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How does the conceptual distinction between “nature” and “culture,” so typical of modernity, inform the perception of limits in artistic practice and visual culture? *Animism* interrogates two key processes in aesthetics—animation and conservation, movement and stasis—against the backdrop of the anthropological term “animism” and its historical implications. For what is mere fiction in modern aesthetics, for so-called “animist practices” is actual relations. What is commonly referred to as the most “fictional” of imaginary productions—the animated universes of film, the effect of the “life-like” in artistic objects and images, the creation of fantastic worlds in which objects are alive and things can speak—then assumes a sudden “documentary” value, by way of which the question of “relationality,” which also played a significant role in recent art history, can assume a new qualitative dimension.

This project had begun to take shape in Antwerp in 2006. The ongoing discussions were extended to Bern, Vienna, and Berlin, places where subsequent versions of the exhibition will be hosted in the course of the next few years—one building upon the other. It is the result of a collaborative effort between artists, writers, curators, and institutions. It was shaped through other projects, exhibitions, and collaborations, and many have given us the opportunity to further discuss the issues at stake in artistic and academic contexts during the process of the development. We wish to thank all of those for the imprint they left on the project.

The present publication accompanies the exhibition in Antwerp and Bern. The publication does not document the exhibition, but rather translates it into the medium of a book. It seeks to lay a foundation from which further questions can be asked. It shifts between different registers and vocabularies, mainly, aesthetics and anthropology. The vast majority of the contributions have been conceived in response to the project, complemented by first-time translations of relevant texts.

We’d like to thank all artists, authors, organizers, and collaborators. We’d also like to thank Sternberg Press, the translators and copy editors, and the graphic design studio NODE Berlin Oslo.

—The Curatorial Team
For most people who are still familiar with the term “animism” and hear it in the context of an exhibition, the word may bring to mind images of fetishes, totems, representations of a spirit-populated nature, tribal art, pre-modern rituals, and savagery. These images have forever left their imprint on the term. The expectations they trigger, however, are not what this project concerns. Animism doesn’t exhibit or discuss artifacts of cultural practices considered animist. Instead, it uses the term and its baggage as an optical device, a mirror in which the particular way modernity conceptualizes, implements, and transgresses boundaries can come into view.

The project interrogates the organization of these boundaries through images, attempting to fill the space of a particular imaginary and phantasy within the dominant aesthetic economy with a concurrent historical reality. It does so because an exhibition about animism that upholds a direct signifying relation to its subject is doubly impossible: Animism is a practice of relating to entities in the environment, and as such, these relations cannot be exhibited; they resist objectification. Putting artifacts in the place of the practice gives rise to a different problem: Whatever way an object may have been animated in its original context, it ceases to be so in the confines of a museum and exhibition framework by means of a dialectical reversal inscribed into these institutions, which de-animates animate entities and animates “dead” objects. Instead, this exhibition attempts to imagine what a quasi-anthropological museum of the modern boundary practices might look like. The exhibition sees animism as node, a knot that, when untied, will help unpack the “riddle of modernity” in new ways, helping us to understand modernity as a mode of classifying and mapping the world by means of partitions, by a series of “Great Divides.”

The cultural particularity of modernity derives from the naturalization of these divisions and separations; that is, from their appearance as distinctions a priori—as if natural and outside history—which pervade all levels of symbolic production, with far-reaching effects on aesthetics and language. The positivism of the modern description of the world relies on the imagination of a negative, which is the result of the same divisions, and becomes equally naturalized. It was through the idea of animism that modernity conceived a good part of this negative, condensing that imagination in one term. Of particular importance for our project is to see this imaginary not merely as a fiction, but also a fiction made real.

Animism is a term coined by nineteenth-century social scientists, particularly the anthropologist Edward Tylor, who aimed to articulate a theory on the origins of religion, and found it in what was to him the...
The colonialist connotations of the term have led some to suggest that we abandon it once and for all. This has been necessary for emerging and important African writers. Présence Africaine’s publications signaled the death of the statue described into an evolutionary scheme from the primitive to the civilized, and classify, we find a gap marked by colonial subjugation, appropriation, and misrecognition. The practices at stake are ones that need to be understood independently of their description by anthropologists, although the two have, of course, become historically entangled. There is also a “new animism,” which proclaims to have come closer to the realities of the cultures in question, which seeks to take “animist” cultural practices seriously (and often struggles to come to terms with the enduring assumptions underlying the old), considering forms of relational knowledge, and, above all, practices different from those predominant in modernity. This distinction between “old” animism and “new” animism, between the animism Western anthropologists conceptualized and what they referred to, is mirrored in the relation of so-called indigenous societies to the term: While many resent the use of the term for its colonial connotations and accusations of savagery, it is also increasingly utilized in political struggles of indigenous groups within the political structures inherited from colonial modernity.

And on yet another register, there is the animism within modernity’s image culture, as an aesthetic economy, and a way of imagining, which gives expression to collective desires and articulates monosensical schemes, determining the possibilities of recognizing other subjectivities, and how life processes can be conceptualized. On this plane, it is important to distinguish between an economy of images that is a symptomatic reaction to the effects of modernity, a compensatory displacement and transgression of the boundaries and fragmentation modernity inflicts, and the critical reflection of those very borders in art. As this distinction can never be absolute, it must remain in question and permanently renewed. Throughout the book and the exhibition it accompanies, these different dimensions are put under scrutiny.

For the moderns, animism is a focal point where all differences are conflated. This conflation makes for the negativity of animism, which therefore breeds powerful images and anxieties: the absorption of differences.
What Makes Modernity Modern?

What does it mean to be modern? A categorical distinction between nature and society, social scientists generally assume. Only they differentiate between facts, the universal laws of nature and matter, and the subsequent purification of each domain (by way of objectification), Latour asserts, makes moderns “see double.” Every modern must take sides, and perceive the world either from the side of the object (where everything is fact), or of the subject (were everything is “made,” constructed), either from nature with its determinate, indisputable, and eternal laws (to which science provides access), or from the society of social agents who can construct their world freely (in politics and culture); but each perspective sees the two domains of nature and culture as absolutely separate, from mutually exclusive points of view that one can not occupy at the same time without falling “back” into animism and an archaic past. The modern idea of animism must appear then as a necessary result springing from the separation between nature and culture, as a category that allowed the moderns to name those who did not make the same distinction, those who assigned social roles to non-human things, and as a category that made them imagine the collapse of the boundaries they had installed.

In his several books that engage with the modern divide between nature and culture, Bruno Latour describes the historical scenarios that can serve as a backdrop scenography to our understanding of the role of animism in the constitution of modernity. The bifurcation of nature and culture, and the subsequent purification of each domain (by way of objectification), Latour asserts, makes moderns “see double.” Every modern must take sides, and perceive the world either from the side of the object (where everything is fact), or of the subject (were everything is “made,” constructed), either from nature with its determinate, indisputable, and eternal laws (to which science provides access), or from the society of social agents who can construct their world freely (in politics and culture); but each perspective sees the two domains of nature and culture as absolutely separate, from mutually exclusive points of view that one can not occupy at the same time without falling “back” into animism and an archaic past. The modern idea of animism must appear then as a necessary result springing from the separation between nature and culture, as a category that allowed the moderns to name those who did not make the same distinction, those who assigned social roles to non-human things, and as a category that made them imagine the collapse of the boundaries they had installed.

