

# Redrawing ecology:

dark ecological thought in art-design practice

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1918 · 2018

Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts in the  
Faculty of Visual Arts at Stellenbosch University.

supervised by

M.J. Kaden

March 2018

## DECLARATION

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March 2018

## Abstract

The thesis follows my practice based research process as a visual communication designer concerned with visualising deep ecological thought. Throughout this thesis, I apply Timothy Morton's dark ecology theory that argues that an awareness of negativity and tragic melancholy is necessary in order to understand our current ecological climate. This mood is integral to closing the gap between internal human involvement and the supposed external environment. The first section *Animism - from deep roots to dark loops* is devoted to a theoretical unpacking of animism as a dark contested theory in relation to the darkness of our present ecology in crisis. In the second section, *Aesthetic animism*, I discuss my own creative practice as an expression of ecological thought supported by an animist mode of perceiving. Animism is unpacked as an outsider philosophy joins forces with working with waste matter in my art-design practice, more specifically the excrement of the ocean. This text incorporates a synergy between knowledge and visibility, text and designed objects as a means of practicing ecological literacy. In order to aid the ecology in crisis this text argues for a renewed, modest, prophetic kinship with our environment, that extends a hand towards non-human agents including the earth within a practice based research process in the realm of visual arts.

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## Preface

This thesis is an integrated study incorporating both a theoretical and practical element. The theoretical component reflects critical inquiries unearthed through my creative practice. Throughout this thesis, I refer back to my creative practice as art-design, which refers to the art of an cultivating an ecologically conscious design process. My intentional use of this invented term is implemented to soften the hierarchy between art and design. As I find myself in an in-between space, a visual communication design student, pursuing a Masters in visual arts. Practically my work involves the making of several objects (*ghost nets*) and their installation with sound in my final exhibition. Throughout this thesis I refer back to the *ghost nets* as figures listed throughout this text and as documentation of my art-design process.

I recurrently write in a mode of expression that the reader may detect as personal. When I refer back to myself, I attempt at accommodating my own voice as the anti, within an academic text. This decision to write at times deeply personally, is done in good spirit to help break out of the normative and oppressive routines even just for a moment.

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems, You shall possess the good of the earth and sun.... there are millions of suns left, You shall no longer take things at second or third hand.... nor look through the eyes of the dead... nor feed on the spectres in books, You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself  
(Whitman 1855:22).

Whenever a wall is erected there will always be 'people arisen' to 'jump the wall', that is, to cross over borders. If only by imagining. As though inventing images contributed - a little here, powerfully there - to reinventing our political hopes (Huberman 2016:3).

I had my recurring dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening (Butler 1993:3).

At night blackness and then blacker blackness. Concentrate and you will see blue and purple deep green, deep and distant. Waves come in and in, go out come in and in go out in and in and in endlessly rolling foaming curling and whirling fat and foamy trickily splashy creamy. The building building wall of water ever coming nearer and nearer. . .  
(Himid 1996:154)

"man" is like a face drawn in sand, eventually wiped away by the ocean tides. What a weirdly prescient image of global warming, with its rising sea levels and underwater government meetings. (Morton 2016:13)

it should be that we have already passed the threshold of irreversible heating, then perhaps we should listen to the deep ecologists and let them be our guide. . . (Love-lock 2006:197).

## Introduction

### My recurring dream

The tide keeps rising and retreating, but rising at a much quicker tempo. It is eating away at the house. The movement of the waves draws closer until finally the structure is swallowed by waves. Water penetrates the cracks and slowly shifts the structure from left to right. In a moment I realise the house is not sinking, but floating. I can hold onto the remaining structure as I shift along with the waves. From my fortress, the kinetic mass of water is hypnotic. I am in a transient state, falling upright. Out of frustration I wake up.

### Background and Aims

In this study I aim to explore the complexity of ecological thought manifest in my immediate environment, visualised through my art-design practice. I aim to make visible how ecological challenges are not just a concern of an external environment, but also a product of personal dreams, desires, fantasies and fears internal to the human mind. My creative practice is anchored in the recurring dream mentioned above that I have experienced ever since I can remember. It reoccurs every few months. This dream, I suspect, is rooted in my experience of living in a house three hundred metres from the ocean on the east coast of South Africa for the past seven years and from partially visiting the same house periodically ever since I was a child.<sup>1</sup> These autobiographical experiences are central to my own strand of ecological awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> A modest, rectangular structure was built by my parents and grandparents in 1983 called the Ark at 25m above sea level. In this location, no other light contaminates the night sky. There are no street lights. There is only darkness, the sound of the ocean, and the moon pulling and pushing the tides. The underlying fear of living next to the wild ocean has impacted my dreams. Incited by my father (who is a deep thinker about environmental and planetary circumstances), I have been part of conversations about solar flares, climate change and the pressing issue of the rising of the shoreline. The water level rises 5mm every year and dampness leaks into the architecture.

Cultivating an ecological practice involves more than just personal experience however. It is a hyper sensitive attitude towards the conditions and moods of the times. I do not claim to propose an answer to ecological problems, but aim only to explore my personal interpretation of anxieties manifesting in my immediate environment and mind through visual and written responses. Throughout my study I apply Timothy Morton's (2016:160) dark ecology theory that argues that an awareness of negativity and tragic melancholy is necessary in order to understand our current ecological climate. This mood is integral to closing the gap between internal human involvement and the supposed external environment.

My role as designer, is to contribute to a visual literacy of ecology and is the primary concern of this study. I centre my creative practice at the core of this investigation and in parallel conversation with the ecology in crisis. The sea level is rising as the earth is getting warmer. The damp heated womb of mother earth is fertile ground for the following research question to take flesh...

How can dark ecological thought manifest visually in an art-design practice based research?

### What is ecology?

Ecology is most commonly defined as "the science of relations between the organism and the surrounding outer world" as coined by German biologist Ernst Haeckel (cited in Capra 1996:33). Rooted in the Greek word, *oikos*, which is translated as 'household', ecology refers to the complex mode of coexistence between different members of the household, arguably of earth as a whole (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'ecology'). The mood and intentions of dark ecology have lured me ever closer towards my local household. Lucy Lippard (1997:7) writes that "[f]or some people the lure of the local is neither felt nor acknowledged; for some it is an unattain-

able dream; for others it is a bittersweet reality, at once comforting and constricting; for others it is only partial reality, partial dream". For me, the reality of the local is complex and total.

Taking dark ecological reasoning as anchor, my own household becomes the entry point into my practice. My interest in ecology is rooted in a specific topological terrain. All my attention is drawn to the isolated house on the shore that is the subject of my dreams. Lippard (1997:7) explains "the lure of the local", the effect of place, as a visceral pull that further unmasks our deepest politics and spiritual legacies.

#### A second vignette

The second experience relevant to my ecological anxiety is not a dream. It is a memory repeatedly rehearsed, rooted in reality. It occurs when I am at home and it is raining. There is a leak in our roof. I look up at the white ceiling. I see a cloud of mould. I think it spreads day, by day, dot after dot, until dots and more dots are breeding in the roof, like an invisible force. In the middle the dots become denser and accumulate in a circular patch. I hear a dripping noise. It disturbs my attempts at sleep. I hear it again. And the dark cloud grows above my head. Wetness and dampness is the enemy. It makes everything rust. The linoleum floors get sticky. Sweaty, salty fog assembles on the windows and there is moisture in my hair and underneath my toenails. Wounds tend to heal more slowly.

Mouldy patches eat away at the house. Mould specifically eats a circular shape into the ceiling above my bed. When it rains, I stare at the fungi nebula forming above me. At night, I hear the dripping of water beating the ceiling at a lethargic tempo. The dampness inside the house continues to the shoreline outside. Walks down to the coastline extend the sense of a damp threshold. Then ocean mist creeps into my hair. My feet are confronted with strips of plastic and styrofoam debris appearing in the sand. My toes catch a piece of rope. The beach house

becomes a site of conflict and the beach, a transitional point between human and non-human bodies.

#### Ecological thought made manifest

If the very question of inside and outside is what ecology undermines or makes thick and weird, surely this is a matter of seeing how ecosystems are made not only of trees, rock formations, and pigs (seemingly “external” to the human) but also of thoughts, wishes, fantasies (seemingly “inside” our human heads)” (Morton 2016:67)

Stuck between the inside of a dream and the outside of a house structure, I take this in-between and liminal space as the location of my art. Dampness is the enemy as it induces decay. Human created waste materials contaminate the shoreline, but nature takes revenge as fungi eats away at private property. As a designer I want to reconcile the two entities of what is inside and personal with what is external. I collect the rope from the coastline as a material to re-create a new object. This specific method of gathering material becomes a tool that fuses together the experiences of my mind; dreams, anxieties and fantasies surrounding water, and tangible reality. It contributes to the visual world of mark making. Ecological thought thus becomes the intersection between life and art, text and image, reality and fantasy. It is this kind of thought that I aim to explore and make visual and visceral in my study.

