

New Animist Thinking through the Ecological Crisis

An exploration of Ecology, Anthropocentrism and Animism expressed through Art

Name: Marit van der Heijden

Student number: 3989682

First reader: Prof. Toine Minnaert

Second reader: Prof. Rick Dolfijn

Master program: Arts & Society

University: Utrecht University

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*"In the human spirit, as in the universe, nothing is higher or lower;
everything has equal rights to a common centre,
which manifests its hidden existence precisely
through his harmonic relationship between every part and itself."*

Goethe

"Turtles all the way down hedgehogs all the way round."

Graham Harvey

ABSTRACT

Animist thinking could alter our relationship as humans with the more-than-human world. As defined by Graham Harvey, animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. These more-than-human persons could be animals, plants, rocks or trees that are in constant communication with each other and the world around them. In this thesis, I explore how animism expressed through art could contribute to a more ecological worldview by moving beyond Anthropocentric thinking. I build my argument upon the work of Donna Haraway ("We need a new story"), Leigh McKagen ("We need an inclusive story") as well as Graham Harvey and David Abram. The main question I examine is how art could provide a framework through which to express contemporary animism. To explore how art can be utilised as a tool to discuss animism, how art can serve as a tool to translate alternative knowledge and how art can create a connection with the more-than-human through artistic practice, I interview as well as analyse the artworks and art practices of several artists from diverse backgrounds and artistic mediums through an animist frame. Throughout this thesis, I discuss the origin of the term animism and the rise of new or contemporary animism. I explore and how art, storytelling and counter-narratives contribute to the way we shape our reality including our understanding of alternative knowledge. Additionally, I analyse artworks that visualise animism and artworks which require collaboration with the more-than-human and include the importance of connecting with the more-than-human through our senses. Through discussing these themes, this thesis offers an exploration of the way stories shape our reality and how animism expressed through art could increase our connection to the more-than-human world.

KEYWORDS

Animism, new animism, contemporary animism, storytelling, ecocentrism, ecocentric thinking, interconnectivity, more-than-human, indigenous communities, traditional knowledge, alternative knowledge, reciprocity, Anthropocene, Anthropocentric thinking, Chthulucene.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2020), Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the creation tale of her native American tribe Ojibwe.¹ In the telling of this tale, Skywoman fell down from Skyworld, landing on what today is our Earth. Down and further down from the sky she fell, seeing only dark water below her. She was caught into the wings of flying geese who carried her down to the other animals who were gathered in the water. The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council of loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish and a turtle to decide what to do. The woman needed land for her home, and they discussed how they could help her. One of the animals, a little Muskrat, dove to the bottom of the water, where they had heard there was mud. After minutes, he came floating back to the surface, not having survived the journey. But in his hand, he clamped a bit of mud. The turtle said, "Here, put it on my back, and I will hold it." Skywoman smeared the mud across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the gifts of these animals, she sang and danced in thanksgiving on the turtle's back. She danced and danced, and as she did, the dab of mud on Turtle's back grew until a whole earth was made, from the alchemy of all the animal's gifts, coupled with her deep gratitude. Skywoman had brought seeds and spread them over the earth, until they flourished into wild grasses, flowers, trees and medicine. And so the animals, too, had plenty to eat, and many came to live with her on Turtle Island.²

This creation story shows the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth. It describes an intra-active, multi-species relationship with the more-than-human beings in the world. This story holds values of the tribe's beliefs, their history and their relationships with nature based on reciprocity and collaboration. Skywoman thought: "for this gift of a whole earth on Turtle's back, what will I give in return?"³ She created a garden of well-being for all, where everyone could live together and flourish in the process. This creation story is very different from the one told in the West, where Adam and Eve are banished from the garden of Eden for tasting the sweet fruit of the earth. The exile of Eve shows the traces of a broken relationship with land. In Kimmerer's words, it is the "same species, same earth, different stories."⁴ Stories like this one matter for our relationship with nature. To proceed with healing our relationship with the land, we need "re-story-ation"⁵

Animist thinking could alter our relationship as humans with the more-than-human world and contribute positively to the ecological crisis. In *Animism: respecting the living world* (2005), Graham Harvey defines animists as "people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. (London: Penguin Books, 2020).

² Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 1-5.

³ Idem, 8.

⁴ Idem, 7.

⁵ Idem, 9.

that life is always lived in relationship with others”⁶. This offers a worldview whereby the earth is experienced through a state of interconnectedness between the more-than-human and the *Self*. Therefore shifting beyond a worldview of dualist thinking and human exceptionalism by which the human is considered the centre of the universe. Stories from an animist perspective, such as the story of Skywoman, have resulted in a respectful relationship between humans and the natural world. Animists live in constant relation to the world around them, engaging in a worldview of “plurality, multiplicity and entwined, passionate entanglement”⁷. This challenges the Anthropocentric story that divides the world into opposites (*self/other, nature/culture, human/non-human*) and proposes an alternative holistic and sustainable worldview. In animism, the Earth is seen as a person. Additionally, more-than-human persons could be animals, plants, rocks or trees that are in constant communication with each other and the world around them. They have a voice, they have a story that needs to be told.

Art is often utilised to tell stories. Visual, narrative and sensory art can tell stories that we interpret and influence how we shape our reality. Animism is often discussed by anthropology in its relation to culture, but what about art? Art imposes emotional affect, moving beyond linguistics of discourse and reason, focusing on (sub)conscious change in thinking or feeling.⁸ In this thesis, I explore how art from an animist perspective could contribute to an awareness of our interconnectivity between humans and more-than-human beings. I examine this by inquiring how artists express but also create their work from an animist perspective, by interviewing different artists about their vision on this matter and discussing their work. For my theoretical framework, I discuss the work of Donna Haraway (“We need a new story”⁹), Leigh McKagen (“We need an inclusive story”¹⁰), Bruno Latour (“We have never been modern”¹¹) and Graham Harvey (“We have always been animist”¹²). I build my argument upon McKagen’s theory to expand the narrative proposed by Haraway to move away from Anthropocentric thinking, to include the voice of the Earth and critique of modernity especially regarding Indigenous communities. To define animism I build upon the work of Graham Harvey and David Abram. The term animism is ambiguous as it was originally used by anthropologists to name the “belief in spirits” by Indigenous communities as a colonial term.¹³ The term new animism, or contemporary animism

⁶ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2005), xiii.

⁷ Harvey, *Animism*, xxi.

⁸ Mellisa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, *The Affect Theory Reader*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

⁹ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): pp. 159-165, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.

¹⁰ E. Leigh McKagen, “The Stories We Tell: Toward a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene,” *Spectra* 6, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v6i2.a.7>.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹² Graham Harvey, “We Have Always Been Animists.” *Harvard University*. Lecture, November 7, 2019.

¹³ Harvey, *Animism*, xix.

however is considered more positive and generally defined by a belief in other-than-human persons (animals, plants, objects, mountains) resulting in a mutual respect to the more-than human.¹⁴ I elaborate further on these terms in the next chapters.

It is not within the scope of this research to find an all encompassing solution to the ecological crisis, rather it offers an exploration of the way stories shape our reality and how their expression through art could have a positive contribution to the current reality. The main question I am exploring is: *How could art provide a framework through which to express contemporary animism?* The methodology I use is dialogical research, which claims that realities are porous and resonate and interact with one another. By bringing different methods into dialogue with one another I cultivate a multidimensional research to comprehend the complexity of these social and cultural phenomena better. As methods, I use discourse analysis, narrative and visual analysis and qualitative interviews. Firstly, I use discourse analysis to understand the academic discourse around Anthropocentric thinking, the ecological crisis, animism and the relevance of storytelling. This forms the theoretical framework from which I build my argument. I explore the sub questions: *How can art be utilised as a tool to discuss animism? How can art serve as a tool to translate alternative knowledge? How could artists create a connection with the more-than-human through art practice?* To answer these questions, I spoke to artists who work with the topic of animism and ecology, and analysed several artworks through an animist frame. This research is based on their intention, rather than its reception by the audience.

For this thesis, I have interviewed five artists from diverse backgrounds and mediums to discuss their view on this topic. The first artist is Jeisson Castillo, a multidisciplinary artist from Bogota, Colombia who works with Indigenous communities in the Amazon. He uses art, mainly painting, drawing and video to translate messages from more-than-human spirits, in particular plant spirits. The second artist is Alexander Cromer from the United States, who researches the relationship between racism, patriarchy and the exploitation of nature. The third artist is Sophie Steengracht, a painter from the Netherlands who grows her own pigment garden to create natural painting materials for her creation process. The fourth artist is Marit Mihklepp, an Estonian artist who currently works with stones to explore the relationships between the human and the more-than-human. The fifth and final artist is Stephanie Duijnisveld, a Dutch artist living alternatively in the Netherlands and remotely in Norway, who explores the use of education to address art and animism in the current ecological crisis. I chose these artists to create a collection of diverse voices and perspectives on this topic and analyse which connections could be noticed in their visions. In analysing these conversations and their work I found nine connected themes: The importance of reciprocity and offering, the decolonizing of the arts and mind, territory and time, cultural heritage, the connection to racism and patriarchy, the use of language, the importance of actively establishing a connection with the

¹⁴ Harvey, *Animism*, 3.

natural world, art practice as a way to connect, using the senses and finally, art as a tool for education and translation. I discuss these themes in the following chapters.

My thesis is set up as follows. In Chapter 1, I explore the origin of Western dualistic thinking, the rise of the Anthropocene and anthropocentric thinking. I explore how these concepts are interconnected and how they have led to our current ecological crisis. Subsequently, I discuss Donna Haraway's theory of *Staying with the trouble* (2015) on the Chthulucene and define the more-than-human. Then I move on to discuss the feminist critique given by Leigh McKagen in *The Stories We Tell: Towards a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2018). In Chapter 2, I discuss the origin of the term animism and the rise of new or contemporary animism. I discuss the importance of reciprocity and how the artist I spoke to relate to these themes as well as introduce their work. In Chapter 3, I discuss the importance of storytelling, and how art and stories contribute to the way we shape our reality including our understanding of alternative knowledge. In Chapter 4, I discuss the importance of oral storytelling and language, as well as telling counter stories and the use of our senses to establish a connection with the more-than-human. In Chapter 5, I explore examples of artworks that visualise animism and artworks that require collaboration with the more-than-human. Furthermore I discuss art as a tool for translation and education. In the conclusion, I summarise the findings of my research to answer my main question and discuss suggestions for further research.

A WORD ON POSITIONALITY

To write about a subject which relates to Indigenous wisdom requires critical reflection on my own position within this research. I am a white woman from Western descent. My aim is not to speak for Indigenous communities but rather to reflect in a respectful manner on what I as a Western woman can learn from animist expression, without moving into cultural appropriation. When reflecting on Indigenous knowledge, I will take a neo-colonial perspective into consideration. I am working to decolonise my own thinking, to be conscious of my own internal bias and reflect on how to overcome them. I take full responsibility for the unknowing errors that will undoubtedly make from my own ignorance. I can not even begin to describe the atrocities that have been done to Indigenous families and communities. In the past, when research involved knowledge of Indigenous communities colonisers, travellers and researchers believed they were seeing their Indigenous Other through an "objective" and "neutral" gaze.¹⁵ I acknowledge that I will not and can not have a "neutral" gaze. I aim not present my findings as the truth, rather as my personal observations.¹⁶

Additionally, there is no pronoun to use in this thesis that is entirely suited. I use the term 'I' to refer to myself. Generally, when I mention the term 'animist', I refer to anyone living with an animist worldview, not to a specific community. I do not intend to compare Indigenous people and suggest that they are 'the same' or have the same experiences, and neither do all western communities. When I use 'us' I refer to us as humans. On several occasions, I refer to 'we' as Western civilians living in the current Anthropocene or 'we' as an all interconnected more-than-human worldwide community. At times, I use 'them' to describe Indigenous communities. The term 'them' is often related to 'us' versus 'them', thereby implying hierarchy and marginalisation. However, I consciously use 'they/them' as I must acknowledge the past and the neo-colonial differences between me and Indigenous communities. Therefore, when I say 'they', I mean not 'them' who are Other to me, but rather them whose cultural and historical difference I must acknowledge. When I refer to the Earth, I use the pronoun 'she'. To me she is female. I call her Mother Earth. Finally, when I talk about "believing" and "alternative knowledge" I am not separating "those who know" through "proven science" from "those who believe". Rather I acknowledge that there are multiple ways of knowing and believing, and that there are a plurality of truths and realities existing alongside each other.

