSz: There seems to be no single appropriate way of representing a crisis visually. On the one hand, we could formulate a scathing critique of many mainstream media outlets, which portray refugees as dehumanized, vast masses, the so-called "waves" of people. As a reaction to this, there emerged the rise of various projects, seeking to individualize the experience, which in turn brought on questions of what
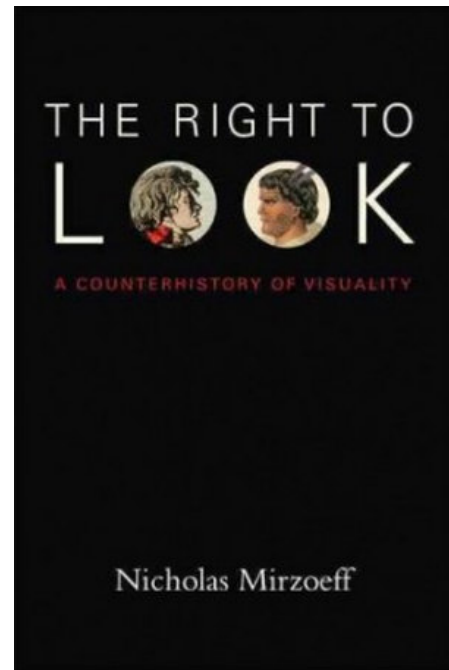
makes one worthy of being portrayed as an individual in crisis, which identity markers make a story more effective in terms of raising empathetic identification. This raises the question of whether there exists a specific counter-visual genre which could subvert the dominant modes of representation?

NM: Again, a very complex question. Let me answer by working through a couple of points. When you have a political leader such as David Cameron, referring to the refugees as "a swarm," the obvious reaction is to say: "No, these are people," and to want to get to know them individually, to tell their stories and so on. I think we need to be a little bit more cautious about such a way of framing. One is that the very concept of the "human" has been tackled by postcolonial critics, such as Denise Ferreira da Silva, who tend to suggest that "the human" is by itself always already a white European person, most probably a man. So our goal should be not to want to humanize them, but to move all people into a category, which is equal. I don't want to use the word posthuman, because not everybody can be posthuman. But it's important to recognize how many – what we have to call human beings, for lack of a better word – have still not been granted human. Referring to people as a "swarm" means that you don't consider them to belong to a collective of humans in the same way as you do.

Then you opened a second order of analysis by asking me about how one can countervisualize. And here I want to mark a kind of transition from the way I have been thinking about these things previously. When I wrote *The Right to Look*, I was trying to analyze how visuality is a technology of colonization. It was first developed on the plantation, exported as a means of imperial war, first in Europe and later elsewhere. The enslaved and the colonized had to respond to the process of visualizing by countervisualizing. Part of the argument in the book was that the right to look is a way of creating a commons that precedes visuality. We're doing this right now: I look at you, you look at me and between us we create something that doesn't belong to either of us. The question I didn't manage to fully render in *The Right to Look* was: how do we get past the binary of visuality and countervisuality? When we talk about countervisuality, by its very nature, it's as if we're playing a game of chess: visuality always has the white pieces, countervisuality has the black pieces. Without any racialized connotation whatsoever. We are always forced to respond to visuality, which is precisely the way it wants us to play. It's a battlefield – they have the advantage and are pursuing us. One of the things I noted in the book was that Napoleon – held up as a great master of visualizing –

used to say there were two areas where his military tactics failed: the mountains and the cities. Thinking about the mountains, one thinks of a fascinating book by James C. Scott, in which he showed that high areas of the world are precisely the places where people resist being formed into a state. The Maroons who go into high places in Jamaica, go there to resist enslavement, but also to resist state-making. Obviously, now, for the first time in history, most people live in cities. It's very clear then this tactic of counter-insurgency that was evolved by post Second World War colonial forces – first in Vietnam, then Algeria, now most visibly in Afghanistan – is failing to contain cities. It's failing conceptually, politically, militarily, in every possible way except the one we might actually like. Rather than leading into something more progressive and egalitarian, it is sinks into chaos.

