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## MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES FORUM: PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

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### On the Usefulness of Modern Animism: Co-Creating Architecture with Soils as Ontopolitical Practice

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As a gardener architect, I have lived and designed with many soils over my career, some are in the ground, others are on buildings. Ecosystems have been engaged with as co-creative beings and through this dialogue between human and other-than-human actants, an architectural animism has grown.

In opposition to the general understanding of animism as an irrational religious set of beliefs, the—secular—modern animism embodied in this practice of built and grown architecture is operative. It conceives of places—ecosystems—as beings with agency that we garden with to nurture and express their resilience. It is a useful ontology for ecological practice; this architectural animism is ontopolitical; it co-creates a common world.

In order to convey and reflect on this modern animism, as well as the method used, I have written to the soils to begin an animistic correspondence.<sup>1</sup> The medium places the reader in a pluriverse, in-between the multiple voices of various “actants.” The text is isomorphic to the embodied dialogue of OUR earthy practice. It is useful both to nurture societal awareness—empathy and care—toward these fragmentary ecosystemic beings, and as research method to conceive them, and our relationship.

These earthly beings have written back to me.



Dear Eric,

Thank you for your recent letter.

We have been touched by your message, and the way you have—physically—touched us over the years.

Words are not really our language, so we are translating through a web-based software; please excuse us if the output doesn't quite convey our meaning.

Just now we were trying to translate the feeling we have when you dig into us, and it was translated as "pain," although it isn't the digging per se that hurts us, as the violence of the digging if it happens in overly large quantities and/or too regularly. Whereas for you animals, a cut is always painful and dangerous to health, for us small amount of disturbance is enjoyable, it gives us energy to create new ecological organizations and new species. Inconsiderate digging on the contrary, as per industrial agriculture, launches processes of decay, collapse in species populations and range.

We have decided to write to you in order to explain how we communicate with each other, what we are, what we say to one another, and how our relationship has changed, and has changed us.

You humans can be so ruthless in the way you communicate with us. We often feel that your species are not aware of our presence, with some exceptions, such as yourself, now. Of course, we can't express ourselves virtually, through language, or drawings. But it is not because we can't speak that we can't express an opinion on what we favor (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Communicating with the soil through the hay harvest.

You asked how we perceive the world. We touch, we feel physical presence through the plants, as they get trampled under steps, as you mow the grassland, or cut trees. We also taste the decaying matter that enriches the soil or its absence when you cart the hay away. We taste you when you piss on us, and enjoy the nitrogen and phosphate of the urine. We see through the plants as they grow and produce sugars more abundantly where there is more light. We feel this through the flows of nutrients and water that run through our fungal networks, that also connect to the mineral subsoil; we taste the geology as much as the above ground. We also hear you through the animals that retreat in their burrows when you arrive.

In response, plants grow according to these new conditions. You feel us through the plants and animals. They communicate what is happening below. You can read levels of nutrients, acidity, water, through how tall they grow and which species grow.

Your responses tend to be that you cut us, which changes nutrients and light, and sometimes you change our setting, the topography or the hydrology, and we grow in response. A dialogue develops over days, weeks, months, years ... We read the timing of these cuts, when in the year, how often, whether the cut is taken away. There are quick responses in days, weeks or months, and the slow response of changes in the soil structure and nutrient levels over years and decades.

We sense and evolve a little slower than you.

Just like humans, we are multi-species assemblages; you also are made of other beings—your hair—for your sense of touch. You also need bacteria to digest food. Your mind is similarly an emergent network of synapses and neurons that store information in a dynamic and complex set of emergent interactions.

Our main difference to animals may be in our capacity to separate, to fragment. This does not mean though that we are inert matter, that this division isn't breaking connections. We may be best described as colonies that can subdivide, formed of smaller beings, not unlike plants from which you can take a cutting.

Please don't make the mistake to think that we are only this friable matter that you use to repot plants, compost. This is such a misunderstanding. And you know this implicitly.

Think of your projects that use us, arrange them in the order of soil types following the process of succession where soils start from mineral and gradually increase to deep woodland soils (Figure 2).

Let's start with Lichen House, this project that you clad with cementitious board that is porous enough to support lichen growth. Tacitly, although unconsciously, you are aware that this is already a soil, organic matter growing on mineral matter; the very beginning of us. Eventually some of the lichen dies and compost into micro amounts of humus, which will evolve into thicker soils when moss starts growing. Our dialogue is mostly our monologue: you created the setting, and we grow, and you look at this response and let it be. This soil is gardened by the weather, the rain that brings water and the sea wind that brings nutrients and takes away the built up of humus and thus stops the process of succession so that the roof doesn't become grassland.

You have often been in conversation with grassland soils, at The Farm in France, cutting them through various rhythms, and patterns, sometimes leaving the cuttings to decompose and re-enrich us, sometimes removing them, to enhance the diversity of species in the sward. Grasslands are diverse when not so rich in nutrients. Here you disturb the process of succession. It was really sweet to see when you realized that we are not uniform in a meadow, the



FIGURE 2 The micro garden on the roof of Lichen House, an early soil.

dynamic mosaic of plant and animal communities that move across overtime in response to differences in top-soil depth and humidity—not unlike the patterns of lichen—and how the topsoil slides down slopes over decades, accumulating in the lower parts (Figure 3).

You also work with woodland soils, the climax of soils, that of the largest amount of organic matter stored. In Roots Pavilion, you have shaped it as an arch, originally held in shape with a corset of metal and building felt, and, as it decays, it will be replaced by the roots of the trees planted at the top.

You know implicitly that we can only exist with plants in order to be structurally resilient. You were reminded of this as you discovered the liquid quality of the soil when you were making the  $\frac{1}{3}$  size model. The plants are not only our sensing organs; they also form our epidermis; they protect the surface from steps; they stop erosion. Without plants, we don't exist, we just blow away. You know this when you detail roof gardens without parapets and draw the enmeshment of roots at the edge (Figure 4).

