

# YES NATURALLY. HOW ART SAVES THE WORLD INE GEVERS

What is nature? And who or *what* has a say in this? Are human beings the only ones who decide, or do plants, animals, bacteria, atmospheres, things and computers play a role as well? *Yes Naturally* puts anthropocentrism – centralizing the human position above all or interpreting reality exclusively in terms of human standards – in perspective. Is our arrogant placing of ourselves above all other agents in the world really justified? Is the DNA of a multicellular organism such as ourselves really so different from that of a virus? Our digestive tract looks remarkably like that of a sea squirt, which belongs to the most primitive of tunicates that have been around for more than 500 million years. And we have more in common with plants than we may on the surface suspect. Mitochondria are the energy producers of plants *and* animals: they are offspring of bacteria that lived in intracellular symbiosis with their hosts in an early evolutionary stage. Interconnectedness and interdependence are in fact the measure of all things.

We seem to forget that we are indebted in every respect to an ecosystem in which we are just one of the many links. Our forgetfulness leads to indifference. We have reduced nature to an object to which we have no connection whatsoever, and which we use, abuse and destroy to our heart's content. Without a clue as to where to begin, the best we seem able to come up with is the promotion of 'green' gadgets. We have become eco-illiterates. The first step towards ecological intelligence is to recognize that we are part of both a beautiful and monstrous environment. Maintaining the illusion of being outside of the world of matter will mean the end of us. Accepting that viruses, bacteria and many other slimy

and wretched 'things' take part in setting our course makes for a better alternative. A more inclusive view of life, in which all of life's agents participate, teaches us to give back, and not just to take.

Tim Flannery, zoologist and environmental expert, maintains in his book *Here on Earth* (2010) that Earth is under serious threat.<sup>1</sup> He also concludes that it's not too late. Most sustainability advisors continue to work from a dualistic perspective as they advocate for the economical use of energy resources, question the implementation of monocultures and opaque chains of production, or weigh up the pros and cons of genetically manipulated food. Meanwhile, Flannery chooses for a route that is different in principle. Flannery sees our planet as a web of interdependent ecosystems. Not only at the macro level, including the atmosphere, oceans and Earth's crust (Earth's 'organs' so to speak), but also on a micro level. He describes how plankton and bacteria contribute to the formation of clouds by acting as nuclei for water droplets; how micorrhizal fungi team up with plants that grow in poor soils, and together, even where soils are appallingly infertile, can symbiotically create spectacular biodiversity; how chemical signals called pheromones allow ant colonies to behave in 'intelligent' ways, becoming super organisms that are made up of living and nonliving matter; how *mnenes* – complexes of ideas – have enabled humans to domesticate themselves and build a commonality despite differences, providing the foundation for our universal human civilization. Flannery's message is that co-evolution and the formation of biocultural partnerships are essential to a fertile living planet. Where people have ruptured these relationships, we need to build bridges so that Earth can become healthy and self-regulating. *Yes Naturally* is a start.

## How Do We Become Ecologically Intelligent?

*Yes Naturally* is an international visual arts campaign that aims to contribute to the current discourse on the condition of the world by proposing a radical shift in how we perceive our environment and ourselves. More than 70 international artists present refreshing and provocative proposals for an alternative worldview. With humour, self-irony and above all by going off the beaten path, the artists search for connections with the world in which they live. *Yes Naturally* challenges our romantic understanding of 'nature', which often leads to the domination of nature, but also allows for an affirmative approach, as suggested in the title. We have to converse with nature. *Yes Naturally* pushes esthetical boundaries and scientific objectifications of the concept of 'nature' that (un)consciously inform our behaviour. By exposing how all systems are kept in motion via a process of continuous feedback, an attempt is made to undermine every fixed state of 'being'. There is no static point from which we can uninterruptedly view the

world. The complex whole of networks and movements of which we all are a part is best summarized as a hybrid merging of 'naturecultures', populated by many dissimilar kinds of agents.<sup>2</sup> A visit to the exhibition or a reading of contributions in this publication invites us to reread the title *Yes Naturally* in an unexpected, fresh light. The world appears to be a lot less 'natural' than we thought.

