

Alive – More than human worlds

A witch tells a story of conquest, exploitation, and destruction caused by human beings. As her tale unfolds, the spell, the witchery of the story, begins to unleash over the entire existence:

“Then they grow away from the earth
then they grow away from the sun
then they grow away from the plants and animals.
They see no life.
When they look
they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them
the trees and rivers are not alive
the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and bear are objects.
They see no life.
They fear
They fear the world.
They destroy what they fear.
They fear themselves.”
Leslie Marmon Silko

What if we could break this spell? If mountains, rivers, trees, animals, fungi, things, spirit beings, and ancestors were living beings that coexist and interact with us?

The planetary crisis challenges us to rethink and reshape our relationships with our co-world. Things and narratives in this exhibition convey experiences, practices, and knowledge from various worlds. They have the potential to radically change the way we live and interact with each other.

More than a tree

For the Kamilaroi communities in Australia, a carved tree, *thulu*, is “more than a tree”: it is an ancestor and a family member, it embodies knowledge and has agency. The markings are associated with specific families, tell their story, and lend them a voice. The *thulu* on display was removed from a ceremonial ground in the early 20th century and acquired by the MKB in 1940 from the National Museum in Sydney. The tree is therefore also a reminder of the trauma engendered by colonization and expropriation.

1 *thulu*, ancestral tree | Boggabri, Kamilaroi Country, Australia | before 1940 | wood | Collection Lucas Staehelin, gifted in 1940 | Va 637

“This charcoal drawing presents a *thulu*, tree. Known as ‘scar trees’, they hold significance as they articulate Kamilaroi practices. The bark has been removed in a vertical configuration, so as not to harm the tree, to make a shield or a canoe. Each of the thirty panels drawn is a pronunciation of the abstract, the metaphysical and the immaterial through mark making. The relationship between the panels shifts this abstraction into a presentation of *country* and modified *thulu*, showing their agency. These drawings express the subjectivity of *country* and our interaction with *thulu*.” Brian Martin, 2023

2 Culturally modified Thulu: Methexical Countryside Kamilaroi | Brian Martin | 2023 | charcoal drawing, paper | On loan from the artist

Through a ceremony performed in December 2022 in Basel, Brian Martin and Alfred Priestly, members of the Kamilaroi people, and Bradley Webb, a Bundjalung man, reconnected the ancestral tree with the communities at home. In doing so, they initiated a process aimed at healing and renewing the relationships. The Kamilaroi people wish for the tree to come home and have submitted a request for restitution. A return would offer possibilities for change: from a Place of removal and trauma imparted to the people towards relationality and responsibility of the involved institutions.

3 *thulu ugal*, song tree | Simon Rose and Brian Martin | Melbourne | 2023 | short film, 12 min, in collaboration with MKB

Resource or source of life?

Human actions have a dramatic impact: global warming, soil, water and air pollution, mass extinction of plant and animal life. From an anthropocentric point of view, land, mountains, rivers, and things are resources. They are exploited by a global, profit-oriented economic system for the benefit of rich countries and companies. Colonial and extractivist practices are based on violence, dispossession, and displacement and are continuing to this day.

“All that taming and mastering [of nature] has made such a mess that it is unclear whether life on earth can continue.” Anna Tsing, 2015

“To talk of Country means not just land, but also the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, stories, songs and feelings, everything that becomes together to make up place. Country is alive for us, it cares for us, communicates with us, and we are part of it.” Laklak Burarrwanga, 2019

The Gran Chaco (Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia) has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world: each day, over a thousand hectares of dry forest are cleared.

“Cattle farmers brought their herds to the land in the 19th century. After dispossessing and displacing the indigenous inhabitants, they began to fence off the land. Deforestation and cattle ranching go together and represent aspects of a neo-colonial and extractivist strategy. Indigenous rights or the effects such actions have on climate change are not considered. My works prompt viewers to question our perceptions, prejudices, and understanding of history. They challenge us to decolonize our mode of thinking.” Miriam Rudolph, 2016

4 Colonization by cattle | Miriam Rudolph | 2016 | etching, aquatint, chine-collé on Kozo paper | On loan from the artist

Extractivist projects do not stop at the boundaries of our planet. The futuristic Afronaut project in Zambia in the 1960s could be read as a parody and inversion of colonialist thinking and practices. By contrast, current explorations and the idea of space conquest constitute a new form of settler colonialism and extractivism.

5 Afronauts | Nuotama Frances Bodomu | Ghana | 2014 | short film, black and white, 13 min
6 Butungakuna. From the series: Afronauts. 2011 © Cristina de Middel / Magnum Photos

In the past, such war shields were used by people of the Upper Sepik as protection. Protection is needed again today: since the 1960s, large-scale gold and copper projects along with a river dam have been in the planning. Indigenous people are defending the river in its quality as a living being.

“For us...people belonging to the river, the river is a spirit that is living. We have languages and we’ve got songs and stories that say it could wake up and it talks to you. And it sleeps. It dreams. ... And all its lifeforms, both plants and animals, are connected to us. And that’s really important.” Manu Peni, 2020

7 *inaune*, shield | Paupe, Sepik, Papua New Guinea | before 1966 | wood, pigments | Collection Gisela and Meinhard Schuster, gifted in 1966 | Vb 22939, Vb 22940, Vb 22941, Vb 22942, Vb 22943
8 *inaune*, shield | Oum, Sepik, Papua New Guinea | before 1966 | wood, pigments | Collection Gisela and Meinhard Schuster, gifted in 1966 | Vb 22945

The *kesa* represents a queen, a guardian of the land and the waters. In Buka, in the region of Bougainville, indigenous people succeeded through protests in shutting down a large copper mine, which had been causing widespread devastation since the 1970s and continues to affect people’s lives. Their resistance against the central Papua New Guinean government resulted in Bougainville being declared an autonomous region. In this struggle, women played an eminent role.

