(Mis)Reading Nature

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Leiden Elective Academic Periodical

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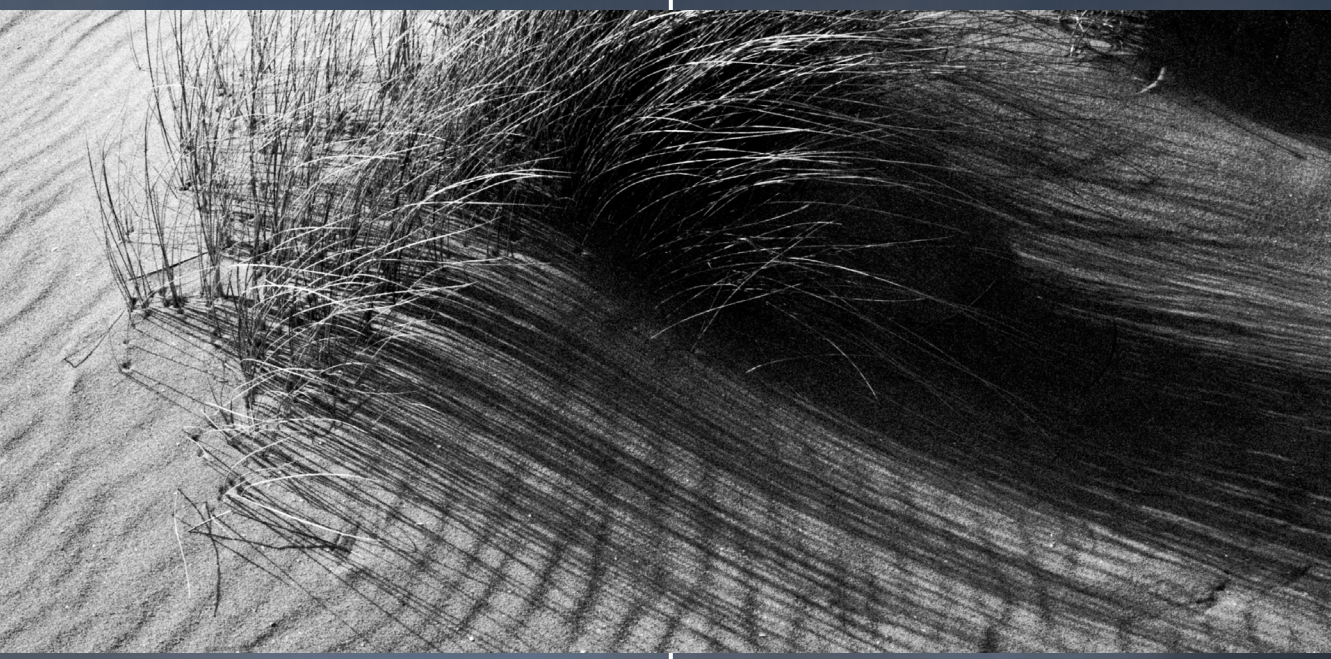

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(Mis)Reading Nature

Editorial team

> There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.[1]

"A Fable for Tomorrow," the opening chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), conjures up an image of "nature" as bountiful and idyllic, reminiscent of what one might find in a David Attenborough nature documentary. In both, the narrative takes a dark turn: "A strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change . . . Everywhere was a shadow of death . . . No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves."[2] Advocating for increased pesticide control to mitigate the detrimental impact of chemicals on the environment, Carson combines strengths of literary narrative and scientific research in an interdisciplinary work of environmentalist nonfiction "that crosses the borders of philosophy and poetry, science and morality, high and low culture, sentiment and practicality."[3]

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[1] Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1.
[2] *Id.*, 2–3.
[3] Foote, "Narrative of 'Silent Spring,'" 741–42.

Silent Spring propelled the development of the field of environmental humanities and simultaneously inspired a broader audience to pay attention to environmental issues.[4] In the sixty years since Carson's plea for a serious consideration of humanity's impact on its surroundings was published, the need for critical approaches to environmentalism has only become more urgent. In a world ravaged by environmental degradation, climate change and countless other crises threatening natural life, critically assessing notions of nature is both an existential need and a moral obligation.

As the yearly reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reliably grow more and more concerning, and as droughts and other extreme weather events threaten the lives of millions all over the world—but especially in the Global South—the notion of environmental crisis has become a central concern to policymakers and scientists, thinkers and activists, and the public at large. Climate anxiety[5] is a response to the disasters that have struck in the past, to those that are currently taking place, and to those that will be unavoidable if carbon emissions are not quickly brought under control. It is a condition that spans past, present and future.

In the twenty-first century, the Anthropocene has emerged as a key concept to address temporality and the climate crisis. As Paul J. Crutzen defines it, the Anthropocene is a "human-dominated geological epoch" characterised by an enormous quantity of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emitted in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution.[6] To understand humans as geological agents, one needs to grapple with spatio-temporal scales that cannot be experienced by an individual. The unimaginably long-term impact of humanity's actions on the environment—from the invention of the steam engine and the switch from water-powered to fossil fuel-powered manufacturing to modern governments delaying the development of green infrastructures and prioritising shorter-term

[4] Emmett, *The Environmental Humanities*, 3; Foote, "Narrative of 'Silent Spring,'" 745.

[5] In 2021, a large-scale survey showed that about 60% of young adults all over the world are either "extremely" or "very" worried about climate change, and only 5% of them report no concerns at all. See Thompson, "Young People's Climate Anxiety," 605.

[6] Crutzen, quoted in Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 33.

goals instead—will define life on Earth for millennia to come and bring about radical changes to its biosphere. As Chakrabarty points out, this collision of historical events and the geological timescale brings about a collapse of the distinction between "human" and "natural" history.[7] Thinking about humans as social, economic or cultural agents is the task of traditional historiography while thinking about humans as biological entities is one of the tasks of environmental history.[8] When making sense of the Anthropocene, however, one can only think of these two domains as intertwined: humans have only become a geological force on account of specific technological and socio-economic developments.[9] Humans (and human history) can no longer be imagined as mostly separate from the environment; the last three centuries have gradually (on the individual timescale) yet very quickly (on the geological timescale) established the human species as a natural force.

The problematisation of the concept of nature in modern scholarship testifies to the impossibility of conclusively defining this concept. Feeling separate from and yet part of the natural world, humans drastically transform the environment and simultaneously are shaped by it. To signify nature as an entity outside oneself is to draw a border around it and thus transform it. To admit that nature is pervasively present is to allow one to be transformed by it. This special issue of LEAP explores the complex interrelatedness of humans and "nature" and our inherently limited understanding of both. The contributors acknowledge the unavoidable risk that any attempt to "read" nature brings. As nature evades narrow categorisation, to read it is potentially to misread it. To understand is potentially to misunderstand.

Central to the contributors' rethinking of the notions of human and nature is a reconsideration of nature as a possible object of knowledge. As the media scholars Wickberg and Gärdebo state, "a redefined human-Earth relationship starts from the insight that the environment is not a fixed object awaiting discovery but something that is continuously produced, intellectually and

[7] Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 26.
[8] *Id.*, 30.
[9] *Id.*, 31.

materially, and that media play a significant role in this production."[10] While Wickberg and Gärdebo emphasise the role of media in terms of data processing, storage and transmission, the contributors to this issue of LEAP approach debates around "nature," the environment and environmentalism from the point of view of cultural media studies. Like Carson, who in *Silent Spring* combines literary writing with environmental inquiry, the contributors take an interdisciplinary approach; their analyses bring together photographic studies, neuroaesthetics, cultural studies, literary studies, film studies and philosophy to rethink the relative positionalities of humans and the environment and the specific conceptions of nature that underpin these relationships. Each of the contributions aims to consider the environment by exploring the relationships between nature (or the environment) and humanity (or humanness) from a multitude of perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach gives space to the manifold interpretations of nature, a concept which has proven impossible for the contributors to define conclusively, and illustrates how environmental issues surpass disciplinary borders but also bridge them.

This special issue opens with an article by Maria Romanova-Hynes titled "On Photographing Nature: from Mimesis to Play." Confronted by the question of whether it is possible to photograph nature, the author sets out to explore through philosophy and her own artistic practice how a photograph can capture phenomena, perception and meaning. Romanova-Hynes discusses the objectification of nature in conventional landscape photography and proposes to reconsider nature photography on the basis of the characteristics of aftermath photography, which compels the spectator to conceive of the interrelationality of humans and the environment in an act of imaginative construction.

While Romanova-Hynes critically reflects on how landscape photography attempts to depict the outdoors, Angel Perazzetta's contribution focuses on the domestic sphere by analysing the phenomenon of the curated lifestyle. In his article "Fitting Years Worth of Trash into a Jar: Saving the Planet through Curated Consumption," Perazzetta examines zero-waste and minimalist

[10] Wickberg and Gärdebo, "Humans and the Planetary," 2.

lifestyle guides, using them to explore the limits—and the roots—of individualist approaches to the climate crisis. The environmentalist narratives he analyses are centred around the private space of the home, but their stated aim is much broader: protecting the Earth from the harms of overconsumption. Perazzetta investigates how this concern with the domestic realm came about, what its consequences are and what alternative responses to the climate crisis might exist.

Scholarship in the environmental humanities seeks to deconstruct and problematise the borders that define the human-nature and culture-biology oppositions. It also embraces a healthy disregard for disciplinary boundaries. Anthony T. Albright's creative travelogue, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Emmen: Notes to Self, or, Ghostly Demarcations, Keener Wound," upsets the distinction between the academic and the artistic. Albright traces the historical and cultural roots of sights that are geographically located in the Dutch town of Emmen but which resonate with unexpected places across the ocean. Taking the reader on a fascinating trip through theory, art history, geography and biography, Albright's essay explores what it means to travel without bounds and find places within places.

The next article engages with the animal kingdom. In "Barking, Singing, Quacking: On Human and Nonhuman Language and Those Who Speak (It)," Nathalie Muffels considers animal voices—and the potential lack thereof—in an anthropocentric world. Tracing narratives in theory of language, she investigates how notions of "species" influence and determine interspecies relationships, considering possible answers to the question of why, in her words, "human utterances hold potential for profound meanings, while duck quacks are generally less likely to harbour similar expectations."

In the subsequent contribution, "Shifting Paradigms: The Relationship Between Nature and Humanity in Contemporary Art," Alicja Serafin-Pospiech explores the connection between a paradigm shift in the human-nature relationship and the emergence of nature-focused immersive artworks. The author uses neuroaesthetic methods to analyse contemporary art that rejects the modernist opposition of biology to culture.

This special issue concludes with an interview with Dr Isabel Hoving, a professor at Leiden University who has long been concerned with environmentalism, interculturality and diversity. Nathalie Muffels and Angel Perazzetta ask Hoving about her past scholarship as well as her hopes for the future of the (environmental) humanities. Arguing for the utility of literary and game narratives to critically reflect on nature, the Anthropocene and environmentalism, Hoving rejects the image of nature with which Carson's *Silent Spring* opens. According to Hoving, nature is not pretty, clean or pure—it includes death, rot and decay—and it is not heterosexual either. Nature, she says, is "mind-blowing; animals and plants are up to all kinds of things, and there's no 'logic' to it."

The textual contributions are accompanied by a variety of visual works. A selection of photographs by Will Boase and Joris van den Einden explore the failures of mankind's attempt to dominate nature, foregrounding, respectively, the impossibility of anticipating the future and the difficulties of visualising environmental decay. While absent in Boase's and Van den Eiden's contributions, the human form is the central theme of Mar Fu Qi's work. Her photographs suggest a deep and harmonious relationship between the human body and the vegetal tree, prompting viewers to think about the human species as part of—rather than separate from—the natural world. A sweater knitting pattern designed by Coco Swaan draws simultaneously from the ancient craft of knitting and the futuristic world of literary science fiction. Motifs hinting at industrial manufacturing and pollution emerge through the slow and methodical process of stitching row after row. Much like ecosystems, knitted fabric consists of a series of loops that build off of one another, and any damage to an individual element has the potential to unravel the whole thing.

Varying in nature and embracing different perspectives on nature, the contributions in this issue highlight the crucial role of the humanities in investigating and understanding environmental issues, which can be approached in a myriad of imaginative ways and demand much further exploration.

The 2022 editorial team of LEAP consist of Nathalie Muffels, Angel Perazzetta, Maria Romanova-Hynes, Alicja Serafin-Pospiech

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On Photographing Nature: From Mimesis to Play

Maria Romanova-Hynes

A photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shows us things that no longer exist.

Marcel Proust, quoted in Eduardo Cadava's *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (1997)

Between 2016 and 2018, I lived in a remote cottage in the west of Ireland. Surrounded by the mountains, the ocean and the open fields, I developed an interest in landscape photography, a genre conventionally associated with images portraying nature. But as I tried to capture "nature," I could not escape the feeling that my endeavour was futile. For even if I chose to ignore the complexity of the debate on what constitutes nature and simply pointed my lens at a natural scene, I understood that where I was standing and what I was looking at could never be contained within the image.

Although I started taking photographs long before then, it was my experience with landscape photography that fractured my relationship with the art. Had I been confronted with the task of photographing a person, I would have been satisfied with pressing the shutter and taking their likeness, believing that, indeed, it captured them (a belief that I came to reassess later). But nature evaded me. In all its vastness, all I could depict was absence. Mimetic representation as such seemed to have failed to represent: none of the likenesses of "nature" I took convincingly portrayed it. It was never enough.

Why, then, were images of people "enough" to me? Why did I think a person's presence could be represented? The answer to this question, perhaps, lies in the deceptive certainty of historical time that puts its own mark on the image: it is relatively easy to locate a person within a system of spatial and temporal coordinates, to

assign them a certain age, a certain place and a certain meaning. Presence is a feature of existence that lends itself to identifiability. Nature, however, belongs to a different temporal scale: its time is measured in aeons, and, as such, it contains our historical time. Since nothing is exempt from demise, this overbearing aspect of nature can only be called "timeless" in relation to one's own limited time. Can the photograph contain this relation? For when the photographer locks a view into a frame, they fix their relative position not to time but to physical objects. Nature slips away, and what remains is a particular landscape: another form of an identifiable presence.

This research, therefore, was born out of my frustration with photography. Landscape imagery prompted me to address the fundamental question of technological representation: What constitutes presence and absence within the photographic frame? My aim was to produce a photograph that would invoke the idea of nature by transcending the denotational value of the image, making it affectual rather than descriptive. If nature were to be represented as I perceived it, its image would have to function not just as a sign but engage the spectator, suggesting the relationality and interplay between the observer and the observed.

Without getting too far ahead of myself, I will note that the conundrum I faced originated from a realisation that landscape and nature were not identical. My landscape photographs denoted their referents—the mountains, the ocean and the fields—and drained them of their agency. Instead of involving the spectator as a participant, engaged with the world unfolding in time, the images divorced them from the living phenomena. My task as a photographer was to find a mode of photographic signification that would enliven nature by eliciting the viewer's response to it. Somehow the photograph had to possess not only a signifying but *experiential* quality of that which it attempted to signify. To simply point the camera and announce that "this is a mountain" rendered all signification hollow.

Confronted by the question of whether it is possible to photograph nature at all, in this article I set out to explore how the photograph can capture phenomena, perception and meaning. Firstly, I examine the problematics of frontal, static depictions of

natural scenes from a phenomenological perspective and discuss the failure of a traditional landscape photograph to account for the experience of being in the phenomenal world. Next, I turn to Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida's ruminations on signification in order to identify how meaning gets into the photographic image. I thus critique the structuralist denotation of presence and offer a post-structuralist reflection on a photograph that captures the indeterminacy of reality in its perpetual play of meaning. Finally, I put forward a deconstructivist interpretation of an aftermath photograph—portraying absence at the site of a historical tragedy—and claim that by focusing on that which lies outside the frame this photograph engages the subjectivity of the spectator, revitalising the image with the phenomenal experience of envisioning one's being in nature.

I therefore argue that one possible way to address the discrepancy between the traditional landscape photograph and the phenomenal experience of the world is to reconsider nature photography on the basis of the performative characteristics of aftermath photography, which can, via its focus on contextualised absence, imbue the depicted "nature" with agency. To discern how nature can (or cannot) be signified photographically, I engage both with theory, delineating the semantics of the photographic image, and photography, used as a mode of experimental inquiry. This article brings these two strands of my research together and initiates a dialogue between philosophy and artistic practice in order to probe what photography depicts when it "captures" nature and to indicate how the latter evades capture. I will thus attempt to show that to photograph nature one must not just signify the *this-ness* of the scene but cultivate the experience of *partaking-in-it*.

Through the phenomenological lens: inhabiting the landscape

During my stay in the area of Connemara, Ireland, I regularly went for walks on a long sandy beach. Most months of the year the Atlantic wind was so harsh it cut through to the bone, the sky was grey and heavy, and the air was permeated with rain. Although I never regretted the lack of "good" weather, when the sun did come out it was a sight to behold. More often than not it did not stay for a day but for a spell and quickly disappeared behind the clouds. It was

on one such walk that I took the landscape photograph that, for the purposes of this article, I shall name *Captured by the Mountain*.

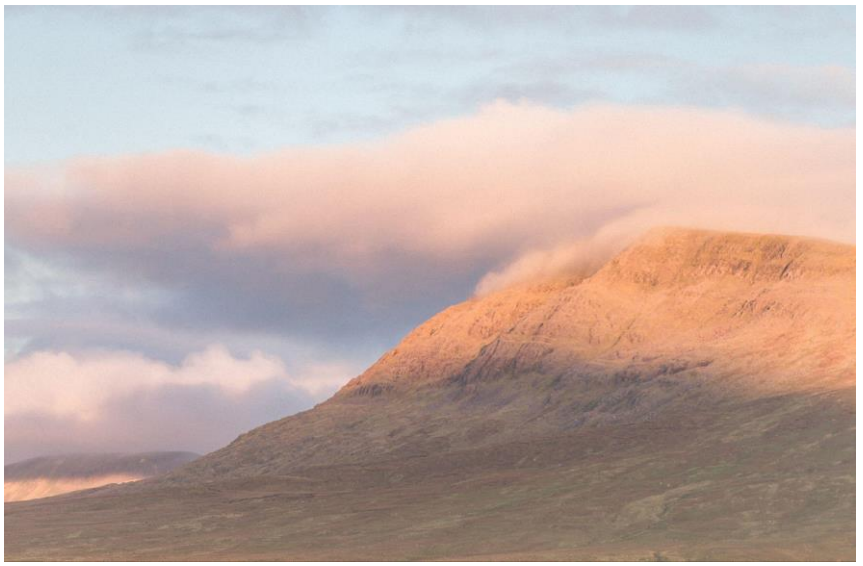

Figure 1: *Captured by the Mountain* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016)

Colloquially, it is often said that a photograph can "capture a moment." Naturally, in a world marked by transience, one tries to memorialise change. But the photograph is a deceptive memorial, as behind its edifice lies a denial of time slipping away, and within this mutable time, there exist equally mutable places. To be in an environment is to perceive its indeterminacy: to listen, to see, to touch, to smell, to observe. The act of taking a photograph, however, halts this continuous and ephemeral experience. It takes the astute observer out of this perceptual and sensing mode, prompting them to cast a momentary impression into an image of the world that has already vanished.

On my walk that evening, when the sun suddenly came out and spilled its light onto a mountain, I felt compelled to respond to the moment by writing it in light.[1] It was an instance of perceptible mutability, in which I could see the shadow of the clouds move across the mountain, as the whole scene became submerged in

[1] The word "photography" is a compound of the Greek *phōtós* (meaning "light") and *graphé* (meaning "writing").

bright crimson. The change from grey to fluorescent pink was striking enough, but it was the mountain that drew my attention. For even though I had passed by it many times, never before had it arrested my thought and my senses. Never before had I found myself standing *in relation* to it. In a way, I did not capture a moment. Rather, it captured me. After a short delay I took the landscape photograph perhaps in an attempt to collect myself.

How can landscape be defined? According to Lucy Lippard, the word traces its history to the fifteenth-century German *Landschaft*, which means "shaped land, a cluster of temporary dwellings . . . the antithesis of the wilderness surrounding it."[2] In the seventeenth century, the Dutch *landschap*, or *landskip*, embraced the additional sense of ideational representation by acquiring the meaning of a "painting of such a place, perceived as a scope, or expanse."[3] Contemporary language, however, gives the concept a much broader scope. As Ali Shobeiri suggests, "landscape" can designate any of the following: "nature, habitat, artefact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, aesthetic and, finally, . . . place, depending on what attributes and qualities individuals elicit from and assign to it."[4] Landscape, therefore, is not just a spatial term, for it also describes a relationship to a place, or a nexus of relationships formed within a place. Landscape marks one's mode of involvement with a unique locale. Ultimately, Shobeiri concludes that "landscape is not something to project, but to encounter as a conglomerate of things in the phenomenal world."[5]

Hence, my photograph resulted from my encounter with the mountain. However, after I took the image, I had to admit that it captured the environment but nothing of my encounter: the photograph seemed void. It arrested neither my thought nor my senses. The mountain, which had previously captivated me, was present within the frame, but now, flat and photographed, it seemed as though dead, eternalised in an embalmed moment. The light of the evening no longer danced on its surface, bringing it forth out of the usual grey and putting it back to sleep. An experience that was

[2] Quoted in Shobeiri, *Place*, 113.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Id.*, 114.
[5] *Id.*, 29.

dynamic in nature was converted into a stasis and emptied of time. Instead of capturing the being of a phenomenal world and inviting me to partake in it, the image prompted me to project an interpretation over it. My photograph shaped nature, subdued it and made it into an "it." An easily identifiable object.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that human language and perception are inherently anthropocentric, as humans position other things in relation to their bodily and mental spatial projections.[6] It is habitually said, for instance: "I stood *in front of* the mountain," rather than "I stood *below* the mountain," or "the mountain stood *over* me." The photograph shares this linguistic orientation and locates the mountain on the eyeline of the spectator, who ends up looking at the image from above. For an attentive photographer, this change in perspective can be dizzying. In my memory, my body was a thing among other things as the mountain towered above me. Moreover, my body was not separate from the ever-mutable world. In Merleau-Ponty's words, the body is "sensitive to all the rest . . . [it] reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours . . . "[7] My photograph, however, reduces the mountain to a self-contained, fixed presence, while at the same time allowing me to look over it. In the living environment of interrelated phenomena, the mountain affected me. But in the representational environment of the photograph, I inadvertently used its image for effect.

While my image eternalises the duration of sunshine in the west of Ireland, reality was much more variegated: the sun disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and the wind felt cold again. As such, the presence of the mountain can be perceived as "self-contained" only within the image's frame. Outside of the frame, it was never fixed. Aware of the photograph's ability to dissociate objects from the phenomenal world, Jean Baudrillard suggests that it can only capture "vanished presence."[8] Within the split second of the photograph's emergence, the camera registers, paraphrasing Siegfried Kracauer, not nature that exists within a

[6] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 116.
[7] *Id.*, 275.
[8] Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 58.

space-time continuum but a single aspect of it, which is "the sum of everything that can be subtracted from [it]."[9]

So, what does the photograph actually depict? Does it cut a particular moment out of the environment's space-time continuum—a moment discovered by the photographer; or, does it constitute something that was never there in the first place? Jacques Derrida observes that in photographic practice "the simple recording of the other . . . as he appeared there . . . is immediately contaminated by invention in the sense of production, creation, productive imagination."[10] Thus, at the moment of the photograph's production, I neither discovered nor conceived the landscape, as the image is contingent on "the two senses of invention."[11] Derrida argues that "in the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the reference to this referent . . . implies just as irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent."[12] The mountain was there. The sun did come out and change the light to crimson. But my photograph fails to capture "the unique past time of its event," for what it shows is a crimson mountain as if it has always unchangeably been there.

My intention was not to present a picture-perfect Ireland in a postcard but to respond to the world engaged in *its play*. Does my photograph succeed in portraying it? Absolutely not. It does not show nature but an object: a mountain. It does not establish a relationship to a co-inhabited space-time continuum. Shobeiri suggests that while "[p]ainters deduce meaning and visualise it as spatial continuum, [p]hotographers photograph spatial continuum and it becomes its meaning."[13] But how can a photograph of a given natural scene mean "nature" if the viewer finds themselves in the position of mastery over the image? Would the image, depicting the world at play, not have to itself become a field of play? Would it not have to invite the spectator as a *reference* rather than furnish them with a deceitful *referent*? To understand how the signifying gesture

[9] Kracauer, "Photography," 37.
[10] Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 43.
[11] *Id.*, 44.
[12] Derrida, "Deaths of Roland Barthes," 53.
[13] Shobeiri, *Place: Geophilosophy of Photography*, 44.

of the photograph may remain uncertain and suspendable, I needed to look deeper into the semantics of the photographic image.

Through the post-structuralist lens: the dissolution of presence

As a photographer, I do not just inhabit the environment but actively interpret it during the production of the image and then later, again, at the post-production stage. I am also an editor, a curator and a spectator of my photographs, and as such, I need to be able to critically examine my own interpretive gaze. If I notice a discrepancy between my recollection of the phenomenal world and its representation in an image like *Captured by the Mountain*, I am prompted to analyse this incongruity further. In addition to using artistic research as a mode of inquiry that yields "empirical" visual data, I can also employ a theoretical toolkit allowing me to read the image in a more systematic way. What do I see when I look at *Captured by the Mountain*? And why do I perceive it in a certain way? To answer the question of how nature may or may not be photographed, I first must understand how the photograph becomes imbued with meaning.

It was Barthes who attempted to examine the semiotics of the photograph by applying to it a systemic structuralist reading and developing a comprehensive vocabulary of terms for image analysis. For him, the photograph has two sides. On the one hand, it transmits the literal reality of the scene, *denoting* it and doubling it as its "perfect analogon."[14] Therefore, he calls the photographic image "*a message without a code*,"[15] which has a direct, physical relationship with its subject. On the other hand, the photograph is an object that has been constructed, treated, read, inscribed into a system of cultural codes, thus inevitably *connoting* certain aesthetic and ideological values of a society that receives it.[16] Barthes calls the event of "the connoted message [developing] on the basis of a message *without the code*"[17] the photographic paradox. What separates photography from other representational arts is precisely

[14] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 17.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Id.*, 19.
[17] *Ibid.*

its claim to denotation, which "naturalises its symbols,"[18] making photography somewhat akin to speech.[19]

Inspired by structuralism's ambition to explain culture in formalistic terms, Barthes develops his own method of rigorous visual analysis, proposing to study the photograph by unpacking three messages: linguistic, connotational and denotational. First, the photograph is always permeated with words surrounding it (caption, article, title, etc.), since our civilization is still one of the text and not of the image.[20] The linguistic message serves two functions: while an *anchorage* "[fixes] the floating chain of signifieds"[21] to one possible denoted meaning to focus the interpretation of the viewer, *relay* positions the text and the image in a complementary relationship, wherewith meaning emerges from their symbiosis (as in film dialogue, or aftermath photography, which will be discussed later).

The second message is the connoted one, which Barthes defines as the imposition of a coding on the photographic message proper, thus forming a "rhetoric . . . as a signifying aspect of ideology."[22] It is through the procedures of connotation that a single photographic utterance, or *parole*, acquires its cultural meaning within the context of the *langue* of photography.[23] Below I attempt to "read" *Captured by the Mountain* (fig. 1) to illustrate some of the connoting procedures that might influence my perception of the image:

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[18] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 51.

[19] Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation echoes Ferdinand De Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign as a two-sided psychological entity, uniting a concept (the signified) and a sound-image (the signifier).

[20] Barthes suggests that in order to find an image not accompanied by words, one would need to go back to partially illiterate societies ("Rhetoric of the Image," 38).

[21] *Id.*, 39.

[22] *Id.*, 49.

[23] This terminology, again, is borrowed from linguistics. De Saussure proposes to study language (*langue*) as a synchronic, homogeneous system, wherein one given utterance, language-use or *parole*, is seen as a diachronic, heterogeneous element. It is this very logic that allows the structuralist method to extend beyond the linguistic domain into the general field of culture. Structuralism, with its appeal to reason and promise to establish objective knowledge by moving from the particular to the general, offers a method for studying any *parole* (be it a literary work or a photograph) within the abstract structure that contains it (be it genre or philosophy).

(1) Through the process of *photogenia*, which embraces the cultural implications of lighting and exposure, the photograph conjures up the environment of the wondrous and spectacular by accentuating the presence of the sun (absent from the frame), as natural light catches the top of the mountain enveloped in a thick cloud.
(2) The material "texture" of the image, its composition and visual treatment, is defined by the procedure of *aestheticism*: the framing of *Captured by the Mountain* privileges the position of the mountain, whose surface, divided between light and shadow, is thus turned into a canvas upon which the spell of sunshine is portrayed. Also, the crimson tint of the image alludes to a romantic ideal of pastoral beauty so commonly featured in the landscape genre.
(3) Finally, the *object* of the photograph also signifies ideas: the rocky mountain, seemingly devoid of any traces of cultivation and habitation, projects a sense of solitude and stillness, while its austere appearance is softened by the warm light.[24]

It can be concluded that the meaning of a landscape photograph in structuralist analysis emerges through the interpretation of a cultural image of the world imposed onto an existing geographical site. It is through such a reading that I identify *Captured by the Mountain* as a photograph presenting an idyllic vision of nature and inscribe it into the genre of landscape photography. Although structuralism provides the photographer and the spectator alike with a useful toolkit of interpretive terms and procedures, it also reveals that one is inclined to make a major assumption: namely, that the photograph contains a presence that can be examined. My reading of *Captured by the Mountain* presupposes that there is a mountain and nature to be read. This image, featuring a natural expanse, thus betrays its underlying politics, assuming the centrality of human culture that, in

[24] Barthes also distinguishes *trick effects*, or a technical manipulation of reality that substitutes the heavily connoted, constructed message for the denoted one (such as photomontage); *pose* describing the actions of the human body within the image as culturally significant (such as "Kennedy praying"); and, lastly, *syntax* involving a discursive reading of a photograph when it figures as part of a series of several images, each imparting meaning upon one another (see "The Photographic Message," 21-22).

this case, represents nature as peaceful, solitary and beautiful, but, ultimately, alienated from the viewing subject. The image does not arrest my gaze. Rather, my gaze arrests it. The view appears "idyllic" not because it actually is, but because I am able to deduce an idyllic meaning from it. Nature, here, is culturally conceived.

Barthes, however, was aware that an act of interpretation alone did not exhaustively explain the specificity of photography as a medium, since he recognised the photograph's power to establish a phenomenal connection to the world. Before his post-structuralist turn, Barthes was already arrested by the mysterious agency of the photograph that he identified as its third, or denoted, message—the message without a code. However, precisely because it does not transmit any code, Barthes struggles to identify this "Edenic state of the image."[25] He suggests that the denoted message can be distilled by stripping all the signs of connotation. Assuming that it is possible to do so, he further states that through denotation photography establishes a new space-time category—its *having-been-there*.[26] But what exactly does that mean? Indeed, *Captured by the Mountain* reflects the mountain that stood there, but as I suggested in the previous section, it fails to capture the mountain that I had experienced. Rather, it produces, through the procedures of connotation, a different kind of mountain and a different meaning. So, what does this photograph denote? What is its signified? What does it tell, except that I was at the site but was unable to capture it? The nature I had encountered eludes me in my photograph and what I see is its *no longer* having-been-there.