I've been also trying to think about the work of the Black Lives Matter movement in the context of countervisuality. How do you not limit yourself to counter-visualizing, but try to establish a different frame? For now, I'm calling this tactic "persistent looking." To refer back to our discussion of crisis or what some other people might call trauma, consisting of all the very difficult moments, like the shooting of Michael Brown or the death of Eric Garner, or the many other men and women who have been caught up in appalling situations in this country and

Source: http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/ maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-black-lives-matter-20141214-story.html

elsewhere. What the Black Lives Matter has chosen to do through its performance of re-enactments, like the "die-ins" or the "Hands up, don't shoot" action, is to stay in the moment, to really make us look at the scene, look at it again and again until we get to the place where we start to see how it might have developed differently. The "Hands up, don't shoot" action is very important to me, because you're putting your hands up at the moment before the policeman shoots. It thus recreates a moment prior to the violence we're trying to forestall. They're trying to ask whether it would be possible to conceive of this encounter in some way that didn't end up with another brown body on the sidewalk.

Persistent looking seems to be a strategy of engagement: going back, and going back, and staying with it. I'm reminded of the work that men and women did in the Civil Rights Movement, for example of Mary Bethune, who circulated images of lynchings, tremendously difficult set of imagery to look at, even now. I think of

Mamie Till, presenting the body of her dead son, Emmett Till, and wanting everybody to see the violence that had been done to him. Many people mark that moment – when those photographs started circulating in the black media and then were taken up by the mainstream media – as the beginning of the Second Civil Rights Movement. Mamie Till demanded that we not look away, that we keep our look focused on this issue.

Here we can return to the refugee moment, the photos of Aylan Kurdi, for example. I'm struck by two phenomena – one, the way in which that single photograph changed the linguistic practice from "migrant" to "refugee" almost overnight. We can track this – Twitter has published a graph, on which you can see the number of times the word "migrants" is used, and then it becomes "refugee," exactly at the moment when that photograph disseminates. And yet, at the same time, we've also seen a kind of freezing over of the sentiment, because we haven't kept with it. There's been a re-hardening of attitudes. One can see that a single image, a single iteration, however powerful, that image is, until it is taken up as part of a collective project, can't sustain the change we want to see longer than for a short period of time. That is something I think we've learned from the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement, Black Lives Matter, and other recent social movements.

It's important to note that all of these movements have a direct action component of placing our body in space, in which we have to feel what it might be like. This semester I taught a class about Black Lives Matter to a very able and competent group of young people. We held a "die-in" practice in an NYU classroom – the students were totally safe, nobody was watching other than me. Afterwards, many of them said that they found it really difficult, because when they found themselves on the floor, counting to eleven and saying "I can't breathe," it was when they realized what it actually means.

Source: http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/11/29/2383041B00000578-2854388-image-104_1417294288831.jpg

People often ask: "What would you say has been accomplished by Black Lives Matter so far?." And I would say – some very major things. For example, the effective outlawing of the confederate flag. One can't overstate the symbolic significance of that. If you are a white person you might not see it, but my African

American friends say that every time they see the confederate flag, it feels like a violent affront. Most of those flags were publicly displayed in states with a very substantial African American population and they hadn't been displayed prior to the Second Civil Rights Movement, which is a very clear way of saying: "You're never going to get civil rights." So if we've done nothing else, apart from removing these flags or at least confining their use to marginal circumstances, that's as much as you can ask of visual activism. I think it's important to understand, that there's a limit of what you can do in the field of visual representation. We shouldn't believethat creating a visual commons, a place in which people have the right to look and the right to be seen, the right to invent each other, will in and of itself lead to the creation of a commons per se. Because it wouldn't. There's a great deal of other work that has to be done. But I think the visual commons is the first step through which other more fundamentally structural goals of economic and political rights can be achieved. Without the visual commons one would not get there. If there is a first statement of "I see you," which actually means "I see you as unequal to me," then nothing else will follow from that. If it starts with "I see you and you are my equal, but I see ways in which your equality to me is impeded," than we have something to work on.