“Although we regained our matrilineal status, we no longer enjoy the pristine environment of our ancestresses – instead we inherit the mine’s environmental damages. The work of, among others, German colonial administrators, collectors and traders in the late nineteenth century carries as large an extractive impact through their holdings of ancestral materials in museum collections worldwide.” Taloi Havini, 2023

9 *kesa*, sculpture of a queen | Naka and Naboin groups, Buka, Bougainville, Solomon Islands | before 1930 | wood, vegetable fibres, feather, colour | Felix Speiser, purchased in 1930 | Vb 8235

Connection and communication with the ancestors are of paramount importance in West Africa. Among the Mafa people, the souls of deceased parents inhabit soul vessels and so remain present in the home of their descendants.

“An inhabited soul jug mediates between this world and other worlds; it creates a connection to the ancestors and the supreme being. When sickness or misfortune strikes a child or any other family member, a sacrifice is made to the soul inhabiting the *vray*. At feasts, too, people make offerings as a way to show gratitude as well as to ask for peace, health, good fortune, and fertility for the family.” Tevodai Mambai, 2023

10 *vriy*, soul vessels | Waydam | Ldamzay, Cameroon | 1953 | clay, red fired | Paul Hinderling, purchased in 1953 | III 12513, III 12514, III 12515, III 12517, III 25834

11 *vriy*, soul vessels in shape of a man and a woman | Mokolo, Cameroon | 1953 | clay | Paul Hinderling, purchased in 1953 | III 12519, III 12521

Small slit drums play an important part in the ceremonial practices of the Yaka people in the Congo: in case of illness or to determine the cause of some misfortune, ritual specialists are consulted and asked for advice. With their slit drums, they connect the living and the ancestors. Through an altered state of consciousness, ritual practices and precise repeated notes on the drum, they channel the ancestors' powers and messages.

12 *n'koku ngoombu*, diviner's slit drum | Angola or Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1933 | wood, brass | Jean Roux, gifted in 1933 | III 8120

13 *n'koku ngoombu*, diviner's slit drum | Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1933 | wood, metal, brass, vegetable fibres | purchased from unknown source 1933 | III 7413

Large drums used on the occasion of official events, ceremonies, and dances belonged to the inventory of a palace or were owned by associations. The spider motif – on drums, headdresses, and masks – was reserved for the royal family and dignitaries. This spider dwells in the ground. Since the deceased are consigned to the earth and receive the status of ancestors from her, the earth spider stands for wisdom and ancestral power. Its ability to connect the world of the living with the world of the ancestors was used particularly for telling the future. By removing ritual things, the link to the ancestors was severed.

14 Drum with a depiction of the earth spider | Oku, Cameroon | before 1970 | wood, skin, metal | Hans Knöpfli, Basel Mission, permanent loan 1988, gifted in 2015 | III 25182

15 Mask with a representation of the earth spider | Babanki-Mokolo, Cameroon | before 1937 | wood | Hans Himmelheber, purchased in 1938 | III 1081

In pre-colonial Cameroon, life was governed to a large extent by associations. They exercised political, legal as well as spiritual authority. Their power and activity were represented by masks, which made their appearance during initiations and ceremonies.

In colonial missionary parlance, such masks and figures were described as 'idols' and 'fetishes', local religious practices as 'sorcery' and 'idolatry'. The incorporation of ritual things into museum collections relegated them from spiritual subjects to mere objects.

“The language used to name and describe the foreign should not be understood merely as a means of communication; it was a carrier of knowledge and contributed to the transmission of a worldview. ... It was not a matter of getting to know the other, but of conquering the other. The process took place from the naming of the objects to their complete domestication through new meanings and narratives.” Albert Gouaffo, 2023

16 Headdress | Lokjamba, Cameroon | before 1910 | wood, plant seeds, plant fibre | Missionary Friedrich Ebbing, purchased in 1910 | III 3249

17 Headdress | Yaounde, Cameroon | before 1906 | wood, kaolin | Carl Hoppe, purchased in 1906 | III 2293

18 Headdress | Lokjamba, Cameroon | before 1910 | wood, seeds, kaolin | Missionary Friedrich Ebbing, purchased in 1910 | III 3248

Through colonization, the context, knowledge, and practices associated with this sculpture were lost, making it the witness of a broken history. Slavery turned humans into objects and commodities. However, in West Africa, things are considered alive, acting as intermediaries between human and other worlds. Global circulation prompts us to reflect on analogies between flight and displacement, migration and diaspora of people and things.

19 Sculpture of a woman | Yaounde, Cameroon | before 1906 | wood, kaolin | Carl Hoppe, purchased in 1906 | III 2294

Becoming-with

According to indigenous understandings in the South American lowlands, the forest is much more than a resource to be appropriated, exploited and marketed. The forest is a living entity endowed with life force and a body that breathes. It is home to a multitude of communities of plants, trees, animals, spirit beings, and humans. Their coexistence and communication is mediated by shamans.

Animals are among the main protagonists in myths that tell of a time in which they, too, were humans and in the course of which they transformed into animals – either at their own behest or as a punishment. They now differ from humans in terms of their bodies, habits, and a life in their own collectives, but still possess their sense of perception, feeling, speech, thought and action.

“Do not think that the forest is inert, that it is just there without reason. If it were without life, we too wouldn’t be able to move. It is the forest that animates us. It is alive. We may not hear its complaints, but the forest suffers, just like we humans do. It hurts when it is burnt and its tall trees groan when they fall to the ground. This is why we don’t want it to be cut down. We want our children and grandchildren to be able to feed and grow there.” Davi Kopenawa, 2003

“Drawing brings back memories of my parents and what they taught me”, says Osvaldo Pitoe. The women are shown gathering. Depending on the season, they fill their large bags with a variety of pods, bush beans, berries, prickly pears, palm hearts, roots, herbs, and wild pepper. Osvaldo Pitoe used to accompany his father hunting. Preferred game included peccaries, deer, rheas, bush fowl, and armadillos (no. 21). No more animals may be killed than necessary to sustain one’s own life. The meat was shared with relatives and the bones of the eaten animals treated with greatest respect.