## Deeper than ecology

In this study, I investigate a theoretical vocabulary of ecology<sup>2</sup> within the visual arts realm. I argue that approaching ecology, through a deeper, darker lens is necessary in order to liberate the term from archaic theoretical schemata. The use of the term ecology is hence not implemented as a branch of natural science, but used on a par with deep ecology theory as devised by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. In his article, *The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement*, Næss (1973:95) conceptualises deep ecology as ‘deeper concerns’ in relation to the state of affairs in our universe. Deep ecology dramatically opposes ‘shallow’ environmental policies.<sup>3</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of environmental ethics and philosophy*, Michael Nelson (2008:207) asserts that the academic use of the term amounts to the awareness of the biosphere as an “ontologically unbroken whole”. Deep ecology denies human beings special consideration over other life forms, which destabilises the ontological boundaries between the self and the surrounding outer world.

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<sup>2</sup> Science historian, Frank Egerton points out in his article, *A history of the ecological sciences* (2001:93), that ecology is one of the most diverse and also the youngest sciences, which makes its origins and history difficult to pin down. Scientist Fritjof Capra points out in his book *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter* (1996:33), that the language of ecology developed in tandem with organismic biology makes it an invention of natural science.

<sup>3</sup> James Lovelock (2006:2) also opposes shallow environmentalism as he states that “[s]ustainable development, supported by the use of renewable energy, is the fashionable approach to living with the Earth, and it is the platform of green-thinking politicians’. Lovelock explains it best:

To expect sustainable development or a trust in business as usual to be viable policies is like expecting a lung cancer victim to be cured by stopping smoking; both measures deny the existence of the Earth's disease, the fever brought on by a plague of people. Despite their difference, they come from religious and humanist beliefs which regard the Earth as there to be exploited for the good of humankind (2006:3).

Lovelock (2006:197) further encourages deep ecological thought when he states “This small band of deep ecologists seem to realize more than other green thinkers the magnitude of the change of mind needed to bring us back to peace within Gaia, the living Earth.”

Deep ecologist David Rothenberg (in Nelson 2008:219) compares deep ecology to a tree where the roots extract nourishment from spiritual, philosophical, aesthetic, and other “speculative soils”. One such speculative soil can be characterized by the debates and discourses that make up the term Anthropocene, our current geological epoch during which human activity is marked as having a noticeable impact on the biosphere of planet earth. The narrative of the Anthropocene frames *Homo sapiens* as a new geological force altering their environment, chiefly through the burning of coal, oil, and natural gases, which induces global temperature changes (Haraway 2016:44).<sup>4</sup> The timescale and ecological implications of the Anthropocene evokes speculative responses to an uncertain future. I experience this uncertain future when the geological terrain of my home next to the ocean is interrogated. In his book *Dark Ecology: for a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016:59), Timothy Morton describes the Anthropocene as “[n]ature in

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between the Anthropocene and water is inseparable as the term was coined in 1980 by ecologist Eugene Stoermer, a specialist in freshwater diatoms (Haraway 2016:44). Haraway adds that “From the start, uses of the term Anthropocene emphasized human-induced warming and acidification of the oceans from fossil-fuel-generated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions” (Haraway 2016:44). I find this correlation between the ocean and the Anthropocene as an important link that ties in with my practice. She further confirms the connection between the Anthropocene and the ocean as a form of capitalist critique when she refers to the exploitation of ocean resources as a result of what she refers to as the Capitalocene:

. . . the Capitalocene, in which deep-sea mining and drilling in oceans and fracking and pipeline construction across delicate lichen-covered northern landscapes are fundamental to accelerating nationalist, transnationalist, and corporate unworlding (Haraway 2016:56).

In addition to her capitalist critique Haraway also provides commentary from an ecofeminist viewpoint of the Anthropocene when she states, “Man plus Tool does not make history. That is the story of History human exceptionalists tell” (Haraway 2016:49). Haraway adds that history must accommodate other narratives that she refers to as “geostories”, “Gaia stories”, “multi-species stories” for inspiration and consolation in ecologically challenging times (Haraway 2016:49).

I acknowledge Haraway’s critique, but consciously align my argument with the manner in which Timothy Morton (2016:21-25) unpacks the Anthropocene as a unifying term. He states that all humans must be accountable for our role in the speculative sixth mass extinction event, when he wittingly states “Humans and not dolphins invented steam engines and drilled for oil. But this isn’t a sufficient reason to suppose them special” (Morton 2016:18). Morton re-describes the Anthropocene as an “open, porous, flickering” concept because it challenges the definition of human species. Only then can the term human be knocked from its “pampered, ostensibly privileged place set apart from all other beings” (2016:24).

its toxic nightmare form". I identify with this "toxic nightmare" (Morton 2016:59) through my experience of nature eating away at the walls of my home, and interior world, and through my recurring dream.

I feel drawn to dark ecology in my practice because of my experience. Timothy Morton's idea of dark ecology supports the notion that nature is not green, but dark. Morton (2016:9) compares ecological awareness to the loop-like coordination of film noir, where humanity as narrators of their own destiny find out that they are also the criminals and perpetrators of their own demise and misery. Darkness hence can refer to the uncertainty and disorder within the Anthropocene. Interestingly, for Morton, darkness starts as a depression, but evolves into an ontological mystery between things (2016:160). It is this mystery between things in my immediate environment and dream world that I explore in this study. I experience a mysterious synchronicity at work between objects I create, and words that jump forward out of text that I read and write. The boundary line between the realms of knowledge, between text and object and experience start to merge and become unclear. Within this study, a certain mystery and uncertainty also surfaces between theory and practice.

### Structure and methodology

The title of this thesis, *Redrawing ecology* traces the migration of ecology from a theoretical concept into my art-design practice in the visual *lifeworld*.<sup>5</sup> *Redrawing ecology* also refers to the re-mapping of ecological discussion within the alternative theoretical terrain of animism.

Animism has been previously understood as the belief of there being a life-force within inanimate objects, believed mainly by people referred to as 'primitive' by anthropologist Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871:417). Animist theory hence has existed outside of mod-

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<sup>5</sup> The term lifeworld is used in the manner of Edmund Husserl, as a phenomenological word that subjects experience together and as a basis of all epistemologies. Husserl introduced the term life world (German *lebenswelt*) in *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology* (1936:108)

ern reason's 'enlightened' order. In accordance with curator and writer Anselm Franke (2010:2), this study supports the importance of bringing a kind of philosophy or mode of understanding once designated to the peripheries of knowledge back into the relational dialogue of modern and central everyday practices in contemporary society.

My reason for addressing deep, dark ecological thought with a specific focus on animism lies in the sensitivity and empathy that an animist mode of being extends towards the environment. An animist mode of being is about a hyper awareness that has roots in a primordial, darker mood. This melancholic mood reflects the origins of animist thought. Animist thought forms an alliance with the outsider, the other. Animism is an outsider philosophy that is not aligned with enlightenment ways of thinking, but rather a darkening and disorder of our current environment.

Animist reasoning joins forces with what is being left out, left outside and disregarded. In the same way, the environment is excluded as it is described as blank page onto which human desires are projected (Morton 2016:65). The projection and extraction of human desires from the environment is often implemented with violence. W.J.T Mitchell notes this continuous desire for power over our environment when he describes environmental landscape as clouded by 'darkness' of a moral, ideological, and political nature (1994:6). The second chapter *Animism - from deep roots to dark loops* is devoted to a theoretical unpacking of animism as a dark contested theory in relation to the darkness of our present ecological climate.

This violence inflicted upon the environment is not only physical but also visual, as projected by the gazing eye (1994:29). Mitchell proposes an "aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land" in order to navigate this darkness that overshadows the environment. I believe that the animist lens can induce an aesthetic alertness towards the evil of our own making embedded in earth. In chapter three *Aesthetic animism*, I discuss my own creative practice as an expression of ecological thought supported by an animist mode of perceiving. As pre-

viously mentioned animism joins forces with what is othered, moved to the outside or disregarded. This interpretation of animism supports working with waste matter, more specifically the excrement of the ocean.

The theoretical and practical components of my practice-based research are mutually informative. The integrated nature of theory and practice is best described by *Ouroboros*, the ancient symbol of a snake eating its own tail (Harper 2016 :online. Sv. 'Ouroboros'). In accordance with this symbol and metaphor, theoretical information moves in a continuous feedback loop<sup>6</sup> intimately connected with my art-design practice. The integration of theory and practice becomes a complex system of its own, an ecological system. Practice and theory contribute to a complex matrix that connects methods of thinking and making. My creative practice is that interface that fuses the inner theoretical realm with the outer visual world, in the process and pursuit of becoming ecologically literate. In his book *Ecological literacy*, author David Orr (1992:86) describes the act of becoming ecological literate as a 'merger of landscape and mindscape'.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, I attempt to reconcile and nurture a synergy between knowledge and visibility, text, art and designed objects. I further draw from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'plugging in' as a complementary methodology described in their book *A Thousand plateaus* (1987). 'Plugging in' is focused on decentering the theory/practice binary. The authors graphically describe a book as a literary machine and in order for it to work properly the literary machine must be 'plugged-in' to other machines (1987:4). Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Jackson use the method of

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<sup>6</sup> A feedback loop within ecosystems refers to the system in which nutrients and waste are continuously being recycled in nature, where once species waste becomes another species source of food (Capra 1996:290). Within complexity theory, the feedback loop is a key property of complex networks, as the concept of feedback is the reason for complex systems regulate themselves, for self-organisation and communication within a network (Capra 1996:82). Both uses of the feedback loop are informative to my own interpretation of the complexity between theory and practice.