¹⁵ Sara Johansson, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 34, no. 5 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2013.803731>, 499.

¹⁶ Johansson, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 215.

CHAPTER 1 On Dualistic Thinking, the Anthropocene and Cthulucene

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe, which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious of "world history", but nevertheless, it was only a minute... [Humans regard their intellect] so solemnly - as though the world's axis turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying centre of the universe within himself.

Friedrich Nietzsche (2000, 53)¹⁷

In this chapter, I explain the meaning of Anthropocentric thinking, the origin of Dualist thinking and discuss the theories of Donna Haraway on the more-than-human and becoming-with, as well as Karen McLeigh's feminist perspective on inclusive storytelling in the Anthropocene.

1.1 Anthropocentric Thinking

The Earth we inhabit as human and more-than-human species is in a state of destruction, for which raising awareness is more urgent than ever. Where this earth as a self sustaining planet has operated in a balanced system for billions of years, the exploitation of natural resources has led to climate change, the instability of ecosystems and disappearance of biodiversity. The changes to the Earth's surface have resulted in the first epoch whereby the greatest change on the Earth's environment and biosphere is caused by humans: the *Anthropocene*.¹⁸ The Anthropocene is connected to the idea of the 'modern world', a time in which technical and human development are expanding at an incredible rate. Although generally considered as a time of progress, the danger of these developments is the destruction of our own habitat. The development of the industrial revolution is connected to the destruction of nature, including climate change and the mass extinction of species. Ultimately, the Anthropocene is understood as the time period in which humans are destroying the Earth.

This current epoch comes with a current way of thinking: *Anthropocentrism*. *Anthropocentric thinking* is a view whereby humans are considered central to the world, creating a hierarchical notion of human supremacy and human exceptionalism. Anthropocentric thinking is a consequence of dualistic

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Truth and lies in an extra-moral sense.", in C. Cazeaux (Ed.), *The continental aesthetics reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 53.

¹⁸ Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill. "The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspective." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* <http://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327>.

thinking, creating a separation of human and the more-than-human. This is rooted in hegemonic centrism, a perception of the world which favours an exclusive elite population. Modernity has created a system that aims to organise the world into opposites: us versus them, mind versus matter and nature versus culture. As argued by Adam Weitzfeld and Melanie Joy in *An overview of anthropocentrism, humanism, and speciesism in critical animal theory* (2014) an *anthropocentric orientation* is inescapable to some degree because as humans we perceive the world through our human bodies and cognition. *Anthropocentrism* however, is more the consequence of privileging humans' knowledge and values.¹⁹ In the Anthropocene, humans are central to the use of the earth's resources and responsible for the exploitation of natural-bodies, animal bodies and human-bodies. This is the historical outcome of a distorted humanism in which human freedom is founded upon the unfreedom of human and animal others, creating a reality that is infused with speciesism.²⁰ Empathy for the land has been traded for efficiency, resulting in a self-destructive way of thinking about our world that deems the more-than-human less worthy and therefore exploitative. Anthropocentrism favours a human "us", and fundamentally intersects with hegemonic practices and perceptions that privilege men (androcentrism) and white people (Eurocentrism). It therefore relates to intersectional environmentalism, the suppression of nature and females, which is currently gaining increasing attention especially regarding the connection to our Mother Earth. Anthropocentrism is the opposite of ecocentrism, which envisions a nature-centred, rather than human-centred system of values. The decentering of the human, is what Richard Grusin calls the *non-human turn*.²¹

1.2 A Brief History of Dualist Thinking

In *Becoming Animal: an Earthly Cosmology* (2010), David Abram argues that the way modernists created a distinction between matter and spirit has certified human domination over the rest of nature.²² The idea that "animals, plants and nature were composed of mechanical matter, and God consisted of mind, whereas humans alone were a mixture of both"²³ has been part of human thought since the work of Descartes.²⁴ Since the Enlightenment, human beings have considered themselves the centre of existence, disregarding the presence of a more-than-human God, attributing knowledge, reason and consciousness exclusively to

¹⁹ Steffen, Grinevalt, Trutzen and McNeill, *The Anthropocene*, 3.

²⁰ Idem, 1.

²¹ Harvey, "We Have Always Been Animists.", 2019.

²² David Abram, *Becoming Animal: an Early Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 47.

²³ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 103.

²⁴ Idem, 103.

humans.²⁵ ²⁶ When the 'soul' was no longer taken into consideration, it created another dichotomy in Western philosophy: the brain or mind versus the rest of the body.²⁷

After Descartes famously stated '*I think therefore I am*', Spinoza opposed the assumption that awareness was only possessed by humans, saying that "we could never reconcile with the human body unless intelligence was recognised as an attribute of nature in its entirety."²⁸ Spinoza acknowledged a connection between our experiences and our bodily awareness. Since then, many writers have been inspired by the idea of reciprocity, the exchange of mutual benefit between humans and the natural world. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991)²⁹, Bruno Latour writes how we have tried hard as humans to keep our imagined separation between nature and culture alive. However, the reality is that the connection of humans and the natural-world is undeniable. Abram asks if we "shall prolong the painful split between mind and body by continuing to neglect our carnal entanglement with this immerse Presence, or shall we finally heal that age-old wound by acknowledging Earth's implicit involvement in all our experience."³⁰ If we recognise that our bodies are intertwined with the earth, then the individual bodies and mind together can be experienced by the animate Earth itself, becoming-with each other in an interconnected reality.³¹

1.3 Haraway: We Need A Different Story

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin In The Chthulucene* (2012)³², Donna Haraway explains that we need a new story. That we need to engage in a collaboration with the more-than-human, engaging in multi-species relationships to be connected in reciprocity in order to move forward out of this ecological crisis. As an alternative to Anthropocentric thinking, Haraway explains the importance of a counter narrative to the dominant Anthropocentric story. In order to reach this reality, Haraway describes the process of *becoming-with*. Both humans and more-than-humans need to become-with one another, to engage in a relationship of mutual trust set in a multi-species collaboration. Becoming-with means to move toward a world where we live *interdependent* of each other and acknowledge this interconnectivity. To acknowledge that we depend on each other as plants, bacteria, animals and more-than-humans. We come together in an intertwined organic ecosystem that is greater than ourselves, entangled in interconnected matter. Becoming-with

²⁵ Steffen, Grinevald, Trutzen and McNeill, *The Anthropocene*, 3.

²⁶ Idem, 5.

²⁷ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 104.

²⁸ Idem, 107.

²⁹ Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

³⁰ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 126.

³¹ Idem, 127.

³² Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

acknowledges the interconnectedness of all more-than-human beings on this interconnected physical earth. We are what we are because bacteria and other beings make us who we are. These are the stories we need to re-tell.

In addition, Haraway uses the metaphor of *tentacular thinking*, which acknowledges the interdependence of our thoughts in interspecies collaboration. Tentacular thinking is a way of thinking that considers all parts of the world an integral, interconnected system. Everything is connected and influences each other in cause and effect. "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories."³³ Haraway uses tentacular thinking to explain the entanglement of species: a network of tentacles through which by feeling or sensing, all species collaborate and think together. To Haraway, we need to move towards an alternative of the Anthropocene which she calls the Chthulucene. The Chthulucene is an epoch in which humans and the more-than-human work together in an entangled, multi-species collaboration of mutual trust. It does not refer to an alternative moment in time, but rather to a paradigm shift in the way we relate to our current world. "Diverse human and non-human players are necessary in every fibre of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story."³⁴ Haraway calls upon storytellers, poets and artists to manifest this reality together, stating that "it matters which stories we use to think stories with."³⁵

According to Haraway we must learn to tell *Gaia stories*, stories of the living earth.³⁶ The Gaia hypothesis is a theory developed by James Lovelock, which describes the earth as a super-organism with a self sustaining system.³⁷ This theory offers a scientific explanation of the earth as a sentient, living system making choices to regulate its own biosphere. This theory is new and yet to be further developed. However, it resonates with thinking of the earth as Mother Earth or Pachamana, a sentient being with a mind and soul of its own as well as influence over her own destiny. In mythical stories, Gaia is the goddess of the Earth. According to Haraway, "those who tell Gaia stories or geo stories are the "Earthbound", those who unscrew the dubious pleasures of transcendent plots of modernity and the purifying division of society and nature."³⁸ To understand that we are an interdependent, entangled ecosystem we must collaborate as one. This interspecies interconnectivity is reflected in the animist stories that we should tell to move away from

³³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 35.

³⁴ Idem, 55.

³⁵ Idem, 35.

³⁶ Idem, 40.

³⁷ Lovelock, James E. *Gaia a New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016.

³⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 41.

Anthropocentric thinking. In Haraway's words, "we must change the story, the story must change."³⁹ If we consciously change our current story and tell stories of more-than-human entities that we are in contact with, this will influence which stories are told in the future and enable us to change our reality. Ecology, as Haraway discusses, refers to *deep ecology*, which is inherently animistic. In contrast with *shallow ecology*, a human centred form of ecology whereby we want to save the environment because it is good for ourselves, deep ecology looks for a deeper unity with life by identifying itself with the natural world, to know the pain of the natural world and its inhabitants.⁴⁰ However, ecofeminists' and indigenous' critique of deep ecology is that humans aim to speak for the more-than-human rather than listen and offer an inclusive story.

1.4 McKagen: We Need An Inclusive Story

In *The Stories We Tell: Towards a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene*, Leigh McKagen extends Haraway's argument to account for the remaining legacies of imperialism and globalisation that generally go unexplored in Haraway's narrative. She examines the origins of the Anthropocene, also referred to as 'the modern world', writing that a working definition of "modernity" is "the ability to create power."⁴¹ This power is literally created by the invention of the steam engine in the later part of the 18th century. However it also includes "power over human beings, power over nature, and intellectual power over nature."⁴² Current debates argue whether the Anthropocene began with the rise of European imperialism and colonisation in the New World in the 16th century, when technology enabled the European project of imperial domination, including the harm of indigenous communities. "In other words", McKagen writes, "we define a society as modern when they have the technological power to dominate."⁴³

McKagen critiques Haraway for rarely taking into account the conditions that created the Anthropocene as part of the necessary response to overcome the crisis. According to McKagen "the stories we tell shape the world around us, and (...) understanding the history behind those stories is vital in moving forward in this time of environmental crisis."⁴⁴ McKagen critiques that by "staying" with the trouble, Haraway contradicts her own principle of *ongoingness*, arguing that we need to understand our past in order to live within the present and move towards an equal future. She addresses the importance to include

³⁹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 40.

⁴⁰ Harvey, *Animism*, 182.

⁴¹ McKagen, *Stories We Tell: Toward a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene*, 7.