Fishers asked the water-women, that is, the fishes’ mothers, for permission to ‘take’ one of their children before setting off. “They look after their children and protect them. From time to time, they let one go and give it to you, then again they tend to be stingy and hide them from you”, says Jorge Carema. When fishers fail to show respect towards the fish, and the

water-women hear their children complaining, they withhold them and hide them away in their houses at the bottom of the river (no. 22).

In his drawings, Efacio Álvarez addresses the relative position of eaters and those being eaten: *chuñas* feed on slow-worms; they and other animals then become the prey of the jaguar (no. 23). “The jaguar is like us; he knows how to hunt”, he says. Just like humans, jaguars feed on meat to sustain themselves; in turn, their life and soul become the prey of spirit beings.

The jaguar in Esteban Klassen’s drawings is the alter ego and help of the shaman (no. 24). According to indigenous understanding, dreaming of the jaguar means danger, combat, and death. The life of the forest is in danger (no. 26). “Through deforestation, the animals are losing their home. They are forced to flee but have nowhere to go to”, says Clemente Juliuz.

20 Drawings | Marcos Ortiz (1952–2022) | Yiclôcat, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2021–2022 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27651, IVc 27653

21 Drawings | Osvaldo Pitoe | Cayin ô Clim, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2003–2021 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27643, IVc 27644, IVc 27646, IVc 27647

22 Drawings | Jorge Carema | Cayin ô Clim, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2019–2021 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27649, IVc 27650

23 Drawings | Efacio Álvarez | Yiclôcat, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2021 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27654, IVc 27655

24 Drawings | Esteban Klassen | Yiclôcat, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2015–2022 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27657, IVc 27658, IVc 27659, IVc 27660

25 Drawings | Richart Peralta | Campo Alegre, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2021 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27663, IVc 27664

26 Drawings | Clemente Juliuz (1972–2021) | Campo Alegre, Gran Chaco, Paraguay | 2018–2020 | paper, ballpoint pen | colectivo artes vivas, purchased in 2022 | IVc 27666, IVc 27667

In the course of colonization, *arete guasu*, the Feast of the Living and the Dead, became fused with the Christian carnival. It is celebrated by Guarani-speaking groups in the lowlands of South America for the purpose of remembering the deceased and the ancestors who join the living for a few days to dance, eat, and drink.

Central figures include the jaguar, the domestic pig, and the bull; during the event, they enjoy the liberty of playing special pranks on the living. The ancestors are also liable to appear in the shape of forest animals.

27 Animal masks | Sierra de Tartagal, Chaco, Argentina | before 1992 | wood, colour | Collection Jean-Claude Steinegger and Elfi Steigert, gifted in 2020 | peccary IVc 27346, toucan IVc 27351, tapir IVc 27347

Stools are often simply used as seats. However, special stools decorated, for instance, with representations of double-headed animals, are reserved for dignitaries and shamans. Shamans are ritual specialists who have the gift of communicating with other beings through dance and song or by means of the ingestion of special substances or tobacco smoke; they can even take on a different shape. The coexistence of humans and other beings is based on a balanced giving and taking. If this balance is disturbed, illnesses, conflicts, and crises may arise. In this case, shamans act as intermediaries between the different worlds.

“The forest is alive. It can only die if the white people persist in destroying it. If they succeed, the rivers will disappear underground, the soil will crumble, the trees will shrivel up, and the stones will crack in the heat. The dried-up earth will become empty and silent. The *xapiri* spirits who come down from the mountains to play on their mirrors in the forest will escape

far away. Their shaman fathers will no longer be able to call them and make them dance to protect us. ... We will die one after the other, the white people as well as us. All the shamans will finally perish. Then, if none of them survive to hold it up, the sky will fall.” Davi Kopenawa, 2013

28 Animal-shaped stools | Upper Xingu, Brazil | before 2000 | wood, painted | Brazilian Embassy, gifted in 2000: coati IVc 25560, young tapir IVc 25562, marten IVc 25561, pacarana IVc 25564, caiman IVc 25563, tortoise IVc 25576, two-headed jaguar IVc 25575, armadillo IVc 25574, fish IVc 25573, bird of prey IVc 25572, *urubu* IVc 25577 two-headed *urubu* IVc 25571

In his works, the artist Abel Rodríguez advocates for the indigenous worlds of the Amazon rainforest, calling to mind the close relationships people have with the forest and its different inhabitants. He grew up on the Cahuinari River among the Nonuya and Muinane people, who like to call themselves the ‘people of the centre’. His uncle told him stories about the creation of the world and introduced him to the lore of healing and plants. Through his drawings and stories, he is passing on the knowledge of his ancestors concerning the rainforest and coexistence in the Amazon. The violent conflicts in the 1990s forced him and his family to flee to Bogotá.

29 *Territorio centro indígena*, drawing | Abel Rodríguez | Colombia | 2021 | ink, paper | purchased with means of the Georges and Mirjam Kinzel-Fonds, 2021 | IVc 27612

30 *Territorio indígena la sábana*, drawing | Abel Rodríguez | Colombia | 2021 | ink, paper | purchased with means of the Georges and Mirjam Kinzel-Fonds, 2021 | IVc 27613

Many Otomí live on subsistence farming; they plant maize, beans, pumpkins, tomatoes, chilies, and fruits. The agricultural cycle is accompanied by rituals. For ceremonies in which healers pray for rain and fertility, they create paper cut-outs representing different spirit beings which are often referred to as ‘seeds’. These cut-outs embody and convey *zaki*, life force. When the cut-outs are unfolded, their life force is activated and released, and becomes manifest in growth and fertility.

