All the Roses and None of Them

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As all life is one, what need is there for words? Yet I have just said all life is one, so I have already spoken, haven't I?

Chuang Tzu, *The Tao of Nature*

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Prologue
That Which We Call a Rose

When I was a child, surrounded by girls with names like Anna (my first friend ever), Laura (my closest friend in primary school), Lara, Lea and later Lisa, I often wished that I had been given a more common name. Forever feeling like a bit of a name-alien, a longing for what I imagined as the ease of a regular name accompanied me throughout my childhood. My name seemed like a phonetic reflection of the oddness that I felt was intrinsic to me already; I even went through a short phase of pretending that my name was Maria. Elfi, by contrast, my only given name, didn't possess any of the qualities that made my friends' names seem so desirable: not the familiarity of a common name, not what my young ears perceived to be the fancy femininity of my girlfriends' names (clearly indicated by the closing *a*), no reference to a namesake saint, and, especially, no *meaning* that would at least lend it, if not immediate phonetic appeal, an aura of symbolic beauty making the sequence of letters a stand-in for something else, like *wisdom* in the case of Sophie.

Without any of this, all I was left with were four letters in and of themselves. My father's reasoning didn't make things much better for my eight-year-old self; he was drawn to the gentle transition from the lightness of the *E* to the openness of the *i*, he told me, to the name's abstraction, to its resemblance with a minimalist poem of sorts. I clearly remember

the sliding movement he made with his right hand as he slowly recited *Elllllfiii,* like a conductor reading a score and conjuring up the sound that the inscription could bring about if unlocked by instruments. 'But all my friends have names that are recognisable as names,' I insisted.

One of the changes brought about by my leaving Germany, aged nineteen, was a drastic shift in the perception of my name. How liberating, how delightful to introduce myself without the previously familiar hassle of asserting that yes, that is my real name and no, it is not an abbreviation for something like 'Elfriede'. Instead, people whose mother tongue was not German were enchanted by the name's briefness and beauty, or—when encountering it in written form—occasionally by the way it withheld immediate clues as to the gender or home country of the name bearer.

My father's prediction that I would come to appreciate my name as an adult has proven to be correct. More than twenty years after our conversation, I did start to like everything that my name was not: tied to a meaning, indebted to the symbolism of a saint or to the pre-empted imperative of wisdom, a reference to some great aunt or grandmother, the name of anyone else in my immediate surroundings. The absence of all of this allows for the name's pure tonality and visuality to come to the fore instead of these features being secondary to an imposed meaning. How freeing not to have been imbued with meaning already at birth!

The functions that names can assume show a

certain kinship with the way words are said to work in general: phonetic, typographic or hand-written shells that function as pointers to some *actual* thing. Inscriptions and utterances work in tandem with what they refer to. A forest's name on a map, for instance, is a verbal reference, but isn't it only when the majestic abundance of trees unfolds around us that the letters are lent their relevance? Sometimes, however, there may not be a direct equivalent in the landscape of semantic meaning. This, according to the Russian linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson, is where poetry begins: when as much attention is given to the sensuousness of language as to its sense, when the sound of a word unfolds a meaning that exists independently of its semantic meaning.[1]

In his 1975 manifesto *The New Art of Making Books,* the Mexican artist, writer and publisher Ulises Carrión posited that 'the word "rose" is neither the rose that I see nor the rose that a more or less fictional character claims to see. In the abstract language of the new art the word "rose" is the word "rose". It means all the roses and it means none of them.' Carrión asks: 'How to succeed in making a rose that is not my rose, nor his rose, but everybody's rose, i.e. nobody's rose?' and answers 'By placing it within a sequential structure (for example a book), so that it momentarily ceases being a rose and becomes essentially an element of the structure.'[2]

It is conceivable that Carrión was making some reference to Shakespeare's famous line from *Romeo and Juliet:*

'What's in a name? That which we call a rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet.'[3]

Imagine that every image or object could potentially become an element of a structure as described by Carrión, a specimen within a larger system that, when singled out, may have a distinct awkward beauty of its own, something that may or may not be deciphered. Perhaps the fondness of an unclaimed language is something that runs in my family, a profound appreciation for the fact that meaning is but one of many features that make language what it is. What a delight to think of a rose that is neither 'my rose' nor 'his rose', essentially 'everybody's rose', and, even more beautiful, 'nobody's rose.'

What propels my writing is a frustration with our human impetus to claim the surrounding world by naming it; our obsessive urge to know what things mean. It seems that we can't stand it when something refuses to make sense and remains abstract, remains itself. Everything 'other' that is entailed in the vast word 'nature' might be said to elude us in this way, having existed since before language came along to try and define it. In *All the Roses and None of Them,* I explore some of the ways in which the human sense-making reflex clashes with the elusiveness of these non-human others.

The essays included as part of this paper speculate on how disruptions of the functionality of human language can lead to encounters with the world that transcend national and linguistic borders. Considering a number of case studies from the fields

of poetry and visual art, I highlight spaces in which alphabetic scripture almost aligns with the natural world.

In the first chapter, I look at different ways of writing about, with and alongside nature. I attempt to map the differences between three ways of linguistically approaching the natural world: firstly, a referential language; secondly, a more malleable, autonomous language; and thirdly a poetic language that lets nature speak for itself.

This leads on to the significant difference between the literary and the literal worshipping of trees. Throughout the second chapter, I highlight that even deliberately 'ecological' artworks do not always resist the temptation to exploit nature as a projection surface for—ultimately—human concerns. In the layered and complex interplay between humans and nature, non-human entities tend to be put in the rear, forced to make space for whatever it is that the human ego feels it has to say. The argument I put forward pleads for the acknowledgement of non-human others as dignified beings, regardless of human comprehension or communicative usefulness.

In the final chapter, I point towards the possibility of a reconciliation between 'nature' and 'language', proposing that these two giant words—or rather everything contained within them—need not be seen as antitheses. A potential way out of the either-or-ness of the nature-versus-language dilemma is to understand human language as a part of nature.

Taking the form of the written English language,

my writing is in itself inherently human. It is bound to the structures whose hegemony I question. In spite of this paradoxical condition, I hope that it may at times be possible to experience the abstraction inherent to language (and nature, if we let it) and that my writing will enable a glance behind the curtain of human projection for a split second, a glimpse of what language could be when freed from the imperative to serve us by making sense, and what nature could be when freed from the human need to define it. At the core of my texts is a wishful speculation towards the idea of marvelling at the world rather than figuring it out. Here, language and scripture are conceived of as something that need not necessarily be written by a person. Instead, I embrace a multitude of voices and life forms, each with distinct semiotic structures of their own. Allowing the bond between the meaning and the physical form of written language to become more fluid might open up possibilities that include the surrounding world being also freed up to some extent. I seek ways of engaging with nature that involve entering into eye-level dialogues rather than treating dominance as a simple given.

The language that I work towards as a visual artist is a language that hosts a multitude of meanings, but is not bound to any particular one of them. My work is an attempt to bundle energy in written language, to create prisms through which words, letters and signs can be seen in the spectral light of their inherent mysticism, ambiguity and clumsy humanness rather than as carriers of non-negotiable

meanings. When the distinction between the familiar and the mystical, between the physical manifestation of words and their immaterial meaning becomes uncertain and the still commonly assumed dualism between them dubious, something more holistic can emerge: a language that sometimes resists and sometimes surrenders, existing alongside—but independently of—our human urge to understand, a translation from utility to an array of autonomies. The language I envision is, like nature, a vacant space, a space for all the meanings and none of them.

1 Gerold, Roman. "Mehr als nur Worte': Wo die Sprache sich verspricht.' *Der Standard,* March 27, 2017, derstandard.at/story/2000054919823/mehr-als-nur-wortewo-die-sprache-sich-verspricht?. Accessed February 28, 2020.

2 Carrión, Ulises. 'The New Art of Making Books.' *Kontexts,* no. 6–7, 1975, p. 5.

3 Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet,* Philipp Reclam jun., 1994, p. 52.