MSz: I find the idea of persistent looking captivating, but I think that we need to look not only at the image itself, but also at the ways in which it has circulated. For example, the lynching photographs were not only used by the civil rights movement, but also circulated as postcards, collectibles. But there are other examples of potentially painful images, circulating in surprising ways. A Polish photographer, Paweł Szypulski, recently published a book titled *Greetings from Auschwitz*, presenting postcards sent from the former concentration camp site after the war, using images from the camp, but containing banal captions, ordinary messages sent to friends and families. Which is why I think that an important visual activist practice would be to trace modes of production and circulation, to uncover dominant ways, in which images of oppression are vernacularized.

NM: I think your point is well taken. The issue is precisely to keep these images moving, keep them circulating. When they end up in an album, they're entombed. The access to that album is obviously limited. If people start saying "Yes, we've seen this image, we don't want to see it any more," then it stops circulating, stops appearing in a public sphere, one is no longer aware of it. If today you show a group of eighteen year olds the Abu Ghraib photographs, most of them won't know what they are.

MSz: Is that an experience you had with your students?

NM: Yes. Before showing the Abu Ghraib photographs in the classroom I decided to talk about them, explain that they're complicated images and check if they're familiar with them. And they said: "No." Then I realized these people were in their teens when these images circulated, or maybe even younger. Hence, their teachers and guardians took the decision that they were too shocking for them to see.

The technology of circulation is obviously critical. The postcards are a great example. Without the international mail service images wouldn't circulate. Almost as soon as photographs come to being, all kinds of extraordinary things end up on postcards. We saw that again with the rise of digital imagery. One of the striking phenomena that we are seeing more recently is the curtailment of public circulation. Snapchat is a very good example of that. You send the Snap precisely so that it can reach only a few targeted people. In the beginning the idea was to facilitate sending more marginalized kinds of visual imagery, erotic imagery, but increasingly it has become conversational. You'll snap your dinner to your friends, so they can see what you are eating. The images are not archived, not retained. The sort of affective work that we placed in the photograph, the digitally computed image doesn't have the same value. And therefore we need to ask questions about digital networks – what they mean, what compression formulas mean, what privacy means, in the context of now very visible processes of global spying. These are questions that circulated very largely around textual information, but I think they pertain very dramatically also to visual material.

Most of us, now on a daily basis, use technology we don't understand. We can't understand. Even the most advanced technical person can't understand every program in a machine. Simultaneously we are also witnessing an extraordinary and extremely complicated phenomenon: the state is now making use primarily of mediocre, low resolution imagery: from drones and closed-circuit television. In 2009, Hito Steyerl wrote the now famous essay *In Defense of the Poor Image* , where she claimed that poor imagery was our resource against those in power. I think that's changed. The state has now entirely co-opted poor imagery. Drones have very mediocre video, two or three frames per minute, which makes it extremely difficult to see what they're looking at. Drones are said to make use of what is called they "persistent stare." For me it is the opposite of persistent looking.

The stare is very impeded and we have to understand that this means, they don't really care. They're perfectly happy to operate within a very wide margin of error. We can recall Dick Cheney's formula, his idea of the 1% doctrine, which he says without irony – that it's better to kill a hundred people if only one of them is a genuine target. Harper's did a study of the drone strikes, in which they found that only two percent of the people they targeted were actually Taliban or Al Qaeda. So that's about the level we're accomplishing through this sort of imagery. You might ask as a follow up question: would it be better to put a high resolution camera on the drone? Of course not. The point is, in the same way that we don't want better police cameras, we just want them to stop shooting people. Analogically, we don't want high quality video on the drones, we want people in power to think about how do deal with the long collapse of the empire that we are now seeing.

MSz: We think of drones as such an advanced technology, whereas they're really so dependent on the scale of human interpretation, the interpretation of visual material. And much of that labor is actually outsourced by the military. Similarly, we could point to the case of Filipino workers hired to sift through visual material on social network sites in order to block offensive imagery from our feeds. It's striking – the fact that such technological labor has to be performed manually in some sense and, of course, that it's performed by underpaid workers who are forced to look at obscene imagery or imagery that for some reason Facebook doesn't want us to see.