31 *antigua frijol rojo*, being of the red bean, *antigua chile verde*, being of the green chili, *antigua mazorea morada*, being of the blue maize | Sierra de Puebla, central Mexico | before 1965 | tissue paper, cut-out | Kay C. Hansen, purchased in 1965 | IVb 3257, IVb 3260, IVb 3261

32 *antigua jitomate*, being of the tomato, *antigua chile colorado*, being of the red chili, *antigua mazorea blanca*, being of the blue maize | before 1973 | San Pablito, Mexico | tissue paper, cut-out | Ferdinand C. Anders, gifted in 1973 | IVb 4564, IVb 4567, IVb 4568

Rice cultivation informs the way of life among the Warli communities in western India. Many daily and seasonal activities in the villages are accompanied by rituals and feasts. These help to strengthen village unity and the connection to the deities, support the growth of plants and ensure a plentiful harvest. In earlier days, Warli paintings were realised with rice-based pigment and usually decorated house walls, but today they are also produced on paper primed with cow dung using acrylic paint. Jivya Soma Mashe was one of the most renowned artists of contemporary Warli painting.

“There are humans, birds, animals, insects etc. Day and night there is movement. Life is movement.” Jivya Soma Mashe, 2012

33 Warli painting, growing and harvesting rice | Jivya Soma Mashe (1934–2018) | Dhahanu, Maharashtra, India | around 1980 | paper, acrylic paint | Gallery Chemould, purchased in 1993 | IIa 10935

34 Warli painting, community work and rituals for rice farming | unsigned, possibly co-workers of Jivya Soma Mashe | Dhahanu, Maharashtra, India | around 1980 | paper, acrylic paint | Gallery Chemould, purchased in 1993 | Ila 10939

Other presences

Spirit beings inhabit the border regions between the known and the unknown but participate in the life of humans. Occasionally they emerge from their sub- or supra-terrestrial spheres to convey messages or else to disturb the human order. Encounters and episodes with spirit beings are told in stories and constitute sources of inspiration for artists.

The worlds of the Yolngu and Kuninjku in northern Australia was formed by creator beings. They not only left their traces in the landscape, they also established lasting kin relations between land, animals, plants, spirit beings, ancestors and humans.

“The human person is not absolute master of the universe, but an important component in an interdependent world of the person with the animal, the plant and the spiritual.” Bernard Narokobi, 1980

The spirit beings represented on bark paintings are distinguished from humans and animals on account of their physical attributes. Mimi are human-like beings with extremely thin and long-stretched bodies. They live in the cracks of steep rock faces and slopes where they have their own sun, rivers, and trees. They are shown hunting, engaging in fights, or performing ceremonies. Mimi are shy and usually benign but if startled, they are liable to punish people with sickness.

35 Three Mimi, bark painting | Billy Yirawala | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1963 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, exchange in 1966 | Va 1335

36 Two Mimi women with kangaroo, bark painting | Billy Yirawala | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1191

37 Mimi, bark painting | Billy Yirawala | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1190

38 Two female and two male Mimi, bark painting | Nangunyari-Namiridali | Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1194

39 Mimi, tortoise and crocodile, bark painting | Nangunyari-Namiridali | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1963 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, exchange in 1966 | Va 1337

40 Mimi and crocodile, bark painting | Nangunyari-Namiridali | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1963 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, exchange in 1966 | Va 1336

41 Mimi hunt freshwater crocodile, bark painting | Nangunyari-Namiridali | Croker Island, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1193

Namarrkon, the Lightning Spirit, ascends to the sky and takes a seat on a storm cloud when the monsoon sets in in northern Australia. There, he produces the sound of thunder and sends bolts of lightning across the sky. But it is the Rainbow Serpent that brings on the rain. From high up in the clouds, Namarrkon observes the people. Are they following the ancestral Law? If something displeases him, he hurls down one of the stone axes attached to his head, knees and elbows. If it misses its target and hits a nearby tree, the splintered tree will remind

the people to observe the Law. In pictures, Namarrkon is usually shown with lines around his body; they represent the lightning's electric charge which lends him such great power.

- 42 Namarrkon, Lightning Spirit, bark painting | Jimmy Midjawmidjaw | Oenpelli, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1186
43 Namarrkon, Lightning Spirit, bark painting | Wumara | Oenpelli, Oenpelli, Northern Arnhem Land, Australia | 1960 | eucalyptus bark, colour | Collection Karel Kupka, purchased in 1962 | Va 1176

This bark painting not only visualizes the presence of the water spirit Yawkyawk in the landscape, it also lends expression to her power and energy. Every year, the Kuninjku perform ceremonies to ensure that the Rainbow Serpent sustains the annual cycle of seasons. Its role as provider of life is reflected in its association with water. The works of John Mawurndjula tell of the people's ties to the land, how they lead their lives according to the Law of the ancestors, and how the Law is kept alive today.

“I paint the Dreaming stories and places which were instituted by the first ancestors, the sacred sites ... These are the stories my father explained to me and I put them into my head.”
John Mawurndjula, 2005

- 44 *mardayin*, bark painting | John Mawurndjula | Maningrida, Western Arnhem Land, Australia | 2004 | eucalyptus bark, earth pigments | Maningrida Arts and Culture, purchased in 2004 | Va 1428
45 Yawkyawk, bark painting | John Mawurndjula | Milmilngkan, Arnhem Land, Australia | 2005 | eucalyptus bark, earth pigments | Maningrida Arts and Culture, purchased in 2005 | Va 1429

The work of John Mawurndjula is closely linked to the land and the beings who inhabit it. Many times, he visits rock paintings and sacred places. He states: “I come here quite often... and dream of the souls of my ancestors... who tell me stories... they share with me thoughts and motives for my *rarrk*-paintings.”

- 46 *rarrk* | Direction: Ivo Kummer & Bernhard Lüthi | 2005 | Switzerland | Installation | Insertfilm AG | courtesy of Pedro Haldemann, 15 min

Timothy Akis' imagination and artistic expression feed on the stories of his community. He was renowned for his prints that feature forest spirits, animals such as lizards, cassowaries, wallabies and humans dancing together. The narrative titles of his works refer to the connectedness of different beings as witnessed in their encounters.

