Imagining More-than-Human Communities

What?

CUCo SPARK Project: Imagining More-than-Human Communities

Alliance themes: Health, Food, Energy, Circular Society. We posit that these are all *more-than-human* issues. If these are the challenges that our society faces, they cannot be met from a purely human-centred perspective.

Initial premise: David Attenborough's recent film, *A Life on our Planet,* begins and ends in the abandoned city of Chernobyl, which has been reclaimed by the surrounding forest and is now a sanctuary for wildlife. In the film, the site functions as a symbol for the resilience of the natural world, and how it can overcome the devastation caused by human technological advancement. "Today," Attenborough narrates, "the forest has taken over the city. It's a sanctuary for wild animals that are very rare elsewhere. And powerful evidence that however grave our mistakes, nature will ultimately overcome them. The living world will endure. We humans cannot presume the same." These images from Chernobyl tap into the post-apocalyptic imaginary of "The World Without Us"—a redemption fantasy of a posthuman future, which posits that the only way for nature to thrive is in the absence of humans. It is easy to imagine such a world if we already assume that humans are fundamentally separate from nature. It is much harder, and therefore all the more urgent, to imagine how humans and nature can co-exist in a way that is *not* based upon conflict and exploitation, but rather on a sense of community, with beneficial effects for both intra-human and inter-species relations. In this unusual collaboration, we have set ourselves the goal of working together to imagine what a more equitable community of humans and nonhumans might look like. We want to explore how more-than-human communities have been imagined in the past, and where they are being lived out in the present. A basic premise of the project is that the spaces we inhabit are already more-than-human. We want to develop models and ideas for how these spaces can be made into more-than-human communities.

Goals for the year:

1. Become acquainted with each other's disciplinary angles, methodologies, and ethical standpoints;
2. build trust and develop a common language;
3. identify and contact possible societal partners and stakeholders;
4. develop an idea for a format or interface through which human-animal interactions may be imagined and experienced.

Who?

Participating Institutions: Utrecht University, Wageningen University, TU Eindhoven.

Back row: Clemens Driessen (WUR), Anne van Veen (UU,), Liesbeth van de Grift (UU, UYA), Kári Driscoll (UU), Kathrin Thiele (UU), Bernice Bovenkerk (WUR, WAY). *Front row:* Anna Vince (UU, student assistant) Irene Kuling (TU/e). Heidi Lesscher (UU). *Not pictured:* Marjolijn Bol (UU, UYA, technical art historian).

How?

Before the summer of 2021, the group met online to plan the year: Three workshops, each led by three project members, with site visits or excursions. Thereafter we scheduled a workshop facilitated by the Flatland Agency to work towards a joined aim for future collaboration.

Workshop 1: Ethics + Visit to Heidi's Lab (13.10.2021)

Led by Anne van Veen, Kári Driscoll and Heidi Lesscher in the CUCo Meeting Space, Utrecht. Preceded by a visit to Heidi's lab and the animal facility at Utrecht University, where we looked at the housing of laboratory animals and examples of behavioural tasks that are commonly used in play and cognitive research.

Workshop: Anne, Kári and Heidi presented their more-than-human research.

- Anne: rethinking sustainability from a more-than-human perspective e.g. "veganising" Raworth's Doughnut by expanding it to include non-human animals. From the idea that analytical frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals are totally anthropocentric: only focusing on humans as beneficiaries of policies.

- Kári: rethinking the idea of utopia, questioning the rhetoric of purity and redemption in conservation.,. We watched a short film by Sven Johne, entitled *A Sense of Warmth* (2015), which highlights the dilemmas of "violent care": http://www.svenjohne.de/projects/a-sense-of-warmth-video/ .
- Heidi: what is play? What does that mean for non-human animals? By playing, children and animals learn social and emotional skills. As such, play is an interesting tool to increase interspecies understanding.

Main themes from the discussion in this workshop:

- What do utopia, peace, choice and play mean for (working) non-human animals?
- The exploitation of humans often goes hand-in-hand with the exploitation of non-human animals
- Including non-human animals as actors in-their-own-right in our visions of the future
- Can we have non-hierarchical relationships with (working or produce) non-human animals?
- What can we learn from non-human animals?
- Reframing our ideas around control: thinking about what we would gain rather than what we would give up in a more-than-human community

Workshop 2 Technology + Exhibition (02.11.22)

Led by Irene Kuling, Clemens Driessen and Liesbeth van de Grift at the Trippenhuis, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Amsterdam. Followed by a visit to the exhibition The World as We Don't Know It at @droog in Amsterdam.

Workshop: Irene, Clemens and Liesbeth presented their more-than-human research and led discussion. Main focus of the workshop was thinking about the role of technology in more-than-human communities.

