

On animism

Pablo Martínez

Animism, Anselm Franke (ed.), StenbergPress, Berlin, 2010

Animism, Revisionem der Moderne, Irene Albers and Anselm Franke (eds.), Diaphanes, Berlin, 2012

Animism, Anselm Franke (ed.), e-flux journal, July 2012 <http://www.e-flux.com/issues/36-july-2012/> 12/

The term animism achieved its maximum expansion during the European ethnological explorations of the 19th century. Those investigations considered “primitive” societies that attributed a soul to objects as animist. Since then any community that has believed in a certain agency of the inanimate world has been considered by an illuminated Europe as “backward”, “superstitious”, or insufficiently rational. Conceived in this manner, animism condensed a major part of the Modernist project and its contradictions, as well as the evidence of its colonial nature.

For *Animism*, curated by Anselm Franke and composed of an exhibition in various European cultural institutions, an international seminar in the HKW in Berlin, and two publications, animism does not simply refer to a period in history. It also represents a trans-historic concept that can help us comprehend our present if we assume, as Bruno Latour asserts, that we have never been modern. Latour’s thinking certainly pervades all of the project – this is partially visible in the texts by Franke as well as in the interview with the French philosopher in Volume 1 of *Animism*, in which Latour makes clear that even if we cannot affirm that objects have a soul, these objects do speak and therefore possess agency. In this sense, the mimetic nature of a large part of animist practices produces a mimetic knowledge that places us in relationship with our surroundings and generates other kinds of relationship distinct from those of Modernism. Nowadays, submerged as we are in a semio-capitalism, the phase of capitalism in which relations based on the emotions, languages, and desires become central to production, it seems pertinent to employ animism as a tool for thinking about ourselves. Compared to the construction of the modern subject, by force based on differentiation and distance, (the subject can only realise itself from an absolute negation and rejection of the existence of the soul of objects, since the subject can exist solely through a contempt of animism), this mimetic production helps us to understand ourselves better and to question essential concepts of Modernism such as those of alienation or emancipation. The central thesis of *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) already questioned the Modernist project’s division between culture and nature and maintained that perhaps our Western society never actually functioned according to this division. Those divisive lines, taxonomies, and categorisations of Modernism did nothing other than generate new hybrid objects that overflowed established boundaries and which are taken up in the investigations by artists, anthropologists, and sociologists. In its different publications the project encompasses, by means of images and from various perspectives (from the legal, the clinical, or the colonial), the mobilisation of the systems of inclusion and exclusion defined in the concepts of science and nature.

Thus, animism as an ontology of societies “without a state and against the state”, as Eduardo Viveiros do Castro defined it, also in Animism, serves to question with Foucault the practices of division of the modern world: from mental illness, to schizophrenia and autism, to the division between live and dead or interior and exterior in the construction of the subject itself. In this sense, various contributions stand out, such as by Agency questioning the limits of legislation; by Avery F. Gordon’s examination of the history of crime; or the article *Machinic Animism* by Angela Melitopoulous and Maurizio Lazzarato, in which they retrace very closely the contributions by another philosopher fundamental to this project, Felix Guattari. In this “machinist animism” as described the authors, subjectivity – already defined by Guattari as an assemblage associated with a singular subject – is decentralised with the goal of rethinking the object and the other as interconnectors in a partial subjectivity, not enclosed in itself.

Animism is part of an international current of thought that in the last decade has questioned the monolithic construction of Modernism and demonstrates to us in a continuous form its multiple defects by means of its contradictions, hybridisations, and mobility. But in the specific case of Animism this questioning also serves as a resource for reflecting on the evolution of capitalism towards a relationality governed by emotions and subjectifications (in many cases mimetic and standardised). Not in vain do we return to animism not as a consequence of the evolution of science, but instead from our necessity of thinking ourselves in the midst of semio-capitalism. The article by Isabelle Stengers, *Reclaiming Animism*, seems to us revelatory, since, as the author states, the witchcraft that keeps us mute, trapped in a world of false choices, in a system that governs us with almost no alternatives, is nothing else than the witchcraft of capitalism.