⁴² Idem, 7.

⁴³ Idem, 7.

⁴⁴ Idem, 2.

critiques of modernity, especially those exploring neo-colonial and Indigenous concerns.⁴⁵ To McKagen, Haraway fails to discuss the issue of imperial and racist histories that are important to understand the present and leaves out one voice in the multi species narrative: that of the Earth itself. McKagen writes that:

By gaining an awareness of the earth itself, and earth-beings driven into silence through the process of imperialism and modernisation, it is possible to expand Haraway's call for multi species collaboration into one that considers the earth itself as a key player (and victim) in the Anthropocene. And barring catastrophic disaster, the earth is most likely survival of the present precarity: we would do well to take this amazing 'critter' into our new narratives of response.⁴⁶

McKagen offers other explorations of narratives of modernity to more clearly articulate a new narrative that decanters the human in this era of ecological crisis.⁴⁷ McKagen's work relates to that of Timothy Morton who addresses that "race, gender and environmentally are deeply intertwined"⁴⁸ explaining that "the struggle against racism is the struggle against speciesism. The struggle against racism is thus also part of the de-anthropocentrization project."⁴⁹ In McKagen's words:

Collaboration with other voices critical of modernity helps fill in the gaps of Haraway's manifesto to create the framework for new stories that can achieve collaborative multi *being* responsibility within the ruins of the Anthropocene while retaining full awareness of how we got to this point and attempting to create something new from the compost piles of the present.⁵⁰

We need an inclusive story if we want to move past the dichotomy of self and other, the exploitative nature of imperialism and the exploitation of the more-than-human world. In the words of Harvey, we need to rephrase the Anthropocene as "the age when the earth answers back at the very moment the human appears to silence it."⁵¹ In the next chapter, I explore what animism is and how it could contribute to an ecological worldview.

⁴⁵ McKagen, *Stories We Tell: Toward a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene*, 11.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, 6.

⁴⁷ *Idem*, 7.

⁴⁸ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2019), 11.

⁴⁹ Morton, *Humankind*, 136.

⁵⁰ McKagen, *Stories We Tell: Toward a Feminist Narrative in the Anthropocene*, 11.

⁵¹ Harvey, *Animism*, 5.

CHAPTER 2 On Animism and Reciprocity

In a play on Latour's words, Graham Harvey, one of the most influential writers on animism said that "We have always been animist"⁵² In a 2019 lecture, he said that "we've all learned how to be animists because we are all in relationships all the time, whether you like it or not, with other species."⁵³ In this chapter, I further discuss the meaning of animism, contemporary animism and reciprocity. Additionally, I introduce the artists whom I interviewed and their work.

2.1 Defining Animism

The term *animism* is open-ended, subject to change and used as a label for different cultural phenomena. In *The Handbook for Contemporary Animism* (2014), Harvey writes that "'Animism' does not label only one explanation but identifies competing efforts to understand the world."⁵⁴ The term animism is considered ambiguous, and much debated within the academic field. It began as an insult to Indigenous communities and a colonial usage.⁵⁵ Harvey describes how Edward Taylor, often considered as the founder of anthropology, defined animism as a 'belief in spirits.' It was considered as a 'confusion' about life or death or the existence of non-empirical beings, among Indigenous people, young children or religious people.⁵⁶ Animism became connected with false believe rather than truths and mistaken ideas rather than knowledge, and can therefore have a negative connotation. However, the term *new animism* or *contemporary animism* separates itself from the colonial term whilst still inhabiting the idea of respectful relationships with the more-than-human world. In the West, there is a rise of this new animist belief system, offering an alternative to the modernist Western culture that sustains a separation of humans and nature.⁵⁷ This newer usage of the term animism refers to "a concern with knowing how to behave appropriately towards persons, not all of whom are human."⁵⁸ It is considered as a more respectful and increasingly 'popular' alternative way of relating to the world.

In *Animism, respecting the living world* (2005) Harvey defines animists as "people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship

⁵² Harvey, "We Have Always Been Animists.", 2019.

⁵³ Idem, 2019.

⁵⁴ Graham Harvey, *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 6.

⁵⁵ Harvey, *Animism*, xiii.

⁵⁶ Idem, xiii.

⁵⁷ Idem, xviii.

⁵⁸ Idem, xviii

with others.”⁵⁹ To Abram, new animism could support new ways of thinking about what it means to be human, interacting differently with the larger-than-human community.⁶⁰ Animist ontology is not about believing about the world, but of being in it. To be alive in the world is characterised by “a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux (...) continuously reciprocal bringing each other into existence.”⁶¹, resonating with Haraway’s theory on string figures and inter-species collaboration. According to Harvey, animism could contribute to current debates on consciousness, environments and ethics as it offers an alternative to the modernist Western culture that exploits other persons by allowing the exploitation of animal and natural bodies.⁶² As Abram describes, some suggest that being exploitative to the rest of nature is part of being human. However, Indigenous cultures often have solidarity with other species that inhabit the lands, only taking the necessities without disrupting replenishment.⁶³

As discussed before, where modernity categorises the world in opposites, animism doesn’t think in conflicting dualities. There is no separation of us/them, male/female, light/dark, spiritual/physical, mind/matter, human/non human, self/other. Animism arises from a respectful learning that boundaries are permeable, and opposites are always engaged with each other. It is a worldview of entwined entanglements, a relational epistemology that is about knowing the world from a related point of view. The animal body is seen as a source of knowledge. Many people from literary cultures speak *about* the natural world, whereas many indigenous, oral people speak *directly* to that world. Acknowledging that plants, animals and landforms are expressive subjects or other-than-human-persons, which they can engage in conversation with. Talking is a conversation whereas speaking is one sided. “It is the animate earth that speaks; human speech is but part of that discourse.”⁶⁴ For animists, “lands are animate, they are agents in their own right. So are the songs, ceremonies, paintings, sacred stones etc in which they transform themselves.”⁶⁵ Language as spoken or written symbols of expression, is therefore not considered solely for humans, but also for the animate earth.⁶⁶ Abram argues that we “must return to our sensory experience to

⁵⁹ Harvey, *Animism*, xiii.

⁶⁰ Idem, xiii.

⁶¹ Idem, xii.

⁶² Idem, xviii.

⁶³ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 63.

⁶⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 108.

⁶⁵ Harvey, *Animism*, 72.

⁶⁶ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 11.

understand this sense of astonishment of the earth, to honour, encourage and enhance the reciprocity between the human animal and the more-than-human-land."⁶⁷

2.2 Reciprocity

When describing the mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the natural world, we use the term *reciprocity*. Reciprocity is the reward of positive action with another positive action, rewarding kindness. Haraway discusses reciprocity when describing interspecies collaboration. Kimmerer writes about her relationship of reciprocity with the Earth, whereby the food she receives, and the care she gives to her garden are all considered as a gift exchange filled with gratitude. She asks the question; "What would it be like to be raised in gratitude, to speak to the natural world as a member of the democracy of species, to raise a pledge of *interdependence*?"⁶⁸ Born in a Native American community in Canada, Kimmerer grew up with traditional knowledge of plants of her ancestors but was forced to leave these thoughts behind once she became a botanical scientist. It took her some time to return to the roots of her grandparents, who were forced to leave their native land and stop speaking their native language. Kimmerer writes stories to connect with her Indigenous wisdom and knowledge of plants, merging science and spirit. One of the activities she discusses is gift giving and receiving, which establishes a relationship of reciprocity between humans and the natural world. We receive from the earth, and must pay respect to show gratitude. Kimmerer explains: "In Western thinking, private land is understood to be "a bundle of rights", whereas in a gift economy property has a "bundle of responsibilities" attached."⁶⁹ Similar to Haraway's statement that it matters which stories tell stories, Kimmerer says that "The stories we choose to shape our behaviours have adaptive consequences."⁷⁰ Kimmerer:

The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But is it just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one. One of these stories sustains the living systems on which we depend. One of these stories opens the way to living in gratitude and amazement at the richness and generosity of the world. One of these stories asks us to bestow our own gifts in kind, to celebrate our kinship with the world. We can choose.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 63

⁶⁸ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 112.

⁶⁹ Idem, 28.

⁷⁰ Idem, 30.

⁷¹ Idem, 31.

Kimmerer asks the question, “how, in the modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again?”⁷²

2.3 Discussing Animism with the Artists

Each of the artists I interviewed related to the term animism in their own way. Visual artist Sophie Steengracht is interested in mythology, magic realism, transformation and the intertwinement of man and nature. Her drawings, paintings and sculptures feature mythical creatures, flora, fauna, the earth and the sky. Steengracht related to the word animism as a way of being in the world: “I want to express what I perceive, that all that surrounds me is alive and in a constant state of flux. That all the particles are living. And even seemingly not living things contain an essence of life which is crucial for other things to exist. This is what I observe around me. That everything moves and everything is alive and connected as well. One thing cannot exist without the other. Especially in natural phenomena, like plants and soil and animals.”⁷³ Even though she resonates with the word and meaning of animism, she doesn’t like having it as a label as she prefers to keep her work open to interpretations.⁷⁴



Figure 1: Steengracht



Figure 2: Steengracht



Figure 3: Steengracht

Stephanie Duijnsveld is a visual artist who makes paintings, wooden constructions and collections of small objects to form installations. She created an art and education project where art, education and ecology are brought together in an open studio space. Duijnsveld regularly stays in Tromsø, Norway for artistic research on how people can rediscover and truly feel that they are part of the natural world. Duijnsveld aims to translate the feeling of reciprocity through her artwork: “Everything on earth is

⁷² Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 31.

⁷³ Sophie Steengracht. Interview with Sophie Steengracht. 18th March, 2021.

⁷⁴ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

interconnected and any belief that we are separate from other life forms including the earth and stars is pure delusion. We exist because of these elements and these nature beings. Art can visualise this world view and inspire people to relate to different things or to other beings. For me it's the only way I can look at the world."⁷⁵



Figure 3: Duijnsveld



Figure 4: Duijnsveld



Figure 5: Duijnsveld

Jeisson Castillo is a Colombian artist and visual researcher who has immersed himself in the ancestral wisdom of Indigenous communities in Colombia. He combines painting, performance, video, magic and anthropological research to create bridges with life in these territories. In particular, he explores the handling of plants and sacred entities to endow his images with spirit. Castillo has traveled extensively in the Colombian Amazon where he worked with different Indigenous peoples who persevered the safeguarding of their traditions and territories. When discussing the term animism with Castillo, he said: "Here in the Amazon, in Indigenous communities, we talk about it. We don't have a word for it but it is a



Figure 7: Castillo



Figure 8: Castillo



Figure 9: Castillo

⁷⁵ Stephanie Duijnsveld. Interview with Stephanie Duijnsveld. 25th March, 2021.

very central topic in the lives of the people.”⁷⁶ The closest word he used to animism is cosmo-politics. “Politics being the relations between people - about power or agreements. Cosmo-politics is more expansive. Because it’s not just between people. It’s between people and plants, people and elements of nature, people and spirits. It’s all of the cosmos. The Universe. We understand the relationship of people that have the knowledge on how to connect. The shamans, the grandmothers or people who have this harmonious relationship.”⁷⁷ In this thesis, I use the word animism to include this description of cosmo-politics, the process to connect and have a harmonious relationship with the natural world.

