



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Ecological Time

*Natures that Matter to Activism and Art*

Peperkamp, M.

#### DOI

[10.37198/APRIA.03.02.a18](https://doi.org/10.37198/APRIA.03.02.a18)

#### Publication date

2021

#### Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

#### Published in

APRIA

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Peperkamp, M. (2021). Ecological Time: Natures that Matter to Activism and Art. *APRIA*, 3(2), 166-183. <https://doi.org/10.37198/APRIA.03.02.a18>

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# **Ecological Time**

*Natures that Matter to Activism and Art*

Monique Peperkamp

**ArtEZ Platform for Research Interventions of the Arts**

APRIA Issue #02, pp. 166-183 \_ March 2021 \_ DOI: 10.37198/APRIA.03.02.A18 \_ <https://apria.artez.nl/ecological-time/>

Title: Ecological Time: Natures that Matter to Activism and Art  
Author: Monique Peperkamp  
Keywords: Art – Anthropocene – N/nature – political ecologies – (new) materialism

Abstract:

The term ‘Anthropocene’ brings together a range of interrelated ecological catastrophes and relates human history to the time scales of the earth. While dominant modes of thinking maintain technocratic notions of nature and time, art has (re)presented alternative proposals and practices that radically shift perception. To foreground and strengthen the power of art to challenge core cultural assumptions and motivate change, this text maps out the implications of philosophical positions often referred to by artists. I consider the ideas of Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Andreas Malm, Naomi Klein and T. J. Demos, and perform a more in-depth inquiry of the aesthetics proposed by Timothy Morton. Two works of art are at the beginning and at the end of this inquiry: *Progress vs. Regress (Progress II)* and *Nocturnal Gardening*, both by Melanie Bonajo. A material sense of time appears to be pivotal for art as an agent of change.

## Ecological Time: Natures that Matter to Activism and Art<sup>1</sup>

‘Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns.’ – Anna Tsing.<sup>2</sup>



Melanie Bonajo, *Progress vs. Regress, (Progress II)*, 2013,  
Courtesy of the artist and AKINCI.

In this essay, a work of art – *Progress vs. Regress (Progress II)* by Melanie Bonajo – instigates a theoretical inquiry into the way science and philosophy frame and affect the perception of time and art in the context of ecological crises. Turning away from this specific work,<sup>3</sup> the second section critically positions philosophy and its implicit or explicit aesthetics. The epochal term ‘Anthropocene’ comes to the fore as having strong technocratic implications instrumentalizing art, impairing its sometimes insurgent sense of differences and different temporalities. The third and last section returns to art – Bonajo’s *Nocturnal Gardening* – to present critical alternatives to dominant technological time regimes.

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is part of a PhD research project at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis of the University of Amsterdam, preliminarily titled *Past Nature in Contemporary Art and New Materialism: How Art and Philosophy Interact*. I want to thank Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, Miriam van Rijsingen, Peter Sonderren and Jeff Diamanti for generously helping me clarify the argument and position of my research.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, PA and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Sustained and detailed analysis of how art works on concepts in its own way, notably in the work of Melanie Bonajo, will be part of my PhD research (see note 1).

## 1. Time in a picture of Progress

*A work of art is introduced that attacks the ignorance of (dis)continuity between nature and culture.*

At face value, the photograph *Progress vs. Regress (Progress II)*, 2013 by Dutch artist Melanie Bonajo appears to make a clear and cynical statement. The background of the central scene consists of water. Beneath a band of grey-blue sky, the horizon marks a darker field, filling about four-fifths of the picture with the surface of a darker sea. The waves and the clouds are tranquil. In the centre of the picture, however, a prominent ochre-coloured piece of cardboard with the word 'Progress' written on it is held by two arms sticking out of the water. Except for the vague shape of a knee, there are no other human features. Where the head should be, just beneath the cardboard, a wave is cresting. The wave looks mild, when the viewer counterintuitively first foregrounds the environment and the sea. Meanwhile, it seems to be fatal to the person holding the board. A drowning person is urgently trying to tell us something.

*Progress vs. Regress (Progress II)* – abbreviated as '*Progress*' here – can be considered as one of the many possible emblems of Bonajo's work, in which she questions what 'progress' and modernity means. It brings to mind the media reports on refugees drowning at sea. Increasingly, people are fleeing because of related political and environmental threats. In times of rising, broad and worldwide protests against the lack of apt political action regarding the interrelated ecological crises, and foremost against the lack of appropriate actions to reduce global warming, the image's message seems obvious. *Progress* comments on a culture that is obsessed with growth and profit, resulting in rising sea levels. This conclusion is also evoked by what the observer of *Progress* may already know about the artist.

Personally, I have been familiar with Bonajo's work for a long time, but only slowly felt it increasingly resonate with my own earlier life experiences – as an artist, as politically active and living in 'alternative' communities – and in line with my current PhD research, that has brought back the urge to engage in active resistance to the ongoing ignorance about environmental degradation in our everyday cultural mode. This engagement foregrounds how the personal and the political relate. Bonajo seems to agree with the feminist anarchist Emma Goldman's ideas on this, cogently epitomized as 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution'.

In interviews, Bonajo has explicitly contextualized her work as a critique on consumerism, capitalism and modernity. Her artistic work, mainly consisting of photos and films, focuses on ways to counter forms of oppression in our personal lives. By foregrounding intimate relations, she reclaims responsibility and possibilities for playful creative strategies against the rule of technological efficiency. Part of her work consists of manipulations and appropriations from the internet, while in settings assembled by Bonajo herself, basic materials and waste are used as props, accessories, and as objects of reverence – past a dualistic idealization of nature and refusal of technologies, or, more critical in the current context: past a complete naturalization of technology.

