

"The forms of power that sail under animist or 'ecological' agendas are not always emancipatory."

Anselm Franke in conversation with Mathilde ter Heijne

Between 2010 and 2012, Franke's project Animism was presented in different versions in Antwerp, Bern, Vienna, Berlin, and at e-flux in New York. Franke has edited numerous publications and regularly contributes articles to magazines such as Metropolis M, e-flux journal, and Parkett. He curated the 2012 Taipei Biennial; The Whole Earth at HKW with Diedrich Diederichsen in 2013; After Year Zero with Annett Busch; and Forensis (2014) with Eyal Weizman.

Originally published in Performing Change by Mathilde ter Heijne (Sternberg Press, in association with Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg).

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Mathilde ter Heijne: I was very impressed by your recent work on animism [see footnote 1], which included a large-scale exhibition, symposium and publication that addressed a very broad range of ideas related to the separation between subject and object, and other kinds of false opposites imposed by the ideas of modernism. I was wondering how you became interested in this subject, and what drew you to this idea?

Anselm Franke: To me, the term animism is a necessary reference when we try not to simply denounce the modern dichotomies as false, but to understand their historical efficacy without submitting to their logic. To me, animism—a broad concept denoting the production of subjects and different kinds of subject/object, material/immaterial and self/other relations—presents us with a challenge, namely that of actually being able to think outside the framework that these dichotomies established, and look beyond the matrix and set of choices they dictated for Western epistemology. The specificity of the modernist matrix lies in the way it prescribes and encompasses opposites; to be anti-modern in this matrix is an almost entirely determined, scripted and essentially modern position, one that shares many basic assumptions and beliefs and possible choices with its opponents. It also encompasses the "pre-modern" and subhuman: it locks in its opposites and negatives. Wanting to denounce the modern dichotomies as "false" does not mean that we are actually able to step out of their matrix, out of the frame. As a maker of exhibitions who believes in a certain modernism—the modernism characterized by the ability of an image, artwork, or form of consciousness to step out of its framing conditions—I was interested in this larger historical question of the frame that we call "modernity," and the point where this frame could potentially be negotiated. I came to this set of questions via psychology; in fact, it was in reading Freud that I first encountered the term animism, which seemed to occupy a central place in his entire system—a place where the normative axioms of his system rested, it seemed to me, on rather shaky ground. Animism, in Freud's system, and in that of his contemporaries from other disciplines, is a name for the absence of what they variously regarded as the "correct" way of

drawing the line between self and other, life and non-life, inside and outside and so forth. But we also have to give them credit for opening the door for the de-naturalization of this "correct" way. The term is always throwing us back onto our own background assumptions.

To be able to describe so-called animist culture without rendering their claims illegitimate is the measure for the decolonization of our thinking about the non-modern others, internal or external. It has connections to the larger history of colonization and cultural difference in modernity: in the concept of animism, we encounter the problem not of cultural difference, but of ontological difference. To be or become "modern" in terms of rationality apparently means submitting to a certain ontological death sentence-to declare that this "other" has a deficient access to reality. This is what interested me, because it amounts to an implicit agreement, and an ongoing declaration of war between the "modern" and the "non-modern." I use animism as a term that does not denote any particular truth, like the general ensoulment of all things or the reality of spirit world, but rather as the only possible, seriously non-reductionist speaking position. That is, a speaking position that does not take any single distinction, border or dichotomy as natural given, but simply accepts a look at the way they are produced.

Mathilde: Looking at your research and work, I was reminded of some issues that come up in ecofeminist writing. Do you think that these dichotomies also have a political dimension; do you see any relationship between these divisions and the hierarchies imposed by patriarchy, for example?