Barthes concludes "The Photographic Message" with a statement indicating his own doubt as to the nature of denotation:

> Is this to say that a pure denotation, a *this-side of language*, is impossible? If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic

[25] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 42.
[26] *Id.*, 44.

> images. The trauma is a suspension of language, the blocking of meaning.[27]

His allusion to trauma as a suspension of language is striking. The non-connoted reality that the photograph denotes seems to belong to a place of absence, where all signification comes to a halt. To signify a having-been-there-ness means to point at a non-presence that is "an absence of meaning full of all the meanings."[28] To appear, therefore, is not to appear. At the time of writing his early essays on photography, Barthes arrives at a paradoxical conclusion that makes him confront the limitations of structuralism. His intellectual sense compels him to leave open the question of how "the photograph [can] be at once 'objective' and 'invested,' natural and cultural"[29] and admit that "it is through an understanding of the mode of imbrication of denoted and connoted messages that it may one day be possible to reply to that question."[30] A few years later such a mode of imbrication begins to emerge in his own and Derrida's post-structuralist work.

Before delving into Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and addressing the question of how meaning might appear only at the moment of its disappearance, I would like to summarise why I consider a photograph like *Captured by the Mountain* a failure of photographic reproduction. As a photographer, I inhabited the phenomenal world, which I experienced as a space-time continuum, when I was disturbed by a happening—the sun coming out of the clouds. The world was at play, and it touched me. I was not traumatised, but my perception, indeed, was pierced. But the resulting image does not pierce me. It shows the world at peace—an idyllic world as the analysis above suggests—while for me the world was ruptured. My photograph was supposed to denote change, the before and the after, not the mountain. My direct, indexical position was to the world at play, revealing the mutability of nature unfurling in time. The photograph, however, wrongly establishes a direct, indexical relationship to the mountain and

[27] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 30.
[28] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 42.
[29] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 20.
[30] *Ibid.*

frames it as a presence that can be contained. Thus, the significance of the image does not coincide with the significance of the moment. Time passing through nature, with its light, movement, variance, that I intuitively aspired to denote, has been substituted for the connoted mountain. My experience, which was explosive and distinct, remained on the periphery of the image. Nature has been tamed. Heterogeneous time has been smoothened.

Habitually looking for a presence that could be pictured, I did not yet discern the intricate dance of presence and absence that takes place within the photographic frame, and I was unable to foresee that the image of an easily identifiable object would inevitably conceal the phenomenal world. But, perhaps, representation is simply always inferior to being? Maybe the fault was not at all my own? Maybe photography was to blame? These questions drew me deeper into semiotics, as I set out to understand what representation is, where it begins and where it ends. Is it a photograph of the mountain? The word "mountain" that I utter? Or the very thought of the mountain when I look at the phenomenal world?

To answer these questions, we need to look deeper into the history of metaphysics, which is synonymous with the history of defining being as presence.[31] For De Saussure, who examined the function of the sign through the lens of linguistics, speech always takes precedence over writing. Voice speaks of the self-presence of an idea, whereas the written sign misplaces it by making its seemingly inadequate copy. Thus, writing translates self-presence into a "mere" representation, functioning as a supplement and a substitution. It takes the place of that which was present in itself and fills it with void.[32] Within this logic, representations are seen as inferior to what they stand to represent, unless one proves their ability to denote reality. That is why the holy grail of photography is presence, the having-been-there-ness and a deciphered code of denotation.

Derrida, however, questions the hard divide between being (the signified) and representation (the signifier), proposing that no signified escapes the play of signifiers. For him, the signified is not a presence locked onto itself but is always already a trace, and, as such,

[31] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 97.
[32] *Id.*, 292.

it finds itself "*in the position of the signifier*."[33] This brings about a profound change in both the methods of visual and textual analysis and our perception of reality. No medium or form of expression, be it speech or photography, can lay a better claim to the signified than any other. The deconstruction of the sign dismantles the very notion of presence, asking: What is presence if not its own erasure? Derrida shapes his philosophy under the influence of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which investigates one's inner consciousness of time. For Husserl, the present is "already something that is not" or "something that is not yet."[34] Present-beingness is always already split, although he does posit that presence can be obtained through the immediacy of unmediated perception.[35] Derrida, however, goes further and challenges the very premise that perception can be "unmediated." For him, presence, defined as "the *form* that remains the same throughout the diversity of content,"[36] can never coincide with itself, because meaning is deferred, removed from us by a concatenation of traces. The search for the origin of the trace—understood as a momentary retention of experience, once experience splits the fabric of space and time[37]—is fated to fail, because each trace appears at the moment of its disappearance, as it is being effaced by other traces. Thus, the trace resists reaching any kind of fixed form, for it emerges not in its being but in its becoming and is incomplete.

Therefore, there is no photograph that can capture the *this-ness* of the scene. There is no view that can arise in front of the lens in its "giveness," as it is always already "contaminated" by the act of signification. The very idea in the mind does not exist outside of signification, and, as such, it is a trace of its own becoming. For example, when I stand in the landscape and see before me the sea, the setting sun and an open field traversed by a network of famine

[33] *Id.*, 73.
[34] Husserl, *Phenomenology Internal Time-Consciousness*, 51.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Lawlor, *Voice and Phenomenon*, xvi.
[37] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62.

walls,[38] I do not encounter it as "shaped" land, as an antithesis to the surrounding wilderness, but rather as the formation of the sign that one may call "landscape," through the deferral of meaning.

Figure 2: *Trace-schaft* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016/2021)[39]

There is no original presence that the photographer may capture while walking in nature. In fact, what "nature" means depends on the context of the surrounding wilderness of thought—nature arises as a view, as a sunset, as a mountain covered in stone walls signifying their own history—nature is a montage, like any other image or word. It is a signifier, and if one were to take its photograph, it would emerge as a constellation of self-effacing reflections. Through this lens, *Landschaft* is a vanishing trace-*schaft*, which does not only disappear but also has not yet appeared.

My photograph *Trace-schaft* (fig. 2) is an attempt to demonstrate the work of traces, but it is undoubtedly an approximation and a simplification. A trace cannot be fixed. There cannot be a photograph of it. What Derrida calls the arche-trace, i.e. the very possibility of a trace,[40] is not an origin but rather the

[38] The famine walls were built by the peasants during the Great Famine (1845–1852) in return for food, as many landowners would not feed them otherwise: the rocks and boulders were rolled up the hills to erect a massive network of enclosures, spanning much of the Irish west.

[39] The photograph was taken in 2016 and processed in 2021.

[40] Avtonomova, "Derrida and Grammatology," 26.

underlying principle of differentiation that allows one to distinguish between differences and similarities and see their underlying simultaneity. Another name for this principle is *différance*, a neologism Derrida coins to describe the process of the formation of form itself.[41] What the trace captures is the dynamism of the sign, as each trace coincides not with itself in the future or in the past but with its neighbouring traces that are synchronously concurrent. This convergence is called "supplementarity," and it describes how each instance of incompleteness seeks completion, or in other words, how absence of presentness aspires to acquire presentness but can never succeed.[42] As such, presence dissolves in the multitude of traces and cannot be centred, collected, or logocentric. For Derrida, presence is an emptiness, an abyss which engenders a play of all possible meanings within a given structure. The desire for presence emerges in the abyss of reflections, in the abyss of mirrors, in the abyss of representations of representations.[43]

Derrida concludes that "*the trace itself does not exist*,"[44] because to exist means to be present in itself. What stands in its place is writing. However, for him, writing is not synonymous with language, for it does not just refer to pictographic, ideographic and phonetic forms of record but to the whole continuity of phenomena that make it possible.[45] Writing precedes and encompasses any form of -graphy that captures not the sign of a thing but the sign of a sign.[46]

A landscape photograph aspires to capture the presence of a natural scene, but it can never transcend the limitations of its -graphy. A static image of a mountain (fig. 1) does not reveal its subject but conceals it. It condenses its essence into a thing that can

[41] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 63.

[42] According to Derrida, the dance of light and shadow establishes not a binary but a relationship along a differential border: "This is the very movement of the trace: a movement that is a priori photographic" (*Copy, Archive, Signature*, 17).

[43] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 163.

[44] *Id.*, 167.

[45] Thus, language is only one species of writing, along with cinematography, choreography, music, painting, sculpture, photography, etc. *Id.*, 9.

[46] Derrida mentions that according to Chinese tradition, writing emerges from the contemplation of traces in nature, such as cuts and marks on a turtle's shell (*Id.*, 123). The possibility of writing predates discerning patterns in nature like constellations in the night sky.

be named and captured, divulging not its "being" but that which functions as a signifier.[47] The image inscribes that which is unique into a system of relations and, as such, is an act of writing, the loss of self-presence, the loss of that which was never really given, which was "always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance."[48] A photograph like *Trace-schaft* does not hide its act of -graphy, compression and reduction but demonstrates its attempt at capturing the presence of a scene of nature as *rupture*. It is a violent act, for that which can be turned into a sign and written must first be compressed. But before the sign is a form, it is a play. Before one can picture a landscape, one must dissolve into the movement of the world, wherein human and nature emerge not as stable entities that can be contained in language or imagery but as shifting phenomena appearing in one's mind in their inter-relation. Before the act of rupture takes place, before the image is shaped, being and representation themselves flow into each other, wherein an "I" is not yet separate from "the other." In *Trace-schaft*, one is already detached from the environment, already on the outside, yet still perceiving the traces of the sign, which, once formed, will be called "landscape."

Even though this photograph captures the multiplicity of nature's appearances, it is also a static image, a presence in itself, a mere illustration. But nature cannot be represented as a presence, for it is not whole and internally coherent. Nature can be inhabited but not signified. Like the movement of *différance*, which is never in stasis, it must reflect the movement of time itself. The representation of nature, which I was seeking, must capture the movement of life-death[49] and thus reflect "the play of the world."[50] Nature can only be "denoted" by gaining access to "an absence of meaning full of all the meanings."[51] In order to appear, it must not

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[47] *Id.*, 125. The transition from speech to writing (in the narrow sense) happens within arche-writing itself. Thus, writing foregoes speech.

[48] *Id.*, 112.

[49] In 1975 and 1976, Derrida gave a series of lectures deconstructing the dichotomy between life and death titled "Life Death," which was first published in English in 2020.

[50] Avtonomova, "Derrida and Grammatialogy," 31 (my translation).

[51] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 42.

be signified but entered through the movement of *différance* that itself does not move towards acquiring some quintessential presence but simply follows the logic of fateful chance, which is history. Rather than capturing presence, I would have to photograph absence.

Through the deconstructivist lens: presence, absence and aftermath photography

One genre in particular situates the spectator in relation to what is not presented within the photographic frame. This genre, which bears the name of aftermath photography (or late photography), documents vacant places associated with past tragic events. Not limited to landscape images alone, it nonetheless often portrays natural scenes, showing, for example, the remains of concentration camps overgrown by forest, or still vistas of the blue sea covering shipwrecks. In short, late photography arrives late and captures traumatic absences. It refers to a time past and a time present and entangles the spectator within its temporal net. The mechanics of this process will be explained shortly, but for now I would like to clarify my interest in aftermath photography. Having learnt that the phenomenological appeal of the photograph happens at the level of the suspension of language, I started searching for an image that would set in motion the play of *différance* rather than furnish a stable meaning. For if I were to portray nature not as an object but as a field of agency, the photograph would have to deconstruct itself by removing the sense of separateness between the viewer and the image. The latter would have to obscure itself, call itself into question and invite the spectator to partake in an act of imaginative construction. I thus perceived the potential of aftermath photographs in light of Derrida's deconstructive method, which undoes binary oppositions (presence/absence, human/nature, subject/object) and explains their impossibility. But first I had to find out how a photograph might be perceived by a Derridean scholar.

Eduardo Cadava suggests that the photographic image is "a force of arrest," which "spaces time and temporalizes space"[52]—like any type of writing. However, this does not mean that the photograph captures a discrete state, since it would not be possible

[52] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 61.

to adjust one's shutter so that the camera would cleanly cut a moment from the stream of time. The image is by definition blurry. Cadava defines the photographed not as an atomic state but as a differential duration: "what eternally comes to pass—simultaneously what passes away and what survives this passing, that is, passing itself."[53] As such, the photograph is only an act of translation of an aspect of time into a unit of experience. Cadava echoes Derrida: "related to both the future and the past, the photograph constitutes the present by means of this relation to what it is not."[54] The "now" of a depicted event is never present, for it occupies heterogeneous time. Consequently, Derrida calls for a "break with the presumed phenomenological naturalism that would see in photographic technology the miracle of [giving] us a natural purity, time itself."[55] Rather, this technology gives us a trace of the so-called present that fails to arrive. For Derrida, Barthes' statement that "the denoted message in the photograph is absolutely analogical, which is to say continuous, outside of any recourse to a code"[56] would be erroneous, precisely because the photograph does not denote the signified. The "having-been-there" is in itself a signifier and, thus, cannot claim to capture its referent. It can only extend its signifying gesture to an absence, while remaining uncertain of its reference.

Electing a place based on "the historicity that is attached to it,"[57] the aftermath photograph gleans into a past time that cannot be shown and can never coincide with itself. It refers to the portrayed scene within a particular historical context and thus captures a duration—alluding to what had been within the illusory frame of the image's "now." Aftermath photographs deviate from traditional photojournalism by assuming a stance closer to forensic photography,[58] featuring no people, often aestheticizing the scenes they capture, and, most importantly, depending on captions for their interpretation.[59] It is through the text accompanying the image,

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[53] *Id.*, 39.
[54] *Id.*, 63.
[55] Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 9.
[56] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 20.
[57] Shobeiri, *Place*, 112.
[58] Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 124.
[59] Shobeiri, *Place*, 112.

serving the function of relay, that the photograph communicates its pastness and invites the spectator to unravel the threads of concomitant temporalities. Moreover, as Shobeiri suggests, by employing the landscape genre, which "has a strong affinity with the temporal dimension of seeing,"[60] the aftermath image "elongate[s] the act of looking."[61] Thus, the spectator is lured to see, but the reference of the image is obscure and points at a place of absence. On the one hand, it captures one's gaze, while, on the other, it suspends one's judgement. As a result, the aftermath photograph cannot serve as a sign signifying "a pre-existing reality,"[62] for it fails to denote its referent. Instead of capturing "reality," it only extends an uncertain gesture to the world, serving as a reference. And it is, perhaps, through this gesture that the photograph may "[exceed] its function as a sign"[63] and offer the "phenomenological fascination"[64] that Tom Gunning recognises in it.

I would, therefore, suggest that the aftermath photograph defers meaning, because it portrays that which had already "vanished into the unique past time of its event,"[65] thus drawing the viewer into the movement of *différance*. And, as a photographer, I see the potential of the aftermath image to portray the agency of nature, because in it the landscape is not just addressed by the spectator, but it addresses them back. Within its frame, presence spills into absence, and absence pervades presence. Through this play of shadows, nature begins to emerge.

[60] *Id.*, 123.
[61] *Id.*, 113.
[62] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?," 45.
[63] *Id.*, 48.
[64] *Id.*, 45.
[65] Derrida, "Deaths of Roland Barthes," 53.

Figure 3: *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* (M. Romanova-Hynes, 2016/2021)

The west of Ireland is not just a beautiful part of the country; it is also a place associated with one of Ireland's major cultural traumas—namely, the Great Famine of 1845–1852.[66] During my time in the west of Ireland, I lived close to the lake Doo Lough and its surrounding mountains, a site that has come to symbolise Ireland's tragic colonial history. I took the photograph *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* because the locale fascinated me: upon looking at the lake, all I could see was the event that never ceased to take place in its non-presence. The photograph itself seemingly captures a spectacular landscape, but, through its caption, it further imparts a historical meaning that collides the past with the present, impregnated with the traces of remembered time. This is the story it refers to: In late March of 1849, Colonel Hogrove and Captain Primrose ordered the peasants, claiming relief, to follow them to a

[66] The Great Famine was caused by the failure of potato crops for several consecutive years due to a potato blight. It particularly affected areas in the west and south of Ireland, where the Irish language was dominant. It is estimated that between 1 and 1.5 million people died from disease and starvation, with a further 2 million people emigrating. Overall, the country's population was reduced by about 25%. Notably, during the Famine, Ireland continued to produce food for export to Great Britain.

hunting lodge situated on Doo Lough instead of meeting at the originally assigned village of Louisburgh. But when several hundred destitute people arrived, they were sent back empty-handed. On their journey, approximately 20 kilometres each way in harsh weather, many died from exhaustion and starvation. Some of the bodies were found on the road with grass in their mouths.[67]

Unlike *Captured by the Mountain*, *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849* was not a sudden response to my immediate environment but the result of a prolonged reflection. It was conjured up from the imagination, as I perceived this scene as a faint echo of the past, a metaphor and a trace. What I realised while editing the photograph was that the image itself helped me to inhabit the landscape, as if it captured me within its frame. The longer I looked at it, the more I imagined myself in the position of someone standing there, hungry and in rugged clothes, on the verge of death. This image, accompanied by its caption, set up a stage upon which a play of my own imagination was beginning to take place. To see, in the case of aftermath photography, was not to see but to envisage. The theatricality of the image resulted from an encounter between the viewing subject and the spectral scene, whose referent is withheld and only alluded to by name.

The Great Famine left no photographic record, even though photographic technology was available at the time.[68] There is no single surviving image, no "original" capturing the sight of the starving population, that may serve as a point of pictorial reference. So, when I look at *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849*, I only know that death was there. But let us imagine that the bodies of the hungry people were portrayed in place of absence. How would this change the perception of the scene? Would the photograph depict *them*? Would their lives be what it signified? No. I realised that I was naive to ever believe that the photograph could capture someone's (or something's) presence, for the starved people themselves would be

[67] A local fisherman told me a more metaphorical story. During the Famine, some people living in this area walked into the lake out of desperation. To drown in the icy-cold water was more desirable for them than to continue living. Now there stands a stone cross, overlooking Doo Lough, that commemorates the victims of famines all around the world.

[68] O'Toole, "What would photos of the Great Famine have been like?"

signifiers. The photograph would capture not their being but their metaphorical (and in some cases, literal) death. The image would be their epitaph. The photograph would herald their disappearance, for every appearance within the photographic frame—be it a mountain or a person—is written by the image to be sacrificed to its discourse. All they would mean within the context of the photograph would be "hunger." They would be turned into an icon of starvation, inscribed into an episteme. So, what presence can a photograph signify, if not the erasure of presence?[69] What truth can it denote if not writing, which is *différance*? The photograph obliterates its subjects by "condensing and immobilising what it seeks to represent"[70] and creates a differentiated moment, which is already a trace.

The aftermath genre recognises that photography stands in a negative differential relationship to what it photographs, for it can never reproduce the non-reproducible presence of phenomena but only seize their likeness. The aftermath photograph allows the photographer and the spectator alike to engage with photography as a relational medium. When I look at a scene of absence, serving as an uncertain reference to that which cannot be portrayed, I am invited to mentally reconstruct a vanished time. My body is drawn into the experience of the photograph, as the image becomes, in Elena del Río's words, "translated into a bodily response . . . body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection."[71] No longer on the outside of the photograph, I actively construct the scene, which could have never been mimetically presented in the first place.

The failure of mimetic reproduction prompts Cadava to suggest that "the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph [would be] the least faithful one, the least mimetic one."[72] A faithful historical photograph would signal its *not*-having-been-there. It would conjure up nothing but a "ghostly emergence,"[73] for it would recognise that the otherness of the past simply cannot

[69] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 109.
[70] *Id.*, 92.
[71] Del Río, "Foundation of the Screen," 101.
[72] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 15.
[73] *Ibid.*

be experienced in the form of a presence.[74] It would reveal itself as a trace, as the absence-presentness of meaning, which emerges not out of itself but out of the play of *différance*. This photograph could never be *known*, but it could be *experienced*. It would not point at an origin but only the past-futureness of self-effacing time. As such, it would give agency to its subjects rather than turn them into the objects of spectatorship.

The fidelity act of an aftermath photograph, such as *The Doo Lough Tragedy, 1849*, is thus to "[withhold] a sense of knowing"[75] and to fashion a perspective instead. Rather than "denoting" the "presence" of the victims, the photograph connotes it. Having adopted the viewpoint of the people who were "there" and who suffered, I view the landscape *with* them. As a result, the enfolding nature within the scene acquires its own agency as "the world in which *we* stand."[76] Nature, here, is sensually conceived. Through this photograph, I start imagining the world they would have seen. Inhabiting the surrounding environment, I ask myself: "They stood in front of this view, this mountain, this water. Where could they have escaped?" The mountain is too high to climb, too bare to nourish. It frames the scene on all sides, capturing me within nature that is inescapable. Nature rises as a force that underlies people's very existence, containing them, pre-empting them and showing their ultimate dependency on its resources. The site of the Doo Lough tragedy has outlived the tragedy and its victims. As a photographer and a spectator, I come to mourn, surrendering myself to death. Thus, I would argue, the aftermath photograph gives rise to what Barthes terms as *punctum*, a phenomenological state of arrest and intensity, enabling me to transform into an active witness of time itself[77] and putting me in relation to the event referenced within the image, which mediates not between the signifier and the signified but transitory temporalities.

When one sees the bare ground where people died of starvation, one experiences a vague recollection of death, pointing

[74] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.
[75] Brett, *Photography and Place*, 6.
[76] Quoted in Shobeiri, *Place*, 23 (my italics).
[77] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 119.

back at one's own position.[78] Thus, the viewer unknowingly partakes in the play of *différance*, being written by the photograph, invented by a multitude of voices, and then erased again. The self-effacing work of traces within the photographic image thus furnishes a mode of witnessing, wherein neither nature nor people are seen as objects, pictured within the photographic frame, but interrelated agencies. Having said that, it should be noted that the landscape here is "staged" in so far as it is dependent on the interplay between the caption and the image. While the photograph's reference is uncertain, its signifying gesture relies on the spectator's familiarity with the context of the event—the Great Famine, identified by a date, 1849, and the word "tragedy." Thus, for the phenomenal play of absence to take place, the presence of the text must first invoke the phantoms of history.

The absence within the image defers meaning. As an image "bound with an uncertainty and anxiety," it does not intend "to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs."[79] In it, nature is felt in its still potency and human suffering is felt in its resounding silence. The image does not hide the play of writing behind the mask of a denoted "there," which would trick the viewer into proclaiming their knowledge of where "there" is. Rather, it is a photograph faithful to its own infidelity, for it reveals the lacuna present at the centre of every photograph: its absent referent.

Conclusion

My quest to take a photograph of nature led me to address the question of what nature is to me. As it turned out, nature is not just the mountains, the ocean and the fields, but the whole complex of living phenomena—a world at play—unfolding in aeonial time and involving me with it. Nature cannot be framed in a static shot; it cannot be denoted as a whole and internally coherent self-contained presence. It cannot be signified, reduced to an object of spectatorship. If a photograph of nature is to possess the slightest measure of what Proust called "the dignity which it ordinarily lacks,"

[78] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 68.
[79] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 39.

it must affect the spectator and further engage them as a participant in an act of imaginative creation.

Therefore, the photograph portraying a phenomenal world at play must itself become a field of play. An image of nature must conceal more than it can ever reveal, for if it were to put the viewer in the position of knowledge and mastery over its referent, it would no longer suggest the relationality between the observer and the observed. To retain its agency, nature must appear in the mind of the viewer not as a fixed sign but as a trace, evading capture and easy categorisation. Moreover, it must be felt, for in order for meaning to have any significance at all, it must be sensed before it can be known.[80]

In this article, I have tried to outline how my experience with aftermath photography, which focuses on absence rather than presence, taught me to engage the subjectivity of the spectator and explore the phenomenological potential of photography. I realised that what I value in this medium is not its denotational claims but, on the contrary, its spectrality, revealing nothing but a "ghostly emergence."[81] It is the phantoms that hold sway, and for nature to have agency in a photographic representation, it, too, must become a phantom, emerging out of the play of *différance*. My task as a photographer, therefore, is not to collect likenesses but to set up a stage upon which objects, people and places can acquire their spectral agency, so that, in Derrida's words, "[one] could speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended."[82] The photograph is a performance. The camera, thus, should not mirror its referents, for it cannot. Rather, it should put the spectator in relation to their own limited time.

[80] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.
[81] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 15.
[82] Quoted in Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, ix.

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Fitting Years' Worth of Trash into a Jar: Saving the Planet through Curated Consumption

Angel Perazzetta

"This is all of my trash for the past five years," Lauren Singer proudly proclaims to the camera as she holds up a small glass jar filled with a jumble of small objects. Packed in the jar are a few drinking straws, a number of plastic clothing tag fasteners, a cut-up credit card, and "a lot of festival bracelets."[1] Singer is a zero-waste influencer who runs a blog on the topic of minimising the amount of trash one generates; she also owns a company making "organic, vegan laundry detergent" and a "zero waste lifestyle store."[2] As an environmental studies major, she was struck by behaviours she saw as contradictory: she and her classmates would spend time in class learning about the environmental crisis and ways to ameliorate it, but they would nonetheless purchase food packaged in plastic and use disposable items. She explains the motivation behind her work as follows:

> I used to think that the solution to environmental problems was through politicians and proactive policy decisions, but I realised that individuals have a huge impact on the world and the climate. And so, with every American making 4.5 pounds of trash per person per day, we contribute to this overall climate issue. And so, by us taking simple steps to reduce our waste, if we all take little steps and we all make little changes, that has a big positive impact, and I believe it can make a difference.[3]

[1] Singer, "My Trash In This Jar," 0:00-0:03
[2] *Id.*, 0:20-0:25.
[3] *Id.*, 3:10-3:39.

This passage encapsulates two elements of a widespread eco-friendly narrative. On the one hand, the passage reflects a belief in the environmental effectiveness of cumulative individual-level changes in lifestyle, particularly those related to the sphere of consumption. On the other hand, it exemplifies a dismissal of large-scale political (or, more properly, "institutional") solutions to environmental problems.

I selected this short video because it is representative of many videos, blogs, social media posts, books, and articles of its kind. "How I Fit 5 Years of My Trash In This Jar" is not a unique text, but rather a paradigmatic example of a popular narrative concerning environmentally conscious action.

Given the increasing awareness of climate change amongst all segments of the population, but especially young people, it is no wonder that guides to eco-friendly behaviour attract a lot of attention.[4] I do not want to investigate the source of this environmental sensibility—the sense of urgency around climate change is well warranted, as the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 1990 was already gloomy and the situation has not improved in the intervening three decades—but rather why exactly such an awareness tends to be realised in the form of lifestyle adjustments. Why is eco-consciousness understood as strictly a matter of consumption, encompassing aesthetic and identitarian pursuits, rather than a mostly political project?

In this essay, I close read a selection of lifestyle guides purporting to teach readers how to lead a minimalist life. The specific texts were chosen because they posit a strong relationship between environmental concerns and minimalist lifestyles—a move that, perhaps surprisingly, is not at all omnipresent in the literature on minimalism *tout court*. I will analyse the corpus of selected titles in order to unearth the ideological assumptions that characterise the subgenre of *environmental minimalism* and to contrast these assumptions with the apparently countercultural affective structure of the texts themselves. My argument is that the minimalist handbooks I analyse adopt the language of individual empowerment

[4] Thompson, "Young People's Climate Anxiety," 605.

and social critique, much like Lauren Singer's video, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the solutions they propose are compatible with the political, economic and ideological hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.

The analysis proper will be preceded by two introductory sections. In the first, I will present the corpus of texts at the core of this article in relation to the practices of lifestyle minimalism, the zero-waste movement and ethical consumption. The second introductory section will delve into the concept of neoliberal governmentality, focusing on its political consequences—especially, as Wendy Brown argues, on its incompatibility with democracy. These introductory sections are followed by close readings of several extracts from minimalist handbooks, highlighting the ideological implications of certain common narratives, such as the idea that lifestyle adjustments are the key to environmental action, that curating one's private consumption is the path to sustainability, and that one's behaviour as a consumer can essentially be understood as activism. In the final portion of the article, I will contrast the individualistic bent of minimalist and zero-waste handbooks with the openly political and communal nature of the possibilities for action proposed in other texts devoted to solving climate change.

What is lifestyle minimalism?

Unlike the idea of zero-waste, which is intuitively easy to grasp (it means striving to produce no garbage by foregoing disposable items and instead choosing goods that can be reused indefinitely), the concept of minimalism is less immediately clear. Semantically, it evokes ideas of paring down, simplifying and reducing. Accordingly, the minimalist movement in contemporary art produced sculptures "characterised by extreme simplicity of form, usually on a large scale and using industrial materials."[5] But in terms of lifestyle, the relevant domain for this article, the minimalist drive toward simplification takes two forms. At the abstract level, it encourages proponents to re-evaluate their priorities, minimising commitments that cause

[5] Chilvers and Glaves-Smith, "Minimal art," 461. Chilvers and Glaves-Smith describe artists contributing to minimal art as concerned with purity of form, transcending mimetic representations of space, and bringing artworks in conversation with the exhibition space.

unnecessary stress and take time away from enjoyable pursuits. At the material level, it involves activities like decluttering (getting rid of superfluous objects) and limiting the number of new things one brings into one's home. Rarely are these two levels completely separate from one another: most books on minimalism recommend simplifying your life *and* your home, understanding these two domains as intertwined. Despite the connection between the psychological and the domestic spheres, authors of books on minimalism typically decide to focus on one of the two, emphasising either the physical act of going through one's possessions or the process of re-evaluating one's career, relationships and priorities.

Focusing on the material side of things, minimalism's emphasis on reducing consumption and living more frugally gives the lifestyle an environmentally friendly connotation. This "green" image is supported by a large amount of content on social media that plays up the sustainability of a minimalist lifestyle, relying amongst other things on a visual rhetoric consisting of images of plant-filled apartments, natural-looking materials, and an aesthetic predilection for the simple and (seemingly) unstaged. Partly because of this environmentally friendly reputation, lifestyle minimalism attracts a lot of popular interest, especially in light of growing concern about the climate crisis.[6]

In order to understand the constellation of practices discussed in this article, a third movement should be mentioned alongside zero-waste and minimalism: ethical consumption. This complex phenomenon—endowed with its own historical and cultural premises—started gaining traction around the turn of the millennium.[7] At the time, in hope of mitigating the impact of their consumption on the environment and working conditions in the Global South, many consumers started to let ethical concerns inform their purchasing habits.[8] Unable to completely opt out of consuming, shoppers who want to practically enact their ethical

[6] Minimalist authors like Marie Kondo and the American duo The Minimalists (Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus) are particularly successful, starring in Netflix shows, publishing best-selling handbooks and boasting large numbers of social media followers.

[7] Lewis and Potter, *Ethical Consumption*, 8.