*Yes Naturally* joins in with artists such as Jimmie Durham, Tue Greenfort, Natalie Jeremijenko, Zeger Reyers and Otobong Nkanga to take a less anthropocentric position and open ourselves to the radical other. Inquiry into the limits of our perception and empathy has as its aim to allow other species and things to draw closer to us. Closer than we usually allow or can perhaps bear. It is in the margins – there where the lines of demarcation are not always clear – that our dependence on other species, and also our reciprocity and possibilities for partnership, become visible. In these contact zones *Yes Naturally* proposes answers to the question of how we can respond to the precarious situations into which we have manoeuvred ourselves and the world.

*Yes Naturally* gives a voice to divergent opinions and disciplines. From 'new' materialism(s) or 'politics of things' – in which objects also have agency – to the dark side of ecology, from geo-engineering to synthetic biology and from the autonomous visual arts to co-creation. Seduction and wonder turn into encouragement to take action. The works of art in *Yes Naturally*, from classics to new works commissioned for the exhibition, form a compass that points in different directions. Artists explore in-between zones in which words do not (yet) exist, but where reality is in full play. They help us to shift perspective, to change the lens through which we view our world and encourage us to step out and relate to the unknown. Such encounters infect, manipulate and transform our perceptions and push at the foundation of our existence.

The *Yes Naturally* exhibition and publication are arranged loosely around three narrative ways of ordering: 'Reinventing Eden', 'Welcome to the World' and 'Co-Evolution and Partnership.' This thematic approach is not meant to make stories univocal or linear. Positions can be strengthened as well as undermined by other arguments. In the book nine cutting-edge authors set out their visions, each in their specific area of expertise. These sometimes confrontational and far-reaching contributions are alternated with thematic essays featuring artists and their work. The diversity of work thus described reveals new layers of meaning in changing contexts. The result is a book that can be read on multiple levels. The keynote articles weave a common thread that is both disrupted and affirmed by the thematic essays. Lastly, various writers and scholars have written 'tweets' of up to 140 characters in which they describe the world from a – for

human beings – 'unusual' perspective: that of an ant, an 'embedded' bacterium, vacuum cleaner, houseplant, rat or fruit fly. These attempts to step into the shoes of a nonhuman species, so to speak, and for a brief moment be freed of the always present blind spot, are part of the social media project *Fora & Fauna* by artists Sjaak Langenberg and Rosé de Beer. At the invitation of biologist and author Tijs Goldschmidt, *Fora & Fauna* was officially launched on 6 November 2012 at the Artis Zoo in Amsterdam. These observations have made their way onto various pages of this book, showing how by 'crawling into the skin' of non-human subjects we can become better, more inclusive world citizens.

## Reinventing Eden

*Yes Naturally* considers 'nature' to belong to the largest 'known unknowns' of our time.<sup>3</sup> As the myth of all myths, 'nature' comes under fire in both the exhibition and publication. One of the most daring deconstructions of the 'Nature Myth' has been made by Timothy Morton. In his book *Ecology without Nature* (2007) he argues that romantic notions of nature form the greatest obstacle to developing ecological awareness and eco-literacy.<sup>4</sup> Good intentions coming from an unworkable mental framework only deepen the divide between humans and their environment. Morton encourages us to let go of our ideas of and about 'nature' because they keep returning in an ever-new aesthetic suit that merely reproduces the existing distance. Morton links this manner of objectifying and esthetical 'limiting' directly with capitalism and consumption. He elaborates on these ideas in his contribution to *Yes Naturally*, 'Ecology in the Shadow of Oedipus', in which he analyses the human intervention of agriculture. Morton draws an analogy to the story of Oedipus, the king who searches for the source of the disaster that plagues not only the people in the city of Thebes but also the environment itself. The conclusion that he himself is the culprit in this catastrophe is inevitable. Morton explains how the coincidence of the Anthropocene – as this era of human intervention is called<sup>5</sup> – and the millions of years spanning geological time, bears a fateful similarity to the moment in which Oedipus unwittingly murders his father and causes the miasma to descend upon his city.