For Them, Nature and Society, signs and things, are virtually co-extensive. For Us they should never be. Even though we might still recognize in our own societies some fuzzy areas in madness, children, animals, popular culture and women’s bodies (Donna Haraway), we believe our duty is to extirpate ourselves from those horrible mixtures.1

It is this extirpation, the ongoing separation and “purification” of the two domains of subjects and objects, that characterizes the process and progress of modernization as such, which received its canonical formulation by the thinkers of the Enlightenment and the positivist, rationalist sciences. “[T]he Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow phantasy with knowledge,” write Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectics of Enlight-
The Great Divide

The Great Divide is what separates modern and premodern societies, positing civilization on one side of the abyss, and the primitive and archaic on the other.

In order to understand the Great Divide between Us and Them we have to go back to that other Great Divide between humans and nonhumans [...]. In effect, the first is the exportation of the second.¹

That the internal (nature / culture) and the external (modern/pre-modern) Great Divide were mirroring each other would also mean that they were upheld by largely the same techniques: The people who found themselves on the other side of the external Great Divide would be subject to the same protocols of objectification as a nature rendered objective in the laboratory. The resulting quest for symmetry is what gave birth to modern anthropology, which had to qualify itself within the ruling milieu of the rationalist, positivistic sciences. Tylor’s conception of animism therefore was firmly based in an objectivist rationalism: Since the people and culture in question did not make the same categorical distinction between nature and culture, since they treated objects as if they possessed the capacity for perception, communication, and agency, Tylor could conceive of animism as a “belief,” as an epistemological error, and could locate his primitive “origin” of religion there. Nonetheless, there needed to be a supplement, since the cultures in question were still human, which meant they could not be objectified in similar ways to objects of nature. Since Western ontology itself and its dualism were far from being in question at this point, however, the cultures on the other side of the Great Divide had to be inscribed into an evolutionary scheme; they had to become “pre-modern.” Thus, Tylor located his animists among the “lower races,” and “savages.” But this evolutionary scheme was not his invention; the “backwardness” of non-modern cultures had been a common conception as early as the sixteenth century in the context of the emergence of Western modernity and mercantilist capitalism. All that Tylor did was clothe it in a scientific, objectivist narrative. Animism was thus progressively inscribed in a set of imaginary oppositions that enforced and legitimized Western imperial modernity, constituting a spatial-geographic “outside,” and a primitive, evolutionary “past.”

Animism, much like the category of the “primitive,” was thus not so much a description of a social order of a past archaic or present primitive form of culture, but an expression of the need and desire to find them. The modern conception of animism says much less about those it presumably described objectively, than about modernity and the distinctions that uphold its cosmography. Animism and the primitive were much sought for mirrors, by means of which modernity could affirm itself in the image of alterity. In the heyday of European colonialism, the invention of a non-existent unity of the animist primitive along an imaginary historical arrow of progress constituted a key to legitimizing the actual subjugation of the colonized as much as it was necessary to provide the moderns with an image that could confirm their identity. It mattered little whether the denigration was reversed and instead idealized as a “paradise state of nature” (which can switch at any moment into the state of nature as the brutal struggle for survival beyond any social contracts), as compensation for the evils of modernity, or liberation from the constraints of civilization.

The Space of Death and the Theater of Negativity

As much as that image of animist primitives and their savagery unified the “rest” on the modern’s side of the Great Divide, it inflicted terror on those locked inside of it. Imaginary appropriation licensed real subjugation; the objectivist “tyranny of the signifier” that had enthroned enlightened reason would enact the savagery it had imputed to its Others. The flipside of the disenchanted, static, enlightened realm of objective facts is equally imaginary; that darkness as of yet untouched by the light of reason. The regime of positivist signification sees its opposite in

¹ Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 97.

“wildness,” just as the bifurcation of nature and culture finds its negation in animism. The result, in both cases, is the creation of a space of negativity. “Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol, the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents. Wildness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage. [...]

This space of death has a long and rich culture. It is where the social imagination has populated its metamorphosing images of evil and the underworld: in the Western tradition Homer, Virgil, the Bible, Dante, Hieronymos Bosch, the Inquisition, Rimbaud, Conrad’s heart of darkness; in northwest Amazonian tradition, zones of vision, communication between terrestrial and supernatural beings, putrefaction, death, rebirth, and genesis, perhaps in the rivers and land of maternal milk bathed eternally in the subtle green light of coca leaves. With European conquest and colonization, these spaces of death blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conqueror with that of the conquered. But the signifiers are strategically out of joint with what they signify. “If confusion is the sign of the times,” wrote Artaud, “I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation.”

In his seminal study of the rubber boom in the Putuyamo region in Amazonas, Taussig describes how, through the arrival of the colonial regime and capitalist exploitation, this imaginary death space was systematically turned into a reality. It is this passage from the imaginary to reality, the process through which images turn into operational maps by means of which we understand, rule and ultimately, create a world that this project, in seeking to explore the imaginary and the historicity of animism, must focus on.

In the death space created at the modern colonial frontier, the imagery (the social representations and the connections they uphold with the world) of the destroyed society and its cosmography fuses with the imagery of the conquering world, creating restless hybrids through which, in discontinuity, continuity and memory are preserved.

The imagery brought to the colonial space of death by the Europeans has its own distinct European genealogy. The extirpation of animisms in the colonial world was preceded by the extirpation of animisms within the West. The imagination of the death space has been shaped by the struggle for Christianization, by images of martyrdom and the experiences of the witch hunt and the Inquisition, which produced a “theater of negativity”, in which the European imaginary of evil was born. This theater would find ceaseless continuations in the Enlightenment and secular modernity, in the progressive exorcisms of all states of mind that resisted the Christian, and later, the modern discontinuity between humans and nature.

Within Europe, the division of the modern cosmography into an imaginary black and white, night and light, was enacted as a progressive frontier. The boundary of the modern world generated an imagery at its internal margins correlating to the colonial death space, but yet articulated in more familiar morphologies of the “night of the world” — what much later would become the “unconscious”. This space is populated by dismembered bodies, by fragmentation, scenarios of disintegration, and the like, providing a monstrous mirror to objectification, discipline, mechanistic fragmentation, and political terror. The unreal, delirious, diabolic night of darkness created by the empire of enlightened reason, however, was always also a space of transformation and transgressive fantasies, as Taussig describes in the work mentioned above; a space of heightened, even delirious animations and sensuous, mimetic ecstasies. Both aspects shaped the imaginary that would later find its conceptual expression in the concept of animism.

The Modern Boundary Replicated

The logic of the Great Divide would find another correlate in the exemplary institution of modernity, the asylum and psychiatry, and the fantasy of animism as the consolation of the modern distinctions would once again be a key accusation that sustained the power of the institutional machine. Michel Foucault wrote a history of this Great Divide, separating the normal from the pathological, reason from unreason in modernity. There are, in his exposé in the History of Madness, several clues to the working of the modern boundary regime. He attempts to write the history of madness starting from the point not of the later imaginary of indifference, but where madness and reason were still unseparated, where the experience of madness was not yet differentiated, not yet marked by a boundary that cut it off. He attempts to return to the gesture of partition, the caesura that creates the distance between reason and unreason in the first place, the original grip by which reason confined unreason in order to wrest its secrets, its truth, away from it.

We could write a history of limits—of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished, through which a culture rejects something which for it will be the exterior; and throughout its history, this hollowed out void, this white space by means of which it isolates itself, identifies it as clearly as its values. For these values are received, and maintained in the continuity of history; but in the region of which we could speak, it makes its essential choices, operating the division which gives a culture the face of its positivity.

