The Coming Nature

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REFERENCES

T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016
 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, Chicago: Hau Books, 2015
 Thomas Schlessner, *L'Univers sans l'homme : les arts contre l'anthropocentrisme (1755-2016)*, Paris : Hazan, 2016
Are We Human?: Notes on an Archeology of Design, Zurich : Lars Müller, 2016
Whole Earth: Field Guide, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. Sous la dir. de Caroline Maniaque-Benton avec Meredith Gaglio
 Mark Dion : *Extranaturel*, Paris : Beaux-Arts de Paris les éditions, 2016
La Bête et l'adversité, Genève : MétisPresses, 2016. Sous la dir. d'Anna Barseghian, Stefan Kristensen, Isabelle Papaloïzos

- 1 The conception of nature as matter to be objectified by modern science or as an inanimate resource at our disposal is currently being disrupted by ecological, ethological, anthropological and philosophical research. Because of global warming, nature is simultaneously entering the political scene. Ironically, the urgent need to reassess our relationship to nature is surfacing at the very same time that we are losing its concept. The books addressed in this article combine art and theoretical thought. They function as explorations that both try to outline the kind of nature we are leaving behind and the possibilities we could be traveling towards. Along the way, we might also lose a certain type of humankind: who are we becoming, and what is our place in this coming nature? All these questions are asked by these recent publications.
- 2 The art historian Thomas Schlessner describes his latest book, *L'Univers sans l'homme* [The Universe Without Humans] as the “genealogy of an alteration”. This alteration

doesn't so much describe the realisation of the toxicity of our relationship to living things, than it does the indifference of the natural realm, considered as a cosmos, to humans. The author thus examines "anthropofugic" works of art, which acknowledge the metaphysical change in focus, from human beings at the centre of the universe ("the confident anthropocentrism of the Renaissance") to a universe where human presence is put into perspective "until it disappears": "untouched nature from an immemorial past", "imaginary and faraway worlds". It seems almost easier to dream of someplace else rather than to try to reconfigure the position of human beings within the world to which they belong. The fact of no longer being at the centre of the universe sometimes seems to have been confused with no longer having a position within it. The "anthropofugic" connection that Thomas Schlessler brings to light, from the painters of the sublime to Pierre Huyghe and his "human-proof ecosystems", recognises the end of the absolute centrality of human beings. But it paradoxically renews one of its closest correlates: the idea of a metaphysical human solitude, that arises precisely from humanity's extraction from nature, operated by anthropocentric modernity.

- 3 Other spatial polarities are better able to frame a new map of our relationship to living things. The issue is not moving from centre to periphery but progressing from a position of exteriority (outside) and superiority (above) as regards nature, to a position of internality (within). In other words, it involves a move from the position of owner and conqueror to one of mere member of the community of the living. Towards the inside reveals itself as the new horizon of the coming world, through "rediscovering the continuity between humans and other living things" and "inspiring a feeling of belonging to the world"¹. The point is to reinstitute a relational human figure that includes all living creatures.
- 4 This is what the architectural researchers Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley work towards in *Are We Human?: Notes on An Archeology of Design*. The question in the title, which may seem unsettling at first, could be interpreted thus: can one still declare, with the same casualness, "I am human," considering that progress, the crucial element in defining the role of humanity and design, is questioned ("design [is] understood as the very principle of human evolution in an uncritical celebration of progress – as if nothing was more human than the ability to modernize oneself"?²). How should we redefine human beings when their figure, as a species destined to increase its hold on its environment (another name for progress), becomes shaky faced with the destruction it wreaks? Can we define them in relation to non-human objects and living things? We would not only be designers, we would also be designed – by non-humans. On the one hand, the authors reconfigure design, no longer as "a controlled act of imposition on the surrounding living world", but as a retroactive system, inspired by André Leroi-Gourhan's theories. "The human is permanently suspended between being the cause and the effect, between designing living systems and being designed by them."³ On the other hand, design should no longer stem from the concept of humanness as a fixed and isolated corporeal entity, a continuously reactivated Vitruvian man, but from "trans-specific mobile collaborations". "Tens of thousands of different species are suspended within each human body and the body is itself suspended within a dense environment of countless species outside it"⁴. The human, "never simply human", is continuously taken and reshaped by its relations with the

objects it creates and the living species it interacts with – this is the new figure from which design should reinvent itself.