<sup>7</sup> Capra (1996:290) describes ecoliteracy as developing sustainable human communities based on the manner in which ecosystems organise themselves. He further states that humanity's ability to survive is directly dependant on our ecoliteracy. In other words the adaptability towards the basic principles of ecology is key for survival on an exhausted planet (1996:295).

'plugging in' in their book *Thinking with theory* (2013). They describe plugging in as a continuous process of assembly and disassembly in order to produce something new, where the emphasis is not on the assemblage as an outcome, but on the process of planning, mapping, arranging and joining (2013:261). To counter repetitive notions of known thought processes and experiences, 'plugging in' as methodology is not only useful, but essential in research (Jackson & Mazzei 2013:269), especially research intentioned as this is to demonstrate and describe the possibilities of ecological thinking with its emphasis on the relationships between all things. They emphasize the plugging of one text into another. Not only texts, but plugging authors and concepts into each other is also used in order to break cycles of repetition and fossilised knowledge systems (Jackson & Mazzei 2013:269).

Importantly, plugging in not only supports the interaction between theory and practice, but also underscores a third component, namely the researcher. "It [plugging in] also evokes a folding—not just of data into theory and vice versa—but also of ourselves as researchers into the texts and into the theoretical threshold" (Jackson & Mazzei 2013:266). In this study I 'plug' my dreams, experiences, and anxieties about ecology into my art-design practice, that is in turn plugged into my writing, as I find these two domains, of experience and text, inseparable.

#### Framework (a complexity perspective)

"Unless one likes complexity, one cannot feel at home in the twenty-first century", according to Braidotti (2002:1). Due to the broad and intricate nature of ecology, a complexity paradigm is adopted. In his book titled *Method*, Edgar Morin graphically describes a complexity paradigm as a matter of "linking what was disjointed" (1992:18). Morin asserts that this linking is necessary so that a new method can be born or "take flesh" (1992:18) and potentially start revolutionising contemporary understanding and methodologies.

In order to describe complex phenomena like ecology, ethical interpretation and evaluation is required. Ethics within complexity does not refer to altruism, but is used on par with Paul Cilliers' lean application in his text *What can we learn from a theory of complexity?* (2000) as an "inevitability of choices that cannot be backed up scientifically or objectively" (2000:29). Additionally, in the article *Difference, identity, and complexity* (2012:448) Cilliers emphasise the importance of this critical stance as complexity inevitably involves an infringement or transgression of accepted boundaries. To transgress means to cut across, or go beyond a frontier, which consequently involves the violation of a law, command, or moral code. Therefore, working within the framework of complexity thinking, one cannot simply repeat and reinforce what is currently accepted. Rather, this involves the infraction and undermining of imposed limits. Complexity demands daring action in the form of moving in-between laws, categories, and disciplines.

In his book *Seven complex lessons in education for the future* (1999:11), Edgar Morin asserts that we should include uncertainties within education and learn to navigate in an uncertain landscape. Morin argues that uncertainty kills simplistic learning and sets complex knowledge in motion. Morin elaborates with the visual image of swimming circles around islands of certainty. This uncertain, fluid terrain between art, science and philosophy forms the basis of my investigation into ecology. My text is an invitation into the grey area in-between these different do-

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<sup>8</sup> The grey area between art and science is hostile intellectual turf. In the article *Why art & science should be allowed to go their separate ways* (2009:34), James Elkins warns that the aesthetic dialogue between art and science is a "drunken conversation" which results in mutual misunderstandings between both parties. Elkins (2009:39) elaborates by arguing that when scientific content is simplified or modified, only the remnants of scientific forms remain. Andrew Yang (2015:1) suggests in his text *That Drunken Conversation between Two Cultures*, that the source of friction between art and science is the oversimplification of their dialogue, as art and science are both complex and evolving domains of enquiry. Most common mistakes include assumptions that the structure of the art-science conversation is a simple interdisciplinary bridge as opposed to a complex matrix. Yang (2015:4) suggests that the principle characteristic of uncertainty is the only entry point into the art-science conversation, and asserts that if artists and scientists both cultivate uncertainty at the root of their practice, the unstable terrain between these two disciplines will be up for deliberation and can be approached creatively.

mains of inquiry.<sup>8</sup> I would like to acknowledge the structure of the art-science conversation as a complex system that continuously invites meaningful uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

### Scope

This study acknowledges ecology as a branch of science, but does not allow for a complete scientific discussion of this. Ecology is discussed as a concept within the perimeters of visual arts, but at the same time aims to expand the discursive boundaries of visual arts. As a result, this study relies on theories that accommodate an alternative application of the term ecology within the realm of arts-based research. Due to the immense nature and scope of ecology as a subject, I choose to focus on the two main theories of deep and dark ecology. Both theories have contributed to a recent change in basic assumptions in ecological thought. This shift is explained by Fritjof Capra (1996:290) as a movement from hierarchies to networks. In my practice I propose a similar structure for my creative research process.

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<sup>9</sup> My theoretical framework has further been informed by the ideas of object orientated ontology (OOO) and posthumanism. Posthumanism questions the centrality of the human, while object orientated ontology explores the manner in which things exist outside of human perception (Morton 2016:16). It argues that the way in which things affect each other (causality) is not direct, but vicarious. Consequently, cause and effect is not linear, but mysterious. OOO does not reject modern science, but rather reflects a shift towards uncertainty that physical science experienced at the hands of Einstein's relativity theory and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle at the beginning of the twentieth century. OOO is desirable to deep ecological thought as it promotes a re-enchantment of what was previously thought, and inadequately so, about the environment.

As mentioned before, this thesis draws an important distinction between shallow and deep ecology, the former being a critique of mainstream environmentalism and its anthropocentric view of nature. This critique is rooted in European and North American industrial culture. In contrast, deep ecology is based on recognizing an inherent value in nature independently of human “wants”, needs and desires (Nelson 2008:206). Deep ecology is based on founding principles that centre around metaphysical holism and biocentric egalitarianism.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the book *The mushroom at the end of the world*, (2015:162) Anna Tsing uses the term “multispecies” as a substitute for advancing away from exclusive human exceptionalism. This radical claim, intrinsic to deep ecology, has received a myriad of academic and non-academic responses. Academically, it provides fertile ground for theorising alternative ecosophies.<sup>11</sup> Practically, it has inspired environmental activism movements. In this thesis I stick to deep ecology as an academic term and do not compensate for discussing deep ecology as a social movement. The flexibility of deep ecology is, however, acknowledged and the fact that it has “not yet crystallized into a complete system” (Nelson 2008:210) is a key reason for exploring deep ecology within the visual arts.

A critique of deep ecology is nevertheless that it does not provide a basis for cultural patterns and social organisations that have contributed to the ecological crisis. This is the focus of social ecology (Capra 1996:8). While the scope of this study does not allow for a social ecological discussion, I do draw from and recognise ecofeminism as a branch of social ecology with a natural affinity towards deep and dark ecological thought.<sup>12</sup> The historical narrative of both feminism and ecology bear similarities as subjects of a dominator system (Warren 2000:1). Female

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<sup>10</sup> These principles are outlined in *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary* by Næss (1973:95-98).

<sup>11</sup> Næss defines ecosophy as “a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium” (1973:99).

<sup>12</sup> The term *ecofeminism* was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort* in 1974 (Morton 2016:65). Ecofeminism underscores the link between injustices of “human others” referring to subordinate groups and “earth others” referring to non-human entities which includes animals and eco-systems (Warren 2001:1).

experiential knowledge is in sync with an ecological vision of reality (Capra 1996:9). There is an historical and theoretical kinship between women and nature which I feel inevitably shapes my writing.<sup>13</sup> As a woman, I embody the relationship between ecology and feminism. My femininity is inseparable from my ecological consciousness.

#### Literature review

Predominantly my literature leans towards those theories and theorists that provide challenges to and create uncertainty in their own respective fields. As previously mentioned, I aim to bring the controversial, 'darker', more contested theories around ecology into a contemporary and visual arts based dialogue. Many of the theorists I focus on have been described as controversial and have generated an abundance of critique, indicative of their relevance and importance in the contemporary discussion of our current geological and ecological climate. The venture of *Redrawing ecology* mimics my gang of theorists' attitudes: I also aim not to claim to provide answers to ecological problems, but instead, to provide the reader with creative and controversial thinking tools for developing their own possibilities.