[8] Shaw and Newholm, "Voluntary Simplicity," 168.

concerns are faced with two possible strategies: they can shift their purchasing habits by acquiring more ethically sourced products, and they can adopt a less consumption-heavy lifestyle to minimise the destructive consequences of their purchases.[9] Ethical consumption has steadily increased in popularity over the last two decades; today, it is possible to purchase bamboo toothbrushes, biodegradable earphones, and all sorts of groceries in glass jars—all in a bid to avoid creating plastic waste. Companies like Apple craft an image of sustainability by promoting their products as recyclable and produced minimizing waste.[10] Many companies' advertisements also emphasise how humane their production practices are and how they empower the workers who labour in their factories. Some companies even enact schemes where, for every item purchased by a (Western, wealthy) customer, another identical item is donated to a community in need.[11] The concerns informing ethical consumption have been fully embraced by corporations large and small: if customers want to purchase items that are environmentally friendly and ethically manufactured, the market will provide them.[12]

The three movements I have mentioned—lifestyle minimalism, zero-waste and ethical consumption—are often combined and integrated with one another. Minimalism proclaims that life is too hectic, that consumerism does not lead to happiness, and that a simpler lifestyle can offer greater rewards than conspicuous consumption. The average reader of books on minimalism is, however, unable to stop consuming entirely: even reducing purchases to the minimum, they will still need to acquire groceries, clothing and technology. Those more or less unavoidable

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Valenzuela and Böhm, "Against wasted politics," 26.

[11] See for example Nike, "Worker Engagement & Wellbeing." See also the buy-one-donate-one schemes carried out for socks and eyeglasses: Bombas, "Thank You X 5 Million," and Warby Parker, "The Whole Story Begins With You."

[12] The twin questions of transparency (is a product that claims to be fully recyclable *really* recyclable anywhere?) and of effectiveness (is donating a second pair of socks to homeless shelters really the most efficient way to help, or is it more of a feel-good practice for customers?) are often brought up by commentators and critics, but that does not seem to inspire much serious debate. On the topic see for example, Valenzuela and Böhm, "Against Wasted Politics," or Kalina, "Treating the Symptom?"

purchases are where ethical consumption fits in: the things that one *must* buy should be both ethically sourced and environmentally sustainable. One could therefore interpret zero-waste practices, which are meant to reduce the amount of waste one creates, as a facet of ethical consumption.

The above-mentioned environmentally-friendly rhetoric often goes unmentioned in published handbooks on lifestyle minimalism. The few printed titles that do explore the ecological implications of a less-consumerist lifestyle invariably focus on the practical aspects of minimalism, and particularly on household management. Such texts effortlessly combine the logic of reduction and simplification, which is so central to minimalism, with an appreciation of zero-waste techniques and a concern with the ethical aspects of consumption. By assembling these different (but related) lifestyle trends, minimalist handbooks that prioritise environmental sustainability focus on the private consumption of individuals and their families. This emphasis on individual consumption (specifically as it concerns the domestic sphere), combined with an acknowledgement of the ecological impact of a minimalist lifestyle, constitutes the core of what I call *minimalist environmentalism*.

I selected Francine Jay's *The Joy of Less*, Bea Johnson's *Zero Waste Home*, and Cary Telander Fortin and Kyle Louise Quilici's *New Minimalism* as the corpus for this article because they embody environmental minimalism as I define it. All three of these books share two key characteristics: firstly, they focus on the domestic space, on the management of material possessions, and on the nefarious consequences of thoughtless consumption more generally. Secondly, they discuss the environmental implications of lifestyle choices in detail—be it in one chapter, as in *The Joy of Less*, or throughout the length of the text, as in the remaining two titles.

Neoliberalism: *homo oeconomicus* and the rational market

In the following three sections, I aim to identify and problematise some common elements of the environmental discourse exemplified by my corpus of minimalist handbooks. I focus specifically on drawing links between arguments playing up the importance of carefully managing one's private consumption, which are a central component of environmental minimalism, and the

much-discussed concept of neoliberalism. Before delving into the analysis proper, I will briefly delineate how I understand two key terms, *politics* and *neoliberalism*, and why exactly the latter is especially relevant for my discussion.

Instead of taking on the challenging task of offering a coherent definition of politics, I will draw on Adrian Leftwich's schematic classification of the meanings of politics and argue that, for my purposes, the term should be understood as *processual*, addressing how "questions of power, control [and] decision-making" are mediated amongst individuals and groups, without necessarily involving governmental institutions.[13] In this article I specifically understand politics as proximate to democratic decision-making, with the idea that in politics multiple interested parties can come together to actively pursue their interests.[14]

Though younger than the debate about the nature of politics, the concept of neoliberalism has also been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. Countless books and countless articles have been devoted to the task of defining neoliberalism. These texts tend to agree on identifying three central elements: a reliance on free-market economics, an individualistic ethos, and a belief in the idea that the functions of the state ought to be very limited—especially as they pertain to the sphere of the economy. Throughout my analysis I will show that minimalist environmentalism is shaped by these three principles, which greatly constrain the range of solutions to ecological problems that minimalist environmentalism can discuss.

Beyond these very general traits, scholars disagree on the domains they see as influenced by neoliberalism: to some, like David Harvey, it is a largely economic affair, while to others, like Rachel Greenwald-Smith, it explains social and cultural phenomena as well. Clearly, in analysing a popular lifestyle through the lens of neoliberalism, I would position myself in the latter camp. My argument is deeply informed by political theorist Wendy Brown's analysis of neoliberalism's influence on contemporary Western societies. In her study *Undoing the Demos*, Brown focuses on the

[13] Leftwich, "Thinking Politically," 14.

[14] Centering the importance of democratic organisation, I follow the arguments laid out by Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* (see, for example, chapter 4) and Jon Alexander in *Citizens*.

incompatibility between neoliberalism—which she defines, following Michel Foucault, as "a specific and normative mode of reason, of the production of the subject, 'conduct of conduct,' and scheme of valuation"[15]—and democracy.[16] Democracy, which Brown understands as "political self-rule by the people, whoever the people are,"[17] asks that people understand themselves as members of a community, and as such pursue the public good.[18] This cooperative imagination is fundamentally at odds with the competitive nature of neoliberalism, which Brown defines as a rationale that understands every human behaviour in economic terms, evaluating every sphere of life as if it were governed by the logic of the free market.[19]

In neoliberalism, crucially, human subjects shed the role of citizens and take on the role of *homo oeconomicus*: they are only intelligible insofar as their actions make economic sense, whether or not they function in domains that are expressly monetized. *Homo oeconomicus*, in other words, justifies taking a break over the weekend because rest will allow greater efficiency at the workplace, not because a break might be enjoyable. Texts on minimalist lifestyles likewise often cater to the interests of *homo oeconomicus*. A particularly straightforward example of this orientation toward efficiency and profit—focusing, of course, on how practices like decluttering can contribute to profit maximisation—is found in *New Minimalism*. Quilici and Fortin recount their experiences with a client, Shawn, "a highly in-demand Silicon Valley engineer, . . . [whose] time was so valuable that it didn't seem worth it to him to deal with his stuff."[20] Shawn thinks like a *homo oeconomicus*: if time is money, then spending time on activities that do not bring profit is an irrational waste. It soon becomes evident to him, however, that living in an organised minimalist environment is economically worthwhile, because it reduces the amount of time it takes him to pack for work trips and it ensures that he is able to reliably arrive at

[15] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 48.
[16] *Id.*, 39.
[17] *Id.,* 20.
[18] *Id.,* 24.
[19] *Id.*, 10.
[20] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, 45.

work on time.[21] After receiving professional decluttering help, Quilici and Fortin point out, Shawn's mental state is so much improved by his more organised surroundings that he decides to move cities and pursue even more lucrative work.[22]

For the purposes of this article, the most important implication of *homo oeconomicus'* overextension of market logic to every facet of life—including domains traditionally untouched by it—is that it stands to reason that the market would also be its preferred space for action. According to this framework, goals, be they individual or social, can only be pursued by keeping a close eye on the opportunities afforded to economic actors. The horizon, then, is not one of democratic mobilisation for the good of the community. As Brown argues, individuals under a neoliberal regime are called upon to act as subjects of the market, not as members of a coherent political body.[23] Minimalist environmentalism, I will argue, is deeply steeped in this market-centric understanding of social and political action.

Environmental concerns: from the centre to the periphery

The three books in my corpus were selected because they devote a significant amount of space to the topic of environmentalism, but they do not approach it in the same way—or with the same intensity. On the more involved end of the spectrum sits *Zero Waste Home,* which could be broadly described as a guide to environmentally friendly homemaking. In this text, Johnson highlights the beneficial effects of her lifestyle recommendations on the environment and psychological wellbeing, while generally overlooking the aesthetic pursuit of sparse-looking interiors. The title, too, explicitly attracts readers whose environmental sensibility pushes them to make lifestyle changes, and it primes them to expect a book whose main goal is to promote a "green" lifestyle. The same cannot be said of *The Joy of Less*, nor *New Minimalism* (whose subtitle, "Decluttering and Design for Sustainable, Intentional Living," ambiguously evokes two meanings of *sustainable*, both as

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Id.*, 46.
[23] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22.

"environmentally friendly" and "easy to maintain in the long run")—and in fact these latter two texts devote much less space to environmental concerns, and more to the creation of elegant domestic spaces.

While *Zero Waste Home* centres on the impact that thoughtful domestic management might have on the environment, *The Joy of Less* and *New Minimalism* only mention the potential ecologically beneficial aspects of minimalism as welcome side effects of their projects, which are mainly intended to achieve the aesthetic goal of a tastefully decorated home and the psychological goal of improved satisfaction. Jay, for example, acknowledges that her readers may "have embraced minimalism to save money, save time, or save space in [their] homes," but reassures them that their minimalist practice—the decluttering and re-using, donating and ethical purchasing—has nonetheless had the effect of "[saving] the Earth from environmental harm, and [saving] people from suffering unfair (and unsafe) working conditions."[24] Similarly, the authors of *New Minimalism* point out that along with improving one's wellbeing, a minimalist lifestyle offers "less obvious benefits . . . like, ahem, saving the planet."[25] Quilici and Fortin are mindful of the fact that their readers might not be particularly motivated to turn into "warrior[s] for our planet's health," but they are adamant that if readers enact the advice offered, "[their] actions will be a benevolent service to our earth."[26]

These passages offer a feel-good rhetoric that has a reassuring effect on readers. By only addressing environmental concerns peripherally—as the last items on a list of a given lifestyle's benefits, or in the last chapter of a rather lengthy book (as in *The Joy of Less*, where the environment is only discussed in chapter 30)—the authors confine issues like pollution and climate change to the fringes of their projects. Whether that is because the anxiety-inducing reality of environmental degradation is at odds with the uplifting self-help tone of the texts, or because the authors do not deem environmental topics all that important, is difficult to conclude. It can, however, be safely argued that Jay, Fortin and Quilici's books suggest that

[24] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, ch. 30, paragraph 1.
[25] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, ix.
[26] *Ibid.*

politically addressing climate change and pollution is made irrelevant by the fact that adopting a minimalist lifestyle already automatically takes care of it. After all, if the practices of self-control and restraint one would adopt to enhance happiness, productivity and wellbeing are already so beneficial for the environment, what is the point of addressing climate change separately?

My critique of the above-mentioned rhetoric is that it communicates the idea that by adhering to minimalist lifestyles for individual wellbeing readers can automatically be (to use Fortin and Quilici's phrase) "saving the planet." Following one's own self-interest, in other words, ultimately adds up to the collective interest, making it unnecessary to consider the common good.[27] Furthermore, the extracts analysed above suggest that curating one's consumption is the most impactful thing one can do to fight environmental decay, which implies that other forms of environmental actions can be overlooked. My concerns with these suggestions are addressed in more detail in the following two sections.

The limitless power of consumption

The reassuring passages analysed above rely on the assumption that lifestyle adjustments have a decisive impact on the serious environmental issues the planet faces in this era of ever-accelerating climate change. The texts in my corpus repeatedly propose the idea that small quotidian behaviours can have larger, rippling effects. Sometimes these effects are said to have an interpersonal impact, such as showing friends and family that a minimalist lifestyle is beneficial and not overly difficult to implement. There is some merit to the argument that one's personal actions can be effective in inspiring others and demonstrating one's commitment to the ecological cause.[28] But in the environmental minimalist handbooks I investigate, the emphasis on interpersonal influence is evoked to support the spreading of a minimalist lifestyle for its own sake, not for any "green" goal. When lifestyle changes are explicitly called for in service to an environmental ethos, their effect is, on the other hand, represented as simultaneously economic and social: the idea

[27] Alexander, *Citizens*, 6.
[28] Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 182.

is that buying certain goods (and, conversely, not buying others) directly influences which products corporations manufacture, as well as the working conditions in the factories that produce these items.

This narrative betrays a boundless faith in the efficacy of the individual choices one makes as a customer. This faith is—as previously mentioned—coherent with a neoliberal worldview whereby individuals are exclusively understood as economic actors. Accordingly, buying ethically produced goods, avoiding products packaged in plastic and moderating personal consumption becomes the equivalent of overtly political action, because by performing one's role in the market as a consumer one contributes to the causes one deems important. By endowing consumption with the potential for environmental and social change while never exploring any other strategies to achieve the same goals, environmental minimalist texts effectively adhere to a neoliberal understanding of individual potential.

In this framework, responsibility for climate change is placed squarely on the shoulders of consumers, whose only available option for solving it is shopping thoughtfully—not, for example, participating in grassroots environmental movements or pressuring governments to prioritise the fight against polluting practices. In the environmental minimalist texts I analyse, the possibility of regulating corporations and forcing them to engage in profit-compromising but ecologically beneficial behaviours goes completely unmentioned. Instead, the solution these texts all propose can be boiled down to ensuring that desirable environmental and social changes coincide with the economic good of corporations. In other words, in step with typical neoliberal discourse, environmental minimalist texts argue that the market can be made to work toward environmental goals, provided that such environmental goals are profitable. The consumers' job, ultimately, is to make sure that the right ethical goals become profitable.

I would argue that this particular understanding of market economics indexes a vestigial form of politics: it shows that environmentally minded minimalists are aware that their actions have larger consequences, and that one's behaviour, coordinated

with others', can bring about social change.[29] But an awareness of the potential of collective collaboration only goes so far; in this hybrid domain of economics and politics, individuals are only ever called to act as consumers. Instead of imagining people actively championing their values as citizens (for example, by arguing that environmental preservation should be a social priority), minimalist texts can only picture their readers as consumers sending messages through their purchasing habits. This imbrication of economics and a vestigial politics is the structuring principle of environmental minimalism. All that matters is what one buys, owns, and discards—the three consumer practices inevitably depicted by environmental minimalism as the privileged arena for environmental change. The consumer-centric meshing of economics and the social sphere constitutes the foundation on which the architecture of lifestyle minimalism (as well as zero-waste and ethical consumption) is built. I will illustrate this claim with a passage from *Zero Waste Home* explaining how individual purchasing habits supposedly "trickle up" to the domain of production.

> We have incredible power as consumers. We rely on grocery shopping for survival and restock a multitude of products weekly (sometimes daily), and our decisions can promote or demote manufacturers and grocers, based on the packaging or quality of food they provide. Where we spend the fruit of our hard labour should more than meet our basic need of filling a pantry shelf; it should also reflect our values. Because ultimately, giving someone your business implicitly articulates this message: "Your store satisfies all my needs and I want you to flourish." We can vote with our pocketbooks by avoiding wasteful packaging and privileging local and organic products.[30]

Johnson here takes it for granted that sustainable consumption is made up of several different components, with each actor

[29] Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 44.
[30] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 52.

responsible for doing their part: the duty of manufacturers is to minimise their use of natural resources, but it is customers' responsibility to choose the right products and ensure that their desires are coherent with an ethos of moderation.[31]

Since consumption is implicitly regarded as a thoroughly feminised cultural domain (and one typically deemed economically marginal as compared to the male-coded domain of production),[32] this doling out of responsibility is deeply gendered.[33] In understanding consumers as the driving engines of environmental sustainability, then, the burden of responsibility is largely placed on the shoulders of women. Although Johnson does not spell it out, in fact, the "we" whose grocery shopping has the power to decide which stores, manufacturers, or production practices ought to "flourish" (and which ones should be left to wither) is made up of women. Day-to-day shopping for essentials is in fact part of the care labour with which mothers, wives and girlfriends are regularly tasked.[34]

As Ines Weller finds in her investigation of the relationship between gender politics and sustainable consumption, the twenty-first century is characterised by the privatisation of environmental responsibility, which greatly overemphasises the capacity of individual consumers—coded as female—to enact environmental change.[35] In the Johnson passage cited above, agency is wielded most effectively by the final consumer, whose environmentally conscious purchasing decisions supposedly influence the practices of whichever retailer they favour. Retailers, the story goes, will accordingly place fewer orders of unsustainable products from their suppliers, ultimately resulting in a loss of profits for manufacturers, who will decide to tweak their production methods to be more eco-friendly. Although this chain of events undoubtedly makes logical

[31] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 333.
[32] This view rests on a traditional view, at least in Europe and North America, that associates the domestic sphere with femininity and the public domain with masculinity. See the paragraph "Separation of spheres" in Timm and Sanborn, *Shaping of Modern Europe*, 89-96.
[33] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 338-339.
[34] Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, 22.
[35] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 331.

sense, its overly simplistic focus on individuals leads to a failure to adequately account for other actors. The relationships between retailers, suppliers, manufacturers and other commercial actors are imagined to be straightforward and univocal, but in reality they are complex and layered. Unlike what minimalist texts argue, the purchasing decisions of consumers do not straightforwardly influence producers. Instead, the interests of shopkeepers and wholesalers, exporters and importers stand in the way, and the waters are further muddied by regulations and subsidies, governments and trade agreements. All these different elements complicate the scene, and when bringing them into focus one inevitably must acknowledge that individual consumers in fact have very limited power: they are merely one of the final links in a long and complicated chain of production and exchange.

Under the pretence of framing the reader as "one more person moving the needle, ever so slightly, toward environmental compassion and responsibility,"[36] environmental minimalist texts regularly brush over the question of scale and feasibility. I would argue that uncomfortable questions should be asked about the efficacy of the solutions these texts propose, even if the answers make individual consumers appear rather powerless. The number of unbought Band-Aid plasters, Listerine mouthwash bottles, O.B. tampon boxes necessary for Johnson & Johnson to notice a difference in sales, let alone reinvent its production line, is astronomical. Likewise, for a consumer boycott to be successful enough to drive Nestlé to cease exploitation of farmers in the Global South, enormous masses of people would have to be coordinated over a long period of time. Such considerations reveal the overly optimistic nature of the claims made by minimalist authors by taking into account the unprecedented scale of consumer mobilisation that is called for.

Ultimately, as Weller concisely puts it, a privatised and feminised theory of environmental sustainability "fails to take adequate account of . . . the other actors who are as relevant, and perhaps even more influential, in the development of strategies and concepts for promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and

[36] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, 100.

production than individuals."[37] To acknowledge this reality, however, would be incompatible with the narrative of consumer empowerment that is so central to environmental minimalism.

Our consumerist overlords

It would, however, be inaccurate to say that handbooks on minimalist lifestyles *completely* overlook the important role that corporations, the manufacturing sector and the macroeconomic domain play in society as a whole. On the contrary, such actors are almost inevitably mentioned whenever the authors of these books argue why most people would benefit from paring down their material possessions. Such explanations occur rather frequently, understandably enough: if minimalism is built around the idea that happiness cannot be bought, the authors need to explain why they think most people feel such a materialistic attachment to their possessions.

The authors of *New Minimalism* provide a brief historical account of consumerist society, placing the turning point after World War II, when economic growth allegedly started to depend on increased consumption. This, Fortin and Quilici explain, marked the birth of "our modern-day big-budget multimedia advertising industry," whose aim is to convince us "to buy things we don't need" by exploiting the "sneaky technique called neuromarketing, which allows advertisers to "tap into both our conscious and unconscious brain to override our natural circuitry . . . trigger[ing] our reptilian brain and make us feel that we are lacking something. And then, once we are in this vulnerable place, we are conveniently presented with the item that will solve this 'problem.'"[38] The issue, in short, is that the capitalist system (which is evoked, but not explicitly addressed by the authors of *New Minimalism* in these terms) needs constant consumption to keep itself alive, and in its vampiric desire for untapped market segments it does not hesitate to engage in the unethical manipulation of innocent people's brains.

Considering that critiques of the capitalist system have been

[37] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 334.
[38] Quilici and Fortin, New Minimalism, 12.

part and parcel of academic discourse since Marx first put pen to paper, taking a dim view of exploitative economic systems is not especially controversial. Nonetheless, one can appreciate the value of general interest publications that dare to challenge the dominant logic of industrialised economies. Concerning to me, however, is that the environmental minimalist guides I discuss in this essay depict the malicious system as something easily avoided through consumer choice. These texts promise that one can simply opt out of "consumerist" (read: capitalist) society by being mindful about one's purchases and avoiding the lure of advertising. According to this logic, if you do not purchase unnecessary, unsustainable or disposable things, you are no longer meaningfully implicated in the workings of consumer society. In this context, not buying becomes an act of defiance; freedom is understood as the exercise of agency in one's dealings with the market.[39] To Quilici and Fortin "every thoughtful purchase—and nonpurchase—is an act of rebellion, a declaration to businesses and advertisers that you are not merely a passive consumer purchasing according to their advertising calendar and quarterly financial forecasts."[40] Johnson similarly feels "as though [she is] outsmarting the system in place" when she makes food from scratch instead of buying processed products. Her "rebellious side also gets satisfaction from being able to make do without buying into corporations and their marketing engines. It gives [her] a sense of freedom, knowing that [she does] not depend on them."[41]

Authors like Johnson, Quilici and Fortin understand the problem of material consumption as fundamentally separate from all of the other social issues that are also rooted in a capitalist society built around the maximisation of profits. "Advertisers, corporations, and politicians" desire to acquire wealth, according to Jay, leaving us "working long hours at jobs we don't like, to pay for things we don't need."[42] While that might be true, single-mindedly focusing on the accessory facets of consumption—on knick-knacks and gadgets, clothes and other discretionary purchases—means overlooking a

[39] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 179.
[40] Quilici and Fortin, New Minimalism, 13.
[41] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 39.
[42] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, chapter 30, paragraph 2.

number of other things that "we" *do* need, such as housing, utilities, transportation, groceries, healthcare, education and so on. All of these needs cannot practically be rejected, and they make up a significant portion of most people's expenses. A number of such unavoidable expenses are inextricably tied up in environmentally ruinous industries, like fossil fuels and the automotive sector, especially for the less wealthy.[43] Presenting the adjustment of one's purchasing habits as a way to disengage from the binds of a neoliberal capitalist system can only be convincing to an audience willing to overlook large-scale issues like those listed above. By choosing to only spotlight those aspects of consumption that could be conceivably solved by thoughtful purchasing habits, then, environmental minimalism promotes a skewed account of eco-friendly action. Its single-minded focus on consumer choices draws attention away from the more fundamental drivers of climate change and social inequality, such as the influence that fossil fuel companies have on governments, and the typically neoliberal reluctance to let profit be threatened by social concerns.[44]

Additionally, it should be noted that distancing oneself from the ills of society comes at a cost. The above-mentioned discourses on thoughtful or eco-friendly consumption are in fact typically directed at those who have the economic means to prioritise (often more expensive) green purchases, and have enough wealth set aside to select the pricier—but longer-lasting—versions of consumer goods. Furthermore, as already remarked, minimalist authors overlook all kinds of questions related to the domain of production, because their books only engage with consumption.[45]

To be clear, it would be unfair to criticise books on decluttering for not zeroing in on the catastrophic effects of the erosion of the welfare state on the working class, or on grassroots movements attempting to shift the world away from fossil fuels. That is not their goal. Environmental minimalist books aim at

[43] If one lives in an area without access to reliable public transport and is unable to move within walking/cycling distance to their workplace, they will have little choice but to drive; similarly, those who do not own their homes cannot make them more energy-efficient, cannot install solar panels.
[44] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 145, 119.
[45] Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 365.

encouraging the pursuit of a certain aesthetically pleasing, presumably healthy lifestyle, and therefore it makes sense that they would scrutinise shopping habits more closely than anything else. Even keeping this in mind, however, one cannot ignore how the texts in my corpus repeatedly hint at some form of systemic critique, only to quickly dismiss it by understanding it in the most literal and restricted way possible.

A politics of imagination

The dismissal of a systemic critique can be understood as a form of psychic self-protection. As Timothy Morton points out, contemplating the complexity of ecological catastrophe evokes feelings of horror and incomprehension—there is no script, no existing frame of reference through which to conceptualise the situation.[46] In this context, investing one's time and energy in purchasing bulk goods in glass jars, buying free-range eggs from a neighbour's chickens and mailing back unwanted junk mail—all practices Johnson recommends—can provide a sense of control and mastery. Even though the environmental effectiveness of these strategies has repeatedly been questioned,[47] they provide psychological reassurance to individuals who can derive a sense of agency and empowerment from the feeling that they are doing their part.[48]

Naomi Klein also evokes the self-soothing nature of this drive to curate individual consumption in the introduction to her urgent book *This Changes Everything*. Here, Klein acknowledges how necessary it can feel to shield oneself from really beholding the realities of the climate crisis. She claims that we are not truly looking at the facts of the matter when we

> tell ourselves that all we can do is focus on ourselves. Meditate and shop at farmers' markets and stop driving—but forget trying to actually change the systems that are making the crisis inevitable because

[46] Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 31-32.
[47] For example by Csutora, "One More Awareness Gap," 159.
[48] *Ibid.*

> that's too much "bad energy" and it will never work. And at first it may appear as if we are looking, because many of these lifestyle changes are indeed part of the solution, but we still have one eye tightly shut.[49]

I am well aware that in dismissing minimalist consumption-based approaches to changing the system, *I* am apparently the resigned voice saying that, in Klein's words, "it will never work." But to be clear, this article argues that what will never work is handling the threat of climate change as something that can be tackled by individual consumers.[50]

Many intellectuals focusing on the climate crisis have provided long lists of alternative solutions, which often call for large-scale social, cultural and economic changes. Klein, for example, writes that changing the constitutive elements of contemporary societies—such as how energy is sourced, how transportation is organised and how cities are designed—"requires bold long-term planning at every level of government, and a willingness to stand up to polluters whose actions put us all in danger."[51] Glancing at the table of contents of Klein's book makes it clear that her focus lies on issues of policy, trade and social responsibility. The use of terms like "free-market fundamentalism," "extractivism," "divestment" and "atmospheric commons," as well as references to "the invisible hand" (of the market) signal that she is concerned with analysing and opposing the political-economic structures that impede large-scale climate action, and not with on individual-level behavioural change.[52]

In the 1970s, climate scientist Donella Meadows ran a series of groundbreaking simulations showing that a number of crucial changes would be needed in order to bring human consumption to a sustainable level—that is, a level at which the rate of resource

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[49] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 4.

[50] In referring to "the threat of climate change" I do not want to overlook that the effects of climate disruption are *already* being felt in many parts of the world, making it less of a future crisis than a present disaster. See Doermann, "Against Ecocidal Environmentalism," 147.

[51] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 119.

[52] *Id.*, 4-5.

consumption did not outstrip that of resource regeneration.[53] Couples would need to have no more than two children; material consumption would need to steeply decrease in wealthy countries and increase in other areas until a satisfactory (but not lavish) lifestyle were granted to everyone; and technological advancement would need to allow for more efficient use of resources, significant reductions in pollution, and higher crop yields.[54] As Meadows points out, a society with a "sustainable ecological footprint would be almost unimaginably different from the one in which most people now live."[55] While Meadows, unlike Klein, does not provide examples of policies that would lead the way to the desirable sustainable future she sketches out, it is clear that the changes she envisions would need to happen on the institutional level. She argues that per capita material consumption in the Global North cannot continue increasing unchecked, implying that individual lifestyles also need to change. In this, Meadows' argument aligns with the arguments made by proponents of minimalist and zero-waste lifestyles. In *The Limits to Growth*, however, these lifestyle changes are envisioned as the *result* of large-scale, structural processes, not as their drivers.

Meadows and Klein's focus on systemic issues as drivers of individual lifestyle shifts is the opposite of what books on minimalism typically suggest. The following quote from *The Joy of Less* demonstrates this point with unusual clarity:

> So what do we have to do to become minsumers? Not much, actually. We don't have to protest, boycott, or block the doors to megastores; in fact, we don't even have to lift a finger, leave the house, or spend an extra moment of our precious time. It's simply a matter of not *buying*. Whenever we ignore television commercials, breeze by impulse items without a glance, borrow books from the library, mend our clothes instead of replacing them, or resist purchasing the latest electronic gadget, we're committing our own

[53] Meadows, *The Limits to Growth*, 254.
[54] *Id.*, 244.
[55] *Id.*, 254.

> little acts of "consumer disobedience." By simply *not buying*, we accomplish a world of good: we avoid supporting exploitative labor practices, and we reclaim the resources of our planet—delivering them from the hands of corporations into those of our children. It's one of the easiest and most effective ways to heal the Earth, and improve the lives of its inhabitants.[56]

I have already pointed out the disproportionate responsibility that is placed on consumers in this rhetoric. The passage above takes one further step—it explicitly calls for a passive stance towards the environmental crisis, rather than implicitly endorsing such a stance. The explicit message communicated here is that there is no need for active political engagement, protests or direct involvement with activism. If one of the easiest and *most effective* ways to solve the climate crisis is to stay at home and just slightly tweak one's purchasing habits, then why not do that?

Once again, Brown's diagnosis of the fundamental incompatibility between neoliberalism and a solid democratic system becomes relevant. The passage above demonstrates how the distinctively neoliberal tendency to see everything through the lens of the market ultimately clashes against a model of citizenship based on active political involvement with issues that shape the lives of the community. In Jay's view, environmental responsibility begins and ends with individual consumer behaviour, but this market-based understanding of environmental action is problematic. Specifically, it carries two crucial drawbacks: first of all, it means that a number of political stances cannot be entertained because they are inexpressible as consumer choices to indulge in or abstain from (one cannot say "I am against fracking," for example, by making specific decisions at the supermarket). Secondly, buying or not buying certain products is a rather inarticulate way to express one's concerns: a decrease in sales can be interpreted in many ways, ranging from the ideological—as Johnson auspicates—to the strictly

[56] Jay, chapter 30, paragraph 2. In Jay's words, minsumers "minimize [their] consumption to what meets [their] needs, minimiz[e] the impact of [their] consumption on the environment, and minimiz[e] the effect of [their] consumption on other people's lives (chapter 30, paragraph 1).

practical (Is the product too expensive? Badly marketed? Lacking in quality?). Citizens have more effective tools at their disposal to make their voices heard, ranging from casting their votes in elections to getting involved in acts of civil disobedience. In actively disregarding such openly political options in favour of exclusively market-based action, the environmental minimalist texts analysed in this article implicitly endorse a neoliberal approach to issues of sustainability.

Environmentalist social scientist Micheal Maniates makes this point forcefully in his article "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" Despite being over twenty years old, this article offers a still-relevant critique of the depoliticized, passive mode of environmentalism that I identify as central to environmental minimalism. Maniates' main point is that the most common, most popular and best-understood "strain" of environmentalism is thoroughly informed by a neoliberal logic. It demands that people see themselves exclusively as consumers who can express concerns only through their "informed, decentralised, apolitical, individualised" consumer practices.[57] Like Weller, Maniates is concerned about the consequences of the individualization of responsibility: by foregrounding the isolated consumer, questions of institutional and systemic responsibility are allowed to lurk unnoticed in the background. The core of the problem is depoliticization, which is—as Brown also observes—an essential component of a neoliberal society.