A Poem Lovely as a Tree

'I've become so accustomed to not reading that I don't even read what appears before my eyes,' a character named Irnerio reveals to the puzzled protagonist of Italo Calvino's famous meta-novel *If on a Winter's Night A Traveller* from 1979. 'It's not easy,' Irnerio candidly continues. '[...] they teach us to read as children and for the rest of our lives, we remain the slaves of all the written stuff they fling in front of us.'[1] Laconically having introduced himself as an artist turning books into 'statues, pictures, whatever you want to call them,'[2] he eventually concedes: 'I may have had to make some effort myself, at first, to learn to not read, but now it comes quite naturally to me. The secret is not refusing to look at written words; on the contrary: you must look at them intensely, until they disappear.'[3]

If we go with the proposition by the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, written words hinge on an interplay of 'signifier' and 'signified'.[4] An arbitrary sequence of letters like t–r–e–e (the signifier) conjures up an image of a trunk, branches and leaves (the signified) in the mind of their reader. This double-edged nature of language is visualised in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* with the help of a bubble that contains both the letters t–r–e–e as well as a tiny drawing of a tree. Since written language is a material reality that doesn't disappear just because it is not being read, Calvino supposedly meant something else by

the words' disappearing: the vanishing of the mental concepts evoked by the semantic exteriors, the content's gradual evaporation from its stubbornly present shell.

Language is often a carrier of content, a tool, a means to an end. It enables us to converse with one another, to name things, to make sense of the world. However, without quite knowing why, I strongly relate to Irnerio's urge to live alongside language, to his unwillingness to translate language's immediate physical presence into meaning. My hunch is that something poetically productive might emerge when making sense is no longer language's prime reason to exist. I am looking for this very space that may open up when language obtains a flair of becoming productively senseless, when written language—those spirits that we summoned—obtains a life of its own. The quest for unambiguity, of demanding from a language a clarity that isn't inherent to life itself, feels to me like measuring the world with a yardstick that is far too human. It imposes structures on a world that simply doesn't function according to the semiotic rules that are the basis of human linguistic systems.

The Hindu monk and scholar Swami Vivekananda, who in 1893 was the first to bring Hinduism to a Western audience, muses on the inevitable egocentricity of human perception:

> 'At dark, a thief encountered a stump of a tree and said: "This is a policeman." A young man waiting for his beloved saw the tree trunk and thought it

to be his dearest. A child, having been told ghost stories, took it for a ghost and began to scream. But all the time, the stump of a tree had remained unchanged.'[5]

In line with Vivekananda's lucid statement, the painter Agnes Martin—having devoted a lifetime of painting to the attempt to purge the canvas of subjectivity—recognised: 'Anything is a mirror.'[6] Though coming from fairly different backgrounds, both Vivekananda and Martin acknowledge the difficulty, if not impossibility, to uncouple vision—what one sees with the eyes—and mind. 'I think that if you can turn off the mind and look only with the eyes, ultimately everything becomes abstract,' the American painter Ellsworth Kelly once ingeniously declared. If turning off the mind was as easy as it seems to be for Kelly, maybe we could resist the sticky mechanism of our minds, which constantly comes between us and the world, turning a 'meaningless' tree trunk into police men, lovers or ghosts. Kelly's entire artistic oeuvre rests on the refusal to engage with any of those mirages. The impressive repertoire of abstract shapes he painted and drew—sometimes derived from shapes encountered in the natural world, sometimes 'invented'—lays out a visual vocabulary that exists alongside the world rather than being a representation of it.

Numerous artistic and literary movements have made attempts at reducing human agency, building non-human, de-personalizing and randomizing mechanisms into the artistic process. Take as an

example Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, roughly translated as 'workshop of potential literature'): founded in 1960, the movement's members placed 'artificial' constraints on their writing process—like avoiding the letter *E* throughout an entire novel—in the hope that this handicap would replace the authors' suppressed subjectivity with something higher. Or consider the Surrealists' fondness for games—games whose rules aimed at reaching a point where art belonged to humankind rather than to the genius of one particular human. Taking a look at yet another approach, something that emerged within Dadaism was the attempt to let poetry write itself by pulling words at random from a hat. This conceptually beautiful ambition was somehow doomed by the fact that the method remained an exquisitely human affair (it was, after all, a human hand, controlled by a human brain, doing the picking). Dada's fondness for chance-based verbal constellations was later echoed in the Cut-up technique embraced by William Burroughs. Attempts at circumventing authorial responsibility were also undertaken by some of the artists operating under the umbrella term 'Conceptual Art' in the 1960s: their alphabetised lists and otherwise standardised or chance-based arrangements aimed for manifestations of words that were deliberately bereft of meaning in a conventional sense. To some extent, it seems to me that those attempts to let language hover above the swamp of human subjectivity reveal the impossibility of their ambition. Anything created by humans—ideas, objects, move-

ments—will not only always bear traces of human subjectivity, but will also be accessed by others through another layer of subjectivity. Contemporary cognitive science postulates the same thing that was voiced by Vivekananda, namely that perception is action, 'something we productively do.'[7]

Interestingly, the vocabulary used to refer to the limits of linguistic expression and the slipping away of language's functionality frequently includes images from the natural world, such as Saussure's example mentioned earlier: the abstract phenomenon that is a tree and its awkwardly human semantic rendering on the page.

In 1913, the American poet Joyce Kilmer published a bucolic poem titled 'Trees'.[8] In six short stanzas, his deep reverence for nature is balanced with his acknowledgement of the inadequacy of human language to approximate this very nature. The sublimity of a tree and a language that will never even faintly resemble it form the boundaries between which the two opposed forces bounce; nature too grand to fit into language, language—the only tool available in poetry—cheerfully pointing out its own limitations while continuing to send pious greetings to the forest. The poem's first two verses frankly reveal Kilmer's firm belief in the insufficiency of language when faced with the beauty inherent to trees:

'I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.'

The eight verses that follow praise a tree's distinctive beauty in different seasons and weather conditions: 'A tree whose hungry mouth is prest / Against the earth's sweet flowing breast; // A tree that looks at God all day, And lifts her leafy arms to pray; // A tree that may in Summer wear / A nest of robins in her hair; // Upon whose bosom snow has lain; / Who intimately lives with rain.' In the final stanza, Kilmer, the poet, humbly concludes:

'Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.'

Using the indefinite article—*a* tree, rather than *the* tree—was a deliberate choice by the poet: 'Although several communities across the United States claim to have inspired "Trees", nothing can be established specifically regarding Kilmer's inspiration except that he wrote the poem while residing in Mahwah [in the U.S. state of New Jersey, A/N]. Both Kilmer's widow, Aline, and his son, Kenton, refuted these claims [...].'[9] Kenton Kilmer recounted that 'Mother and I agreed [...] that Dad never meant his poem to apply to one particular tree, or to the trees of any special region. Just any trees or all trees that might be rained on or snowed on, and that would be suitable nesting places for robins. I guess they'd have to have upward-reaching branches, too, for the line about 'lifting leafy arms to pray.' Rule out weeping willows.'[10]

Somewhat ironically, Kilmer's reluctance to claim any particular tree—his loving dedication to

any trees or all trees—did not prevent the posthumous linguistic labelling of a whole patch of land with his name functioning as a seal of quality: in 1938, the federal government of North Carolina purchased 3.800 acres of old growth forest, a patch of land now called *Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.* [11]

To return to the main line of thought, I can relate to Kilmer's sentiment about poems being made by fools. However, I would prefer to stay away from the word 'God', for causally linking the tree's beauty to something known—like the concept of God—to me, takes away the magic of the inexplicable, sublime tree-ness of a tree. Not giving its beauty a cause or its cause a name, by contrast, to me creates a productive gap in the network of human reasoning, it lets the tree be what it is. Kilmer, however, arguably gravitating towards the more conservative side of the poetic spectrum, seems to have been somewhat bound to this devotional tone, unwilling to leave the field of tension between a sublime nature and an insufficient human language. The one hundred and seven years that have passed since the publication of 'Trees' may seem like a long enough time to accommodate such fluctuations of poetic perspective. It would be wrong, however, to understand the romantic patina clinging to Kilmer's language merely as a sign of his times, for it was only three years later that nature and language met each other in a very different manner across the Atlantic Ocean.

