

things are people too

an exploration of animistic design

This research zine captures the intermittent results from a first round of gathering and analysing data. The goal of this zine is to create access to said data, in a less rigorously scientific manner. I'd love for you to see this a snapshot, as well as a working tool. It's not meant to stay untouched. Take notes on it, mark what you find interesting, scribble and sketch. The texts are not meant to be read in a linear way. Just jump in where your attention takes you. It's a process and you're now part of it.

What is animism, anyways?

In the last few month I got to know many different sides of animism. All a bit different, but somehow related.

Animism is a concept that originated in anthropology and was used to describe the beliefs of some indigenous communities and people. Animists believe that other-than-human things like rocks, plants, or even rivers have a spirit residing in them. On the other hand, in psychology, animism means that something is perceived as animated, or alive. This is best described in the different stages of animism in children, in the studies of Piaget. A third approach, which is heavily inspired by both these areas, is found in the post-structuralist thought of Felix Guattari and the scholars building on that work.

There are links and relations between these three fields, although at this moment rather intuited than scientifically proven. There is animism that stems from experience or perception, and another that stems from knowledge or belief. Both path lead to a changed interaction with or treatment of the thing in question. That doesn't always have to be a positive thing, but in a best case scenario it's the base for a new ethics. The Māori people that live along the Whanganui river, for example, fought for decades that this river is getting the legal status of a person. This river now has fundamentally different rights with huge implications for environmental protection.

I use animism as a continuation of the process of developing ethics that we as Central-European and white people started with animal rights. A mere 150 years ago, we still argued that animals are soulless and can be treated like machines. That not only animals but also plants and other-than-human things like the weather or rivers is a long-established fact in many indigenous epistemologies. What we have to do know, is to unsettle our beliefs in which we impoverish everything other-than-human of the same ethical considerations as we give ourselves.

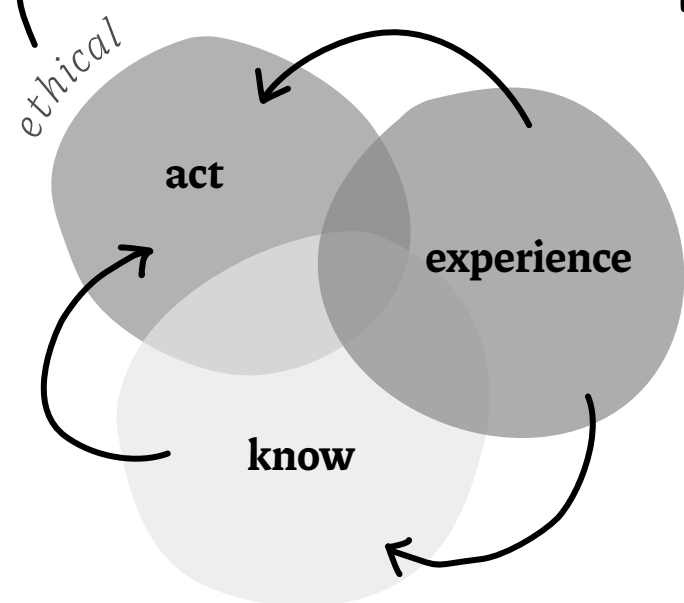
Animism is the acknowledgment and the perception that we're neither in the center nor alone in this reality. The best expression we have for the other-than-human subjects is the ascribing of a common base, for example, that we all have a soul, contain spirits, or have some kind of consciousness. Animism is also the practice and aesthetics of such a world-making project.

That sounds pretty abstract, doesn't it? Have you ever talked to one of your houseplants? You could consider that as an animism practice. Did you ever caringly caress your smartphone after you let it fall? Animism. Do you have a unique ritual for an old kitchen device, without it wouldn't work? Probably animism, I would argue. Through and with animism, we elevate pasive things to alive things, even if they don't move or are biological beings (although that makes things much easier).

The problem we have, as a Central-European culture, is that we don't have a way to express animism. We need to change that. We need to find ways, to unsettle our over-rational ways of going about our businesses and need to develop ways of expressing our relationship that we have with the things we surround ourselves. This is the core aspect of this research project. To develop the knowledge on how to create things out of such a mindset.

*Felix Guattari's
Machinic Animism*

*Piaget's thesis of
animism in children*



*Animistic beliefs
and mythologies*

Can animistic views and practices be found in approaches in our society, even if it can no longer show any animistic tradition? Can animistic practices in design lead to a more intensive connection to technological products and processes? What are the effects of such a relationship?

