Building Common Ground
Ecological Art Practices and Human-Nonhuman Knowledges
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With the Wild
Artmaking as Collaboration with Wild Landscapes and Their Inhabitants

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Abstract This essay explores the intersection of art, nature, and culture, delving into the role of the artist as an agent who interacts and collaboratively creates with their surrounding ecosystem. The essay draws from examples like Pintubi song maps in Australia, the coastal pilgrimages of Jakarta-based duo Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, and Rashad Salim's *Ark for Iraq* project. Through these examples, it discusses how artistic practices can emerge from dialogues with landscapes and communities, and how such practices can evoke new mythologies and worldviews. The text reflects on the blending of human agency with the elements of the environment, bringing forth a perspective of plural realities and decentralised designs, challenging anthropocentrism, and emphasising the inherent agency within these artforms that reciprocate and resonate with their ecosystems.

Keywords Vernacular design. Pluriversal ontologies. Ecosystems. Ecological art practices.

Summary 1 Mirrors to a Living Planet. – 2 Weaving and Feeling: Locating Ourselves in a Limitless Cosmos. – 3 Being Pilgrims: Measuring the Landscape with Bodies, Steps and Words. – 4 Departing from the Coast: Our Agency Stems from the Ecosystem. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Mirrors to a Living Planet

Humans have been making art for a long, long time. A group of archeologists recently retrieved what is currently thought to be the oldest figurative painting ever discovered, dating to roughly 45,500 years ago: three little hairy pigs, painted on the limestone walls of a cave on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia (Brumm et al. 2021). Before that, only non-figurative forms of expression existed, even though it is debated whether those examples could be defined as artistic endeavours (McDermott 2021).

What is sure is that such primordial examples of human expression were inspired, sustained and produced in dialogue with the ecosystem: starting

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from the physical materials, such as the Neanderthalian bone etchings, to the marvel evoked by the world around them, interiorising it and then producing an artistic output. This is close to what Henry Miller describes as a very important element for writing: the ability for humans to leave their own self, to come back in it enriched by a dialogue with the world.

> I stood before a mirror and said fearfully: "I want to see how I look in the mirror with my eyes closed."
>
> These words of Richter's, when I first came upon them, made an indescribable commotion in me. As did the following, which seems almost like a corollary of the above – from Novalis:
>
> *"The seat of the soul is where inner world and outer world touch each other. For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another one at the same time"*. (Miller 2004, 111)

Even though tens of thousands of years have passed, and the forms of art are widely different – from cave painting to modern writing – there seems to be a common thread between those early humans carving images in limestone and bones and the modern writers pondering on the limitedness of our human selves. What is the root of artmaking, if not the relationship between artists and the broader cosmos that surrounds them? If in one case it can be the relationship with others, at a more primordial level it can be considered a collaboration between an artmaker and wilderness itself.

Among various examples of collaboration between human and non-human artists through art history, it is interesting to look at the recent work of Aki Inomata, who undertook a extensive artistic research process to blend her own artistic agency with that of different animals. For example *How to Carve a Sculpture*,[1] developed in collaboration with beavers who materially make the sculptures from pieces of wood gifted by the artist **[figs 1-2]**. The beaver is an artist: it makes the archetype, then a human sculptor realises a replica on a larger scale.

Inomatas's approach represents an act of sharing artistic agency, and in doing so it goes beyond other more historically established works such as Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) or Richard Serra's *Animal Habitats Live and Stuffed* (1966), where the animals were treated more as objects than subjects: valued on the basis of their relationship with humans rather than as autonomous beings equipped with their own agency and worldmaking capacity.

Inomata's practice seems to be answering a different set of values, in which humans are not masters of nature but instead inhabitants on par with other life forms. As such, the world's space is shared and not there to be grabbed, its rules written in a more-than-human language. This sharing of space and communication is similar to what Gary Snyder tells about the indigenous Ainu population of Japan, who see the wild spaces as *iworu*: fields where certain animals grow and live, getting closer to human spaces only occasionally. Around the village are different *iworu*, mainly that of the Bear (the mountains) and of the Orca (the waterways and sea), from which come two of the most important animals and food sources: the deer and the

1 Aki Inomata, *How to Carve a Sculpture*. 2018-ongoing. More information at `https://www.aki-inomata.com/works/how_to_make/`.

