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The New York Times
New Work Summit

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*Scientists say we've entered the **'Anthropocene'** — the first geological epoch defined by human impact. But is the only remedy yet more interference? By Wesley Yang*

Only Human

Perhaps you've noticed, amid the hot invective and dry mockery of daily events in your social-media feeds, reports of the glaciers melting at each pole. Arctic ice cover reached record lows this summer and fall, while in Antarctica, we saw the continuing enlargement of an already massive crack in the region's fourth-largest ice sheet, threatening its continued stability. The year 2016 was the hottest ever recorded, surpassing the previous record in 2015, which had in turn exceeded that of the previous hottest year ever recorded, 2014. Just as the world seemed poised to embark on a collective effort to wean itself off dependency on fossil fuels, its leading power elected as president a man who has claimed that global warming is a conspiracy invented by the Chinese and who went on to select as his secretary of state the chairman of Exxon Mobil. The choices they make will shape the future of all planetary life. ¶ Our inability to connect the day's ephemera with the geological time scale has summoned a striking neologism: the Anthropocene — the "Age of Man." Its meteoric rise is a case study in the stubbornness of the problem that the word was

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Brian Lowery was continuously troubled by a persistent dry throat and cough. But a CT scan revealed something far more serious: a walnut sized mass at the base of his tongue. This prompted Brian's local ENT physician to call him even though it was a Saturday night. He said, "You're going to Mount Sinai. Someone will contact you shortly." Brian argued that surely he could receive quality medical attention at his local hospital, but Brian's doctor insisted, "It's Mount Sinai – end of discussion!"

After being referred to the Mount Sinai Head and Neck Institute, the diagnosis was HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)-oral cancer. Doctors met with Brian and reassured him that they were confident on how they would approach his treatment. With its high percentage of success, doctors performed minimally invasive robotic surgery, a specialty at Mount Sinai, to remove his tumor.

OU

DOCTORS SAVED BRIAN

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and bulk up the compost. Thoroughly mingled, the compost was then laid in rows and covered by a fleece blanket to cook; heat killed any pathogens and weed seeds. Twice a week for a month, workers remove the blankets and spider a mechanical windrow turner over the top, fluffing and mixing. After resting for several more months, the compost is fed into a screening machine. About 60 percent of McEnroe's 28,000 tons of finished material nourishes the farm, which raises organic vegetables, grains and pastured meat. The rest, selling for up to $100 a cubic yard, helps balance its books.

The nation's industrialized compost operations bring in roughly $3 billion annually; American firms bought $21.2 billion of conventional fertilizers in 2016. I liked being part of this smaller economy, though. McEnroe's adorable Angus calves and grain-filled silos made it easy to imagine that my waste was circling virtuously, even as I blocked out the miserable labors of the transfer station downstate. The system worked, I liked to think. Compost could scale up; food could return to being food.

Then I got on the phone with Will Brinton, who runs the Woods End Laboratories in Mount Vernon, Me., and has spent his entire career studying the science of rot. Several years ago, Brinton began comparing the costs and benefits of composting food with those of anaerobically digesting it. He assumed that composting would come out on top. But, Brinton said, "I was horrified to see, at the end of the study, that we were investing more carbon in making compost than the compost returned to the earth." All those energy-sucking bulldozers and trucks and augers and screeners were taking their toll. Biogas created by anaerobically digesting corncobs and orange peels, in contrast, was carbon neutral. That's because the plant generates its own energy, and burning the fuel doesn't release new carbon into the atmosphere, as burning oil or coal does; it merely recycles the carbon already inside those scraps. Take the calculations a step further, by subtracting the methane that would have been generated by putting this food waste in landfills, and biofuel could be considered carbon negative.

In recognition of these facts, the Environmental Protection Agency now lists anaerobic digestion as preferable to composting when it comes to surplus food (of course, feeding surpluses to people, followed by animals, is even better). Even the U.S. Composting Council, a trade group, acknowledges anaerobic digestion's beneficial role in producing energy.

AT FIRST, I didn't know what to make of Charles Vigliotti. You seldom hear the words "wealthy" and "composter" strung together. But as he explained his roundabout path to the energy sector, I began to sense Vigliotti's commitment to solving some serious environmental problems, even as he lined his silky pockets.

After city landfills began closing in the 1980s, Vigliotti found he was spending too much money directing waste out of state. He began to move away from the trash business and in 1991 established with his brother Arnold a compost company in Westbury, N.Y., that transforms Himalayas of landscape debris — grass clippings, leaves, wood chips — into millions of bags of lawn and garden products. Business was good, but Vigliotti remained restless. In 1999, he opened a compost site in Yaphank, where in 2008 he began dabbling in food waste, mixing scraps from a Whole Foods Market and a small-batch won-ton manufacturer into his formula for potting soils. At this point, Vigliotti wasn't thinking of food waste as a renewable energy source or a way to reduce the city's far-flung garbage footprint or greenhouse-gas emissions. It was simply a way to take in more volume and thus make more money.

Vigliotti initially composted his food scraps using a basic windrow technology similar to McEnroe's. That was fine for bakery waste and those won tons. But when he began accepting meat, fish, oils and road-killed deer, he ran into trouble: The site now produced eye-watering odors and attracted blankets of gulls. After a multiyear battle with angry locals, who supported organics recycling in theory but had little patience for its stinky reality, Vigliotti and other stakeholders devised a remedy. Instead of composting food in windrows, he would digest it in tanks. But in order to justify the expense of building those tanks, Vigliotti would need to attract more food scraps. And if those came from households in addition to commercial establishments, he would need a lot of fancy equipment to screen out the sort of contaminants that bedeviled Reali's laborers in Queens and Waste Management's workers at Peninsula in Delaware.

THE YAPHANK COMPOST FACILITY.

And so the project grew. Today, American Organic Energy is supported by $45 million in borrowed capital, plus grants from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority ($1.35 million) and Empire State Development ($400,000).

Gazing down from that high bluff of soil in

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