

Critical Zones. Observatories for Earthly Politics

Virtual Opening 22.05.2020

<http://www.zkm.de/en/event/2020/05/virtual-opening-critical-zones>

The planned exhibition *Critical Zones* about the critical state of the Earth coincides with a crisis period for humankind because of the coronavirus pandemic. A new Earthly politics also demands new policies for exhibitions.

Thus the physical *Critical Zones* exhibition currently taking shape on site at the ZKM will be connected to a digital exhibition and to a nonlocal event field in real and virtual space. Starting on 22 May 2020, the exhibition opens with a Streaming Festival lasting several days — the program will consist of streamed tours of the real exhibition and the virtual space, as well as interviews and talks. The ZKM will be a platform for a decentralized, nonlocal event field: it will come to the homes of the audience and as a “home museum” will offer a virtual accompanying program with a wide variety of features. All existing channels — offline and online, real and virtual, analog and digital — will be connected in a novel way to transform an exhibition into a broadcasting program. In this multidimensional, multichannel communication between transmitter and receiver, the aim is to turn receivers into active transmitters. The exhibition will become an echo chamber, a resonating space of symbiotic forms of communication — a response to the symbiotic planet. The recognition that life on planet Earth arises and endures through the symbiosis of all life-forms also demands new modes of communication between human beings.

Critical Zones

Up to now the “globe” has informed our relationship to the Earth. One astronomical body among myriads of others, divided by lines of latitude and longitude, seen from an impossible perspective from outside and at a distance to us, this image describes our relationship to the world we live in: distant, mechanical, and above all controllable.

The *Critical Zones* exhibition takes its point of departure from a change of perspective: it exhorts us to recognize that we don't live *on* the globe, but *within* the critical zone, embedded in its multifarious dynamic processes. The term “critical zone” comes from geoscience and is defined as “Earth's permeable near-surface layer — from the tops of the trees to the bottom of the groundwater. It is a living, breathing, constantly evolving boundary layer where rock, soil, water, air, and living organisms

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Press Contact

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Lorenzstraße 19

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Funded by



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Staatliche Hochschule
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interact”¹, the fragile, and highly reactive “skin” of the planet, in which all life has evolved and created the conditions for sustaining life. Bruno Latour has extended the term into the philosophical dimension where it becomes a critical, participatory relationship of ourselves to our lifeworld, whose threatened state has reached an unprecedented scale in the Earth’s now human-made history.

“We must face up to what is literally a problem of dimension, scale, and lodging: the planet is much too narrow and limited for the globe of globalization; at the same time, it is too big, infinitely too large, too active, too complex, to remain within narrow and limited borders of locality whatsoever.” (Bruno Latour)

The focus of the exhibition is the question of what policies we should pursue to ensure that the Earth remains habitable for us. Here we shall follow Alexander von Humboldt who saw that in nature “Everything is connected” and the groundbreaking scientific work of James Lovelock, originator of the Gaia hypothesis, and of Lynn Margulis, its codeveloper. Lynn Margulis’s research, and her theory of the symbiotic planet in particular, are highly topical reference points to create common ground via new forms of coexistence and politics.

“[...] all life-forms have in common [...] that they have made up their own laws. They don’t obey rules made elsewhere. The key discovery is that life-forms don’t reside in space and time but that time and space is the result of their own entanglement.” (Bruno Latour)

Together with French philosopher Bruno Latour the ZKM has established an observatory — in the mode of a thought exhibition — which on a small scale presents the diversity of life-forms’ relationships on Earth. Exhibition visitors become observers, their behavior modifies the exhibition, and the exhibition’s behavior changes as a result. In this way its behavior can also change the world. In this respect the exhibition serves as a living laboratory to develop, in a transdisciplinary cooperation of innovative scientific and artistic strategies, future potential of knowledge and options for action outside established notions and concepts of “nature” and “ecology.”