Main themes/topics:

- Irene: Include AI and robots (including haptic technology) in our more-than-human thinking. Challenges the boundaries between humans and the non-human. Using technology to change our perspective.
- Clemens: focus on the role of geography (space and place) in our interactions with the non-human. What do the boundaries between human and non-human spaces do? Where are they blurred? How do particular places and the way spaces are organized influence a non-human animal's choice, play, freedom?
- Liesbeth: investigating anthropocentrism/human-centredness. When and where should non-human factors come in when studying history? Distinction between human supremacy and anthropocentrism.

The meeting led us to more systematically question 'the human', which we often assume as a fixed concept. We may need to be willing as humans to give up control in order to create more-than-human communities. Losing control does not always mean being threatened.

Exhibition: visit to The World as We Don't Know It, https://www.youdontknow.world/.

Workshop 3 Agency + Irene's labs (31.01.22)

Led by Bernice Bovenkerk, Kathrin Thiele and Marjolijn Bol at TU Eindhoven. Preceded by a visit to the haptics and robotics lab and Irene's own lab.

<u>Irene's labs:</u> tour of the general haptics and robotics labs including the robot football field. Then an interactive tour of Irene's lab with haptic feedback in VR and teleoperation.

<u>Workshop</u>: Bernice, Kathrin and Marjolijn presented their more-than-human research and led discussion.

Main themes/topics:

- Bernice: focus on non-human animal agency (animal ethics, ecofeminism). Decentre humans, take non-human animal voices seriously; let animals co-shape communities, environments and academic studies (aim to be non-hierarchical).
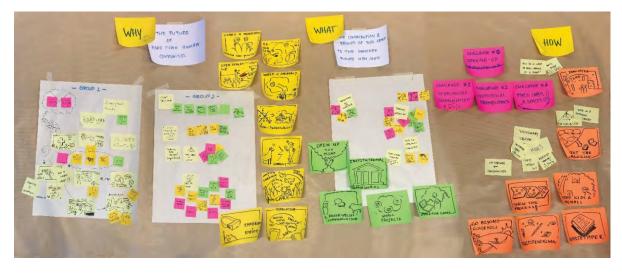- Kathrin: focus on *how* something is envisioned. How we imagine things is embedded in established methods of knowledge and thinking, so it is not neutral; this shapes the way we enter and have discussions. How could we be thinking and imagining differently?
- Questioning the human position: Who is considered human? Which questions do we need to ask in order to avoid a solely human perspective on what we want from nature and non-humans? Ecological thinking requires a systemic approach rather than a dialogical one.
- Marjolijn: Rethinking contemporary notions of what it means to be durable by considering animals as artisans/makers. How would an animal define durability? Durability vs. sustainability.
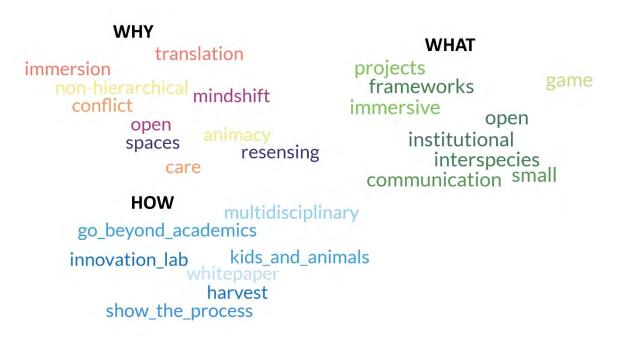
Workshop 4 (Flatland Agency)

Now that every member had presented, we had a variety of themes and topics that had come out of discussion. In the fourth workshop, we brought in members of the Flatland Agency (Niva, Nadia and Tom, https://flatland.agency/en/) to help develop a common language and narrow down our focus in advance of writing the next proposal. This took place at the ArtLab, where Marjolijn works, in Utrecht. Flatland works through visualisation. The workshop was split in two parts:

1) Content of the proposed project:
    - The 'why' of the project: used visual thinking and functional drawing to create a concept of a shared image of More-than-Human Communities, plus an inventory of ideas on how the project can contribute to making this vision a reality.

- The 'what' of the project: looked at the tangible results that the project would need to deliver and the way in which each team members might contribute.
2) Process of working together in an interdisciplinary team:
- The 'how' of the project: explored the process of working together, which interdisciplinary tools or processes we could use, and with whom we could work (external collaborations).

The highlights of the workshop can be summarized by the following word clouds:

Based on the outcomes of the session with Flatland, we defined the next steps for a UCo proposal in which we envision a wide audience to discuss about our human perspective on the world and societal problems. This project starts in February 2023, for more info about the interactive events and the outcomes, visit the UCo page: https://www.unusualcollaborations.com/imagining-more-than-human-communities.