This study draws from what have been termed 'third culture' theorists that provide a different context for understanding scientific terminology. Third culture philosophers consist of scientists who make dense scientific information accessible through their use of easily digestible language, as discussed by John Brockman in his book *The third culture: beyond the scientific revolution* (1996). I found the writing of scientist Fritjof Capra in his book *The Web of Life: a New Synthesis of Mind and Matter* (1996) extremely useful for contextualising and clarifying scientific terminology. In addition, scientist James Lovelock provides a comprehensive overview of our current

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<sup>13</sup> The harmony between ecology and feminism within this text is inspired by Carla Lonzi's statement in her controversially titled text, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, (1970:13) that states that the women's movement is not international, but planetary. Lonzi elaborates by highlighting man's exhausted relationship with reality, proven by space flights and searches for life on other planets. In contrast, the female planetary conversation has only recently begun, as women are in the process of advocating for *her* life on our own planet to begin (Lonzi 1970:17).

ecological crisis in his book, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back – and How we can Still Save Humanity* (2006). Lovelock provides an animistic interpretation of earth by controversially explaining his scientific research as Gaia theory.<sup>14</sup> Lovelock (2006:1) speaks from the self-appointed position of “planetary physician” whose patient, namely living earth is suffering from a fever. Anthropologist Tim Ingold is also a main contributor to the contemporary discussion of animism in his variety of articles surrounding the re-animation of western thought. A fresh take on ecology is provided by theorist Timothy Morton who writes extensively about the topic in a sequential series of books, *Ecology without nature* (2008), *The ecological thought* (2010) and *Dark Ecology* (2016). I found Morton to be an important link between ecology and the arts, as the author continuously pursues an alliance between the humanities and sciences. Morton aligns far flung fields of knowledge by finding a symbiosis between continental philosophers (known to the arts) and popular evolutionary biologist philosophers.

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<sup>14</sup> Lovelock unapologetically defends his use of Gaia, the mythic goddess, in relation to a scientific concept. “I know that to personalize the Earth System as Gaia, as I have often done and continue to do in this book, irritates the scientifically correct, but I am unrepentant because metaphors are more than ever needed for a widespread comprehension of the true nature of the Earth and an understanding of the lethal dangers that lie ahead” (2006:188).

## Part One: Animism – from deep roots to dark loops

I experience my art-design process as an expression of animistic movement between myself and the lifeworld. What I mean by animistic movement will be discussed in this chapter. I deem it necessary to explore the notion of animism and the theories that surround the topic in an in-depth way, as these are critical to my practice, as explored in Chapter Three: Aesthetic Animism.

Central to the ecological narrative of this thesis is the concept of animism, in which ecological thought is etymologically and contextually entangled. Animism, contextually linked to anthropology, is known as a practice of pre-modern societies that attributed a moveable life, spirit or soul to inanimate objects or the environment. The etymological origin of animism is derived from the Latin term *anima*, which translates to life, breath or soul, which is suggestive of a living movement in its most basic form as well as ‘mysterious’ movement within the environment (Harper 2016 :online. Sv. ‘animism’).

In a contemporary light, animism is being ‘revived’ or reconsidered, re-animating a Western tradition of comprehension. Hence ‘animation’ can refer to a continuous movement with the potential to destabilise previous categories and outdated thinking.

## Animating the void

This section is dedicated to addressing a gap, wound or void expressed as the 'great divide' in which animism becomes particularly significant. The discourse of the 'great divide' dates to the fifth century before Christ in Greek atomists' philosophies. In their book *Order out of chaos: man's new dialogue with nature* (1984:3), Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers note that the Greek atomists reduced the complex character of nature to mere atoms floating in a void. The earliest expression of the atom, devised as the smallest indivisible building block of matter, rested on its antithesis from the void. According to their doctrine, motion is made possible because of the empty space between atoms. The source of motion was not accounted for, but was associated with external forces of spiritual origin and inherently opposed to matter (Capra 1975:21). The dualism between spirit and matter was brought to a head in the seventeenth century with the philosophy of René Descartes who based his view of nature on two independent domains consisting of matter (*res extensa*) fundamentally opposed to mind (*res cogitans*) (Capra 1975:21). Philosophical developments like the Cartesian split preceded classical physics, but nevertheless become the modern archetype against which much of the modern world has been measured.

The hostile relationship between modernity and animism also surfaces in an influential text by anthropologist Edward Tylor who implemented the term animism in his book *Primitive culture* (1871:23) as "the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings" (1871:287). Tylor's conception of animism was derived from secondhand observations of the beliefs and practices of pre-modern societies. In his book *We have never been modern* (1993:10), Bruno Latour describes the adjective 'modern' as a rupture along the regular passage of time. Latour's use of the term 'modern' refers to the movement of breaking, or splitting of a timeline into moderns and ancients, the victors and the vanquished (1993:10). The adjective 'modern' thus signifies a myriad of dichotomies like nature/culture or subject/object, human/non-human; which is also loosely expressed as the 'great divide'. Latour raises the question of how to transform the torturous rela-

tions maintained within the 'great divide'.<sup>15</sup> "How are we to conceptualise the Middle Kingdom?" Latour asks (1993:77). He elucidates:

As I have said, we have to trace both the modern dimension and the non-modern dimension, we have to deploy the latitude and longitude that will allow us to draw maps adapted both to the work of mediation and to the work of purification (Latour 1993:77).

An updated expression of animism can hence also be described as a map<sup>16</sup> that illustrates, surveys and moves across the imaginary landscape of the 'great divide'. Anselm Franke (2012:29) compares animism to a map covering a territory that unveils multiple movements below what appears to be a stable foundation. In this regard, animism reveals the known past as an unstable landscape. An animist lens becomes a tool through which to interrogate history, modernity, and master narratives. Animism brings awareness to the modern (contemporary) position, with specific regards to the way knowledge is produced, positioned at the border of rigid knowledge and objectification. Animation happens when this border is loosened, moved, or crossed (Franke 2012:29). Animism acts as a key that unlocks the oppressions of religious, teleological and colonial building blocks on which modernity has been based, as Franke (2010:2) writes :

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<sup>15</sup> This kind of thinking has great relevance within a South African context, where society still struggles with a divided past. It is a sense that I have, from the reading and practicing of animist philosophy, that herein lie tools to help diffuse long-standing unhealthy dualisms in thought, perhaps also offering useful theoretical perspectives within the context of South Africa's fraught political landscape.

<sup>16</sup> This study finds the graphic metaphor of drawing maps relevant. In the co-authored *A thousand plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari compare a map to their notion of a rhizome in order to emphasise the multi-dimensionality of a map. Deleuze and Guattari state that a map promotes connections between diverse fields and most importantly posits multiple points of entry. They elaborate:

The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation (1987:12).

A ghost is haunting modernity - the ghost of animism. It awaits us everywhere when we step outside modern reason's cone of light, outside its firmly mapped order, when approaching its frontier zones and 'outside.' We find it in the imagined darkness of modernity's outside, where everything changes shape and the world is reassembled from the fragments that reason expels from its chains of coherences. The task is to bring those constitutive others at the 'dark' side of modern reason - like 'animism,' but also the 'imaginary,' the 'negative,' 'otherness,' or even 'evil' - back into the relational diagram of modernity (2010:2).

Through animism I can engage with "those constitutive others" (Franke 2010:2) in my visual practice and through writing. Stengers refers to the act of writing as textual animation. Textual animation is writing that builds a bridge to the past and more importantly gives ideas from the past the power to affect the present. Textual animation also brings awareness to my own present position as a researcher, where I<sup>17</sup> "[a]s a philosopher, I am situated: a daughter to a practice responsible for many divisions, but which may also be understood as a rather particular means of bridge-making" (2012:03). Bridge-making is a practice of weaving relations across the divide (2012:03). This practice has the ability to turn a divide into a living contrast that has the power to affect, evoke participation, thinking and feeling.

The recollection of, return towards, and retreat into animism aims to contribute to a transformative process of bridge-making, hence of also animating divides, as well as map-making across divisions. Animism is a means of addressing the uncertain future of the planet through a destabilization of the present by returning and retreating into a primordial past understanding of 'mysterious' and 'spiritual' movement.

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<sup>17</sup> The words of Deleuze (1988:38) are also in support of the animistic and transformative aspect of the writing process, that "to write is to struggle and resist; to write is to become; to write is to draw a map".

## Animistic ontology

Animism exemplifies an ontological anarchy (Franke 2012:2).<sup>18</sup> This section is dedicated to investigating the ontological discourse central to animism. It aims to highlight not only the ontological anarchy but also the ontological mystery at the core of animism. This is to bring awareness to the mystery and magic inherent in the environment, and hence to re-enchant ecological thought.