Techno-culture overrules nature, turning ‘Progress’ into ‘Regress.’<sup>4</sup> Dominant technology and science have cultivated a detached perspective,<sup>5</sup> of a universal mankind and its exceptionality. But faith in technological ‘solutions’ is a pivotal part of the problem itself. Technologies require continuous adaptation to the always new,<sup>6</sup> thereby making us forget that the past is not just the history we choose to remember for a future ideal. In nature, artefacts, waste and natural processes in which nature and culture are merged, the past is *materially* present. Therefore, ‘[w]e can never be in the heat of the moment, only in the heat of the ongoing past... Indeed, the air is heavy with time’.<sup>7</sup>

In *Progress*, being in the moment is both enhanced and immediately threatened by the rising sea level. The interrelated processes of nature and human history end human life. Time is lost, both as a tool to get a grip, to measure and master change, and as an idiosyncratic flow. Living in the moment is an ideal of mindfulness as opposed to an instrumental time regime. But it is also a feature of precarity, meaning the incapacity to plan.<sup>8</sup> Precarity is a prime example of unequally distributed property. Even a culture that neglects its dependencies, however, remains inextricably interrelated with and dependent on what we call ‘nature’. The article of faith held high in *Progress* prevents the ability to swim; a sign

---

<sup>4</sup> *Progress* is part of a series that enquires into the idea of modern progress. The photo is an independent work of art, and it is treated as such in this text. The first part of the full title, *Progress vs. Regress*, however, is also the title of a film in which Bonajo highlights the role of technology in the life of young and notably of elderly people. In the context of this film, ‘Regress’ literally hints at old age and mortality.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), pp. 68, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Stiegler, interviewed in *The Ister*, directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross (Icarus Films, 2005). DVD.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 278.

becomes a pressing weight. *Progress* identifies the rising tide with a very material sense of time.

The relatively recent philosophical branch of New Materialism dissolves the dualism between nature and culture, and shares environmentalists' hopes when it assumes that a more vibrant understanding of materiality can help counter environmental neglect.<sup>9</sup> Ignoring the consequences of our actions and cultural habits seems less likely if nature and humans were more intimately understood as consisting of the same substance. If we were above, or outside of it, we would essentially remain unaffected by our environments, like an immaterial spirit, an immortal soul or a 'Spaceship Earth'. There would not really be a problem, only, maybe, a sense of loss of something other than the man-made, of natures living their own time. This feeling of loss itself would be a remnant desire, a redundant nostalgia. In this immaterializing mode, however, environmental awareness is still thought of as a superiorly modern ethical development, while upscaling technology is often regarded as the one and only way to respond to ecological problems. Accordingly, the argument goes that the picture taken from the moon was a prerequisite for environmental awareness, ignoring earlier, low-tech and yet successful attempts of amateurs and scientists to alarm wider audiences,<sup>10</sup> and ignoring the knowledge of non-modern cultures. Moderns are always assumed to be ahead of others in time.

## **2. Dissolving dualisms and the notion of nature in the Anthropocene**

*The Anthropocene dissolving of the dualism between nature and technology monopolises knowledge and imagination.*

---

<sup>9</sup> In this respect I agree with Jane Bennett's New Materialism as explained in *Vibrant Matter*. My position departs from hers regarding the political necessity of responsibility and accountability, see note 50. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii.

<sup>10</sup> A well-known example of modest yet influential scientific research is Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009). It was first published in 1962, a decade before the 'Blue Marble' picture of the earth as seen from the moon was taken, and the first reports based on combined computer data argued for global conclusions. 'Carson's writing inspired a new, much more radical generation of environmentalists to see themselves as part of a fragile planetary ecosystem rather than as its engineers and mechanics,' Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 185. On Bruno Latour's 'sharp distinction between science and indigenous thought', see Tsing, *Mushroom*, pp. 315n2-316, 305n12.

A long tradition in philosophy has occupied itself with the question of why humans are essentially different from (the rest of) nature. Many regard technology as the distinctive feature, and cultures that are technologically more developed have therefore been regarded as superior. *Progress*, however, indicates that modernization also entailed a loss of perceptions and capacities to respond. Indeed, an increasing amount of data on environmental degradation paralleled the vast proliferation of technologies in the past decades. Meanwhile, generic philosophical rejections of technology turned to differentiating specific human-technology relations, and nature perished from ecology in ‘techno-ecologies’. Excitement of imagined possibilities that new technologies incite have also impaired the sense of their interrelated, real and lasting effects on nature.

Technological optimism prevailed on the threshold of the breakthrough of internet in the 1980s, when biologist and feminist philosopher Donna Haraway proposed we should understand ourselves as ‘cyborgs’.<sup>11</sup> Critically appropriating this concept, she did not stress modern and human exceptionalism, but aimed to expand possibilities for new connections and solidarities. Haraway countered the dualism between humans and technology, between nature and culture, as likewise social scientist and philosopher Bruno Latour did.<sup>12</sup> Latour seems to have been more alarmed by the uncontrolled increase of what he called nature-culture hybrids such as global warming. To him these imbroglios implied that we can no longer speak of nature.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, philosopher Timothy Morton – who is often referred to by artists – has stressed that the notion of nature should dissolve.<sup>14</sup> Now, what does this dissolving mean for art concerned with ecological catastrophe?

---

<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 127-148. Written between 1978 and 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Latour speaks of nature-culture. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 7, 96, 105-109. First published in French 1991. Likewise, Félix Guattari stated ‘nature cannot be separated from culture,’ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 28. First published in French 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Latour, *Modern*, for example pp. 7, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2009). To Morton, the conceptualization of nature was a tool to distance nature from culture, which enabled a ‘sadistic admiration’, akin to ‘the figure of Woman’ as objectified within patriarchy. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 5. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, pp. 5, 55-59. Reversing the identification of the origins of technology with war, he states that the concept of nature is ‘[t]he slowest and perhaps most effective weapon of mass destruction yet devised,’ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 5.



## Anthropocene imagination

Both Morton and Latour have adopted the term Anthropocene, which foregrounds the fading of the division between nature and culture. The name comes from the Greek word for ‘human’ and urges us to acknowledge the vast and irreversible impact humans are having on the planet – such as the dispersion of nuclear fallout, global warming, the acidification of the oceans, and the loss of biodiversity. According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene requires an ‘Earth perspective’, as opposed to a human ‘world perspective’.<sup>15</sup> Ending the relatively stable period of the Holocene, the Anthropocene places human history within the timescales of the earth. Fully understanding what this means would entail a restructuring of politics, and it would entail fundamental cultural changes. Therefore, although apparently ‘merely’ a matter of scientific geological classification, the concept of the Anthropocene has rightfully evoked concerns in the humanities and arts.

