

In Infinity, Eternity Performs

by Thomas Provost



100 Antipodal Towers

Plotted along a great circle connecting antipodes Bogota and Jakarta, this colossal monument to humanity exists as a perfect geometry in the present; when Pangaea reunites, the human order succumbs to forces greater than our own.

Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback: there is no progress. [...] What we call “progress” is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though in some immense realm, only to founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with the deepest disdain the burden of human arrogance. The same monotony, the same immobility, on other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs—imperturbably—the same routines.

—Louis Auguste Blanqui, *L'Éternité par les astres* (1872)

Humanity is a small flare, a minor vector. Consider, for example, how Earth's concentric cousin, Pluto, will have only traveled one-third of its way around the Sun in a human lifetime.¹ We humans are floating in a vast, ever-expanding (or contracting) universe. During the twentieth century, astronomers calculated the universe to be 14 billion light years wide, a figure revised in the twenty-first century to 15 billion.² While present-day computational processing power allows for a remarkable precision in gauging these unreachable cosmic boundaries, they remain wonderfully speculative given the impossibility of apprehending these scales through either perceptions or concepts. It is within this vast, unknowable cosmic arena that the staggering and equally incomprehensible extension of humanity takes place.

A beam of light projected from the top of the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas: it is said to be the most powerful on the planet, visible from the moon.³ This expenditure of capital is excessive not only in its claim on extra-planetary space and perception, but also in its abuse of time; the domination

of time in two directions, the squandering of history and of potential futures, the evacuation of temporalities through the immediacy of spectacle—all of this is characteristic of the Anthropocene. As cities become concentrations of the sediment of spectacle, we are reminded that, as Walter Benjamin warned, those societies which are incapable of responding to new technical abilities with a new social order are destined to a monotonous repetition of injustice and suffering.

The dust of this planet that allowed gases to harden into Earth—folding upon itself over its 4.6 billion-year lifetime—can be thought of as the origin of all tellurian material transformation. Mythical beliefs rooted in these geological processes are what make landscape interventions, such as the Uffington White Horse or the Nazca lines, and inhabitations such as the monastery of Skellig Michael, the focus of anthropologic studies; these human-geological operations depict a temperate Holocene mood. They are works made with both additive and subtractive material methods at a monumental scale. By contrast, our contempora-



The Moon, 3000 AD
Post-lunar-occupancy.

ry processes and the monuments they produce are all too expeditious, due, most especially, to extensive technological systems which coordinate operations among any material state or scale. Geology, as the formal record of a select group of practices and processes on earth, collects the traces of human existence within its stratifying sediment. Does this geological trace have any way to record the experience of human wonder? Can geology somehow remember the human desire, now all but extinct, to celebrate the mysteries of the universe—not through mastery, but as festival?

Although humans can perceive the mountains and stars as models of majestic stasis, we must know that the Earth's crust transforms ceaselessly under our feet, while the firmament sweeps us along in a cyclone of stars. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin first recognized the collective disregard for this seemingly benign yet incredibly theistic measure of the grandeur and complexity of the cosmos.⁴ His proposition—to align human ethics with a cosmic sensibility to relieve some of our deep confusion over existence—predates the contemporary discussions, instigated by Bruno Latour and others, of a new spiritual-scientific alliance in the Anthropocene.⁵ Perhaps Chardin held a clue to satisfying the excessive spiritual absence of modernity when he

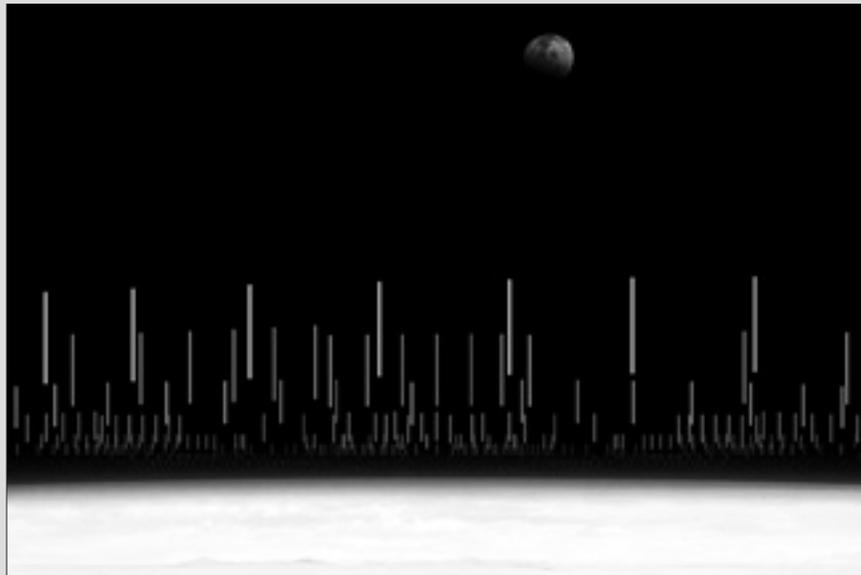
criticized the common practice of reducing existence to the scale of the human in order to maintain a “here-and-now” mindset of one lonely century. one lonely century. As the era of the Anthropocene prepares to witness a dramatic warming of the planet, it seems necessary to at least recognize that the condition of the planet we have come to inhabit, or “life-as-we-know-it,” is a post-glacial affair. The *longue durée* of the post-glacial era is now a concern, a fear, and an open question.

The Anthropocene—a yet-to-be-confirmed stratigraphic designation—speculatively demarcates the trace of a velocity; that is, it imagines the future trace of the rapid changes to the Earth caused by human agents and their harnessed, if unpredictable, forces. Given the incomprehensible scale of the earth, that the aggregate effect of human activity should alter the geology of the planet itself in only a few hundred years is a staggering realization; the consequences are dramatic not least because they offer a golden spike of reconciliation to the once divided languages of nature and culture.⁶

But, in this now untenable divide between nature and culture, where human activity produces not only atmospheric change but also geological transformation, where does architecture appear? Can architecture enter

the Anthropocene? As the construction of perspective, How will architecture frame the infinite by challenging the here-and-now quality inherent in contemporary modes of production. I contend that an architecture driven by the desire to radically inflect the perspective of the human with a geologic sensibility—through narrative, serial production, and atypical successions of scope and purpose phasing in

and out of sequence—can begin also to connect to the cosmos. As Walter Benjamin wrote of the doctrine of antiquity, “They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.”⁷ Perhaps through an architecture of the Anthropocene, the powers of the cosmos might help us discover that to “possess the earth” we must first recognize ourselves as indelibly part of it. ×



Gravitational Construct

A global, celestial columbarium existing as a human order outside of habitable space and time.

Endnotes

- 1 Phillip D. Stern, *Our Space Environment* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).
- 2 Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).
- 3 Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
- 4 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Fontana, 1959).

- 5 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature*, 2013 Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, accessed 15 May 2013, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/486>.
- 6 Jonathon Keats, *Virtual Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 92.

Bio

An architect-in-training, **Thomas Provost** (M.Arch, Detroit) is most often found theorizing the interstices of architecture, geology, and theism in various post-industrial laboratories that expose the discrepancy between the human and superhuman scale. His work is collected at www.11235.ca.