Alexander Cromer is a writer and performance artist who uses alternative research methods to create and produce performances, talks, music, and other experiences. He discussed the relationship between animism and object orientated ontology, whereby everything is considered an object: “Humans, houses or trees are objects. Even thoughts, heavens, ideas or time frames are objects in the sense that these objects are more than the sum of their parts and cannot be reduced to a single thing.”⁷⁸ His reflection is what story these more-than-human objects are telling, and how we can relate to that. To Cromer, storytelling, confrontation and dialogue are key to establishing a relationship with the more-than-human. He is a fan of using fiction as a means of uncovering counter narratives, establishing relationships and developing new methods of interaction with the earth. He is currently working on a project in which he explores the relationship that the Arctic has with the middle passage in connection to slave trade and Blackness.⁷⁹

Lastly, Marit Mihklepp related to animism as a way to create a relationship with a specific environment and beings inhabiting these places. Mihklepp often works with stones in her art practice, collaborating with them and inviting the audience to relate to them by listening to them or feeling their resonance. Mihklepp is an Estonian artist based in the Netherlands. Her works explore the existing and



Figure 10: Mihklepp

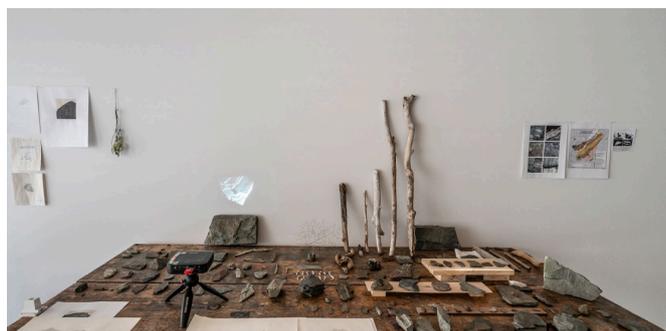


Figure 11: Mihklepp

⁷⁶ Castillo, interview, 2021.

⁷⁷ Idem, 2021.

⁷⁸ Alexander Cromer. Interview with Alexander Cromer. 19th March, 2021.

⁷⁹ Cromer, interview, 2021.

speculative communication systems between humans and other-than-humans, often using instructions and objects to be activated by the audience. She is interested in how collaborative practices with stones, bacteria, everyday objects open spaces for alternative understandings of human life, less based on possession and power. Lately, she has exhibited pieces investigating the differences of time perception between human and stone bodies. To Mihklepp, animism is connected to the senses and tuning the attention towards the more or less alive, including geologic bodies. As a child, she was often alone, playing with stones, bugs and snails in her grandparents garden, feeling like they were also part of her family. When speaking to these artists, I found both similarities and differences in their visions and practice. In the next chapters I explore the expression of animism through art and relate each theme to the exchanges with these artists.

CHAPTER 3 On Alternative Knowledge

In this chapter I discuss Indigenous knowledge and its translation through art. I discuss the importance and ambiguity of aiming to avoid cultural appropriation. In addition, I consider the importance of time and place to these topics.

3.1 Defining Indigenous and Alternative Knowledge

The term *Indigenous* is problematic as it aims to collectivise distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been very different. To define what I refer to with Indigenous in this thesis, I turn to Francesco Mauro and Preston Hardison's *Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous and Local communities: International Debate and Policy Initiatives* (2000):

The current definition of Indigenous people most accepted in the international framework includes parts of all of the following elements: self-identification as indigenous; descent from the occupants of a territory prior to an act of conquest; possession of a common history, language and culture regarded by customary laws that are distinct from national cultures; possession of a common land; exclusion or marginalisation from political decision-making; and claims for collective and sovereign rights that are unrecognised by the dominating and governing group(s) of the state. Of these, self-identification is central.⁸⁰

Animist worldview has been embodied in Indigenous knowledge throughout history.⁸¹ Indigenous peoples are demanding the respect and support of scientists, for cultural diversity and Indigenous knowledge to be treated equally to Western scientific knowledge. There is a hierarchy whereby Indigenous or alternative knowledge has often been disregarded, being framed as "ideas", "beliefs" or "non-scientific due to its different systems of knowledge production."⁸² Indigenous communities know that the use of their traditional knowledge is needed for survival, both culturally and through the maintenance of healthy ecosystems. Much of the world's biodiversity occurs on traditional Indigenous territories, and can be protected if the close

⁸⁰ Francesco Mauro and Preston D. Hardison, "Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous and Local Communities: International Debate and Policy Initiatives," *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): pp. 1263-1269, [https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761\(2000\)010\[1263:tkoial\]2.0.co;2](https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761(2000)010[1263:tkoial]2.0.co;2), 1264.

⁸¹ Harvey, *Animism*, xxiv.

⁸² Idem, xv.

interdependence between culture and ecosystems are maintained.⁸³ Kimmerer wrote that “for all of us, becoming Indigenous to a place means living as if your children’s future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depend on it.”⁸⁴ Kimmerer describes how her ancestors were removed from their land three times, and lost their language, knowledge and names along the trails.⁸⁵ In Kimmerer’s words, “The Indian removal policies separates us from our traditional knowledge and life ways, the bones of our ancestors, our sustaining plants.”⁸⁶ We need to be critical to the ways knowledge is evaluated and taught, and the frame in which they are produced.⁸⁷ The knowledge we believe is always a story. Knowledge is not static. We choose, or be taught, to listen to the stories of traditional knowledge, Eastern or Western medicine, or “proven” science. Once again, it matters which stories we use to tell and think other stories with. It is important to note that throughout this thesis, when discussing alternative knowledge I also refer to traditional Western or European knowledge that challenges the dominant modernist thought and invites a reconnection to ancient wisdom and our ancestral roots. In “*Animism*” revisited. *Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology* (1999), David Nurit-Bird writes that:

“Knowing, grows from and is maintaining relatedness with neighbouring others. It involves individuating the environment rather than dichotomising it and turning attention to “we-ness”, which absorbs differences, rather than to “otherness”, which highlights differences and eclipses commonalities. Against, “I think, therefore I am”, stand “I relate, therefore I am and “I know as I relate.”⁸⁸

Nurit-Bird explains that knowing is connected with perceiving, as attention is educated, by means of “aids of perceiving” such as stories, words and pictures.⁸⁹ Stories are therefore also systems of knowledge production. Therefore, storytelling is a great tool to decolonize our mind and understand alternative knowledge, through sharing an alternative perspective.

⁸³ Francesco Mauro and Preston D. Hardison, “Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous and Local Communities: International Debate and Policy Initiatives,” *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): pp. 1263-1269, [https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761\(2000\)010\[1263:tkoial\]2.0.co;2](https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761(2000)010[1263:tkoial]2.0.co;2), 1267.

⁸⁴ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 9.

⁸⁵ Idem, 13.

⁸⁶ Idem, 16.

⁸⁷ Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose. “Lively ethnography Storying Animist Worlds”. *Environmental Humanities*, University of South Wales, Australia, 86.

⁸⁸ Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited,” *Current Anthropology* 40, no. S78 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1086/200061>.

⁸⁹ Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited”, S74.

3.2 Cultural Appropriation

When discussing Indigenous knowledge, and in this case its relation to art, it raises the questions how to avoid cultural appropriation: the unacknowledged adoption of customs, practices or ideas of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society. In *Amazonian pain, Indigenous Ontologies and Western Eco-Spirituality* (2012), Wolfgang Kapfhammer rightly asks if thinking about the cosmologies of marginalised cultures in order to “animate” or “re-animate” hegemonic Western cosmology is not just another abuse of Indigenous cultures.⁹⁰ I discussed this ambiguity with the artists and their main reply was the importance of being humble. It seems clear that continuous self reflection is needed to prevent unintended harm.

Castillo, who works with Indigenous communities and plant teachers, described the importance of understanding that the knowledge that is shared through us is not for us. We as humans are only the medium to pass on information from the spirit world. His main importance is to constantly ask ourselves: “What do I want to do with this information? Is it only for research or is it also a way to reflect within myself?”⁹¹ According to Castillo, Indigenous communities are slowly starting to share their sacred information, as they see communities worldwide are trying to reconnect to their traditional knowledge. Castillo: “In Europe and the States, the colonial process of “progress” killed all this information. But now people are looking for this information in other territories, asking themselves: what happened here? How can we reconnect? And this information starts to activate some questions: What are our sacred places? What are our plants? What is the way to have a relationship with the beings of the river, or the sea, or the mountains. This is a very important process everywhere.”⁹² According to Castillo, we have work to do in this lifetime, to learn and understand our relationship to each other. In addition, he addressed that culture is not static but always dynamic and we are therefore appropriating culture from each every day. To him, the question is what we appropriate and why.⁹³

Duijnisveld who spends her time between the Netherlands and Norway mentioned the importance to honour the source and not place the theme that is discussed out of context, but similarly look at what binds us as natural beings and earthly creations. Duijnisveld: “Our [European] ancestors also had nature based religions, but it has been hidden. We have to heal all these processes as European women and men. And unfortunately there is still stigma about it.”⁹⁴ Both artists mention the re-establishment of our

⁹⁰ Wolfgang Kapfhammer, “Amazonian Pain. Indigenous Ontologies and Western Eco-Spirituality.”, (*INDIANA* 29, 2012), 152.

⁹¹ Castillo. Interview, 2021.

⁹² Interview Jeisson.

⁹³ Idem, 2021.

⁹⁴ Duijnisveld, interview, 2021.

connection to the natural world as our work for this generation of humans on earth, and art as a tool to translate this invitation to reconnect. To tell these stories, is to engage with human and more-than-human persons and to share the wisdom that their knowledge brings. It can be a way to visualise and restore Indigenous knowledge that is threatened to be lost. Castillo spoke of the traditional knowledge that is stored within the arts of Indigenous communities. Colombian art is in the West often considered as crafts. However, these artworks, which could be basketry, painting or architecture, hold sacred information about the world. They represent complex ideas about the universe and the relationship with nature, and the relationship between the history and the spirits. These relationships are what Castillo is translating through his painting, drawings and other representations.

Another artistic tool that could be used to preserve and visualise traditional knowledge, culture and arts is film. For example, in the participatory film project *Voices of the Caribou people*, Indigenous communities collaborated with filmmakers to document their traditional knowledge for future generations⁹⁵ The filmmakers found that film was a useful method to preserve and access community knowledge “because the audiovisual medium aligns with how these Indigenous people teach and learn, by watching, listening, speaking and following.”⁹⁶ The films they made shared understanding of Caribou ecology, their community lifestyle and the challenges they found relating to the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge.⁹⁷ This way, art can be a tool to preserve knowledge whilst avoiding cultural appropriation, by keeping it in ownership of the communities themselves. Additionally, *The Ceibo Alliance* has been teaching Indigenous communities in the Amazon how to tell their own stories through film.⁹⁸ This organisation conjoins different Indigenous tribes of the Amazon to fight the destruction of the rainforest together. As part of their work, they are training local youth to make their own videos and share their stories about their life, culture and their fight against corporations invading their land. These films not only share the story of their struggle and advocate for the importance of the rainforest, they also preserve traditional knowledge by filming the Indigenous elders as they explain traditional plant knowledge or the making of traditional arts and crafts. This way, art is utilised as a tool to share valuable knowledge on traditional arts and ecology practices.

⁹⁵ Bali and Kofinas, “Voices of the Caribou People”, 2.

⁹⁶ Idem, 9.

⁹⁷ Idem, 10.

⁹⁸ Harvey, *Animism*, xxi.