- 5 Thus, the challenge of our times is to define the human not by distinction, but by affiliation. Among other things, the question is no longer what makes humans so special and different from non-human animals, but rather what they have in common, in order to build a shared world. Faced with this task, the anthropology of nature plays a crucial role, by introducing cultural worlds where what is in common is not merely biological, unlike in the West. In *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the word “nature” describes a reality that is the exact opposite of the modern Western conception. Human and non-human animals share a similar interiority. “Animals impose the same categories and values on reality as humans do: their worlds, like ours, revolves around hunting and fishing, cooking [...], war, initiation rituals.”⁵ But their bodies are different. In the Amazonian view, the body is not understood as a “distinctive substance or fixed shape”⁶, contrary to Western modernity’s characteristically materialistic approach. Rather, it is considered as “an assemblage of affects or ways of being”, “a bundle of affects and capacities”⁷ typical of different species. Therefore, though “all beings see [...] the world in the *same* way – what changes is the *world* that they see,”⁸ because their differentiated bodies give them different perspectives on the world. “What to us is blood is maize beer to the jaguar [...]; what we see as a muddy waterhole, the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house”⁹. It is the fact that the body is not seen as pure biological matter, and consequently that there is no hierarchy between body and soul, typical of our own cosmology, which allows animism to see a “metaphysical continuity”¹⁰ between human and non-human animals, where our own cosmology shows only discontinuity. In this way, the Amazonian perspectivism shows us possible paths to create community with animals: by highlighting the fact that the body is not pure matter but full of soul, by moving towards a sensual and ethological approach of the body, in order to transform the biological connection between living species into a metaphysical one.
- 6 These internal transformations, which are capable of building a sense of belonging to nature, can be sparked by praxis, not only by awareness. This is what *Whole Earth Field Guide*, supervised by Caroline Maniaque-Benton, underlines. This book is a collection of articles from *Whole Earth Catalog*, an emblematic journal of the ecological and political turn in the United States, published between 1968-72, in the wake of anti-nuclear mobilizations and the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) and *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich (1968). The journal’s specificity was that it mixed specialist scientific articles with practical skills: in the “Land Use,” “Craft” and “Shelter” sections, readers learned how to create an agro-ecological vegetable garden, increase their energetic autonomy, build houses in connection with their environment or survive in the wild. These articles were published alongside essays by the most influential thinkers of the times, like D’Arcy W. Thompson, Aldo Leopold (“Understanding Whole Systems” section), Saul Alinsky and Margaret Mead (“Community” section). It is only at the intersection between theoretical and practical knowledge, transformed into modes of action and thought, that we can invent another way of living, that does not consist of destroying and impoverishing the only Earth we have: this was the implicit premise on which *Whole Earth Catalog* rested. In other words, transforming our concepts of humanity and its relationship to nature only means learning to live differently. In this regard, *Whole Earth Field Guide* plays a much deeper

role than just being a token of a particular cultural context. It reactivates a guide that is still valid for our times, which in many ways resemble the late 1960s.