The dialectic and vernacular distinction between objects and things is an important differentiation to make when concerned with animistic ontology. In the text, *What do pictures want*, the author W. J. T. Mitchell notes, “objects are the way things appear to a subject – that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template... The thing is invisible, blurry or illegible to the subject. It signals the moment when the object becomes the Other” (2005:156).

While a modernist denunciation of animism was premised on the exclusion of things as other and unrecognisable, through an animist lens things have become intelligible (Franke 2012:2). One such effect of things as intelligible has resulted in what can be described as an ‘anarchy of things’. Matt Bernico explains the nature of the above-mentioned anarchism in the text *Anthropodicy: An Anarchism of Things*<sup>19</sup>. He explains that an anarchy of things happens through a desire for egalitarianism, ecology and democracy that does not favour human exceptionalism. Instead, he advocates for a democracy of things (2015:78). The author explains:

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<sup>18</sup> Ontology refers to the study of existence. Ontology does not outline exactly what exists, but rather how and in what manner things exist (Morton 2016:16).

<sup>19</sup> Bernico’s use of the term ‘anarchism of things’ is derived from Bruno Latour’s already established ‘parliament of things’ in his seminal work *We have never been Modern* (2015:73).

Contemporary ecological events and catastrophes demonstrate the exasperated relationship humanity shares with the rest of the world and our anthropocentric metaphysics and politics need to be rethought. We need an anarchist politics that imagines that another world is possible, but more than just a human world: we need an anarchism of things (2015:74).

This idea is elaborated on by Isabelle Stengers who further brings the discussion into an ecological framework, by

connecting heterogeneous practices, concerns, and ways of giving meaning to the inhabitants of this earth, with none being privileged and any being liable to connect with any other. One might object by calling this a figure of anarchy. Yes - but an ecological anarchy (2012:03).

An anarchy of things, according to Franke, does not mean a resistance to power or absence of power, but insists on the right and legitimate not to be subjected to power (2012:6). In the text *Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought* (2006) anthropologist Tim Ingold asserts that animism within the lifeworld is not about infusing spirit into substance or agency into material as Tylorian dogma initially insisted. For Ingold, the animacy within the lifeworld is ontologically indifferent or unconcerned about the difference between what posits life and what does not (2006:10). For Arne Næss, the same argument amounts to a principle he refers to as 'biospherical egalitarianism' (1973:96). From a deep ecology perspective, the "equal right to live and blossom" is not exclusively reserved for humans, but for all processes and forms of life. If this principle is restricted exclusively for humans, there are detrimental effects not only to the environment, but to the quality of human life itself. Attempting to ignore our inter-dependence reinforces a master and slave like narrative that contributes to the alienation of all life forms, whether human or not.

Building on the biospherical egalitarianism of Næss, a similar theory more familiar to the art world is found in Graham Harman's book *Tool – being Heidegger and the metaphysics of objects* (2002), where Harman proposes a fresh reading of Heidegger's tool analysis that appears in Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* (1927). Harman suggests that Heidegger unknowingly put forward the idea of "guerrilla metaphysics" to describe the existence of things (2002:1). Hence an object orientated philosophy took shape, also referred to as *Thing Theory*, as in the text of the same name by Bill Brown (2001:1). Jane Bennett further explains 'thing power' as a curious potentiality that inanimate things possess. Thing power is an ability of inanimate things to act, animate, and produce various effects, subtle and dramatic alike (2010:6).

This argument is aligned with dark ecology as Morton continuously underscores the importance of the ontological mystery of things (2016:160). Morton states that we cannot really see things. We see only human versions of things (2016:28). He emphasises the inevitably entangled position of humans due to their perceiving abilities. It is concluded that we cannot possibly claim to *know* things, which is why things remain ontologically mysterious. What is deduced from object orientated ontology is that things exist in a withdrawn manner, which is to say that their existence is not displayed in the open in a knowable way. Thus, the way things affect one another (causality) is not linear, mechanical or direct, but rather non-linear, indirect, weird or strange. Things affect each other at a distance, vicariously, aesthetically (Morton 2016:16).

Animating ontology allows for the re-animation or transformation of reality as mysterious, unknowable and magical. An animated ontology puts forward that things exist in equal relation to all things, in a democracy. If all earth's inhabitants, human and non-human alike, exist democratically, the free and flat interconnection between them can be understood as a disruption of imposed hierarchies. This disruption can be explained as ontological anarchy. The animistic cosmos rests on the premise that all things are intrinsically mysterious, democratic and anarchic.

### Animism as a relational epistemology

Anthropologist Nurit Bird-David distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge in her article *Animism revisited* (1999). The first is knowledge that accumulates representations of “things in-the-world”, while the second form of knowledge refers to acquiring the skills of “being in-the-world” (Bird-David 1999:78). The former requires thinking, while the latter emphasises a method of relating. Both models of knowledge have their limits and strengths. The first form highlights differences, but knowledge that relies on relating absorbs differences (Bird-David 1999:78). The latter mode of knowing, through relating, includes framing the environment relationally as this kind of knowing draws similarities between different components. Bird-David proposes a fresh take on animism, by redefining it as a relational epistemology (1999:86), a way of learning how things function in relation to how we function. Animism as a relational epistemology aids the exploration into how the earth-environment functions in relation to its inhabitants.

Ingold emphasises understanding movement as a priority for understanding the animistic cosmos, a relational epistemology as Bird-David suggests. The first reason is that within the animistic cosmos, the environment is always in flux, always moving (2006:10). Ingold distinguishes two types of movements; a lateral movement across a surface which is referred to as transport and driven by a preconceived destination, and secondly, the movements along paths of travel which are referred to as wayfaring. He draws similarities between wayfaring and an *Inuit* understanding of movement, capturing the idea that “as soon as a person moves, he [/she] becomes a line” (2006:14). ‘People as lines’ emphasises a body consciousness and awareness of trace also as a result of movement. Celestial bodies like the sun and moon can be recognised by their trails or their paths rather than being described as disks in a specific time and place. Ingold’s description of wayfaring as movement applies to all things, human and non-human alike.

Ingold's animistic perception of life in general is one of a process of becoming, where things have a way of emanating forward, leaving trails behind them along a pathway, in a continuous process. Ingold refers to the term *becoming* as an expression of wayfaring and fundamentally opposes *being* as a static placement within a spatial construction. Animism becomes the continuous transformative potential of beings (whether they be thing-like or person-like) existing through a web of relations (2006:10). Ingold's redefinition of animism as a relational epistemology is embedded in the relationships between things, but mostly the effect they evoke and reciprocate through continuous interaction. To animate, according to Ingold, becomes an action of continuous birth (2006:10).

#### Dark loops and Gaia theory

A process of 'continuous birth' refers to the animistic lifeworld as an infinite loop. For Morton, the loop is a metaphor for a meeting place of human and non-human entities. Morton warns that nature is not an empty page onto which human desires can be projected, but a 'desire' loop dependent on different entities that also stand in a loop-like relation to each other (2016:65).

Ecological awareness also takes a loop like form. Morton describes that simply to exist is to take on the form of a loop (2016:6). Ecological and biological systems are often loops, for instance ecosystems as food chains. Morton presents a dark ecological loop explaining the loop of human interference with the environment. This strange loop occurs where two seemingly separate levels flip into one another with a twist (2016:7). This twist is related to the weird, uncanny or unexpected relationship between two utterly separate human and non-human entities, for example. The twist can merge contradictory positions like old and new knowledge systems. The process of binding contradictions causes a movement that Michael Riffaterre (1984:143) describes as mythic animation. Mythic animation acts as a carrier of meaning from

one spatial state to another, making transformation possible on different levels such as linguistic, metaphysic and symbolic levels (Kaden 2002:108).

Morton also attributes our perception of ecological challenges to the reading of a poem (2016:37). Poems entangle us in loops, because our reading of a poem is provisional. Our thoughts about what poems are also influence how we read them. Similarly, ecological challenges, for example, climate change or global warming, are seen creatively and ironically through the eyes of people who are also the perpetrators of the crisis. Those seeking the solution are active participants in the creation of the problem.

Another author who theorises human entanglement in ecological problems is James Lovelock, notably in his book *Gaia: why the earth is fighting back – and how we can still save humanity*. I find it necessary to elaborate on Lovelock's theories as he proposes an animistic view in line with animism as a relational epistemology, further thinking of earth as a living system, giving it the name of a mythical goddess, Gaia. Gaia in Greek Mythology is the ancestral mother of all life: the primal Mother or earth goddess. Gaia is a Greek primordial entity, also spelt *Gaea*, which relates to the personification of the earth (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'Gaia'). Gaia theory in Lovelock's terms explains earth as a self-regulating system that controls its own temperature to always remain comfortable, just like the human body (2006:2). Lovelock's animistic interpretation of earth as alive is used as a tool to bring awareness to the heated state of today, hence to realise the severity of earth's 'fever'. He writes that "[o]nly when we think of our planetary home as alive can we see, perhaps for the first time, why farming abrades the living tissue of its skin and why pollution is poisonous to it as well as to us (Lovelock 2006:2).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The central argument of Gaia theory is not to victimise the earth under threat, as in fact it is fittingly sometimes referred to as a 'tough bitch' (Margulis in Lovelock 2006: xv). Gaia shares behavioural traits to that of a stern mother who is nurturing, but at the same time "ruthlessly cruel towards transgressors, even when they are her progeny" (Lovelock 2006:188).