Figure 1 Aki Inomata, A beaver carving a sculpture, working at nighttime as artists famously do. © Aki Inomata, production assistance: Nasu Animal Kingdom. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2 Aki Inomata, *How to Carve a Sculpture*. Installation form at Mori Art Museum, part of *Roppongi Crossing 2022. Coming & Going*, curated by Amano, T. et al. Photo: Eisuke Asaoka. Courtesy of the artist

salmon. When these animals approach human spaces, they are referred to as *marapto* (visitors or guests). As such, after the hunting and before the feast, the animals are honoured and sang to. Hunting and fishing activities are not practised in remote areas, as they are sacred spaces. Through these rituals, the spirit of the *marapto* is delighted and, as Gary Snyder tells:

> Having enjoyed their visit they return to the deep sea or the inner mountains and report "We had a wonderful time with the human beings". Thus if the humans do not neglect proper hospitality – music and manners – when entertaining their deer or salmon or wild plant *marapto*, the

> beings will be reborn and return over and over. This is a sort of spiritual game management. (Snyder 2020, 94)

In this tradition we do not only see the agency of animals, but also how perceiving a living ecosystem – a living planet even – inspired songs and tales, rituals and worldviews in response to it, rather than in a man-led effort to give meaning to it.

2 Weaving and Feeling: Locating Ourselves in a Limitless Cosmos

Within an array of sign systems which translate the world into human shapes, maps are an obvious one – with a graphic sign that shares many aspects with artistic practice. Particularly, we think of a bird's eye view of the land. By today, used as we are to maps orienting our daily crossings, perceiving ourselves as moving points in a vertical view is so easy that it seems as an extension of human nature. And yet, it is only one of many ways to translate the world and trace places and distances.

Take the Ocean for example: with its incommensurable extension, it has long been perceived as impossible to map and therefore partition. Grotius, an influential Dutch thinker from the sixteenth century, used this quality of the Ocean to argue in favour of his Mare Liberum idea: trying to justify the Dutch interests in areas very far from their national borders, the East Indies, he argues that "wine is possessed by means of a vessel, [and] rivers by means on their banks" but the sea instead was (and is) "an unlimited liquid [that] is not to be possessed" (Grotius 2012, 108). Such words sparked an immense debate at the time, specifically with the competing British Empire and its intellectuals, who argued that the sea was indeed quantifiable by technological means – specifically the compass. As Scottish jurist William Welwod said:

> God hath diversely informed men by the helps of the compass, counting of courses, sounding, and other ways to find forth and to design *finitum in infinito*. (Welwod 2012, 71)

This argument shows clearly how since the very early stages of modernity, and stretching back to ancestral times, the perception of space is strictly connected with time and inherently *relational*: the position of a human in relation to the world. Four centuries later, Carl Schmitt noted how the compass created a shift in human perception, as it brought

> the most distant terrains of all the oceans […] into contact with one another, so that the globe expands. (Schmitt 2015, 23)

But according to scholar Renisa Mawani, who brilliantly interprets this centuries-long debate, even Schmitt forgot a key element: the chronometer, or clock, allowing humans to keep track of the passing time:

> It was the clock and not the compass that offered greater precision in naval measurement, thus rendering the sea to be progressively less elemental and increasingly spatial and temporal. Through the precision of

> the chronometer, longitude could be determined with greater accuracy, the Earth could be mapped with reliability, and East/West became seemingly objective coordinates that naturalised geographical, temporal, and civilizational orders. (Mawani 2020, 55)

A technological invention that shaped a standardised view of the world, increasingly human-centric and independent from the wilderness and the rules of nature.

Different worldviews and tools, constantly influencing one another, thus correspond to different ways of locating our bodies in the world, and therefore of moving towards faraway places. This translates into art and culture, and especially in the way humans make maps. This became very evident in the Pacific Ocean, when Captain James Cook travelled the yet unmapped archipelagos of Polynesia and Micronesia all the way to Aotearoa/New Zealand. In order to orientate themselves in this "Sea of Islands", as Epeli Hau'Ofa (1994) defined it, the crew of the *HMS Endeavor* befriended Tupaia: a legendary Polynesian navigator who allegedly sought allegiance with the British to avenge the invasion of his native island, Ra'iatea, by the warriors of Bora Bora. Tupaia, a man of fine intelligence, rare navigational talent and artistic skills, drew a map in 1769 that still raises questions among scholars **[fig. 3]**.