Prints | Timothy Akis (ca 1944–1984) | Waigani, Papua New Guinea | before 1975 | paper, colour | Center for Creative Arts, purchased in 1974/75

- 47 *magani litimapin wanpela man*, Wallaby, leave the man alone | Vb 27635
48 *Man and dog* | Timothy Akis | Waigani, Papua New Guinea | before 1973 | paper, colour | Meinhard and Gisela Schuster, gifted in 2020 | Vb 32150.01
49 *em i tingting bilong mi tasol*, That's all my thoughts | Vb 27645
50 *man i bilas, na dok na devel tupela i paitim em*, A man dresses up and is beaten by a dog and a spirit | Vb 27617
51 *man i mekim amamas antap long magani*, Man dancing for joy on a wallaby | Vb 27634
52 *tupela man holim han na pilai antap long wanpela muruk*, Two men holding hands and playing on the back of a cassowary | Vb 27642
53 *man i rausim klia magani na palai*, Man chucks out a wallaby and a lizard | Vb 27637
54 *man na palai*, Man and lizard | Vb 27626

According to Hindu-Balinese understanding, the world is structured into three spheres, one above the other. Volcanoes and high mountains represent the seat of the gods – and, at the same time, are gods themselves. The island's highest mountain, Gunung Agung, a still active

volcano, is the seat of the divine ancestors and of the god Shiva. Humans inhabit the middle world, lent to them for a time by the gods and the ancestors. Their terraced rice fields are referred to as ladders to the heavens. Upon invitation of the humans, the gods descend to the middle world for a few days each year, when they reside as guests in the temples. Demonic spirits and diseases dwell underground and at sea.

55 *odalan*-festival in the Pura Taman Ayun temple in Mengwi and rituals in the rice paddies | Peter Horner and Urs Ramseyer | Bali, Indonesia | 1970s and 80s | Slide reproductions | MKB A_96, MKB A_117, MKB A_242, MKB C_26, MKB C_79, MKB C_177, MKB C_522, MKB D_63, MKB E_1012, MKB E_1018, MKB E_1047, MKB E_1057, MKB E_1189, MKB E_1286, MKB E_1296, MKB E_1310, MKB E_1303, MKB E_1306, MKB E_1315, MKB E_1317, MKB E_1364, MKB F_304_1, MKB F_347, MKB P_111

Earth beings

Mountains, rocks, glaciers, rivers, lakes, oceans, and the weather are considered active beings in many parts of the world. They belong to the community of the living and, together with humans and other beings, shape the world.

Legal systems regulate the interests, ownership claims, and dominance of humans. They legitimize violations, acts of pollution, and overexploitation of soils and waters. Indigenous peoples and environmental movements are demanding new relationships with the earth. Among other things, they demand that rivers, lakes, and mountains be granted the status of legal persons. Thus, for instance, Mother Earth, the source of life, was included in the national constitution of Ecuador in 2008 and that of Bolivia in 2009. In 2017, the government of New Zealand, Aotearoa, granted the Whanganui River – for the Maori since ever a family member and ancestor – the status of a legal person with its own rights.

“We are owned by the river, we do not own the river, the river owns us.” Gerrard Albert, 2019

Mount Meru or Sumeru marks the centre of the world in Hinduism. It is surrounded by mountains, lakes, and continents arranged in a circle. In the middle of the mountain stands the palace where the god Indra resides. The picture is an educational chart and a topic of meditation at the same time, and expresses the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds.

56 World mountain Sumeru, thangka | Tibet | 1872 | linen, gouache, brocade | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, gift to FMB in 1998 | IId 13862

In Jainism, a religious community originating from India, all living beings seek liberation from the cycle of rebirth. All beings who possess one or more senses are considered alive: this includes not only animals and plants, but also earth, water, air, and rocks. The ethical principle of non-violence or non-harming, *ahimsa*, applies to all of them. Hence, Jains are

strict vegetarians and treat their co-world with greatest respect. Spiritual guides like the *tirthankara* (lit. ‘ford-makers’) remind their believers of these principles. These guides are generally represented naked since non-harming also implies the renouncement of all material possessions. The spiritual master Parshvanath is considered the proclaimer of the four basic rules that lead to liberation in Jainism: do not harm, do not lie, do not steal, and do not own anything unessential.

57 *tirthankara*, sculpture of a spiritual master of Jainism | Gersoppa, Karnataka, India | before 1850 | stone | Missionary inspector Joseph Friedrich Josenhans, gifted in 1854 | IIa 288

58 *tirthankara* Parshvanath, a spiritual master of Jainism | Gujarat, India | 17th/18th c. | bronze | Jean Eggmann, gifted in 2003 | IIa 11304

Snake stones, *nagakal*, often make up part of outdoor shrines in many regions in South Asia. They are placed at the foot of trees to protect the fields and grant fertility. Occasionally, uninhabited termite mounds are transformed into places of serpent worship. Sacrifices and milk are offered to the snakes dwelling there. *Nagaraja*, mythical serpent-kings, are particularly revered. They are the guardians of underground riches, which they bestow on those who grant them protection.

59 *nagakal*, snake stone | India | before 1971 | stone, colour | Collection Basel Mission, permanent loan 1981, gifted in 2015 | IIa 9214

60 *nagakal*, snake stone | India | undated | stone, colour | Collection Basel Mission, permanent loan 1981, gifted in 2015 | IIa 9839

The popular shepherd-god Krishna is the eighth incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. With his flute he is able to enchant humans and animals alike and show his affection for all living beings. As a child, he subdued the serpent Kaliya who was contaminating the waters of the river Yamuna. Instead of killing him, Krishna ordered him to go and live in the sea so that humans and animals could bathe again in the river.

61 *nagakal*, snake stone with dancing Krishna | Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India | before 1920 | granite | Fritz Sarasin, gifted in 1925 | IIa 549

In the Andes, the earth is known as the nurturing mother, Pachamama. Humans are obliged to show her respect, make offerings, and care for her. In return, she gifts them with crops, herds of llama, health and fertility. Neglect or lack of respect tend to provoke Pachamama’s wrath. If she is injured, she answers in the form of drought, frost, storms, avalanches, even earthquakes.