3.3 Connecting To Our Territories

When discussing traditional knowledge and arts as part of our relationship to the natural world, each of the artists mentioned territory, time and making offerings as a way to connect to our own roots. These themes are interconnected with animist thinking, whereby we relate to places and more-than-human beings that have been here longer than us as humans. Several of the artists described the relationship to the earth as an agreement of reciprocity. Castillo focussed on reciprocity through giving offerings to the natural world and receiving healing or prosperity in return. To Castillo, spirituality can be defined as our relation with the Universe, with life and with the invisible beings and energy that surround us.⁹⁹ He explained that we need to make offerings to show our respect and keep a balance between humans and spirits of the world.¹⁰⁰ This is one of the processes he aims to translate through his art. Castillo offers materials through a ceremonial practice, which could be gold or plants depending on each individual territory. He performs these rituals the way his grandparents and ancestors used to do, as they are a sacred part of traditional knowledge and must be maintained and revised to explore our new relationship with the natural world. In Castillo's artwork, he often draws the keepers of certain places and territories. By visualising these spirits, others can relate to his understanding of the spirit world. Steengracht additionally discussed the difference between European and Western representations of nature, whereby in the West, nature is often represented as something dominated by humans. However in Peru for example, many patterns of traditional weavings entail symbols of snakes, the clouds, suns or moon, natural beings with agency and importance in daily and spiritual life. Additionally, in Nepal for example, the mountains are a grand part of artworks and the daily life of the people.¹⁰¹ According to Castillo, the traditional knowledge of our territories that has been lost through imperialism, still resides in our cellular memory and he considered art as a way to translate and visualise this knowing, through craftsmanship, visual arts, or performing ceremonies.¹⁰²

Castillo additionally discussed the arts as a way to address the exploitation of territories. Referring to Colombia and the Amazon, he said: "Our territories are destroyed because the people of the North need to stay comfortable in their houses. The cost of this is that another territory is explored, mined and raging with wars. Art can show this part of the story."¹⁰³ To Castillo, it is important to establish connections with each place in the world, but particularly to our own roots, saying: that "we are a global community, but within this global community, there are specific ways to reconnect in different territories with its own

⁹⁹ Castillo, interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Idem, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

¹⁰² Idem, 2021.

¹⁰³ Idem, 2021.

traditions, cultures and materials for offering.”¹⁰⁴ Castillo draws a connection with the Indigenous communities in Europe from the past, addressing how their knowledge too have been killed in the colonial process, by the Romans and Christians. According to Castillo: “This knowledge didn’t disappear. It will be kept in some places. In the mountains, in the plants, maybe in orality. We need to reconnect with this. To look at the rivers, the forests, the mountains, and ask ourselves: how can we offer? What materials can we use for offering? This is homework that this generation of Europeans have in this time. This work is for all people.”¹⁰⁵ The key here is to connect to our own roots, the roots of our ancestors and that of the natural world we are inheritable connected too.

More of the artists mentioned the influence of their grandparents or their ancestors in establishing their relationship to the natural world, and translating this into their artworks. Steengracht mentioned her grandparents from whom she learned to connect to her own territory during her childhood: “After traveling to different places, I felt a bit as if I was acting this colonial act. Going away, finding beautiful stuff, taking it back and in a way appropriating it. And I felt that instead I needed to be in connection with the soil where I am from and respect it. To show people that the Dutch nature is equally beautiful and important to cherish.”¹⁰⁶ This connection with our own territory is also mentioned by Mihklepp explaining that in every relationship you change the place where you go to but you also are changed by the place. To her the key is not to look for the most natural, pristine landscape, but find this connection also in the soil below your feet, or a plant in your garden. If we look, this connection can be found all around us. Furthermore, time plays a key role in the relation of arts and the natural world. For example, Mihklepp works with various stones in her art process. These stones carry multiple layers of different times in their bodies - so unlike the time scale of humans. Cromer works with research on the Arctic, which contains information on the different layers of time of the atmosphere. He considers it really poetic how the arctic contains this natural archive of the world.¹⁰⁷ The indigenous knowledge of our world is kept in our soil, in our ice, in our plants. And each of the artists connect with this indigenous, timeless wisdom in their creation process.

By connecting to the soil, the stones, the plant spirits or the particular plants of a territory in the art work and creation process, each of these artists connects deeply to a natural place and to the animist world. Indigenous or alternative knowledge offers an alternative to the dogmatic scientific knowledge of the West, and can be visualised, expressed and preserved through art. In the next chapter I discuss the importance of storytelling in sharing this way of animist thinking.

¹⁰⁴ Idem, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Castillo, interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Cromer, interview, 2021

CHAPTER 4 The Importance of Storytelling

In this chapter, I briefly explore the way we construct our reality through storytelling and the importance of language to shape our understanding of the world. Secondly, I explain the importance of decolonizing the mind to establish this relationship between the Self and Other. In addition, I discuss how our senses can connect us to the natural world.

4.1 Oral Storytelling and Language

Storytelling is the one of the key ways in which individual and collective realities are constructed.¹⁰⁸ Multiple tellings are needed to tell an entire story, therefore one piece of art will not change the world. Nonetheless, it can influence the conversation. A story in this regard can be an idea, a cultural phenomenon: a story of 'us versus them', a story of connection or disconnection. These stories can be written, spoken, shared or visualised. Oral stories have been shared in ceremonies and gatherings for decades in communities around the world. These stories, whereby characters were the sun, the moon, animals and plants, were told through generations and express an animists understanding of the world. In Abram words, within these stories "the land is alive. Everything has its pulse. Such is the realm open to us, still, by our animal senses."¹⁰⁹ According to Abram, by dismissing our felt, animistic experience, we sacrifice much of our empathy to the animate earth.¹¹⁰ Yet by telling stories of this animate world, we open ourselves up again to its senses. In Indigenous oral cultures, nature itself is articulate; she *speaks*. This perception honours the otherness of the alive more-than-human world. The human voice is engaged in the discourse each part of nature in its own expression.¹¹¹ To Abram, "stories, like rhymed poems or songs, readily incorporate themselves in our felt experience; the shifts of action echo and resonate our own encounters."¹¹² In her book *Understanding kinship and complexity*, Lela Brown writes that a common theme in traditional stories is remembering time when all animals, plants and celestial bodies were like humans and humans were more powerful and wise through closeness to nature.¹¹³ She explains that "when we listen to satires with animal characters, we are experiencing the world though "mirror neurones" that fire in our brains as if we were

¹⁰⁸ Jerome Bruner. "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1-21. Accessed May 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343711>.

¹⁰⁹ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 296.

¹¹⁰ Idem, 307.

¹¹¹ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 75.

¹¹² Idem, 77.

¹¹³ Lela Brown, "Storytelling and ecological management: understanding kinship and complexity", *The Journal of Sustainability Education* (2016), 1.

experiencing the story firsthand.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, it is understood that stories, art and play likely serve a similar social function and evolutionary purpose. In Brown’s words “The fact that people experience enjoyable feelings when listening to a story, due to the release of dopamine in the brain, suggests that our bodies have evolved an incentive for storytelling because it has helped us survive.”¹¹⁵ Oral stories have a function, to preserve the knowledge of plants, animals and places without writing. Additionally, Kimmerer writes that: “The traditional ecological knowledge [is] found in Native science and philosophy, in life ways and practices, but most of all in stories, the ones that are told to help restore balance, to locate ourselves once again in the circle.”¹¹⁶

To Abram, in addition to stories, language is key to our understanding of the world around us.¹¹⁷ In the past visual language was part of our relationship to the natural world through cave drawings and hieroglyphs which connected to animal imagery. However, the rise of the alphabet has disconnected us further from this more-than-human understanding.¹¹⁸ Language generally has become a human gift and therefore a human power. In animism however, language is not considered solely for humans, but also for the animate earth.¹¹⁹ When speaking to the natural world, many names can be used: Mother Earth, Spirit, or Pachamama. How we speak to and about our surroundings, influences how we relate to those surroundings. To give the natural world a name is to consider her again as a person. In terms of other beings, we relate differently to a he or she than to an “it”. When discussing this with the artists, Mihklepp mentioned that in her mother language Estonian there is no gender.¹²⁰ There is no he or she pronoun to address a person, only ‘tema’ or ‘ta’, which means both she and he at the same time. You can use ‘tema’ or ‘ta’ for both humans and non-human persons, leaving the connection more open. Cromer mentioned that in many native communities, language is verb based rather than noun based. Cromer explained that “instead of a mountain being a noun, a mountain is a verb. It’s a state of being so a mountain is being a mountain. Likewise a human can also be a mountain in the sense. A human can mountain in the same way that a mountain can mountain.”¹²¹ The way we tell our stories through our language, influences our perception of the world: to embrace our natural senses or disconnect from them. An example of using language to disconnect to the natural world is from Duijnsveld, who mentioned the habit of people to say that they are

¹¹⁴ Brown, *Storytelling and ecological management*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Idem, 3.

¹¹⁶ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 179.

¹¹⁷ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Idem, 87.

¹¹⁹ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 11.

¹²⁰ Mihklepp, interview, 2021.

¹²¹ Cromer, interview, 2021.

“going to see nature” for the day, expressing that we are not part of nature already. Duijnisveld said: “we forgot to speak the language of nature, which is about feeling, intuition and direct knowing. I am in the process of remembering this language, of reweaving myself back into the web of life. And that process takes time. I spend more time with nature now, I take more time to listen, meditate and tune in. I wish to make this process of reconnecting visible to other people, to inspire them.”¹²² Art could be an invitation to speak with this natural world in an inclusive language, to relearn the language of nature and re-establish our connection to the more-than-human world.

4.2 Telling Counter Narratives

To overcome the dichotomy of self and other, humans and more-than-human, we need to address the relationships of oppression of those who are considered Other. A powerful tool to create a connection between *Self* and *Other* is through telling counter narratives. Listening to stories trains our ability to see the world through another’s eyes and therefore be more receptive to another’s perspective. Once again, it matters which stories we use to think other stories with. Our reality is not a given, but rather something we construct through our conversations and our lives together. Animist stories offer a counter narrative to the dominant anthropocentric story. A counter narrative here is not only a linguistic or oral story, it can also be an image, an experience, an expression of knowledge. Counter stories, whether spoken, written, visualised or performed, embrace otherness. They are a powerful tool for connectivity thinking and can allow multiple meanings alongside one another in a multiple storied world.¹²³ Through telling counter-stories, reality can be understood as a construct which can be altered. Whether it is to connect with another gender, other race, other knowledge or in this case with the more-than-human others. By opposing the dominant narrative and listening to the voices of marginalised groups, whether human or more-than-human, we can aim to overcome the power relations within society and establish an equal relationship.

As mentioned before, Morton addresses that the struggle against racism is the struggle against speciesism and thus also part of the de-anthropocentrization project.¹²⁴ Cromer argues that we haven’t learned to connect among ourselves as humans, resulting in a problem to connect with anything that is not ourselves. He says: “There may be few laws to stop humans from exploiting nature but there is also no enforced legislation that prevents people from killing indiscriminately. This is the same thing. We need to look at what worked in social movements and apply that to our relationship with nature. We need to acknowledge that colonialism is how we got here in the first place, through hetero-patriarchy and the

¹²² Duijnisveld, interview, 2021.

¹²³ Van Dooren and Bird Rose, *Lively ethnography Storying Animist Worlds*, 85.

¹²⁴ Morton, *Humankind*, 136.

capitalist machine."¹²⁵ To overcome the dichotomies of self/other, we must not only overcome the separation of nature/culture, human/more-than-human but also those of us/them, white/black and male/female. As long as we have power relations of racism, patriarchy and anthropocentrism, there will be exploitation of "other" bodies. Therefore, a key step to reconnect to the more-than-human is to decolonize our mind.