The unique characteristic of Tupaia's map is that it seems to blend traditional Polynesian knowledge with British mapping customs: a way of translating his own cultural perception of these enormous oceanic distances. Albeit the truth behind this map is still debated among scholars, a fascinating reading has been developed by Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwartz (Eckstein, Schwarz 2019), who explain that

> for Cook, a chart was a bird's-eye view of the curved world stretched onto a two-dimensional plane. Tupaia instead took a canoe's-eye view, a perspective that shifts depending on where you start from. While Europeans usually fixed North at the top of the page, Tupaia may have placed it in the centre. (Gelling 2021)

This would have been done by placing the word *E Avatea* ("the noon") at the centre of the map, giving a clue on how to orient it. Through this system, Tupaia translated his own way of orienting the ship to something understandable by Cook and his crew, who everyday gathered right before noon to determine the ship's latitude and calibrate the clock and compass readings. Usually, Polynesian navigators like Tupaia used a wide array of elements to position themselves: the sun, of course, but also the moon and stars, cloud formations, winds, currents and swell patterns. To the British expedition, the North was the main cardinal point, therefore he translated it with the typical position of the sun at noon in the Southern hemisphere.

From this story we understand how the Ocean inhabitants met by the British and Dutch explorers perceived their watery world in a different way, and therefore translated it into different cultures, structures, and maps. A compelling example of this method can be found in Marshallese stick charts, in which sticks and shells are used to represent the journey routes departing from each of the islands to the surrounding ones, following and interacting with ocean swells and their relationship with the islands and the seafloor. These beautiful objects are unreadable for those who do not adopt

Figure 3 Tupaia's map, indicating more than 70 Pacific islands with names accessible to the British sailors. Credit: Tupaia / Public domain

the Marshallese worldview, but they become functional wayfinders for the islands' navigators (Ascher 1995).

Grasping this relational and metaphorical meaning of the stick charts, Brazilian artist Renata Pelegrini recently developed a series called *MAPPA* (2022-ongoing) in which she interprets Pacific traditional knowledge and draws inspiration from it.[2] In her works she interweaves orchid branches from her garden, creating objects that look very much like stick charts, whose purpose, however, is not that of locating a place around the world. Instead, she uses common gardening green twine to direct the growth of the flowers in commercial flower shops as the shells that locate islands in the original charts, and leaves the tips of the branches – the aerial roots – open ended, pointing at multiple directions. Through her work, the artist wants to invite the public to think about its embeddedness in nature, locating themselves within, or in relation to, a point in the chart. Orchids, Pelegrini explains, are epiphyte plants: they can grow even without soil or pots, living together with other organisms, and this metaphor can be useful for humans too. By using the not commonly praised parts of orchids, and re-purposing the plastic knots to direct their growth in a human-pleasing way, these charts talk about embodying the innate knowledge of such social plants, listening to the ecosystem just as the Pacific master navigators who are able to listen to deep ocean swells by lying on the bottom of the canoe.

2 The following content was gathered during a conversation between the Author and the artists.

The act of weaving further recalls that of meeting, in the case of the stick charts it is through a line, while in more circular designs it can be that of a hug, or of holding hands. In another recent series, Pelegrini engages with the coastal tradition of women communities in the Northeast of Brazil, where it is common for men to work at sea (mainly in shipping and fishing) while women remain on the shore. Here, in the case of particularly long trips, women developed a number of songs that are sung while holding hands – in a game similar to *Ring-a-Ring o'Roses* – usually by the moonlight. In Portuguese, this playful ritual is called *ciranda*, and this inspired a series of 'singing' sculptures where moulded copies of found items make noises when they are put in motion, mimicking the looping movement of the singing women. This work, also connected to the act of weaving, reminds the audience of the role of singing and storytelling in maintaining the connections created throughout geographies, but also of the role of time in perceiving space and travel – in this case waiting for journeymen to return **[figs 4-5]**.

3 Being Pilgrims: Measuring the Landscape with Bodies, Steps and Words

If stick charts were a particularly poetic way to trace the relationship between humans, canoes and the Ocean, there are countless means to translate the landscape into forms intelligible to humans, many of which are rich with metaphors. While conceptualising a map, a functional strategy is to realise it in a way that fits the means of transportation and the timescale needed to cover a certain path. After all, there are different maps for cars and aeroplanes, for boat journeys and hikes.