Science and environmental historians Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz have warned that the Anthropocene introduces a regime of scientists overruling public and democratic consultation.<sup>16</sup> Such a master perspective has indeed been implicated from the beginning, as atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen shows, who, together with earth scientist Eugene Stoermer, has promoted the term since 2000.<sup>17</sup> Crutzen has pointed out the Anthropocene entails the need for large-scale technological solutions and appurtenant science:

A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behavior at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to “optimize” climate.<sup>18</sup>

Although international approval is required as Crutzen states, scientists and engineers are attributed with a ‘daunting task’ ‘to guide society’. Apparently, they are to decide what ‘appropriate human behavior at all scales’ is. What does ‘guiding’, ‘appropriate’ and

---

<sup>15</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time,” *History and Theory* 57, no.1 (March 2018), pp. 5-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12044>.

<sup>16</sup> Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Albert Faber, *De Gemaakte Planeet* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no. 23 (January 2002), p. 23. <https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a>.

‘optimize’ mean, and what is to be sustained? Who finances these engineers and scientists, who decides, who owns knowledge? What does this imply for those less present in this discourse? The proposed ‘solutions’ will arguably effect everyone, while concerns to attribute to the public an active, informed, emancipating role seems to be an obstruction to the vision of specialists.<sup>19</sup>

While the Anthropocene importantly dissolves the dichotomy between nature and culture, it entails a new, vast scale of domination of nature, and simultaneously cultivates a gap in knowledge, which will become a self-fulfilling prophecy by not engaging those that will be and are severely affected by decisions made. This affirms the understandable impression that technological developments continue without democratic and public involvement, and that consultation is postponed until there seems to be no choice left.<sup>20</sup> To shape a new imagination for the Anthropocene, art has been seduced to play a prominent and seductive role.<sup>21</sup> This appeals to art’s role as modern avant-garde, at the visionary top of the social pyramid, progressing already where others follow later on.<sup>22</sup> But artists and technocrats may have very different ideas about matters of concern and about time. The Anthropocene as a cultural project proposes faith in the progress of science and technology, while its discourse is a secluded one. This is a good time, therefore, to question what assumptions are implied in current expectations of art shaping a new Anthropocene imagination.

## **Ecology without nature**

---

<sup>19</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, pp. 260, 256-261. Faber, *Gemaakte Planeet*, pp. 90, 93, 96. Although Faber’s argument clearly differs from Klein’s, they share concerns in this respect. In response to a plan to disperse sulphur in the atmosphere – which is only one specific example of similar plans that are currently being developed – Faber writes: ‘If climate change can only be controlled by a continuous process of dispersion of sulphur in the high atmosphere, then we are living in a world in which a very small number of technicians control the qualities of the world we live in. Life in the Anthropocene becomes a totalitarian project, which puts the fate of humans in the hands of a small technocratic elite’ (p. 96, my translation). Referring to atmospheric ‘experiments’ Klein states: ‘We would have a roof, not a sky—a milky, geoengineered ceiling gazing down on a dying, acidified sea.’ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, p. 260.

<sup>20</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, pp. 8-10, 276-78. Klein has written about this strategy as the ‘Shock Doctrine’.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Faber, *Gemaakte Planeet*, p. 197.

<sup>22</sup> A critical note on the avant-garde as related to the incapacity of the modern novel to address global warming is made in Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 123.

‘... don’t try to find some ideal position from where like Archimedes we can leverage the Earth, the first image of geoengineering. Let’s first step down....’ – Timothy Morton.<sup>23</sup>

As an author often referred to on the subject of the Anthropocene, Timothy Morton has been important for artists and theorists, and for me. In a writing style that challenges disciplinary expectations, he articulates the sense of imminence and fragmentation with which ecological catastrophes seem both distant and nearby, mediated and absent, sometimes shimmering on the edge of perception, or ‘too close’ and ‘under one’s skin’.<sup>24</sup> With Morton, environmentalism is opposed to metaphysical ethics that ‘elevates the soul’.<sup>25</sup> There is no ground to cultivate a pristine nature defined in opposition to culture and at a distance to ourselves. To consciously arrive in the Anthropocene, Morton states, the concept of nature should dissolve.

Morton specifies an *Ecology without Nature* in the concept of ‘hyperobjects’. These objects are past the division of nature and culture; they can be black holes or global warming, caused by humans or not.<sup>26</sup> Hyperobjects are always there, but they are only partly perceivable sometimes. They are ‘nonlocal’ and ‘massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’.<sup>27</sup> Both massive and ‘under one’s skin’, they evoke a sense of uncanny ‘magic’ that identifies causality with aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> Ecological aesthetics, ambiguously collapsing and maintaining its distance, becomes ‘necessarily elemental’;<sup>29</sup> a non-anthropocentric phenomenology that *feels* what is (un)known. ‘Art, then, must attune itself to the demonic, interobjective space in which causal-aesthetic events float like genies, nymphs,

---

<sup>23</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 120. In the following section I argue that Morton presents alternatives to a technocratic Anthropocene in art, while he leaves the premisses of domination unchallenged.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 139. Stacey Alaimo aptly speaks of ‘Transcorporeality’ to name this interrelatedness. Alaimo, Stacey, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 2-4.

<sup>25</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 96. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 40, 79, 127, 135, 203-205. Morton’s environmentalism makes you aware of the strangeness of you, yourself, weirdly being part of the *res extensa*. On the relation between phenomenology and cartesianism: ‘Descartes himself, from whom phenomenology deviates and to whom it returns...’ With Morton, cartesian phenomenology loses its ‘intentional transparency’. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 127. The quoted characterization of phenomenology in this note is from Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, pp. 1, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 181.

<sup>29</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 41. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, pp. 78-79.

faeries and djinn'.<sup>30</sup> Unsurprisingly, critics have remarked that hyperobjects mystify causalities and interests, and discourage human responsibility.<sup>31</sup> And indeed, according to Morton, this is the ideal moment to '*not act (out)*'.<sup>32</sup>

Congruent with the Anthropocene discouragement of public involvement and knowledge of politically charged causalities, Anthropocene perception is cut off from practices of active social-ecological concerns. 'Art in these conditions is grief-work', Morton states.<sup>33</sup> Art is a place to feel, to accept and attune, not to learn, criticize or change. Action and thinking, politics and science are opposed to experiencing and feeling. 'We need art that does not make people think'.<sup>34</sup> The distinction between human caused action and natural phenomena is dissolved in a shift to 'pure' perception in which distinctions between nature and culture, between the sounds of highways or seas, of thunder or bombs, between black holes and global warming don't matter. We may wonder if this dissolving of the notion of nature is not specifically useful in art when we need to comfort ourselves by indeterminacy and detachment, despite the ever more obvious and ongoing destruction of environments and lives for profit.