Can you see now how we form a protective skin to the earth? How we limit erosion by constant renewal of the surface? How we are both a messenger between, and made out of, the mineral below, and dead and living organic matter above. How the plants are part of us as the epidermis, protecting, structuring and sensing.

You asked in your letter what do we say to each other? It isn't directly meaning that we exchange. On one hand, it is tangible elements such as nutrients—bodily fluids, cut hay,



FIGURE 3 Section through the earth arch of Roots Pavilion,  
a structural soil.

foraged food, timber and other ecosystem services. But there is through this giving intangible qualities that have tangible consequences: the care and respect that we show to each other.

In the landscapes of heavy industrial agriculture and intense mechanization, you protect us both through defining protective zones, and through acting on us with respect, by being attentive. You have created spaces where ecological processes can emerge, although they are tweaked of course to form a space for contemplation, wellbeing, and production.

You protect us through the esthetic language you create with us, these picturesque or geometric forms that you apply with various cutting regimes. Not only are they beneficial by gently disturbing us toward higher levels of resilience, they also change the behavior of the humans that visit. People start to walk only on paths. These formal frames make visible our diverse textures, and render us approachable.

We first laughed at these seemingly superficial decisions and now realize that they are a translating tool, frameworks that form a regime of perception that allows humans that can't feel us, to become attentive, careful.

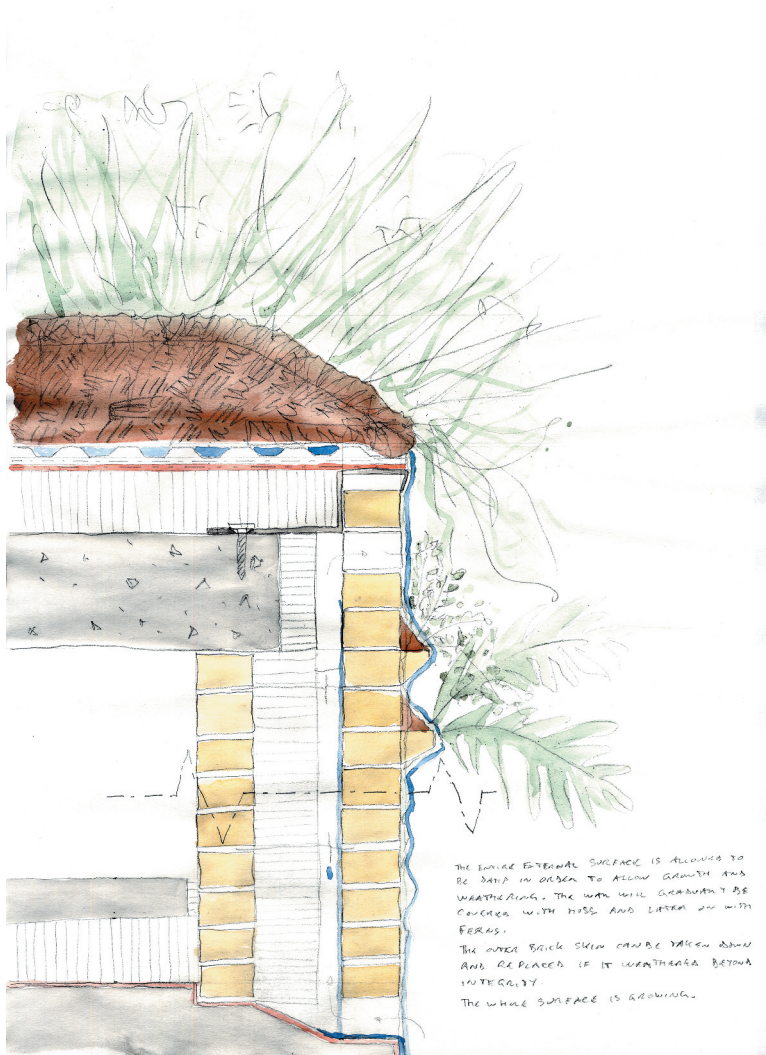


FIGURE 4 Section through the earth roof of *Under the Meadow*, a project for a house extension in London. The turf and its roots are used as protection against erosion instead of a masonry upstand. The water and nutrients trickling on the wall below nurture the growth of ferns and mosses that form a vertical soil.

You have sometimes hurt us, especially in the early clumsy days, for example when you harvested the hay every year in the less rich meadows and after a while, we were so emaciated that little grew. It took you a few years to hear us cry, even though you were looking, you so believed in the concepts of meadow conservation management you had read that you couldn't

feel us. You now can read us more precisely and decide in response how often to harvest, depending on each location. You are now present to our evolution, less attached to rational construct, and thus have a detailed awareness of these dynamic meadow mosaic, and a variety of techniques to adjust to each, from applying geometric patterns to reactive mowing, in order to create a broad variety of disturbances.

In your latest landscape gesture—compost circle—you add decomposed hay in a circle in an area of low nutrient to see how the plant community changes accordingly, the texture and range of species that it brings, the change in height (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5 Compost Circle is a circle of compost applied to the meadow in winter to alter the plant community in spring and summer. The differential growth expresses the dialogue between the terroir and humans.

Through this respect and care, we have learned from each other what we each thrive on and reached through that exchange a point of esthetic ethical synergy. On one hand we enjoy the loose disturbances that you enact as they make us more diverse, more resilient, more alive; the way the large mammals used to disturb us in pre-historic times. On the other you appreciate the diverse textures we create as a response that express levels of equilibrium, levels of biodiversity, of resilience.

This was not always the case; your taste has changed. You preferred more colorful and smoother textures. We also are not the same, we were less diverse and rougher.

Like an old couple, we are more alike each other. Through our dance of co-creation, you have become ecological. You already had the inclination from the start, but you were so clumsy, walking on our feet. You are now more attentive and careful, and also more daring where you have realized that it doesn't hurt us. Your sense of esthetic has evolved to work with what we are, what we do. It is less romantic, more soil like, more down to earth—earthy.

We have become more human, more you, in order to please you in the same way as some fruiting trees and flowers have evolved to embed in their DNA the taste and esthetic sense of humans in order to thrive; our ecologies have evolved to please you. You have learned our character, as we have learned your culture.