I hope to present a robust and well-rounded discussion of animism as a loop, cultivated from dark, primordial soils, which continues to entangle us and all living and non-living components into what can be defined as a relational epistemology. The recognition of the loop-like structure of animism destabilizes the boundaries between the internal self and external world.<sup>21</sup> This cosmos and world is always in flux or continuous motion and everything in it is in a state of becoming, in a process of continuous birth as Morton suggests. The continuous interaction between humans and the geological environment takes the form of a dark(er) loop described by Gaia theory in which the primordial earth as a goddess and mother figure sustains life, but will also not hesitate to destroy us (her offspring), a sobering reason for justified ecological anxiety.

The idea of the circle and circularity is also linked to the concept of the loop. The chapter ends with these notions in mind, referencing concepts that blur the distinctions between beginning and end, opening a space for reflection.

Bruno Munari writes in his book *The discovery of the circle* (1966:5), that while a square is identified with man and his projected constructions like architecture and writing, in contrast, the circle refers to unstable and dynamic rotary movement, which is closely linked to the divine. Much like divinity, the circle is representative of complex problems and riddles. As Valera explicates, “we find ourselves in a circle: we are in a world that seems to be there before reflection begins, but that world is not separate from us” (1992:3), the question ultimately one about where the end is and where is the beginning. Morton argues that thinking goes in a loop, but the duration of the loop is a mystery as we do not have knowledge of its beginning or end. He writes, “we will be pushing the limit of computability if we try to know whether we will be looping forever” (2016:24).

The unstable foundation of the circle takes form in the concept of ‘circularity’. In the book *The Embodied Mind*, Francisco Varela explores the possibility of circulation between science of the

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<sup>21</sup> As Lovelock validates, “the universe is something internal as well as external” (2006:191).

mind and human experience (1992: xiv). The former cognitive science refers to the 'inner' phenomenological world, while the latter relates to 'outer' biological experience. The author emphasises that the relationship between the two are not in opposition, but in circulation. The shape of the circle is a central key to the synthesis of inner and outer worlds. The author elaborates: "...the recognition of this circle opened up a space between self and the world, between the inner and outer. This space is not a gulf or divide; it embraced the distinction between self and the world, and yet provided a continuity between them" (Varela 1992: 3).

What is important about circularity is that it advocates for a position of groundlessness. The uncertainty of this groundless position is explained as "organism and environment enfold[ing] into each other and unfold[ing] from one another in the fundamental circularity that is life itself" (Varela 1992:215).

## **Part Two: Aesthetic Animism**

I experience my art-design process as an act of mythic animation between myself and my immediate environment. Mythic animation provides a mysterious communication channel that allows for movement between my own personal mindscape and external environment. I experience this complex systems approach to creative processes as a relational ecological structure. My art-design process is in constant relation to my own experienced environment. I find mythic animation integral to creating within the backdrop of the Anthropocene, and in terms of plan-

ning for the future. This theoretical chapter, *Aesthetic Animism*, aims to provide insight into my practice, an act of communicating and visualising ecological thought. It is also guided by my own interpretation of animism as a means of explaining my personal, experiential, and visceral art of design in process.

I retreat to an introspective mode. As a designer, frustrations and points of tension surface through everyday encounters with my surrounding environment. In response, I find myself constantly (over)thinking and planning for an alternative future. I identify with the position of designer, in the manner of Bruno Munari's words, as "a planner with an aesthetic sense" (1966: 29). In the book *Design as art*, Munari elaborates:

What then is this thing called Design if it is neither style nor applied art? It is planning: the planning as objectively as possible of everything that goes to make up the surroundings and atmosphere in which men [and women] live today. This atmosphere is created by all the objects produced by industry, from glasses to houses and even cities. It is planning done without preconceived notions of style, attempting only to give each thing its logical structure and proper material, and in consequence its logical form (1966: 35).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Munari supports my reasoning for using the term design to describe my creative processes rather than art when he addresses the connotations with art as exclusive practice. He writes that "[t]oday it has become necessary to demolish the myth of the 'star' artist who only produces masterpieces for a small group of ultra-intelligent people. It must be understood that as long as art stands aside from the problems of life it will only interest a very few people" (1966: 25). As previously discussed I combine both the terms art and design as a conscious use of art-design when I refer to my own creative process. This is done in order to soften the hierarchy between these two realms of knowledge as I identify with both practices when creating. This conscious use of the term art-design also mimics the 'open design' process discussed later in an attempt to open up the design process in an interactive manner towards the outside world and environmental concerns.

Design cannot exist outside of the problems of life and the environment. My process consists of making objects that can address the issues or uncertainties of the Anthropocene. I am aware that potentially bringing objects into the world is not going to make it 'a better place', and could in contrast add to the insurmountable amount of junk already present on the planet (arguably a by-product of capitalism and consumer culture in general). The role of designer must shift from mere stylist towards creative problem solver (Bonsiepe 2006: 28). As an aesthetic (at times obsessive) planner, but also a problem solver, I am also aware of just how ubiquitous and omnipresent designed objects have become. As Ben Highmore suggests, we live in

a world where design is an informal activity that everybody participates in. Out here, in the world of ubiquitous design, canonical design objects have to take their chance along with everything else (Nike and knock-off alike). Ubiquitous design is technology that can be soft and fluffy as well as hard and shiny. To gain a sense of ubiquitous design, think more about a disposable drink can and less about haute couture (2008: 5).

Aesthetic Animism is a creative mode that informs and mythically animates the relationship between myself and my immediate environment. This creative mode influences what I create. The movement of everyday trash that the ocean spits out upon the shore enters my everyday life and my consciousness. Marine debris (fig. 1-5) becomes a part of my ecology. Through my 'eco-feminist' hand it is transformed through a crafted process into designed objects.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> My mother, an occupational therapist, worked for a centre for disabled people where I also spent much time as a child. I remember the centre as a strange, dystopian warehouse, and an alternative to attending pre-school. I still remember a group of women making carpets with a tool called a latch hook marine debris and using recycled wool. My crafting today has a great deal to do with these memories. I apply the same method to making textiles as strands of material are looped and knotted repeatedly. Looping and knotting is repetitive, inviting reflection and introspection akin to a mythic, ritualistic, and more poetic movement that I aim to describe in the next section.

## A poetics of practice

In the book *Designed Animism*, author Brenda Laurel argues that the importance of animism does not lie in its philosophical or religious capacity, but in the creativity and productivity that animism brings to surface (2009: 252). 'Designed animism' is positioned at the nexus between design and poetry. It influences how we create in the world, simultaneously bringing a future world into being.

Arthur C. Clarke (1973:21) writes in *Profiles of the future: An inquiry into the limits of the possible*, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". A synthesis between technology and animism is expressed in Betti Marenko's proposal of a neo-animist paradigm in her article *Neo-Animism and Design: A New Paradigm in Object Theory* (2014:221). Marenko suggests that animism continues to inform our understanding of the world, especially with regards to new technologies. Animism is evident in modern life in the way that we engage, communicate, and reciprocate towards technology as smart objects and systems continue to inhabit our world (2014:219). Marenko emphasises that the pace of digital innovation is encouraging a rapid reconsideration of the object/subject framework as a hybrid breed of human-made things, simultaneously animate and inanimate, are inhabiting spaces at a fast tempo. "material agencies, experienced animistically can be best read through the lens of a neo-animist paradigm" (2014:221). Neo-animism, is implemented in order to engage in my material. The importance of neo-animism then lies in its function as a lens through which to understand a modern world and its anthropocentric byproducts like waste in the ocean. The neo-animist paradigm becomes the intersection between my relationship with trash I see on the shoreline and informs the way I engage with it. I use the notion of neo-animism as a means that inform the manner in which I engage with material.

Gathering material is a ritualistic, mythic process, informed by an animist understanding of interconnectedness and non-hierarchical relatedness, and is also an expression of my own poetic sensitivity. I embark on a process of walking along the shoreline of the east coast near to the dwelling I have previously described. I walk to the ocean in front of my house and trance-like, scout for marine debris. I have numerous encounters with ghost nets (fig 6-9). These are commercial fishing nets that must have been abandoned by boats and literally dumped into the ocean. These abandoned nets, often imperceptible to marine life, entangle oceanic life forms and endanger organisms in the surrounding environment. Ghost nets appear on the shore as a deathbed of knotted nests of plastic rope mixed in with marine organisms, a hybrid form of human and non-human entities, resembling a meshwork of man-made plastic and organic matter. Sometimes they are complete and knotted together, but sometimes I find fragmented pieces of the net as well.