In his voyages through Australia, Gary Snyder encountered one interesting example of engaging with space and time through voices, a surprising mapping methodology through storytelling and singing in the Pitjantjara and Pintubi lands around Alice Springs, Central Australia. Here, venturing with the aboriginal community, Snyder covers a stretch of desert by truck with Pintubi elder Jimmy Tjungurrayi. During the trip, the elder starts to speak very rapidly, seemingly out of nowhere, telling a story of mischief, wallabies and lizard girls set in the mountain territory that they were passing by. The story is incomprehensible, mainly because of the extremely fast pace. Immediately after finishing, another story about the following hill follows, again impossible to keep up with.

Later on, Snyder gets to the reason behind this:

> I realized [...] that these were tales to be told while *walking*, and that I was experiencing a speeded-up version of what might be leisurely told over several days of foot travel. (Snyder 2020, 88)

A form of oral lore that also functioned as a map to place yourselves in a landscape, traditionally inherited from elders who guided foot expeditions to younger members of the group, often travelling nightlong and napping in the acacia shade during the day. Through these oral maps, Pintubis pass on traditional knowledge, legends, and practical information simultaneously, revealing for example a convenient place to set camp or the proximity of a waterhole that survives even through drought years. Trying to explain this

Figure 4 Renata Pelegrini, *MAPPA – And a New Grammar*. 2022. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 5 Renata Pelegrini, detail of a *Ciranda*. 2022. Courtesy of the artist

custom, Jimmy and other elders sang throughout the night, explaining that there's so many songs that they need to be constantly rehearsing:

> Each night they'd start the evening saying, "what will we sing?" and get a reply like "let's sing the walk up to Darwin". (89)

Such singing maps blend culture and cartography, art and landscape observation: more than being songs and tales about specific places, they are human expressions that emerge from a dialogue with these landscapes, their qualities and inhabitants – humans or otherwise.

Of course, this approach strongly resonates with the practice of many contemporary artists who strived to blend their agency with that of a

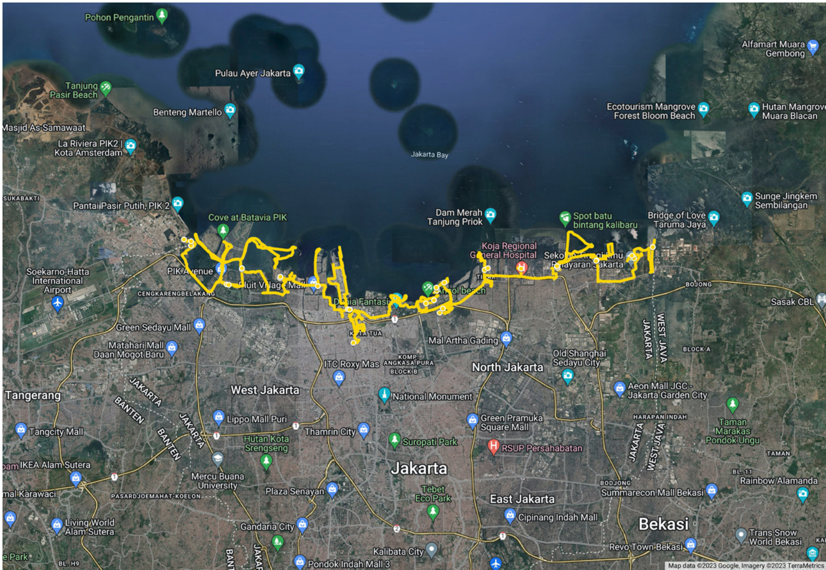

Figure 6 Tita Salina, Irwan Ahmett, Map for *Ziarah Utara*. 2023. This image and the following ones (7-11) were taken during the various editions of *Ziarah Utara* and shared with the Author to accompany the essay. All are courtesy of the artists

chosen landscape, predominantly the land art movement. One example is Nancy Holt's video *Swamp*, in which Holt advances in a wetland area filming through her Bolex camera, her sight confined by the viewfinder, while her partner (and artist in his own right) Robert Smithson vocally guides her steps.[3] In this action, the swamp's agency comes out prominently, interacting with Holt as much as Smithson does through his voice. The feeling of being in an unusual environment, precarious and in constant evolution gets through the artist's uncertain steps and carries the spectator in a swampy embrace.