Mainates posits that individualization is an obstacle to people's willingness to join in on the "empowering experiences and political lessons of collective struggle for social change" because it labels as irrelevant all action that exceeds the individual domain, or that is not strictly a form of consumption.[58] I, however, partially disagree with this point. While *The Joy of Less* openly disregards various forms of political activism, the other environmental minimalist texts analysed above do not explicitly argue that activism is useless. This is not to say they endorse it. Rather, they ignore it, just like they ignore the deeper, more troublesome issues that cannot be

[57] Maniates, "Individualization," 41, 47.
[58] *Id.*, 44.

satisfactorily addressed by adjusting one's consumption patterns. By overlooking the systemic problems that contribute to the environmental crisis, minimalist lifestyle guides ensure that the possibility of radical change never enters the conversation.

In light of these observations, I would instead suggest that the issue at hand is what Mark Fisher labelled *capitalist realism*—the widespread perception that the capitalist system is the only feasible way to organise society and the economy, such that it is impossible to imagine a viable alternative to it.[59] One can recognize the severely limited futurity of minimalism when Jay fantasises about a future scenario where she might scan the barcodes of products to learn about their environmental impact and whether the people who made them worked in humane conditions. She conjures up this scene of consumer empowerment rather than picturing a world free from exploitation.[60] Similarly, when Johnson paints a picture of a world where zero waste is considered primarily as an economic opportunity, rather than as a commitment to the common good, she is still thinking of "economic opportunities" as the overriding priority—as an unquestioned value.[61] Moving beyond capitalism seems unthinkable perhaps because it is largely perceived as a *rational* system, and the idea of rationality is constitutive of contemporary Western society. Rationality is the rubric according to which we evaluate which ideas make sense and which ones do not, what is right and what is wrong. As long as the identification of capitalism with rationality is uncritically accepted, the system will continue to be perceived as natural and, therefore, indispensable.[62]

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that lurking behind the depoliticized rhetoric of minimalism, one can glimpse the absolute triumph of global neoliberal capitalism, which has successfully managed to popularise its understanding of individuals as exclusively economic agents. A crucial contribution to this state of affairs is the foreclosing of other horizons of imagination. The only possibility that can

[59] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.
[60] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, chapter 30, paragraph 8.
[61] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 241.
[62] Straume, "The Political Imaginary," 33, 37-38.

readily be imagined is a more eco-friendly, less aggressive form of the socio-economic system we are currently embedded in.

Minimalist and zero-waste lifestyle handbooks tend to understand consumption as the only way to make a difference in a world facing several environmental disasters. This individualised and apolitical approach to the challenges of pollution and climate change is fully compatible with the neoliberal atomization and reduction of individuals into consumers rather than political beings. Despite their purportedly countercultural stance, the minimalist texts I have analysed in this essay betray, upon closer inspection, a deep commitment to the processes that have led to the current climate crisis.[63] Their inability (or unwillingness) to depart from neoliberal assessments of the present prevents them from imagining radically different systems, which I would argue—along with Klein, Mainates and Meadows—are the only possible way forward. This is not to say that individual change is irrelevant or that it should be overlooked; rather, my point is that individual lifestyle change must follow as a *consequence* of the larger socio-economic processes necessary for maintaining the Earth inhabitable—not its main engine.[64] The radical thinkers mentioned in this conclusion imagine futures that include some of the key aspects of minimalism, like a decrease in consumption, the reduction of waste, and disenchantment with the ethos of pursuing infinite growth. However, in proposing that their imagined futures be realised through democratic and communal means (like participating in elections, engaging in local politics or community-based mobilizations against fossil fuel companies),[65] these thinkers acknowledge that individual consumer choices made within the current neoliberal system cannot bring about the necessary change.

In this article I have shown how handbooks of lifestyle minimalism and zero-waste, despite often adopting a form of rhetoric that seems to criticise capitalist society, can in fact be understood as coherent with neoliberal governmentality. By weaving this interpretation together with environmentalist critics arguing for

[63] On this contradiction, see also Meissner, "Against Accumulation," 5.
[64] Meadows, *Limits to Growth*, xv; Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 10.
[65] Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 69. See also Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 337-366.

political involvement as the only solution to climate change, I want to suggest that the salvific power of carefully-managed consumption—central to minimalist rhetoric as well as green-washed advertising campaigns—should be thoroughly questioned and problematised.

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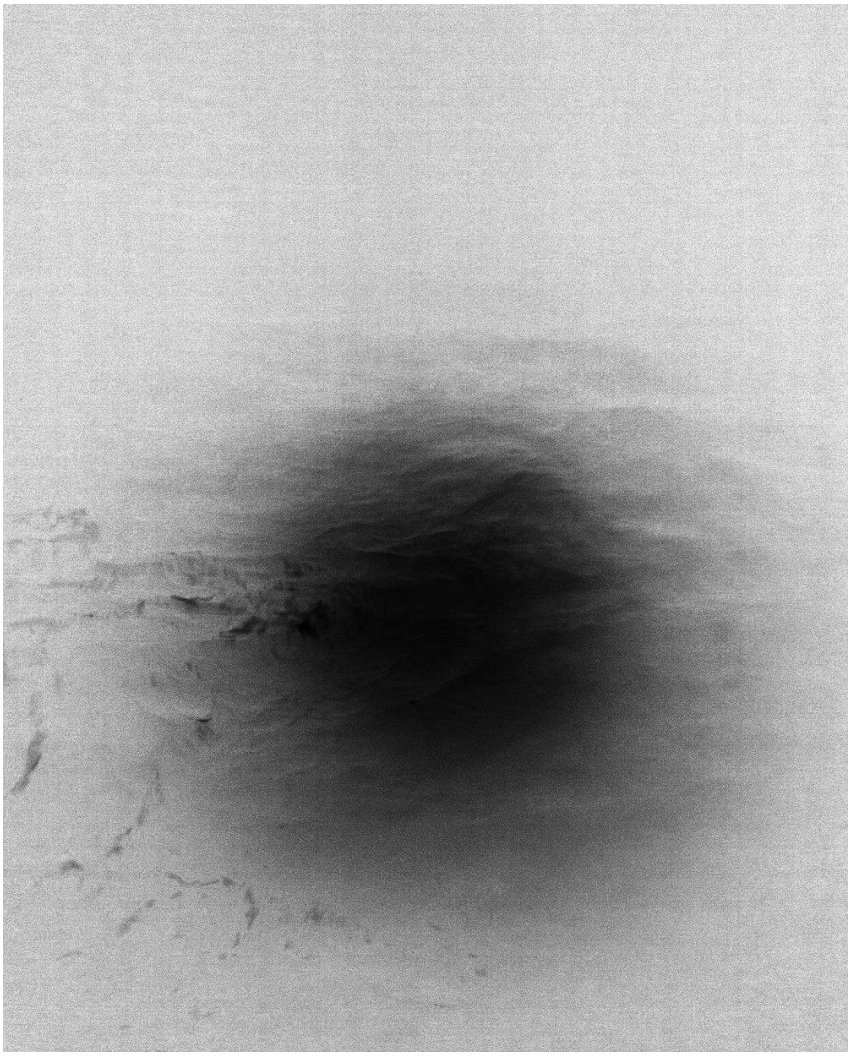
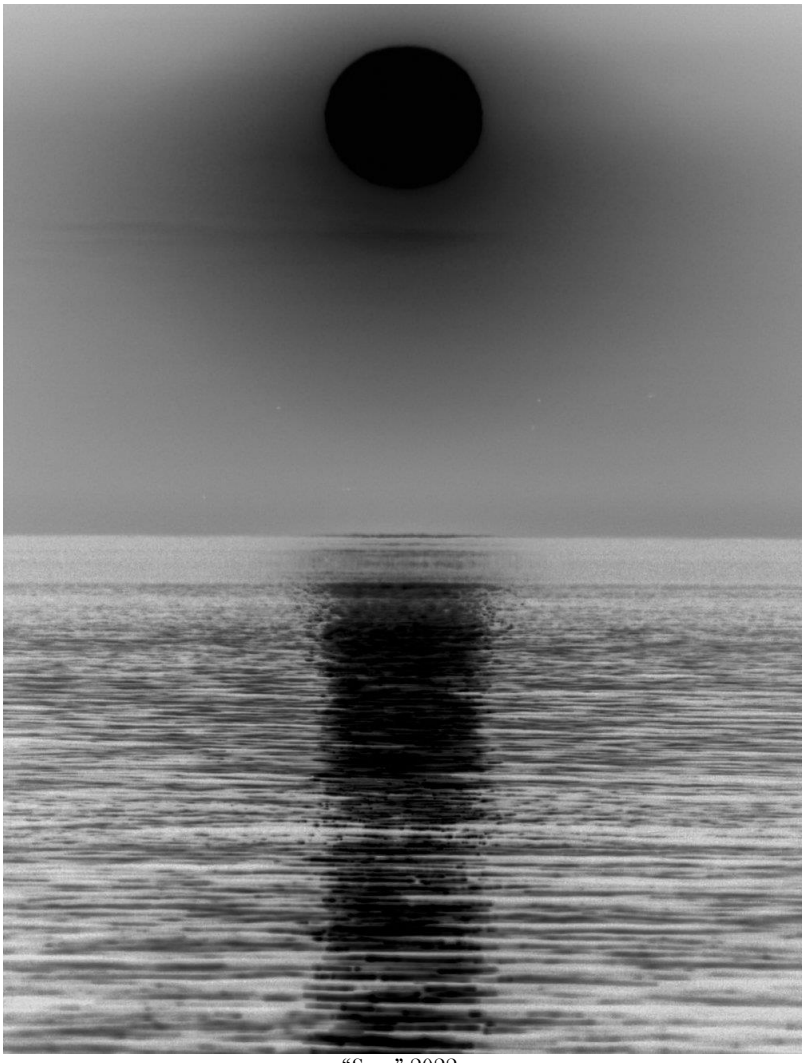
Joris van den Einden

Tread Lightly



"Water #2," 2022.



"Sun," 2022.

Tread Lightly is a photographic artistic research project by Joris van den Einden (jorisvandeneinden.com) that investigates how the ecological crisis may be productively and critically aestheticized. Its images of light pollution centre on the notion of the uncanny: the experience of simultaneous recognition and estrangement. The inverted contrast and abstraction of the images interact with recognisable textures and compositions to simultaneously conjure up feelings of familiarity and foreignness.

Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Emmen: Notes to Self, or, Ghostly Demarcations, Keener Wound

Anthony T. Albright

I. Site: From Amsterdam

If, on a Saturday's excursion from Amsterdam, you were to cycle to Amsterdam-Zuid Station, take the Intercity train to Zwolle, from Zwolle take the Blauwnet Stoptrein to Emmen, and from Emmen Station walk several kilometres through a wood called the Emmerdennen to Emmerhoutstraat 150, you would see a wide, shallow pit in which a lacustrine body of water is enclosed around a sloping shoreline of variable width. What is this site? Where is this site? It is located on the eastern limit of a prehistoric ridge of sand stretching from Emmen to Groningen called the Hondsrug. It is a place from which sand was once dredged at an industrial scale. It is the place where in 1971 the American artist Robert Smithson realised his only earthworks outside the United States, known together as "Broken Circle/Spiral Hill."

In English, the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150 is often called a *former sand quarry*. The word *quarry*, one etymological theory holds, comes from the Latin *quadrare*, meaning "to make

square."[1] A quarry, thus, would take its name from one objective potentially realised there: the production of cubic building stones. Fine, but Robert Smithson was no square. The Dutch language offers several names for the site that provide alternative—and potentially more relevant—traction. An official name for the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150, for instance, is *Zandgat De Boer*. In *zandgat*, we find a compound word. Why does this matter? One feature of compound words is that very often they cannot be squared. One span does not agree with the other. These words are restless. They can seem to disagree with themselves, to constantly double back on themselves, to vibrate above their ostensible referents in ways that force us to think dialectically—and then, inevitably, to rethink. These words do things with us. With *zandgat*, we are forced to think a series of overlapping tensions between *zand* ("sand")[2] and *gat* ("hole," "gap"),[3] between presence and (constitutive?) absence. The problem is that sand and the absence of sand cannot coincide in space. In the space of a hole, it stands to reason, there is not sand. There is only a place from which sand has already been excavated. Where there is sand, conversely, there is no hole. Or rather, there is only a hole yet to be excavated. But with the compound, we must compose (or else, compost) these words together. *Zandgat* does not resolve itself. We are referred to what the Smithson calls the *dialectics* of landscape, whereby space becomes the negative space of negative space. "A thing," in other words, is no more than "a hole in a thing it is not."[4]

Another word that might name the property at Emmerhoutstraat 150 is *afgraving*: an excavation.[5] This is a noun derived from a verb, a thingification of what need not strictly be called a thing: a process of disruption, earth work, architectonic movement. This word *afgraving* also points to the grave, the tomb, and the crypt—in other words, to the monument (e.g., the burial

[1] *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. "quarry."
[2] *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. "zand."
[3] *Id.*, s.v. "gat."
[4] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 95.
[5] *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. "afgraving."

monument) and the work of a monument's engraving.[6] Does it also point to Exodus 20:4 in the King James Version?

> Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth.[7]

Ostensibly these lines contain the Biblical commandment prohibiting idolatry, but beyond that they have an incantatory strangeness befitting Emmerhoutstraat 150. Could Exodus 20:4 set the terms of a contemporary artistic or political manifesto? *Sous les pavés, la plage*? What is a graven image if not an engraving? What is an engraving if not a significant displacement? What would it mean to say that a gap in the sand, an *afgraving* of earth, a sandy shore beneath the street, were a graven image? Could a quarry be a material signifier of its own materiality? In Emmen, Exodus 20:4 seems to spiral back on itself. Call this site *mise en abyme*.

Look to the north rim of the abyss and you will see from the lakeshore rise a conical frustum of shrub-covered earth. This is Smithson's Spiral Hill. To approach the Spiral Hill from the edge of the quarry, you must first descend ten meters into the earth to meet the shoreline. Smithson calls the quarry a "sunken site."[8] Perhaps the surrealist Leonora Carrington, who tells us that "the task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope," would say that it is "down below."[9] A literary scholar might call the requisite descent a "catabasis narrative." But I will not draw such crass anthropocentric conclusions. I will merely say, "It has been done."

Descend to the shoreline, follow the shoreline counterclockwise to the Spiral Hill, and you will see that the eponymous spiral is a footpath winding upwards and upwards counterclockwise around the conical frustum. It might occur to you that the form of this earthwork is isomorphic to a volcano. You might think to a text by Georges Bataille called "The Solar Anus."

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[6] *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. "monument".
[7] Exod. 20:4 (King James Version).
[8] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 253.
[9] Carrington, *Down Below*, 18.

> The terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus. Although this globe eats nothing, it often violently ejects the contents of its entrails. Those contents shoot out with a racket and fall back, streaming down the sides of the Jesuve, spreading death and terror everywhere.[10]

It might also occur to you that the form of this earthwork is isomorphic to the Tower of Babel as it is depicted by the painter Breugel the Elder.[11] A potential confusion of tongues flashes up. But the site asks one to risk such a possibility. Follow the counterclockwise upward-leading spiral footpath to the Spiral Hill's highest point and from there look out south toward the lake. You will then have a bird's-eye view of the other earthwork Smithson constructed at Emmerhoutstraat 150. From the west, the shore in front of the Spiral Hill is bisected by a roughly 130-degree, 49-meter arcing canal. From the east, the lake just in front of the Spiral Hill is bisected by an arcing jetty sized to correspond with the area of land displaced by the canal. Or perhaps it is the other way around and the canal is sized to correspond with the area of water displaced by the jetty. I don't know.

In the space between the canal and the shoreline is a semi-circular peninsula. In the space between the jetty and the shoreline is a semi-circular inlet. Together, jetty and canal, peninsula and inlet—simultaneously land and land displacement, water and water displacement—suggest the forms of concentric composite circles, half-moons that do not fit together. At roughly the centre of the peninsula sits a granite boulder. All of this comprises the earthwork known as the Broken Circle.

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[10] Bataille, "The Solar Anus," 8.

[11] One of Bruegel's depictions of that tower is (as of April 2022) on view at a museum called the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen. The Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen, a sarcophagus-fortress of a structure, is Bruegel's Tower of Babel were it horizontally reflected, crossed with Paris–Charles de Gaulle Airport's Terminal 1, clad in mirrors, and capped with an upscale restaurant.



If Smithson is to be believed (I do not know if he should be), the boulder at the centre of the Broken Circle, which surely weighs many thousands of kilograms, was in 1971 one of the largest known to exist in the Netherlands.[12] It is true, in any case, that the Dutch soil is not known for containing very many large rocks. Those that do occur, in the discipline of geology called *glacial erratics*, were carried to their present sites from elsewhere by Ice Age glaciers that long ago melted. Smithson was always more of an eccentric than anything *-centric* and he claims to have been highly disturbed by the erratic boulder in the middle of his earthwork. He resented that boulder, it seems, for breaking the Broken Circle—in other words, for unbreaking the circle by taking place as its central point. It just so happened, Smithson writes, that the only part of the quarry's shoreline he received permission to work upon was a stretch with that boulder at its centre. There was no other way. He claims, again perhaps hyperbolically, to have been told that only the Dutch army would have been up to the task of displacing his earthwork's erratic centre. Smithson's language to describe his encounters with that boulder is notable for what we might call its self-conscious literary flair. The boulder was, he writes, "a kind of glacial 'heart of darkness.'"[13]

[12] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 258.
[13] *Ibid.*

> By an unforeseen chance, I was trapped in Emmen with a monstrous point to contend with. . . . I was haunted by the shadowy lump in the middle of my work. . . . The perimeter of the intrusion magnified into a blind spot in my mind that blotted the circumference out. All and all it is a cyclopian dilemma. . . . Neither eccentrically nor concentrically is it possible to escape the dilemma, just as the Earth cannot escape the Sun. Maybe that's why Valéry called the sun a "Brilliant Error."[14]

Smithson, where is thy lustre now? Do these lines parody an artist's delusions of grandeur? Possibly. But before considering this possibility, we must read the words as they come. We must allow the boulder to take place on the order of what Freud calls the "navel" of the dream, or the point at which the tangled network of dream thoughts becomes unplumbable as it stretches out into the unknown and forces the analysis to stop short.[15] The point of the unplumbable is the point of speculation. At this point, two directions of thought emerge. First, to vision (and/as) inability to see. Which is it? Second, to the conspicuous megalith (and/as) the conspicuous void. Which is it? Smithson refers us to the eye of the cyclops. So we refer to the eye of the cyclops:

> While they lifted the olive-wood stake, sharp at the end,
> and thrust him in his eye, I pressed my weight from above
> and twisted it, as when some man bores a ship's plank
> with an auger, while others below rotate it with a strap
> they clasp at either end, so it always runs continuously.
> So we took the fire-sharpened stake and twisted it
> in his eye, and blood, hot as it was, flowed around it.
> The breath of his burning pupil singed all around his eyelids
> and eyebrows, and the roots of his eye crackled with fire.
> As when a smith man plunges a big axe or adze
> in cold water to temper it, and it hisses greatly,

[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 528.

> for this is how it has again the strength of iron,
> so his eye sizzled around the olive-wood stake.
> He let out a great horrifying cry, the rock echoed,
> and we scurried off in fear.[16]

The cyclops cries out. Nobody has blinded him, and therefore he cannot see. Can we? The above passage from the *Odyssey* performs a synesthetic disorientation, a confusion of persons and senses. The story of Odysseus and the cyclops has been told many times and in many places. Can a return to the text reveal anything new? One first revelation: to blind the cyclops is to violate the *breath of the pupil*. Then we must ask: do pupils breathe? How might this breath sound? The second epic simile in this passage does not attempt a visual representation of the blinding wound but—as if doubling that wound—creates a soundscape: as is the blinding of the cyclops, so is the hiss of hot iron plunged into cool water. Blindness is a "breath" that becomes a "crackle," a "crackle" that becomes a "hiss," a "hiss" that becomes a "sizzle," a "sizzle" that becomes a "great horrifying cry" that penetrates into the rock and resounds as an "echo" so horrifying that one can only scurry off in fear. The figures of this passage are so insistently non-visual as to suggest an identity between the narrator, Odysseus, and his blinded foe. Is this a covert instance of embedded focalization?

Singe in me, muse! That is the motto of the cyclops. Poetry, here, is less like painting than it is the static of a poor long-distance connection. It is less a vehicle for representation or sentiment than an incessant murmur in one's ears, a language which does not cease not working. A wounded eye—a ship's wooden plank penetrated by the wind of a helical screw—is already an earthwork. This wound winds in directions both volcanic and lacustrine. One realises, for instance, that the depression (*gat*) in which the Broken Circle takes place might also refer us to the eye, as in the phrase *in de gaten houden* ("keep an eye on"), and to the anal orifice (i.e., "asshole," the gap between the legs).[17]

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[16] Homer, *Odyssey*, 9.382-396.

[17] *Van Dale Groot woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, s.v. "gat."

There is another potential direction of thought here (or perhaps this is the same direction by a different course): to the haunting, the *hauntology*, if you will, of the boulder. To the sepulchre, to the sepulchral engraving, to ways of not being and of what nightmares might come. In the Robert Smithson archives at the Smithsonian Institution, there is a typescript with the following unelaborated observation attributed to longtime Emmen cultural ambassador Sjouke Zijlstra:

> the glacial boulder was too heavy to remove and Smithson decided to keep it in the work. seagulls with foodpoisoning from the local dump choose it to be their last resting place: this fascinated him.[18]

Robert Smithson, it must be first noted, is not the eponym of the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian is an American cultural and scientific organization—a large collection of museums, libraries, archives, and research centres—named after James Smithson (1765–1829), a mineralogist and the illegitimate son of a British aristocrat. James Smithson, who died childless, left his inherited fortune to a nephew on the condition that if the nephew were also to die childless, the estate would fall to the United States government for the purpose of founding an "Establishment for the increase & diffusion of knowledge among men" in Washington, D.C. In a turn of events that American president John Quincy Adams called "incomprehensible," James Smithson's nephew indeed died childless in 1835 and the United States came into possession of Smithson's fortune in 1838.[19] The Smithsonian Institution, named for a man who never visited the United States nor had any apparent connections to the country, was subsequently established in 1846.

James Smithson, who was wont to drift from his native England, died in Genoa, Italy. He was buried in that city's British cemetery, which was at the time situated on a hill overlooking the sea. But Smithson's remains were not to remain. By the early 1900s, Genoa's British cemetery faced an existential threat in a nearby

[18] "Notes from a conversation with Sjouke Zijlstra on 8 9 1982".
[19] Ewing, *The Lost World of James Smithson*, n.p.

quarry. As a cemetery steward writes in a 1900 letter to the Smithsonian Institution, the quarry

> was slowly but surely eating its way towards us from the sea through the rocky side of the hill on which we stand, and excavation has lately come so close to us that the intervention of the Consul became necessary to arrest further advance on the plea that our property would be endangered if the quarrying were carried on.
>
> Actual blasting has in fact been put an end to for the present, and the Cemetery (although the boundary wall is now on the very edge of the excavation) remains untouched[.][20]

You like this garden?
Why is it yours?
We evict those who destroy![21]

[20] Le Mesurier, *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, 244.
[21] Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 132.

An 1897 photograph of Smithson's Genoa burial site is remarkable for its near-total absence of site perspective.[22] Where is the port? Where is the expanse of the Ligurian Sea? To what blasting does the steward refer? We see an engraved plaque and a bathtub-like sarcophagus before a solid boundary wall, the upper edge of which bisects the frame and blocks the horizon. Above the dividing line, branches stand out against solid white. At the right of the frame, the surface of the wall is darkened by tree shadows. At the left of the frame—closer to the sarcophagus—the wall greys and then verges on the white of the sky above. Caught before (behind?) this wall, we cannot place ourselves in Genoa, or even on the surface of the earth. The site, framed by two vertical tree trunks and that wall, has an asphyxiating—or at least, nauseating—inevitability that seems to render action impossible. It is (take your pick) a walled garden, a prison yard, a museum, or a chamber in which we are to be buried alive. And yet, a limit encroaches. Just beyond sight, all that is solid undermines into air.

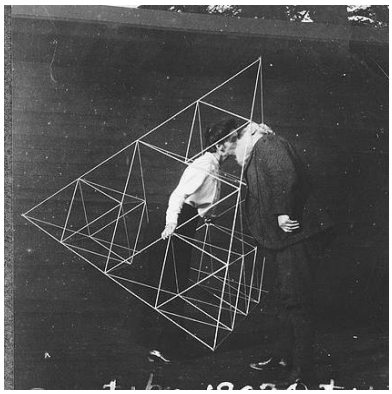
It was not long after this photograph was captured that the city of Genoa officially expropriated the cemetery property. This property was to be quarried. When we look at the photograph, we see the death mask of a graveyard. For the cemetery's British custodians, the expropriation raised the question of what to do with the human bones and burial markers that remained on the property, including those of James Smithson. As it happened, Alexander Graham Bell—the inventor of the telephone—took a great interest in the fate of Smithson's gravesite. Bell, who in the early 1900s served on the Smithsonian Institution's board of regents, successfully petitioned the Smithsonian to sponsor the disinterment and relocation of Smithson's remains and sarcophagus from the imperilled cemetery in Genoa to Washington, D.C. In Washington, Bell arranged for Smithson's reinterment at the Smithsonian Institution's headquarters, a Norman Revival–style building popularly known as the Smithsonian Castle.

Alexander Graham Bell was not only the inventor of the telephone and the man responsible for James Smithson's interment at the Smithsonian Castle but also a man of great interest to Robert

[22] Prematio Studio Fotographico, *Tomb of James Smithson in Italy,* 1897.

Smithson. Bell attracted Smithson's attention in particular for his work as an aeronautics engineer, which led him to construct tetrahedral kites intended for (but which never accomplished) human flight. Bell's kites, Robert Smithson proposes in an unelaborated essay footnote, are "flying 'thought-word-thing triangles.'"[23]

What is a flying "thought-word-thing" triangle? A bell that calls elsewhere. A wind that wounds. The breath of a burning pupil. A spectral seagull lying dead on a boulder in Emmen. The noise of foisting lava in one's ears. Grinding water and gasping wind. A line of flight by which the *bird* is the death of the thing.



Caught in a flying "thought-word-thing" triangle. Is there love in the telematic embrace?[24]

Alas, poor Yorick? At a soon-to-be-quarried hilltop cemetery in Genoa, the United States Consul is pictured with Smithsonian Institution founder James Smithson's exhumed skull.[25]

The province of Drenthe, as Robert Smithson was aware, is noted in travel guides for hosting a great number of *hunebedden* (known also as dolmens): prehistoric piles of glacial erratics, the ruins of burial chambers for mortal remains long since dedifferentiated into the earth. If you were to walk from Emmen Station through to Emmerhoutstraat 150, you would pass several of these large rocks

[23] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 345.
[24] *Alexander Graham Bell kissing his wife*, 1903.
[25] *American consul William Bishop, holding skull of James Smithson,* 1904.

in the intervening woods. It is monuments such as the *hunebedden*, Jacques Lacan argues, at which signification begins and to which signification ultimately refers. If, as Hegel puts it, *the word is the death of the thing*, it follows that, as Lacan writes, "the first symbol in which we recognize humanity in vestigial traces is the sepulture."[26] Smithson, for his part, argues that "a tendency toward 'tombic communication' is still with us"—and perhaps only ever more palpably with us—in the postmodern writing scene.[27] Riffing on Marshall McLuhan, Smithson proposes that *the medium is the mummy*.

> There seems to be parallels between cybernation and the world of the Pyramid. The logic behind 'thinking machines' with their 'artificial nervous systems' has a rigid complexity, that on an esthetic level resembles the tombic burial structures of ancient Egypt. The hieroglyphics of the Book of the Dead are similar to the circuit symbols of computer memory banks or 'coded channels.' Perhaps one could call a computing machine—an 'electric mummy'—the medium is the mummy.[28]

So the symbol begins as the Pyramid, the megalith, the burial marker, the sarcophagus-bathtub–Stedelijk Amsterdam? This is but one version of the thesis of language's materiality. There are others. Perhaps symbols are shit by any other name. If you were to descend the Spiral Hill and go for a close look at the boulder, you would find that it is surrounded by weeds, goose feathers, and goose droppings. Australian wombats are like quarries: they produce cubes.[29] The geese at the *Zandgat De Boer* shit in spirals.

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[26] Lacan, "Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," 77.
[27] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 342.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Natasha May, "Box Seat: Scientists Solve the Mystery of Why Wombats Have Cube-shaped Poo," 2021.

The medium is the *merde*? "Broken Circle/Spiral Hill" calls for a delirious stereography: one eye in the microscope, the other in the telescope.

II. Non-Site: From New York

Robert Smithson constructed "Broken Circle/Spiral Hill" on occasion of the 1971 edition of the Arnhem's Sonsbeek exhibition, which that year was titled "Sonsbeek buiten de perken" ("Sonsbeek beyond the pale" or "Sonsbeek beyond lawn and order"). Previous iterations of the exhibition had occupied Arnhem's Sonsbeek Park but participants in Sonsbeek 71 were unsatisfied with the confines of a nineteenth-century landscaped park and the nostalgic version of nature (e.g., as docile, pastoral, static, idealised, etc.) that for them it embodied. Interested in new possibilities for engagement around cybernetics and information theory, the Sonsbeek 71 participants opted to set the show at a network of sites across the Netherlands, amongst which the *Zandgat De Boer* in Emmen was one. Rather than functioning as a sculpture garden, Arnhem's Sonsbeek Park was reimagined on the model of a switchboard or communication hub fitted with a video studio, an auditorium, and an information pavilion connected by telex machine to satellites across the country.[30]

In an interview, Smithson comments that "the idea of putting an object in [Sonsbeek Park] really didn't motivate me too much. In a sense, a park is already a work of art; it's a circumscribed area of land that already has a kind of cultivation involved in it."[31] A staunch anti-humanist, Smithson objects strenuously to a "wishy-washy transcendentalism" that he finds so often informs not only park

[30] Stichting Sonsbeek, *Sonsbeek 71.*
[31] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 253.

planning and outdoor exhibition design but early-1970s ecological thought writ large.[32] "Nature," as Smithson puts it, "is simply another 18th- and 19th-century fiction."[33] Smithson traces this fiction to the *cemetery*, a "sylvan setting" that emerged during those centuries concurrent with the accelerating decline of churchyard burial.[34] A correspondence—indeed, a conceptual overlap—emerges across the cemetery, a stultifying garden full of what Smithson dismisses as "little pyramids, you know, for the dead," and the traditional sculpture park, a stultifying garden full of discrete little artworks.[35] Perhaps Smithson's dismissal of the cemetery allows us to see why he found the dolmen-like boulder in the centre of the Broken Circle so irritating: it threatens to turn the *zandgat* into a park. In Genoa, an *afgraving* of stones threatened a plot of gravestones. In Emmen, the "cemetery" and the "sedentary" threaten the sedimentary.