From the high sierra of Northern coastal Colombia the Kogi Indians already warned their 'younger brothers' in the 1990s that a climate change was coming. They warned that greed and destructiveness were to have far-reaching consequences. The Kogi have been aware of the threat facing the planet for a long time, in any case many years before Western politicians were ready to believe their own scientists – at least those who did. This is the position taken by zoologist and cultural critic Jean Fisher in her article 'Thinking Otherwise'. Environmental experts go to great lengths to repair the damage of the human-caused ecological



SMACRIBEON@fora\_and\_fauna  
No more real flying: not necessary for our life.  
We just kinda freestyle over the ground from a  
bit of hotdog to a blob of mayo. #lowflyer

SPERMATOZOOM@fora\_and\_fauna  
3some possible even @ my level now. 1 of me, 2 of  
them: nucleus from 1 and rest of cell from other.  
2 women + 1 man. #porn #gentherapy



disaster. But their point of departure, an anthropocentric worldview, is grossly inadequate to the task. Fisher considers 'globalization' a Western concept, above all informed by economics, and urges that we replace it with the cosmological all-inclusive perspective of Native Americans. Their way of 'being in the world' adds a new dimension to the idea of a self-regulating Earth. For Native American cultures, language, knowledge, culture and nature are intermeshed. This very interrelationship offers insight into the interdependence between humans and ecosystems. Reevaluation of this repressed or 'lost' knowledge of the 'natural world' can revitalize organisms and ecosystems.

The concept of 'Urban Politics' is receiving growing attention, especially due to the dawning realization that in less than 50 years 80 per cent of all human beings will be living in cities. Various articles, including those by Henk Oosterling and John Thackara, explore this theme. Thackara offers a palette of inspiring examples and recent developments in cities around the world in his article 'The Ecozoic City'. A surplus of energy has blinded us to the limits of the earth's natural resources. Now that many resources are running out, we realize that the security of our lives in artificial units is relative. Real wealth is dependent on the health and self-regulating capacities of lands, forests, insects and fish hatcheries that support all other life – including ours. Biocities offer a potential response.

#### Welcome to the World

Environmental activist Vandana Shiva founded Navdanya in 1991, an Indian organization to stimulate traditional farming practices. The organization collects indigenous seeds and distributes them to local farmers. This is intended to protect biodiversity and help farmers remain independent of patented monocultures. Shiva presents the following paradox: the dominant myth and greatest illusion of our time is that we are no longer dependent on nature, that we have been liberated and are now free from it, while in fact the modern, industrial, globalizing and consuming human being is more dependent on nature than ever before. She calls this separation in our mind, combined with an intense dependence on natural resources, 'eco-apartheid'. We have to develop new paradigms in which people are understood to form part of a world community. In 'From Eco-Apartheid to Earth Democracy' Shiva presents concrete proposals to facilitate the development of living democracies. She considers them the necessary conditions for defending and deepening our fundamental freedoms.

Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling gives a compelling example of effective action. In his article 'Ecoliteracy in between Politics, Philosophy and Art' Oosterling explains how it is possible on a small scale to bend aesthetic and artistic awareness into an affirmative perspective that inspires and motivates residents, schools and policymakers to action. The practical expression of

philosophy and ecology, 'footprint' and 'foodprint', come together in Rotterdam Skillcity, a ten-year project in primary schools in economically less privileged neighbourhoods in South Rotterdam. Like Thackara, Oosterling sees the city as a laboratory, as an open source oriented, reflective and cyclical 'management' system. This system reintegrates energies – physical, social and mental – that have been decoupled in our fragmented economy by binding them with professional, artistic and ecological skills. Ideas of 'human resources management' and the concept of corporate social responsibility can thus be seen in a new light. In the operational implementation of Skillcity, Oosterling shows how a network of small-scale sustainability strategies can give meaning to the 'three P's' – people, planet, profit.