On the 14th of July 1916, at the first public Dada evening in Zurich, Hugo Ball recited the *Dada Manifesto,* proclaiming the credos of this 'new tendency

in art'.[12] While Kilmer was aware of the linguistic dilemma he found himself in, he did perpetuate the use of language as a representational tool to describe nature, to write *about* it. Ball, by contrast, demanded a radical abolition of the dualism of content and form. He postulated a language where the form of language is no longer the servant of its meaning, but something in and of itself:

> 'And yourselves, honored poets, who are always writing with words but never writing the word itself, who are always writing around the actual point.'

Ball voiced his reluctance to accept the authority of a canonized language by stating that 'All the words are other people's inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too, matching the rhythm and all my own. [...] Each thing has its word, but the word has become a thing by itself.' Listing the different definitions of the word 'Dada' in different languages, the manifesto goes on to explain that it is precisely the word's exceeding of these meanings, the decided non-belonging to any one of those vocabularies that lends Dada—the movement—its transnational appeal: 'An international word. Just a word, and the word a movement.' The advocating of a word's exterior as a mere necessity—a confine to be transcended in order to arrive at what truly matters—is echoed by the contemporary Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar when he speaks of '[...] expression versus meaning,

expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning—it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond.'[13]

Dada's poetry was, among other things, a persistent effort to resist the corrupting influence of fascist ideologies on language. The brutality and senselessness of the First World War that formed its historical backdrop led the movement to strive for a language that would transcend national borders rather than reinforcing them. Another core ambition was its reorientation with regards to the artistic use of language—its treatment as a material. In an exasperated and yet somehow touching tone, Ball eventually put forwards the question:

> 'Why can't a tree be called Pluplusch, and Pluplubasch when it has been raining?'

The proposition of a language that changes when the weather changes could be read as an actualization of Saussure's notion of the arbitrariness of the bond between an actual tree and its random rendering as t–r–e–e. According to Ball's vision, language is not a static and somehow inadequate—although reliably functional—system, but part of a living reality, affected by rain as is the tree itself.

If one part of the *Dada Manifesto* were to be chosen as an elegant summary of its entirety, to me it would be Ball's quintessential conviction that 'A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language [...].' The use of the word

'filth' is reminiscent of the dirt- (or cleaning, respectively) related vocabulary often invoked when it comes to the idea that language needs to be protected against exploitation by those with ulterior motives: 'We must sweep and clean,'[14] proclaimed fellow Dadaist Tristan Tzara, referring to the necessity of resisting the contemporary political situation. In his 1945 essay 'Poetry and Knowledge', the Martinican author Aimé Césaire expressed that poetic language 'returns language to its purity'.[15] Susan Sontag, in her—still relevant—essay *Against Interpretation* from 1966 linked this concern for purity to the budding topic of environmentalism:

> 'Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities.'
>
> She warned:
>
> 'In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.'[16]

Sontag's aversion towards the compulsive urge to 'make sense' of art is picked up by the contemporary poet and scholar Ann Lauterbach, who idealistically asserts that 'Poetry resists false linkages ... Both conventional narrative strategies and the mimesis of visual description are inadequate to the demands

of contemporary experience ... Resisting false linkages while discovering, recovering, uncovering new ones, poets might help sweep the linguistic path of its polluting and coercive narratives, helping us to re-perceive our world and each other with efficacy, compassion, humor, and mutual regard.'[17]

When words are called empty, it usually refers to something like the disappointment or anger about a broken promise, rather than being meant as a compliment on the poetic purity of someone's manner of expression. I'd like to propose that a reduction of the content hosted within words, first to lower dosages, perhaps at times to near-complete emptiness, could also be something valuable. In her 1990 story *Summer Rain,* the French writer Marguerite Duras muses:

> 'Words don't change their shape, they change their meaning, their function ... They don't have a meaning of their own any more, they refer to other words that you don't know, that you've never heard or read ... you've never seen their shape, but you feel... you suspect... they correspond to... an empty space inside you... or in the universe...'[18]

I rarely come across empty spaces in the universe, or—despite a continuous engagement with meditation—inside myself; it therefore seems all the more worthwhile to me to preserve the tiny reserves that have not been colonised by the human urge to infiltrate them with meaning.

The recurrent invocation to 'sweep and clean' language from 'filth', 'pollution' and 'poison', in any case, is particularly interesting in light of the fascist conditions against which the Dadaists erected their principles. The beyond cynical terms 'ethnic cleansing' or 'ethnic purifying', a staple in fascist terminology, refers to the methodical elimination of certain groups—'the expulsion, imprisonment, or killing of an ethnic minority by a dominant majority in order to achieve ethnic homogeneity.'[19] To speak of 'cleansing' in a context like this one strikes me as so outrageous that I struggle to find words for it. 'Beyond cynical', my attempt above, is obviously much too weak, but even a hazy notion of the magnitude of the atrocities going on around Ball and his contemporaries is enough to fill me with a reluctance to even want to try and find a linguistic equivalent. My own response is a momentary renunciation of language; I fall silent.

Acknowledging the limits of language need not be a limitation—instead, I'd argue, a sudden hole in the network of content can also be a powerful monument. If the political situation in full swing around the Dadaists wanted to 'cleanse' nations of any shred of influence that went against the grain of their fascist beliefs, Dada's ideology (or, in their own terms, precisely anti-ideology) in turn cleansed language of the stains it obtained from having been made into an instrument of evil-minded ideological forces. The fact that Ball thought of poetry as a *chance*, not a definite *cure* for the ills of the world testifies to his sophisticated awareness of the fact

that assigning to poetry the role of a cure would be another way of coercing it into a function, abusing it. I wonder if Dada's ambition was to replace the sense that fascism wanted language to make by its opposite, or if it was rather a matter of turning towards a realm not situated on the spectrum between sense and nonsense, but outside of it, creating a linguistic concept that renders language *a*-sensical.

Ball's poem 'Wolken' (Clouds)[20] from 1917 is a brilliant example of the word having become 'a thing by itself'. Rather than relying on pre-established vocabularies to write *about* clouds—as Kilmer supposedly would have—the language becomes a malleable substance, fluid enough to assume shapes that resemble the ever-shifting, unstable materiality inherent to clouds.

Wolken

elomen elomen lefitalominal
wolminuscalo
baumbala bunga
acycam glastula feirofim flinsi

elominuscula pluplubasch
rallalalaio

endremin saxassa flumen flobollala
fellobasch falljada follidi
flumbasch

cerobadadrada
gragluda gligloda glodasch
gluglamen gloglada gleroda glandridi

elomen elomen lefitalominal
wolminuscalo
baumbala bunga
acycam glastala feirofim blisti
elominuscula pluplusch
rallabataio

When read out loud, there is an undeniably attractive rhythm to the poem. However, when Ball performed pieces like this one at *Cabaret Voltaire,* most likely the audience was not able to link their immediate acoustic experience to any discernible meaning. However, it was not just a matter of being exposed to a language one did not understand: the words did not belong to any particular language. Nonetheless, I would propose, they were at home in more than one of them, or at least in the spaces in between one nation's vocabulary and another's. Apart from two trees—one of them being rained on—appearing amidst this letter tangle, I am blissfully unaware of what 'Wolken' might ultimately be *about*. The letters become their content, we are offered a way out of the binary between form and content, 'the very distinction [...] which is, ultimately, an illusion.'[21] While still inescapably human, this language has been catapulted from being secondary—a tool, a servant, at worst serving a fascist master—to the

role of the central character, a character playing itself. The title 'Wolken', the German word for cloud, is the only one of the poem's forty three words that gives a clue as to the mother tongue of the poet. The remaining words sit in the spaces in between fenced-off linguistic communities.

As Zadie Smith, among many others, has pointed out, we live in an era where the rise of nationalism, among other destructive tendencies, is accompanied by an acrid quest for verbal unambiguity, where questions on identity and belonging are expressed in linguistic debates that tend to take on a matter-of-life-and-death urgency. Those concerned with the protection of borders also seem to be the ones who are the least willing to put up with a language of ambiguity. In the light of these contemporary tendencies and retrogressions, I find it deeply insightful to be able to quote a poem which was not written in any particular language, but has happily existed in a linguistic intermediate space for the one hundred and three years since its publication, without the need for translation. A poetic-subversive gesture whose visionary scope seems to be in fullest bloom in times of political upheaval, Dada's rejection of drawers was an act of resistance whose strength remains unwavering.