Animistic and Emotionally Durable Design

In my research I found two approaches who fit very well together. One is about the exploration of animism in digital technology and the other one is about designing things to which we can have meaningful relationships.

This project, or my work here, is not the first and probably not the last approach to bringing animism and design together. Most notably are the theoretical works of Brenda Laurel and Betti Marenko who put much thought into this. They have a very specific approach, coming from critical theory and going towards new materialism. New materialism thinks about matter as more than just passive stuff and instead perceives it as a complex and highly active other-than-human element. On the other end, I found Jonathan Chapman's work on emotionally durable design very powerful. The core message is that trash is just a failed relationship between us and the things we discard.

There is a subtle link between the theoretical approach of Marenko, the practical approach of Chapman and my intentions. I want us to live in a world, where we perceive the things we surround ourselves with as complex and beautiful actants that co-create our lives as we do their existence. That needs change to happen in two areas; We need to learn to perceive the world and the things it contains as such and we need to be able to express that.

What follows are two categorizations from the two different approaches. I find them interesting and inspiring when I try to think about animistic design.

Neo-Animism

Agency

"Rather than considering only subjects as active, and objects as passive, animistic design explicitly considers objects on an equal stand with subjects, as all agents that 'do' things. Agency is not something that objects a priori have; it is not an innate property. Agency is conceptualized as a relational concept instead, as being actualized, embodied in the relationship between the object and the broader ecology in which it is interacting." (Zaman et al., 2018)

Embodiment

"Embodiment is critical to the animistic design approach because it creates a physical milieu for a person to use their spatial perception to organize ideas from each actant, tangibly manipulate the actants and what they represent, and participate as a social actor with the actants." (Marenko & van Allen, 2016)

Ecology

"An animistic design perspective challenges interaction designers to design for an expressiveness of animated objects with intent, while positioning them in a wide ecology of human-object entanglements." (Zaman et al., 2018)

Uncertainty

"Instead of aspiring control and creating pre-defined, predictable human-computer interactions, animistic design embraces the uncertainty that emerges when various agents creatively engage in and co-create different realities." (Zaman et al., 2018)

What practical knowledge do designers need to enable them to create meaningful interactions between users and their devices?

Emotionally Durable Design

Relationships

How can we build a relationship that is emotionally rich and engaging between products and users?

Narratives

How can we build and capture narratives that exist between products and users?

Identity

How does the identity of the product and the user coexist within the interaction journey?

Imagination

How can we build imagination delight, intrigue, engagement within the product interaction journey?

Conversations

How can we create conversations between products and users?

Consciousness

How can we create a sense of consciousness within the product interaction journey?