What is most relevant in Foucault’s description for the present context is that there arises in it an explanation how the logic of partition creates the space of silence of an exchange being brought to a halt, that is being filled by the monological discourses and institutions congruent to the division; he asserts that these discourses and institutions are indeed the result of the primary partition, spanning and administering the very abyss that made them possible. The partition lines of the Great Divides, it seems, must be replicated on different scales without which their management and overall organization would not hold together: They must run through the interior of each subject, through the body, the family, the nation, through modern culture at large, and finally, through humankind. This replication on various scales helps us see more clearly that none of the scissions remain absolutely static; indeed, they must be
León Ferrari
L'Osservatore Romano, 2001-2007
Collages on paper
Courtesy the artist
negotiated and replicated permanently. Finally, their logic becomes implicit within the cognitive mapping of the world (“an obscure gesture,” which constitutes the positive and negative, the social implicit and the explicit), and in order to describe them without operating within their registers, one must return to the point before the scission, before the de-coupling of elements such as body and mind, subject and object, humans and nonhumans, reason and unreason in order to think their entanglement and unity. In this lies the potential significance of animism beyond its symptomatic, pathologized articulation as a transgressive phantasy where differences conflate. For there are, in the practices referred to as animist, indeed relations that constitute experiences of difference not marked by the proliferating Great Divides.

Foucault’s history of the separation that gave rise to the modern institution of psychiatry also entails an aspect relevant to the question of relationality and difference. The relation established by the modern discourses to the absolute differences they postulate is monological: psychiatry speaks about madness, not with madness. Madness is objectified; what the psychiatrist speaks is the language of objective facts, which can no longer account for subjective experiences. Indeed, key symptoms of modern pathologies are a response to such objectification, which is experienced as the threat of petrification and immobilization.

The boundaries of all Great Divides stir not only scientific interest, but are populated by anxieties in the form of images, figures, the threat of mimetic infections, in which the order of rationality is always put at risk, and defended by an extension of its rule. The modern subject, in its laboratory situations deprived of dialogic relatedness, becomes armored in defense of its unity, and this defense is symptomatically displaced into the border-imagery. The anxiety about the border itself is what defines the morphology and symbolic economy of its images— and these images become templates for the inscription of otherness. The threat of machinic dismemberment is displaced into the anxiety of the body given over to the fluid and fragmentary, and to emergent relational subjectivities, against which the subject builds up an “armor of anaesthesia” (Susan Buck-Morss) that upholds its unity in a reiterated gesture of defense. These “Others” are the symptomatic articulation of the rationalist boundaries; they encompass in the interior the so-called unconscious, the sensuous, emotional, and sexual, and in the exterior, the racial other, the subaltern.

Whelped in the Great Divides, the principal Others to Man, including his “posts,” are well documented in ontological breeding registries in both past and present Western cultures: gods, machines, animals, monsters, creepy crawlies, women, servants and slaves, and noncitizens in general. Outside of the security checkpoint of bright reason, outside the apparatuses of reproduction of the sacred image of the same, these “others” have a remarkable capacity to induce panic in the centers of power and self-certainty. Terror is regularly expressed in hyperphilias and hyperphobias, and examples of this are no richer than in the panics roused by the Great Divide between animals (lapdogs) and machines (laptops) in the early twenty-first century C.E. Technophilias and technophobias vie with organophilias and organophobias, and taking sides is not left to chance.”

Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10.

Mixed media
Courtesy Anthamer - Film Production Company, Ltd.

Life

The backdrop against which to understand the nineteenth-century conception of animism is ultimately the partition of life from non-life, and its many offsprings and differentiations. The distinction between life and non-life is perhaps the most fundamental one in modernity, explicitly as well as implicitly qualifying its notions of objectivity and the laws of nature, the divisions between subjects and objects, material and immaterial, human and non-human. It is, at the same time, the most unstable of divisions, having an instability that finds its expression in bioethical debates, technophobias, and the gothic imaginary and unique importance the experience of the “uncanny” holds in modern aesthetics as a borderline condition in which the inanimate turns out as animate and vice versa; and which, in Freud’s canonical interpretation, has consequently been explained as a “return” of animistic convictions.

For anyone undertaking a genealogical study of the concept of “life” in our culture, one of the first and most instructive observations to be made is that the concept never gets defined as such. And yet, this things that remains indeterminate gets articulated and divided time and again, through a series of caesurae and oppositions that invest it with a decisive strategic function in domains as apparently distant as philosophy, theology, politics, and—only later—medicine and biology. That is to say, everything happens as if, in our culture, life were what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided.

In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a
logos of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. What is man, if he is always the place-and, at the same time, the result-of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way-within man-has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values.11

The segmentations of life have a common background in what has dominated European Christian debates for centuries: the question over the character and composition of the soul (in Latin, anima, from which the word animism is derived), which was seen variously as an entity distinct from the body or as its animating principle, or both at the same time. Radically simplifying the quarrels over the nature of souls, what is tantamount to the milieu of rationalist positivism in the nineteenth century was its gradual disappearance from center stage in an evolving modernity. The soul could not be objectified since it had no apparent material reality that conformed to its latest metaphysical designs. When the anatomists during the Enlightenment opened up the body, there was no evidence of it. The soul could not be objectified, and thus it retracted into the realm of the subjective interior, and was secularized in the notion of the psyche and self. As a consequence, the very definition of “life” was put at stake—for the “hard” sciences, life had to be explained without making reference to an immaterial force (which the vitalists were still defending through concepts such as the élan vital), it had to be explained through mechanical, biochemical processes and their inherent laws alone. It is against this background of (often vulgar) materialism that one must understand the characterization of animist relations to matter and “objects” as a “belief” and an epistemological “mistake” that had no objective claim to reality, disregarding the experiential dimensions of those relations and the questions they may pose.

But to describe the primitive ghost-soul as either matter or spirit is misleading; if these terms are to be applied to it, we must describe it as a material spirit. This is, of course, a contradiction in terms, which we can resolve by recognizing that the peoples who believe in the ghost-soul have not achieved the comparatively modern distinction between material and immaterial or spiritual existents.12

Images, Media, and the Return of the Repressed

Nineteenth-century rationalist science frequently referred to the soul as an image:

It is a thin, unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, film or shadow; the cause of life and thought in the individual it animates; independently possessing the personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner, past or present;
This is a description that, with minor alterations, would be applicable in almost all its features to the photographic and cinematographic image. Though substantial, the photographic image, too, moves through time and space, appears as a phantasma bearing likeness, continues to exist after death, and has a certain physical and mediunistic power to “possess” other bodies, as any observation of a crowd in a cinema suffices to show. Is there a relation, and if so, of what kind, between the Great Divides and modern technological media? Is there a relation between the “disenchantment” of the world, the retraction of the soul to subjective interiority, and the objectivist stance? The canonical accounts of the industrialized, rationalized modern world frequently come to that conclusion. Is there, however, a connection, or even a similar process happening to images, regarding their status in modernity, and their technologies?

According to Bruno Latour, the division of nature and culture, and the subsequent purification of the two domains of subjects on the one side, and things on the other, is only possible by a repression of the middle ground, the mediation that connects subjects with objects in multiple forms. “Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the phantasm of the unconscious of the moderns.”