The intimacy of storytelling has always been used to build connections and be in communication with this larger-than-human world. In *Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance* (2019), Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes describe that "stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonisation theory in its most natural form. And many Indigenous movements around the globe have been sustained by poets, musicians and artists."¹²⁶ ¹²⁷ African novelist Ben Okri says that "people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers make nations sick. And sick nations make for sick storytellers."¹²⁸ Through telling inclusive stories we can begin to heal our past, move towards equality and away from exploitation. To oppose the anthropocentric narrative, a counter narrative could engage with the more-than-human as a character with agency and rights. According to Cromer, "for art to bring us closer together, we really need to focus on developing counter narratives and devising those spaces of confrontation within art."¹²⁹ Cromer discussed the importance of *embodiment* as a powerful tool to become-with the more-than-human Other. Embodying personhood, making something into a character which we can relate to and therefore connect with, could play an important part to establish this relationship and address environmentalism.¹³⁰ In *Persons at plants* (2013) Monica Gagliano writes that "Generally, the term 'person' is used to indicate a human being."¹³¹ However in its origin the word, derived from the Latin word *persona*, which in turn was most probably derived from the Etruscan word *persu*, referred to the masked actors that appeared in theatrical performances where the mask described the character an actor played on stage."¹³² Using art to raise awareness for the personhood on the natural world could increase the establishment of an equal relationship. In fact, recently a river in New Zealand and forest in Ecuador received legal *environmental*

¹²⁵ Cromer, interview, 2021.

¹²⁶ Sium and Ritskes, *Speaking Truth to Power*, 2.

¹²⁷ Idem, 3.

¹²⁸ Idem, 5.

¹²⁹ Cromer, interview, 2021.

¹³⁰ Idem, 2021.

¹³¹ Monica Gagliano, *Persons as Plants: Ecopsychology and the return to the Dream of Nature*. (University of Western Australia, 2013).

¹³² Monica Gagliano, *Persons as Plants*, 2.

personhood.¹³³ Currently laws are being created to make Ecocide, the destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or negligent human action, illegal.¹³⁴ Through environmental *personhood*, rivers or trees can be given similar rights to human rights, enabling prosecution of companies which exploit, pollute or misuse natural resources. This may reflect that changing the words we use to speak of the natural world, the stories we tell with and about the more-than-human and attaching the word "person" to the story does affect the empathy we feel towards it.

4.3 Using The Senses

Abram discusses that most humans don't tend to let any awareness of our earthly relations come too close to our creaturely sensation as we would insert the overwhelming grief, for our instinctive empathy for the living land. Instead we stay with numbers and objective thoughts to understand our reality.¹³⁵ To Abram, the body is the primary instrument for knowledge, and perception to him "is nothing other than this open-ended relationship: the active allurements of the body with a river, or other natural entity."¹³⁶ It is through using our senses, visually, emotionally, that we can understand and feel our connection to the more-than-human world. One way is to really listen to the voices of the more-than-human persons and re-learn, by engaging with our own animal body. Abram understands that the animate terrain is not just speaking to us but also *listening* to us, that there is perceptual reciprocity. To Abram, "sensory perception, here, is the silken web that binds our separate nervous system into the encompassing ecosystem."¹³⁷ Harvey says that "to reunite the body, the sensual, acting, feeling, emotive aspects of self, with the thinking, language-knowing self creates havoc with most modernist versions of culture."¹³⁸ Art can make us feel something new, something different, something that opposes the dominant Anthropocentric thought. This experience can be influenced through the creation and reception of artworks. To feel our way through the world with art, is to feel our emotional and spiritual connection to the soil. Art aids us to experience what we can not understand through science or rational thought, away from the modernist dualism of separation between humans and nature. We may feel that we have lost our connection with the senses, but Cromer wonders:

¹³³ Gordon, Gwendolyn J. "Environmental Personhood." *University of Pennsylvania*, March 7, 2017.

¹³⁴ "Polly Higgins, Lawyer Who Fought for Recognition of 'Ecocide', Dies Aged 50," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 22, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/22/polly-higgins-environmentalist-eradicating-ecocide-dies>.

¹³⁵ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 7.

¹³⁶ *Idem*, 45.

¹³⁷ *Idem*, 134.

¹³⁸ Harvey, *Animism*, xviii.

“Did we really? How do we know we lost it? We are already a part of nature. We just need to figure out better ways to communicate with the earth and develop that relationship.”¹³⁹

The artists I spoke to all mentioned the use of our senses to establish a connection. Most of them mentioned the process of walking bare feet or the touching of a tree as enough to establish a connection. Steengracht and Mihklepp both mention the importance of changing our perspective, literally moving to the ground, away from our human height to observe what is happening in the life of bugs, in the grass or in the dunes. Curiosity is key here, to be deliberately astonished by the aliveness of the natural world. Mihklepp adds that “When you spend a longer while in the forest, the environment just begins to communicate, perhaps your imagination also helps in shaping the experience.”¹⁴⁰ To allow ourselves to move past the rational, into awe and beauty requires openness. It requires utilising art as a tool to change our internal bias towards the more-than-human. In *Re-thinking the Animate* (2006) Tim Ingold describes how astonishment has been banished from rational science but is a great source of strength, resilience and wisdom, but with this way of seeing comes vulnerability, as you may be misunderstood.¹⁴¹ To Duijnisveld, animism is the only sensible materialism. To her, every living being is conscious and art can visualise this worldview and inspire people to relate differently to other beings. To Duijnisveld, all creatures on earth are spiritual beings, with the same essence in different forms, containing an energetic spark. “This becomes more valuable as I experience this deep knowing within my body myself. I hope that when I make art, people can feel it too.”¹⁴² To Duijnisveld, walking bare feet and connecting with Mother Earth is a way of relating to her own soul and wisdom, asking questions and asking for guidance from the helping spirits that she feels and sees around her. Duijnisveld describes this process as learning to trust: “We have to learn to trust that there are more ways of knowing. Trust our animal bodies, our intuition, our curiosities. Trust what is true to ourselves. Art and expression are a way to free ourselves.”¹⁴³

Art that works with the senses, that challenges the audience to feel differently could therefore contribute to more awareness of our connection to the natural world. The way we tell stories, use language and establish connections by using our senses are all part of the reconnecting to the more-than-human world. To use inclusive language, to trust our natural, animal bodies, to engage in an understanding of our true nature can be tools that enable us to express a new found relationship to the natural world. Artistic practice and artistic expression can therefore be used in each of these processes as a way forward to challenge Anthropocentric thinking.

¹³⁹ Cromer, interview, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Mihklepp, interview, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Tim Ingold. *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social Relations*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 19.

¹⁴² Duijnisveld, interview, 2021.

¹⁴³ Idem, 2021.

CHAPTER 5 Animism Through An Artistic Frame

In this chapter, I analyse examples of artworks and art practices which visualise animist world views. I discuss the importance of actively creating a connection with the more-than-human and examine examples of artists who collaborate with the more-than-human in their process. Additionally, I discuss how art from an animist perspective can be utilised as a tool for translation and education.

5.1 Visualising Animism

In his lecture “We have always been animists”, Harvey asks: “Could it be that by shifting our focus away from the human to the more than human world, we might actually summon an ecological *imagination* that better safeguards humans, precisely by displacing them from the centre of all inquiry and attention?”¹⁴⁴ Art can help us to imagine alternative futures and to find the inspiration to create a world where we can coexist with other species in a more-than-human collaborative reality. Art can be used to become-with, or be immersed into the more-than-human world and to engage in the beauty of an *inclusive story* where all more-than-human persons can take part. Expressing animism through visual artworks, enables us to imagine alternative realities. It enables us to look at the world from an alternative, animist perspective. In this paragraph, I discuss several examples of artworks that visualise an animist world.

Visual arts are a powerful tool to express messages and emotions. In *Becoming Animal*, Abram discusses the work of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh believed in a breathing, moving earth and visualised this through his paintings. In *Starry Night*, Van Gogh captures the moving elements of nature: the bright stars, the moving clouds and the shining moon. According to Abram: “Each thing, each being is in steady intercourse with the entities and elements around it, negotiating its passage and exerting its participation in the ongoing emergence of what is.”¹⁴⁵ Van Gogh was a Dutch man, brought up in Western civilisation, yet



Figure 12: van Gogh

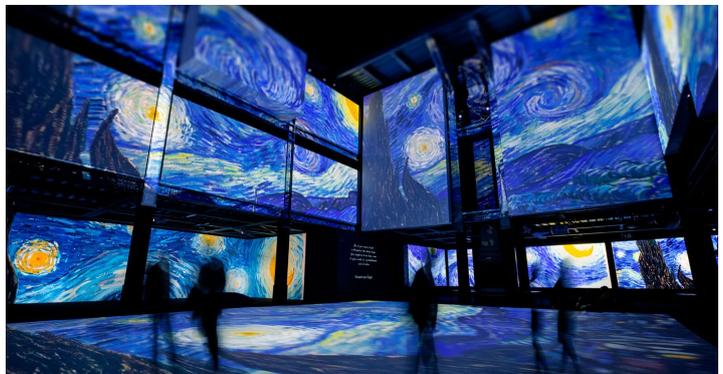


Figure 13: van Gogh Art Alive

¹⁴⁴ Harvey, “We Have Always Been Animists.”, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 51.

experienced and expressed the world as animate and alive. To him, visualising nature through art and physically moving through nature created a similar feeling connection. In a letter to his brother, Van Gogh wrote: "Sometimes I long so much to do landscape, just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were."¹⁴⁶ Van Gogh was considered an outcast in the artistic world. His work was not appreciated in his own time, but became amazingly popular after his death. Van Gogh's paintings provide a window through which we look at an alive world. Perhaps this is why his paintings are so loved in the West these days, because they provide an experience that our perception is craving. Transforming the way we look, or desire to look, at the alive, animate earth.¹⁴⁷ Recently, in Amsterdam and Paris there was the Vincent van Gogh Art Alive exposition.¹⁴⁸ A moving display of Vincent van Gogh's work projected onto ceilings, floors and walls. As you move through these virtually alive surroundings, you are immersed within this alternative world. This way multi-sensory experiences can be a tool to invite an audience to be immersed into an artist's animate perception, engaging once again with our animal senses.

Additionally, Sana Ahmed uses photography in combination with painting to visualise alternative realities. Ahmed created a photography series called *Tree honouring*.¹⁴⁹ She photographed different trees who died in her neighbourhood and brought them back to life with acrylic ink by painting their leaves with vibrant colours. She chose to work with cotton-based paper instead of traditional photo paper made from



Figure 14: Sana Ahmed

¹⁴⁶ "292," To Theo van Gogh. The Hague, Sunday, 10 December 1882. - Vincent van Gogh Letters, accessed May 7, 2021, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let292/letter.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 51.

¹⁴⁸ *Van Gogh Alive*, multi sensory experience, Grande Experiences, 2019, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. <https://grande-experiences.com/van-gogh-alive/>

¹⁴⁹ Sana Ahmed, three photographs of the series *Tree Honouring*, 2019, <https://www.theearthissue.com/artists/sana-ahmed> (accessed 15th March, 2021).

wood pulp due to the theme of the series. Through this combination of photography and paint she paints a different, imaginary picture of reality. Ahmed: "I wanted to express my strong desire to see these trees alive and vibrant once again. I also wanted to bring attention to the vulnerability of urban trees in the midst of urban sprawl, extreme weather events, and environmental issues."¹⁵⁰ This work mourns, celebrates and honours the tree-persons who died, not through human action but rather through natural circumstances, therefore creating a positive relationship of respect and hope with the more-than-human. This approach enabled the artist to tell a more-than-human story, becoming-with this tree-person in a story of vulnerability and of living and dying together.