Having considered two ways of poetically approximating—or failing to approximate—the natural world, I'd like to point towards one last tree poem. 'Listen to what the White Pine sayeth,' wrote the American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.[22] Those seven words are all there is, there

is no second or third stanza, no 'writing around the actual point'. Emerson acknowledges the limits of his language and lets something—someone?—else speak. His one line of poetry—curiously reminiscent of instruction pieces from the 1960s by artists like Yoko Ono—does seem to get rid of all the filth clinging to 'this accursed language'. It directs our attention towards the immediate physical surroundings, paradoxically, *away* from his words. The poem has been there all along, Emerson seems to imply, we just need to look up from our books for once. The White Pine, here, is the piece, Emerson's poem but a pious gloss.

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3 Ibid., p. 49.

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6 Martin, Agnes. *Writings/Schriften.* Edited by Dieter Schwarz, Kunstmuseum Winterthur/Edition Cantz 2005, p. 18.

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10 Ibid.

11 'Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.' *United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service,* www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/nfsnc/recarea/?recid=48920. Accessed February 10, 2020.

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18 Duras, Marguerite. *Summer Rain.* Translated by Barbara Bray, Scribner, 1992, p. 63.

19 'Ethnic cleansing.' *Merriam-Webster,* www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnic%20cleansing. Accessed January 12, 2020.

20 Ball, Hugo. 'Wolken.' *Gesammelte Gedichte.* Arche, 1963, pp. 24–25.

21 Sontag, Susan. 2009, p. 11 (see note 16).

22 Hempton, Gordon. *One square inch of Silence. One Man's Quest to Preserve Silence.* Free Press, 2009, p. 290.

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'Wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt es heraus' is a German saying that translates to something like 'Whichever way you shout into the forest, that is the echo that will return.' The proverb has approximately the same meaning as the English 'What goes around comes around', 'You reap what you sow', and—very broadly—the spiritual concept of karma. For now, however, something else intrigues me more than the proverb's meaning: the way that the phrase treats the forest as a resonance chamber. Intrinsically mute, it is portrayed as offering nothing but an echo of whatever humans decide to 'shout into it'.

This chapter explores what forests might have to say in those instances when humans restrain themselves from constantly shouting things into them. It reflects on the world being meaningful on its own, beyond human reasoning, and advocates a non-hierarchical coexistence of different modes of being, without the need to decipher everything. This thought is developed alongside art works that address—more or less critically—the relationship between humans, trees and narrative.

Among the many things that books can be, they are always at least two things: content and some kind of material container. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* is a literary account of a good two years that its author, the American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, spent in a hut built 'by the labor of [his] hands only'[1] by Walden Pond, Massachusetts. As

recounted in *Walden*—a curious mix of transcendentalism, social criticism and spirituality, interspersed with detailed descriptions of birds as well as practical advice on housekeeping—Thoreau sought a way to return to himself as well as to nature, an antidote to the fast-paced life in quickly industrialising cities.

The field between the supposedly immaterial content of the book and the book itself, the object, epitomises an interesting field of tension. Thoreau's experiment of temporarily detaching himself from civilized society, countered by the subsequent writing of *Walden,* entails a contradiction, I find, albeit a productive one. Thoreau submerged himself in the forest seeking *less;* writing a book about this search, however, is bound to add *more* material—thought and paper—to the world (a paradox that would pertain even if he had 'just' written a poem). Strictly speaking, Thoreau's somewhat monastic ambition of reducing life to what truly matters is undermined by the writing of the very book that admittedly enables people like me to still learn of his experiment today. I do not mean to say that reaching out to one's fellow humans for validation—or some kind of response, at the very least—is condemnable: in fact, it is an innate human need. A contemporary version of this primal need might be the photos of remote natural sites found on social media, testifying to the unresolved human battle between solitude and connection: the wish to detach oneself from social fabrics while simultaneously not wanting to give up some kind of reassuring link. Coming back to Thoreau, an author's praise of nature's blissful

silence can easily become a disturbance of someone else's silence.

Be that as it may, Thoreau—in his typical limbo between deriding society and happily assuming the role of a cultural pundit within it—grandiloquently declared:

> 'To be a philosopher is [...] to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.' [2]

Considering the two-edged form in which we are likely to encounter *Walden*—the verbal praising of trees on paper, a material traditionally made from trees—makes the relationship between the practical and the theoretical rather complex.

Walden was first published in 1854. Countless reprints that have appeared since have seen Thoreau's iconic narrative contained in glaring paperbacks printed on demand on bleached office paper, in precious antique books with enchanting woodcuts, in tiny hardcover editions reminiscent of holy scriptures, as part of commercial anthologies in vast fields such as 'nature' or 'spirituality', and everything in between. In spite of their disparate materialities, there is something that these books share; the dutiful protection and silent carrying of Thoreau's iconic words.

Spread out on the table around me are blank pages of varying sizes and hues of white, torn out of some twenty different copies of *Walden* that I started to collect throughout the past year. The

patina of hands having turned the pages, the fading of the paper or its darkening as a result of being exposed to sunlight, stains and mould; all of these are non-verbal, non-linguistic information that I feel add a layer of the 'practicality' mentioned by Thoreau. While collecting the pages, I wondered if the physical features of the material that humbly and unobtrusively carries the always-prioritized content may be considered *readable*, too. By displaying the blank pages, I attempted to carve out a space within the existing narrative, a space that would be devoid of what we usually call content; a space for potential meanings on material that doesn't coerce its viewer toward any particular one of them. The pages—carriers of verbal imagery 'about' nature—are actual representations of nature (and time) as well, a quality that I felt deserved to be foregrounded.

Thoreau's retreat into the woods was, among other things, a gesture of refusal towards industrialisation, which prompted the increasing framing of 'nature' as a provider of supplies, establishing 'a Western mindset that perceives nature as only instrumental, a resource to be used, or a silent backdrop.'[3] This mindset stands in stark contrast to the downright sanctified ways in which many native cultures around the world traditionally treat their surrounding world. The Indian scholar and environmental activist Vandana Shiva has aptly summarised this paradigm shift:

> 'In folk and tribal cultures, trees and forests are worshipped as Vana Devatas, forest deities. But the

> forests, our sacred mothers, our teachers of peace and security, are themselves becoming the victims of war. It is a war unleashed by the violence of the monoculture mind, which reduces nature to raw material, life to a commodity, diversity to a threat, and views destruction as "progress."'[4]

Thinking of trees as raw material, as mere substances that enable the creation, dissemination and consumption of text without having agency in their own right, remains a somewhat problematic commodification of non-human others if it is not questioned. While I am wary of the risk of setting up another dualism, I would join Shiva in asserting that indigenous (or indi-*genius,* as suggested by Philippine artist and filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik[5]) peoples from all around the globe traditionally kept and still keep a healthier company with the surrounding world. Fortunately though, the acknowledgement of 'non-human natures' as 'lively and agential'[6] is increasingly starting to seep into the collective consciousness of the industrialised Western world. A compelling rendering of this thought is expressed by Eduardo Kohn, Associate Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. In his 2013 book *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human,* Kohn states:

> 'If thoughts are alive and if that which lives thinks, then perhaps the living world is enchanted [...].'

I'm not sure why he relativizes the splendid notion of an enchanted world by applying the filter

'perhaps' to it. Various strands of contemporary research show that trees communicate across large areas of land by means of the underground fungal connection between their roots and while this field of research is gaining momentum (the university of Halle, Germany recently set up a post graduate program in biodiversity research dedicated to the 'cooperation between trees'), it remains likely that the proposition of an enchanted world still evokes some rather condescending smiles across Western academia. Unwaveringly, Kohn asserts:

> 'What I mean is that the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans.'[7]

I would like to take a closer look at the notion of the world beyond the human being meaningful—regardless of human intervention.