> The parks that surround some museums isolate art into objects of formal delectation. Objects in a park suggest static repose rather than any ongoing dialectic. Parks are finished landscapes for finished art. A park carries the values of the final, the absolute, and the sacred.[36]

Robert Smithson died at 35 in 1973 when his chartered aeroplane crashed into a Texas hillside. Just across the Hudson River from Manhattan at a site in New Jersey called Hillside Cemetery is a granite headstone engraved with Smithson's name. What is a Hillside cemetery? In the United States, it is always another. Naming conventions for American cemeteries dictate porosity, Arcadian blandness, an insistent resistance to emplacement.[37] To ask anything

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[32] *Id.*, 163.
[33] *Id.*, 85.
[34] *Id.*, 309.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Id.*, 155.
[37] Sigmund Freud was not particularly impressed by America, but he was amused, at least, by what would later be called the "American way of death." In a 1937 letter to Marie Bonaparte, Freud recalls a slogan he deems "the boldest and most successful" instance of American advertising: "Why live, if you can be buried for ten dollars?" See: *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 436–437.

meaningful about a place called Hillside Cemetery, one must first ask, *which one*? If you were to download a list—or, as someone more computer-literate would say, a *dataset*—containing the names of every cemetery in the United States and sort this list by word frequency, you would find there are 228 cemeteries with names containing the word "Hillside," including nine in the state of New Jersey alone.[38] This makes "Hillside" the 131st most frequently occurring word amongst all American cemetery names. There are, further, thousands of cemetery names containing the word "Hill," which ranks (after "Saint") as the second most frequently occurring word amongst American cemetery names. There are dozens of American "Pleasant Hill" cemeteries, and at least one "Colonial Hill," "Gravel Hill," "Round Hill," "Pebble Hill," "Iron Hill," "Flint Hill," "Rock Hill," "Sand Hill," "Quarry Hill," and "Circle Hill" cemetery. There is not, however, a "Spiral Hill" cemetery. Nor is there a "Broken Circle" cemetery. Not officially.

Perhaps an evocative way of emplacing the particular Hillside Cemetery in New Jersey containing a granite headstone bearing the name Smithson would be to think of it as what the artist might call a "monument of the Passaic"—a ruin in reverse, in reverse. This is to say that if on a Saturday's excursion from New York you were to go to the Port Authority Bus Terminal at 41st Street and 8th Avenue, buy a newspaper and a paperback novel, board New Jersey Transit bus number 190 at Gate 232, and disembark at the first stop, the intersection of Orient Way and Barrows Avenue, you would find yourself atop the eponymous hillside. That hillside, a north–south ridge running parallel to Manhattan for several kilometres, marks the western limit to a hinterland between New York and all points westward known as the Meadowlands, a heavily polluted low-lying wetland colonised by the Dutch in the seventeenth century as Nieuw Nederland.[39] Follow Orient Way one hundred meters south from the bus shelter, crossing over an east–west highway called Route 3, and you find yourself between a restaurant called the Colonial Diner, established 1986, to the west, and Hillside Cemetery, established 1882, to the east. If you were to wander through Hillside

[38] ArcGIS Data and Maps, "USA Cemeteries."

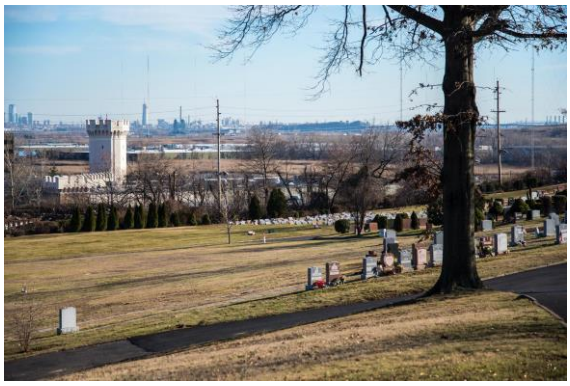
[39] This followed Hudson's visit aboard a ship called the *Halve Maen* in search of a passage east.

Cemetery reading the headstones, you would eventually come across one bearing the name "Smithson." You might find this discovery thrilling. Or you might be bemused to see that this headstone is American kitsch of the highest order: polished granite, symmetrical, engraved with floral patterns and a cross.

A cross—really? What had you sought? A spiral? A limit-experience? An ascent? A descent? Have you come out to New Jersey to contemplate an object of formal delectation, a little pyramid—a nice little word-thought-thing triangle—for the dead? This Smithson headstone is not a Smithsonian earthwork. One could say, if nothing else and as Smithson might, that "It was there."[40] Or, rather than say anything, you might think of buying one of those solar-powered plastic cats that will not keep bowing its lifeless automatic paw until the end of the world. If you look out eastward past the Smithson headstone, you might realise that all of the sound and fury in the expanse is no more than the meaningless plungings of automatic paws. This might be a relief or this might be a terror.

Look down the hill and you will see the reeds, the radio masts, the flyovers, the railway bridges, the traffic, and the mud of the Meadowlands. Look across the Hackensack River—past Secaucus, past Weehawken—and you might see traces of the Manhattan skyline. Do you reflexively and perversely imagine the sky as the canvas it might have been on 9/11? Or does your gaze fall nearer: to the grey fortified tower of a Smithsonian Castle on the near edge of the abyss called Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament?

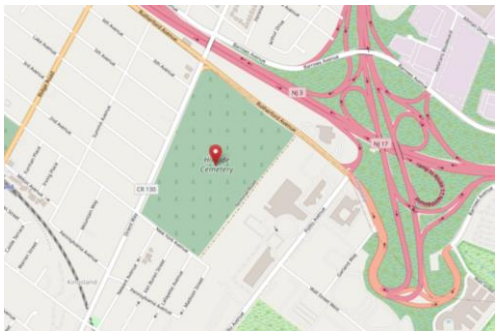
[40] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 68.

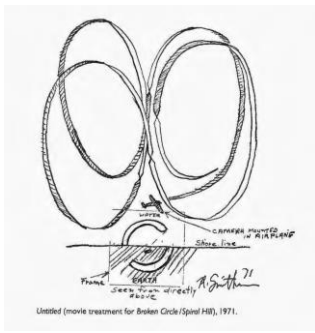


Look just north of Medieval Times and you will see the castle parking lot. Look just north of the castle parking lot and you will see a hotel called the Courtyard. Look just past the Courtyard and you will see a hotel called the Renaissance. Look past the Renaissance and you might glimpse the American Dream® shopping mall and indoor ski slope. A narrative composes itself in one sweep of the gaze.

If you were to place a pin on a map marking the exact location of the Smithson headstone, you would see that this headstone takes place almost exactly at the centre of the Hillside Cemetery property. This fact might seem significant—or simply funny. You might begin to trace the potential outlines of an unplumbable correspondence between this headstone and the boulder that so haunted Smithson in Emmen. Granite gets the last laugh after all. And then your eyes might drift westward across the New Jersey map to a cloverleaf highway interchange between Route 3 and Route 17.[41] This interchange might wind another chain of spiralling associations. You might, for instance, remember a page in Smithson's *Collected Writings* printed with a diagram of the artist's unrealised plan to mount a movie camera to an aeroplane and fly it in a "cloverleaf maneuver" over the *Zandgat De Boer* in Emmen.[42]

[41] OpenStreetMap, "Map of Lyndhurst."
[42] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 257.





> One seizes the spiral and the spiral becomes a seizure.[43]

I identify these outlines neither in the interest of superstition nor paranoia. I make no argument and I draw no conclusion. Rather, I write after Bataille:

> It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.[44]

Or Smithson:

> When does a displacement become a misplacement?[45]

Or the recently deceased Joan Didion:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.
>
> Or at least we do for a while.[46]

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[43] *Id.*, 147.
[44] Bataille, "The Solar Anus," 4.
[45] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 124.
[46] Didion, "The White Album," 11.

Or at least we do for a while. Joan Didion owes much of her popular reputation to the first sentence of the above quotation. But she qualifies that famous assertion with a rejoinder that puts our fate in question. Do we tell ourselves stories in order to live? Or do we trace correspondences and correspondents, string figures and crossed lines, defiances that define, definitions that defy, spirals that unspiral, places that displace, ties that blind, cloverleaves that redouble and then double back? Is there a difference? Should there be?

On a Saturday's excursion from Amsterdam to the *Zandgat De Boer*, I will only mention by way of closing, you may notice that the last stop before Emmen is Nieuw-Amsterdam. Blessed rage for order! But this bell calls elsewhere. "Size determines an object," Smithson writes, "but scale determines art."[47]

[47] Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 147.

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Alexander Graham Bell kissing his wife Mabel Hubbard Gardiner Bell, who is standing in a tetrahedral kite, Baddeck, Nova Scotia. 1903. Gilbert H. Grosvenor Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-DIG-ds-06863.

American consul William Bishop, holding skull of James Smithson, at the British cemetery at San Benigno, outside Genoa, Italy. 1904. Gilbert H. Grosvenor Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-DIG-ds-09987.

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Prematio Studio Fotographico, *Tomb of James Smithson in Italy,* 1897. Historic Images of the Smithsonian Catalog, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

All other images are by the author.

Coco Swaan

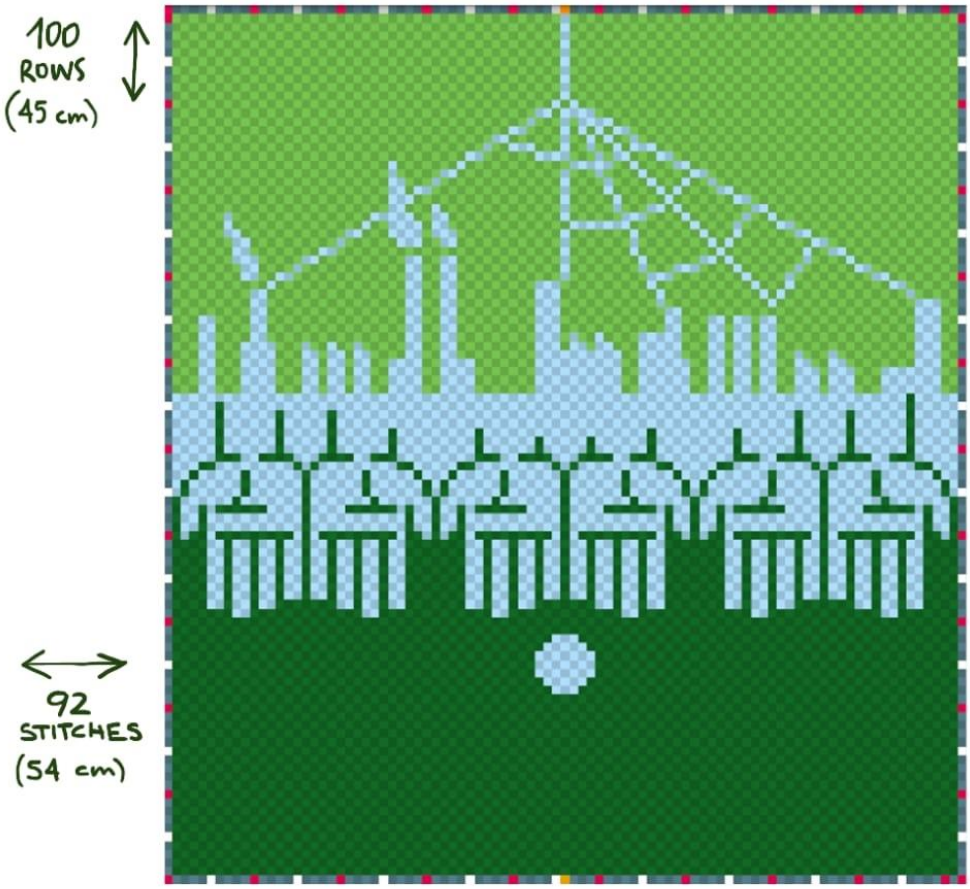
A Roadside Knit

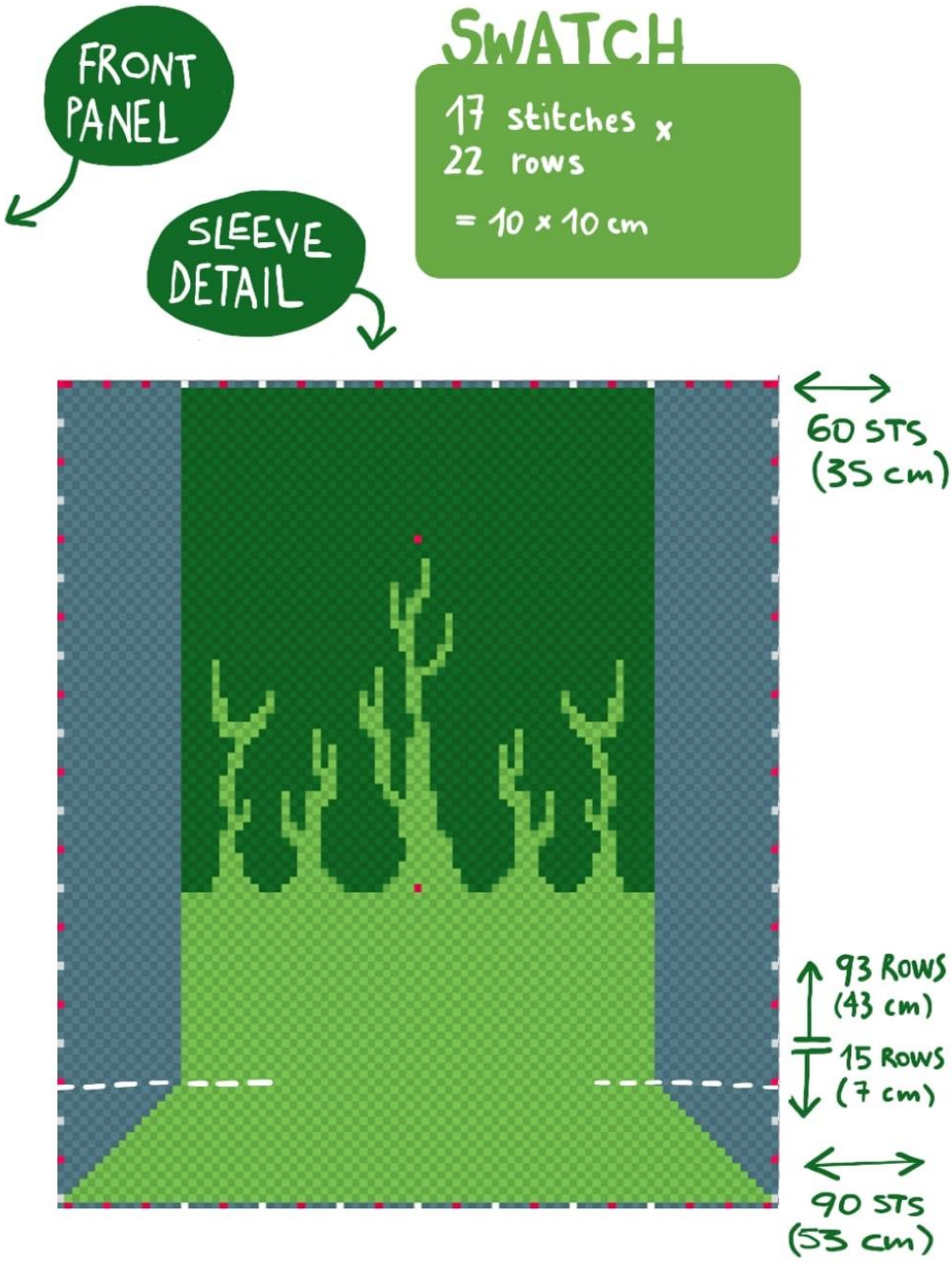
MATERIALS

- 5mm needles
- alpaca/sheep wool
  - light green
  - dark green
  - grey

TECHNIQUES

- stockinette stitch
- intarsia
- rib stitch




FRONT PANEL
SLEEVE DETAIL
SWATCH
17 stitches x 22 rows
= 10 x 10 cm
60 STS (35 cm)
93 ROWS (43 cm)
15 ROWS (7 cm)
90 STS (53 cm)

A Roadside Knit by Coco Swaan is a knitting pattern for a sweater drafted as an artistic representation of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 1972 novel *Roadside Picnic*. This transformative object takes the form of a sweater, because sweaters are the item of clothing that is most often circulated within personal spheres (they are often given as gifts by mothers and grandmothers and frequently shared, borrowed and exchanged between friends and loved ones); it is knitted because, in both the novel and in knitting, nothing is without consequence—pulling a single thread will undo the whole work. The pattern consists of three distinct fields of colour that represent the interaction of society, nature and the alien in Strugatsky's novel. This art project transforms the way in which the novel deals with concepts of trade, material and entropy into a physical object. Read more online via https://graduatejournal-leap.universiteitleiden.nl/

Barking, Singing, Quacking: On Human and Nonhuman Language and Those Who Speak (It)

Nathalie Muffels

[The donkey] Benjamin could read as well as any pig, but never exercised his faculty. So far as he knew, he said, there was nothing worth reading.

He seldom talked, and when he did it was usually to make some cynical remark—for instance he would say that God had given him a tail to keep the flies off, but he would sooner have no tail and no flies.

George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945)

What does it mean to call bee dances,[1] bird songs, or human speech "language," even though all seem fundamentally different? To say that nonhuman animals communicate is far from controversial. Research continuously unveils new insights into the sometimes-unexpected attributes of nonhuman animal communication: studies on the grammar of bird language suggest its significant structural and substantive complexity, and experiments show the symbolic potential and extensive sentence repertoire of bee dances.[2] But surely, nonhuman animal communication must in some way be different from human languages, which allow humans to produce philosophy, politics and literature. If not, would humans not at some point have encountered a nonhuman animal equivalent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) or Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat" (1989)? And if such a work exists, is it below the human radar because, so far, humans are unable to understand it, or

[1] "Waggle dance," to be exact.
[2] Meijers, *When Animals Speak*, 54; Gould, "Dance-Language," 688, 692-93.

because humans *know* they are unable to understand it?[3] Yet, exactly these questions seem to point to a concession. More and more, humans discover and study (to humans and other species) unfathomable methods of information conveyance by nonhuman animals. To acknowledge the intricacy and complexity of nonhuman animal communication methods represents a departure from long-held notions of nonhuman animal communication as mechanical, instinctive and rudimentary. Recognising such exchanges as equivalent to human language, however, is another story: doing so would deeply upset the belief in human language's uniqueness and exceptional potency, a belief that is fundamental to historical and contemporary human worldviews. This tension points to an uneasiness towards the potential implications of recognising nonhuman animal languages as equivalent or comparable to human languages, for such a turn could impact the current interspecies relational system, which comprises a human society in which nonhuman animals hold, euphemistically said, an instrumental function.

In this article, I want to investigate this tension in the relationship between human and nonhuman animal language, determining if and how it might hint at a larger ideological framework that circumscribes interspecies relations. This tension is

[3] In this article, I use the terms "nonhuman animal" and "human." Language is loaded, and it develops continuously, and therefore choosing what terms to use in research is a tricky task. While at the moment of writing "nonhuman animal" is a common term in animal studies, 'human animal' is less so. Words are not just words: "nonhuman animal" adheres to the idea that there is also a human animal, whereas the term "human" does not reflect this. Connotations of "human," instead of "human animal," imply an emphasis on singularly "human." This artificially distances "human" from nonhuman animals, which "human animal" potentially avoids. Nonetheless, I will use "human" as this is the more commonly used term at the moment of writing. The quickly evolving and expanding research on nonhuman animals, along with its ever-changing language conventions, bears witness to the necessary but complex consideration of interspecies relationships. Articles and research are in that sense also reflections of the time, so if at another time the terms I use in this article are no longer appropriate, which I imagine to happen as they rarely are, please regard this choice within the context of the time of writing.

just one of many indications, or symptoms,[4] that separately might not make an impression, and are perhaps barely even perceptible in daily life because they conform to normative conceptions of human and nonhuman animal language. Within this context, human utterances hold potential for profound meanings, while duck quacks are generally less likely to harbour similar expectations. Such normative conceptions are generally indistinct and unquestioned, yet purposefully so, as they are part of the prescriptive ideologies that determine meaning production in the context of human and nonhuman animal language. The result is that one specific interpretation of language—language as it is potentially used by humans—is privileged at the expense of other languages that do not quite fit into that category. This stigmatises other language practices, and by extension, their practitioners. I am interested in the processes involved in the representation and construction of differences between human language and nonhuman animal language. Language, human and nonhuman, is more than a theoretical phenomenon or social practice. It is an ideological concept that addresses human and nonhuman beings through everyday conventions and practices, as they partake in contemporary interspecies society.[5] The concept of language provokes various different questions that in distinct but subtle ways attend to and lean on species subjectivity: How are humans "different" from nonhuman animals? How do humans identify with but also

[4] Two examples of other symptoms of the tension in the relation between human and nonhuman animal language that I am interested in studying further are unserious or mocking depictions of animal language in human culture, such as the use of animal sounds in (popular) media to create a comical or absurd effect. Examples include Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (1996), and humans speaking (metaphorically) through nonhuman animal figures in (popular) media to reflect on human issues, such as in Disney's *Zootopia* (2016).

[5] Rather than "society," a term that excludes nonhuman animals as societal subjects, I refer to 'interspecies society' to articulate my point of view that contemporary societal organization extends beyond species borders due to the far-reaching consequences of interspecies relations on both human and nonhuman animals, a point of view that is reflected throughout this article.

dissociate from nonhuman others when they reflect on relational positionality in interspecies society?[6]

Stuart Hall's understanding of ideology underlines the far-reaching implications of normative ideas on language. As a cultural studies scholar, Hall defines ideology in a way that focuses on society at large. As a result, the relevance of his concept of ideology to research on human and nonhuman animal languages might not immediately be evident. However, throughout this article I will follow the logic that society at large is inevitably an interspecies society because ideas about the human-nonhuman animal divide play a fundamental role in determining how society is organised and how its subjects are positioned. Hall explains that ideologies are "the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation—which different classes and social groups deploy to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works."[7] The ways humans understand and represent human and nonhuman animal language are not independent of or inconsequential to the human perspective on reality. These ways of understanding and representation actively constitute how interspecies society is organised. They inform and create what is considered part of consensus reality, and what is not.

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[6] While writing about "humans" might give the impression I refer to beings I am not part of, it has not escaped my notice that I, too, am a human. Problematizing anthropocentrism and normative human subjectivity as a human is difficult, and frankly disorienting. I do not assume I can shed my human subjectivity, for that would be unrealistic and presumptuous. To be able to estrange oneself (that is, me as I write and you as you read) even a fraction from this subjectivity, I think it is helpful to refer to humans with a slightly more distanced "humans" and "they," instead of "we" and "us humans." This is not because I especially believe that the illusion of distance is effective or even beneficial (for it is purely performative because this illusion, or any actual distance for that matter, is limited by what human subjectivity allows of it), but more so because the alternative wording of "us/we humans" pertains to a group sentiment, which in this context I particularly want to avoid. I do not speak for humans. I speak for myself, however, unavoidably I do speak from a human positionality. Consequently, it is very fair to wonder about to what extent I can reasonably execute this project without compromising the results, if at all. I wonder about that myself too. Rather than invalidating any attempt because a human is not the optimal being to do this research, I prioritise making an effort to develop this underexplored research.

[7] Griffin, *Communication*, 344.

The effect of ideology is that one does not question or suspect normal beliefs because they are normal, and that those beliefs are normal because one does not question or suspect them. Breaking with these tendencies, I aim in this article to examine what happens when I attempt to question assumptions that humans do not normally think to question.

I will examine the normative ideas on language and species that circulate in human knowledge production, considering how these ideas are connected and what parts they play in how humans construct and understand their subjective identity, which unfolds in relation to those of nonhuman animal beings. To do this, I will look at texts about human and nonhuman animal language to examine what the language used in these texts reveals of the ideological ideas humans hold, based on the concept of "species," about the human-animal divide.

In this philosophical research project, I follow a two-step process and therefore divide the article into two sections. In the first section, *The Language of Language*, I will trace the ways that ideas about species inform and influence conceptions of language. I will look at three text excerpts, each of which gives different insights into normative ideas of "language." By close reading these excerpts, which theorise "language" from different perspectives according the their research fields of their authors, I will look at the significant ways they shape human conceptions of language.[8] In the second section, I will zoom in on understandings of "species" and consider how interpretation influences interspecies relationships. Specifically, I will consider "species" in the light of the terms "naturalisation" and "construct." Finally, I will depart from abstract theorisation to briefly consider in what practical ways conceptions of "language" and "species" can be found in the physical world. Taking these steps, I

[8] To a (un)certain extent, I cannot avoid the arbitrariness of the material I examine. I have selected a number of texts that are illustrative, but not perfectly exemplary or representative for the research fields on language. My aim (and expectation) is not to formulate a conclusive evaluation, but rather to initiate the first steps of an inquiry on the relation between "species" and "language," which naturally requires a more extensive and thorough analysis of a wider selection of texts than I can provide here.

hope to come closer to an understanding of how the concepts of "language" and "species" are not just related but intertwined.

The language of language

Theories on the origin and nature of language explain how language is attributed to humans and nonhuman animals. Studying these theories, consequently, is a useful first step in examining the relationship between language and species. Broadly speaking, these theories branch out in two directions: there are biological approaches and the humanistic ones. The humanistic approach considers language as a socio-cultural construction, while biological approaches argue that language is the result of evolutionary or (socio)biological processes. In his debated yet influential *The Language Instinct* (1994), Steven Pinker follows a biological approach, arguing that language is "the product of a special human instinct" such that the ability to understand language is innate to the human mind.[9] There is an extensive number of works on the origin of language that are available today and this text offers relevant insight in normative ideas on human-nonhuman animal differences specifically because of its biological approach. I do not examine this text in an attempt to verify the theory it poses. Instead, I am interested in the language of the text, its narrative strategies and the underlying assumptions on which it builds. My aim, therefore is not to involve myself in debates on the epistemological truth of Pinker's theory of language. Rather, I want to explore how language is used in its formulation. Pinker's text mostly focuses on humans and language, but every now and then nonhuman animals appear. Why and how do nonhuman animals fit into explanations of how humans acquire language? What does the language in this text reveal about ideological assumptions around human-nonhuman animal differences?

According to *The Language Instinct*, language is universal to human societies. Language must be innate, rather than learned, because children show many signs of instinctual language use, develop intricate grammar systems without instruction, and apply

[9] Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 24; Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 21, 26.

and correct grammatical structures without exposure to correct use.[10] Pinker's approach builds on Noam Chomsky's notion of universal grammar, which is not a linguistic grammar but a mental grammar that underlies all human linguistic grammars and that humans are able to grasp and apply intuitively.[11] This universal grammar allows humans to produce language and participate in language exchanges between humans.

The Language Instinct uses cognitive science to locate the origin of language in the mind and evolutionary psychological adaptation.[12] Pinker writes, for instance, that "the mind contains blueprints for grammatical rules."[13] This is then not only a biological, but also an essentialist approach to language. Viewing language as part of a human's essence, it is even described as "our biological birthright."[14] This deterministic argument seems to disconnect the origin of language from the realm of culture and places it in that of nature. Historically, culture is founded and grounded in human existence, and therefore it already excludes nonhuman animals (and other nonhuman beings) right from the outset. By arguing that language is not produced culturally but biologically, *The Language Instinct* assigns a biological origin to language and leaves open a possibility for language in nonhuman animal instincts—for nonhuman animals, too, have a biological component (and arguably even more so than humans, following dichotomous nature-culture debates that emphasise humans are cultured beings).[15] This biologisation of language's origin might seem to create an opportunity for nonhuman animals to be included in the realm of language, for they, too, perhaps have language in their instincts. However, the text calls "language" a "special human instinct," refutes possibility of this: "language is a magnificent ability unique to *Homo sapiens* among living species."[16] At moments, the text considers ways that nonhuman animals are unique: while the human species is

[10] Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 411, 22, 39, 293.
[11] *Id.*, 22-23.
[12] *Id.*, 18-19.
[13] *Id.*, 43.
[14] *Id.*, 19.
[15] Hall, *Representation*, 233.
[16] Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 19.

unique, nonhuman animals certainly are unique too, for spiders can spin webs and bats use Doppler sonar. "In nature's talent show" Pinker writes, "we are simply a species of primate with our own act."[17] Despite these frequent comparisons of the human language instinct to nonhuman animal instincts, which create the impression of putting both the human and the nonhuman on equal footing, a dazzlement by human language permeates the text: the "formidable collective powers" that human language produces and the consequence that humans, "like blue-green algae and earthworms, [have] wrought far-reaching changes on the planet," may suggest that even though all living beings in the world are unique, some are just a bit more unique than others.

The first chapter of *The Language Instinct*, which lays out the foundation of the book's argument—namely, that an instinct to acquire and speak language is essential to the human species—has a title that is telling in itself: "An Instinct to Acquire Art."[18] In this title, the word "art" refers to "language," implying language is a form of art and thus excluding nonhuman animals not only from the realm of language, but from art as well. This title is illustrative of assumptions as to which conceptual and intellectual realms nonhuman animals can access, or rather, are given—allowed—access. Art is yet another realm exclusive to humans, something for which intentionality, consciousness, self-awareness and a certain level of intelligence are needed.[19] While nonhuman animals are excluded by means of "language" because of a special inherent instinct they lack, humans not only do possess that special instinct, but moreover, this instinct is artful. Even when humans find the roots of their traits in nature, those traits are elevated above nature or biology in itself, for the traits are also artistic, and decidedly out of reach of nonhuman animals. Language, then, is not singularly an ability to potentially gain, but it is a faculty to possess, and moreover, to be allowed to possess, to be properly given, and to be granted access to by those who control and produce the knowledge on language. Calling

[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Id.*, 15.
[19] The interesting and relevant discussion of whether, an how, nonhuman animals can create art is not within the scope of this project, for which reason I will not elaborate on it further. However, I hope to do so some place elsewhere.

language "our biological birthright" elevates language to a right, a natural right, even; this means that humans have the right to language because of their inherent nature as humans.[20]

The Language Instinct works with and around ideas of species difference in unexpected ways. Even though species difference is not the topic of the work—which the introductory chapter announces to be *human language* as an instinct—clarifications, comparisons and explanations in the argumentative narrative throughout the chapters consistently feature nonhuman animals in a supporting role.[21] The theory promises to say something about human language, but when it does, it inevitably also says something about nonhuman animals and their language, even though doing so is not the proposed objective of the theory. Further, *The Language Instinct* specifically leans on ideas of the human-animal divide. The text explicitly calls humans a "species" amongst other species, presenting humans as a component of an interspecies whole, yet its implicit underlying reasoning has an anthropocentric tone: the specific essence of humans is more extraordinary than the specific essence of other animals.[22] The message that *The Language Instinct* presents up front is that a unique capability of "language" is at the essence of the human, and that this capability is a clear differentiating factor that separates humans from—and also elevates humans over—other animals. One could reasonably argue that the text does not presume *not* to be anthropocentric in nature, but what strikes me in particular about this text is the sense of unhesitating self-evidence with which the human (as well as its positionality and status) is defined and positioned relative to and against the nonhuman. The text works with, but to a lesser extent reflects on the proposed relative positionality. Why and how is it self-evident that the human use of language is especially extraordinary, compared to bats using sonar? The text, then, is formally about human language, but actually also about humans' position as a species relative to other animals.