Anselm: Obviously they do. To me, at a very basic level, animism was a way of giving a large historical context to debates on disenchantment, reification, liveliness, reproductive labor and biopolitics. The bottom line in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* [see footnote 2], his monumental account of animist magic and power around the world, are fertility rites. With a reference like this, the question of social power and biopolitics is being situated in a different frame than the one the Marxists tend to put it in. The exhibition project did share a lot with feminist positions, especially feminist historiography, but it also kept a safe distance from any essentialist or identitarian position, along with a certain nature-romanticism or spirituality that may persist in eco-feminism. But the shared basis is certainly larger than the disagreement, especially when it comes to historical analysis. Prior to organizing the animism project, I was engaged in a project called *Mimétisme*, an exhibition that took place in Antwerp in 2008. This project was very much inspired by feminist theory and artistic strategies. "*Mimétisme*," following Luce Irigaray, involves a concept of "exhibiting" or returning to the sender a mode of "being addressed" and rendered a captive of certain images, ideas and frames. It upends patriarchal ideas of a "feminine," unsubstantial mimesis based on a Platonic and Cartesian genealogy, turning it on its head. With this particular project, I began to engage with the larger history of the mimetic faculty in modernity and its gradual suppression-the backdrop against which the self-same, male autonomous individual could emerge, but also the ontological designations we have today, such as "art," or even "psychology." There is a long history of struggle with this most incredible of all resources-the soul. Struggles that first had a theological nature, and were then recoded through

capitalism and colonialism, and finally turned into secular debates, into the academic disciplines as we know them today. The ethnographic and psychoanalytical concept of animism as developed in the late 19th century is a product of this history. As a history of patriarchal disciplining of the mimetic and of "media," it gives a name to the "negative" of modern power, and the very concrete reality of this "negative" was the power of women. The modern capitalist and patriarchal order established itself in Europe with the exploitation of women as a reproductive resource. Silvia Fredericci's *Caliban and the Witch* is an important reference, also within the exhibition; it is part of an entire section that deals with objectification, from the early spectacles of the anatomic theater to Charcot's staging of hysteria.

Mathilde: Most religions commonly associated with animism tend to be practiced in areas of widespread poverty, where large groups of people are disempowered and disenfranchised. Do you think that the ideas behind animism could also have a political dimension-allowing those without power to step out of the rules of dominant ideologies and take power back?

Anselm: I think that this can only be the case when these ideas and practices go hand in hand with a well-articulated critique, also a self-directed one, that articulates itself in a non-identitarian framework and supports the basic, modern idea that all power must be made accountable. Because in the frame of modernity, no form of animism ever stays the same.

They sort of reify; they are transformed by the touch of modernity. The way this happens is one of the major questions that must be raised, also in the former Third World. Because in many cases where we have seen an assertion of indigenous beliefs or of spirituality, it has led to anti-modern, reactionary politics. Even in contexts where animism is an explicit reference for struggles over land and ecology, such as in South America (Ecuador, Bolivia, etc), the results are often questionable in terms of the power relations that are being formed under such auspices. The forms of power that sail under animist or "ecological" agendas are not always emancipatory.

Mathilde: Would you say that animism represents a kind of transgression, political or otherwise?

Anselm: I would say yes, of course: to me, animism is above all about organizing the possible crossings of ontological boundaries. This is what happens in shamanism, for instance: the crossing of boundaries between humans, animals, spirits, etc. We see the same thing in Disney films: they are, as Sergei Eisenstein put it, a revolt against ontological fixation. But we have to keep in mind that any transgression can easily end up asserting the power of the norm. Beyond that, I think animism also refers to the simple fact of life, and the fact that life somehow articulates itself even if its language is that of the symptom. Social life in particular has a life of its own, so to speak, one that will always overhaul any of the reductions applied to it. To me, understanding animism means understanding the way we become mediums, and the way we become subjects and subjected. Such an understanding is essentially political.

Mathilde: Could animism be considered a political tool?

Anselm: Yes, but only if it is separated from spirituality. It is a political tool in order to negate what Brian Massumi has called the onto-power of contemporary capitalism, a tool against specific forms of subjection, and normative social power. But I do not believe in animism as a tool to instigate ecological change, for instance.