In the 2003 book *Strangely like War. The Global Assault on Forests* by the American environmental activists Derrick Jensen and George Draffan, the Canadian writer and poet Margaret Atwood is quoted as saying:

> 'We would never buy paper made from dead bears, otter, salmon and birds, from ruined native cultures, from destroyed species and destroyed lives, from ancient forests reduced to stumps and mud; but that's what we're buying when we buy paper made from old growth clear-cut trees.'[8]

In the light of the author's general concern for ecology and specific statements like this one, it comes as a surprise that Atwood has not only taken part in, but assumed an explicit advocate role in an art project making the logging of rather a large quantity of trees (though quite the opposite of old-growth) a central element.

Future Library, a long-term project by the Scottish artist Katie Paterson, has been growing since 2014, in the form of one thousand spruces in a forest bordering the outskirts of Oslo, Norway. The project envisions the logging of the trees in 2114, a hundred years after their planting. Subsequently, the wood from the trees will be turned into paper to be used for an edition of one thousand books, each containing contributions by a hundred writers. While the unknowing spruces grow towards their destiny of being turned into something else, one hundred eminent writers such as Atwood—having kicked off the project in 2014—contribute one hundred manuscripts. Certificates entitling their buyers (or likely their grandchildren) to one of the one thousand books are available via Paterson's galleries. 'This is probably not the trees' idea of what to do in life, but that's how it is,' as the Canadian-American writer Annie Proulx once laconically remarked while looking at price-labelled planks in a timber store.[9] I particularly like the speculative aura of the word 'probably' here. *Future Library*—probably—didn't place the consideration of what the trees might have wanted to do in life at its conceptual centre.

'A forest in Norway is growing,' announces the

website accompanying the project. As simple a statement as it is, it is not exactly true, as natural forests are characterised by being 'layered, with multiple canopies, small openings where the sun shines through, and darkened hollows where it does not.'[10] The spruce monoculture growing as per Paterson's order might be more accurately described as 'a single-age, single-height, [...] single-species plantation.'[11]

In the German folk tale *Hansel and Gretel,* a brother and his younger sister are lured into a candy house by a witch, where the boy is thrown into a cage and force-fed in order to be turned into a roast. Since the witch is blind, she is unable to see the effect of the force-feeding and instead makes him stick out his finger from between the bars every day, so that she can—based on the finger's felt circumference—estimate the time until her feast.[12] So-called 'handover ceremonies', in which the *Future Library* writers hand over their—sealed—manuscripts, take place in the forest where the spruces grow every spring. The role played by the delicate spruce saplings during these annual festivities, year by year, reminds me of the procedure of checking Hansel's finger width, day by day—a thought which provokes some within me. It might appear a bit far-fetched, but there even seems to be a link—a quality of poking around in the dark—between the blindness of the witch and the sealedness of the manuscripts. In the spring of 2014, Margaret Atwood handed over a box containing a text titled *Scribbler Moon*. Since Paterson's project entails the requirement of utter discretion (the authors sign contracts not to reveal any of the content

of their writing other than its title), Atwood merely pointed out that the two words making up the title of her manuscript refer to writing and to time—for the moon was, she explains, humanity's first clock. Since then, there have been countless clocks in countless forms, and perhaps today, the spruces are one of them. While the compelling reason why the authors' stories need to be printed on the wood of those particular trees eludes me, a key role that the trees appear to have been assigned is their inherent ability to make visible the passing of time simply by growing. Tree trunks as clock hands on a clock that exceeds the lifespan of most humans.

Every year that passes is a year closer to the premeditated end of the trees' living existence. While in some way they are the project's protagonists, the trees are simultaneously reduced to the role of innocent bystanders. Incapable of voicing any resistance, they are subjected to human plans, plans which do not conceive of them as sentient beings in and of themselves, but as raw material.

'There's still a sensation that this was once a tree, each [...] piece, but it's in another form. It's been transmuted into something humans can use,' Annie Proulx resignedly commented on the wooden boards lined up against the wall of said timber store.[13] The transmutation of living beings into material, something 'humans can use', the flattening of the complex and self-sustaining ecosystem that a forest can be if left alone, is at the core of *Future Library*. Thanks to a curious coincidence, the word transmute also contains the word 'mute', something which is rather

fitting in this context. Supposedly, Paterson's project activates the forest, gives the trees voices; however, no matter what human message they become the carriers of, their own being is forever silenced. Trees as material, needed because human hubris places human utterances far above anything the trees might have to say—even if this is not much, in human terms.

The project has on many occasions been praised for its hopefulness, for the trust it invokes and for the positive gesture it makes towards the future. The reasons for this almost unmitigated journalistic appraisal regarding a project that places the annihilation of living beings at its centre remain a bit obscure to me. I cannot help but read *Future Library* as an uncritically anthropocentric, extractivist endeavour. Nature is reduced to a mute and limp resource while the utterances of humans—and not just any human, but a deliberately chosen line-up of award-winning authors—is granted a privileged role that, in my mind, imposes an unpleasant hierarchy in the forest. This thoroughly anthropocentric perspective might need to be readdressed in times in which the imperative of 'growth' is stretched to the limit, in which resources have become scarce, in which debates on 'climate change' have become debates on a 'climate catastrophe'. Is this not the time for the human feeling of superiority to dwindle? Should nature really still be viewed as a disposable object for art? In light of all of the above, the 'meaning' of trees ought to shift. It seems even more out of place to look at non-human others primarily in terms of their functionality. On

a side note, it is not only the one thousand spruces that fall prey to *Future Library*. Prior to beginning the project, the patch of forest where the spruces now grow, was 'emptied' of all existing trees. Their wood was used for a 'Silent Room' in the 'New Deichmanske Bibliotek' in Oslo, where the growing number of sealed manuscripts can be viewed. Ironically, the room is said to have a pleasant forest smell about it.

Apart from the idea that trees possess a dignity that shouldn't be defined in terms of usefulness, there are benefits to them—the purification of water and air, the storing of carbon, the providing of shade, clean air and habitats for animals and people—that make their preservation and, ideally, proliferation urgent. 'While [...] there are many selfish reasons to stop cutting down forests, we don't want to emphasize them, because ultimately—and even in the short run—we don't think that particularly helps. It doesn't challenge the grotesquely narcissistic and inhuman utilitarian perspective that *is* our world view and underlies our attempts to dominate the world,' as phrased in *Strangely like War. The Global Assault on Forests*.[14] Against this background, the symbolism built into a project like *Future Library* gives evidence of the privileged human vision that is at its core; at a time of climatic disaster, the logging of trees for the printing of stories seems like a clash of currencies; symbolic ones and real ones.

Atwood's commitment to *Future Library* strikes me as particularly bewildering, as her writing elegantly addresses questions of human mortality and insignificance:

> ‘Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we’re still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants. [...] We monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. [...] We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down.’ [15]

In 2015, then, Atwood recounted that she was intrigued by the idea of the time capsule entailed in *Future Library*. Something about the project reminded her of her childhood, of putting things in little boxes, burying them or putting them into streams or rivers, in the hope of someone else receiving the sealed message at another point in time. Atwood also revealed that she chose an archive paper to print her contribution on, doing what she can to make sure the people whose job it is to turn the trees into books will find a manuscript, and not merely dust, inside the archive box labelled ‘Margaret Atwood. *Scribbler Moon,* 2014’. I think a box bearing a title and a handful of dust could also be seen as an extended concept of writing, or at least of leaving traces, which arguably is, what most writing sets out to do. The act of taking part in the project—the drive to memorialize themselves—might reveal more about the human condition than the contents of the manuscripts. Submitting the sealed texts speaks loudly enough. Even a hundred contributions consisting of dust or empty pages would make it clear how ‘badly we want to memorialize ourselves’.

A forest, this sublimely non-linguistic array of possibilities can be understood by anyone, regardless of their mother tongue or language skills. The contemporary artist and poet Hanne Lippard asks and answers in one of her pieces:

'Do you speak English?
No, I still only speak language.'[16]

Having authors come up with texts, inevitably subjective in one way or another, narrows down the forest's potentiality: from an infinity of meanings—and, importantly, the possibility of *no* meaning—to particular meanings intended by particular writers. Whatever messages are transported into the future will only be understood by people who happen to read English (or other languages featured in the project, such as the Icelandic contained in the 2016 contribution by the novelist Sigurjón Birgir Sigurðsson, better known as Sjón, who was worried that his native language, today spoken by about 314.000 people, might be extinct in a hundred years' time).