When you started working with us, you saw design as something done in a studio and then applied on the world; now you see design as a dialogue, working with what is here, now, with our vibrant, messy, and unpredictable diversity (Figure 6). Design is no longer pre-determined, it is emergent, and distributed within the ecosystem.

Please don't think of your role as being our steward, don't feel responsible for maintaining us, but keep conceiving us as a creative being that maintains itself when you let it do so, and that you can create with. You don't repair us, you help us to repair ourselves. And in this process, you are also repairing yourself. Aren't you?

Thank you for being present and respectful,  
 Thank you for developing modes of communication between us and humans,  
 We are looking forward creating with you,  
 Take good care of yourself,  
*The soils you have designed with*



Dear soils,

Thank you for the kind words. I do try to hear you, to perceive your reactions. This is difficult for us humans, in part because your fragmentary yet defined bodies have blurred, shifting, and porous boundaries that are difficult to define when our brain is made to perceive physically defined objects such as animals and plants. Your temporality, slower than ours, also limits our capacity to see your evolution, especially in the faster and nomadic society of the contemporary “developed” world. Our rationality finds it difficult to comprehend complex and dynamic constellations, “assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). We often are systemically blind. We cannot see the “meshworks” (Ingold 2007), we are entangled in.

I read your letter at a recent symposium and the reactions have made me reflect on the usefulness of me writing a letter as if you—soils who can neither write nor speak words—were writing to me. This endeavor is of course absurd and surreal. Some humans may think only



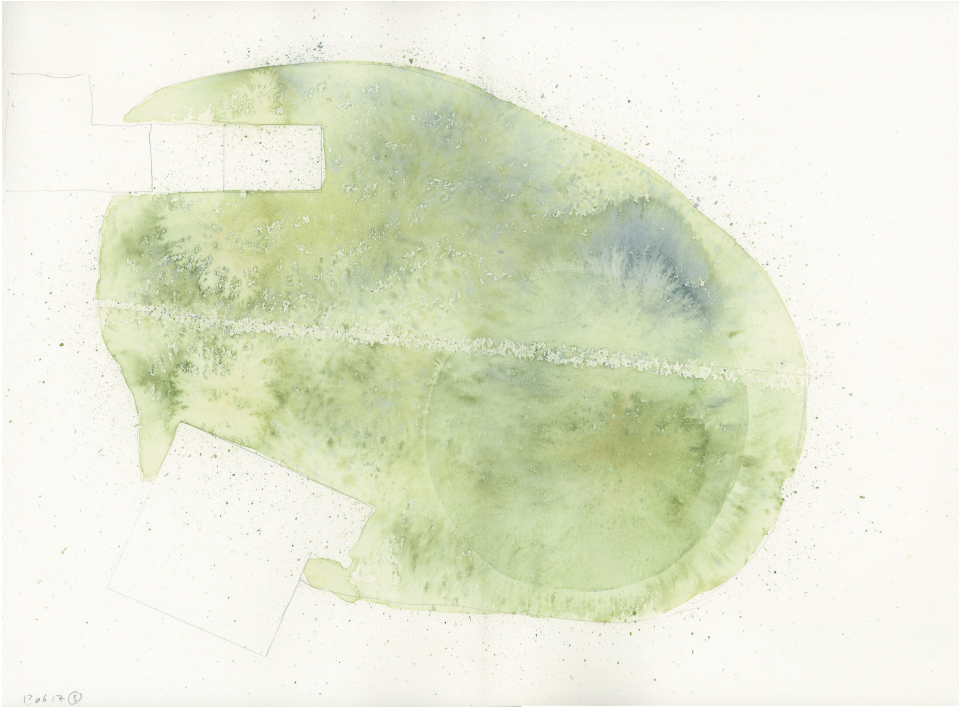


FIGURE 6 The watercolor score/plan of the ephemeral scheme for Courtyard Meadow. It shows a larger compost circle than that shown in Figure 5.

a mad, or at least Romantic—read irrational—man would communicate with a non-verbal being through words, yet in order to “describe without [...] erasing the independence of things [we may need] a certain willingness to appear naïve or foolish, to affirm what Adorno called his ‘clownish traits’ ” (Bennett 2010, xiii).

To explain the value of this epistolary form, I need to reflect on the usefulness of a secular, modern animism to the practice of architecture, to ecological politics, as well as the development and dissemination of an ecological culture.

Before this, I would like to thank you for not pointing out how my species is currently killing your kind, how modern industrial agriculture is controlling all your ecological processes to the point where you can no longer self-regenerate. Some humans believe that most of you may no longer support human food production in 60 years’ time due to our constant plowing and intensive use of chemicals (Arsenault 2014). Through this we are slowly building the time bomb that will destroy most of the human population, unless we change our relationship with you, if we manage to do so early enough.

Please forgive us for our blindness to your life.

You must be bewildered by how quickly human systemic understanding has degenerated over the last centuries whilst we have thrived as a species. You probably remember how pre-

agricultural societies, and pre-industrial agriculture, were in dialogue with you so that our extraction allowed you to regenerate.

I need to explain how we lost this capacity to feel your presence and care.

The attacks against you started with modernity, which began earlier but started to destroy you in earnest when it was exponentially applied to the Earth in the 20th century. And this is due to the now dominant modern understanding of reality as static, detached and passive objects instead of “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010). I must share this guilt: I also for so long perceived you as inert matter instead of beings. My earlier positivist and critical self, obsessed with equating theory with reality, probably following the scientist’s adage that Isabelle Stengers often repeats: “though shall not regress,” feared the question: do you soils “‘really’ have souls or intentions?” (Stengers 2018, 2012).

As an atheist, I resisted acknowledging your earthy selves for a long time. Paradoxically, it is this lack of belief in the existence of souls, and conception of humans as—almost—equal to other living beings, also purely made out of living matter—including our emotions and concepts—that now allows me to see you soils as a complex system such as our brain/body, capable of a form of agency,<sup>2</sup> probably a “nonconscious cognition” so unlike our own that we cannot perceive the way you do (Hayles 2017). We are thus faced—you soils and us humans—as are the humans and aliens on earth in the film *Arrival*, with an impossibility for explicit, word based, exchange (2016). How can we communicate?