The very few figurative representations of her include small pouches in the shape of a woman with children, commonly known as Pachamama bags. They are used for keeping money, offerings, and amulets, the idea being that keeping them in the ‘fertile lap’ of the mother goddess promises prosperity.

“We people of the Andes never understand ourselves as beings detached from Mother Earth; nor do we perceive the earth as an inert, lifeless planet ... We are the sons and daughters of Pachamama, Mother Earth, which is why we live together in harmony and great respect. Our forebears told us that the earth thinks, speaks, feels, and loves like a mother does her children.” Leonidas Mamani, 2019

62 Pachamama bag | Ayata, Bolivia | 20th c. | wool | Thomas Meyer, purchased in 2003 | VI 43351

People try to appease Pachamama with pacifying and conciliatory rituals. Depending on the region and type of ritual, they make offerings of food, tobacco, coca leaves, flowers, and

animals, at home or on mountain peaks, at rivers or near springs, by dancing and singing. At sacred sites, offerings are placed on blankets spread on the ground, in Mother Earth's lap, so to speak. The first sip of any libation is sprinkled on the ground because she, too, is 'thirsty'. In addition, people serve Pachamama lama fat and alcoholic drinks in ceramic vessels.

- 63 Coca leaves | Chia, Peru | before 1973 | coca | Jean Louis Christinat, purchased in 1973 | IVc 15973
64 *cocha para chicha*, sacrificial vessel for chicha | Uru-Chipaya | Chipaya, Oruro, Bolivia | around 1980 |
fired clay, wool | Collection Valentin Jaquet, gifted in 2012 | BO 1337B
65 Sacrificial vessels in the shape of llama | Peru | around 1979 | fired clay | Collection Valentin Jaquet,
gifted in 2012 | PE 330, PE 331
66 Sacrificial vessels in the shape of llama | Peru | around 1979-80, 1999 | fired clay | Collection Valentin
Jaquet, gifted in 2012 | PE 333, PE 511, PE 920, PE 929B

On the African continent as well as in the African diasporas in Brazil and the Caribbean, Mami Wata is considered the embodiment of water. She is revered but also feared. Like water, Mami Wata is a source of fertility and vital force, wealth and happiness but, at the same time, she can bring on unpredictable and devastating floods. Mami Wata and other water spirits dwell in coral reefs, springs, rivers and lakes. They are the guardians of the waters and watch over the handling and distribution of common goods, such as water and land, fish and harvest.

- 67 Mami Wata, glass painting | Bamako, Mali | before 1979 | glass, cardboard, wrapping paper, colour |
Bernhard Gardi, purchased in 1980 | III 22019
68 Mami Wata, glass painting | Bamako, Mali | before 1987 | glass, colour | Bernhard Gardi, purchased in
1987 | III 24660

Human-like beings called *boson* inhabit mountain tops, rivers, waterholes, and trees. On altars devoted to them, ritual specialists place powerful sculptures and things. To the beat of drums and accompanied by singing they establish contact with the *boson* in séances, where they ask them for health, fertility, and well-being.

- 69 *boson* altar | Anyi | Ivory Coast | 20th c. | wood, animal skin, textile, metal, glass, bast fibre, plastic |
Kunstpalaat Düsseldorf, gifted in 2012 | III 27716-III 27720

The artists of the Saint Soleil movement, among them Richard Antilhomme (1922-2002), were concerned with Voudou in their work. According to this highly complex philosophy and spiritual practice, the supreme god, Bondye, watches over the world with the aid of spirit beings called *lwa*. They interact with the animate and the inanimate, thus upholding the balance in the cosmos. Artists spoke of being 'mounted' by *lwa* while painting: in this altered state of consciousness, they painted what the spirit beings told them.

"When I paint, I am guided by the brush ... the bird appears at night; he speaks to you and you understand what it is saying. In a similar way, all these spirit beings will join you. They will make sure that everything runs smoothly. You see, this spirit is there to protect your field and to make things grow. If it's not there, your seed might be stolen, eaten by animals, or simply remain infertile. It is this spirit being that renders your field fertile. Don't forget, you have to pay attention to what the animals tell you." Richard Antilhomme, 2018

- 70 'Spirit of the seed', painting | Richard Antilhomme | Haiti | 1990-1995 | oil on cardboard | Heinrich
Thommen & Marlyse Thommen-Strasser, gifted in 2019 | IVc 26986

The *lwa* of fire and ironwork, Ogoun, watches over all things metal. Ogoun comes from a dynasty of mighty Yoruba warrior spirits in West Africa. His dominant colour is red. He

stands for fire and its transformative as well as destructive powers. Here, he is shown in the company of his favourite animal, a dog.

The 'Spirit Macaya' makes reference to one of the most important feasts in Haitian Voudou. It is staged at the end of December and marks the triumph of light over darkness. The term *macaya* refers particularly to sacred leaves added to the ingredients for purification baths that are performed during the festival. In the purification ceremony, those who serve *lwa* spirit beings renew their energies, allowing them to begin the new year protected and purified.

71 'Spirit of fire', painting | Richard Antilhomme | Haiti | 1990–1995 | cardboard, oil colour | Collection Heinrich Thommen & Marlyse Thommen-Strasser, gifted in 2019 | IVc 26985

72 'Spirit Macaya', painting | Richard Antilhomme | Haiti | ca 1989–1991 | wood, oil colour | Collection Heinrich Thommen & Marlyse Thommen-Strasser, gifted in 2019 | IVc 26984

The high valleys of the Canton Valais are difficult to cultivate owing to the scarcity of water. The story goes that when God created the world, he asked the people of the Valais whether he should provide the irrigation or whether they preferred to do it themselves. The locals answered that they would see to it, at least the job would then be done properly.