- 7 Art also emerged as a guide to both shaking up and reconstructing our relationship to nature, through different approaches that outline a very wide field of action within the issue of ecological crisis. In *Decolonizing Nature*, the art historian T.J. Demos argues that “in its most ambitious and far-ranging sense, art [...] offer[s] new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature”¹¹. The idea of a “colonization of nature” highlights the convergence between the development of the Western conception of nature as inanimate resources and the historical phenomenon of colonization, understood as organized exploitation (scientific, military, economical and political) of humans and nature. T.J. Demos also examines contemporary artists, such as Superflex and Nils Forman, who demonstrate the way in which “the technological, social and economic systems [...] construct the environment”¹², and who try in turn to construct alternative political structures to access new ways to relate to living things.
- 8 Mark Dion’s art takes the form of an archeological inquiry “into the past landscapes of ideas on nature, in order to understand how, when, and why we have become societies who entertain a suicidal relationship to nature.”¹³ His exhibition project at the Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris, *Extranaturel*, explores the idea that “some answers can be found in counter-history and the supernatural”¹⁴. The idea is to reveal “strangeness, monstrosity and supernatural” within an institution “devoted to the rational teaching of artistic production and art history”¹⁵. The exhibition displays casts, skeletons, engravings and contemporary works side by side, and through a confrontation of naturalist and supernatural objects seems to want to show the artificial, arbitrary and discriminatory character of our category of nature (but isn’t this the case for all categories?, wonders ethologist Vinciane Despret in an interview). The catalogue does not clarify what is at stake here, and sometimes creates misunderstandings, by seemingly likening the transformation of our relationship to nature to a rejection of categories and rationality. Vinciane Despret, however, manages to show what the supernatural as a category is able to reveal about our conception of nature: “calling an event or a phenomenon supernatural is an act whose consequence is to mistrust the powers of nature completely. [...] David Abram says that when one believes that some phenomena can only be explained as supernatural – in its standard meaning as something that escapes nature – it is actually because we overlook the unknown extent of the powers of nature. It actually has to do with a very limited understanding and our ignorance of nature.”¹⁶
- 9 *La Bête et l’adversité*, published by the Swiss association Utopiana, helps us become better aware of these non-supernatural “invisible creatures”: living things and their powers. This collection of texts, which combines pictures of contemporary artworks and theoretical essays, features a very interesting reflection by the above-mentioned American philosopher David Abram, who questions the idea that nature has been completely objectified by modern science and therefore disenchanted. Of course, we can now observe and access knowledge on an unprecedented scale, but we have not exhausted nature for all of that. Indeed, the living territories we inhabit are not only occupied by visible and observable beings, but also by the invisible: “the relationships between these visible things – the way they influence each other and us – remain hidden”.¹⁷ Abram enumerates examples of the relationship between pollinating insects

and flowers, between trees and clouds, between rain and roots, that remain, in all their subtlety and complexity, beyond our reach. Becoming attentive to this invisible dimension of the living world encourages us to discard the exterior, superior perspective, while acknowledging “these powers that we have not created and whose activity we cannot control”.¹⁸ In this way, Abram outlines another possible direction for contemporary art in the context of the ecological crisis, along with the creation of alternative political structures and an archeology of our concept of nature. This orientation seeks to enrich our impoverished sensitivity to nature and its powers, in order for the project of reentering nature to not only be perceived as a necessary measure and a renunciation, but also as a desire and a widening of our field of existence.

NOTES

1. Barseghian, Anna. Kristensen, Stefan. *La Bête et l'adversité*, Geneva : MétisPresses, 2016, p. 5
2. Colomina, Beatriz. Wigley, Mark. *Are We Human?: Notes on an Archeology of Design*, Zurich : Lars Müller, 2016, p. 39
3. *Ibid.*, p. 56-57
4. *Ibid.*, p. 219
5. Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, Chicago: Hau Books, 2015, p. 251
6. Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Ibid.*, p. 257
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 251
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 260
11. Demos, T.J. *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2016, p. 19
12. Demos, T. J. *Op. cit.*, p. 44
13. *Ibid.*
14. Basta, Sarina. Dion, Mark. *Mark Dion : Extranaturel*, Paris : Beaux-Arts de Paris les éditions, 2016, p. 6
15. Basta, Sarina. Dion, Mark. *Op. cit.*, p. 6
16. Alliou, Kathy. « Entretien avec Vinciane Despret », *Mark Dion : Extranaturel, Op. cit.*, p. 38
17. Abram, David. « Les Invisibles : vers une phénoménologie des esprits », *La Bête et l'adversité, Op. cit.*, p. 208
18. *Ibid.*, p. 210