Objectification, that is, the purification of the domains of subjects and things, of life and death, of a particular economy, of a split, a schizophrenic regime. For the image, too, the machine in this instance either records the world neutrally, objectively, or it is the willful instrument of a subject’s intention, although surely such division can only be maintained conceptually, never in practice. In each case, the turning point, the infrastructure of a complex chain of mediations, is blended out.

We are digging for the origin of an absolute—not a relative—distinction between truth and falsity, between a pure world, absolutely emptied of human-made intermediaries and a disgusting world composed of impure but fascinating human-made mediators.14

The schizophrenia derived from the repression of mediation in its own right finds its ultimate articulation in Iconoclasm and anti-fetishism, two distinctively modern stances to which Latour has also devoted significant work. It is the link between the fate of the soul and the fate of the image under the rule of objectivism that is, that is, when images are endowed with souls.

On the level of pictures, the fetish is the embodiment par excellence of a forbidden hybridity, of the “horrible mixture” outlined above. It represents what for modernity is an impossibility, at least conceptually: a fact that is also constructed, made. The fetish is the figure of an image-object subjectively made and falsely endowed with an objective reality, an agency, a subjectivity and life of its own. In order for it to be real, no human hand is allowed to have touched it. The desire for an unmediated, non-relational access to nature and truth calls for the destruction of false images. In the face of the fetishistic power of imagery, the moderns shift between an omnipotence and impotence that is, an antinomic mirror of sorts, a projection of interiority onto the outer world, reduced to the picture plane. The status of photography provides perfect evidence of this ever-shifting status: Either the photograph is seen as a merely machinic product, over which consequently no right of authorship can be claimed (as was the case in the early days of photography), or it is seen as the expression of a subject (as made constitutive at a later stage). The machine in this instance either records the world neutrally, objectively, or it is the willful instrument of a subject’s intention, although surely such division can only be maintained conceptually, never in practice. In each case, the turning point, the infrastructure of a complex chain of mediations, is blended out.

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According to Bruno Latour, the division of nature and culture, and the subsequent purification of the two domains of subjects on the one side, and things on the other, is only possible by a reselection of the middle ground, the mediation that connects subjects with objects in multiple forms. “Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the phantasm of the unconscious of the moderns.”

Objectification, that is, the purification of the domains of subjects and things, of life and death, of a particular economy, of a split, a schizophrenic regime. For the image, too, the machine in this instance either records the world neutrally, objectively, or it is the willful instrument of a subject’s intention, although surely such division can only be maintained conceptually, never in practice. In each case, the turning point, the infrastructure of a complex chain of mediations, is blended out.

We are digging for the origin of an absolute—not a relative—distinction between truth and falsity, between a pure world, absolutely emptied of human-made intermediaries and a disgusting world composed of impure but fascinating human-made mediators.14

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The work by Art & Language refers to Lewis Carroll’s perhaps best-known poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*, which evolves around an empty map of an ocean. In *Map of the Sahara Desert after Lewis Carroll* (1967), Art & Language transform Carroll’s map of the ocean into a map of a desert—a map, that is, with the exception of cardinal points and scale, empty, thus creating a short-circuit between the internal and external sign-relations. And as much as the systematizing demonstration of the coordination among sign-relations leaves us in permanent oscillation between its various registers, the iconoclastic emptiness of *Map of the Sahara Desert after Lewis Carroll* breeds new images, inevitably inviting the imagination to populate a blank territory.


Anti-fetishist to destroy the fetish re-institutes a paradoxical belief. The facticity and rationality that inhabits the world in which fetishism has been destroyed is replaced by a new fetish, ever more powerful than the previous one: objectivity, a form of knowing that is absolute and non-relational, bracketed off from history and social context. Inscribing these facts once again into the historicity of knowing and science, Latour brings the fetishistic “heart of darkness,” which Europeans had so successfully placed in their imaginary of the Other, back home again. “But the myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were themselves its product.”

In modern technologies of mimetic reproduction, the borderline condition of all modern imagery finds its ultimate technological expression. The destruction of images and the repression of mediators not only produces the paradoxical reversal where the power of images is proliferated in the act of their destruction, but also yields unprecedented desires for the production of new images, in which the experiential dimension of modernity is expressed, confirmed, and overcome. The technological media are themselves the product not merely of a technological advance, but of these desires that are the direct outcome of the logic of the divides. Modern imagery—as with any set of images—constitutes a meridian point of simultaneous association and dissociation in which objectification and subjectification blend, although this blending happens only in constellationary flashes, preparing a rescision, which re-inscribes them on either side of the divides. This meridian point is a political battlefield; it holds both dystopian and utopian potential. It is a site of constant dialectical reversals, of intense unrest, nervousness, and anxiety. The image becomes at once the very site of the “horrible mixture” and its decomposition.

The key to understanding the knot at the meridian point of modern imagery is the experiential dimension of modernity. Industrialization and rationalization produced a segmentation and fragmentation of the senses, mirroring the effect of the “disenchantment” that objectification and modern iconoclasm had on our perception of the world. The hand that holds time and space together breaks, and with it, symbolic unity, resulting in a generalized condition of social disembodiedness. Alienation is the concept that describes the experience of the modern objectified world and the splitting of that experience into isolated categories such as agency, object and observer, self and non-self. Social alienation is the price of modernity, as well as being the precondition and symptom of modern power relations:

*Human beings purchase the increase in their power with the estrangement from that over which it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them.*

Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of humans to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of the mind. Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operations objectively expected of...
in question (if not once and for all). The simultaneous conservation in institutions of modern knowledge, such as museums, archives, and exhibitions, did not run counter to this destruction; it merely gave it an adequate expression, through which the power of inscription could become manifest.

Life and Death on Display

This is where an exhibition about animism must begin. It must use the concept of animism as the mirror of modernity that it was from the outset, while at the same time disempower the relations that the powerful imaginary of the term upheld. The projection and exportation of animism onto the imagined Heart of Darkness out there, at the other side of the Great Divides, must be reversed, and similar to the concept of fetishism, animism must be “brought back home.” The economy of the imaginary of the Great Divides must become visible in the modern imaginary, so that the relations enforced by the foreclosing of relations can come to the fore. And insofar as the position of animism in the geography of the Great Divides links the question of life and non-life with that of the object and the subject, it must focus on the dialectics of objectification (mummification, petrification, reification, and so forth) and animation in modern imagery.

A powerful, if somewhat sentimental root-image situating the dispositive of objectification within which such a dialectics unfolds is the butterfly—symbol of the psyche, of life undergoing metamorphosis. In order for the butterfly to become an object within a static taxonomy, and for it to enter the material base of such taxonomy; that is, the archive, exhibition, and so forth, it must be conserved. Its fixation requires mummification, and it is “installed” at its place within the grid of the taxonomy (the modern cosmography) by the needle that pins it to the display. The needle is a figure for the act of objectifying signification. If this requires actual killing, there are also various forms

Wesley Meuris’ series of designed cages for animals are derived from the artist’s engagement with zoological classifications, taxonomies and systems of knowledge. As architectural propositions, they turn these meditations on scientific classification into a question of relationality: What is the mode of knowing we have about the object on display, and what creates the spectatorial enjoyment of seeing animals in captivity? Since the cages are empty, however, the scene of such reflection is transferred to the imagination: We have to give shape to the animal in question in our minds, using the enclosed architectural habitat as an inverted script that gives shape to a life-form, thus engaging in a form of spectatorial empathy that displays like these normally foreclose.