The etymology of the word ghost is traced back to latin *spiritus*, referring to breath or respiration. Additionally, a ghost is a spirit that can be good or bad. Spirit is an "animating or vital principle in man and animals" (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'ghost').<sup>24</sup>

Ghost nets have a strange presence, or 'spirit'. They are directly linked a human spirit of desires. The desire for food is the driving force behind commercial fishing. The desire within my body for meat or protein reinforces this desire. Symptomatic and an indirect result of my own desires, commercial fishing nets are at some point discarded and end up, through various cycles and loops, at my feet again. I am obsessed with the idea of how to make an undesirable piece of trash desirable again, how to break or transform or reanimate this excrement, this detritus, this literal 'piece' of the cycle. How can it be redeemed? What agency as animator or designer do I

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<sup>24</sup> I am drawn to the German translation of a Ghost (Geist) or spirit, as it is associated with the *zeitgeist*, directly translated as 'the spirit of the age' (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'zeitgeist'). I am currently embedded in and interpret the Anthropocene as the ecological 'spirit' of the time.

have within the relational web of my own ecological environment? Taking the ghost nets apart is an act of destruction. Destroying the old structure of fishing rope and assigning it a new purpose is an act of transformation. The rope is taken apart to make strings and strands that are knotted together again into a new textile (fig 10-12).

It is more than an act of recycling for me. I am also engaging in a transformative process with what can be termed hyper objects, ubiquitous objects often so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization (Morton 2014:1). They can be a direct effect of man-made manufacturing such as styrofoam or plastic bags (Morton 2014:1). Hyper objects are associated with man-made phenomena like plutonium and climate change, one of their central characteristics being that they will outlive their human makers. According to Morton, they have a significant impact not only on the environment, but on human social and psychological space as well (2014:1).

This creative act is an attempt at a kind of redemption of the hyper object, the ghost net, and is also an attempt to affect the loop of human desire that I am a participant in, described above.

I have begun to look at waste not simply as pollution, but rather through a deeper and darker ecological lens, hence often as hyper objects that can be recontextualised and transformed. My rejection of the normal and the everyday interpretation of trash gives creative voice to its material potential. Hyper objects help remind me of my own temporality on the planet. They reflect our own mortality. They become monuments that will outlast human lives.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> What form these monuments will take hence becomes an important question to me as a designer.

My encounter with marine debris, with hyper objects, and my longing to redeem their potential material agency constitutes what I experience as a poetic and mythical encounter.<sup>26</sup> It could be described as a “happening” in Anna Tsing’s words.

How does a gathering become a “happening,” that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option (Tsing 2015:27).

#### Sound and textiles

Braidotti raises her concern for the supremacy of visual media in the world today and remarks that the omnipotence of the visual is a symptom of our era that has marked visualisation as the primary form of control and absolute truth (2006: 204). The trouble with pure appearance, however, is that it cannot be reduced to truth, warns Morton (2010: 78). A critique of the primacy of vision has its roots in feminist discourse as well. “The primacy of vision has been challenged by feminist theories, which have inspiring things to say about scopophilia, that is to say a vision-centred approach to thought, knowledge and science. In a psychoanalytic perspective, this takes the form of a critique of the phallogocentric bias that is built into vision” (Braidotti 2006: 204).

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<sup>26</sup> A poetic encounter involves a specific mode of time. It does not correspond to a chronological conception of time known as *chronos*, but follows an alternative expression of time named *kairos*. Leston (2003:30) explains *kairos* as an inventive and intuitive sense of timing most commonly translated as the right or opportune moment. This requires the ability to interpret what an exact moment calls for and to reciprocate with a proper response to that moment. It felt as though my encounters with material were pregnant with *kairos*, not following any preconceived timeline, but instead feeling inexplicably mythical. I encountered the ghost nets in a different way every time in a way that I have not done before.

My focus is not only on the visual. In accordance and alongside the visual, I experience sound as a phenomenon. “A phenomenon is not an appearance, or even an apparition, but a sign, a symptom which finds its meaning in an existing force”, writes Massumi (in Deleuze & Guattari 1987:13). Sound cannot be seen, but is measured by affect, which becomes visible in the interaction of humans with a soundscape.

My first installation of a ghost net textile is displayed with five minutes of recorded ocean sound embedded in the object.<sup>27</sup> The sound played in an ongoing loop through a speaker that was placed inside the textile at a low volume. I experience sound as an ecological element, because it made the viewer aware of systems that exist other than the visual. It also acted as a tool to lure the viewer towards the artwork (fig 13-15). The addition of sound gave the textile an animating element adding a voice, a breath, to the inanimate object. During the display of the textile, people leant in toward the work to hear the sound more accurately. This movement resulted in the viewer touching and interacting with the object. These almost performative enactments are what Karen Barad and other ‘new materialists’ refer to as intra-activity where “we use to ask how our intra-action with other bodies (both human and nonhuman) produce subjectivities and performative enactments not previously thought” (Jackson & Mazzei 2013: 268).

This participatory practice can be described as ‘open design’. Open design represents a disruptive force no longer concerned with representation, but rather concerned with non-representational action, an effect or performance. “Nonrepresentational theory focuses upon practices – how human and nonhuman formations are enacted or performed – not simply on what is produced” (Thrift in Van der Beek 2012: 425). In fact, “[i]nteractivity between designer and users morphed design into an open-ended, process driven, participatory practice” (Van der Beek 2012: 426).

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<sup>27</sup> This was in a student group exhibition entitled *Threshold* at Gus Gallery in Stellenbosch in August 2017.

The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy – for some, strangely or fightingly easy – to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more the world opens up (Morton 2010: 1).

Open design and ecological thought are inseparable. Open design is a critical element for survival as it reflects a state of mind that is essential for dealing with the current social and economic circumstances (Van der Beek 2012: 424). Open design itself is a development that has its roots in a socio-cultural shift which is revealing a change in how we experience ourselves, others, and our environment (Van der Beek 2012: 425).

This “reflective mode”, an ecologically aware mode, is representative of what Oosterling (in Van der Beek 2012: 440) describes as a shift from design towards *dasein*. Heidegger used the term *dasein* to explain a mode of being in-the-world as opposed to being closed subjects of the world (Van der Beek 2012: 429). Instead of asking “Who am I?” Heidegger asked the existential question, “How is my being in relationship with the world?” (Van der Beek 2012: 429). As a result, he distinguished himself and his description of being from what was traditionally considered the closed subject or ‘*homo clausus*’. “The German sociologist Norbert Elias therefore suggests that although in Western society we are accustomed to the vision of self as a closed territory, a *homo clausus*, contemporary identity is constructed in relationships with others, whether they are subjects or (design) objects” (Lawler in Van der Beek 2012: 429). The shift from design to *dasein* is thus representative of a relational mode of being in-the-world that exposes and challenges the traditional position of the subject as closed off from their environment. In open design the question of ‘how does the design object relate to the world?’ replaces the primary concerns around the formal elements of objects.

Ecology refers to a household, and arguably earth's household, as I mentioned in Chapter One. I choose the idea of the textile as a carpet, or a piece of furniture that can be found in the household of the future. It is a design object that is familiar (found inside the house), yet strange (made from waste material). To demonstrate this concept, I have photographed the textiles in progress in front of our house as a site specific documentation (fig 16-21). I like to think of it in Timothy Morton's terms, as a "strange stranger" (2016:18). Ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers. My textile becomes the meeting place for different strands of rope, but also the meeting place between myself and my environment. Another way of describing how I experience this complex nest of relations is as a matrix.