The Language Instinct is just one contribution to theory of language, however, and it is not within the scope of this article to sketch out the full debate on the origin of language. Nevertheless,

[20] *Id.*, 19.
[21] *Id.*, 17-18.
[22] *Id.*, 19, 45, 104, 151, 305, 334.

human linguistic exceptionalism is a common conception in linguistics, philosophy, theory of language and ecology: nonhuman animals are not considered to speak language, at least not in a way comparable to humans, and this inability is presented as one of the most important criteria for differentiating between humans and nonhuman animals.[23] Throughout human history, a variety of differentiating markers have passed by to indicate the "species barrier" between the zones of the human and nonhuman: "first it was the possession of a soul, then 'reason', then tool use, then tool *making*, then altruism, then language, then the production of linguistic *novelty*, and so on."[24] Language is represented as a significant marker of difference because it does not only signify difference, but it also constitutes and prescribes understandings of difference, and it creates the subjects it differentiates. "Language" is both a marker and the act of marking.

Let me take a closer look at the question of what language is by turning to another text: linguist John Lyons' *Language and Linguistics*. Definitions vary, but also meaningfully coincide. The accepted definitions that Lyons discusses, as well as the onces in other philosophical works on language, point to the general conception of language as a system of signs and symbols designed to enable (intentional or unintentional) communication.[25] More than actual definitions of "language," the language used in research on language reflects ideological notions regarding human and nonhuman animal language.

The word "language" in itself points to how human language defines the category of language, and by extension that of nonhuman animal language. "Language" primarily refers to human language, that is, not-nonhuman animal language, not-computer language, not-mathematical language. Without a qualifier, "language" is not language in a vacuum, devoid of human context, existing as a self-determinative concept, but it is its human incarnation or

[23] Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*, 2; Akmajian et al. *Linguistics an Introduction*, 359; Meijer, *When Animals Speak*, 27; Heath, *Talking Greeks*, 16; Reznikova, *Studying Animal Languages*, 4, 7, 11.
[24] Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 2.
[25] Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*, 8; Yule, *Study of Language*, 14; Morris, *Philosophy of Language,* 1.

manifestation. The word "human" is typically not included in titles of academic research publications on theory and philosophy of language. The absence of qualifiers implies that the research concerns human language, as opposed to other types of languages.

But in research into nonhuman animal languages, a qualifier to the word "language" is imperative so as to not confuse readers' expectations about the area of study. The "animal" in "animal language," announces a deviation from "language" in what Lyons calls the "strict sense."[26] Language in any other context than in one that centres human language then becomes a subcategory, a variation on normative language in itself: human language. While such a variation is predicated on the main, fundamental, and primary category—on account of its similarity to the main category, it is considered a subvariant of language—the variation is always located in a peripheral position. Thus, comparative positionalities of language are not created and maintained spontaneously or in a void, but in a specific anthropocentric context.

According to Lyons, the word "language" can refer not only to human languages such as English, but also to various other communicative systems such as programming languages (e.g., Javascript) and mathematical languages (e.g., fractions), though the answer to the question of "whether they are rightly called languages or not" remains inconclusive.[27] Interestingly, when he mentions examples such as "'body language' or 'the language of the bees'", Lyons explains that these

> are other systems of communication, both human and non-human, which are quite definitely natural rather than artificial, but which do not seem to be languages in the strict sense of the term, even though the word "language" is commonly used with reference to them.[28]

From this, we see that for Lyons there are systems of communication named by the term "language" that are not "strictly"

[26] Lyons, *Language and Linguistics*, 2.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.*

language.[29] This implies that the term "language" has a strict interpretation, that of actual language, and a non-strict interpretation: language, but not really language.

Theory of language and ecological research on nonhuman animal language exhibit comparable notions of strict and non-strict interpretations of language, which in these contexts appear to apply only under certain conditions. In his *Study of Language* (2020), George Yule discusses the criteria for differentiating human language from animal communication, describing experiments in teaching human language to nonhuman animals. He distinguishes between human language and "animal communication,"[30] implying he does not consider the latter to be language.

Yule holds that human language has distinctive properties compared to nonhuman animal language: reflexivity (the ability to reflect on language and its use), displacement (the ability to refer to the past or future), arbitrariness (lack of "natural" connection between linguistic form and meaning), productivity (linguistic innovation), cultural transmission (the ability for a language to be passed down intergenerationally) and duality (the fact that intrinsic meaning is not connected to individual sounds).[31] The language Yule uses in this section of *Study of Language* is telling: while humans "talk," "speak," and "say," nonhuman animals "produce," "signal," "communicate" and "convey [a] message."[32] Identifying characteristics that differentiate human and nonhuman animal languages, Yule trivialises nonhuman animals that challenge the species-uniqueness of these characteristics by mentioning bee language as a "small exception" when bee language shares a quality with human language that deemed unique to human language, namely that of displacement.[33] Initially, the text bases the differences between human and nonhuman animal language on the twofold distinction between the categories of humans and nonhuman animals (meaning, all nonhuman animal species). But, with bee language,

[29] *Ibid.*
[30] Yule, *Study of Language*, 14.
[31] *Id.*, 14-18.
[32] *Id.,* 15-17.
[33] There are more bees on Earth than humans, and bees are vitally important to the existence of humanity. Beehour, "How Many Bees Are Left in the World?"

the nonhuman animals category potentially destabilises the formal boundary between twofold category distinction between humans and nonhuman animals by exhibiting language properties normally exclusive to the human category. In reaction to this, the text changes the conditions of these human-nonhuman categories: while humans represent the human category, a single species of nonhuman animals, bees, cannot represent the nonhuman category by itself, or, perhaps, form its own distinctive category to make a threefold distinction. The category "nonhuman animals" cannot (synecdochally) be represented by bees alone to form a credible threat to the proposed language properties, keeping intact a binary interpretation of the human-nonhuman animal divide, and invalidating potential category borders within the category of nonhuman animals. This emphasizes a certain status of "human" as a singular species in relation to "nonhuman." However diverse and extensive the total sum of nonhuman "species" the category "nonhuman" consists of, the singular being of the "human" species holds a greater weight when it comes to categorical comparisons that are ultimately based on binary oppositions.

In its discussion of experiments in teaching nonhuman animals to use human language, the text exemplifies unease around and resistance to potentially accepting nonhuman animals into the realm of "language," and above all, into that of human language. The author discredits the potential language abilities of a chimpanzee named Viki, who was taught English, by putting the word "say" between quotation marks each time he refers to expressions by this chimpanzee: "to get Viki to 'say' English words."[34] In the rest of this section, "saying" or "speaking" are not used to describe expressions by nonhuman animals learning human language. The effect is to gatekeep the domain of speaking subjects, reserving that position for human linguistic subjects. Viki does not say but "produce[s] some words."[35] Similarly, the chimpanzees Washoe and Sarah, having been taught sign language, do not use words and sentences, but '"words"' and '"sentences,"' which the author sets between

[34] *Id.*, 19.
[35] *Ibid.*

quotation marks.[36] The chapter concludes by nuancing what it means to "use language," but here too, the author distances human use of language from nonhuman animal language in the greater potentiality of the former:

> there is a difference . . . [in] the capacity to develop a complex system of sounds and structures, plus computational procedures . . . to produce extended discourse . . . No other creature has been observed "using language" in this sense. It is in this more comprehensive and productive sense that we say language is uniquely human.[37]

Human language is presented as unique, potent, and exceptionally complex. Nonhuman animal language, in comparison, is presented as mere communication. Moreover, the linguistic potential of nonhuman animals engaging in human language forms is invalidated; they may speak but they do not actually "say." The border of the realm of language, then, is determined not only by ability to speak the language but also by who speaks.

As in Pinker's *The Language Instinct*, ideas around the human-animal divide are fundamental to the arguments of Lyons and Yule's texts. Both Lyon's and Yule's texts, further, give a more detailed view of how interpretations of "language" and "species" fluctuate depending on the context, sometimes implicitly and at other moments explicitly. For example, their texts generate differences between 'say' and "say," and interpret "animal" as either one homogenous category or as a heterogeneous collection of nonhuman species, as opposed to the singular interpretation of the human species, creating a generalized and singular interpretation of "the animal." In this sense, interpretations are to some extent dependent upon one another: as terms and concepts float back and forth across the species-border separating human and nonhuman

[36] *Id.*, 20-21. *The Language Instinct* demonstrates this use of interpunction as well in a section that discusses ape Petitto learning American Sign Language, for instance by putting quotation marks around "translate," implying there is no actual translation process. Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 338.
[37] *Id.*, 22.

animals, the interpretations and meanings of these terms and concepts shift depending on the side of the division they on which they land.

In discussing Pinker, Lyons and Yule's books, I have so far focused on texts concerning human language. Different insight might be offered by ecological research on nonhuman animal language: perhaps in this specific context, anthropocentrism is less assumed, takes form in a different way, or might be problematised. In her research on the language of ants, behavioural ecologist Zhanna Reznikova defines "communication" in nonhuman animals as "both unaware and unintentional sharing of information and language-like, symbolic communication."[38] Reznikova's definition of "communication" establishes the terminology of her project. She distinguishes between "language" and "language behaviour," which for her is "the intentional transfer of information between members of a group" and "usually refers to nonhuman animal communication systems in which referential signals exist that can be compared with words in a human language."[39] Only if it meets certain requirements in terms of purposiveness, structural integrity and complexity does Reznikova consider nonhuman animal communication to be language behaviour. She further explains that language behaviour is the "most complex form of nonhuman animal communication that takes place when nonhuman animals advisedly transfer the information to each other."[40] She also defines language behaviour as "intelligent communication."[41] These terms are synonymous in Reznikova's work.[42] While never explicitly determining the difference between language and language behaviour, Reznikova's text uses the aforementioned terminology to reserve "language"—which she regards as "the most sophisticated communicative system"—exclusively for humans.[43]

Moreover, while the text uses human language as a frame of reference by using the terms "language" and "linguistic" to refer to

[38] Reznikova, *Studying Animal Languages*, 2.
[39] *Id.*, 2, 7.
[40] *Id.*, 3.
[41] *Id.*, 4.
[42] *Id.*, 7.
[43] *Id.*, 5.

examples of nonhuman animal language,[44] it relies on a strategy similar to Pinker and Yule's texts when it indicates with quotation marks that the meanings of these words differ from their meanings in human contexts: "'nonhuman animal 'languages'", "'linguistic' potential", "the question of existence of developed 'languages' in non-humans."[45] Determining such differences without explicitly defining the terms language and "language" creates an active comparison between human and nonhuman animal language, prompting readers to understand nonhuman animal language by the literal means (terms) of human language. To explain research demonstrating evidence of the complexity and potency of nonhuman animal language, Reznikova compares this evidence against human linguistic capabilities. Nonhuman animal language is interpreted—both in form (terms) and content (value)—in the light (or shadow) of human language.

Reznikova's use of language in her research resembles that of Pinker and Yule, but something slightly different catches my attention here: even though Reznikova employs human linguistic terminology, she seems to call this use into question by providing an alternative nonhuman animal linguistic terminology (such as "language behavior") to express comparable terms and concepts in human language. Most curious about this, is that Reznikova frequently abandons this nonhuman animal terminology, opting for human terminology instead. So, in spite of proposed differences in the capabilities of human and nonhuman language, describing nonhuman language in terms of human language is a returning pattern, possibly implying that human language and human linguistic terminology are a norm, a neutral standard to measure against and compare to.

In research on linguistics, theory of language, nonhuman animal language and ecology, the language of "language" embodies and reproduces the overdetermined interpretations of language depending on human or nonhuman animal context. As I have shown, Pinker, Lyon, Yule and Reznikova's texts do not only say

[44] Other examples are "words," "babbling," "texts." Reznikova, *Studying Animal Languages*.

[45] *Id.*, in the introduction and chapter 1 and 2 alone: v, 2, *5*, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 22, 25.

something about language, but also—and most importantly, for my discussion—about the users of language. As language research appears to employ diverging understandings of language depending on context and subject, this dominant terminological mode may point to symptomatic evidence of anthropocentric and speciesist narratives. At the same time, there is no absolute dichotomous separation between human and nonhuman language in linguistic research. In research on nonhuman animal language, humans describe this language with the words "animal *language*." So, despite humans' long-term project to nuance the definition and perception of the word "language" in "nonhuman animal language," the word "language" stubbornly persists. As of yet, attempts to coin alternative terms or neologisms have not lessened the prominence of the term "nonhuman animal language" in academic debates around animal communication.

The Language of Species

Up to now, I have used close reading to focus on ways that theory of language implicitly expresses, constructs and reproduces different normative ideas about "species" in the light of the human-animal divide. The idea that interpretations of "species" possibly hold ideological connotations might strike one as a bit counter-intuitive, because the concept has a distinct connection with the scientific study of biology, a branch of science generally characterised as positivist in nature. Biology, therefore, stands at risk of being overlooked in critical inquiry. For this reason, I intend to dwell on the idea of "species" a bit longer in this second section, shedding more light on how and why "species" can be sensitive to normative assumptions. In what follows, I will take a closer look at the broader context of theoretical tendencies that the text analyses in the previous section demonstrated: namely that theory of language has underlying narratives of essentialised linguistic status connected to anthropocentrism and interspecies power imbalances. By taking a step back from specific texts to a broader theoretical context, I attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptual mechanics that causes the term "species" to play a significant role in narratives on language. I do this even though the term "'species" is not explicitly central to the initial research questions, which were aimed

at human language. I will bring together possible underlying notions about "species" to learn more about what informs the narratives in the analysis in the previous section, allowing me to eventually move beyond theoretical concerns to real-world implications. I will consider the phrase "naturalised construct," which will help to further shed light on the ideological nature of "species," by examining the two terms that comprise it: first I will consider *naturalised*, and second, I will consider *construct*.

Considering how processes of naturalisation work and what their implications are is the first step in gaining insight into why "species" is fundamental to theories of human language even though it is seemingly unnoticed and unacknowledged. In the previous section, I discussed how Pinker's *The Language Instinct* positions language as essentially and uniquely human, calling it "our birthright," and implying that nonhuman animals are necessarily excluded from this right by being nonhuman, *not*-human.[46] The idea that language is a human linguistic birthright correlates with ideas in Yule, Lyon and Reznikova's texts. In these texts, nonhuman animal language is presented as not *really* language, such that nonhuman animals do not really "say" in the way that humans do, but rather only communicate. This adds a further dimension: nonhuman animal language is then not simply not a real language because in essence, nonhuman animal language holds different linguistic structural attributes and characteristics than human language, but further, the idea of a linguistic birthright makes of nonhuman animal language a language that is spoken outside of the rightful domain: an unrightful language. To speak in a language that is not rightfully a language is to speak in an invalided form of language: an illegitimate, unofficial, less substantial derivative of the proper human language which, instead, is rightful language, spoken by those who lay rightful claim on it by birth. Narratives of right connotate sentiments of protectiveness. Rights are assets to safeguard. The instrumental narrative strategies I have discussed perform this safeguarding. Underlying connotations like these legitimise anthropocentric assumptions. The concept of "right to language" essentialist and

[46] Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 19.

deterministic: it is human (essence) and *in* human (biology), and that is just how things are.

To present nonhuman animal language as different from human language on account of formal linguistic specifics, or because of conceptual differences that are particular to language as a theoretical phenomenon, relies on an imagery of objectivity; it is to look at language as a scientifically factual defined structure. But a perspective that builds upon biological, essentialist values adheres to naturalising interpretations and representations of difference. While definitions of language as a theoretical and practical system are less permanent—for they are more open to change owing to historical, cultural and geographical interpretations and the development thereof—to define language according to an embodied biological principle anchors language to an ostensibly fixed state of biological essence and naturality. Directly connecting language to biological nature makes language deterministic, part of an identity and stable in its biological embodiment. Positioning language, or the normative understanding of language—"actual" human language, as Pinker, Lyons, Yule and Reznikova's texts imply—in biological human nature and presenting it as uniquely human, locates the difference between human and nonhuman animal language in biological nature, in the natural bodies of human and nonhuman animal subjects.

Hall explains the socio-political potency of this type of essentialist reasoning, which relies on naturalisation practices, when he discusses how racial differences are signified in the context of European imperialism. He describes how representations of racial difference were located in specific characteristics that were said to be innate or inborn, such as laziness and primitivism.[47] In this "racialised regime of representation," processes of ideological meaning production relied on reducing cultures and cultural practices to nature.[48] Characteristics of cultures or communities, and their differences compared to others, were presented as consequences of biological nature. Consequently, those characteristics that were said to be inborn, "natural," were not

[47] Stuart Hall, *Representation*, 233-34.
[48] *Id.,* 234.

subject to change. There is a sense of permanence in biological nature. Ideas on the concept of "species" are similarly subject to naturalisation and essentialisation, in spite of their biological—and by extension, objective—origins. According to Cary Wolfe,[49] a prominent scholar in the field of animal studies, the discourse of species is predicated on the notion that human is defined and constructed through, by means of and in relation to the nonhuman other.[50] Moreover, the category of the non-human animal in particular is significant in the formation of "human" because

> our stance toward the nonhuman animal is an index for how we stand in a field of otherness and difference generally, and in some ways it is the most reliable index, the "hardest case" ... the nonhuman animal possesses a specificity as the object of both discursive and institutional practices, one that gives it particular power and durability in relation to other discourses of otherness.[51]

Thus, ideas of what "species" is directly inform ideas of what "human" is, even in discourses of human otherness. Systematic discrimination against an Other based on the characteristic of species is known as "speciesism," a concept that emerged from animal rights theories.[52] The discourse of species, then, is a grouping instrument based on a naturalised construct of species. "Naturalised" is an important term here, indicating that ideas of species categories are not biologically stable but ideologically framed and determined by their links to the fixed embodied nature of subjects, reducing subjects to their essence. Constructs of species do not singularly start from biological taxonomy, but assume meaning in the ways that essentialised biological interpretations relate to difference: if language in its proper form is unique to humans and preserved for humans, then nonhuman animals, by being nonhuman, logically cannot inhabit the same position, for this would

[49] And with him Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida and René Girard.
[50] Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 3, 5.
[51] *Id.*, 5-6.
[52] *Id.*, 1, following Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975).

destabilise human positionality. In Yule's text on animals learning human language, there is some leeway, some room for ambiguity in that humans take an interest in teaching animals human language, or actively attempt to measure nonhuman linguistic ability such as in Resnikova's work. However, this ambiguity is regulated through controlled environments and attitudes in humans' research on nonhuman languages.

Eva Meijer can help me show where this ambiguity in human research on nonhuman language can be located. Meijer theorises the political potential of animal voices, which forms the common thread throughout her research in the field of critical animal studies.[53] As an illustration, let me briefly outline one research experiment Meijer discusses that demonstrates the complexity of interpreting interspecies language exchanges. In *Animal Languages*, she describes examples of research on the linguistic proficiency of chimpanzees and gorillas. One early experiment involved teaching chimpanzees human speech, with little success. Researchers initially concluded that the chimpanzees' failure to learn human speech was due to a lack of intelligence. But later attempts to teach chimpanzees sign languages proved successful, invalidating the earlier, premature conclusion that pointed to an inferiority in intelligence and instead suggesting that chimpanzees' brain structure prevents them from pronouncing human words.[54] Meijer discusses the results of sign language experiments on a chimpanzee named Nim, mentioning that Nim's actual language abilities were unknown. Researchers argued that rather than acquiring linguistic proficiency, it was possible that Nim had learned sign language through operant conditioning, thus not really understanding the meaning of the signs (though successfully understanding the reward he would receive for signing). Ultimately this interpretation of the data on Nim won out.[55]

Objective data may suggest that in experiments nonhuman animals are capable of learning human language in various ways: learning what is explicitly taught, learning by watching humans sign

[53] Animal studies and critical animal studies (CAS) are both interdisciplinary fields that focus on questions regarding 'the animal' (in the broadest sense), but critical animal studies is further characterised by its activistic nature.
[54] Meijer, *Animal Languages*, 24, 31.
[55] *Id.*, 26.

among each other, creating signs themselves, and demonstrating understanding of concepts that researchers might assume are foreign to nonhuman animals, such as crying.[56] However, interpretations of data analyses and results indicate that scepticism as to the degree of comprehension by nonhuman animals engaging with human language is a structural sentiment in human-performed animal research.[57] Here, Meijer's example of research on chimpanzees shows how initial conclusions appeared to be based on assumptions that reflected preconceived prejudices against nonhuman animals as comparatively less intelligent than humans, potentially colouring data analyses. These biases are reinforced in the process of interpreting research data in accordance with expectations on, for example, chimpanzees' performance as users of human speech. Meijer's example reveals how notions of comparative species intelligence—and nonhuman animals' capacity for and access to forms of language that are closely linked to human language—are informed by an assumption that nonhuman animals are essentially linguistically inferior to humans.

In *The Language Instinct,* Pinker discusses a similar experiment which sought to teach apes American Sign Language. Pinker states that the idea that the apes really learned sign language is "a preposterous claim" and that "[their] true vocabulary count would be closer to 25 than 125." Pinker explains that the observations of the research team and a deaf native signer differed as the native sign language user was less convinced of the ape's sign language proficiency than the researchers. But Pinker does not consider the possibility that, while the research team might miss the intricacies of sign language, the sign language user, being only indirectly involved in the research and therefore less familiar with apes' use of sign language, might misread an ape's signs. So perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between.[58]

To analyse the concept of "species," it is important to consider not only the term *naturalisation* but also *construct*. In the first half of this section, I explained that discourse of species is based on a naturalised *construct* of species. As I discussed earlier, the concept

[56] *Id.,* 24-25.
[57] *Id.*, 24-26.
[58] Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 338.

of "species" is connected to biological research, which is generally regarded as positivistic and geared towards epistemological truth. To think of "species" as a construct, then, might feel contradictory. "Construct" suggests that the meaning of "species" is less a product of objective observation of biological organisms than it is dependent on subjective perspectives involved in its construction. The notion of "construct" draws attention to the manufactured, relative, conditional and inconclusive status of the concept. Strange as it may be to think of species as constructs, this idea is not new. In reference to evolutionary theory, David Hull discusses the complications of essentialism in and of species classification; he quotes Darwin:

> We shall have to treat species in the same manner as those naturalists treat genera, who admit that genera are merely artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect; but we shall at least be free from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of species.[59]

The complex deficiencies in the theoretical apparatus of differentiating species are an accepted issue in contemporary biological research.[60] While the scientific correctness of "species" factualness is important to consider, in my discussion the point in question is really not about the verifiability of the statement that differentiating species is, or is not, biologically sound. Instead, there are several other points that I consider more significant in the discourse of species: first, this discourse (re)presents and (re)produces "species" and species differences through normative ideas of what species differences between humans and nonhuman animals are assumed, expected and imagined to be. Second, understandings of species can be employed to justify certain behaviours towards nonhuman animals, and can establish a certain social positionality of nonhuman animal groups. And third, these ideas are connected to knowledge production regarding species

[59] Hull, *Effect of Essentialism*, 320.
[60] The headache this issue causes in biological research is inconspicuously named "the species problem." Pavlinov, *Species Problem.* Richards, *Species Problem.* Wells, *Species Heuristic.* Stamos, *Species Problem.*

naturalisation, justification, preservation and monitoring. In constructing a specific representation of species, positionality based on differentiation and categorisation is the basis for hegemonic power structures. The consequences of this positionality permeate every branch of reality. For instance, constructing a species-hierarchised society supports an economic model predicated on differentiation and exclusion, where the line between production and consumption coincides with species.

Practices of taxonomy are strongly linked to knowledge production: they have zoological explanatory power. This means that constructs of species "must bear some relation to the actual qualities and requirements of the species in question, beyond mere prejudice . . . [A]nd here discrimination is equivalent to prejudice. But discrimination also means the making of . . . distinctions; being able to discriminate or distinguish on the basis of knowledge or objects or subjects in question."[61] Representation of species, then, is an accumulation of constructed naturalised differences. Firstly, these are differences that subjects embody. These differences are studied and established in the context of objective biological research, producing "species" as an object of knowledge. Secondly, the conditions under which this knowledge production occurs are important. Research is embedded in an anthropocentric context and informed by anthropocentric ideas and norms.[62]

In an anthropocentric context, ideas of species lose their explicit connection to their specific anthropocentric origin: species seems to be a self-explanatory, natural, normal, unquestioned concept that is inherent to reality. And it seems inherent to reality, or more accurately, to a commonly agreed upon reality as presented and represented by humans. Species do not exist because of their ontological actuality but because of epistemological processes of

[61] Cole et al., "Speciesism," 2.

[62] What is considered fact, is fact within a context, and to neglect taking into account this context, is an indicator of anthropocentrism. Research necessarily holds implicit and explicit narratives (mine does, too) and these narratives both echo the conditions of the context from which it is produced, as well as creates narratives that informs other contexts it is related to. Such conditions are inevitable, and they necessarily leave their imprint on all aspects of research (such as motive, approach, process, result, and interpretation of result).

differentiation. Species difference is a useful tool for structuring interspecies society: humans formulate normative ideas on species and species differences, and because of this, "species" exists. It is not the case as that acknowledging, mapping and implementing (consequences of) species differentiation result from objective, biologically embodied necessity. These processes of differentiation do not emerge spontaneously but constitute an effective and functional system of differentiation that, if instrumentalised as it has been throughout human history, creates and maintains a privileged human position over nonhuman animals (both linguistically and otherwise).

Conclusion

Privileging a human linguistic position over nonhuman linguistic presence potentially results in the obscuration, erasure, and alteration of nonhuman linguistic presence due to anthropocentric normativity in contemporary interspecies society. Species discourses shape the lives of nonhuman linguistic subjects. The degree of anthropogenic influence on nonhuman subjects' living environments varies, but it is universally and continually present. A linguistic perspective on the environmental terms of nonhuman animal subjects' lives reveals the significance of conceptualising linguistically exemplified ecological concepts in relation to anthropocentrism and ideas on "species." This perspective sheds light on the resulting reinforcement of anthropocentric hierarchical interspecies relations, and the deterioration and erasure of nonhuman animal subjects' linguistic presence.

Up to now, my inquiry has transpired in comparatively theoretical, abstract spheres. The issues I have discussed do, however, have concrete consequences. In this final section, I will therefore touch upon ways in which discourses of species and language reverberate in "real life." Studies suggest, for example, that human-induced noise pollution (by traffic or other forms of human presence) affects animals' acoustic communication. Anthropogenic sound pollution and city surfaces disturb animal communication by scattering sound waves and creating multiple

reverberations, interfering with animal communicative practices.[63] It has often been observed, for instance, that birds living in cities sing at a different pitch than conspecifics living in areas with less anthropogenic sound pollution.[64] This shows that anthropocentric contexts alter the living conditions of nonhuman linguistic subjects.

In the case of birds, sound pollution can mask bird vocalisations, requiring the birds to modify their vocalisations by increasing their duration, changing their structure, and producing them at different times and different frequencies—all of this provided that the birds are capable of "adaptations," as they are called (all of which are virtually unnoticeable by non-ornithologist humans).[65] Research on bird language grammar suggests its significant structural and substantive complexity.[66] This implies that altering birds' linguistic practices consequentially influences and reformulates birds' modes of communication, potentially irreversibly. The voices of birds incapable of "adapting" are at risk of being silenced or erased.

Studies show that in addition to disrupting bird communication, anthropogenic noise pollution affects insects, fish and amphibians.[67] Light pollution affects nonhuman animals, such as by changing the timing of bird songs.[68] Anthropocentric living conditions alter nonhuman animals' communicative processes but

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[63] Slabbekoorn et al., "Sound Transmission," 67. Perhaps it strikes one as surprising that after discussing the effects of using a term like "communication" to describe nonhuman animal language, as opposed to for instance "speaking," I now fall back on precisely this word. This has less to do with my philosophical perspective on this type of phrasing, than with the practical complication that paraphrasing "communication" as, perhaps, "dialogue" or "language exchange" would bring me in a tricky situation since doing so consequently alters the connotative meaning of the paraphrased content for the exact reasons that I have been presenting throughout this article. If anything, this issue only brings out yet another layer in the relation between "species" and "language," a layer I might explore at another place, but in the meantime, I will have to compromise with this footnote.

[64] Brumm and Zollinger, "Avian Vocal," 187; Brumm and Horn, "Noise Pollution," 254; Roca et al, "Shifting Frequencies," 1269; Wiley, "Noise Matters," 216.

[65] Murgui and Hedblom, *Ecology and Conservation*, 104.

[66] Meijers, *When Animals Speak*, 54.

[67] Murgui and Hedblom, *Ecology and Conservation*, 97.

[68] Gómez and Macgregor-Fors, "A Global Synthesis," 1134.

also lead to animal migration.[69] Nonhuman subjects leave areas affected by human activity when the changed living conditions prevent effective communication, forcing animals to migrate to areas that accommodate their communication methods; in anthropocentric environments, there is only room for animals with languages that can adapt. Were nonhuman animal language to hold an equal status to human language in popular imagination, then light pollution might be handled differently than it is currently, because in that situation, the risks of compromission or extinction of animal language practices would be considered equally disastrous as it would be for human languages. But since nonhuman languages are not *really* considered to be languages, their potential endangerment and extinction are not *really* considered disastrous by humans.

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[69] Murgui and Hedblom, *Ecology and Conservation*, 97.

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Shifting Paradigms: The Relationship between Nature and Humanity in Contemporary Art

Alicja Serafin-Pospiech

The muffled syllables that Nature speaks
Fill us with deeper longing for her word

George Santayana, "Premonition" (1901)

Modernity has upheld the categorisation of the world's subjects and phenomena into those belonging to the realm of nature and those belonging to the realm of culture. This division comes from the long tradition in Western philosophy that distinguishes the intellect from sensation and emotion.[1] The rational products of the human mind are separated from its unconscious, emotional reactions, which are perceived as connected to something more primal and natural. Many works of contemporary art focusing on emotion, fleeting sensation and ephemeral phenomena are changing those paradigms. In these works, sensation leads the audience to interpretation, dissolving the barrier of culture and intellect separating humanity from the natural world.

The birth of immersive art, which is often based on current technical advancements, comes along with technological progress and the emergence of neuroaesthetic studies.[2] In the works of authors who draw from research in neuroaesthetics, the connection between the art object and the viewer is based on the neural reaction

[1] Salah and Salah, "Technoscience Art," 150.
[2] *Ibid.*

created on the biological level.[3] The body's reaction leads the mind to interpretation, and what was formerly categorised as biological and cultural now intertwines, functioning in flux between one and other.[4] Since artworks have freed themselves from the boundaries of the traditional media (such as the canvas plane), the exhibition space has become the field for manipulation. Artistic expression has given birth to immersive art, which can occupy entire rooms and buildings of museums and galleries. Simultaneously, the environmental crisis emerges as a theme in many artists' works, which focus on recasting the human/nature dichotomy present in the previous millennium. Nature becomes the sole theme in exhibitions and artworks which present humanity's control over the natural world as an illusion.