Another example that immediately comes to mind is that of the walking artists – Richard Long and Hamish Fulton among many others – who made walking more than a means of transportation, or even a research methodology, but the very centre of their practice. Using maps, photography, muds and other found materials to translate their artwork in exhibition spaces, these artists have made it clear what the audience can see is only a testimony of the real work, which is invisible to anyone but the artists and their occasional companions: it is the walk itself and the secret dialogue with the landscape surrounding them.

Among countless artworks influenced by land and walking artists, of particular interest is a unique practice initiated in 2018 by Jakarta-based duo Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, who under the title of *Ziarah Utara* ("Pilgrimage to the North") started a yearly coastal pilgrimage crossing the Indonesian megalopolis – home to almost 35 million people – from the urbanised South to the wilder North **[fig. 6]**. This pilgrimage takes more or less

3 Nancy Holt, *Swamp*. 1971. Video on 16 mm film, colour, sound, 6′00″.

Figure 7 Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett comment this image as "one of the ugliest beaches made from metropolitan residents' sins caused the silting of the rivers in Jakarta"

two weeks of walking, stopping and encountering wildly diverse realities. It constitutes a platform for collaboration with other artists, researchers and communities, but above all a research methodology and a collaboration with the surrounding biosphere: a practice of working with elements such as the wind and the sea, the coal and the salt.

The North of Jakarta, the artists tell,[4] is where the contradictions that lie as the foundations of the city are more visible: it is an area of estuaries and wetlands, broadly reclaimed to make space for development, where fishing cultures still persist and clash with luxury real estate projects, gated communities and the planned Garuda Seawall – a gigantic infrastructure that, if realised, should separate Jakarta from the sea with a 32 km stretch of dikes that would also host further infrastructures and residential areas **[fig. 7]**. The Garuda is a mythical creature – an enormous eagle that also is Indonesia's national symbol – and mysticism plays a key role in the acceptance of the project and the disruption of local communities' lives. For example, precisely because they are built on reclaimed wetland and sea areas, the luxury real estate units here are very impractical: their ground floor often floods, they need to be gated and are hard to reach and move around from. The reason why they are so appealing to the regional elite is very rooted in the belief that here lies 'the head of the dragon': it anticipates fortune – your ground floor might flood each season, but that means that business will flow! **[fig. 8]**.

Here mysticism and materialism go hand in hand, while political strategies adapt to that: the problem of Jakarta's subsidence has been mitigated

4 All the following material comes from an interview with Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, held online on the 17 May 2023, and has been reviewed with them. More information on the work can be found on various online sources, among which the website `https://ziarahutara.hotglue.me`.

Figure 8 Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett comment this image as “a rotten security post container on a decaying reclaimed island”

Figure 9 Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett comment this image as “the pilgrims who perhaps seek for their human values by looking for suffering”

in the last decade, but its rhetoric works well to attract climate adaptation funding. The famous sinking mosque of Wal Adhuna, also in the way of the pilgrimage, works as a symbol: the constant performativity of its dialogue with the tide reinforces the claim for funding, just as a work of public art that needs to be maintained always in its precarious state **[fig. 9]**.

Ahmett and Salina perform their yearly pilgrimage to these areas, witnessing their inherent dynamic nature and refreshing the inspiration that comes from visiting the coastline, learning with the mangroves and the

green mussels, and dialoguing with the communities that live such developments on their skin. These marginalised groups often live in precarious settlements (*kampung* in Indonesian), the majority of which are informal, bearing no right on paper. They are thus easy to displace to make space for new development, but recently some of them are obtaining legal documents and began unionising, using their cemented solidarity to demand the rights to survive and manage their surroundings. There is no such thing as a nature without humans, as there are no humans without nature. The connection between these elements here is very strong and can be felt through the body: the flesh and bones and brains and hearts of the artists (and their companions) become instruments to feel their surroundings. A "*telemetric* body"[5] that allows a different kind of research and knowledge – neither scientific nor humanistic, innate and therefore hard to translate into data or words.

This kind of knowledge emerges from a dialogue with the ecosystem at large, including its more-than-human inhabitants. Recently Salina and Ahmett have met a family who holds Wati in precarious conditions: a female pig-tailed macaque, most likely from the mountainous island of Borneo or Sumatra. They have made their mission to free her, and the strategy that worked was not the rational one – which was to point out the legal issues with it – but an oniric one: Ahmett said to have had a dream in which the macaque was speaking to him while biting her own hands. This convinced the family to let him take the macaque with him **[fig. 10]**.