Biologist, philosopher and feminist Donna Haraway is highly acclaimed for her efforts to undo the dualism of nature and culture. Her elaborate concepts, 'companion species' and 'multispecies co-evolution', were given a human face during an interview by Rick Dolphijn at the international kick-off of *Yes Naturally* in Kassel, Germany (at documenta 13). Haraway explains in clear language how she experiences the world and why the hybrid term 'naturecultures' can help people reinvent themselves as world citizens. The title of the interview, 'Staying with the Trouble', is also her method: stay where there's movement, where we don't just stand by and keep distance. Remarkable similarities can be found between the insights shared by Haraway and the perspectives of Native American cultures, which Jean Fisher frees of the label 'animism' while placing them in the middle of contemporary discourse. Such associations are hopeful. The thought-provoking interview with Donna Haraway is also the introduction to the final theme of *Yes Naturally*.

#### Co-Evolution and Partnership

Tim Flannery envisions innovative technology facilitating new relationships with other living ecosystems. Imagine, for example, monitoring Earth with the aid of satellites; global forestry using aboriginal methods based on drawing CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and returning it in the form of carbon to the land. What we need, according to Flannery, is accurate, interactive and up-to-date maps of the Earth, instruments that allow us to influence the Earth's organs, unanimity of purpose informed by a profound scientific understanding and intelligent and responsive management tools.

Technologies capable of large-scale intervention also have their shadow side. The doom scenario that Morton sketches in his Oedipus analogy is one example: agriculture is both a blessing and a curse. Technology can generate insight into the high-tech quality of all that lives, but it can also narrow our view,

prompting a desire to control circumstances that we wish to change or that we would rather not see and deal with. Ethical discussions about geo-engineering and synthetic biology make it clear that it is paramount that we remain modest. If we cannot allow the ambiguous awareness of our interdependence and interrelationship with our environment to really get through to us, we will continue on the self-indulgent and destructive course that we are now following. We will just simmer along in our *comfort zone*.

No cause for alarm? In the not so distant future the scenario portrayed in 'Synthetic Nature' by philosopher and biotechnologist Luciana Parisi will be the equivalent of 'Ecology in the shadow of Oedipus'. Parisi shows how vibrant and relevant the concept of 'naturecultures' is and what its potential consequences could be. Synthetic biology allows us to see how bacterial nature affects culture. The so-called bacterial brain (a chemically assembled brain of bacterial data) turns out to be more than just a vehicle for giving form to nature. Bacteria *themselves* possess the capability of spontaneously regrouping themselves and could easily recombine information extracted from biotechnologically capitalized nature. Such an imaginable complement to evolution theory presents a new challenge to our habit of seeing 'nature' as a static, not self-evident 'ground' upon which to house human culture.

The concept of 'naturecultures' is also the point of departure for Ike Kamphof's essay 'Mediating Species Companionship' about the facilitating role of the webcam in forming friendships between humans and animals. New observation techniques (see the growing popularity of webcams) can make other, technologically mediated ways of living together possible. Webcam projects, such as AfriCam.com or the WWF, enable us to simultaneously visualize humans and animals together, as if we were drinking 'tea with a giraffe', to quote Kamphof. However, the (invisible) power relations behind these friendships remain asymmetrical. Companionship requires more and the webcams still reflect too strongly the objectifying view of humans. Current technology is still far from being sufficiently equipped to engender the symmetry that friendships and relationships usually have. Animals must be experienced as living creatures with their own lives and relationships in a shared environment. We still have a long way to go.

Evoking Donna Haraway's motto of 'staying with the trouble', acclaimed anthropologist Tim Ingold concludes his article with the proclamation: 'Here's to the proliferation of loose ends!'. Ingold's rich thought was important for the conceptual stages of *Yes Naturally*. In 'The Art of Inquiry' he warns against a world informed exclusively by 'knowledge about' things, as opposed to 'knowing' based on 'corresponding to', or 'resonating'. Artists take the lead: they make attempts to come closer

to their objects of inquiry and in doing so leave their safe havens of identity and control. It seems that the more we know, the less able we are to observe what is really going on in our environment. To revitalize our senses, to allow knowledge to grow from the inside out and experience how life unfolds, we need art. Art won't save the world, but art does offer a reliable compass for striking out in the new directions of our collective journeys.

1 Tim Flannery, *Here on Earth: A New Beginning* (London [etc.]: Penguin Books, 2010).

2 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

3 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009).

4 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 126.  
5 Paul Crutzen, 'The Anthropocene', *Journal de Physique*, vol. 12 (2002) no. 10, 1-5.