Josephine Klerks is an earth artist and folk herbalist practitioner based in Sweden. In her art, she draws and paints her embodiment of the connection with Mother Earth and living entities around us. Her images visualise what others may feel but could find hard to express, visualising plant-persons, flower-person and tree-persons. Klerks feels deeply connected to Mother Earth and regularly which makes altars for her as offerings. The collection of her work tells a story of connection with the Earth and it's more-than-human spirits. It reminds me of the work of Duijnsveld, who also draws more-than-human beings that she sees and feels around her. Similar to Duijnsveld, she sees art as the magic we need and discusses the healing we have to do as Europeans to connect to our intuition, territories and our own roots. "We are meant to live in co-creation and relationship with the land. Working with plants is a way for me to re-engage with the skills from my ancestors. I feel how my working hands and my heart is in direct conversation with the life force itself."¹⁵¹ Klerks wants to invite her audience to get out of their mind and into their body, in order to feel this more-than-human connection. This means to connect with a dream world of wonder and to deprogram herself from viewpoints she grew up with, to understand and tell stories of the sacredness of mother earth. In her drawings, Klerks focusses on natural beings, drawing humans as more-than-human



Figure 15: Klerks



Figure 16: Klerks



Figure 17: Klerks

¹⁵⁰ Sana Ahmed, three photographs of the series *Tree Honouring*, 2019, <https://www.theearthissue.com/artists/sana-ahmed> (accessed 15th March, 2021).

¹⁵¹ Josephine Klerks, "Borage Sun Tea". Instagram, published June 28, 2020. Accessed 7 May, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB-715FDHYS/>

beings. Although her work features human outlines that we can relate to, these beings are often expressed as spirits, plant spirits, ancestors, for example by being drawn in the same size as a flower, or being shaped with a mushroom for a head. Her work changes with the seasons, and is inspired by plants, herbs and energy work.¹⁵² Her drawings are unscripted with poetry, in which she writes about re-awakening and re-imagining our relationship to the natural world.

Lastly, there are several examples of animation film whereby the viewer engages in an animist world. A widely acclaimed example is the Oscar winning film *Spirited Away* (2001)¹⁵³ in which a young girl engages on an adventure in a more-than-human world. Animation is a medium through which adults can be invited to revisit their childhood reality. Children have not yet learned the anthropocentric narrative of separation of the self and the more-than-human world. Children often talk to stones, to trees, to plants or “non-alive” objects. But this connection gets broken when he or she grows up and becomes part of the “adult community whereby nature is seen as an economic resource to be used for human purposes rather than a friend.”¹⁵⁴ Therefore, all children are animists until they unlearn to be, when they engage in the adult world of separation of self and other. These animated stories can bring people back to the reality of their childhood where they were open to engagement with the more-than-human community. *Spirited Away* has often been compared to Alice in Wonderland, another story whereby a young girl engages in a more-than-human world. In *Spirited Away*, the protagonist Chihiro, finds herself in the Spirit world, where she becomes acquainted with both visible and invisible more-than-human beings. These Spirits are Kami, in traditional Japanese culture spirits who usually don’t have visible forms but are only visible to human eyes when they inhabit another form, such as a tree or other element of nature. In *Spirited Away*, these Kami have taken a visible form, remaining visible solely as shadows. The more-than-human being who accompanies Chihiro in her journey doesn’t speak, yet they communicate without the use of language to establish a mutual collaboration of trust. Animation tells stories and communicates emotions and ideas in a unique, easy-to-perceive way that both small children and adults can understand, visualising something that is hard to



Figure 18: Miyazaki



Figure 19: Miyazaki

¹⁵² Alexandra Lembke, “Exploring the divine feminine with Josephine Klerks”. Like a prayer podcast. S1:E2. April, 19th, 2021.

¹⁵³ Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited Away*, film. 2001.

¹⁵⁴ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 42.

express in words or through live action movies. Animation in this sense has unlimited expressive potential: whatever the artist imagines can be drawn into the moving imagery. Immersing in their magical setting, it is a reminder to engage in the world through the imaginative eyes of a child.

5.2 Collaborating With the More-Than-Human

Art practice can be another way to develop and maintain a relationship with the more-than-human. For Steengracht, this is by using the material plants, letting them guide her, feeling their agency as they move their own way. For Mihklepp it is by engaging with stones, talking to them, asking them for permission to collaborate. To Castillo, this is through the collaboration with plant spirits who guide him during his creative process. When Castillo works with Jaher, the plant spirit guides him to paint. Jaher shows him which colours to use, which ideas to manifest and Castillo then puts this experience into a material form. Another practice to connect is by focusing fully on a single element of nature. For example, artist Lisa Lipsett drew a tree in her garden over and over for days and days, until her energy started to merge with that of the tree, feeling a connection between herself and this more-than-human person.¹⁵⁵ The more that she shifted her attention to this tree, the more that she felt intuitively engaging in conversation with him. Furthermore, materials play an important role in this connection Maori are known to ask permission to greenstone before utilising them to become jewellery, and the wearer of the object is responsible to make sure when taken overseas, that at some point the stone finds its way back home.¹⁵⁶ Within this artistic process, the artwork is alive and must be honoured, which is an expression of animist thought. As mentioned, Steengracht has created a pigment garden in the surrounding of her home. She grows and gathers different plants, flowers and therefore colours which she then harvests to make her own natural paint. The use of her material is derived from the Earth, creating a connection in her art practice between the mind, the hands and the Earthly material. She feels guided by the pencil or by the material, which is becoming even more important in the work. Steengracht says that "some of the colours fade and they behave differently. They cling together or they flow. They dry very quickly or not. They behave in their own way so I have to kind of collaborate with the plant. When I'm doing that myself I'm in a state of flow where I lose track of time and feel connected to everything around me. It makes me feel much more connected to nature."¹⁵⁷ These processes enable the creator to build and maintain a relationship of connectivity with the more-than-human world. Additionally, the natural materials have the agency to behave in their own way.

¹⁵⁵ Michelle Flowers, Lisa Lipsett, and MJ Barrett. "Animism, Creativity, and a Tree: Shifting into Nature Connection through Attention to Subtle Energies and Contemplative Art Practice." (*Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 19, no. 111-126 2014)

¹⁵⁶ Harvey, *Animism*, 54.

¹⁵⁷ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

Duijnisvels thinks that it is getting more and more common to work with nature and communicate with nature: "We're all still figuring it out. It's an ongoing process."¹⁵⁸ Throughout this processes, we are guided by the natural world. Multiple artists mention the use of their intuition to connect to the natural world in their art. Steengracht says that: "I believe that objects and things and trees have an agency to help you or to guide you as a spirit or to show you the way or to maybe warn you for something. I also use this in my life, not too literally but in a more intuitive way. If individuals would receive the world in this way, I think they would have more respect and more awareness of resources, of nature and probably of everything around them. It would make them more humble to feel that they are part of a bigger whole."¹⁵⁹ The intention to create a relationship of reciprocity with the natural world would be a great step forward in this ecological process. The engagement with natural materials, and telling natural stories based on intuition could be one of the ways to do so.

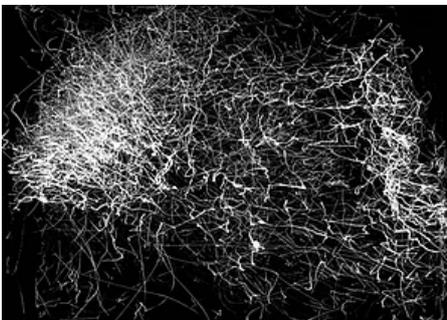


Figure 20: Kennedy

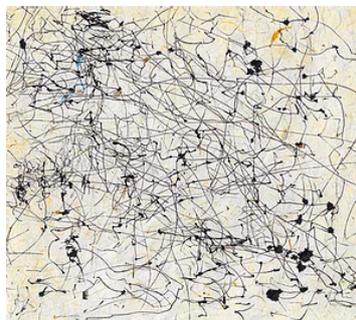


Figure 21: Kennedy



Figure 22: Kennedy

Another way to express animism through art is to collaborate with the more-than-human in the artistic process. An example of this is to let the more-than-human *be* the artist, illustrated in the project *Wind Drawings* whereby artist Megan Kennedy has invited the wind to make drawings on pieces of paper, enabling this natural being to express itself through a visual form by following her movements.¹⁶⁰ Another form is to work together as an artist *with* other species. Mihklepp discussed that: "We're starting to work more interdisciplinary, but also cross-species."¹⁶¹ For example, artist and beekeeper Ren Ri created *Yuansus II*¹⁶²: an artwork of sculptures, created from bee wax in collaboration with bees. Ri works by building transparent polyhedrons and cubes with a wooden framework, in which he places the queen bee at the centre. Consequently, the bees start building their hive around her. Once in every seven days, Ri rotates the sculpture, causing the bees to build in different directions due to gravity, resulting in different shapes and

¹⁵⁸ Duijnisveld, interview, 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Meghan Kennedy, *Wind drawings*, date unknown.

¹⁶¹ Mihklepp, interview, 2021.

¹⁶² Ren Ri. *Yuansus II*. Sculptures. Solo exhibition, 2015. Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong.

forms.¹⁶³ *Yuansus II* represents a symbiotic collaboration between humans and more-than-humans. Although Ren Ri creates the base for these sculptures, the bees have the freedom to decide how they build their hive based on the current state of the box and the influence of gravity. This way they become equal partners in the creation of the artwork, becoming-with as interspecies, artistic collaborators and overcoming the hierarchy of Anthropocentric thinking.



Figure 23: Ri

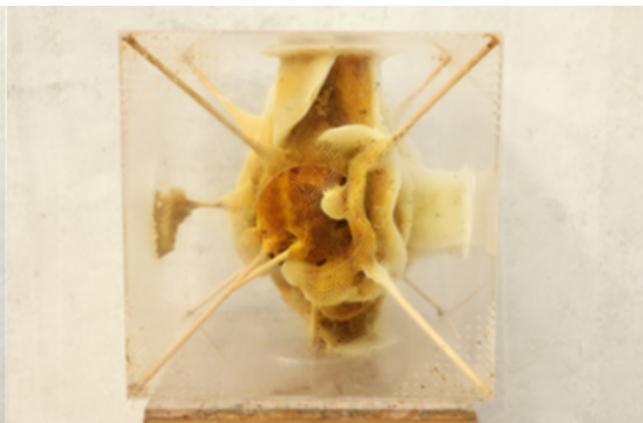


Figure 24: Ri

Another artist who works from this perspective is Maria Peñil Cobo: an artist who works together with microbes to create colourful artworks consisting of microbe organisms. Through this work, she wants to transform the relationship that humans have with bacteria into one of appreciation and beauty. Cobo: "We create a canvas where the microbes can be spread around like paint and allowed to grow and create art. Unlike most forms of art, our 'paint' is alive, and will live, breathe and grow over time, often in unforeseeable ways."¹⁶⁴ Similar to Steengrachts work with natural materials, the microbes have agency. The artist does not have full control of its medium, enabling the more-than-human to be seen in its own expressive ways. To appreciate the microbes as an important part of the system we are part of, even as a part of us, demands a move away from anthropocentric thinking. The microbes and the artist become-with into something that they could not have been individually, engaging in interspecies communication. Mihklepp said in this regard that "we are also our microbes. We are ourselves environments. If we go more into these kind of stories and ways of storytelling of how we are microbial bodies as much as human bodies, collective clouds as much as individual outlines, then you start to see the responsibility and also the beauty of the circulation of matter, life and death."¹⁶⁵ This beauty is visualised by Cobo in her artwork. As mentioned before, becoming-with acknowledges the interconnectedness of all more-than-human beings on this interconnected physical earth. We are what we are because bacteria and other beings make us who we

¹⁶³ Christopher Jobsen, "Geometric Beehive Sculptures by Ren Ri", *This Is Colossal*, July 15, 2014. <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/07/geometric-beehive-sculptures-by-ren-ri/>

¹⁶⁴ Maria Penil Cobo. "BacArt's mission."