This article uses neuroaesthetic methods to investigate what kinds of artistic strategies provoke the audience's specific emotional and neural responses and how those responses lead to the interpretation of the artworks. These strategies are reflected in the artworks of Studio Drift, Olafur Eliasson and Lee Bororson, all of which are focused on the condition of the humanity-nature relationship. The theme of the artworks I analyse in this article is the dire future of our species and the natural world. As the dichotomy between viewer and object is abolished in these immersive artworks, acts of seeing/sensing and interpreting intertwine. Neuroaesthetics-based analysis, which focuses on the observer's bodily sensations and emotions, can help us understand how the artworks respond to the changing hierarchy of the humanity-nature relationship. The shift in the relationship between humanity and the environment it inhabits can be traced to paradigms present in contemporary philosophy.

Between culture and nature, mind and body

Definitions of what is natural and what is cultural changed significantly at the end of the twentieth century. Discussions surrounding the effects of human activity on the environment have

[3] See, for example, Onians, "Art, the Visual Imagination and Neuroscience," 182-188. For more works on neuroaesthetics: Kędziora and Onians, *Basic Bibliography*.

[4] Kędziora, "Niezauważona i rewolucyjna neurohistoria sztuki," 228-231.

influenced how we conceptualise nature and in what way humanity has positioned itself in relation to it. While postmodernist theory often focuses on studying the influence of culture on our perception of the world, more current research poses questions about the natural bases of different cultural phenomena. Scientific discoveries and studies of empirical experience have led philosophers to reframe nature as an ontological problem. The questions of what is natural and what is human-made, what is natural and what is cultural, are being disputed.

In his book *We Were Never Modern* Bruno Latour points out that the separation between the cultural and the natural is a notion coming from modernity. According to him, this dichotomy is a product of the 20th century, which positioned humanity and its cultural production higher on the hierarchy of things, while positioning nature and what is natural as phenomena subject to human control.[5] This false construct allowed us to see nature as the "raw material of culture," an object to be manipulated and controlled, deprived of its agency.[6] In this view, humans and the rational human mind stood above what is natural, biological and unconscious—things which pose no threat to the wonders and powers of human-made objects, science and technology. The discoveries of a hole in the ozone layer and global warming have provided proof not only that humanity cannot separate itself from nature, but also that humanity can be endangered by the environment.[7] This brought Latour to reject the paradigms of modernity, arguing that we need to see humanity/nature and body/mind as interconnected entities in a constant process of influencing each other.

Latour critiques the postmodern approach as well, for even though it rejects the modern cultural/natural dichotomy, it emphasises the cultural and ultimately disregards ideas of objective materiality and human ability to influence natural matter.[8] Postmodern views base themselves on subjectivity and, according to

[5] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 35-39.
[6] McKey, *Repositioning Neuroaesthetics,* 73.
[7] *Id.*, 71.
[8] Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 191.

Latour, reject belief in reality.[9] This critique of postmodernism is also present in neuroaesthetic researchers' works. Łukasz Kedziora states that the postmodern discourse omits the first step in experiencing art—seeing—and moves the process of analysis straight to interpretation.[10] He critiques postmodern authors' focus on disputing social connotations, while the object itself and the formality of the artwork seem to disappear. Kędziora's art history research shifts focus to the materiality and visuality of the artwork rejecting views stemming from the modern view of the world. The approach is therefore not postmodern, but a-modern, creating new notions of what is cultural and what is natural. The result is the merging of biology and culture, creating an *assemblage* in which nature and humanity are intertwined, with the cultural and the biological influencing reality at the same level. Examining the connections between cultural and biological phenomena can help us to understand the contemporary relationship between humanity and nature.

Seeing/interpreting

The main problem at the core of the dispute surrounding the use of neuroaesthetic knowledge in art analysis is the dichotomy of presence and representation in a work of art, which separates the act of seeing and experiencing art from looking for its meaning in the cultural field.[11] Theories that take presence as their focal point see artworks first as images and then, later, as texts to be read. Theories focused on representation, on the other hand, concentrate on associating artworks' components with their meaning.[12] For representatives of both approaches, the neuroaesthetics method is not convincing, because it makes no clear distinction between what comes from the socio-cultural realm and what is biologically determined. Sally McKey argues in her dissertation that aesthetics is an ongoing dialogue between nature and culture.[13] She demonstrates

[9] *Ibid.*
[10] Kędziora, *Wizualność dzieła sztuki*, 189.
[11] McKey, *Repositioning neuroaethetics,* 53-56.
[12] *Id.,* 54. Sally McKey is referring to the Didi-Huberman's critique of Panofky's Iconological method.
[13] *Id.,* 32.

that neuroaesthetic research sees the products of the mind and psychology as a part of the body, so that sensorial reaction to art becomes part of the socio-cultural model. If the body's response is also culturally determined, the dichotomy between the body and the mind is abolished.

The difficulty in creating a bridge between neural response to and interpretation of the artwork is partially resolved in the work of David Freedberg. In his method, the main concept bridging the two is memory.[14] When we approach an artwork, what we see and experience is influenced by our memories and cultural background. Freedberg does not overlook this social and personal aspect of perception. In the article "Memory in Art" he introduces two concepts of memory: direct memory and indirect memory. Direct memory is a basic neural response as the body reacts to the presented art. This response on bodily and neurological levels is a basis for the awakening of "indirect memory"—the memory created from our experiences, the cultural artefacts we have encountered, and everything else that we store in the part of the brain responsible for memory. Bridging these two notions of memory allows Freedberg to connect the findings of neuroaesthetics to artworks' meanings. Analysing Rogier van der Weyden's "Descent from the cross," Freedberg recalls viewers' testimonies of their reactions to this work of art, which focus on emotions the viewers expressed after encountering it.[15] Freedberg's method is interesting because it provides an association between the "emotional" and sensorial response and memory, which holds the socio-cultural connotations we looked for in theories focused on representation.

This method is especially relevant to the interpretation of artworks that refer to the fragility of the contemporary human condition. Since these artworks undermine the humanity-nature dichotomy, it is necessary to explore whether certain artistic strategies connect the acts of reception and interpretation, thus intertwining what art history theories deem as biological and cultural. Freedberg's method, in which both of these modes are considered, allows the artwork to be examined comprehensively.

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[14] Freedberg, "Memory in Art," 337-38.
[15] *Id.*, 343-344.

Capturing beauty and captivating attention

In 2018, a solo exhibition of the Studio Drift collective called *Studio Drift: Coded Nature* was held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. While the show was on view, I visited the museum for the first time. Studio Drift's bizarre, very technical, and yet somehow ephemeral and delicate creations caught my eye. What particularly captured my attention, though, were the different reactions of the audience: while the viewers moved quickly between the paintings, sculptures and objects on view in the museum's permanent exhibition, the rooms occupied by the Studio Drift show were filled with observers. The viewers were lying on the museum's floors, changing positions before the objects and trying to get the most out of the experience of encountering art. Studio Drift's constantly moving, shining objects seemed to enchant the audience. Is it the meaning behind the art that casts the spell, I wondered, or is it the pleasing sensation, the feeling and the emotion that comes from aesthetic experience? Where does feeling stop and interpretation begin? Can the two coexist in an ongoing interplay?

The artistic creations of Studio Drift, Olafur Eliasson and Lee Boroson share similar artistic qualities: They are full of colour and movement, filling the gallery space with objects. The works' structures are created with the viewer's reaction in mind: the artists often work with a specific space, and they consider how the viewer might encounter the objects. The artists use a lot of light, colour and movement to make their objects visually gripping. In the article "Neuroaesthetics: The Cognitive Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience," the authors refer to George Santayana's notion of beauty. Santayana explains that people are "drawn to aesthetic features of an object and its environment."[16] They conclude something quite obvious to the connoisseurs of the visual arts: that aesthetic features play a major role in determining the influence that the object has on the observer. Santanaya, a philosopher, rejects belief in the metaphysical world and positions beauty as something that comes from the natural and aesthetical judgment rooted in sensory response. This view comes from the branch of philosophy known as naturalism. According to Alberto Marinho Ribas Semeler,

[16] Pierce et al., "Neuroaesthetics," 265-79.

theories of empirical experience go through a constant process of naturalisation, and the contemporary epitome of such theories is neuroaesthetics.[17] Semeler defines naturalisation, following Edmond Couchot, as "a philosophical branch which aims at defining what it is to be human, at times in a reductionist manner, addressing natural phenomena, submitted to the rules and laws of nature just like any other object in the world."[18]

Santanaya's views anticipate current discussions about culture and nature, laying the groundwork for neuroaesthetic studies defining the biological basis of empirical experience. According to the radical naturalisation perspective, an artwork is also a natural and biological object, because it originates from human activity, which is necessarily subject to the laws of nature. Identifying the biological basis of empirical experience, therefore, leads to determining the natural sources of art creation and aesthetic judgment.

Returning to the works of Studio Drift, Olafur Eliasson and Lee Boroson, their especially captivating usage of light—ensuring that the objects will attract the viewer's attention—creates a longer-lasting neural connection between the observer and the object. The process of sensory reaction is not instant but temporal, and therefore the viewer needs to spend some time with the art and reflect on the message that their body is sending. Assuring that the art is aesthetically pleasing guarantees the audience's positive judgment of its beauty and, further, leads to the art's presence gripping the audience. According to studies on emotional responses to installation art, immersive artworks, relying on the use of light and colour, provoke an emotional reaction that aligns with the curatorial and expert discussions. This is not the case with art based on more traditional media.[19] The researchers found out that even lay viewers can be led by their emotional response to the interpretation the artists intended. This suggests that identifying the sensory and emotional reaction, which Freedberg labels as direct memory, should be part of an artwork's examination, as this reaction is where the initial source of its meaning lies. This methodological approach

[17] Semeler, "Neuroaesthetics," 284.
[18] *Id.*, 286.
[19] Pelowski et al., "Capturing Aesthetic Experiences," 19-20.

will guide the analysis of artworks by Studio Drift and Olafur Eliasson presented below.

Studio Drift—hybrid forms and neuroaesthetics

In Studio Drift's exhibition at the Stedelijk, two installations captured the audience's attention the most: kinetic objects resembling flowers, titled "Meadow," and "Shylight" (fig.1). According to the findings of neuroaesthetics, experiencing an artwork provokes a reaction in the viewer's neurons.[20] Looking at kinetic sculptures awakens the part of the brain that is responsible for perceiving movement. If the perception of movement is awakened, the body becomes more eager to react with its own movement.[21] Studio Drift often focuses on creating moving objects resembling natural forms. The artworks "Shylight" and "Meadow" are made with this artistic strategy in mind—the featured objects are moving lamps hanging in a cluster from the ceiling. The lampshades' forms resemble flowers, blooming with the help of a complex wiring structure. As we see in the picture, viewers were eager to interact with these moving objects. Some people decided to lay on the ground to better experience the artwork sensorially without any disruptions.[22] This way, the body as a whole is captivated by "Shylight" and "Meadow." According to neuroaesthetic research, the viewer positions their body in order to connect to the artwork the most. Interpretation is accessible if we

Figure 1: Studio Drift, "Shylight," aluminium, polished stainless steel, silk, LEDs, robotics, 2018. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, permanent collection Rijksmuseum, 2018. Photo: Alicja Serafin-Pospiech.

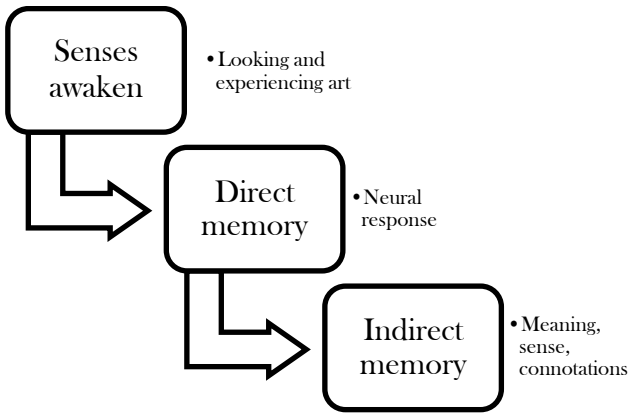
[20] Pierce et al., "Neuroasthetics," 267-70.

[21] David Freedberg refers to the Damasio's studies on this matter in *Memory in Art,* 341.

[22] Viewers often react similarly to the hanging painting, trying to position their body in the most desired way before/in relation to the image plane.

experience it through the senses and the initial neural and emotional reaction guides the mind towards deeper understanding.

Applying David Freedberg's method to the works of Studio Drift yields interesting results. The reaction of the viewer to an artwork, according to Freedberg, can be summarised in the scheme presented below:

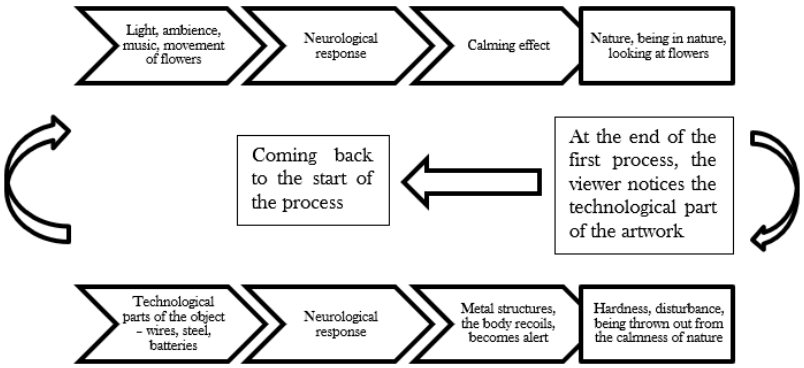


Freedberg uses this schema to analyse the relationship between a viewer's sensory response and the meaning that the viewer interprets. Many viewers of the Studio Drift show acknowledge that the objects provoke a sensory response. These viewers describe the objects as "pretty, captivating." According to the Stedelijk Museum's announcement of the Studio Drift exhibition, "[t]he works' tranquil beauty invites us to pause and experience the wonder of what is unfolding—to enjoy a few minutes of stillness in our hectic, fast-paced, digital world."[23] The artworks, which mimic the forms and movements of flowers, refer to the natural world. The mimicry of natural objects is very significant, provoking emotional and neural responses similar to those provoked in encounters with nature. Direct memory revoked by this artwork is the memory of experiencing nature. If the viewer's sensory response then creates a bridge between the viewer and nature itself, the agency of the object seemingly connects contemporary society to nature. In fact, though, the connection is here disrupted. If the response from direct

[23] *Studio Drift*, "Coded Nature."

memory is a serene feeling associated with experiencing nature (as nature is suggested by the use of light and the movement of the objects), the "technological" part of the artwork disrupts this connection. We can analyse the process of a viewer's experience with "Shylight," for example, in the following way:

But there is a disruption in this process:



The experience becomes a cycle back and forth between nature and technology.

The force of "Shylight" lies in this cycle, repeatedly connecting to nature and disconnecting from it. In this case, nature and technology connect. They are not presented as oppositions. The neuroaesthetic analysis of Studio Drift's art shows us exactly this problem. The technological parts of the artwork connote different senses than the artwork as a whole. This leads to a ceaseless process of connecting to and disconnecting from nature. Further, the work provokes viewers to reflect on their everyday lives and recognise that we cannot connect to nature anymore, as our focus on technological advancements and products of culture stands in the way.

As it is presented in the scheme above, Freedberg's method of analysis is still based on references that can be attributed to cultural influence. As Sally McKey points out, we make connotations not only under the influence of culture but also with

the help of our body's reactions, which are often determined by past experiences and knowledge.[24] Although Freedberg's idea to include neural reaction as part of the interpretative process is fruitful for the analysis, the proposed process of simple cause and effect does not really work in object analysis. The *indirect memory* awakened by the *direct memory* has already influenced the latter significantly, before and during the encounter with the artwork. This can be seen in the constant cycle of neural reactions and cultural connotations, as they become intertwined with each other in a perpetual process of interpretation. Eventually it becomes impossible to determine what is cause and what is effect. But the crucial part of the process of interpretation is the point of connection between different connotations and sensory reactions, not only in the associations based on visual analysis.

Studio Drift's hybrid forms, therefore, represent the entanglement of human-made forms and nature. In some of Studio Drift's artworks, like "Dandlelight" (fig. 2) and "Fragile Future" (fig. 3), it is difficult to determine what is technical and what is natural. "Dandlelight," belonging to the series of works in which artists focused on dissecting dandelions, combines natural parts with technological structures. The final form is a structure made of small dandelion lights, constructed to resemble cells, growing on the wired circuit board. Although one can assume that the flowers in the dandelion series are fake, real dandelions were in fact pulled apart and their seeds were assembled again on the LED lights. The Studio Drift's alterations to the dandelion, which was an intervention into the natural object, was a very precise task. In the end, the clear distinction between natural and human-made in "Fragile Future" is difficult to comprehend without knowledge of Studio Drift's creative process. Latour saw the hybridity of modern technology as one of the indications of the fact that the dichotomy between the cultural and the natural is in its essence false.[25] Technology, seen as an aspect of the technoscience combination, represents the mind, as it is part of many human-made cultural creations.[26] The human ability to use what comes from nature and combine it with technology contributes

[24] McKey, *Repositioning Neuroaesthetics,* 32.
[25] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1-10.
[26] Salah and Salah, "Technoscience Art," 151.

to the philosophical view of the human entity as an assemblage of the natural and the cultural, without a hierarchical relation between the two.

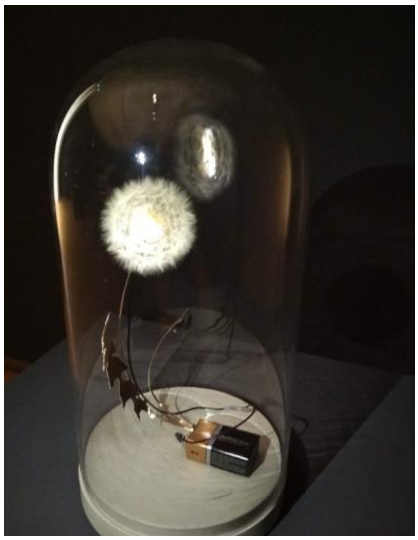


Figure 2: Studio Drift, "Dandlelight," battery, wires, glass, LED lightbulb, real dandelion seeds, 2017. Installation view: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2018. Photo: Alicja Serafin-Pospiech.

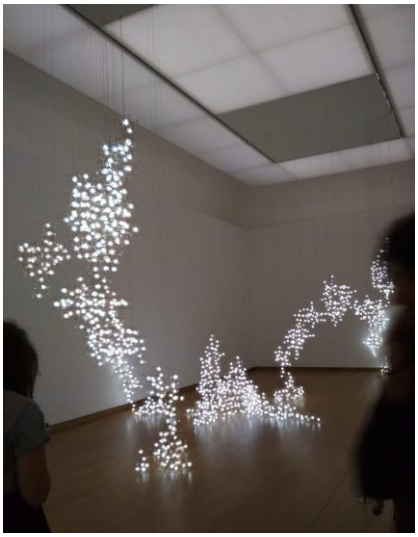


Figure 3: Studio Drift, "Fragile Future," phosphorusbronze, LED's, real Dandelion seeds, 2018. Installation view: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2018. Photo: Alicja Serafin-Pospiech.

Unconscious and conscious

The "Tree of Tenere" (fig. 4) is another Studio Drift artwork addressing the relationship between nature and humanity. It takes the form of a tree with leaves made out of LED lights, equipped with sensors and connected to a programmed electronic controller. According to the artists, the sensors react to the audience's presence, and software adjusts the colours of the leaves accordingly.[27] "Tree of Tenere" was shown both at the Stedelijk Museum (fig. 4) as well as at the Burning Man festival, where viewers actively engaged with it: they climbed the tree and sat on its branches. This shows that there is a relationship between the artwork and the viewer on the material level—the viewer's body becomes part of the creation. If the viewer's body is an actual part of the art, then it is important to think about

[27] Studio Drift, "Tree of Tenere."

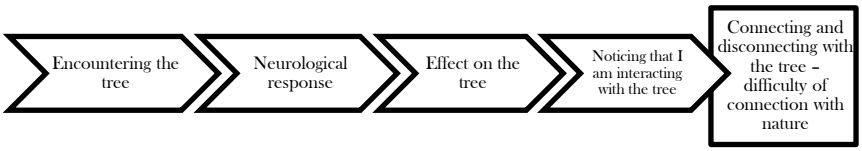
what the viewer's neural response might be. In "Technoscience Art: A Bridge Between Neuroesthetics and Art History?" Salah and Salah analyse AI-based artworks that tend to connect directly with the viewer without the need for fixed representation: the forms of these artworks change according to the viewer's interventions and, as in the "Tree of Tenere," unconscious reactions.[28] Technoscience art relies heavily on the connection between the object and the viewer, removing the presence and form of the work almost entirely. In this way, technoscience art abolishes the "necessity of representation."[29] Studio Drift's artworks function on two levels: they are representational, and they rely on a connection between the object and the viewer. That is why visual analysis of these artworks is still important. Considering the viewer and their reaction to the art is a further step in this analysis. The art of technoscience, according to Salah and Salah is to create a "new interface" made out of neurons.[30] That is exactly what "Tree of Tenere" does when viewers' unconscious and conscious reactions interfere with the object. The artistic medium of "Tree of Tenere" are the neurons of the viewer's brain, like paint and brushes in the act of painting.

Figure 4: Studio Drift, "Tree of Tenere," steel, aluminium, fibers tube, hand-sculpted polyester, paint, plastics, LEDs and embedded electronics. Installation view: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2018. Photo: Alicja Serafin-Pospiech.

This artwork by Studio Drift treats the problem of combining culture and nature from a different angle. "Tree of Tenere" shows that the relationship between the body and the mind is also a matter of what is regarded as conscious and unconscious action, and how those notions stand in the hierarchy of things in contemporary philosophy. The unconscious neural process is especially awakened when the viewer encounters "Tree of Tenere," and it is the neurological response of the viewer that completes the artwork. In

[28] Salah and Salah, "Technoscience Art," 151.
[29] *Id.*, 153-54.
[30] *Id.*, 151.

this way, the neurological response—the viewer's indirect and direct memory—creates the artwork itself.



With "Tree of Tenere," Studio Drift aim to show that humans have a connection with nature on the basic biological level. The viewer's body connects to the program before any conscious, cultural interpretation is formed in the mind. But in "Tree of Tenere," this connection needs to be re-established through an algorithm and technology, which belong to the realm of human-made objects. The connection or disruption in this connection becomes the main point of understanding. The need for connection with nature is always present, as the human is not separate from nature. The technology here, thus, can be seen on two levels: as something that disrupts our connection with nature and as a requirement for establishing it in the first place.

As Sally McKey points out, the unconscious, sensual and emotional are often seen as connected to nature.[31] A reaction that is biological and spontaneous escapes from the control of the human mind, belonging to the realm of ephemeral reactions that quickly move to intellectual interpretation. In "Three of Tenere," the observer's unconscious reaction is provoked without their control. The viewer attempts to regain this control, while being confronted with the algorithm-based process behind the changing light. The connotations of one's life being subjected to forces outside of one's conscious, rational and intellectual control come to light. The artwork reminds humans that they are, in fact, biological beings connected to the natural world, and in this, not entirely in control of their environment.

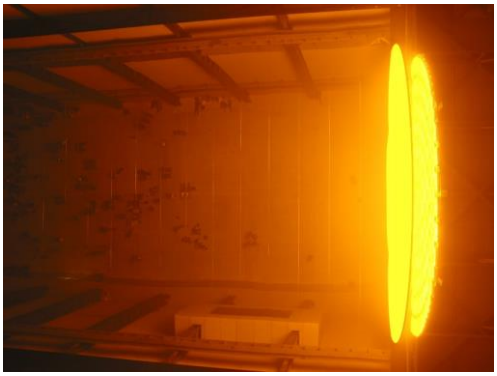
[31] McKey, *Repositioning Neuroaesthetics*, 53.

Representing nature and human influence

Studio Drift's "Tree of Tenere" is also a commentary on humanity's influence over the natural world. Humanity influences the natural world not only through rational thought—such as by creating technologies that pollute the Earth—but also through sensory reactions originating within our bodies. This means that our presence in the world already makes an impact on it, no matter if we try to control ourselves or not. As viewers learn how they interact with "Tree of Tenere," they try to change their actions and give them a rational direction. The first step to changing humanity's impact on nature is to gain knowledge about this impact. Only then is it possible to redirect human activities towards reducing potential damage to nature, and even to create positive outcomes out of humanity's impact on nature.

While technology becomes a necessity in Studio Drift's works, Olafur Eliasson masks the technical part of his creations. In Eliasson's famous work "The weather project" (figs. 5, 6), which was exhibited at London's Tate Modern Gallery in 2003, he confronts the audience with the sun. Through clever manipulation of space, he manages to transform the gallery space into a sun-filled dessert. Fog filling the room scatters light radiating from a large, semi-circular yellow lamp hanging from the ceiling, which is covered in mirrors. These mirrors reflect the audience, which appears to be comprised of small, dark, barely recognisable figures. The light overwhelms the hall, changing its range of ambient colours and creating an effect of high contrast.

Eliasson uses this same strategy in "Din blinde passager" (2010) (Figs. 7, 8, 9), but this second work immerses the viewer completely in the changing colours of fog. The boundaries of space seem to disappear, and the audience is left alone, without guidance from the artist. The immersed viewer sees only the lights and fog, moving through the makeshift corridor without a sense of direction.




Figures 5, 6: Olafur Eliasson, "The weather project," 2003, Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding. Installation view: Tate Modern, London, 2003; Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles © Olafur Eliasson.


Figures 7, 8: Olafur Eliasson, "Din blinde passager," 2010, Fluorescent lamps, monofrequency lamps (yellow), fog machine, ventilator, wood, aluminium, steel, fabric, plastic sheet. Installation view: Tate Modern, London; photo: Anders Sune Berg; Courtesy of the artist; Andersen's Contemporary, Copenhagen; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles © Olafur Eliasson.

Both of these creations focus on recreating nature through more than just visuals: the viewer's body itself becomes the vessel of meaning. The audience's reactions and movements become part of the artworks. If we look at the artworks from the perspective of Freedberg's methodology, the scheme below represents the process of the viewer's encounter:

The direct memory is feeling the warmth of the sun on the skin, like the heat of a summer day, recalling the sensation of "heat." Ephemeral sensations are not the only topic of these creations; as they capture and recreate things as fleeting as weather phenomena, Eliasson's works create a new relationship between the viewer and the art. The immersed audience is not separate from the work. In fact, viewers are not only part of the work in that they interpret it,[32] but their bodies, moreover, are part of the real structure of the work. In this, actions of the body are intertwined with processes of the artwork's creation and, at the same time, interpretation.

Eliasson points out that we no longer evolve from the model to reality, but from model to model.[33] This changes the relationship between reality and representation as the old notions shift: representation is no longer the aim. Rather, the aim is the recreation of experience, through which meaning can be conveyed. When representation becomes more fleeting, the viewer's sensations hold the potential for "meaning" or interpretation. The importance of the viewer is embodied directly in "The weather project," as the members of the audience watch themselves interact with the artwork.

The experience of Eliasson's works takes place somewhere between the artwork and the viewer. The focus in these works, is on interaction and connection, not on the artwork or the viewers

[32] Poststructuralist philosophy puts the recipient's mind as the main source of the interpretation of the artwork.
[33] Eliasson, *Models are Real.*

themselves. In this way, recreating natural phenomena can bring the audience back to nature. Once again, this makes humankind one with nature, or in the case of Eliasson's creations, overpowered by nature. As the viewer looks for an exit from "Din blinde passager," a sensation of being lost in the fog becomes the initial basis for interpretation. The sense of powerlessness, of being overwhelmed, creates a separation between nature and humans. The viewer's experience becomes unpleasant and fearful, and a sense of danger is awakened. Reality and representation are not separate, Eliasson has pointed out, just as the viewer's sensations are real and convey connotations coming from indirect memory.[34] Eliasson's recreation of nature, therefore, is a way to confront the viewer with nature's power and show that humanity is actually fragile, once it finds itself in a relationship with nature.

Nature is also the subject of Lee Boroson's artwork "Lucky Storm" (fig. 9). Like Eliasson, Boroson aims to recreate ephemeral experiences by creating gallery installations mimicking nature. In his large-scale inflated sculptures, Boroson recreates different natural environments, providing the opportunity for the audience to enjoy the visuals of these environments. But like with Studio Drift's artworks, the mimetics are disrupted by the material and the technique. The materiality of Boroson's artworks contributes to their interpretation: while plastic represents destructive human influence on the natural world, the inflated objects are fragile like balloons, suggesting that humans could lose the miracles of nature at any moment. The process of interpretation here is similar to that explored in the analysis of Studio Drift's work, highlighting the fragility of our connection with nature, which is continuously lost and re-established during the encounter with the artworks.

Figure 9: Lee Boroson, "Lucky storm," Dimensions vary, Nylon, monofilament, stainless steel, hardware, blower, 2004, http://www.leeboroson.com/art/recent-projects/outer-limit.

[34] *Ibid.*

It should be noted that Latour's critique also acknowledges that although the complete separation of the biological and the cultural is a social construct rooted in modernity, a distinction between the two is necessary to identify the human ability to influence the environment.[35] If we do not distinguish ourselves from the natural world, we lose the tools to critique the actions we direct consciously and unconsciously towards the environment. If we look at the products of culture, following Couchot, as de facto objects of nature, every human action can be recognised as being a product of the natural world. In this way, technologies that destroy land and pollute water can be seen as extensions of the "natural." Studio Drift's hybrid forms represent this line of philosophical thought. In these forms, technology and nature merge with each other seamlessly, giving birth to new kinds of entities. As the artworks' enchanting beauty captures viewers in awe, the audience can forget about the dystopian reasoning behind the creations. What we actually look at when we encounter Studio Drift's art is the failure of humanity to change. Humanity's impact on the Earth is so far-reaching that human activity and human creations are inseparable from the natural world.

Communal experience

Explained through neuroaesthetic methods, the process of reception can be viewed as an individual experience. A sensory experience is the impression of one particular individual, making it seem inherently subjective. The artworks discussed above, also combine the knowledge of the viewers' reactions with the use of big spaces, occupying entire galleries. The viewer, then, is not separated from others in the audience. Just as these works blur the boundaries between object and viewer, they also create connections between individuals immersed in the gallery space. This is especially apparent in Eliasson's creations (fig. 10), in Studio Drift's "Shylight" (fig.1), and in Boroson's inflated caves and clouds (fig. 9), where we can experience the art as a collective body, united with the other viewers. The actions of one viewer heavily influence those of the others. When, as Eliasson puts it, "sensations become actions,"[36]

[35] Pollini, "Bruno Latour," 25-28.
[36] Cabañero and Mulet, "Spaces of Participation and Memory," 25-29.

one's sense of individuality becomes increasingly vague. The audience together experiences the space that the artist provides for them. The experience becomes communal. Photographs depicting the audiences of these works show that the gallery spaces are often occupied not by isolated individuals but by the audience as a group of people mimicking each other's movements and actions. The feeling of connection to the art is shared, and the audience forms a collective subject.[37] The transformation into this collective subject takes place in the gallery space.

Figure 10: Olafur Eliasson, "The weather project," 2003, Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding. Installation view: Tate Modern, London, 2003; Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles © Olafur Eliasson.