This detaching aesthetics may remind us of the sublime. As initially articulated in the eighteenth century by Edmund Burke, the sublime is distinct from the 'merely' beautiful, because it stressed the delight of scenes evoking *the idea of pain and danger*.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Morton has foregrounded that we cannot distance ourselves from our degraded environments and that learning to mourn is crucial. However, feelings of loss and pain become abstract and empty of content by dissolving the distinction between nature and culture and by foregrounding sensation itself; *nothing can be lost when the notion of nature as a sense of*

---

<sup>30</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 176.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Hansen, "Media Entangled Phenomenology," in *Philosophy After Nature*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 79-83. See also, for example: Morton *Ecology without Nature*, p. 5: 'My readings try to be symptomatic rather than comprehensible'. Morton *Hyperobjects*, pp. 2, 129. 'The hyperobject is not a function of our logic,' p. 2. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 25: 'The Anthropocene ... as a hyperobject that is real yet inaccessible'.

<sup>32</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 28, 198. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, pp. 6-7. 'The end of the world has already occurred,' p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 184. 'We need art that does not make people think (...) but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse,' p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> 'The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately effect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without actually being in such circumstances... What ever excites this delight, I call *sublime*'. Edmund Burke quoted in Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Paladin, 1975), p. 73.

*otherness is completely dissolved.* Likewise, sublime ecologies without nature discourage active resistance to ecological degradation.<sup>36</sup>

Hyperobjects enhance a sense of incomprehensible and dematerializing abstractions, related to an understanding of aesthetics via Descartes and Kant.<sup>37</sup> To Kant, aesthetic experience is devoid of concepts and judgements.<sup>38</sup> Kant foregrounded the sublime of being overwhelmed by nature, which became tinged with eighteenth century geological knowledge that radically shifted and expanded perception of scales of space and time far beyond previous, biblical and anthropocentric narratives. Geology inspired nineteenth century evolution theory, placing humans inextricably within nature. But the platonic tradition of Western philosophy glorified detachment from earthly entanglements. From an elevated perspective from ‘nowhere’, nature is only (part of) a vast and moving universe, of inert matter that had, notably by Descartes, been framed as mechanical and insensitive.<sup>39</sup> A new sense of materiality thus came with an intellectually challenging loss of grip, for those aware of (the impact of) such knowledge. It thereby enhanced a simultaneous sense of disorientation and newly elevated sovereignty. The sense of humiliation was the flipside of a self-evident anthropocentrism and domination, and it did evidently *not* result in modesty. Instead, the sublime restored the privileged detachment from earthly concerns.

Now, the ‘abysmal distance’ between our ‘tiny Umwelt’ and ‘the range, nature, scale of the phenomena’ that, ironically, has been cultivated in literature and art, and which numbed and thrilled us, has become impossible.<sup>40</sup> ‘The disconnect has shifted so completely that it no

---

<sup>36</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4: ‘There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference’.

<sup>37</sup> Phenomenology brought Kantian correlationism ‘down to Earth’, Morton states. Kantian awareness that knowledge cannot be neutral, complete and encompassing is extended by Morton to include (relations between) non-humans. See, for example: Morton, *Hyperobjects*, pp. 18, 30, 196-197. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 25, 28, 113.

<sup>38</sup> Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 157, 203. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>39</sup> On the cartesian subjugation of nature, see, for example: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 1989), pp. 125, 188, 192-196, 243, 277; Michel Serres, *Het Contract met de Natuur*, trans. Roel Kaptein (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992), pp. 53-54, 56; Plumwood, *Feminism*, pp. 109-117, 192; Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), pp. 52-54: ‘Descartes’ philosophical abstractions were practical instruments of domination’. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 105, 176. Morton instead refers critically to widespread anti-Cartesianism in ecological thinking (p. 176).

<sup>40</sup> Bruno Latour, “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Arts and Politics,” (Lecture, French Institute, London, November 2011). In *What is Cosmopolitical Design?*, ed. Albena Yaneva & Alejandro Zaera-Polo (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 2-7. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/446>. ‘[W]e can still feel the sublime, but only for what is left of nature *beyond* the Moon

longer generates any feeling of the sublime anymore since we are now summoned to feel *responsible*.<sup>41</sup> Being responsible is opposed to the sensation of the sublime. In the context of the Anthropocene, the sublime would distance scales of place and time and elude grief over the actual kind of nature that can be and has been destroyed. Accordingly, I argue, a phenomenology of an ecology without nature suits the neglect of specific earthly lifeforms made interchangeable, alienated and uprooted in processes of accelerating technologization. Dissolving the notion of nature suits ever less controlled techno-corporate powers.

‘Nature will take care of itself’, we say. But this is the platonic Nature of universal and eternal natural laws. This Nature with a capital N does not need nature. Ecology without nature has fully *absorbed* the abstract kind of Nature that, as ecofeminist and philosopher Val Plumwood put it, ‘requires no one’s defense or solidarity, certainly not that of the environmentalist. Its glorification (...) is in fact a glorification of the conquest of nature in its more relevant environmental senses.’<sup>42</sup>

Art that is conscious of its political and cultural implications therefore, cannot cultivate an aesthetics of not-knowing, as *Progress* shows by relating different time scales and evoking the (dis)connections between different kinds of knowledge and experience.<sup>43</sup> Tellingly, Haraway, who countered the dichotomy between humans and technology by appropriating the concept of the cyborg in the late 1980s, as mentioned earlier, understood that it had already lost its critical potential only a decade later.<sup>44</sup> Objecting to alienating Big Science, she promotes ‘art science worldings’ and learning other languages, for example to

---

and only when we occupy the View from Nowhere. Down below, no longer any sublime.’ Latour, *Waiting for Gaia*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 3. While I’m using Latour’s actualization and problematization of the sublime, I’m aware that he, like Morton, proposes to dissolve the concept of nature. I critically relate this dissolving to the sublime.