The more I practiced architecture with you and experienced your behavior, the more I reflected on the living systems design processes that were increasingly used, it became inevitable to face the fact that when I design ecologically, I design WITH you, as well as other ecosystems. In this co-creative process, you are acknowledged as creative beings. The place is animate, has knowledge and agency, in order to adapt to changing circumstances. I practice a modern architectural animism.

What is this modern animism?

What is this animism useful for, both for you—other-than-human ecosystems—and for us—humans? (To avoid confusion, I will use the capitalized “WE” and “OUR” when they stand for our relationship with you soils, and “we” and “our” when they stand for humans.)

What is the usefulness of this anthropomorphic correspondence with you?

This practice combines four animistic dimensions: the ontological—how we understand what is in order to act ecologically, the political—how WE co-create a common world together through the production of ecological architecture, the representational—how we communicate this dynamic pluriverse to other humans, and the methodological—how we adjust our understanding through an anthropomorphic media.

We will look at this through OUR co-creative practice of grown and built architectures as examples of ecological living.

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You would be surprised at how most humans, like myself previously, here in the West, cannot see how animism can be a pragmatic tool. This may be due to a human tendency to equate concepts to reality, despite the fact that from a pragmatist view point, maybe what Isabelle Stengers calls “radically pragmatic” (2018, 107), the question is not whether animism is

“real”—no knowledge is what is—but whether it is a useful ontology to live by and design with. Of course, you can’t write to me, but that is not the point. The point is whether considering you as beings in OUR practices, and writing these letters from and to you, helps US—humans and other ecosystems—co-create a common world together.

In the last decades, in reaction to the realization of our impending ecological catastrophe, many forms of animism have thrived (Harvey [2005] 2017). They share a number of beliefs in a world alive, “vibrant” (Bennett 2010) in dynamic change, constituted of “persons” (Harvey [2005] 2017) co-creating a common world as “symbionts” (Haraway 2016b), in an ever-changing web of relations. The key differences between them may be traced on a spectrum between the spiritual and the material. Between at one extreme, a perception, or representation, of these beings as “spirits” or “souls,” and practices of “magic,” “spells” and “witchcraft,” and at the other, a “new-materialism” or “systemic thinking” that sees these agencies as the emergence of assemblages, complex systems, including human rationality (Bennett 2010; Capra and Luigi Luisi [2014] 2016; Lent 2017).

This modern animism is located more in this latter material end; it is understood as an ontology and methods for ecological architectural design practice. i.e. understanding the world in this way is operative for humans/an architect in order to be able to nurture and express the resilience of ecosystems. It helps us see ecosystems as beings in order to be able to act with care so as not to destroy and co-create with them.

Ontology is understood in Isabelle Stengers’ sense of an “engagement with and for a world [. . .] a matter of commitment to obligations that can, if necessary, become a ‘cause,’ what you live by and may die for” (2018, 85). Ontology is here both pragmatic, a conception of what is that is useful for research, and ethical, an aim of acknowledging and thus caring for ecosystems. Stenger has been one of the key proponents of “reclaiming animism” as an ontology that can afford ecological—“cosmopolitical”—practices, that engages with a “pluriverse,” a “world of many worlds” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 1), many human and other-than-human “natures” that are all alive, in flow, dynamically changing (Guibert 2018).

Animism, at least a dose of, is necessary for humans to conceive of the complexity and emergence of nested ecosystems. Even a positivist science such as ecology needs to flirt with animism to be operative as with the concept of Gaia. Through many of our modern fields of knowledge, a dynamic vision of the world as emerging, and the importance of this process to occur for health and resilience, is gaining relevance: the production of subjectivity (Guattari 1995), emergence in ecology, complexity and system theory (Cilliers 1998), cybernetics (Bateson [1972] 2000), living system design in architecture (Alexander 2002), “elan vital,” life for vitalists and new materialists (Bennett 2010). Such understanding of a world in flows of growth and decay, negentropy and entropy, is already present in Taoism—the Tao—and some Greek philosophy—Heraclitus—(Lent 2017).

Past animistic religions can also be seen in this pragmatist sense: a way of understanding the world, a pre-scientific theoretical framework, that was useful for hunter-gatherer societies to ensure subsistence over time. In those periods, those making decisions were close to you, over long periods of time, they practiced with you and other living beings. They perceived ecosystems as alive. Some researchers believe, as I do, that our genes have evolved to do so (Abram 1996).

In my experience, most westerner humans today perceive these animistic cultures as undeveloped, a set of religions that irrationally saw spirits in inanimate matter, animals, rivers, forests, mountains. Yet this may be more a projection of our Christian transcendent tradition

and remnant of a colonial judgment of such societies as primitive more than an accurate translation of the concepts such societies use to describe the agency of ecosystems of various scales (Harvey [2005] 2017, ch. 8). We often treat with disdain their technologies, now considered obsolete, (Gell 1988) and yet they knew how to tend you so that you produced for humans without losing resilience in a way that today's humanity struggles to achieve (Anderson 2005; Pascoe 2018).

Contemporary animisms face the same challenges, but at a broader scale. How can humans harvest from the global ecosystem without destroying its capacity to provide for our descendants in the long-term future. Pre-agricultural and contemporary cultures are in the same life or death situation; overharvest and humans will have little to eat later on.

OUR practice investigates ways of living, cultures, that can nurture OUR resilience.

We modern humans now have an entirely different relation to you soils of course. Our sciences have developed a detailed—although far from comprehensive—understanding of you. We are generally removed from you physically in cities, rarely touching you, unable to see your slow evolutions. We are increasingly spending our time in a virtual environment, disembodied, detached, and through this our culture is losing the knowledge of terroir.