Mathilde: To what extent would you say gender issues figure into your ideas around animism?

Anselm: Re-thinking gender hierarchy has been fundamental to the basic, historiographic narrative of the animism project. It has also informed many choices within the exhibition. Patriarchal art history, for example, would favor a certain kind of painter who animates the canvas with his genius! There was no trace of such self-glorifying male dramas in the animism exhibition.

Mathilde: The act of curating an exhibition means making a lot of decisions about what to include and what not to include in the presentation. When you were selecting works and images for your show, how did you avoid falling into the trap of reinforcing the same divisions and hierarchies that the concept of animism tries to reject?

Anselm: It was important not to "show" animism, not to reify or objectify it, as happens in ethnographic museums. The exhibition is a dialectical apparatus: it comes with a monolithic title promising that "you will see animism," but then you are immersed in a cabinet of mirrors that only throws you back on your own relationality. We tried to create constellations (what Adorno called constellation critique) that disarm one other. If there is a tendency of objectification in one work or object or context, it had to be blown to pieces by another work. Rosemarie Trockel's rendering of Courbet's *Origin Du Monde* with a spider on the female organ is a blow to Grandville's use of the animated animal metaphor, and it also "exhibits" a crucial aspect of the Freudian theory of the uncanny: the uncanny being about the crossing of ontological boundaries.

Mathilde: Your animism exhibition was followed by another large exhibition about American counterculture and counterculture communities in California in the 1960s. Psychedelic drugs figured into these communities to some extent. Do you see a connection between these two topics in your research? How would you describe the connection between psychedelia and animism, for example?

Anselm: Yes, these projects are connected. *The Whole Earth* describes the transition to a post-cartesian, neoliberal biopolitics. The hippies want to "return" to nature. In feminism, we find a lot of references to the Great Goddess, and so forth. Generally speaking, animism no longer means the absolute "other" and "outside" to a disciplinary, objectivist modernity. The production of subjects has become the new paradigm, if not on the political level, at least as an ideological interpellation. The new capitalist culture wants us all to become animists, at least within its demarcated boundaries. We ought to subjectify and animate this capitalist world, to give life to it. The psychedelic culture of the 1960s is an important part of the anti-cartesianism and crisis of

objectivism that was really fostered by information technology, cybernetics and computing. It was always much more about the new reality principles induced by technology than "nature" per se. The exhibition *The Whole Earth* tried to find new perspectives on this convergence. When we talk about psychedelia, the crucial issue in the *Animism* exhibition applies here as well. The point was not to assert any sort of deeper animist or spiritual truths "behind" the veil of false appearances, but to keep a dialectical perspective following Walter Benjamin's lead. The problem of "truth" is what happened to the New Age, and generally to right-wing spirituality and obscurantism. Yes, psychedelic experience destabilizes ontological boundaries. What matters, however, is the focus on the making and re-making of these boundaries, and their relationship to history and politics: their status as symptomatic. For the generation that came from an objectivist, reifying, disciplinary culture, LSD was as though an animist universe had opened up. Suddenly, the world began to talk again; objects answered when you spoke to them; there was a re-discovered sense of connection and unity, even if this is always full of paradoxes. But they did not necessarily manage to re-engineer the boundaries they discovered were relational and flexible.

1. *Animism* was a multi-faceted exhibition project that addresses the reevaluation of modernity currently taking place along the lines of Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*. The exhibition's starting point is the artistic-aesthetic process of animation, best known from cartoons and animation films, and examines its relationship with the categorial definitions and limits of the modern world-view.

2. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* is a comprehensive, comparative study of mythology and religion. Written by the Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941), it offers a modernist approach to discussing religion, treating it dispassionately as a cultural phenomenon rather than from a theological perspective. *The Golden Bough* had a substantial influence on contemporary European literature and thought.