A number of trees are—by means of the grotesque logistic effort of tearing down one set of trees only to erect another that will only be logged again—turned into a translation of themselves, something based on intellect rather than mere presence. In her eminent 1966 essay *Against Interpretation,* Susan Sontag wrote: 'The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have'[17] —a thought

that can be elegantly applied to *Future Library* (in spite of its different thematic focus), but furthermore also touches on topics—depletion, impoverishment—that must be considered with growing unease in the light of the current climate crisis. I would like to propose the forest as being the art work here, an author-less array of beings coexisting without the need for human intervention. When Sontag writes about the 'refusal to leave the work of art alone'[18], I see strong links to the unwillingness to leave the trees alone, both in *Future Library* and in the world at large. Sontag also stated that at the core of interpreting art works is 'a dissatisfaction [...] with the work, a wish to replace it by something else.'[19] A dissatisfaction with the forest seems to be present in the case of Paterson's project, prompting its interpretation, a wish to lend the trees relevance by making them the raw material needed by humans. 'Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all,'[20] as Sontag eloquently sums up the matter. Agnes Martin voices a similar sentiment in simple words: '[...] there shouldn't need to be anything added.'[21] The futility of attempting to squeeze more content out of nature than is already there finds new expression from time to time, but at its root it always remains the understanding of humanity's role as a part of nature rather than as its master. Early expressions of this modesty were expressed by the medieval French abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who, in a letter to Henry Murdac, mentioned in passing:

> ‘Believe me who have experience, you will find much more labouring amongst the woods than you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.’ [22]

The Persian poet and mystic Jalal ad-Din Rumi expressed a slightly different, though in my view related sentiment, when he refers to ‘a voice that doesn’t use words.’

On a very practical note, I was intrigued to know how the trees were going to be felled and wrote an email to Katie Paterson to ask. Her assistant got back to me, saying that the project is based on trust: they *trust* that the people assigned the task will find the most suitable solution in 2114. I obviously do not know what people who are not yet born will deem a suitable way of cutting down a thousand spruces, but I do know that the most common commercial way today involves chain saws. The noise of a chain saw—120 decibels—is as loud as an air hammer. A rustling leaf, on the other hand, only has 10 decibels—the same as a human breath.

A common response to criticism is the request to come up with a better alternative. However, I do not think anything *better* is needed. What could be made from this forest if another road was taken than the one proposed by *Future Library?* What might we end up with if the forest simply remained untouched? In the words of Agnes Martin, ‘You don’t get anything. What you do get is rid of everything.’ It is interesting that Martin specifically muses on the role of the

future in her *Writings:* '[...] you can't make promises. The future's a blank page.'

Planting a set quantity of trees is a gesture with a number of more or less known artistic precursors. One of them is *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years.* Initiated by the Hungarian-American artist Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain* involved 11,000 pines planted atop a former gravel pit near the town of Ylöjärvi in Southwest Finland. Denes, considering that it would take at least four centuries for the ecosystem to establish itself, made the protection of the pines for at least this time span a legal requirement of her piece, which is sponsored by the United Nations Environment Program and the Finnish Ministry of the Environment. In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the project was presented as 'Finland's contribution to help alleviate the world's ecological stress.' Aira Kalela from the Finnish Ministry of the Environment declared *Tree Mountain* to be 'the largest monument on earth [...] not dedicated to the human ego, but to benefit future generations with a meaningful legacy. [...] It is designed to unite the human intellect with the majesty of nature.' [23]

Another particularly well-known example is *7000 Eichen—Stadtverwaldung statt Stadtverwaltung (7000 Oaks—City Forestation Instead of City Administration)* presented by Joseph Beuys at documenta VII in Kassel, Germany. On March 16, 1982 Beuys planted an oak in front of the museum Fridericianum, arguably the main documenta venue. In the following years, another six thousand nine hundred

and ninety-nine trees would be planted throughout the city of Kassel with the help of numerous volunteers. The ambition towards which this and other Beuysian tree projects aspired was a 'perpetual tree endeavour, covering the Earth in trees and ideas.'[24] Alongside this Sisyphosian task, Beuys (co-founder of the German Green Party) tirelessly disseminated his ideas on green futures, direct democracy and—perhaps most importantly—his 'extended concept of art', a concept accommodating enough to grant tree-planting a place at an art event like documenta.

Although *7000 Oaks* is not tied to narrative in the way *Future Library* is, Beuys' project was also entangled with narratives of sorts. One of the core concerns that kept coming up in response to the planting was the question whether the project was meant to solve 'the German question'.[25] In the Third Reich, namely, the oak had been misused as a sylvan embodiment of the endurance and hardness that the Nazis had a fondness for, a claimed natural entity without the means to speak up against being turned into a German hero. Beuys, however, did not see the erasure of meanings that he had not brought into the world as his mission. It is also noteworthy, particularly juxtaposed to Paterson's project, that he reasoned about his choice of tree in terms of the longevity of the oak—he deliberately chose a type of tree that would only unfold its full seventhousand-fold beauty centuries after being planted.

The highly methodical set-up of *7000 Oaks* was upended by life itself; Beuys passed away before all of the trees had been planted. On July 12, 1987, just over

a year after his father's death, Wenzel Beuys planted the seven thousandth tree, next to the first one. Today, those two and the majority of the other trees are still around. They are art in public space, but also 'regular' urban trees (as if trees become *better*—more meaningful, relevant, beautiful—by being declared art). They will provide shade and clean air for you regardless of whether you worship them from a Nazi or pacifist point of view, as an art object, a 'sacred mother', or a weapon against global warming. They will even do so if you don't worship them at all.

What sets Beuys' trees apart from any other—author-less, non-art—tree in Kassel is the fact that every one of 'his' trees is accompanied by a basalt stele, demarcating it as a member of the Beuys club. Today, thirty eight years after their planting, the trees have outgrown the stones by far, turning them into mere footnotes. The hierarchy between the living, growing organism of the tree and its static human annotation has been reversed.

Beuys stated:

> 'I, as a person, have no significance at all. [...] Should I have one, however, I would like this significance to be removed.' [26]

And yet, despite those claims, I am left feeling somewhat uneasy considering this question of 'personal significance'. Seven thousand may be a vast quantity, but it is still a finite number. Something about the diffusion of this limited tree edition—signed and numbered by means of basalt steles– throughout

commonly used urban spaces has an aura of a hegemonic gesture. Why is it so hard to engage with non-human others as an artist without claiming them? On a side note, I would like to mention that in 2003, an artist planted a symbolic seven thousand and first tree, a gesture that I read as a peaceful contesting of the monumental insularity of *7000 Oaks*. Enchantingly, this artist's name is not even mentioned on Wikipedia; I feel a sense of momentary relief from the authorial heaviness that almost chokingly characterises Beuys' project.

One of the fusions of seemingly contradictory traits that converged in the figure of Joseph Beuys was a pridefully displayed anti-health nihilism—'One has to wear oneself out. What a waste to still be in good shape when one dies! One has to burn to ashes while alive, not only at the point of death.'[27] —with a downright pious attitude towards non-human nature. In a 1984 conversation with the Catholic priest and art adept Friedhelm Mennekes, Beuys stated:

> 'Trees today are much more intelligent than humans.'
>
> He continued:
>
> 'They are disfranchised. They know this very well, their disfranchisement. Trees, animals, are all disfranchised. I wish to make trees and animals capable of holding rights. This, naturally, is a duty of humankind.'[28]

1 Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods.* Random House, 1999, p. 3.

2 Ibid., pp. 14–15.

3 Neimanis, Astrida. 'No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself).' *Somatechnics. Missing Links and Non/Human Queerings,* guest edited by Line Henriksen, Marietta Radomska and Margrit Shildrick, volume 5, issue 2, September, 2015, p. 139.

4 Jensen, Derrick and Draffan, George. *Strangely like War. The Global Assault on Forests.* Foreword by Vandana Shiva, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2003, p. vii.

5 'Louder Than Words with Kidlat Tahimik.' *YouTube,* www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl3-7bRLQes. Accessed January 14, 2020.

