# C1: Presentation II

20200528184324

#colloquium-i #animistic-design

[Slide with own quote]

How we treat our things, we treat our fellow human beings, we treat our environment. These acts, this habitus, can be found again in our language, our thinking, our ideas. All these things are interlinked and interwoven.

Hello everybody and thank you very much for being present at my short presentation on my research project. In the provided paper i focused mainly on the construction and justification of the the research question as well as the relevance. In this presentation I’ll go into the details of three areas I could only briefly touch so far: Animism, narratives and the research setup.

I want to start where the paper ended. Let me give you some context.

[Slide with Aibo image from presentation]

In the Shinto-Buddhistic beliefs of Japan, everything has soul or spirit. These are not uniquely human, but to be human can be one of the stations on the soul’s path. Like this, the concept of soul can act as a unifier along difference. As you can see, these Aibo robots also have soul and they are treated accordingly. The support and maintenance of Aibo bots was stopped in 2014, which left many of the owners desperate. They did not only find entertainment in these gadgets, but companions. As a response to the pressure of the owners of these bots, Sony came up with a workaround. What you see in this picture is a funeral-service hold for Aibos at Kofukuji, an old temple near Tokyo. Sony, the temple and a company called *A Fun* work together in a recycling scheme. Completely defunct Aibos are given their final blessing and then become cannibalised for parts to repair less seriously damaged models.

This is a story about animism, but it is not our story.

[Slide Image Descartes/Livestock]

Where im from, we also have a concept of soul, which became superseded by rationality and humanistic values during the enlightenment. But it seems like, that our concept of soul is much more about a differentiation from the rest of the world then a connection. Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy had an opinion about animals. He denied them reason, intelligence, let alone a soul. As such, he said, they are like machines and feel neither pain nor anxiety. I’m speculating here, but there might be some connection to this view on animals and the ethics of industrial livestock farming.

This is not a story about animism, but it is our story.

We tend to discredit stories, or narratives, as fiction but then again, they accompany us since childhood and are the driving power behind advertisement, on of the strongest industries as of today.

[Slide with quote]

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; **it matters what stories we tell to 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 J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble

This is probably one of the more often quoted pieces of Donna Haraway’s latest book, Staying with the Trouble. She wants to point out, how important a reflection on the assumed basics are and how we’re embodying them ourselves. It’s a poetic rendition of what Anne-Marie Willis writes about in her work on ontological design.

[Slide with quote]

“If we pervade buildings, they also pervade us — entrances, corridors, stairs, lifts, large rooms, small rooms — all design our modes of spatial occupation and our movements through spaces, allowing some, not allowing others. **While we as humans design buildings, they also design us.**” - Anne-Marie Willis, Ontological Designing

It matters what designs design designs. Narratives are designs for the ontological. Narratives shape our Being-in-the-world, as much as a door in a room, just not on a physical plane, but how we understand the world and how we behave towards it.

[Slide: Animism]

Let us have a look at the project-specific application of the term animism before I go deeper into the proposed research approach.

Being me, a privileged white person, and speaking of animism is not without problems. Animism is an anthropological term, coined in colonial times by a christian-raised man. And that’s what it is. When I speak about animism I can only speak about an anthropological categorization, and never about indigenous communities and peoples specific animistic practices of world-making and beliefs.

The research project is based on the assumption that animism is not only culturally conditioned, but is a basic constant of human existence. However, the majority of Western cultures have lost an animistic practice. An appropriation of animistic narratives, and thus identity and faith culture, of indigenous communities is not only ethically wrong, but also counter-productive. An animism is embedded and interwoven in a multitude of practices and specific epistemologies. It is therefore necessary to develop animistic narratives that can take root here *in the West*.

[Slide: Shintoism]

That said, there is one specific animism, which served as inspiration for this projects approach.