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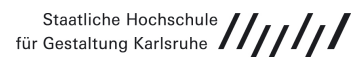
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¹ Definition of the critical zone by the Critical Zone Observatories U.S. NSF National Program

From a Thought Exhibition to a Developing Thought Platform

The coronavirus pandemic has made it imperative to avoid gathering in groups and so the ZKM has decided to exit the closed museum and enter the open space of online communication. This does not mean that the physical space of the exhibition has been abandoned; rather, as of May 22 the material *Critical Zones* exhibition will develop in the Atria of the ZKM to reflect the exigencies of the current political and medical situation, as a process, as propagation. The exhibition will be subject to constant change on a weekly basis as new works are added, new scientists and new artists will be present in person. This exhibition in a state of flux, which develops in tandem with real events, will be connected to a virtual exhibition platform — numerous virtual activities and streamed content on the Net — will also continually grow. Thus *Critical Zones* — in contradistinction to the usual concept of an exhibition — is a growing event field: the temporal habits associated with analog space are transcended to provide anyone-anytime-anywhere options for visits and the possibility to confront and engage with the infosphere of the exhibition.

“As a museum, we are thus departing from the strategy of organizing an exhibition for a local audience a specific venue which is created on the basis of physical mobility. This exhibition addresses an audience that is decentralized and nonlocal on the basis of the immaterial mobility of signs, qua telecommunication. The digital technologies of telecommunication, which have existed for decades now like the personal computer (1980s) and Internet (1990s), will be utilized optimally to generate new forms of knowledge and experience.” (Peter Weibel)

In this way the ZKM reacts to the current critical situation and the critical state of affairs as a whole.

“The injunction to maintain a distance to others and avoid all close personal contact — social distancing — declares the end of near society and points to telecommunication that uses teletechnology (from the Greek tele-: distant, at a distance, far). We have lived for some time now in the telecommunicative society, from talk shows to sporting events. It is high time that we created a new public and a new public sphere, a new res publica: not the masses physically tied to a specific location, but the many individuals located in many different places are our addressees.” (Peter Weibel)

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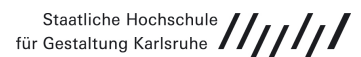
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For the first time in the history of humankind the opportunity exists — due to the current situation — to orient oneself gradually on the concept of a telesociety. In a situation in which inhabitants only encounter one another virtually and not in reality, and their encounters with artworks not only take place in physical space but also in virtual space. How do community, interexchange, and meetings function now? The ZKM wants to seize the opportunity offered by the virtual event field of *Critical Zones* to expand participatory activities to new horizons together with local initiatives and the public. The activation program of the exhibition, consisting of workshops, excursions, tours, dialogues, performances, and other food for thought, can now take on other forms — online, live, streamed. As an experimental platform for virtual activities *Critical Zones* would like to invite its participants to engage in a self-motivated way and explore new forms of the collective.

“The experience that the ZKM has gathered with digital technologies in the twenty years since its web-based exhibition net condition (1999) are now bearing fruit in the critical situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The ZKM confronts political imperative of self-isolation with an artistic digital initiative, with a programmatic digital extension. The current situation has led us to leave our buildings and enter virtual space, and to engage in multidimensional communication. In this situation art exhibits new modes and helps to overcome the fear of losing the near society.” (Peter Weibel)

Curatorial committee: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel with Martin Guinard-Terrin and Bettina Korintenberg

Curatorial advisory board: Alexandra Arènes (architect), Bruce Clarke (literary scholar), Jérôme Gaillardet (geochemist), Joseph Koerner (art historian), Daria Mille (curator) and the Critical Zones Study Group of the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design (HfG)

Exhibition team: Barbara Kiolbassa (museum communication), Jessica Menger (curatorial assistance)

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For more information about the exhibition:
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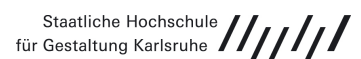
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