6 Neimanis, Astrida. 2015, p. 147 (see note 3).

7 Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forest Think. Towards an Anthropology beyond the Human.* University of California Press, 2013, p. 72.

8 Jensen, Derrick and Draffan, George. 2003, p. 10 (see note 4).

9 *In de ban van het bos.* Directed by Tomas Kaan, VPRO, September 8, 2019, www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2019-2020/in-de-ban-van-het-bos.html. Accessed December 24, 2019.

10 Jensen, Derrick and Draffan, George. 2003, p. 32 (see note 4).

11 Ibid., p. 33.

12 Grimm, Jacob and Grimm, Wilhelm. 'Hänsel und Gretel.' *Grimms Märchen,* Lechner 1992, p. 165.

13 *In de ban van het bos.* 2019 (see note 9).

14 Jensen, Derrick and Draffan, George. 2003, pp. 12–13 (see note 4).

15 Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin.* Anchor, 2001, p. 236.

16 Lippard, Hanne. *This Embodiment.* Broken Dimanche Press, 2015, p. 31.

17 Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays.* Penguin Modern Classics, 2009, p. 7.

18 Ibid., p. 8.

19 Ibid., p. 10.

20 Ibid., p. 14.

21 Martin, Agnes. *Writings/Schriften*. Edited by Dieter Schwarz, Kunstmuseum Winterthur/Edition Cantz, 2005, p. 39.

22 Clairvaux, Saint Bernard de. *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*. Translated by Bruno Scott James, AMS Press, 1953, p. 156.

23 Kalela, Aira. 'Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule—11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years.' *Agnes Denes,* www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works4.html. Accessed February 25, 2020.

24 Beuys, Joseph and Blume, Bernhard and Rappmann, Rainer. *Gespräche über Bäume*. FIU-Verlag, 2006, p. 8 (my translation).

25 Ibid., p. 22 (my translation).

26 Ibid., p. 83 (my translation).

27 *Beuys*. Directed by Andres Veiel, zero one film, 2017.

28 Beuys, Joseph and Blume, Bernhard and Rappmann, Rainer. 2006, p. 114 (see note 24).

Throughout this paper, fleeting alignments of what we call 'language' with what we call 'nature' have alternated with sudden discords, confusing gaps and surprising continuities between the two. The language involved in the discussed poems and artworks has praised and imitated the natural world, it has stepped back in order to try and let nature speak for itself, it has usurped nature, clashed with and worshipped it.

Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*, Hugo Ball's *Wolken* and Emerson's invocation to listen to a white pine share an awareness of the 'insufficiency' of human language. Rather than lamenting this insufficiency, the three poets have found modes of using this imperfection of human alphabetic language in what they see as poetically productive ways.

Kilmer considers language from two seemingly contradictory perspectives: while embracing a relatively conventional use of it, he simultaneously recognises this language to be hopelessly restricted, allowing, if anything, only superficial views of the world, faint allusions to what lies beyond the words. Why does he hold on to a language whose imperfection he is so perfectly aware of?

This seeming paradox also features in *No Representation without Colonisation? Or, Nature Represents Itself* by Astrida Neimanis, lecturer in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. In this 2015 essay,

Neimanis elaborates on the problem of a 'can't-but-must' condition engrained in the task of representing non-human others—its equally pressing impossibility and necessity. While in the case of Kilmer, 'can't-but-must' remains a primarily philosophical problem, Neimanis considers it in terms of the ethical challenges we ought to be aware of when speaking of—or, particularly riskily, *for*—nature. Two roads that are commonly taken are representationalism and post-positivism, she expounds. Both positions (the representationalist one stating that there are representations on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities on the other, the post-positivist one stating that any attempt at representation constructs, rather than merely mirrors the real) perpetuate an ontological gap between word and world. This gap, according to Neimanis, is at the core of the problem of representation, reinforcing hierarchies between word and world rather than helping overcome them. She offers 'agential realism' (a term coined by the American feminist theorist Karen Barad) as a way out: a philosophical concept that postulates that all entities have ontological significance of their own and that they coexist in non-hierarchical ways. The agential realism sought by Neimanis is a conception where entities and representations, nature and culture cease to be conceived of as antitheses.

Interestingly, Hugo Ball also negotiated the idea of language and reality as ontologically distinct entities and, to some extent, rejected it. When the poet urges us to consider 'Why can't a tree be called Pluplusch, and Pluplubasch when it has been raining?', he proposes

for language to become a part of the world. In a way that shows a clear kinship with Neimanis' vision of non-hierarchical coexistence, Ball shepherds us into the realm of continuity: he leaves behind the arbitrary bond of signifier and signified proposed by Saussurian semiotics as well as the dualism of content of form which Susan Sontag recognised to be an illusion. The vocabulary he offers instead enables a glance at what language could be—even just for the time it takes to read a poem—without the paradigm that installs a hierarchical opposition of form to content. *Wolken* is a radical and yet tender enactment of a language that comes neither before nor after reality; it removes us from the idea of language as 'a kind of screen that divides us from the world of existing things,'[1] to use the words of book designer and publisher Phil Baber. Baber writes:

> 'When we see a continuum, not a rupture, between language and life, the question of the ineffable immediately falls away. Which is not to say that the world is wholly describable or that words give us privileged access into the nature of things, only that emphasis now lies elsewhere. For the ineffable is a 'problem'—i.e., a limit to be overcome—only when we see language as being at the disposal of experience—when we see language as a means to capture experience rather than a medium of experience in and of itself.'[2]

Ball's language is a *medium of experience in and of itself* that truly enchants me. Neimanis points out

that '[o]n such views [in terms of the agential realism described above, A/N], entities do not enjoy a higher ontological status than their representations, but nor is the reverse true.'[3] Ball seems to have found a way of letting something—clouds—and something else—words like *elomen* or *lefitalominal*—coexist in a way where neither of them have dominance over the other.

Emerson's poem—or rather, his call for attentive auditory engagement with the surrounding world—accepts human alphabetic language for what it is and nonchalantly reduces it to a bare material minimum; just enough to still be able to function as a delicate frame.

Listen to what the White Pine sayeth;

seven simple words, a gesture of poetic humility, a most subtle speech act, turning the reader's attention towards the authorless world all around us. Emerson embraces a conception where a human writer's utterance is of no more value than those of a pine. In *Poetry and Knowledge,* Aimé Césaire fittingly writes:

> '[...] all true poetry, without ever abandoning its humanity at the moment of greatest mystery ceases to be strictly human so as to begin to be truly cosmic. There we see resolved—and by the poetic state—two of the most anguishing antinomies that exist: the antinomy of one and other, the antinomy of Self and World.'[4]

I feel that the way Emerson builds the utterances—or silences—of the white pine into 'his' poem eschews this difference of the Self and the World most elegantly. Without humanness being abandoned, an element of something else starts to seep in. Neimanis, referencing the scholar Catriona Sandilands, also asserts:

> 'There is an 'Other-wordliness and a 'wildness' in nature [...] that is unspeakable by us.' [5]

I feel that Emerson's poem, not quite wanting to belong to the 'strictly human' field, is a rather radiant poetic acceptance of this unspeakable other-wordliness.

In line with Césaire's conception of a blurred line between Self and World, Phil Baber writes:

> 'When we lament the ineffable what we are really lamenting is our inability to dominate and possess the world. But when we recognise that word and world participate in the same flux and vibration of being—are literally contained one within the other—the writer's 'task' becomes at once simpler and more profound: the radical reorientation, through language, of the self toward the other [...].' [6]

In stark contrast to this, Katie Paterson's *Future Library* reduces non-human others to a purely functional material—establishing hierarchies which render any meaningful continuity between *self* and

other impossible. Agnes Denes took a step back, reclining as far as possible from artistic authorship while in fact still being *Tree Mountain's* author. Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks* attempted to circumvent narrative altogether. However, while he arguably took a valid step towards a more 'pure' use of trees, ultimately we are still dealing with a case of *using* trees—a somewhat hegemonic human element remains.