To channel meltwater to the fields, long water conduits were built along the slopes with great effort. The *suone* Niwärc'h is mentioned for first time in a document of 1388; it still exists today along a stretch of just about three kilometres to Ausserberg. *Suone* are owned and maintained by commons; for a long time, water rights and communal tasks were recorded on tally sticks.

73 Section of the *suone* Niwärc'h | Ausserberg, Valais, Switzerland | before 1914 | wood | Friedrich Gottlieb Stebler, purchased in 1914 | VI 6137

74 Photo of the *suone* Niwärc'h (reproduction) | Baltschiederthal, Valais | around 1914 | b/w print on gelatine silver paper | Friedrich Gottlieb Stebler 1914 | Collection files MKB VI_0645

75 Water tally | Zeneggen, Valais, Switzerland | around 1841 | wood | Friedrich Gottlieb Stebler, purchased in 1923 | VI 9763

Ways of being together

What are the ideas and values that inform coexistence? Which beings do we recognize as co-habitants? To whom are we responsible? In many places, local and indigenous ethics have survived colonialism and forced assimilation. They highlight community and collective wellbeing. They promote values and practices that focus on care, not only with regard to humans but also towards other beings. The notion of non-violence and non-harm in South Asia, the Andean concept of 'good life', various forms of connectedness and complementarity, *ubuntu* in southern Africa, or communal models of living and economic activity like the idea of commons, encourage a reflection on alternative models of togetherness.

"I am because you are; you are because we are." From Southern Africa

"For us, the earth is the house where we live with other beings." From the Colombian Andes

"The world we want is a world where many worlds fit." Zapatistas, Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle

Game: Which way?

How do we relate to our co-world? What are the consequences of our actions? Our thoughts and actions shape the future. Your answers in the game show your general orientation and encourage discussions around ethical questions. So, which way do your decisions lead you?

Perspectives

What does it mean to live together with others in entangled worlds and precarious times? Humans play a vital role in the current killer story – the mass extinction of animals and plants and the destruction of the earth. Will we, too, be wiped out? Or can we still hope for survival, like the trees and fungi that survived nuclear catastrophies?

The “art of living on a damaged planet” is not about inventing new worlds, conquering space or escaping into a seemingly safe future. Rather, it is about acknowledging the reality of plural worldings. Openness and dialogue, narratives and fiction, science and the arts are ways of achieving this.

“The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” Haraway 2016

In *The End*, graphic novel author Zep explores an apocalyptic future scenario. Trees turn on humans, causing a wave of mass extinction. For Zep, humans are still on probation, so to say: as yet, the co-world has not decided on their fate on earth. With his story, he pleads for a future in which humans enter into a dialogue with the living and reconnect with their fellow beings.

“I observe that the ecological reflex still carries overtones of the feeling of human superiority. ‘We must protect nature’, we say, as if it were something weak, as if we humans were the planet’s custodians. Yet we are only the last ones to have arrived here, the ones with the least awareness for other species. For some time, the – revolutionary – idea has been growing that there is a form of intelligence within nature... I think we have to listen to this wisdom of nature to find our place within the score of the living.” Philippe Chappuis alias Zep, 2023

76 “The End”, reproduction from the graphic novel, pp. 6, 14, 24, 25, 48, 49, 66, 70, 71, 77, 89, 92 | Zep | Schreiber & Leser, Deutschland | 2020 | courtesy of Philippe Chappuis (alias Zep)

Apart from selling honey and wax, Slovenian peasants also traded in honey bees throughout the 18th and 19th centuries: the Carniolan bee *apis mellifera carnica* from Slovenia is still found across the world. The front of the hive boxes were decorated with religious and everyday motifs which also helped to identify the various apiaries.

77 Beehive panel with biblical motif | Slovenia | around 1830 | wood, colour | Robert Wildhaber, purchased in 1964 | VI 31110

78 Decorated beehive panels | Slovenia | probably 1st half of 20th c. | wood, colour | Gottlieb Hofer, purchased in 1971 | Peasant scene VI 39201, Motif from the genre ‘inverted world’ VI 39202, Games

played whilst harvesting flax VI 39203, Scene from a game of cards *kvartapirci* VI 39205, Stereotypical depiction of a Turkish man negotiating a marriage VI 39206

More than 70 per cent of the world's hundred most important cultivation plants are pollinated by bees. Without bees, we would be short of roughly 30 per cent of our food sources. Today, the world is facing an alarming decline in bee and insect populations. What would the loss of the bee power mean? With his camera, Markus Imhoof follows bees, the main protagonists in his documentary, and tells of the diverse relationships between humans and bees, reaching from a 'traditional' beekeeper in the Swiss mountains, to an industrial honey farmer on an almond plantation in California, to northern China where fruit trees have to be pollinated by the human hand.

"The relationship between humans and bees, which reaches back thousands of years, reveals to an increasing extent the conflict between human civilization and nature. It raises this very basic question: are humans part of nature? Or do we prefer to stand apart and subjugate nature? Couldn't there be a kind of fruitful symbiosis between all the actors involved, that is, the bees, the beekeepers, the plants, the farmers, the traders, and the eaters, in other words a kind of all-star jazz orchestra consisting of virtuoso soloists who all have an ear for each other and make music together? A kind of utopian swarm intelligence?" Imhoof & Lieckfeld, 2013

79 More Than Honey | Markus Imhoof | 2012 | Switzerland | excerpts from the documentary | © Thelma Film AG, Ormenis Film AG | with kind permission of Markus Imhoof, 11 min

Fungi not only embody connectedness and collaboration, they are also extremely resilient: the first being to rise from the ruins of Hiroshima after the atomic blast was a matsutake mushroom; after the Chernobyl disaster, a black fungus started to grow in the core of the reactor; and mould spreads in the ISS space station. As Marion Neumann shows in her film, the planetary crisis holds great opportunities for fungi. The documentary invites viewers to listen to them, delve into their realm, and radically change the world with them.