– Natascha Sadr Haghighian

Unification through objectification takes the form of extinction coupled with conservation. Extinction because the conceptual denial of otherness inscribed real others into the continuum of objects, and if the destructive force thus unleashed did not result in direct or indirect genocides, it nevertheless destroyed the subjectivities (and cosmographies)
of “social death,” which leave biological life intact while depriving the subject/object in question of the Umwelt (Jakob von Uexküll) that constitutes its life, of the web that constitutes its being in relationality. This is the objectification of life we find in the ethnographic displays during the era of the grand world fairs, and such are the enclosures of the zoo. They are displays of objectification because they enclose and isolate—yet another phenotype of the disciplinary institutions and enclosures described by Michel Foucault as the engines of modern power—and because they foreclose the possibility of dialogic relationships, and deliver the object on display to consumption and spectacle clothed in educational terms.

The entire discipline of anthropology, it has been claimed, is implicated in an objectification in which extinction (cultures doomed to disappear as civilization and modern progress inevitably progress) and conservation are merely the flipsides of one and the same coin, creating what Paul Ricoeur has envisioned as an “imaginary museum” of mankind. The intimacy of extinction and documentary inscription and conservation characterizes ethnographic film as well as photography—as famously illustrated by the case of photographer Edward Curtis and his pictures of North American native cultures, which he thought were at the brink of extinction, a “vanishing race.” “The information that is to be gathered [...] respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost.”21 The pictures themselves express the borderline, simultaneously reaching out and upholding it—the border between “us” and “them,” and between an imagined past, a present mastered by modernity, and a future that holds no more place for “them.” The pictures become, in an uncanny sense, the borders themselves.

Curtis’s pictures have frequently been invoked in debates over the myth of the camera stealing the soul.22 This myth, ascribed to natives world-wide, once again links image with soul, and is an expression of the modern belief in the continuity, as well as the rupture, between magic and technology—an instance, once more, of the modern “belief in belief,” a blindness to the world-producing power of relational practices, which already structures the “fetishism” discourse.23 On another, general register, the connection between photography and death, the “uncanny” status of photography in that it transcends the boundaries of time and space, absence and presence, life and non-life, has been subject to intense debates that need no reiteration in detail here. Earlier, I noted that modern technological images are themselves a meridian point of sorts in regards to the separation of object and subject, a transgression or even dissolution of that very division; and that, nevertheless, this dissolution upholds, confirms, and re-does the scission, having to dissolve the tension in the direction of either pole. However, the technological image cannot be wholly “subjectified.” It is not, and cannot be, neutral with respect to the two poles of the subject and object, life and non-life, since it is itself the inscription of an objectification. Roland Barthes gives an account of this when he says:

In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.”

Of specters, we know that they are halfway between life and death, disembodied souls roaming the sphere of the living, bound to return. They are alive only in relation to the deprivation of life, having been withdrawn from the status of a subject across various registers—a “thing,” as Derrida invoked with Hamlet,24 but a thing that is real only in the Lacanian sense. Specters inhabit the space of death, the space of negativity, of the un-cohered, thus being denied entry into a circle that binds together a community of the living, and dissociates it from its outsides.

Museums and photography, as two examples of modern dispositifs of the conservation of “life,” are haunted, afflicted by the specters

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22 For further elaboration on the myth of the camera stealing the soul, see The Museum of the Stealing of Souls, http://stealingsouls.org.
23 See Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel eds., ICONOCLASH.

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Tom Nicholson
Drawings and correspondence, 2009
Charcoal drawings and off-set printed artist’s book, excerpt
Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

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Anselm Franke
of objectification, by the return of animism, which here takes the form of the “uncanny” return of a repressed life turned into a spectacle. This “hauntedness” is a key to the ways in which media and institutions built the modern social imaginary—in circumscribed confines, giving way to the desires to overcome alienation, the desires for the re-animation of a de-animated, de-mobilized world, thus re-populating the deadened, disenchanted, objectified world with its monstrous images of hybrids and phantasies of returns and speed-deliriums. And in so doing, ever-actualizing the imaginary of animism as the Heart of Darkness, ripe with anxieties and fears of regression, which demand ever-more re-assuring objectifications and enclosures: No photographic image without its spectral quality, and no museum in which one is not invited to contemplate the skeleton of a dinosaur coming back to life.

The node in which objectification—the fixation, conservation, and mumification of life—meets the transgressive desires for re-animation, re-creation, mobilization, and transformation, however, finds its ultimate technological expression in film, and what André Bazin has famously referred to as its “mummy complex.” The “mummy” form, it is often assumed, refers to a universal of art: the desire to provide a defense against the passing of time, and, ultimately, death. The symbolic victory over death is supposedly a “basic psychological need in man.”

However, we should not be too quick to agree, and instead, should return to the question of psychology and art at a later point.

It is cinema, however, that gives ultimate expression to “the great Frankensteinian dream of the nineteenth century: the recreation of life, the symbolic triumph over death.” In the cinematic synthesis of movement creating an illusion of life, the negative returns animated, redeemed in phantasmagoric and symptomatic form: images, souls, states of mediacy. Having lost the right for a claim to reality, they assume the form of hybrids between life and non-life, fiction and reality. Cinema, from its outset, is populated by zombies, Frankensteins and man-machine hybrids, and mummies deserting their graves. Every coming-alive of the dead—or, in other terms, every re-subjectification of a “dead” object—however, is a confirmation of the “proper” boundary that keeps them firmly apart: The Frankensteinian dream does not undo the subject-object dichotomy; rather, it qualifies it. It is the symptom of a bourgeois hegemonic perspective that has internalized the logic of the divide and turns the tension, the antagonism between rigor mortis and phantasmagoric animation into an aesthetic economy endlessly reiterated. The Frankensteinian dream is congruous to the structure of the commodity, and rather then overcoming its paradigms, it channels the anxieties it produces by providing a phantasmagoric displacement of relations that have previously been displaced.

Art occupies a special position within the modern geography marked by the Great Divides. It shares many of the characteristics of the status of images described above, but midway between subject and object, it is dissolved into the direction of the fictional, imaginary, and subjective, where it fuels hopes for re-instituting the sovereignty of experience. The modern institution of art acquires its relative autonomy thus; for the price of being rendered politically inconsequential, its effects must remain in the realm of interiority and the imagination. Much of the history of modern art can be aligned with a contestation of that very boundary drawn around its legitimate place—the over-
Henri Michaux and Eric Duvivier  
*Images du monde visionnaire*, 1963  
Video, 38 min  
Courtesy the artists and Novartis AG

Poet and painter Henri Michaux experimented with drawing under the influence of various psychoactive substances, above all mescaline. He asserted that the effect of the drug was “so wholly visual that they are vehicles of the purely mental, of the abstract,” further explaining that “mescaline diminishes the imagination. It castrates, desensualizes the image. It makes images that are 100 percent pure. Laboratory experiments.”