Matrix is derived from the Old French word *matrice* which means "womb, uterus". In late Latin "womb" also refers to a "source, origin" (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'matrix'). The matrix thus first referred to the womb or origin, but today it can also carry a multiplicity of meanings.<sup>28</sup>

In the text *Matrix Marmorea*, Paul Vandenbroek (2013) proposes the concept of a matrix as a "non-phallic symbolic domain" (2013:201). For structuralists like the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, meaning and knowledge are only created through a phallic model of substitution (2013:201). This model follows a binary logic of absence and substitution. This is a problematic mode, as meaning only arises out of opposites like empty/full and female/male. In opposition to this mode, the matrix is representative of a weave which implies multiplicity, diversity, and strangeness in a meshwork. The matrix is analogous to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a rhizome. The rhizome is an alternative model of thought based on a root system, which does

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<sup>28</sup> Matrix can refer to the earth as a female and as source or origin and the dirt of the earth as the womb of mother earth. In her book *Overlay* (1983:41-42) Lucy Lippard explains the connection between the female body and the earth:

Women can and do, identify the forms of our own bodies with the undulations of the earth - the hills and sacred mountains which were the first gardens and the first temples. Our menstrual periods are moon-determined, therefore related to the earth's magnetic energies and to the ocean's tides. Our genitalia recall caves, cleft rocks, river beds - the cozy and fearful abysses associated with the nourishing and with the fearsome, with the maternal and the sexual, the regenerative and the deathly aspects of the Earth Mother (Lippard 1983:42).

not privilege hierarchy, but accommodates multiplicity, change and movement (Van der Beek 2012: 432). The matrix as a “rhizome”, “grid” or a “mesh” is composed out of multiple lines of connection, which diverge from elements and intersections, forming a grid. In the grid, positions are relative to each other, dramatically opposing the idea of perspective where positions are based on specific or singular points of origin. The idea of the matrix, the grid, and meshwork, has become something I follow in the making of a textile.<sup>29</sup>

### Retreat

I explore how ecological thought can become visual and visceral by retreating into animist sensory understanding and thought. From here, I experience my creative practice as a mysterious movement concerning, and between, myself and the lifeworld, I retreat into my imagination which helps me unlock the ecological relationships inherent in my practice. To retreat refers also to my geographical withdrawal to my own local household and the threshold space between this intimate space and the ocean. Here, I encounter dreams about flooding, drowning and floating, and memory is further rehearsed when it rains and the dampness eats into my consciousness. The name of the house, *Die Ark*, in Afrikaans, refers to the biblical story of Noah’s Ark that acted as a place of refuge during a flood. The beach house remains a site of tempestuousness, anxiety, and conflict however, but my art-design process becomes redemptive. Redemption itself refers to a retrieval, recovery, recoupment, return, and rescue.

Without my exploration into animism as a return or a retreat and a mode that elucidates the relationships between the human subject and its inevitable entanglement and inter-dependence with the environment, I would fall prey to duality and outdated binary or hierarchical relations. Endorsing the complexity of a nest of relationships challenges any master-slave like narrative.

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<sup>29</sup> The method of making a textile is also referred to as craft, which is associated with a female experiential mode of creation (Vandenbroek 2013:194).

Nietzsche put forward the metaphor of the *Gordian knot*<sup>30</sup> that reduces living to acquiring mastery, which leads to domination. Morton provides a valuable solution to escaping this trap:

What happens when you try to rise above his argument? You fall prey to his logic of mastery. Nietzsche's idea eats away at all positions that strive to overcome it. How do we get out of this trap? By crouching low and crawling away, like a sensible small mammal. . . We should think like losers, not winners. Consciousness then becomes a property of lowliness and weakness, rather than of power (2010:73).

Lying low, retreating into one's own household in search of answers, is more favourable than trying to solve ecological problems 'out there', as these are vast and potentially unsolvable challenges. There is, however, some agency in returning to the 'self' to unlock interpretations of planning possibilities and creative solutions. Animistic retreat is an important metaphorical process because of its backward movement as opposed to the logic of moving forwards in order to progress. "We are so obsessed with the idea of progress and with the betterment of humanity", writes Lovelock, "that we regard retreat as a dirty word, something to be ashamed of" (2006:8). Lovelock uses the same idea of retreat to unlock and diffuse the domination of the human subject over the earth. The author states that we have passed the earth's temperature threshold and that it is too late for ecological reform – we need ecological retreat (2006:7). Lovelock suggests a sustainable and spontaneous withdrawal into a world where we try to live in harmony with Gaia (2006:192).

Retreating implies reversing, going backwards, and potentially reconnecting again with an imagined beginning. Such animistic engagement hence can be described as embracing circularity or taking the form of a circle or a loop. I want to redeem the idea of retreat as a dirty word in order to reconcile our relationship with the underbelly and darker aspects of ecology. My ap-

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<sup>30</sup> The term *Gordian Knot* is used as a metaphor for an intractable problem (disentangling an "impossible" knot) solved only perhaps by finding a loophole or thinking creatively.

proach has been a retreat into animism as the dark, mysterious, 'other' sister of modern reason. Animism transforms a divide into something productive; a living contrast. Animism has informed my approach to art-design, as it advocates that all things (human-like or thing-like) withdraw into themselves and stay intrinsically mysterious.<sup>31</sup> It endorses the mysterious communication network involving making and thinking and transforms our relationship with the earth; how we engage with ecological challenges. Inner and external boundaries are transgressed and challenged through alternative ways of mapping what is truly alive, blurring the distinction between the inside and outside worlds of both humans and non-human entities alike.

## Conclusion

The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy – for some, strangely or fightingly easy – to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more the world opens up (Morton 2010: 1).

When you are designing with ecological thought, it means that you are planning in an invisible and intimate space. That means that should rely on other senses, feelings, memories, experiences along with sight, aesthetics, or visual knowledge. These feelings trigger a reflective mode which relates directly to what Heidegger referred to as being in-the-world (*dasein*). I experience my art-design process as inseparable from *dasein*. "Reframing our world, our problems and ourselves is part of the ecological project. This is what praxis means - action that is thoughtful and thought that is active. Aristotle asserted that

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<sup>31</sup> I hold that all entities (including "myself ") are shy, retiring octopuses that squirt out a dissembling ink as they withdraw into the ontological shadows (Morton 2013:3).

the highest form of praxis was contemplation. We shouldn't be afraid to withdraw and reflect" (Morton 2010: 1).<sup>32</sup>

Withdrawing into ecological thought is a process of questioning my own position as designer and researcher inside the framework I am embedded in. Donna Haraway rethinks the position of the researcher and critical thinker as a 'modest witness'. The modest witness thus resembles an empathic, border-crossing figure who continuously repositions their own practice in relation to fast shifting contexts (Braidotti 2006: 206).

"masterless man, outcast, outlaw," 1871, from Japanese, from ro "wave" + nin "man." (Harper 2016:online. Sv. 'ronin'). Designing implies that you are moving in between spaces, categories and disciplines, an uncertain position. I experience this movement as non-linear, mysterious, and animistic. As a researcher, this movement is personified as an intellectual Ronin. There is resistance, and uprising and a retreat. This movement is repeated. There is no aim except to follow an orderly and sustainable withdrawal into a world that is in harmony with the earth. I align my own position as a wave man, or wave woman follows the shifting context in a wave like motion.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "There should be philosophy across the borders, not only in philosophy proper, but in other fields, such as law, medicine, and so forth. . . . We should have philosophers trained as philosophers as rigorously as possible, and at the same time audacious philosophers who cross the borders and discover new connections, new fields, not only interdisciplinary researche[r]s but themes that are not even interdisciplinary" (Derrida, 1997, p. 7) in (Jackson & Mazzei 2013: 269).

<sup>33</sup>Contemporary subjects are exposed to constant change. Zygmunt Bauman coined this modern phenomenon as "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). This age is commonly referred to as a sea of voices and the voice of this generation often gets lost in translation. In order to address this issue Braidotti emphasises that thought itself is a nomadic activity. Just because it is not topologically bound does not mean that it is without context "like a view from nowhere. To be in process or transition does not place the thinking subject outside history or time: postmodernity as a specific moment of our historicity is a major location that needs to be accounted for" (Braidotti 2006: 199). Because the wave woman is constantly moving, does not mean that it is without location.

Creativity would be unimaginable without some visionary or spiritual fuel. This is post-secular thought at its best. Prophetic, nomadic or visionary minds are thinkers of the future. The future as an active object of desire propels us forth and we can draw from it the strength and motivation to be active in the here and now of a present that hangs on in between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' of advanced postmodernity. The present is always the future present: it will have made a positive difference in the world. Only the yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present (Braidotti 2006: 206).

Drawing energy from the thinkability of the future means that our desires are sustainable to the extent that they engender the conditions of possibility for the future. In order to get there, a nomadic subject position of flow and multi-layeredness is a major facilitator. This is not a leap of faith, but an active transposition, a transformation at the in-depth level, a change of culture akin to genetic mutations, but registered also at the ethical level. (Braidotti 2006: 207).

To recap, dark ecology is against the idea of framing nature as green. It also rejects the term *environmentalism*, because it implies that the idea of a nature in its green beautiful state. Additionally, environmentalism implies that we can reverse or redeem the current state of the planet. In contrast, dark ecology argues that our new idea of nature is dystopian and that we must work with what we have and make this state a new normal or a new ideas of nature.

In my practice, the ecology in crisis cannot be ignored, it is everywhere, it is a dark feeling of impending doom following young people who anticipate an uncertain future on earth. In order to aid the ecology in crisis I discussed a return, to ancient knowledge (Animism, Shaman, Ronin, Nomad). Animating ecology means blending connections and tensions (creating hybrids) between the ancient and the futuristic ideas in order to make sense of the uncertain future and address the unstable present. Animism resembles a

renewed, modest, prophetic kinship with our environment, and extending a hand towards non-human agents including the earth.

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## Acknowledgements

Parents Barry and Anette Fourie

Mentor and supervisor Martha Kaden

Louis Odendaal for sound and incentive

Joeri Verbesselt for dystopian optimism

Michaela Hause for poetic editing

Family and friends, near and far

for continuous support