Shintoism is one of Japan’s official religion and is categorized as animism. Basically, in it all kind of things can have a spirit residing in them; From rivers, mountains and the sun to foxes, trees and also all kind of human made objects. What is interesting is, that Shintoism is a decentralised and highly hyperlocalised belief- and practice-system. Every community has their own spirits to interact with and do so in ways appropriate to the local environment. It is said that there are 8 million different spirits, which in Shintoism is synonymous with infinite. An animism is seemingly messy because it gives agency to the other whereas western epistemologies usually search for order in hierarchies.

[Slide with image of lantern tsukumogami]

The relationship the japanese people have with their things goes a long way. There is a category of spirits called the tsukumogami, that is objects that aquired spirit. The word is generally understood as an object that has reached it’s 100th birthday. I’d say we know similar stories of old things, that are haunted, in good and in bad ways. It shows how heirloom object can be loaded up through history and find poetic expression in animism.

[Slide with Image Hari-Kuyo]

Another beautiful example and related to the Aibo case is Hari-Kuyō, the shintoistic festival for the broken needles. You’ve seen this image in the paper. As all things can have spirit in Shintoism, so do needles. If a needle is broken or becomes unusable, one has to tend to that spirit attached. If not properly respected, that spirit can start to haunt the owner. So these needles are brought to a temple and honored for their work. Further, the needles collected in this manner are then recyled by the temple, melted and used as raw material for new things.

The adaptability of Shintoism, it’s nonrigid structures and it’s hyperlocal practices let it transition into the industrial Japan and by today, finds it’s applications in modern technology. A kind of Shintoistic Techno-Animism. That’s what I wanted to point out with the Aibo robots example. There is a connection, between these narratives around the spirits and the practices of recycling and this connection has made it into these, modern times. Techno-animism is of interest to the project because it can serve as an example of possibility.

There are three core aspects of animism that are of importance here.

[Slide with circle Graphic]

1. Animism as relational epistemology

This aspect is taken up from recent movements in philosophy and anthropology. It is the theoretical base-layer that aides and guides this project. It is maybe also the most difficult part to explain. The connection between animism and a relational epistemology is made already in Nurit Bird-David’s paper “Animism revisited” which was published 1999.

[Slide with quote]

“**This epistemology is about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses**, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. The knowing grows from and is the knower’s skills of maintaining relatedness with the known.” - Nurit Bird-David, Animism Revisited

This is in stark contrast to our specific way of knowing the world, including ourselves, where the focus is on how something is constituted or how can I use something - where we quickly have a dichotomy between subject and object.

In western thought we have this idea that to be human is to be a body and a mind and in many cases also a soul and that this configuration is only possible in humans. In animist thought subjectivity, the experience of I, arises out of social ties to other people. In this web of relationships plants and animals as well as inanimate matter and objects can be people as well and as such be open for social relations. It helps to imagine an object like a pet, in which we can find a companion, but whose language we can’t understand.

[Slide with circle graphic again]

1. The Aesthetics of animism

The aesthetics of animism are like the affordances of narratives, or the packaging of the animistic narratives. While the core point, relational epistemology, is share by many animisms, the aesthetics can differ quite a lot.

The aesthetics can be the choice of tone in language, the form given to an object, or the selection of patterns that create relatability or what shape a spirit has taken. Aesthetics from aisthesis, perception, is the form via which the people can engage with the narrative. This relates to the adaptability of animism as mentioned above, in the quote on the 8 million spirits in shintoism. Animism is about making a relation fitting the local context. As animism is always making embodied, local connections, it is important to develop a framework for narratives of generating aesthetics that fit a local context.

This aspect of animism is where design practice and design research come in. The creation of affordances on all planes of experience is where design is strong, be it visual, as written story or a physical object.

1. The entangled practices

Narratives are not just oral stories to be told. narratives are also embodied and material practices. Sometimes they come out of stories, and sometimes the stories come out of them. Rituals come to mind, but even oral storytelling practice is embodied in a shared, secure and trusting space. An animistic narrative can’t be simply written on a paper and read to a participant and it works. It needs to be physical embodied into practices, rituals, repetitions, places and shared with people.

These three core aspects make up the narratives that this projects wants to develop, whereas the first aspect is more or less a given. Animism lends itself to design through it’s poetic powers and the ability to evoke emotion.