NM: I had a personal encounter with this. Before the Aylan Kurdi image became news, an artist in Berlin, Khaled Barakeh had found these images of drowned refugees of the coast of Libya and circulated them through a Facebook album titled *Multicultural Graveyard* . They were dramatically censored, disappeared from people feeds. Facebook just announced that it was a mistake, that they didn't mean to do it. But they didn't say who did it. It couldn't have been the algorithm, because not all of the images disappeared. So it had to have been somebody choosing to block the images after seeing them. It probably had to do with the large number of shares that they hit, but mostly I think it had to do with someone's reaction to seeing children's bodies, seeing that some are unclothed. And so they stopped it.

Your point about the drones is, again, well taken, because really essentially what these are are flying iPhones, generation 2 or 3, with a very poor camera. The basic guts of the drone is the same thing that goes into a phone plus a propeller and a weapon. When you talk to people who live in regions where drones fly, they say they are not secret at all, because you hear them. They're very loud. So any time

you hear them you know that at any given moment somebody might end up being shot. The stress of that, living under that sense of not just being watched, because we're all watched every minute of the day, but knowing that because you can hear their sound, you might die the next minute. My parents grew up in London during the Blitz and there was this famous sensation, that Thomas Pynchon included in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* – hearing screams coming from the sky. The V2 missile would make this screaming sound. And you were fine as long you could hear it, but if you couldn't hear it, then you were in trouble, because it meant it was falling. If you live in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, or any of these places you consider to be somewhere that they want to watch, you live with that sound. The sound is this sensory alert to the fact that you're being watched, which is an alert to the fact you might die. If you want a symptom of the current moment – that's it.

MSz: Another aspect of contemporary visual culture that I find particularly interesting is the tension between universality and particularity. Visual culture studies itself – as you write in your most recent book – moved from focusing on particular identity work to topics which can be considered more universal. This tendency to universalize has also been visible in discussions about the Anthropocene, in which some authors argue that the Anthropocene crisis creates the necessity to return to universalist thinking, as it places us all, as a species, in danger. However, it seems that universalizing can also be a dangerous way of eliminating discussion about the different ways, in which we are endangered and oppressed. Obviously, not everyone is affected by climate change in the same way.

NM: I think what I'm arguing for is not universalization, but a kind of oscillation between the frame of the particular, the local and the frame of the global. We always want to think about these things as existing in both frames at once. Something like Black Lives Matter is obviously on some level about identity. But on the another, it's not about representation, because it's saying that we don't want to simply defer this issue to some representative who will take this on for us and implement a form of social change. It's about saying "No, we're going to think what that means persistently," and how this might change then not at the top level, but precisely at the level of the commons, which will be different in different places. The commons is not universal.

In terms of the Anthropocene, another pertinent question you could pose here – is what would it mean to see Black Lives Matter in the context of the Anthropocene. You can see that geology is a science that's irrevocably marked by its adoption of racialized tactics. All the first geologists, Georges Cuvier and others, who invented

the subject as a means of thinking about new formulations of life in the late 18th and early 19th century, pursued these matters in the context of the Haitian revolution, slave uprisings and abolition, having known that this mode of racialized hierarchy was at the verge of collapsing. Saying there exist geological dividers between time periods, they also want to say there are human divides between the races. Cuvier does this with Sara Baartman for example. Then we have the story of Louis Agassiz, who visualized and discovered the Ice Age through minute examination of striated rocks in the Alps, looking at the tiny scratches on. From that kind of highly particular visual analysis, he deduced the former extent of the Ice Age. He then brings that sensibility about visualized distinction to North America, encounters slavery and takes the photographs we all know in South Carolina. The goal for him is to trace not only the visual distinction between black and white, but to be able to see the geography on the body, to be able to say "this person comes from Kongo, this person comes from Guinea," on the basis of visual proof. The project failed, but it didn't stop him from trying, and it didn't stop people from believing that the task could be achieved.