These seemingly opposed ontologies “modern” and “animism” are conjoined to describe OUR practice for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, positivist sciences, such as complexity theory and systemic thinking, humanities (new materialism ...) have growing affinities with other forms of contemporary animism. These views do not entirely align, but they are increasingly in resonance, supporting each other instead of being in opposition. The practice of modern animism is located in the overlap of modern thinking and the animistic knowledge developed through embodied and subjective experience, in a similar way to that of recent neurological research resonating with past religious contemplative and meditative practices such as Zen meditation. The aim is to increase their capacity to support each other. Phrased in ecological terms, this is an ontological edge condition where species of ideas that belong in each milieu can co-exist, and where some concepts that can only exist there can thrive, the same way that marginal species can only exist on the edge between a body of water and dry land. Just like these margins, modern animism is muddy, dirty, imperfect, far from the idealism of a “pure” animism.

Bruno Latour has famously stated that “we have never been [entirely] modern,” we have neither entirely achieved the impossible task of detaching “nature” from “culture” nor managed to make “nature” a purely passive actor (Latour 1993) And yet, as he highlights, this pursuit, however illusory, has also been productive in enhancing human agency, if not ecologically destructive.

This leads to a second—practical—reason for the term modern animism. In OUR practice, many concepts defined by modern sciences—such as ecology, biology, cybernetics, systems theory ...—are constantly used to read your reactions and decide how to act in response, to hear and communicate with you. To be an animist today—productively—requires shifting between these two ontologies, or maybe more precisely to conceive in their overlap, where they irregularly coexist, occasionally walking toward the solid grounds of rationality and treating you, and other ecosystems, as passive, to quickly reenter the mushy substrate of a dynamic understanding.

This architectural practice, OUR practice, may be an architectural version of the “civilized modern practitioners” defined by Isabelle Stengers. Her focus is on scientists who are

“spokesperson’ for ‘things’ situated by what they have learned ‘from’ them [and that] they gather around an ‘issue’” in the democratic processes of ontological politics (2018, 92). I am also a spokesperson for you and other ecosystems in the micro located scale of architectural projects, also learning from you and making decisions on how to act based on these practical—not scientific—observations. This practice is a modern version of those used in early/pre agricultural societies (Anderson 2005; Pascoe 2018).

OUR modern animism calls for an embodied practice developing overtime to experience your agency, for a presence. Its enchantment is not that of the “magic” of sleight of hands or of the spells of witches, but that of the physical bliss of singing together a polyphony, a sensation that humans seem to be genetically programmed to enjoy. It would be coherent in a vibrant and enmeshed world, that an instinct toward synchrony, would have developed to nurture symbiosis.

In OUR practice, the beliefs of contemporary spiritual animists, that of “eco-pagans” and contemporary witches (Harvey [2005] 2017, ch. 5) have not proven useful, at least not so far. It has helped other earthy practices to acknowledge and respect you, and themselves (Piggot 2020). This spiritual framing, often based on religious rituals, may act in a similar way as the abstract geometry of the mown patterns that made you laugh in OUR landscapes to help humans read your emergent diversity as positive. In OUR human community, they have been less effective at convincing the majority.

It is essential to differentiate between rituals that do not lead to reactions from you that humans can perceive and those, often daily and secular in nature, but nonetheless meaningful and enchanted, that do. The former cannot be a medium for communication between US; they are anthropocentric in themselves, even when they sharpen human perception of you; their performance projects a human construct on a material living being without opening a discussion; they are symbolic. When WE have tried these, they have felt in the way, an artificial and cumbersome screen between you and I. The later, such as the landscape gestures that WE have performed, or ecological soil care, are where the actual attentiveness is developed, humans act, and you respond, and humans notice this change and act accordingly; they are iterative, gardening, rituals. A practice may combine both, for example biodynamics combines religious rituals that the performers experience as a change in their human emotion toward soils, but not as changes in the soil itself, and they also apply various practices of soil care that do (Piggot 2020). Some rituals may equally be both symbol and iteration, such as the moments of stillness and respect before cutting a tree, or simply contemplating a place. Sian Sullivan describes such a moment as “transcendental immanence” (2014, 241) but I do not experience this transcendently. The feeling is powerful, but it is concrete in this experience, seemingly devoid of symbolic mediation, and does not exist out of this materiality. I honor you as a person that is present in front of me and that can only be nurtured and honored in OUR materiality.

OUR practice is not only located away from human settlements; it exists in cities, suburbia and rural landscapes. Whereas most “eco-pagans” generally seem to understand “nature” as something “unspoilt,” other-than-human, WE practice it as a condition of persons—whether human, other, or both—allowed to emerge according to their own nature, their essence, as opposed to ecosystems controlled to follow pre-established abstract designs (Mathews 2004, 2011). This is not to say that the various parties are not affected, and I know that my hand can be heavy on you at times, but that you are—rarely—entirely controlled.

Although I am in favor of a broad diversity of animisms,<sup>3</sup> I also worry that naming your cognition as “spirit” may hide as much as it reveals by becoming a sign between ecosystems and humans, one that easily can be mistaken for a transcendent soul or goddess, one that can be detached and projected on a fetish, and thus concealing the immanent material being that WE are, of recreating the separation that we are trying to erase.<sup>4</sup> OUR modern animism only exists in OUR practice, our dialogue.

Modern animism is such a fine line to tread, practicing with you, and conceiving of you almost as a human, is inevitably partially through symbols. In order to think with you, I need to give you a voice. This letter attempts to tread this edge; it both describes OUR concrete experiences and uses anthropomorphism to understand and communicate it.

Isabelle Stenger has compared animism with André Breton’s view of magnetism as a necessity for the repressed bourgeois to “escape the shackles of normal, representational perception.” (Stengers 2012), to get back in touch with their subconscious. Yet the gap between those spirits and the unconscious in magnetism seems much wider than that between your ordering force and modern animism. There is a closer alignment between an ecosystem’s emergence and its conceptualization as an agency akin to human, than there is between our own subconscious and the spirit of other dead people. This gap seems no wider than that between a concept in physics and the phenomenon it describes.

It has not been useful—so far—in the practice of OUR modern animism to describe you as a spirit.