<sup>42</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 83. This kind of Nature relates to the currently popularized notion of Deep Time, which was historically related to fossil fuels: ‘Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imperial logics of domination began to contend not just with a New World, but a new Earth, and Earth of fossils and deep time that cared nothing for human well-being,’ Cara New Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Different ‘critical and creative’ ‘modes of examining, looking and narrating’ in theory and art ‘forge an embodied epistemology’ and ‘shared ways of knowing’. Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti, *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), pp. 2, 5.

<sup>44</sup> The historical context of concepts is crucial for understanding their (initial) agency. Haraway has since focused on multispecies coexistence. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 4.

recognise ‘the art of the redwood’ and read ‘Eggplant’.<sup>45</sup> Such multispecies understanding composites creative strategies and new stories.<sup>46</sup> Humanities would become ‘humusities’.<sup>47</sup>

To seriously understand the shift in perception required, the Anthropocene discourse is in need of nature with a lowercase n, of non-technocratic modes related to down-to-earth social and material relations, of humanities, humusities and art. Aesthetics of a dissolved distinction between nature and culture, experienced as overwhelming phenomenological presence may be shocking and/or soothing, but as such it does nothing to stop ecocide.<sup>48</sup> Insofar as dissolving dualisms promotes a distancing sense of matter and time, it is not the time of art intending to be an ‘agent of change’.

### 3. Dualisms of the materially present past

*The need to dissolve ontological dualism does not solve the problem of oppositions required to counter the degradation of life. Art that aims to be an agent of change involves social-ecological knowledge practices.*

Dissolving the notion of nature would implicate the loss of a pivotal tool to counter ongoing ecological destruction.<sup>49</sup> Several authors have argued that the concept of the Anthropocene obfuscates interests and responsibilities by stressing a technological and economic notion of progress, assuming a collective human ‘we’, as if we are all equally responsible. In contrast to Haraway, Latour and Morton, therefore, Naomi Klein, Andreas Malm and T. J. Demos argue for a critical understanding that places social-economical inequalities at the forefront of understanding the ecological crises, which is why they speak of the ‘Capitalocene’. Part of a naturalized capitalist business model is the acceptance of both ecological and social

---

<sup>45</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 117, 122. “Do you realize,” the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, “that they couldn’t even read Eggplant?” – Ursula K. Le Guin, quoted on p. 117.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 67, 101.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 32, 57, 97. Haraway combines ‘humus’ and humanities in ‘humusities’.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Ecocide’ is a term that has been promoted by environmental barrister Polly Higgins to legally fight crimes against nature.

<sup>49</sup> Malm, *Progress*, p. 53. Malm argues for ‘substance monism property dualism’. Dissolving the notion of nature is a new climax in the ongoing domination of nature and people. Especially important for understanding the (implicit) persistence of hierarchic dualisms and its ‘master perspective’ in philosophy and culture, as well as in several environmental movements is Plumwood, *Feminism*. Plumwood has historically traced and contextualized the hierarchical dualism of reason (and its notion of Nature) over nature, in relation to the interests of the elite in possession of the means to understand and control, in the history of Western philosophy beginning with Plato.

degradation for the benefits of some.<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, acknowledging that humans consist of the same stuff, and of the same stuff as non-humans, means we share a problem. On the other hand, proportional responsibilities need to be faced urgently, to stop ongoing extinction.

Paradoxically, to counter dualisms, you need to use them.<sup>51</sup> Blurring contradictions in theory instead suits the ongoing colonization of nature and of cultures more reciprocally related to nature. Art historian and environmental activist T. J. Demos is an outspoken critic of the Anthropocene and its rhetoric of a collective ‘we’. In agreement with activist and journalist Naomi Klein,<sup>52</sup> he attacks the need for large-scale technologies stressed by an ever less controlled techno-corporate elite, and its promotion of a manipulative visual culture.<sup>53</sup> Alternative art and visual culture – importantly including indigenous manifestations and practices – acknowledge relations between scales of place and time from a decidedly down-to-earth perspective of care. These practices show how ecology is economical, mental, social and biological at the same time.<sup>54</sup> They do not cultivate scientific separation of the senses,

---

<sup>50</sup> Those benefitting most from ecological degradation make others pay and suffer. See for example Paul Luttikhuis, “Het is de rijke minderheid die voor de grootste milieuproblemen zorgt: Interview Johan Rockström hoogleraar duurzame ontwikkeling en watersystemen” [“The rich minority causes the bulk of environmental problems: interview Johan Rockström, professor of sustainable development and water systems”], *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 June 2020. Addressing this sense of injustice and proportionality is pivotal to any down-to-earth ecological concern and commitment. I therefore depart from New Materialism as articulated by Jane Bennett, which renders the desire to take responsibility and the political urgency to make accountable powerless: ‘How does recognition of the nonhuman and nonindividuated dimensions of agency alter established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability?’, p. 446; ‘... should we acknowledge the distributive quality of agency in order to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hope of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?’, p. 464. Bennett obviously rejects the latter. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 445-466. See also note 9.

<sup>51</sup> Malm, *Progress*. The fact that nature and the social merge makes ‘the distinction between the social and the natural more essential than ever’, according to Andreas Malm, attacking hybridism. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-77 (quote p. 61).

<sup>52</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, pp. 230-290.

<sup>53</sup> T. J. Demos, *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016); T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> This is a reference to the ‘generalised ecology’ proposed by Félix Guattari, comprising three registers: environmental, social and subjective. I specifically mention economy, and biology as a reference to nature, precisely because the two are faded in his ‘*machinic ecology*’. While I have taken inspiration from Guattari’s understanding of the role of art as a form of psychiatry, entailing the need for engagement and responsibility, and from his notions of transversality, creative counter-repetition, subjectification and the importance of heterogeneity of various levels of ecological praxis, I question his backgrounding of economics outdating Marx, the dissolving of ‘nature’ and the discounting of ‘the simple defence of nature’. Predicting and accepting geo-engineering in the 1980s, Guattari criticizes ‘technocratic state apparatuses’ rather than techno-corporate powers, and insists social struggles should ‘radically decentre’. Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, pp. 17-18, 21, 24-30, 32-35, 45-47.



competition of disciplines, or the contradiction of art as opposed to knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Nor is awareness reduced to a detached eye or mind.