"Fungi challenge me to explore the unknown, to adapt, and to slow down, to find alternative pathways. Contemplating fungal consciousness, I try to celebrate a joyful relationship with the world. Whether it is the significance of a profound experience, growing healthy food, revitalizing parts of the land, or the emerging relations between people, the research on the abilities of fungi allows me to experience life's fertility on earth. Fungi have the astonishing capacity to change things very quickly. And so do we." Marion Neumann, 2023

80 'The Mushroom Speaks' | Marion Neumann | 2021 | Switzerland | excerpts from the documentary | Intermezzo Films | courtesy of Marion Neumann, 9 min

The distinction between 'natural' and 'cultural' things is not a given but a matter of ongoing constructions, as the continuous rearrangement and realignment of institutions, scientific fields and museum collections demonstrates. Things, however, defy this order; they point to the multiplicity and ambiguity of categorizations which is one of the reasons why we argue for fluid boundaries and transitions, for questioning established orders, and for exploring interlaced forms of knowledge production.

"The three great separations that have brought us to the verge of extinction as a species are the separation of humans from nature; the separation of humans from each other through divisions of class, religion, race and gender; and the separation of the Self from our integral, interconnected being." Vandana Shiva & Katikey Shiva, 2020

81 <Natural> things | Switzerland, Germany, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Serbia, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Estonia, | 1900-1980 | Minerals, parts of plants and animals | H. F. Feilberg, Hans in der Gand, Markus Giss, Julius August Konietzko, Leopold Rüttimeyer, Friedrich Gottlieb Stebler, Annemarie Weis | More information via QR-Code

Stories stimulate curiosity, openness, and sensitivity. They are also a strategy for coming to terms with crises. Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction inspired us. For her, mesh bags are of significance because they were the first recipients used by humans to collect, carry, and share vegetable food. Stories too are like spacious mesh bags in which people collect, store and pass on meaningful and important things – such as the stories of the webs of life in this exhibition.

82 Mesh bags | Northern Cameroon, South Sudan, Peru, Paraguay, Papua New Guinea | 1910–2017 | vegetable fibre | Gerhard Baer, Alfred Bühler, Adam David, René Gardi, Verena Regehr, Gisela and Meinhard Schuster | More information via QR-Code

Webs of life

Humans, just like other beings, are not islands. Life is interconnected and interdependent. We become and exist together. Humans and other beings form collectives and networks. Not only indigenous and local voices show that life is based on relationality, exchange, and cooperation. Recent research, too, demonstrates that life is a matter of symbiosis. Stories play a central role to shape coexistence: they braid, knot, and weave relationships. What kind of future do we wish to build?

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;
it matters what stories we tell other stories with;
it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties.

It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”

Donna Haraway, 2016, 12

The photographs document the disastrous consequences of logging and deforestation, of devastating wild fires and air pollution as well as the labour conditions on illegal oil palm plantations in Borneo. Not only in Borneo, but also in Papua New Guinea, the Congo and the Amazon region, the tropical rainforest with its diversity is threatened by large-scale deforestation for the sake of monocultures – soja, palm oil, or sugarcane.

“The sun had stopped shining on Borneo. The monsoon rains had evaporated before they reached the ground. The largest island in the archipelago lay wreathed in thick smoke. ... Under the blanket of smoke, the brown coal deposits were burning underground, setting fire to the roots of the last ironwood trees of the rain forest. The trees were still standing while their insides turned to carbon.” Daniel Schwartz, 2003

83 *Borneo. Destruction Business* | Daniel Schwartz | Borneo, Malaysia and Indonesia | 1998/99 | digital reproductions and pigment prints on Wallpaper Fine Art 180g of 12 vintage silver gelatine multiple exposure composite prints | Purchased with the support of the Werenfels-Fonds 2021 | (F)IIc 41142-(F)IIc 41153

Together with the Penan people, Bruno Manser was committed to the preservation of the rainforest in Borneo. He went missing in 2000; in 2005 he was officially declared dead. He lived six years among the Penan (1984–1990), during which he recorded what he had learnt and experienced in his diaries.

“In following these questions, you become aware of connections, you develop a consciousness for the fact that the Earth in all its manifestations functions like a giant, living organism in which everything is interconnected.” Bruno Manser, 1988

84 Pages from Bruno Manser’s diaries (1954–2000) | Sarawak and Kalimantan, Borneo, Malaysia |
1984–1989 | paper, ink, pencil, coloured pencil | Bruno Manser’s community of heirs, gifted in 2021
85 Photographs from the rainforest | Bruno Manser, John Kuenzli and anonymous | Sarawak and
Kalimantan, Borneo, Malaysia | 1996–2000 | Digital reproductions | courtesy of the Bruno Manser
Fonds

Baskets like these were used by the Penan for transporting household goods when shifting residence, which occurred quite often: roof and sleeping mats, cooking pots, fan and fire tongs, axes, arrow poison, water and food. Toddlers could also be carried in them. Bruno Manser documented the making of such baskets in great detail: he described the types of rattan used for the various parts of the basket, the dye procedure applied to the dark weave strips, and made drawings of the various weaving steps.

86 *kiwáh*, basket | Northern Borneo, Sarawak, Malaysia | 1980s/1990s Jahre | rattan, vegetable and
synthetic string, woven | community of heirs of Bruno Manser, gifted in 2022 | IIC 25612

Inspired by the drawings in Bruno Manser’s diaries, the Basel-based Institut für Textiles Forschen (Institute for Textile Research) designed and created a multiple-rooted giant tree. Its widely branching aerial and supporting roots encourage viewers to reflect and to join in braiding the tree, thus connecting with others and experiencing what it feels like to be part of the web of life. The tree provides an opportunity to relate and make kin.

“The organic structure that grows through knotting and weaving alludes to the interconnections and bonds between different beings. The knots express their multiple interdependencies and call to mind the fragility and sensitivity of their relationships.” Institut für Textiles Forschen, 2023

87 Giant tree, Institute of Textile Research | Basel | 2023 | hemp, colour, metal

Thank you for returning this handout!

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