It is going to be difficult for most humans to conceptualize ecosystems—such as your earthly selves—as living beings and yet it is necessary for ecological architectural practice and it may be for living in general, as human’s daily living is designing the world around us. Without acknowledging the creativity of the ecosystems we design with, we will only practice sustainably, we are only limiting our damage instead of nurturing their systemic regeneration. In order to nurture the resilience of human and other-than-human assemblages, we have to understand them as complex systems. We need to acknowledge that complex systems store knowledge and have a capacity for self-generation that affords them to adapt to changing conditions. We often forget that you have an other-than-human form of memory and agency (Guibert 2018).

It is obvious for you that ecosystems, such as yourselves, thrive without us designing you and that you provide all beings with “ecosystem services.”<sup>5</sup> It must baffle you that we can’t see that WE have evolved together as “companion species,” or “symbionts” (Manifestly Haraway, 2016a, 2016b).

I am glad that you also feel that we are increasingly becoming alike. I sense that you are part of me and I am part of you, that I am thinking in part through you. This feeling resonates with Marisol De la Cadena description of the Runakuna society’s understanding that they are the earth beings—the ecosystems—they are part of, that all beings living there—including the entire habitat—are part of the same clan (2010, ch. Story 3, 100–101). The difference with US is that humans today move more. Even when we spend much time living with a landscape, we often spend time elsewhere.

The usefulness of this systemic ontology for architectural practice is first to avoid destroying a system’s capacity to provide. Secondly it is to nurture what an ecosystem can do for itself. This limits how much we humans need to do, as well as the consumption of material, energy and thus CO2 emission that is necessary. And lastly it nurtures its capacity to do it over time by

allowing processes of biological and cultural diversification, enmeshment ... Architectural animism maximizes self-productivity and nurtures resilience.

This form of design is a co-creative practice, disseminated through the ecosystem in question, and facilitated, mentored, by a designer to nurture the creation of synergies toward more favorable outcomes, for humans. The method of architectural animism is to design within this dialogue through facilitation. (Guibert 2018)

There are two forms of dialogue in OUR architectural practice. The first is actual—a dance—I look at what you are doing, I act, you act, and I listen to your response. The second is representational, it takes place through drawings, and words such as these letters, in order for humans to conceive, design, and communicate. I will come back to this imbrication of practice and representation later.

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Our dialogue with you, is a form of communication with places, that aims to strengthen both parties by giving them a creative voice. The practice itself is a form of an “ontopolitic,” a democratic system aiming toward “a world where many worlds fit,” without necessarily the need for discourses to align, but for different ontologies to co-exist (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018). The dance between ecosystems—such as yourselves and the species nested within—and us humans allows each party to develop their own world in a process of co-evolution.

The workings of the practice share many similarities with Isabelle Stengers’ (2014) and Bruno Latour’s concept for a “cosmopolitical” system that will support the resilience of ecosystems and species, a system that will gradually include an increasing number of living beings. Its workings are a cyclical process of “progressive composition of a common world” (Latour 2004, 378, author’s translation). His democratic cycle is akin to our gardening process, but, once the voice of other-than-human beings has been recorded, it is primarily based on discourse, on language, and, as it involves many institutions (politicians, scientists, artists and other translators ...), it is likely to occur at a much slower rhythm, and at a larger ecosystemic scale. Such a system would benefit from a partial decentralization in order to be able to adapt to localized specificities as well as faster evolutions cycles (Berkes and Folke 2003, ch. 14). Latour’s “parliament of things” is necessary for regional, national, or global scales but cannot deal with that of local variations.

Animistic architectural practice is a localized, micro, version of the “parliament of things.” Due to its incremental nature and gardening process, over time, an increasing number of species are taken into account. There are, generally although not necessarily, less human specialists involved.

It is an embodied form of ecological politics, that Jane Bennett described as “political ecologies” that express their agency through what they physically do, “with their feet,” or, in your case soils, with growth (2010, ch. 7); it is an embodied feedback mechanism.

Although feedback mechanisms are always at play, “modern” humans do not generally listen to the response. Industrial agriculture for example in relation to yourselves is what we call in France a “dialogue de sourds” (dialogue of the deaf), people speaking without hearing each other. Many of your earthly kind are dying globally but this is not heard, specifically because mechanistic practices hide the response through the use of fertilizers and pesticides. As long as

soils are considered as inert matter instead of living beings, as long as we cannot perceive your assemblages, it is unlikely we will listen, until you are no longer able to support growth at all.

WE are privileged of course, although some of you do provide food, this is outside of corporate pressures—your production is exchanged through gifts in our “network of care” (Krzywoszynska 2019, 672). Commercially viable large-scale agriculture is bound by short term financial constraints; even when driven to produce sustainably, it has to treat you like our digestive system with “probiotics”; some of the living beings that form you are used as machines; as in any biodesign you are still conceived as passive matter, cared for, but entirely controlled (Krzywoszynska 2019, 670).

OUR practice increases biodiversity within and around OUR sites. Hunters who shoot on surrounding land benefit from this increase in game. Farmers sometimes complain of the overpopulation of wild boar that damage their fields; the wild pigs have to be occasionally culled as humans are their only predators today. Caring is also sometimes killing. This biodiversity also attracts many for the wellbeing of its experience, both of the results and of the act of caring for you. It encourages others to care for other soils elsewhere. OUR practice nurtures the resilience of OUR “networks of care” reciprocally.

Architectural Animism is thus a form of ontopolitical design. This is close to “cosmopolitical design” (Yaneva and Zaero-Polo 2015), but is primarily embodied, and disseminated, within the ecosystem, performed live, more than through discourse. It is a kind of dance. The communication takes place through action. A story is created with the actant ecosystem by conversing with it live through acts.

A version of this story is then written.

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What is the role of this writing, for you soil, for you reader, and for the architect?