Beuys' wish to make animals and plants capable of holding rights, by contrast, shows direct links to the concerns that Neimanis' essay revolves around, extending the set of problems that come with speaking of and for nature into the realm of law: 'The complexity of representing non-human natures as a form of advocacy is further underlined if we turn to a legal context. Even here [...] the distinction between 'nature in the active voice' and well-meaning human advocates is not easily parsed,'[7] she writes.

An interesting example of the role that nature can assume in a legal context is brought up in *Forest Law—Selva Jurídica,* a collaborative piece by the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann and the Brazilian architect, researcher and writer Paulo Tavares. *Forest Law* concerns itself with an artistic mapping of legal trials in the Ecuadorian Amazon in which 'a series of landmark legal battles have unfolded in the past years, where nature has been declared a subject of rights.'[8] This reframing of nature as a subject of rights opposes the one proposed by modern consitutionalism, enclosing 'nature within the category of object/property'.[9] Neimanis cautions her readers to consider whether approaches like this one are not

'simply cases of humans extending human language to non-human natures, or presuming to know what these natures would want, or say, in just another act of colonization?'[10] While she answers with a laconic 'Perhaps', I feel compelled to reply to the question with a firm 'no', because it supposes a split between humans and nature that is absent in the case discussed by Biemann and Tavares: the Sarayaku people opposing the exploitation of their land by, for instance, multinational oil companies, conceive themselves as part of the surrounding world. Any attempt at drawing a clear line between the people and the land would, as far as I am concerned, reinforce the binary that was originally disputed by Neimanis herself.

Another instance of a sincere attempt to work *with* nature that finds a legal expression is the artistic practice of the 'pioneers of the eco-art movement'[11] Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison. Their work—involving, among other things, endangered meadows, portable orchards and disappearing rain forests—always takes the form of site-specific commissions. A 'detail' that aims to preclude any potential human hegemony towards the natural world is the fact that they will only accept a proposal for a commission on the condition of 'a general agreement that *their actual client is the environment itself* [my italics].'[12]

After a complex journey through the simultaneous necessity and risk entailed in the task of speaking of, for and with nature, Neimanis concludes her astute essay with the proposal of '*imagining* what we

call 'nature' and 'culture' as truly consubstantial.'[13] Drawing on the work of Vicki Kirby, Professor of Sociology at the University of New South Wales, she proposes a conception of human language that will always inevitably remain a part of the world, 'neither ontologically nor materially cut off from that which we seek to listen to, describe, and even represent as non-human nature.'[14] In the words of Vicki Kirby, the question to be asked would be:

> 'Could the generalised origin of re-presentation ... be thought as the Earth's own scientific investigation of itself?'

I found this question somewhat complicated at first, but as Neimanis went on to unpack this proposition, I got a sense of what she means: 'even—and especially—'the tiny marks on this page [...] all become a rendering, an iteration, a re-presentation of various natures finding ways to contract and offer life anew.'[15] If we regard the world-word relation in such terms, anything we say *about* nature—our speaking of the beauty, sublimity, endangerment or utility of trees—remains a part of nature. Letters on a page, then, are nothing secondary, but an instance of Kirby's proposed concept of 'nature writing itself'.

Everything we do as humans being an instance of 'nature representing itself' does not absolve us from taking an authorial or ethical stance in relation to the world that surrounds us. Quite the opposite—our attempts to verbally position ourselves towards non-human others, like trees, ought to be informed

by sincerity and care. The relationship between 'us' and 'them', in any case, remains inspiringly unresolved.

Let me conclude with a passage from 'Trees are Fags' by Benny Ramsay Nemerofsky, an audio piece described by the artist as 'a guided encounter with a tree.'[16] One early Sunday evening, I listened to the polyphonic guide in the pouring rain, in the quiet company of the trees of a forest-like park in The Hague. In line with the questions that I circled around throughout the thicket of this thesis, one of its voices mused:

> 'We were made to touch trees, to live among them in profound, connected relationship. But given how deeply an unnatural separation between us and trees has been cleaved in this chapter of the Anthropocene, given the entitlement with which humans touch, grasp, claim and use whatever we want, given how the language between us is broken, perhaps a gesture of respect, a gesture of repair, a request for consent might be in order. Perhaps there is something we might learn from asking for a tree's consent, to not assume our touch is welcome. We could try it and see what happens when we ask the tree: *May I?'*

After a thoughtful pause, in which all I heard was rain, the voice wondered:

> 'How might we do this? In what language?'

1 Baber, Phil. 'We Shall Have Worked.' *The Last Books,* Spring 2017, p. 2, thelastbooks.org/pdfs/WeShallHaveWorked.pdf. Accessed on February 18, 2020.

2 Ibid., p. 3.

3 Neimanis, Astrida. 'No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself).' *Somatechnics. Missing Links and Non/Human Queerings,* guest edited by Line Henriksen, Marietta Radomska and Margrit Shildrick, volume 5, issue 2, September, 2015, p. 136.

4 Césaire, Aimé. *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry. 1946-82.* Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, University Press of Virginia, 1990, p. xlix.

5 Neimanis, Astrida. 2015, p. 139 (see note 3).

6 Baber, Phil. 2017 (see note 1).

7 Neimanis, Astrida. 2015, p. 140 (see note 3).

8 Biemann, Ursula and Tavares Paulo. *Forest Law–Selva Jurídica.* Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, 2014, p. 7.

9 Ibid, p. 19.

10 Neimanis, Astrida. 2015, p. 142 (see note 3).

11 Harrison, Helen Mayer and Harrison, Newton. 'Helen & Newton.' *The Harrison Studio. Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison Environmental & Ecological Artists,* theharrisonstudio.net. Accessed February 25, 2020.

12 Ibid.

13 Neimanis, Astrida. 2015, p. 146 (see note 3).

14 Ibid., p. 149.

15 Ibid., p. 147.

16 Nemerofsky Ramsay, Benny. *Trees are Fags.* www.trees-are-fags.eu. Accessed February 25, 2020.

Epilogue
Two Missed Chances

Being aware of a topic's complexity does not mean that one is safe from getting entangled in the structures one seeks to avoid. As I tried to navigate the intricacies between nature and language, I found that establishing modes of thinking beyond—or at least alongside—my innate human sense-making-reflex remained difficult.

Last year in October, I was involved in the planting of two apple trees. It should not matter at all, but the trees were part of a project titled *Apple. An introduction. Over and over and once again* by Antje Majewski and Pawel Freisler, envisioning the planting of one thousand and one apple trees throughout urban spaces.[1]

As my boyfriend and I began digging a hole amidst the bushes in front of our house, a thought occurred to me: if this tree is a symbol for biodiversity, as intended by the project, a monument to the loss of species, a critique of global capitalism, wouldn't it be useful to have a plaque somewhere near it, letting passers-by know all this? As I shared these thoughts, I learned that Majewski had taken a deliberate stance against burdening the trees with her name or any text. The artist had not wanted to *claim the trees.*

The next morning, as we were busy planting the second tree, an enthusiastic passer-by got intrigued by what we were doing. A conversation unfolded

in which I found myself explaining the details of Majewski's piece, only to be cut short by the suddenly irritated stranger: 'Do things always need a name!'

Fairytales often grant their characters three chances. In this thesis, I tried to resist the clutches of meaning and naming, not to reject or suppress those impulses, but—hopefully—to write alongside them with a heightened awareness of their complex artistic and ethical implications. As Astrida Neimanis, among others, has remarked, solving is not the task when it comes to the ethics of linguistically positioning oneself towards any kind of non-human other; rather, it is a matter of 'living ethically with the problem'.[2] The weight of the nature-versus-language question is at once alleviated, however, when we realize that human language will always be an expression of this nature —at least as long as we feel the need to talk about things.

1 Reisner, Lena Johanna. Antje Majewski & Pawel Freisner: *Apple. An introduction. (Over and over and once again).* galerie-im-turm.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Handout-GiT-Majewksi_Freisler_2019_EN.pdf. Accessed January 12, 2020.

2 Neimanis, Astrida. 'No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself).' *Somatechnics. Missing Links and Non/Human Queerings,* guest edited by Line Henriksen, Marietta Radomska and Margrit Shildrick, volume 5, issue 2, September, 2015, p. 150.

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All the Roses and None of Them

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