### **Art practices politics and poetics of a relational, not idealized nature**

Ecological awareness fosters connections between personal experiences and the no less locally obtained global, scientifically mediated knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Latour stresses the need to move away from the universal vantage point ‘from nowhere’, to understand the Earth ‘from up close’.<sup>57</sup> His question ‘where can we land?’ nevertheless shows that his perspective begins from a generalized and elevated position of science.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, Morton proposes we ‘step down’.<sup>59</sup> Very different from a sense of non-local objects of the knowing mind, and more earthly to begin with, philosopher Michael Marder foregrounds the time being of plants.<sup>60</sup> Plant time is a rooted movement persisting in ambulant animals like us. Vegetal being and time itself is vitally disrupted at times, while it subsists in mutual exchanges with/in heterogenic temporalities of its own and of its others, sharply opposed to an extractivist mode. ‘[R]esponsiveness and exposure to the other’ is ““the very accomplishment of time” in vegetal being’.<sup>61</sup> Still, the very down-to-earth question of if or how this philosophy strengthens active resistance to injustice and ecocide remains as relevant here as it has been for all our interlocutors in this text, and it has not been answered yet. Considering the film *Nocturnal Gardening* by Melanie Bonajo will keep the question in mind and renew it, for now.

---

<sup>55</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa writes about thinking and knowing as care, caring and knowing as touch; about ‘Touching Visions’, ‘Soil Times’ and making ‘time for care time’ to ‘[foster] alternatives that challenge predominance of antiecolological timescapes’. María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 16, 19, 20, 23-24, 95-122, 169-215.

<sup>56</sup> Latour, *Waiting for Gaia*, p. 5-7.

<sup>57</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, pp. 68, 74.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Where can we land?’ is a literal translation of the Dutch title of Bruno Latour’s *Down to Earth* (*Waar kunnen we landen?: Politieke oriëntatie in het Nieuwe Klimaatregime*, trans. Rokus Hofstede (Amsterdam: Octavo, 2018). I do not know if Latour agreed with the Dutch title, but the book gives enough reason to assume he would.

<sup>59</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 120: I’m referring to his quote at the beginning of this chapter here.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 93-117, 128.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107. Marder’s ideas are akin to Haraway’s understanding of living “as” and “in” the world; *in medias res*, ‘among things’. Donna Haraway and Thyrza Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Donna Haraway* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 24-26. Daggett, *Birth of Energy*, pp. 5-6.

Part of the *Night Soil* trilogy of 2016,<sup>62</sup> *Nocturnal Gardening* foregrounds intimate and reciprocal relations to specific environments. The film consists of four separate parts; each part portrays a woman and her world. The women are not introduced by name, which shifts the attention to the ways in which they sustain different relations to their environments, rather than to individual accomplishment. In the voice-over, they reflect on why and how they critically deviate from the standards of profit and competition, in ways that suit their values.<sup>63</sup> *Nocturnal Gardening* evokes a seemingly anachronistic slowness and attentiveness to things backgrounded and distanced in modern culture, restoring environmental connectedness to others, especially in relation to food.

Care for nourishment is both spiritual and physical in *Nocturnal Gardening*. Detailed observation and knowledge of plants, animals and seasonal changes matter, as well as historical awareness of how our life choices can make a difference within or to society, in everyday practices as well as in moments of rest.<sup>64</sup> The women are filmed in lasting moments of silent alertness. Only hair and grass or leaves move visibly. In this still, ‘vegetal’ mode of being in time, being time this way, others are ‘embraced’ by them.<sup>65</sup> These ways of being are a counterpart to the urgencies of the time of activism. But activism can also be the fruit and seed, the roots or branches of such profound alternatives.

### **Places in time**

In the first part of *Nocturnal Gardening*, an Afro-American woman speaks about the produce farm she runs together with other participants of the *Soul Fire Farm* project. They are aligned with the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and their growing crops is not oriented towards making profit. The farm is a form of ‘spiritual activism’, related to the need to heal the negative self-image resulting from a history of slavery and colonialism. Originating from the desire to build a community to care for themselves and for each other, *Soul Fire Farm* is a

---

<sup>62</sup> Shown, among other places, at the Foam museum in 2016, at the Bonnefanten museum in 2018, at the Akinci gallery in 2018.

<sup>63</sup> All four women consciously dismiss the norm of scalable technologies. This norm has stultified low tech, site-specific and small-scale practices. Tsing, *Mushroom*, p. 42. However, ‘Even the UN is now admitting that small-scale organic farming is the only way to go,’ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 141.

<sup>64</sup> Daggett, *Birth of Energy*, pp. 4-5, 11. A ‘singular logic of energy’ ‘justifies the indexing of human well-being according to the idealization of work and an unquestioned drive to put the Earth’s materials to use for profit’. ‘The intertwining of energy and the Western ethos of dynamic, productive work was produced as cosmic truth’. Daggett argues for a ‘post-carbon and feminist post-work politics’.

<sup>65</sup> Marder speaks of ‘the plantness of time’ and of time as ‘embrace’. ‘The meaning of vegetal being is time’. Michael Marder, “The Weirdness of Being in Time,” (lecture, Political Ecologies Seminar 2020-21: The Ecology of Forms, University of Amsterdam, 26 November 2020).

way of restoring and building a community by reconnecting to the land. Images of hands touching the soil suggest what is gained when technologies are absent.

Likewise stressing the value of physical contact, and countering industrial farming, the second part shows a Dutch woman who used to work as a communication advisor in a wealthy part of Amsterdam. Critical of bioindustry, she decided, at one point, to make people aware of the culturally legitimated suffering of animals, notably pigs, by starting a farm, which is actually more like an animal resort. We see neatly dressed people kneel in the straw, slowly stroking the pigs with intense devotion. The kind of knowledge the woman shares is about living with the pigs and about, for example, their individually different ‘passionate’ or ‘curious’ characters; promoting the kind of attention that is deemed irrelevant and repelled in upscaled industries.<sup>66</sup> Moments of contemplation and relaxation with the pigs recur in carefully composed *mise-en-scènes*. This relief of stress depends on a deliberate deviation from efficiency-driven routines, and on deliberately giving time.