I want to start with a small example to link this analysis with the proposed research process.

[Slide]

Many of us speak with plants, me included. Many of us also heard about the research done into the benefits of speaking with plants. And probably everybody who heard about that research never cared to actually read it. It is hard to say what came first, the practice of speaking with plants or the reasearch into the benefits, but i doubt that it’s the later. This practice is also often embedded into the weekly routine of watering the plants where we have the embodied practices.

The research process is parted into three phases.

[Slide with 3-phase process]

* Inputs → Weak Signals

In the given example, speaking with plants would be a weak signal. Weak signals are something that are already present, hiding amid the noise of daily life. I’m interested in weak signals that can be amplified into animistic narratives. These can be found in the daily routines and stories already present.

The discovery of these rely on classic ethnographic research: observation, interviews as well as the attempt to extrapolate from good parts of technology through appreciative inquiry.

The collected weak signals are categorized and will be made ready for the second phase.

* Design → Fictions, Fabulations, Futures

Relating to the example, this is the circulating story about the research into the benefits. This phase is about the development or design of narratives. As mentioned above, this will include ephemeral as well as physical components. I want to organize two different workshop formats, in which designers as well as users take part.

The Make Tools workshop will concentrate on the physical aspects and the Design Fiction on the part that can be written down as a story. Both formats will draw heavily on methods used in speculative design, but without a speculative work as it’s main output. Needless to say that the two formats will have to work together so that the results of the one inspire the process of the other.

* Testing → Cultural Probe

The last and most important phase is also the phase I’m most unsure about, and as such would love to have some feedback from you later on. Basically I’m interested in the change of worldview as well as behavior that can be triggered through this narratives.

I planned to do A-B-A and longitude tests. In these a baseline is established in a first interview or observation of a person. The narratives are then given as cultural probes to the volunteers. In A-B-A there is testing during the engagement with the cultural probe as well as when the probe isn’t present anymore, to see a deviation to the baseline. In longitude tests, the same variables are observed over a period of time. It’s more difficult to get a whole picture with this method, but good to observe details.

[Same Slide with 3-phase process but with descriptions added]

I want to give a short fictional example to illustrate the process.

Weak Signal: A participants is observed to wipe down the smartphone with a wet wipe upon arrival at home. Later questioned, the person explains the practice with a removal from the microbes and how beautiful shiny the smartphone is after.

Design: The participatory workshops comes up with a package, consisting of a small pedestal for the smartphone that also add a nice light, as well as a short story centering on the positive feelings a smartphone has after being cleaned.

Testing: A volunteer is given the package as cultural probe, with a set of tasks and a diary for self-observation. The volunteer will do an A-B-A testing to see if the baseline behaviour changed after the cultural probe package is given back. All overall a slightly reduced screen time at home is measured. especially during the B-Phase, but no substanial change in buying behavior is found in a longitude test.

I hope this example could illustrate the proposed research-process a bit. The projects attempts to find narratives for already existing technological products and processes that influence our everyday life, like smartphones or social media feeds. In this, it does not seek to propose a best outcome in results. For example, it does not propose an optimal screentime, as such a variable is highly individual. There are some outcomes which can be deemed positive, and those are the reduction in consumption of new devices and energy as these are directly related to the exploitation of a workforce in precar situation as well as the negative impact for the ecosystem.

[Slide with fechner]

I want to finish this presentation with a small anecdote. Do you remember my example about speaking to plants? I wanted to see mentioned research myself and have at least a look at it. There is actually not much decisive research on the benefits of speaking to plants and what is out there is often heavily contested. But the actual idea or theory that plants benefit from human conversation dates back to 1848, when German professor Gustav Fechner published the book *Nanna or About The Inner Life Of Plants*.

[Slide with Fechners Nanna Book]

You see, Fechner was an advocate of a type of panpsychism and he argued that plants are conscious beings, having a life of feeling and volition, and thus should be treated like people.

That is a story about animism, and it is our story.