¹⁶⁵ Mihklepp, interview, 2021.



Figure 25: Cobo

Figure 26: Cobo

are. Each of these artworks represent animism through their vision, their message, their creation process, their collaborative nature. Animism through art is not a static expression, it can be done in a diversity of mediums and is dynamic in its process. The possibilities to engage in art through an animist frame are endless and offer a wide range of opportunities to tell alternative, inclusive counter stories in these current ecological times.

5.3 Art as a Tool for Translation and Education

In addition to telling stories and counter narratives, art can be used as a tool to translate thoughts, representations and belief into artworks and experiences. To Castillo, as an artist you are the mediator, translator or messenger between the more-than-human spirit world and the general human population. These messages can entail information about how we should live in certain territories, or how we should engage with the world around us. Being a mediator or a translator as an artist seems to be a common theme for each artist, however it can also be a challenge. These artists tell stories from an animist perspective, sharing the stories of the more-than-human world. Castillo is the one artist who really relates to the spirits of the plants and engages into conversation with it, the other artists relate through their intuition. When speaking to Castillo about using art as a tool to translate knowledge he mentioned that art is interesting because it can show information to others, especially with children, in a soft way.

“Art is a very powerful tool that is connected with education. We can show a drawing, a painting, or a video and it will be easier to understand for people than written research. How do you share this, how do you translate this information into an experience with the people. Art is very powerful in the sense that it has the capacity to translate these ideas.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Castillo, interview, 2021.

Duijnisveld discussed her vision on ecological education to enhance the relationship to the more-than-human from an animist perspective. To Duijnisveld, education should be seen as an artistic, creative process where children create familiarity with their own body, their own senses and the nature around them. By relating to themselves and how they feel and by spending time with other species, children become less frightened and more familiar with the natural world. To give education with a more ecological basis, will make it more normal to take care of the earth. The stories we tell children and natural materials they use in their explorations can aid this process. Finally, this education can aid the earlier mentioned importance to inspire and be positive. To Klerks, when we invite ourselves to be playful, we connect to the mythic forest, fairies and more-than-human beings. She mentions how children don't have these filters yet, and are open to live in their world of imagination."¹⁶⁷ For Steengracht, art "could be an educational tool of reminding us how we are connected to the natural world and that we are an important part of it and that we should treat it in a careful way and a respectful way and use it in a regenerative way. I think it could be a trigger."¹⁶⁸ Mihklepp did discuss the worry, that as an artist it is hard to tell which change is happening at all. "You are an artist and then sometimes you think - are you actually changing something? I'm doing these subtle things as a mediator." The artist I spoke to all mentioned this unknowing of the reception of their work. Rather than knowing how his art makes a change, Cromer explores the way art can be used as an ongoing research process by incorporating fiction:

"Art is a part of the research process, that helps us better understand the world around us in a way that science could never do. We are all trying to get to the core of what it means to be human, what it means to live in this world and how we can better interact with the world around us and with ourselves. And art does that in a very specific beautiful way. Art is a lie that tells the truth."

When telling animist stories, a challenge is to tell truthful stories about the more-than-human world without speaking for, or on behalf of the more-than-human. As mentioned before, an *anthropocentric orientation* is inescapable to some degree because as humans we perceive the world through our human bodies and cognition. As mentioned before, ecofeminists' and indigenous' critique of deep ecology is that humans aim to speak for the more-than-human rather than listen and offer an inclusive story. According to Cromer: "We always have to put it in human terms but we are human beings we can't think outside of human, we can't speak, we can't think outside of what is actually human. I can never fully understand a tree, because I am not a tree. I can only relate to it as a human. So we have to be very careful. As artists, are we truly

¹⁶⁷ Lembke, "Exploring the divine feminine with Josephine Klerks". Like a prayer podcast, 2021.

¹⁶⁸ Steengracht, interview, 2021.

respecting that more-than-human object?"¹⁶⁹ Earlier I discussed Mihklepp's practice of talking to the stones she works with, asking them for permission to be moved: "Now I'll try to at least leave something, like my hair tied around somewhere close by the stone - to leave something for the void I leave behind. Something from myself that is a very tiny offering, but I still want to say thank you. Or ask, can I take you? This is just by intuition more than analytical thinking"¹⁷⁰ The challenge here is still to avoid speaking for nature, or interpreting the needs or desires from nature. Mihklepp remembers sometimes filling in the blanks herself, rather than tuning into the specific stones' desires. "So I was speaking for them more than with them, that I must say is a struggle. There is a certain beauty or sincerity in attempting and trying."¹⁷¹

Another topic that came up when discussing the engagement with our surroundings is that we should not see ourselves as either a destroyer or saviour towards nature, but rather as part of the unfolding story. When remaining in this good versus bad narrative, we're perpetuating the good/bad, human/non-human dualism that we're trying to overcome. We have to move past the dualism of placing ourselves outside nature, by telling an inclusive story. We cannot take the role of the saviour but we can take the role of just one of the players in the whole story. By seeing ourselves only as the destroyer of nature, we are also disconnecting ourselves from nature. According to artist Duijnisveld, "we need a lot of positivity, inspiration and imagination also to get the courage to create a sustainable world where we can coexist with other beings. And I think that art is very capable of giving this positivity and inspiration and imagination." There is a need and desire to create a *positive* relationship with the natural world. Not only one of crisis, fear and destruction but one of beauty, curiosity and partnership. We need to actively engage in and establish this relationship. This creates responsibility, but also intense joy. In Duijnisveld words, "art is the magic we need."¹⁷²

Our imagination is a powerful tool, a tool that enables us to become anew. It can be a tool to tell the story in a soft way, to translate alternative knowledge, inspire and make others curious. This world consists of interconnected realities, stories which are told from various perceptions. An animist worldview could shape a holistic approach to being in the world. A way forward is to start listening to multi-species stories and realising that we should not create one synthesised story about the world, but acknowledge that there are many more to be told.

¹⁶⁹ Cromer, interview, 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Interview Marit Mihklepp, 2021.

¹⁷¹ Idem, 2021.

¹⁷² Duijnisveld, interview, 2021.

Conclusion

Animism expressed through art can contribute to a more ecological worldview, by challenging the dominant narrative of anthropocentric thinking. Throughout this thesis, I explored the telling of oral stories and counter stories to overcome the dichotomy of self and Other. I discussed the active establishment of a relationship with the more-than-human through offerings, the use of natural materials and collaboration with more-than-human persons. Additionally, I analysed the visualisation of animism through different art mediums, whether through the expression of the artwork or through its creation process. Each of the artists I spoke to works with animism in their own way, nonetheless many correlations could be found in their approach. The establishment of an equal relationship with the more-than-human is at the forefront of each of their artistic practices.

Telling inclusive stories from a more-than-human perspective will influence our relationship as humans to the more-than-human world, whether it's visually, linguistically, orally or emotionally. Throughout this research, I found that art can be utilised as a tool to express new or contemporary animism in diverse ways. The imaginative nature of the arts creates opportunities to re-imagine a relationship with the more-than-human world, through visualisation or the exploration of the senses. Arts can be a tool for translation, for education or to visualise a relationship of reciprocity. The creation of art can be an invitation to establish a new connection, by making offerings, honouring sacred territories and collaborating with the more-than-human in an artistic process such as Cobo or Ren Ri. We can work with natural materials which have their own agency, such as Steengracht's work with natural pigments or Castillo's work with plant teachers. Visual art can express a felt connection with invisible more-than-human beings as done by Klerks. Art can be utilised as a tool to describe an intra-active, multi-species relationship with the more-than-human. In essence, art can offer a way forward to tell a new story, an inclusive story and a counter story to the dominant Anthropocentric narrative. However, we need to be conscious of the existing power dynamics and understand the colonial, exploitative past that has brought us here to move towards inclusive change. The exploitation of bodies through racism, patriarchy and speciesism are interconnected. Therefore, to move forward from Anthropocentric thinking, we must overcome the power relations of self and Other, in every shape or form.

Through the interconnectivity of tentacular thinking, we understand that it matters what stories we use to tell other stories with. In Kimmerer's words, to proceed with healing our relationship with the land, we need "re-story-ation."¹⁷³ It is after all the "same species, same earth, different stories."¹⁷⁴ Kimmerer asks the question, "how, in the modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again?"¹⁷⁵ Here art can be an invitation to imagine an alternative future of multi-species collaboration. Through visualising alternative perspectives in animation, painting, drawings or performance, art can envision hopeful possibilities for an altered world, past the current hierarchical systems, which perhaps we can

¹⁷³ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Idem, 7.

¹⁷⁵ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 31.

not imagine yet. Once again, "art is the magic we need."¹⁷⁶ It is important to include our senses into this practice; to feel and listen to the natural world and to trust our own bodies, to unlearn the duality that has become our reality and re-learn to speak the language of nature. This can be done through exploration of the world in bare feet, to touch trees and plants and engage in conversation.

In addition, we can change the language we use to tell our stories, to include more-than-human beings into the conversation. Although it is important to bring awareness to the seriousness of the ecological crisis by creating spaces of confrontation, art in addition can be used to inspire and bring joy to this exchange. It is important to establish a positive, equal relationship of reciprocity to the natural world. This could be done by embodying more-than-human persons into a character which an audience can relate to and therefore feel empathy for. Additionally, art can serve as a tool to visualise and translate alternative knowledge by documenting the rituals and wisdom of our ancestors, elders and grandparents in orality, film and writing. This can bring awareness to the relationship of reciprocity that has always existed within us. A way forward in this process could be to listen to what the more-than-human is telling us, as well as acknowledge the knowledge of Indigenous cultures and ancestors of the Western world who live in harmony with nature. Through telling these stories, we can create these new realities and return to the knowledge our ancestors living in harmony always knew: that we are part of the natural world and live in a constant relationship of flux with the natural world. Importantly, this connection should be made to our own territory, the soil that we came from, to understand the beauty and importance of our own roots.

It is important to stress that this research is solely an exploration. Attention must be given to the limitations of this research. I have spoken to five artists and analysed the work of more. However, future research could include more artists from more communities from different territories across the world. It is of value to speak to artists from different Indigenous communities, to include their voices more into the conversation. In addition, future research could focus more on the reciprocity of the discussed artworks, rather than the intention of the artist. How did these artworks actually change their thinking? Which changes in their behaviour can be seen? And besides the neocolonial perspective of these five artists, further research could elaborate on the decolonisation not only of our own minds, but of the art world in general.

In conclusion, animism expressed through art can be a tool to feel, visualise and understand our connection with the more-than-human world. The re-establishment of ourselves as part of the natural world, which is currently in engagement with all its more-than-human beings is a beautiful gift. To re-learn the language of the Earth is an ongoing process that takes time, but it is one that offers hope for the future. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer speaks to one of the elders of her community, about her inability to speak the natural language of her tribe to communicate with the plants and places that she loves. His reply is that yes, "they love to hear the old language. It's true. But", he said, with fingers on his lips, "You don't have to speak it here." "If you speak it here", he said, patting his chest, "They will hear you."¹⁷⁷ When we connect our heart and mind to the more-than-human beings of this world, they will know it.

¹⁷⁶ Duijnsveld, interview, 2021.

¹⁷⁷ *Braiding sweetgrass*, 59.

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