The third part of the film shows a woman and her daughter foraging in the woods, somewhere in upstate New York.<sup>67</sup> The surrounding nature is dense and diverse, and they feed themselves with what they find. The girl experientially learns to select food from her mother, who possesses detailed knowledge of nutritional values, changing with the seasons. We observe them walking in the woods, investigating plants, fruit and flowers up close, looking, smelling, reaching for what is beautiful, interesting, edible. We see the woman naked, floating in the water while the camera registers her; she is obviously conscious of its presence and apparently at ease with being looked at this way.<sup>68</sup> She helps others re-connect to the abundance that is still already there, in nature, she says, challenging the self-evidence with which well-being is defined by consumerism.

---

<sup>66</sup> This knowledge stimulates cautiousness and awareness of their expressions, which compensates to an extent for the fact that the pigs did not themselves decide to be available for humans to be touched. The pigs are not the cuddly things that visual culture has made of them. As the woman states, sometimes ‘They destroy everything you make, and you’re supposed to just keep smiling.’ On animal languages: Eva Meijer, “Political Animal Voices,” (PhD Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2017), <https://hdl.handle.net/11245.1/7c9cfda4-560d-4d67-94ea-7bdda29554c9>.

<sup>67</sup> The fact that her background is Iranian is not foregrounded in the film; it is mentioned in the exhibition leaflet.

<sup>68</sup> In *Nocturnal Gardening*, more than in some of her other films, Bonajo is the apparently withdrawn observer. Instead of objectifying, however, a sense of physical closeness and familiarity is thereby enhanced. An embodied sense of intimacy is also elicited through the way Bonajo exhibits photographs and films as part of installations with unconventionally shaped benches and cushions. Inviting the audience to sit or lie down, the desire for physical intimacy with or distance from others becomes a conscious decision expressed without words. These artistic strategies are strong reminders of nontechnological sensitivities and values.

Equally committed to practices of healing of social, mental, environmental harm, the woman depicted in the fourth part of the film speaks of a painful past. The woman is Dineh - Navajo - and has been tasked by her ancestors to have people look beyond the ideas that were enforced on them by those aiming to conquer the land, and to bring the indigenous tribes together again. We see her banging a drum or standing still with her arms along her body in clothes expressing her roots, while her gaze is fixed on the camera, looking directly at the viewer. Unlike the woman filmed foraging in the woods, there are traces of anger and hurt in her story and appearance. We see her from behind, in silhouette, her shoulders and her long straight black hair, while she watches the land. This may be felt by the observer as a move away from our gaze, a refusal, an (un)intentional reproach. Another scene shows her sitting against a tree or practicing rituals together with her sisters. The rituals help to heal relations to the earth and to heal a history of cruel oppression. They cultivate the Native American understanding of all life forms as family. This attitude is strikingly reversed to extractivism and exploitation. She states: 'We do not own the land', 'the land is our owner'. She explains how their way of living was, in her words, poor from a Western point of view, but rich according to the land.

*Nocturnal Gardening* demonstrates how histories are present in embodied realities and in alternatives to the hegemonic 'master perspective' that marginalizes others. This hierarchy of beings relates to the notion of time as accelerating movement of upscaling technologies, which is at the root of the ecological catastrophe.

Interestingly, while several philosophers have proposed that the concept of nature should dissolve, artists have recharged the term to critically investigate core cultural assumptions. Bonajo has stated she questions 'our shifting relationship with nature'.<sup>69</sup> Ana María Gómez López placed the word 'Nature' prominently on the wall of an exhibition where she showed how she had let the seed of a plant sprout in the tear duct of her eye.<sup>70</sup> Terike Haapoja characterizes her work as having 'a specific focus in encounters with nature, death and other species'.<sup>71</sup> By defamiliarizing our conventional exchanges with nature – in consumption, art, science – they strikingly shift perceptions of other life forms, our notion of

---

<sup>69</sup> Melanie Bonajo, "Melanie Bonajo – AKINCI | Digital eco-feminist," AKINCI, accessed 28 December 2020, <https://akinci.nl/artists/melanie-bonajo/>.

<sup>70</sup> Ana María Gómez López, *Inoculate*, <https://manual.vision/inoculate-a-florilegium>. The artists mentioned here, and especially maybe Gómez López, do not necessarily or explicitly relate their work to an environmentalist sensitivity.

<sup>71</sup> Terike Haapoja, "Terike Haapoja", Parsons Fine Arts, <http://amt.parsons.edu/finearts/lectures/terike-haapoja/>.

nature and the related core cultural ideas about being human. To question and challenge cultural assumptions and dualisms that go unremarked in everyday life, these artists use distinctions in a provocative way. Intensification of non-anthropocentric duration, of being (in) time, is essential to their works and practices. Artistic strategies evoke an experiential and material sense of time, reminding us of what the technological mode cannot perceive as qualities of life.

### **Ending to progress**

End of life, represented in Melanie Bonajo's photograph *Progress*, positioned at the beginning of this text, has become a prolific source of transversal inquiries on how time matters, how vested interests seek to shape futures, how histories are present, how experiences relate to knowledge, and how theory and art relate. These questions do not come from nowhere, or from the image itself. *Progress* gathers, connects, proliferates and intensifies them, inviting committed research and articulation. Showing an isolated and static moment that lacks narrative temporal linearity, the photo strikingly (re)presents the very problem of relating to apparent abstractions of, and such as global warming. *Progress* shows human history is *in medias res*, in the middle of a story progressing towards the end, in a moment of unfolding catastrophe. This story is part of another, ongoing story, told by a degraded and backgrounded, but increasingly present environment. Obviously, two time scales – of geological time scales and the time of world history, divided to avoid conflicting methods and truth claims – are connected.

Opposing the dichotomy of nature and culture, body and mind, *Progress* (re)presents the entanglement of different temporalities as physical processes. Moreover, connecting *Progress* to the film *Nocturnal Gardening*, also by Bonajo, foregrounds the urgent need to counter strategies of the detached mastering mind and technocratic incitement to 'solve' ecological problems by naturalizing a complete colonization of nature, as the concept of the Anthropocene appears to promote. Structures of domination have to be understood and confronted, to motivate more profound and committed practices of ecological care. Art concerned with the ecological crises does not cultivate grief as stasis, although these timely modes are likely to recur.