These stories, among others, arise from the act of immersing in the landscape, and can be very much considered new mythologies that tell about the relationship between humans and the landscape, just as the Pintubi maps mentioned above. They are shaped by the dialogue between the artists, their collaborators, and the ecosystem itself. Along the pilgrimages, the thousand faces of Jakarta are visible: from the archipelago of the 'thousand islands' (actually they are about 110, some of which will disappear soon, either victims of sand and coral extraction, airport expansion, real estate development, or swallowed by the sea) to the constellation of abandoned 'haunted' infrastructures scattered in remote corners of the city, where often ghostly messages from the past or the future can be found by pilgrims **[fig. 11]**. Only by observing and feeling it from multiple angles, at different times, this can be grasped, because the coastline never says the same thing twice.

"It's our labour of love", the artists say. Love for the sea and the coasts, that follows the pure feeling of awe of being immersed in it.

5 The term has been coined by Soh Kay Min, Research Associate for NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore, who has been involved with Ziarah Utara through an interview and a visit to two *kampungs* in the northern coast of Jakarta.

Figure 10 Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett comment this image as “apig-tailed macaque on the chain looks irritated amidst the high tide being soothed by a boy who was deprived of the things he deserves at his age”

Figure 11 Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett comment this image as “no turtles lay eggs on sinking Talak Island, Thousand Islands archipelago, anymore”

4 Departing from the Coast: Our Agency Stems from the Ecosystem

Following this logic, we can see how mythologies themselves emerge from the ecosystems where they are first crafted, adopting topics and characteristics that come from the natural world. One example is in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which inspired the judeo-christian myth of the Great Flood and Noah's Ark.

Gilgamesh – archetypal hero of Mesopotamia – meets Utnapishtim: a character who was made aware of an incoming apocalyptic flood that would punish humanity for their excessive noise and activity. The bringer of the message was the god Ea who – taking pity in humanity – advises the reed houses to turn into boats.[6] This comes directly from the specific vernacular architecture (materials, cultures and skills) used in the Fertile Crescent, in turn designed as such because of the wide local availability of certain plants and materials just as in ancient Anatolia, Italy and elsewhere: an alphabet of making that is universal throughout hominid cultures and stems from the material qualities of ecosystems and ecologies.

Taking inspiration by this recent knowledge, that shifted understandings and worldviews, and by a process of expeditionary engagement that developed into an ongoing commitment with local communities and marshes as part of a larger body, Iraqi artist Rashad Salim started in 2018[7] with Safina Projects the long-term initiative *Ark for Iraq*, that has evolved in many directions among which *Ark Re-imagined*, Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2021.[8]

The project aims to study boatmaking traditions, some of which are on the verge of being forgotten or even lost and recreated, broadly realised with the use of endemic plants and available material such as the reed that grows on the banks of the great rivers or easily accessible bitumen – the earliest example of hydrocarbon culture that fuelled waterproofing, mobility and trade. These techniques survived kingdoms and empires through the ages, but are now almost forgotten because of the arrival of colonial techniques disregarding locally available materials, thus generating a shift that severed the connection with the surrounding ecosystem. Greatly affected by the metalification, motorisation and dependence on oil (that replaced coal), the people living in the Fertile Crescent have been displaced by the war and suffered the isolation of Iraq, losing their engagement with the rivers, their wetlands and knowledge – both ancient and contemporary.

Through his long-term commitment to understand and use ancient boatmaking and architecture techniques that employ widely available local materials, the project has established a network of boating clubs along the river, starting from Babylon and sailing the riverine network inland to Basra, Baghdad and to the mountains. These clubs help people engaging with the rivers, and mirroring in other geographies such as Venice, Scandinavia,

6 The Epic of Gilgamesh (2000, 88), XI, ll. 20-7: "Princely Ea swore with them also, repeating their words to a fence made of reed: "O fence of reed! O wall of brick! […] Demolish the house, and build a boat! Abandon wealth, and seek survival! Spurn property, save life! Take on board the boat all living things' seed!".

7 The founding inspiration for this interest comes from the mythological expedition led by Thor Heyerdal on the Tigris in 1977 on a reed boat. For more information see Heyerdahl 1993.