My goal is to try and think it through in the context of the present debate about the Anthropocene. If you scrutinize the research of the Anthropocene working group, you'll realize there is a major tension about when the Anthropocene began. Two British scientists published a fascinating article in "Nature" magazine, proposing that we consider the Anthropocene as having begun in 1610. That is the point in time where they identified a visible drop in the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at that time. Why is there a drop? Because the Americas reforested after the extinction of indigenous population due to European arrival, or what I would call genocide. The enormous drop in population in the Americas, of some 50 or 60 million people, the disappearance of the cultivation they were performing, resulted in the appearance of this phantasmatic virgin forest that we all think of as being typically American. If you look at the materials from the Leap Manifesto, a Canadian project which works on the imagining of the Anthropocene, the picture they often use is that of a swirling pine forest. What that image actually shows is not a natural state, but a re-forestation. If we were to adopt this marker – which the Anthropocene working group finally declined – it would cause an enormous conceptual shift. Instead the AWG proposed that the Anthropocene begun at a very precise moment – the split second of the detonation of the first atomic

device at the Trinity test site in New Mexico. And this places a very different inflection on the Anthropocene. It's still about human responsibility, but it places it at the level of deliberate action, technological innovation, human capacity to cause damage, but then potentially to rectify it as well. One of the leading spokesman for this concept is Clive Hamilton, whose book is very symptomatically entitled *Earth Masters*. This kind of language poses the Anthropocene as a tragic event, but also as an opportunity. If we've done this, that means we can also undo it, and then continue re-doing it in certain ways, as if the Earth was some kind of toy.

To answer your question: I think the Anthropocene Working Group process is as entirely redundant to dealing with the multiple challenges of the Anthropocene, as the political representative process is to dealing with the challenge of Black Lives Matter. It's going to take local, specific, engaged actions that transform local cultures and communities until one gets to a place where things don't stay the same. Take a visual example that I'm working on right now. In New York City, a group of people did a tour of the American Museum of Natural History, called the "black out tour," and talked about the ways in which racism was structurally encapsulated in that museum. What if you would go to the Metropolitan Museum and propose a conversation touching upon the standard depiction of slavery, which is ignored in this institution. Let's talk about the portrait of George Washington standing next to a man who is described only as a Billy, who is actually one of his slaves. We could also engage with Velazquez's portrait of Juan de Pareja, a man who is at that time enslaved by him, place it next to Washington's portrait, and next to representations of other slaves who were "owned" by Europeans. We could present it next to African art that was shaped in response to slavery, like the Minkisi sculptures from Kongo or Fon sculptures from West Africa. But I also want to do something more fundamental, and this goes back to your argument about technology and circulation: I want to think about all the materials gathered in museums of this continent. Take one of the fundamental arguments around the Anthropocene, the extraordinary extraction of silver from the Americas and its distribution throughout Europe. Go to the very dusty and untraveled part of the Metropolitan Museum, where the silver objects are on display – case after case after case of these silver objects, which we no longer look at. They are a mark of the Anthropocene – if we see it as a result of the European conquest of the Americas and the genocide of the Native American people. Look around that area of the Met and you'll find these

things called sugar boxes – silver boxes for the storage of sugar with pictures of the sugar cane and the enslaved on the outside. Those are the objects I want to talk about. I want to talk about what's going on in a museum like this one, an institution which encapsulates the product of the Anthropocene and the things that made the Anthropocene happen. How do we decolonize all of that? What would we do to all the cultural property there? What are we to do about the fact that there still are, in the Egyptian rooms, mummies, which are human beings? What are they still doing there? Lying around to be looked at by school tours. We have bodies of Native Americans in museums up and down the country, some of them are being returned, some of them are not.

But what is the endpoint of all of this? The museums will say: "Hey, hey, if you start returning cultural property, then there isn't going to be any museums left." And I would say: Okay, let's start the conversation from that place. Let's ask what would it mean to have a museum complex that wasn't about the colonial expropriation of other people's bodies and property, and now we would also add the Anthropocene production of materials like cotton and silver and so on. What would be left? Not a great deal actually. You get at that step by step, until you reach the place where you're willing to look at the challenge of making the new. In other words, not to imagine building a monument to the Anthropocene, as some people have been trying to do in Europe. I don't think that's the way to go. I think we want to think about a museum that doesn't represent a prison, in which there isn't expropriated labor, there isn't extinction, there isn't genocide. What would that look like? And if we could imagine that museum, then we'd have done the work of visual activism I'm trying to do.

MSz: I think that's a wonderful ending to our conversation.