*Progress* and *Nocturnal Gardening* present references to information and histories and evoke storytelling. 'Storytelling [...] does not aim to convey the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out

of him again.’<sup>72</sup> Sinking ‘the thing into the life of the storyteller’ ‘to bring it out again’ applies to the women portrayed as narrators in *Nocturnal Gardening*, to Bonajo the artist, and to the person drowning in *Progress*. And apparently, the sea too speaks of ‘the thing.’ Such thinking and sinking, feeling and expressing counters the rule of linear time, of a detached mind over discounted matter, and over the kind of nature we ourselves are. Sensations in the art of Bonajo (re)present embodied time. Positioned at the beginning and the end of this text, it presents a sense of knowing and feeling that motivates both artistic and theoretical work. This way too, art as an ecological agent of change presents a material sense of time and contemporaneity.

The question how theory relates to art in the current context of ecological catastrophes has been at the core of this text, engaging with art and supporting its social power. To understand how a concept – the Anthropocene – links science, politics and culture, and affects art, this inquiry has had to connect different fields of knowledge itself. The objections which are sometimes made that theory would overrule and politicize the perception of art this way tend to neglect how art is already framed by interests. Art nevertheless escapes instrumentalization; theory cannot be a ruler over art. Artists do not need nor claim a final truth about the theories they use, as little as theory grasps the essence of art in a single fixed truth claim. Knowing this is the precondition for mutual, prolific and ongoing interchanges.

#### Bibliography:

Alaimo, Stacey, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

ArTEZ studium generale, “Melanie Bonajo”, accessed 28 December 2020.

<https://studiumgenerale.artez.nl/nl/studies/people/melanie+bonajo/>

Barison, David and Daniel Ross, dirs., *The Ister*, DVD, Icarus Films, 2005.

---

<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, p. 46: ‘When information supplants the old form, storytelling, and when it itself gives way to sensation, this double process reflects an imaginary degradation of experience. Each of these forms is in its own way an offshoot of storytelling. Storytelling [...] does not aim to convey the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again’. *Progress* can be understood as transversing these layered divisions between storytelling, information and sensation, when sensation is not regarded as a necessarily newer and degraded form compared to storytelling. Information and histories evoke sensations. No less, sensations evoke them.

- Bennett, Jane, “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout,” *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005), pp. 445-466.  
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5b9f/aa999aa63f335b5c94cfc0f1f6eb4cd1019b.pdf>
- , *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bellacasa, María Puig de la, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Bio Art & Design Award. “BIO ART & DESIGN at ZonMw – Bio Art & Design Award,” accessed 28 December 2020. <https://www.badaward.nl/news/bio-art-design-at-zonmw>.
- Bonajo, Melanie, *Progress vs Regress (Progress II)*, 2013, photograph,  
<https://galleryviewer.com/nl/kunstwerk/17031/progress-vs-regress-progress-ii>.
- , “Melanie Bonajo – AKINCI | Digital eco-feminist,” AKINCI, accessed 28 December 2020. <https://akinci.nl/artists/melanie-bonajo/>.
- Bonneuil, Christophe and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. Translated by D. Fernbach, London and New York: Verso, 2013.
- Carson, Rachel, *Silent Spring*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. First published 1962.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, “Anthropocene Time,” *History and Theory* 57, no.1 (March 2018): pp. 5-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12044>.
- Crutzen, Paul, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no. 23 (January 2002), p. 23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a>.
- Daggett, Cara New, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Demos, T. J., *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016.
- , *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment Today*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.
- Faber, Albert, *De Gemaakte Planeet: Leven in het Anthropocean*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Gómez López, Ana María, *Inoculate*, <https://manual.vision/inoculate-a-florilegium>.
- , “Gómez López, Ana María | NIAS,” NIAS, accessed 28 December 2020.  
<https://nias.knaw.nl/fellow/gomez-lopez-ana-maria/>.

- Guattari, Félix, *The Three Ecologies*, translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. First published in French 1989.
- Haapoja, Terike, “Terike Haapoja”, Parsons Fine Arts,  
<http://amt.parsons.edu/finearts/lectures/terike-haapoja/>.
- Hansen, Mark, “Media Entangled Phenomenology,” in *Philosophy After Nature*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 73-94.
- Haraway, Donna, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991. Written between 1978 and 1989.
- , *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- , *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Haraway, Donna and Thyrza Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Donna Haraway*, New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Klein, Naomi, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. UK, Penguin Random House, 2015.
- Klingender, Francis D., *Art and the Industrial Revolution*. London: Paladin, 1975.
- Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. First published in French 1991.
- , “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Arts and Politics,” Lecture, French Institute, London, November 2011. In *What is Cosmopolitical Design?*, edited by Albena Yaneva & Alejandro Zaera-Polo, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, pp. 21-33. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/446>.
- , *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity, 2018.
- , *Waar kunnen we landen?: Politieke oriëntatie in het Nieuwe Klimaatregime*, translated by Rokus Hofstede, Amsterdam: Octavo, 2018.
- Luttikhuis, Paul, “Het is de rijke minderheid die voor de grootste milieuproblemen zorgt: Interview Johan Rockström hoogleraar duurzame ontwikkeling en watersystemen” [“The rich minority causes the bulk of environmental problems: interview Johan Rockström, professor of sustainable development and water systems”], NRC Handelsblad, 23 June 2020.



- Malm, Andreas, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020.
- Marder, Michael, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- , “The Weirdness of Being in Time,” lecture, Political Ecologies Seminar 2020-21: The Ecology of Forms, University of Amsterdam, 26 November 2020.
- Meijer, Eva, “Political Animal Voices,” PhD Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2017, <https://hdl.handle.net/11245.1/7c9cfda4-560d-4d67-94ea-7bdda29554c9>.
- Merchant, Carolyn, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York: HarperOne, 1989.
- Morton, Timothy, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- , *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- , *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Patel, Raj and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
- Plumwood, Val, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Serres, Michel, *Het Contract met de Natuur*, translated by Roel Kaptein, Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992.
- Szeman, Imre and Jeff Diamanti, *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond*, Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, PA and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.

#### Biography of the author:

Monique Peperkamp is currently conducting PhD research at ASCA, and she is a member of the ArtEZ kenniskring of the Professorship in Theory in the Arts. Educated as an artist, and as an art historian at the UvA, she has worked for over a decade as a coach, lecturer and teacher in art theory. The research she is conducting was funded by an NWO grant for teachers. The

working title is *Past Nature in Contemporary Art and New Materialisms: How Art and Philosophy Interact*, and it is motivated by social and ecological concerns, connected to the question of the power of art.