8 See https://arkforiraq.org/.

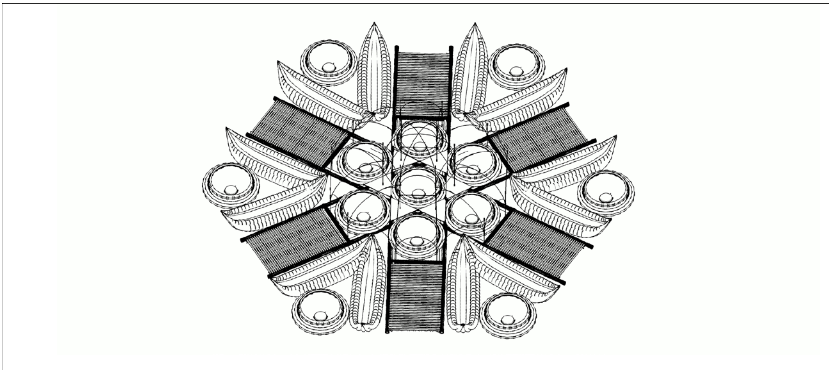

Figure 12 Rashad Salim with Abu Hyder in a Guffa (coracle) on the Tigris in Baghdad, 2013. Image courtesy of Ali Jewad al-Musafiri

Figure 13 Ark Re-imagined study (aerial view) by Khalid Ramzi and Rand al-Shakarchi. 2016. Copyright Safina Projects

reaching out and connecting similar agencies, trying to reconnect an intergenerational loss of local knowledge, rebuilding continuity **[figs 12-13]**.

This re-engagement and exploration of vernacular knowledge, that not only emerges from the ecosystem, manifesting itself materially, but also develops a reciprocal relationship between the region and its inhabitants, clashes with the idea of designs that should fit all and be adopted by any culture. Metal, for example, with its apparent superiority took over previous crafts with un-sentimental pragmatism that created removals. Recently, a number of theorists are developing the idea of a 'pluriverse', one where many worlds and worldviews coexist and that starkly refuses homogenisation and the reduction of diverse realities to a standardised one. This idea of a pluriversal world has been developed by thinkers such as Arturo Escobar (Escobar 2018), and Thomas Mercier (Mercier 2019), criticising the

Western tendency to apparently allow for diversity, but creating a general category of 'others' that denies their inherent complexity and creative power, ultimately crushing it and extracting its natural and human capital.

Among different thinkers, it is interesting here to consider Alfredo Gutierrez Borrero's idea of DESSOBONS ("DEsigns of the South, of the Souths, Others, by Other NameS"). It indicates designs that are more than alternatives – or 'others' – to standardised ideas: they go beyond being cultural objects and man-made inventions, they are invested with their own agency, they act in the world as symbols and metaphors projecting other things (Gutierrez Borrero 2021).

Through this lens, we see how the crafts and architectures developed within Salim's *Ark Project* are more than returning vernacular designs, and even more than the community processes that their envisioning and realisation sustained: they express the relationship with the surrounding biosphere, a vision of unity and specificity. For sure, these meanings embody history, communities and worldviews, but are not limited to such things. A boat is a boat, it needs to function as such, but it also becomes a richer metaphor that gives it power.

5 Conclusion

Projects and practices such as the ones described in this essay – developing in parallel with a growing momentum to include more-than-humans and even whole ecosystems in jurisdictions and policy-making[9] – empower artmaking in a broader sense, to become a collaboration with the wilderness: the artist must acknowledge their unlimited nature, necessarily intersecting with that of other humans, cultures, animals, and ecologies. This takes not only a great humbleness and altruism, but a capability to perceive complexity. Once an artwork, with the process of its making, comes into the world it can embark on a life of its own, creating ties and effects independent from its maker's intentions.

It can be frightening, but it is what makes it alive and generates hope.

This means also refreshing an inevitably anthropocentric perspective coming from an inescapably human maker: the artist becomes an actor in dialogue with others, who maintains a relevant position and power, consciously blending with a broader dimension. It is a work made by humans, but becomes a bridge that reaffirms a connection with the wild.

The case studies analysed are but a small selection in a ever-growing array of similar practices, that testify not only an increased sensitivity by contemporary artists on topics of ecology and biocentrism, but also the ability of art to transcend its boundaries and create meaningful collaborations not only with other disciplines, but with entirely new realms of existence, specifically the more-than-human world.

9 See, for example, the recent UN declaration of a human right to a healthy environment, or the fast-growing movement for rights of nature. Among many sources, one example is Stilt 2021.

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