Although Michaux asserted that the experience of mescaline “eludes form,” that “it cannot be seen,” he agreed to collaborate on a film commissioned in 1963 by the Swiss pharmaceutical company Sandoz (best known for synthesizing LSD in 1938) in order to demonstrate the hallucinogenic effects of mescaline. It is the only venture in film by Michaux. In charge of the filmic translation of Michaux’s prescriptions was director Eric Duvivier whose other films include an adaptation of Max Ernst’s collage novel *La femme 100 têtes.*
The photographs from Białowieża Forest depict a location that through history has been greatly infused with myths and metaphors. The forest dates back to 8000 BCE and is the only remaining example of the original lowland forest that once covered much of Europe. Situated in Eastern Poland, it contains a great diversity of plants, animals, and insects, as well as thousands of species of fungi and vascular plants, many of these elsewhere extinct. Over the years the forest has been described in literature and travel accounts as a sylvan Arcadia, an asylum, a pristine Eden, a sacred grove, and a dark and alien impenetrable wilderness. This work can be seen as a continuation of Joachim Koester’s practice in which an imaginary site is paradoxically investigated through its material reality.

They take on the courageous task of saving what can be saved: souls, minds, emotions, interpersonal relations, the symbolic dimension, human warmth, local specificities, hermeneutics, that margins and the peripheries.28

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Art and Psychology

All social representations, insofar as they bear a mythical structure, are to be explained by psychology. In canonical art history, the question of animism and the boundary between life and non-life is therefore discussed under the parameters of psychological universals. Art, it is understood, derives from the need to resist time and triumph over death. “The desire to bring time to a standstill, to conserve and fix, is as much at the root of art, as is the desire to animate, to re-create life, to gain access to the forces of creation. These psychological universals are inextricably linked to motion and stasis, and their relation and dynamics in works of art. This scenography is populated by mythical figures, captured, for instance, in the animating gaze of sculptors Pygmalion and Daedalus, on the one hand, and the chthonic monster Medusa, whose gaze petrified life, on the other. Anthropomorphic projection and visualization, objects that appear to “return one’s gaze,” works of art that assume a subjectivity of sorts, or instances of “the uncanny” in which something inanimate seems to “come back” to life, are all perfectly familiar cases that do not present a real challenge to the discipline of art history as long as the primary boundary between reality and fiction is upheld. The question of “life” poses itself as “mere” symbolic production, always in terms of the “life-like,” and has consequences not for the “real” world, but for the reality of the subjectivity of perception and its “primitive roots,” for which Freud gave the canonical description in relation to animism when he asserted:

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The projection outwards of internal perceptions is a primitive mechanism, to which, for instance, our sense perceptions are subject and which therefore normally plays a very large part in determining the form taken by our external world. Under conditions whose nature has not been sufficiently established, internal perceptions of emotional and intellectual processes can be projected outwards in the same way as sense perceptions; they are thus employed for building up the external world, through they should by rights remain part of the internal world. [...] Using to the projection outwards of internal perceptions, primitive men arrived at a picture of the external world which we, with our intensified conscious perception, have now to translate back into psychology.29

Any journey into the animist universe of the unconscious must therefore remain a confirmation of this split between the real and the unreal, as long as the unconscious remains unconscious, as long as its existence is assumed as a fact, rather than as a production resulting from a particular boundary-regime. The anti-psychological stance within modernist art history has struggled with this logic as long and insofar as it remained tied to gestures of transgression. The paradigm of psychology as laid out by Freud led to another symptomatic genealogy—that of ecstasy. Once again, it is inextricably linked to the imaginary of animism (in this book, the question of ecstasy, animism, and aesthetics is discussed in an exemplary way through Sergei Eisenstein’s analysis of the art of Wält Disney). In states of ecstasy and intoxication, the very boundary that separates the self from the world is undone, and interiority is exteriorized. The trip is a figure of transgression in which...
re-mobilization, re-animation, re-enchantment and metamorphosis are brought about by an unleashing of the boundaries that confine the subjectivity of perception, providing an immediate experience of the world-making power of images, transforming a mute world into dialogic excess. This “dialogue” temporarily unleashes experiences of mediality, in which subject and object appear as mutually constitutive and keep changing sites. The ecstatic undoing of the boundaries of the subject through intoxication, extreme physical states, eroticism, or spiritual ecstasies represents a major resource for modernist art.

There is, however, a different trajectory, perhaps more fruitful for a re-evaluation of animism; one that is less caught up in the logic of the symptomatic and compensatory transgression, and the dialectical confirmation of the modern’s own myths. This different trajectory makes clear that the modernist cultural response to the objectifying stance derives from a similar set of configurations. An influential part of the modernist iconography is directly derived from the rationalization of the movements of the living body, and the objectifying “inscription of life.” This link is discussed in the frame of situating modern animation in the present book by the exhibition’s co-curator Edwin Carels. The physiological motion studies of Étienne Jules-Marey and Eadweard Muybridge gave expression to the experiential dimension of the modern fragmentation of time and space. Such “expression,” however, was not their primary aim; instead, their target was a rationalization of the economy of the working body to achieve increased efficiency in production—these “inscriptions of life” served as the blueprint for Taylorism, the theory of management that analyzes and synthesizes work-flows. Not merely the decomposition of the visual field characteristic of modernist iconography, cinema also passed through this applied science that would have the most profound impact on the body and the human sensorium.

Technology at the Meridian Point

It was Walter Benjamin who conceived of these two registers of modernity together, for Taylorism and the related emergence of a variety of physiological and psychological tests placed technology at a meridian point in which subject and object were no longer separated, but subjected to management, giving rise to new forms of subjectivities. Benjamin maintained a perspective that saw more than merely a somatic, motoric form; such as the transformation of the experience of innervation is understood as the conversion of affective energy into somatic, motoric form; such as the transformation of the experience of sensitivity to gesture to express themselves; their language is so poor that it does not suffice to make them understood [...]. With primitive man, gesture precedes speech [...]. The gestures the savages make are in general the same everywhere, because these movements are natural reflexes rather than conventions like language.

Félix-Louis Regnault was a physician who applied chronophotography to study culture specific human locomotion and produced what is widely recognized as the first “ethnographic footage” at the Paris Exposition Ethnographique de l’Afrique Occidentale in 1895. He attempted to create a scientific index of race, suggesting in 1900 that all museums collect “moving artifacts” of human behavior to study and exhibit. All savage people make recourse to gesture to express themselves; their language is so poor that it does not sufficiently make them understood [...]. With primitive man, gesture precedes speech [...]. The gestures the savages make are in general the same everywhere, because these movements are natural reflexes rather than conventions like language.

Benjamin conceived of the body as a medium in the service of imagining new forms of subjectivity. Negotiating the historical confrontation between the human sensorium and technology as an alien, and alienating regime requires learning from forms of bodily innervation. Innervation is understood as the conversion of affective energy into somatic, motoric form; such as the transformation of the experience of digitized profiling, lost any of its actuality since. This is a form of technologically aided animation through subjectification, which presents a different paradigm from the compensatory, symptomatic one of the Frankensteinian dream and aesthetic economy of animation it gave rise to.

“In the cinema, people whom nothing moves or touches any longer learn to cry again.” In his work on technology and the cinema, Walter Benjamin conceived of a possible emancipatory potential of the mass media, envisioning a process inverse to the inscriptions of Marey: from image/technology to physiological motion and experience. Benjamin insisted that technology has to be transformed from a means of mastering nature into a medium for “mastering the interplay between human beings and nature.” “The expropriation of the human senses that culminates in imperialist warfare, fascism can be countered only on the terrain of technology itself, by means of perceptual technologies that allow for a figurative, mimetic engagement with technology at large, as a productive force and social reality.” Yet rather than redeeming experience at the price of “rationality,” he made the registers of human embodied experience the measure of technology and media, with a view on new forms of collectivity and transformed relations between nature and humanity. The very impulse to theorize technology is part of Benjamin’s techno-utopian politics, through which he seeks to re-imagine the aesthetic in response to the technically changed sensorium.