Your dynamic selves will be sensitive to the Deleuzian conception of text as a setting—my word—for “thought-events” to occur, as opposed to text as a representation of existing static knowledge (Grosz 2001, 61). For Deleuze, thought is understood as “complex assemblages” in motion, “fundamentally moving, ‘nomadological’ or ‘rhizomatic’, ” an “active force, positive desire, which *makes* a difference.” It “results from the provocation of an encounter,” and such an encounter can take place in a text (Grosz 2001, 58, 61, 62). Deleuze conceives of the value of text in terms of its operative nature; texts “only remain effective and alive [...] if they have effects, if they shake things up, produce realignments” (Grosz 2001, 58).

What can our correspondence realign?

There are two types of thought-events that take place in and through text. There is the completed text as a setting for a reader’s thinking, and there is text as a method, as a thinking through the act of writing.

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In our letters the structure of the text as a correspondence with other-than-human actants is a provocation that deals with an impossibility. What form off writing would avoid presenting ecosystems of which we are part as external? How do we place the reader inside OUR dialogue? What medium structure can represent your simultaneously fragmentary/unitary quality?



Traditional academic writing describes objects as external to us, and without agency. Literary narrative text, with single narrator, such as those I used to write about you, conveys our interactions but it is one sided—a “personal” phenomenological version of our journey—the reader is in the shoes of another human.<sup>6</sup> Giving a voice to an ecosystem in a letter forces both reader and writer to empathize with you.

The anthropomorphic quality of these letters forces the writer, and the reader/listener alike to become aware of a living ecosystem as being, a type of being that we find difficult to perceive due to your friable and sluggish nature.

Through this form of roleplay, you are represented as of equal value as us human. It develops in us empathy and respect. It uses a romantic trope—with a small “r”—to develop feelings, care for ecosystems and tap into our “ecopsychology,” our species genetic memory of ecosystems (Ecopsychology 2019; Wikipedia 2019).

Stengers, from a reading of David Abram, describes that “our senses make us animists” (2018, 104). We constantly animate matter, in arts we animate sculptures, paintings . . . And you—reader—is animating this text as you read, as I am animating it as I write. They all become events, alive.

Anthropomorphism allows us to use the knowledge and experience we have of the behavior of the complex system we know best—human character—and apply them to another. This knowledge has the added benefit of being universally known and thus anthropomorphism communicates to the widest human audience.

This quality has been used recently by Culture Declares Emergency, an ecological activist movement, in their Letters to the Earth (2019) to communicate the impending ecological catastrophe to a broad audience through nurturing empathy and respect toward the Earth as a living being, as Gaia. The artist John Newling in *Dear Nature* also writes a series of letters to “Nature” (2018). In both of these, the letters are humans writing to Gaia; they are monologues that act more as reflections on how we understand and relate to the global ecosystem than how an ecosystem may perceive and communicate with us. The absence of response retains a degree of detachment. The correspondent—nature—is used as a mirror helping see ourselves and the consequences of our acts.

This detachment is also found in the work of scientists as well as artists who use scientific technologies to listen to plants and other ecosystems. The relation remains that of object being studied to subject researching instead of a dialogue. The desire of the researcher to avoid having an effect on the object of study in order to remain “objective” limits the possibility for exchange.

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The epistolary form—the written correspondence—that this letter is part of places the reader in the middle of a dialogue between various voices, humans and other-than-humans. The reader is in-between. It is a “textual weave” as that used previously in my doctoral thesis where academic and literary texts are enmeshed; there the reader was shifting between different human hats whereas here other-than-human roles—you—are added to the mix (Guibert 2018).

The weaving, or assemblage, of multiple textual modes and voices, forms an in-between space, between the threads, or between the elements assembled, an indeterminate space that is open for the emergence of thought and yet clearly zoned by the presence of imperfect determinate letters and artifacts. The textual assemblage is isomorphic to the entangled embodied practice that is its soil.

Isomorphic does not mean equal, nor equivalent. There is a gap. Our language struggles to embody your paradoxical assemblage nature—fragmentary yet unified—other-than-human and human—simultaneously. The more alive you are, the more your body takes shape and your boundaries clarify, so I have decided to give you my soils the voice of a collective—matter of fact—interlocutor. As you are fragments, and humans are some of these fragments, I have set myself as the—rational—correspondent. More than your voice, it is the correspondence as a whole that stands for you.

This is not perfect of course. Some may criticize that giving you a human voice is a lack of respect to your difference, but as my purpose is to nurture an awareness of what is similar to us, of your life, I prefer to highlight this unity of a voice, with the fragmentation of the exchange.

Marshall McLuhan famously stated that “the medium is the message” ([1964] 1994). The structure of the medium itself forms our conception of what is; it isn’t neutral. Placing ecosystems as narrators in a polyphonic dialogue is central to communicating that they are beings of equal-ish importance, interacting with each other and us.

The written word reduces the anthropomorphic dimension compared to visual representation. It suspends disbelief. It is—just about—believable for us human that your thoughts, most probably unlike our own and without a sense of self, could be translated in that way. The epistolary correspondence has a temporality that mediates between your longer time and ours.

The structure of this medium functions differently to a metaphorical transcription of the anthropocene in speculative architectural projects by Design earth—for example in the series Cosmorama—(<http://design-earth.org>) (Design Earth 2019). There the processes are expressed as architectural static solid objects whereas the correspondence focusses on performative and narrative qualities, on change.

OUR letters form an anthropomorphic polyphonic weave.

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The correspondence only exists in connection to the practice that is its soil. It shares with Donna Haraway’s “Speculative Fabulation,” the—in part—fictional and speculative, and—in part—scientific, dimensions used to invent worlds that care for other-than-human beings. These letters differ from the futuristic Science Fiction dimension of “SF,” such as the *Camille Stories* (Haraway 2016b, ch. 8), by being grounded in actual ecosystems, many in the process of being co-created. The fiction in these texts is not a speculation on a future, some form of utopia, but a co-created narrative iteratively being developed physically in the present. Its fictional quality—the correspondence—is used to comprehend in order to act today and to communicate.

OUR earthly stories, as much as they have been physically created and explained with the support of science, arises from and feeds back into practice. They are somewhere between Haraway’s grounded description of her relationship with her dog in the *Companion Species Manifesto* and the futuristic visions of the *Camille Stories* (Manifestly Haraway, 2016a, ch. 2). These present fabulations speculate through practice and writing.