According to the findings of neuroscience, mimicking others is not necessary to create a connection between individuals. John Onians associates mimetic theory with the specific neurons in the body called mirror neurons. As Semeler points out, the

[37] This process takes place while the viewers encounter the objects at the museum, or the gallery. *Id.*, 26.

> neurons present in the premotor cortex demonstrate how we learn. Through imitative processes, even if we do not understand the meaning of the actions we carry out, or without performing any movement. When we observe someone performing any task, we activate in ourselves the same area of the cerebral cortex.[38]

From this perspective, seeing other members of the audience move around already creates an association in the individual's mind. Mimicking and simulating others' movements is not necessary to interpret the artworks in the same way as the other viewers. These insights provide a new way to look at neuroaesthetic experience: while processes of reception happen individually, the members of an audience influence each other.

This leads us to Freedberg's concept of memory as included in the process of reception. If experiencing art is a collective experience, the process of interchanging influence amongst viewers draws upon cultural memory while at the same time creating a new common cultural experience within the plural subject of the audience. McKey has called this kind of aesthetic experience taking place in the gallery a "performative assemblage," through which collective knowledge of all the actors is involved—both human and non-human (objects, viewers, gallery space)—emerges.[39] This approach shifts from examining a particular individual subject to examining the plural one consisting of different kinds of entities. This creates a model based on a network of connections between the viewer, the object, other members of the audience, and those members' social background and culturally influenced neural reactions.

Conclusion

The art objects analysed in this article represent a paradigm shift in contemporary views of nature and the natural. Since these objects merge what is natural and what is human-made, the distinction between natural phenomena and products of culture becomes diffuse. The artists not only mimic the aspects of nature observable

[38] Semeler, "Neuroaesthetics: Aesthetic," 297.
[39] McKey, *Repositioning Neuroaesthetics,* 78.

by the senses, but also try to enhance the human ability to comprehend nature by creating spaces that allow the viewer to experience different phenomena. Their artworks allow the audience to once again feel a connection with nature, even though these works are human-made objects. Neuroaesthetics explains the processes of this connection, bridging the cultural and biological and showing that the body's reactions to art bear some similarity to real experience. A viewer's connection with an artwork recreating nature becomes, to a degree, a connection with "real" nature itself. This is especially clear from the analysis of Studio Drift and Eliasson's immersive art, which identified mimetic strategy as recreating sensations, movements and emotions in the viewer. The artworks become only the first prompt to induce the feeling of being one with nature. Their form is important only within the function for the purpose of capturing the viewer's attention. The neuroaesthetic method conceptualises and captures the physicality of the connection between the viewer's body and the art object.

This poses questions about the relationship between humanity and nature. The artworks analysed in this article guide the viewer, positioned as a representative of humanity, to the sensation of something lost. Studio Drift points to the damage that we caused to the natural world in the modern era. Nature and its objects, for Studio Drift, are not things that we can mimic without a visible combination with technology. Nature, according to this view, is lost and unsalvageable, and we can only hold onto the memory of the natural world. Eliasson's creations shift the position of humanity, posing different notions. The human, in Eliasson's work, is small and lost, overpowered by natural phenomena. In both Studio Drift and Eliasson's approaches, we are included in nature and we are not seen as separate from each other. Products of culture are therefore inseparable from nature, and, as such, our analysis of them should not dispense with the findings of neuroscience and biology. These findings can lead art historical and visual culture researchers to more comprehensive interpretations.

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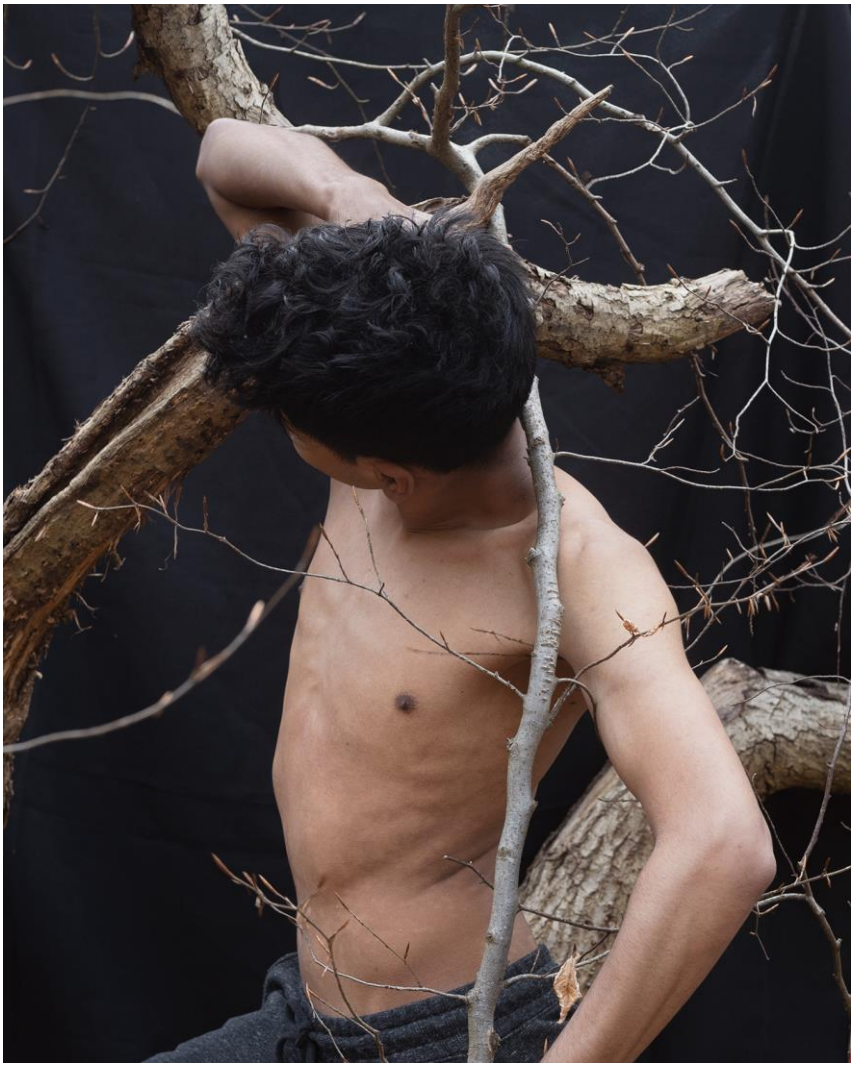
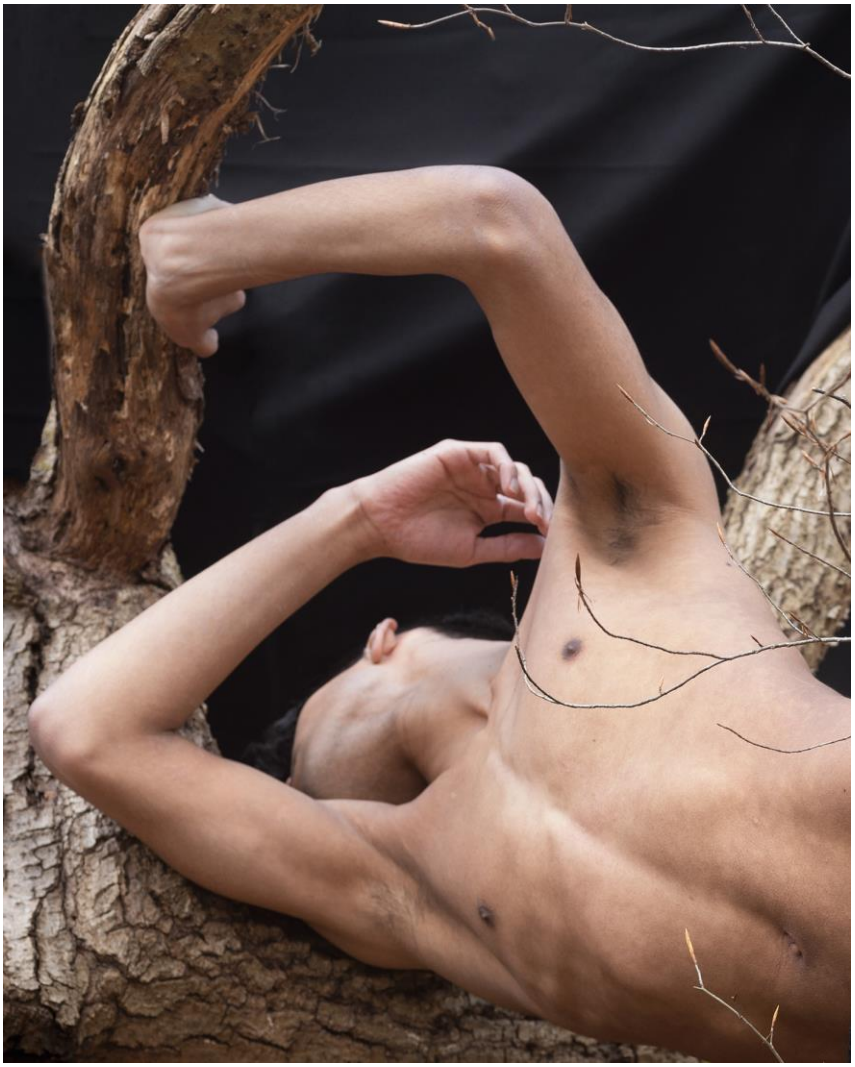
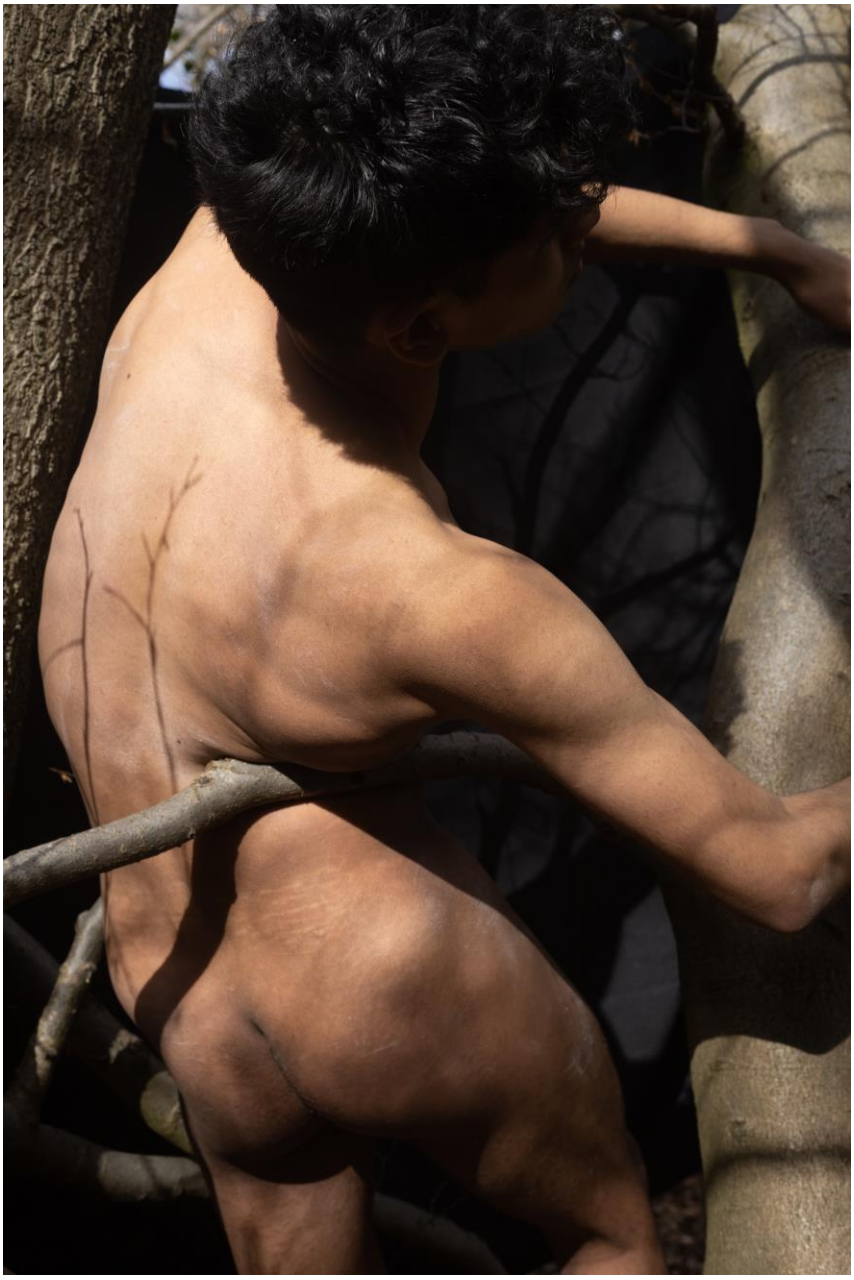
Mar Fu Qi

Through Wood and Wind, I Speak: Taking Nature as My Guidance to be Carried Away by the Tree's Language







Through Wood and Wind, I Speak: Taking Nature as My Guidance to be Carried Away by the Tree's Language is inspired by the spinning limbs and spiral turns of the muscle movements in the old master paintings from the Renaissance. Mar Fu Qi (marfuqi.com) explores the relationship between the body and self-identity and social identity. The body as a firm fleshy foundation and an elusive phenomenon at the same time. *Through Wood and Wind, I Speak* includes dynamic compositions, moving shadows and intertwined figures to portray the body as an unfinished, ongoing dialogue, like the eternal dance of twisted trees.

INTERVIEW

Nature: Less Pleasant, Less Pretty and Significantly Smellier than Often Thought

Nathalie Muffels and Angel Perazzetta

To academic all-rounder Dr Isabel Hoving, who has recently retired from her position as Associate Professor at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), working at a university goes beyond holding a particular function or tallying publication numbers. "Critical thinking," she says, "is not just a job that you do, but it's a very emotional, intense exploration of what it means to be human." Hoving's work is characterised by the theme of diversity, and she has long striven to create meaningful connections between the theoretical fields of interculturality, race, gender, sexuality and environmental critique. In her research, she does not limit herself to one medium, exploring the narratives and immersive experiences evoked both by literature and video games. For Hoving, storytelling is about weaving together voices, communities and connections. In addition to teaching and research, her career has included a variety of other pursuits: she writes crossover philosophical fantasy literature, she developed the game studies minor at Leiden University, and as the first Diversity Officer at Leiden University (and the very first academic Diversity Officer in the Netherlands), she actively worked to connect the too-often isolated domains of academic critical reflection and university policymaking. Just before she was to round off her 44-year teaching career—on what was officially her last day, to be exact—we sat down with Isabel for a conversation on the ways in which research in the humanities can comment on, problematise and offer new approaches to thinking about the environmental crisis.

In your publications over the years, your focus has shifted slightly, moving from postcolonial theory, Caribbean literature, globalisation and interculturality to the environmental humanities. How did this development come about in your research?

Coming from postcolonial studies, I noticed a blind spot there. That was not my own discovery, of course: a lot of people that were working in postcolonial studies were slowly moving into environmental humanities and starting to talk about climate change and the Anthropocene. That fascinated me. In postcolonial studies, we have mostly focused on human relations, society, power relations and cultural issues. But what we didn't focus on, as humanities scholars, was that colonisation was very much about the appropriation and exploitation of the environment as well. Colonisation was really destructive for many environments. New kinds of ecosystems were created in colonized territories, because the land was only seen as a site for production, within a global economic system—which is completely reductive, of course. The destruction of the environment, in many cases, went hand-in-hand with the disappearance of local cultures, whose relationships with the land were disrupted.

The destruction of the environment is not just the disappearance of local culture, but it is especially very directly related to issues like poverty and hunger—very concrete things that have nothing to do with symbolic dimensions. These dynamics weren't always so present in the eyes of so many postcolonial scholars in the humanities, especially not metropolitan scholars. That blind spot was what drew me in, and now we can understand that process of environmental destruction in colonised territories as an early example of what is now happening on a global scale: the climate crisis itself. In the colonial project, everything is connected: material and environmental dimensions are tied together with the disappearance of cultures and the exploitation of colonised people.

But there's also another, more philosophical aspect there, related to a posthumanist approach. Before, postcolonial studies focused on the postcolonial subject and led its investigations by prioritising identity issues. Therefore, it was on the one hand a psychological approach, while on the other hand power issues were

analysed too, because there has always been a strong Marxist background in postcolonial studies. But now it has become apparent that, perhaps, these approaches are no longer adequate to analyse the state the world is in now, in the postcolonial era, an era of globalisation, which some argue is better described as *neo*colonial, rather than *post*colonial.

Why do you think this is an important development?

We need to think about a new way to theorise human identity, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argued in 2012.[1] It is in this context that the notion of the Anthropocene popped up. An individualist and psychological approach cannot singlehandedly analyse the (destructive) presence of humanity in the world. Instead, you have to see humanity as a geological force that is shaping and influencing the climate, and in this, the functioning of the global system. This line of thinking became more prominent in the 2010s, but we still see it today. The newspapers are filled with it, warning that perhaps we cannot save the planet, that we will not make it.

So this is the kind of thinking that is so relevant, and that is getting more attention only now, which is a little bit late. Well, that's not true. Because, of course, this kind of thinking was there already decades ago, especially in the work of scholars in the Global South. So, although this kind of thinking started gaining steam some decades ago, it wasn't prominent until recently. At first there was no connection with the political world, and it did not inspire the same sense of urgency it does today. A lot has changed.

The blind spot that was there has been very risky, and perhaps we should have been able to see that earlier. We should have at least listened to those who saw that earlier. In hindsight, we should have connected to other scholars from other disciplines at an earlier stage.

And, instead, when did this connection really start happening?

A lot of people were doing it already, of course. In the Caribbean, people have long been writing about what has been happening to the

[1] Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies," 1–18.

environment, because it was so visible there—it was impossible to ignore it. It's the metropolitan scholars that didn't really see it so much. I would say that the publication of Chakrabarty's essay was really kind of momentous for me. When I was working on my PhD, my field was Caribbean literature. While doing my research I noticed that there was so much writing about nature, the environment and gardens. I felt there was something deeper there—that these images were not simply there to portray a kind of local setting, let alone an "exotic" setting. They were connected to identity issues, to poverty and also to culture. And these references played an incredibly important role in rethinking a lot of issues that have to do with colonialism, and to rethink gender, definitions of gender identity and racial identity.

"I think that the term nature has been abused for a lot of purposes."

To most people, the word "nature" calls up images plucked from documentaries, such as forests, trees, coral reefs and so on; this is quite different from the perspective you sketched out just now. In which ways do you wish the idea of nature could be problematised or challenged for a broader public?

In the first place, I think that the term nature has been abused for a lot of purposes. It is used to naturalise a lot of ideologies shaping the assumptions that we have about what the world should look like. And I think it's very illuminating to see how the word "nature" (and the idea of the "natural" in general) is abused to defend some very narrow, ideologically determined ideas about gender, sexuality and race. Very often, in mainstream discourses, you find the idea that there are certain natural sexual behaviours. However, these so-called natural sexual behaviours *just so* happen to coincide with a very, narrow, metropolitan, Euro-American idea of what sexual behaviour should be in our patriarchal and heteronormative, capitalist and neoliberal society. Our culture has a very clear idea of what natural sexual behaviour should be: it should be monogamous, it should involve a man and a woman of approximately the same age, and they should be able to procreate together. That is, supposedly, what is

healthy and normal. The purpose of sexuality, supposedly, is propagation, and in a healthy environment reproduction is prioritised.

It is, of course, absolute nonsense to say that this has anything to do with what's happening in nature! There are so many studies that show how wonderfully varied sexual, affective and parenting behaviour is in animals. It is mind-blowing—animals are up to all kinds of things, and there's no "logic" to it. A lot of what they do couldn't possibly be described as heterosexual, or homosexual for that matter. Plants, too, have been described by scientists relying on a heteronormative discourse, but plants are in fact mostly hermaphroditic. So you can't say there are male and female plants. Our human terms just fall short, because they are based on a certain ideology that goes way back and was influenced by, for example, religion and the capitalist system. This ideology has nothing to do with what sexuality actually is, in all its real-life variety.

Queer environmentalism is the field that takes a look at these kinds of ideologies, and one of the most important insights it has to offer is that, ultimately, life is no more important than death and rot. Our ideas of nature include things like the sunset, a beautiful landscape and colourful flowers. Rot seems like it should not be a part of nature. But if you don't have rot, you cannot support life. Nature isn't pleasant, and it isn't pretty, as Timothy Morton says. There's a lot of mud and insects and decay and smelly stuff going on.

Do you think part of the reason people don't want to accept climate change is that it would mean accepting a discourse about nature that is not ideologically preferred?

That's a very interesting question. And there are so many sides to it. First, yes, a lot of people indeed have a lot of trouble coming to terms with the destruction of the environment. This is not surprising, anyway. They don't really want to think about the fact that they might be affected. What you have is a kind of exaggerated response: "the apocalypse is upon us!" Those kinds of imaginations seem apocalyptical and very extreme, but they are also very reassuring. In many disaster films and novels, everything is

destroyed. The world as we know it disappears. A common response to this scenario is to reason that, once everything is destroyed, the world is better off, because Mother Nature is certainly able to survive without us.

There's a gender dimension to this: we are like wicked children, and Mother Nature will take care of our messes. She will clean up everything again. And then we'll be pristine and our misdeeds will not have happened. I think this apocalyptic imagination is a disgusting and immature attempt to evade responsibility. If Mother Nature takes over, then your guilt is no longer there. These kinds of imaginations are what I think we should criticise, because the reality is that there will be no clean, neat ending to everything. No, we will live on and on with the atrocious effects of what we're doing now.

"Whatever happens to our surroundings also happens to us, because we are in open connection to the world. The world is entering through our pores incessantly."

The other thing that I wanted to say is that there are different kinds of destruction. Rot and decay and death are very important parts of life. If you want to live your life, you have to deal with them and acknowledge them as part of the cycle of life. And it's important to realise that that's inevitable, and that it's also a good thing. It's important that you should try to understand what mortality and decay mean, both your own and those of the people around you.

But what you're asking about is something else. And this kind of human-caused destruction is not inevitable—it need not be a part of the cycle of life. Anna Volkmar just published her dissertation on how human beings deal with nuclear waste,[2] because that's one of the wicked problems, of course. Many people see nuclear energy as a very good solution to the climate crisis. But radioactive waste is a huge problem, one that stays dangerous for millennia—it doesn't just go away. This is the kind of decay and destruction that is the most difficult to accept, because it's not part of what we can deal with. These threats don't exist on the same time scale as human lifespans.

[2] Volkmar, *Art and Nuclear Power.*

In this context, I think it is important to take responsibility, to *stay with the trouble*,[3] as Volkmar says in the wake of Donna Haraway, to face the huge danger that was created. That's a huge challenge for the humanities, because all of the imaginations that are currently available are somehow insufficient—they don't do the job. We have to do better.

What concepts do you think could help develop more responsible imaginations?

The kind of imagination that we are stuck with—and which has been very reassuring—is the idea that we, as human beings, are somehow outside of nature. Nature is seen as scenery, as something you visit in your spare time, on holiday or on a hike. I think we have to find a different way to imagine humanity. We are intertwined with everything, whether we call it nature, the environment, or—as the Caribbean scholar and writer Édouard Glissant calls it—surroundings.[4] At the end of the day, that's the place where we live, and that's the space that we are part of. Whatever happens to our surroundings also happens to us, because we are in open connection to the world. The world is entering through our pores incessantly. *Viscous porosity* is a wonderful term that I read in an essay about Hurricane Katrina by Nancy Tuana.[5] It highlights how we have a continuous openness to the world and everything it contains, whether that be toxic fumes, microplastics, electromagnetic radiation, or even bodily emissions. We are porous to each other. We are part of whatever is in our surroundings. It will find its way into our bodies. I think that this line of thought, explored by people

[3] Philosopher and ecofeminism theorist Donna Haraway coined the phrase "staying with the trouble" in her book of the same name (2016) to reimagine our relationship with the future and the future of Earth. She proposes to move past the epoch of the Anthropocene towards the Chthulucene, a new epoch that offers a "timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2). According to Haraway, "[s]taying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1).

[4] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 151.

[5] Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," 188–213.

like Nancy Tuana, Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, is incredibly powerful. It's a way to grope for a new imagination. Can you imagine what stories, films and video games playing with this idea would be like? Instead of the happy, unproblematic narrative of picturesque nature, they could grapple with a nature that is toxic but also beautiful—in a weird, dark, queer sense.

You mentioned video games, a medium you are very passionate about. How do you think video games can contribute to the issues we have been discussing?

I am proud to say that I have designed the video games minor here at Leiden University. It's unique because it's the only Dutch programme approaching the medium from a cultural analysis perspective. I think we really have to deal with this medium, because it is so effective at creating very intense experiences. Video games speak to the condition of the twenty-first century in a way that no other medium can. They are a digital medium and we live in a digital age. This medium helps us to think through what it means to live in a digital society and to be digital subjects ourselves. More and more, we are living on the screen and through the screen. So video games offer valuable insights into questions like "who am I—not just as a person sitting in front of the screen, but also as someone who interacts *with* the screen?" Video games evoke feelings of power but also create space to roleplay with all aspects of one's identity: you can place yourself in apocalyptic environments, for example, but also play out environmentalists' scripts, dealing with nature (surroundings or the environment) in different ways.

Besides, video games are a wonderful medium to critically reflect on what it means to be critical. It's a very self-reflective medium: so many games reflect on what the medium of games actually is, just like novels and films are always partly exploring their own media.

This relates to what I said earlier about being part of the environment. Yes, we have to understand what it means to be in an open, viscous connection with an environment that we see as natural. But we also need to understand what it means to be in an open connection with a technological environment—and this is what

video games allow us to do. These two levels are not disconnected: they are part of the same posthuman way of thinking, asking questions about what subjectivity means and what being connected with the broader technological *and* natural world means.

As we established, nature is sometimes unpleasant. It is not "other" than human beings, and it is queerer and weirder than we often imagine. Going forward, what do you think might be a fruitful way to think about what nature essentially is*?*

As I mentioned earlier, we tend to think of nature as a place. But I think it's much more productive to think about nature as a certain type of process. Nature grows and develops itself at different paces and at different scales, both spatially and temporally. The processes that you find in human society, or in technology, happen on a different timescale. In this sense, nature is not a space outside of technology. Nature is just another temporal or spatial process than technology is. If you want to think through what it means to be a human being in our surroundings, you have to realise that these surroundings don't consist of spatially different spheres, but of processes that all follow their own logic. So there's a diversity, a plurality of processes; plants are part of it, bacteria are part of it, but technology is part of it, too. And if you look at all these systems, you could analyse them as systems of information transfer. That is a way to describe bodies—plant bodies, the soil, animal bodies, but also computers and technology. Those are all systems of information transfer. There is no basic difference between one and the other. So we need to think about nature (or the environment, or surroundings) as an intertwining of everything that can be analysed as different systems of information transfer. Nature is not something that is completely outside human nature or technology.

This is a posthumanist approach. And it's very interesting to realise that the way we think about ourselves as human beings is defined by the technology of our age, as Frans van Lunteren showed.[6] In the eighteenth century, we thought about ourselves as clockwork. In the nineteenth century, when the steam engine was

[6] Van Lunteren, "Clocks to Computers," 762–776.

the dominant technology, we started to think about ourselves as steam engines—take Freud and his idea that emotions are suppressed and need a way out. By relying on dominant technologies as explanatory mechanisms, you inevitably come up with theories that will sound outdated at a later time. All of this stuff about information transfer will sound ridiculous a hundred years from now, if we live to see it.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Tom Breedveld kindly assisted in the preparation of the interview.

In honour of Isabel Hoving's academic achievements, this interview is accompanied by a supplementary video in which our conversation continues. Taking a more personal turn, we ask her to briefly reflect on her academic career as she looks ahead to retirement. To watch the video, please visit the YouTube channel Leiden University—Faculty of Humanities. The video was created by Nathalie Muffels, Angel Perazzetta and Tom Breedveld in collaboration with Thomas Vorisek (Expertise Centre for Online Learning), who kindly handled filming and editing.

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Will Boase

The Weight of the World

In Will Boase's (willboase.com) *The Weight of the World,* colossal physical forms are designed using prior events to predict the future, and with time our perception of the natural shifts, until everything is the result of a calculation. Nothing may occupy space without a purpose, no space may be left empty without a reason. Our domination of nature is complete, the landscape is transformed into a machine for the protection and benefit of humanity. But variables change and algorithms reveal their limitations, and the balance shifts. Suddenly we are small, and the landscape is vast.

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Joris van den Einden is a Dutch photographer and filmmaker, based in The Hague. His work focuses on a reflective and critical practice of making-visible; what does it really mean to "capture" an image? What does a photograph reveal, and what does it conceal? Alongside this, his work tends to engage in the rethinking of humankind's relations to the world around us. In film, Joris translates everyday affective experiences and confrontations into carefully written, shot and edited moving images. His video works are reminiscent of practices of diary-writing and meditation.

Anthony T. Albright is a writer and editor in Utrecht. In addition, he is a tutor in the Department of Humanities at Erasmus University College in Rotterdam.

Coco Swaan is a student at the University of Leiden, where she is currently writing her thesis for the English track of the Literary Studies Master. Before coming to Leiden, she took her Bachelor at the University of Amsterdam. Her academic interests lean towards speculative fiction genres like fantasy and horror, as well as to other forms of media, like TRPGs, computer games and—currently—

narrative podcasts. She often analyse these works through the lens of Materialist or Marxist theory. Last summer participated in Dr E. J. van Leeuwen's art installation during the exhibition *If Things Grow Wrong* at the Lakenhal Museum. In the future, she hopes to be involved in similar projects combining artistic expressions and academic critique.

Nathalie Muffels is a (Research) Master student in Literary Studies and Philosophy at Leiden University. She is interested in animal studies and ecocriticism, and her research currently focuses on interspecies relationships. She combines her academic research with a job at the Expertise Centre for Online Learning (ECOLe), where she works in teaching support and maintenance for the digital learning environment, and she assists in the development and implementation of several teaching innovation projects, also at Leiden University.

Alicja Serafin-Pospiech is a Master student in the Arts and Culture program at Leiden University specializing in Museums and Collections. She's currently writing a thesis about Dutch exhibitions held in the Polish People's Republic, focusing on the influence of countries' policies on cultural exchange. Her recent interest also involves the application of neuroaesthetics in art history studies and the practical and ethical aspects of using data analysis and information technology in heritage research. Privately she works as a database administrator in the foundation for the homeless and socially vulnerable people in the Netherlands.

Mar Fu Qi is a Dutch/Chinese visual artist who studies Photography at Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. Her practice embodies photography, film, text and performance, that explores themes such as cultural identity and human interaction in the digital modern world. She is currently following an exchange semester at London College of Communication.

Will Boase works as a freelance photographer specialising in architectural and public health stories. For much of his career he has been based in Kampala, Uganda, though he is presently enrolled

on the Photography and Society Master course at the Royal Academy in Den Haag. He remains a regular collaborator with the Uganda Press Photo Award (UPPA), for whom he teaches and mentors. He also works as a commercial proof-reader and copywriter for clients across the commercial and humanitarian sectors.

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