Benjamin conceived of the body as a medium in the service of imagining new forms of subjectivity.
an image into physiological motion and emotion; where bodily sensation and technologically-produced images constitute not irreconcilable counterparts, but an integral “body- and image-space.” Benjamin invested cinema with the power of innervation, by means of which the technological apparatus can be brought to social, public consciousness as the “physis” of a transformed collectivity, which has its “organs” in technology. Experimenting with psychotropic substances, such as hashish, was for Benjamin one way of subjecting the experience of innervation to auto-experiments and self-regulation. Unlike several of his contemporaries and successors who experimented with drugs, Benjamin treated the effects of intoxication as symptoms and effects rather than metaphysical truths. The experience of intoxication destabilizes the boundaries of the self, and transforms the parameters of subject and object. What Benjamin conceived of, in other words, is a politics of the meridian point, the dissolution of modernity’s notoriety, of “purification,” gradually lose ground and cease to be operable. We Have Never Been Modern, 39.

**Century after century, colonial empire after colonial empire, the poor premodern collectives were accused of making a horrible mishmash of things and humans, of objects and signs, while their accusers finally separated them totally—to remix them at once on a scale unknown until now.**

The practice of modernity, Latour asserts, is diametrically opposed to its conceptualization and self-description. While accusing other collectives of the mishmash they make between categories whose distinction for us holds sacred values, they set up a practice that intertwined culture and nature on a previous unknown scale. The “official” version of modernity is but a mode of classification that allows one to do the opposite of what one says. Modernity also made an absolute split between theory and practice, between de facto practices and their juridical, conceptual framework. The conceptual register of modernity keeps on erecting borders, purifies fields of knowledge, insists on disciplines, and so forth; while in their practices, they work on creating assemblages, “hybrids,” or “collectives” that conceptual machines can not simply account for. This allowed the moderns to mobilize nature without due democratic discussion on the impact of this mobilization, without mediation and representation of “things,” thus producing an unprecedented amount of new “hybrids,” of “quasi-objects,” of chains of associations in which subjects and objects are mutually constitutive, which contain both subjective and objective aspects, and span the divide between culture and nature in multiple ways. It is only with the proliferation of these “hybrids,” overwhelming us in the form of the ecological crisis, that protocols of strict division, of “purification,” gradually lose ground and cease to be opera-
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The essential point of this modern Constitution is that it renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthink-able, unrepresentable. Does this lack of representation limit the work of mediation in any way? No, for the modern world would immediately cease to function. Like all other collectives it lives on that blending. On the contrary (and here comes the beauty of the mechanism to light), the modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies.12

According to Latour, science, by way of its construction of “indisputable” facts, holds democratic politics in an iron grip, limiting the collective concerns that can be negotiated to human affairs alone, while bracketing off all other agencies that participate, and indeed hold together, the “common world.” To bring the sciences back into politics, Latour calls for a “parliament of things,” in which the work of the sciences is not the presentation of objective facts that supposedly “speak for themselves” and end all other debate by suppressing the necessary mediation that makes them “speak” in the first place, but rather the “socialization of nonhumans,” their enrollment and subsequent mediation in a social realm extended to “things.”

Is Bruno Latour suggesting yet another “return” to animism, a form of political order that is based on a dubious animation of things? Is the “parliament of things” not a regressive fiction reminiscent of the universe of Walt Disney, where everything comes to life and things act like people, or to one of the techno-utopian fantasies of a Charles Fourier?

Before my readers begin to get a disquieting impression that they are being pulled into a fable where animals, viruses, stars, and magic are going to start chattering away like magpies or princesses, let me emphasize that we are in no way dealing with a novelty that would be shocking to common sense. […] I am proposing, very reasonably, to make this mythic contradiction between mute fact things and speaking facts comprehensible by restoring all the difficulties that a human encounters in speaking to humans about nonhumans with their participation. […] I do not claim that things speak “on their own,” since no beings, not even humans, speak on their own, but always through something or someone else. I have not required human subjects to share the right of speech of which they are so justly proud with galaxies, neurons, cells, viruses, plants and glaciers.13

Latour calls for a parliamentary model—composed of “spokespeople,” mediators, and mediums—that accounts for the enrolment of nonhumans in the constitution of the common world. For the modern imagination, this is nothing short of a horror scenario. Not only does Latour ascribe things agency, but with their agency, he lets them get so close to subjects that the subject becomes virtually unimaginable other than in

Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard (1803–1847), better known by the name of his comedian grandfather, Grandville, is synonymous today with the twin methods of the personified animal and the “bew-tailed” human in modern illustration. In his satirical caricatures of the 1820s and early 1830s, but also in his later book illustrations such as those of the La Fontaine fables, J.J. Grandville addressed the question of social groups and types. In this, he was strongly influenced by physiognomist theories of the day, including the writings of Lavater and Gall. While the “animal metaphor” already held some currency in French social satire during his life-time (see Louis Huart’s “Museum Parisien” of 1841), Grandville stands out for his thorough exploitation of the theme of organic metamorphosis from man to animal, man to plant and vice-versa. Along with the exploits of Honoré Daumier and Gustave Doré, Grandville’s daring use of anthropomorphism in illustration had an influence on generations of illustrators and animators to come, from the Frenchman Ernest Griset, the Englishmen John Tenniel and Edward Lear, the Pole Ladislav Stær-wicz and finally the American Walt Disney.

Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 34.


32 Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 34.
Vertov’s Soviet Toys (1924) is generally assumed to be the first Soviet animated film. It is a propaganda film in which Vertov reacts to the introduction of limited forms of capitalist enterprises by Lenin’s New Economic Policy, and is both an iconoclastic and a literalist illustration of the animated fetish-character of commodities described by Marx. The theory of animism as one of the animation of “dead” matter was developed in the midst of the consolidation of commodity capitalism in Europe and North America. The commodity, as Karl Marx provocatively proposed, was not dead matter because it was animated by a “fetishism of commodities.” There is a structural parallel between the commodity fetish and the cinematic image. Marx’s commodity fetish derives its uncanny animation by displacing a social relation (of labor) into an inert object: “A definite social relation assumes […] the fantastic form of a relationship between things.” Hiding its means of production equally grants the cinematic image the animated quality it has for the viewer.

For Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs, film gives visual shape to a physiognomic quality in both the animate and inanimate: “[In film,] all things make a physiognomic impression on us, whether we are conscious of it or not.” This physiognomic quality, however, was, for Balázs, an anthropomorphic projection, in line with expressionist theories that saw an “animated mirror” (Georg Simmel) in all modern art. For French film theorist and filmmaker Jean Epstein, they are not merely mirrors, but also assume the status of characters in the (human) drama: “Through the cinema, a revolver in a drawer, a broken bottle on the ground, an eye isolated by an iris, are elevated to the status of characters in the drama. […] To things and beings in their most frigid semblance, the cinema thus grants the greatest gift: life. And it confers this life in its highest guise: personality.”

In Ghosts Before Breakfast (Vormittagsspuk, 1928), Hans Richter stages a revolt of things, showing everyday objects turning against their users in a cinematic ghost hour of sorts. Teacups and saucers drop on the floor and break, beards appear and disappear, positive film changes into negative. Clothes desert their wearers, and strip them of the all-important markers of their bourgeois identity and dignity: the absence of hats releases a state of anarchy and “unreason.” But before noon strikes, reason, order, and serenity are restored: “In the end the old hierarchy of person-master over the object-slave re-established itself. But for a short time, the public entertained a niggle of doubt about the general validity of the usual subject-object order.”

Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades
—Alexander Rodchenko, 1924

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Animism
In Reto Pulfer’s works, things press close onto consciousness, and states of consciousness dynamically things. No interior, but passages between states of mind, words, materiality, things. In these passages, there are multiple forces at work, elementary as well as symbolic, that produce a drifting and shifting of signs and sensations, uncohering and re-cohering meaning, experience and memories. Those drifts can be intensified through further short-circuits between signs and things, between sounds and textures, structured by systems of notations that become templates for a space that calls various presences forth.

who, in everyday custom, translate their texture into human language, into faculties. There is no such thing as ecstasy: We are already always outside our selves with things, because they structure our habits, experiences, and, finally, our language, which, according to Benjamin, contains an archive of sensuous correspondences. For Benjamin, there is a continuum, not a rupture, between sensuous correspondences, the body as a medium, and the medium of language.

In ascribing language only to humans, in submerging mediarity the body as a medium, and the medium of language. The truth or honesty of nonlinguistic embodied communication depends on looking back and greeting significant others, again and again. This sort of truth or honesty is not some trope-free, fantastic kind of natural authenticity that only animals can have, while humans are defined by the happy fault of lying denotatively and knowing it. Rather, this truth telling is about co-constitutive natural cultural dancing, holding in esteem, and regarding open those who look back reciprocally. Always tripping, this kind of truth has a multispecies future.

Beyond Mirror Worlds

Once animism is released from the modern cage that defines it as either “erroneous thinking” with the respect to the reality of objects or as a question of projecting subjectivity, the concept opens up a very different set of problems, at the core of which lies not subjectivity of perception (leading to ever-new mirror-games), but perception of the subjectivity of the so-called object. These subjectivities are not to be conceived in anthropomorphic forms, but rather in relation to the available and possible forms and dispositifs of recognition. Trying to give an answer to the question of defining “human,” Latour answers:

“The expression “anthropomorphic” considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, plasmormisms, ideomorphisms, themomorphisms, samicomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. A weaver of morphisms—isn’t that enough of a definition?”

Besides the concept’s potential to act as a stereoscopic mirror for the understanding of modern boundary-practices, anthropology has revived the concept of animism, understood as “relational epistemology.” There is, as anthropologist Rune Willerslev asserts, a danger in these accounts of replicating the projection of a romantic sentiment paired with assertions of scientific universality escaping cultural relativism that still denies the very claim of the ontologies in question that the relations they uphold to non-human subjects are real, and not merely a transference of social metaphors onto the world, by means of which the difference between self and Other is absorbed.

We can only have an experience of a world if we are conscious subjects of experience who can distinguish between ourselves as subjects and an external world that transcends our subjective experience of it. Otherwise, the experiencing subject and the object of experience would conflate, would become one, thereby making any experience of the world impossible.
To be sure, all cultures draw boundaries, and organize and negotiate differences. All cultures objectify, and draw a line between what is real and what is imaginary in ways that constitute these realms mutually. However, they differ in the way these differences are organized, and only the moderns are known for having operated through the bifurcation of nature and culture, and the derived system of equally categorical Great Divides, monologic in their structure and form of relationality. That the societies described as animist do not ascribe to such forms of difference a priori does in no way mean that these differences do not exist; rather, they have to be created constantly through everyday practices. These practices are basically mimetic, if mimesis is understood as a faculty and sensuous-cognitive process:

Mimesis is essentially relational in that the imitator has no independent existence outside or separate from the object or person imitated; and yet the imitator is constantly being thrown back on himself reflexively, without ever achieving unity. Thus mimesis offers assimilation with otherness while also drawing boundaries and distinguishing oneself. Animism demands both, and without mimesis the very basis of animistic relatedness is therefore likely to break down. This is not to say that mimesis is identical with animism. We can and do imitate things without being animists for that reason. Rather, what I am arguing is that mimesis is and must be a prerequisite for animistic symbolic world making. […] Mimesis, therefore, is the practical side of animism, its world-making mechanism par excellence.37

Control Society

Since the 1970s, the question of relationality has taken on new forms within the realm of what previously was characterized as industrialized modernity. With the decline of industrialism, the rise of post-Fordist modes of production and immaterial labor, and the end of the “disciplinary regime,” the very site occupied by animism previously as a focal point of its imaginary opposites, animism has become a resource experienced a significant shift. From being the negative of modernity, the animism of thinking derived from industrialization has become the modality of interiorization. The rise of the green economy as the next capitalist frontier will do its part in creating new quasi-animist forms of governmentality. All this can be explained as a mimetic, morphological adaptation of power, spinning the wheel of dialectics between resistance and form of power further, now in the process of appropriating the transformative forces of relationality and the mimetic. The outlines of the new regime, as in the old, can once again be traced negatively, by means of its congruent pathologies. The neurotic boundary-syndrome is replaced by the mode of depression, which Jennifer Church has described in terms of being able to see a reflection of the romantic, trangressive role animism had once played: as “false one-ness with the world.” It is false, because it is a oneeness in which the subject is ultimately deprived of agency, of the possibility to act and relate, a subject being locked into an immobilized time-space by means of subjectification, rather different from the immobilization experienced by objectification that gives rise to neurosis and paranoia, yet which is strictly correlative. One battlefield of the future will be the boundaries of the self in search for the tools to resist the interiorization of the structures of power implicated in the flows of relationality. And yet one must not forget that these developments remain rather local phenomena, and that outside the “postmodern” mobilization of “clinical” animism induced in new forms of subjectification, what awaits us everywhere is history. Despite the postmodern amnesia of a capitalism turned green, the conflicts of modernity are far from pacified. History’s battlefields need new modes of recognition, and understandings of production and transformation of relational cosmographies under the modern traditions and conditions of war. It is against this backdrop that animism, as a grand narrative of sorts, may become a necessary epic for the society of control, a tool for the tackling of the qualitative, political aspects of relationality.

37 Rane Willerslev, Soul Hunters, 191


Animism 50

Lili Dujourie

Initialen der Stilte 5, 2008

MDF, metal and clay

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Paris

Initialen der Stilte consists of a gray functional table upon which a heap of objects is laid out. They are earthen in color and resemble scraps of clay peeled off a rolling pin—curved little flake of earth, the edges of which are gently rapped. From atas; the table looks like an operating table or a doctor’s instrument tray, and the jumble of earth-like, curled skin or broken body parts. The haphazard placement of the curved flakes makes that appear convex, some concave. A dynamic is created; the individual elements appear to be in movement like the limbs of one body. Both in mythology and in the scriptures, clay was the material with which divinity made man. There is, in Dujourie’s use of clay, the idea of return to the very beginnings. Under the work’s title, Initialen der Stilte (Initials of silence), we may read the scraps of clay as testimony to the god’s and God’s shaping of man and woman, to the essence of the body, which, through the ages, has been objectified and silenced.
Étienne-Jules Marey,
Goéland volant obliquement dans la direction de l'appareil, 1887
Original ink drawing on Bristol board
left: Empoisonnement d'un animal (espèce non précisée), undated
Original photograph on lampblack
Courtesy Cinémathèque Française, Paris