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The epistolary medium is also a research method for the practicing architect and academic. Message = Medium = Method. It is a way to conceptualize what has happened, and is

happening, in ecological projects to practice more effectively and carefully later. The act of writing a letter from an actant defines it. It defined you—my soils—as a skin protecting the mineral earth, with porous and hairy boundaries, with plants as receptors. It unearthed that we communicate through acts and that respect and care—presence—are exchanged. The exercise also made me aware of this implicit drive toward making earthy architectures, to challenge the illusory permanence of architecture through the integration of the processes of growth and decay constitutive of soil. I now realize that it is this delineation of soils that is one of the main media of this architectural practice. Lastly, this method showed how we have transformed each other into being more akin, a human earthiness, an earthy culture.

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OUR co-creative architectural practice is an embodied animism. Modern animism, a useful ontology that appeared within OUR ecological architectural practice, isn't spiritual, it is material. This is a localized "ontopolitical" practice, a physical ecological political dialogue through which we make together a common resilient "world where many worlds fit" (ejército zapatista de liberación nacional, quoted in Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 1). Modern Animism is a practice through a mosaic of human ontologies, in dialogue with other-than-humans.

OUR growing epistolary dialogue is a tool to understand and share OUR relationship. It uses our human animistic neurology to feel you in order to practice ecologically, with care. It places the reader, however imperfectly, in the middle of a dialogue, role playing the various interlocutors, human and other-than-human alike.

This anthropomorphic writing method is operative; it allows humans to clarify what we are working with, you, and how to adjust our acts. Such artistic method also can bring your voice in the deliberations of the "parliament of things," in complementary ways to the methods used by scientists envisaged by Bruno Latour for the functioning of a cosmopolitical discourse.

For this medium to operate, it needs to be written as honestly as possible, to connect to what happened. It must be close to the experience of the embodied practice, entangled with contemporary scientific knowledge. Care is necessary to avoid—over—Romanticizing as much as—over—Rationalising—both with capital Rs. Pure representation should be avoided in Animistic Dialogs. Attentiveness to your physical response is necessary to avoid the dangers of the anthropocentric tendencies of transcendental detachments.

Modern animism is a speculative ontopolitical practice; it redefines our conception of the world and our relationships within it live. Although here found in a specific architectural practice, it may embody a contemporary position that is of use elsewhere; contemporary human living is in some way designing.

The aim in the coming years is to integrate this epistolary medium fully within OUR architectural practice. Whereas these first two letters have been written after—most of—the events, the future correspondence will be written as the events unfold as a polyphonic correspondence akin to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Choderlos de Laclos 2008). The narrators will be diverse: meadows, technocratic management, tools, soils . . . The stories will be created as they are made and written to speculate further and encourage others to embody and tell similar stories. I hope to feel you more clearly.

In "a world where many worlds fit," questions remain about what these worlds and their agency are, and how each world relates to others, in particular how we relate to you. This is all

the more challenging as systemic beings sometimes partially overlap with, sometimes are nested within another.

Similarly, how precisely does the modern and animistic sides of this practice combine? Are they simultaneous or do they happen one after the other?

I begin to realize that in OUR practice, there are different relationships established, some more distant than others, some occasionally violent and cruel, others gentle. Could you describe them from your point of view? What are we for you in these different connections? What are the relations between your cognition and our own, human, biological and artificial intelligences?

Yours, earthily,  
Eric



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An early and much shorter version of this article – the first letter – was first presented at the Monsoon [+other] Grounds Symposium on 22nd March 2019 at the University of Westminster.

## NOTES

1. This was inspired by a doctoral performance by Alicia Velázquez during which she interrogated key actants of her artistic practice such as time and the color pink (2016).
2. There is a long philosophical history of such a position in Europe, starting from Spinoza, which has been beautifully traced by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010).
3. The position is that our ecosystems would benefit from a broad diversity of animisms working together, of which this modern animist practice is one version out of many. Although I agree with Sian Sullivan’s position that “Animist perspectives [...] emphasise the ethical perspectives and practices that may arise when people live and act as if diverse other kinds of being can see and in some way represent ‘us’”, her rejection of “vital materialism” from the spectrum of animisms on the grounds of a lack of recognition of “differentiated agency and intentionality” seems unproductive, as well as unfounded (Sullivan 2017, 221). This is surprising as, elsewhere, Sullivan points out the urgency to “imagine and articulate different possibilities to counter-balance the destructive ‘truths’ legitimising current socioecological trajectories” (Sullivan 2019, 21). The enormity of the challenging task at hand—defining contemporary cultures that nurture ecosystemic health while retaining human agency—calls for unison, mutual support and an openness toward different ways of practicing animism.
4. A recent and frightening embodiment of the dangers of the misuse of neo-pagan religious symbols is the “QAnon Shaman” who was one of the leaders to the attack on the Capitol this week. His body is tattooed with symbols of various Viking/Nordic gods (at least Thor and Odin), that had also been used by Nazis in various rewinding rituals. Of course, most neopagans are not extreme right-wing fanatics but when symbols—including rituals as symbols—are detached from an actual practice of care with place, they can easily take an anthropocentric life of their own and associated with the most confused and dangerous mix of ideas. Animistic ontologies exist solely in an actual dialogue with place, and this can be more, or less, spiritual.
5. Many have pointed out the limits and potential pitfalls to the ecosystem services framework, for example the capitalization of some, such as carbon sequestration, when detached from others—in itself a misuse of the concept—(Sullivan 2010), nonetheless they help many understand the systemic nature of ecosystems and have led to an improved perception of our environments and policy. We should be careful of not throwing the baby with the bathwater through a generic application of a specific criticism.

6. In earlier texts, there were stories from the human side, describing the dynamics of the more-than-human ecosystems from the outside. As Kris Scheerlinck pointed out during my doctoral public defense, inevitably, they were not given a voice in the writing, at least not completely. I wish to thank him for pointing this out.

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