Integrity

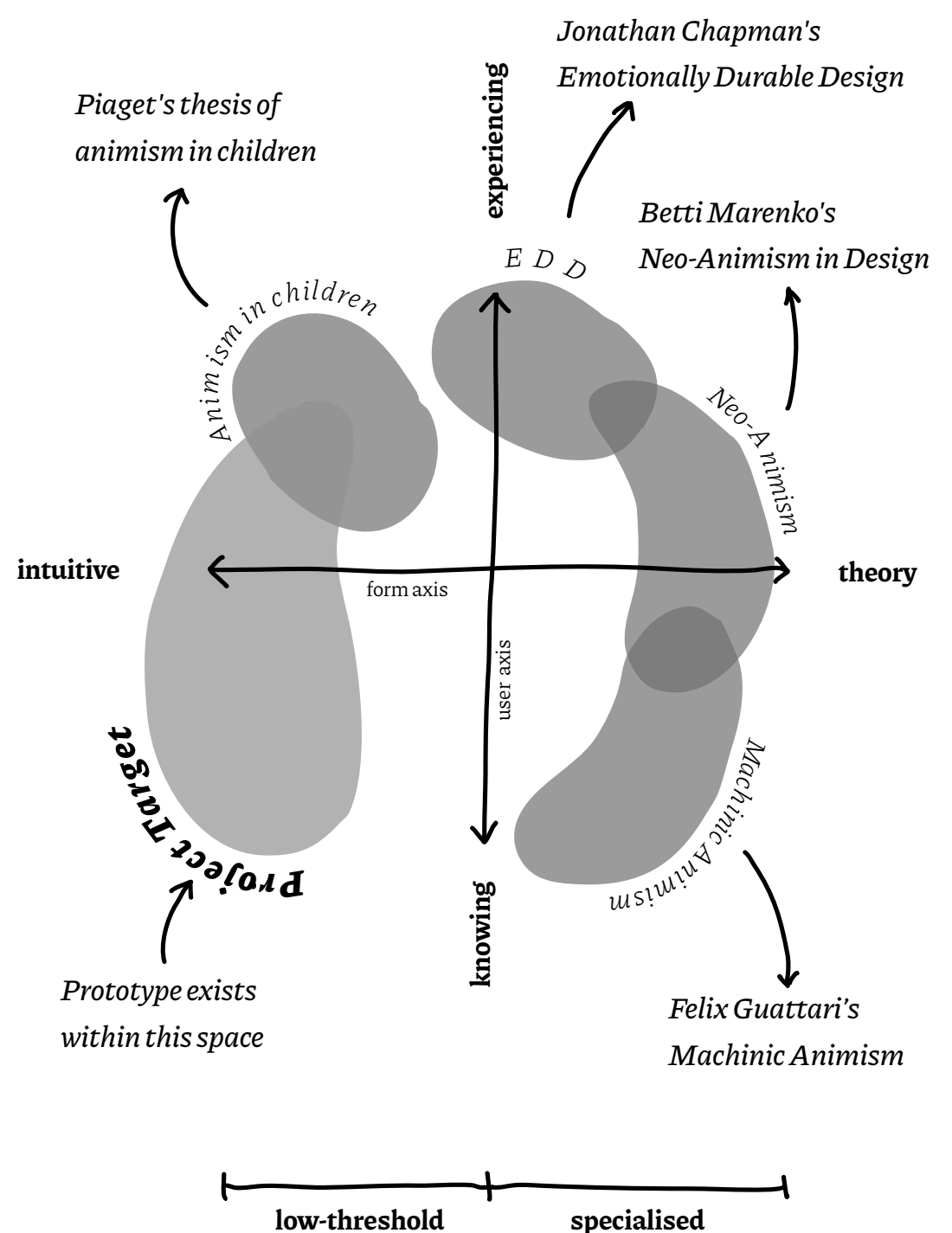
How can we build integrity both the physical integrity and emotional quality into the product?

Materiality

How does the materiality of the product develop and change over time through use?

Evolvability

How can the product evolve with the user?



Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is an approach to work with qualitative data. In it, you label pieces of data that you find interesting, help to answer questions or stand out with codes. In a second phase, you try to find themes that summarize the codes. I followed a reflexive approach after Brown & Clark. All the data that lead to this analysis can be access on the digital archive. The main methods involved in the gathering were interviews, observations, user journey mappings as well as online research.

In the analysis I concentrated on those parts, that were not so positive. They interested me because they offer potential for change.

What is a voice assistant?

This theme explores questions around what such an assistant is, can be or is perceived as. Voice assistants, especially those within a stationary device, are a relatively new technology. As such they don't have a very well established use case and the users are often not very sure what it actually is.

In my research, I differentiate between the device, which contains the electronics and the hardware, and the assistant, which is the software part, the person residing inside the device.

Before everything else; The sexist approach to voice assistants is highly problematic, to say the least. The first choice for the assistants' voices was female. That says a lot more about this thing than the tech companies intended. Lately Google added different gendered voices and makes the initial choice random. But this deep-running problem in the tech industry made its way into the assistant as well.

"Like with a stupid dog that doesn't want to hear what I say. Sometimes it's cool when it does, and then you think wow great, he did it! Good, good Alexa. And otherwise, I often just say "Alexa, you whore". Just like that, just for a little bit, ah you stupid thing."

I don't know where and when this dream of a personal assistant arose, but I guess it is intricately linked to advertisement and the advent of a middle class, which wishes of feeling further above in the social hierarchy got triggered by said ads. The voice assistant caters to an unsharp end, but according to the ads, it must involve having a simpler life. Shades of pastel, symbols of the creative class, or slogans of automated, optimized lives accompany the storytelling around the voice assistants.

The people I interviewed were often just curious to explore the possibilities. Only few go so far as to automate parts of the home. They got hooked by this reality turned scifi technology that many of us got to know from popular culture.

But what is then in the end, this assistant? There are more questions than answers to this. Is it entertainment? It is probably for those who use the assistant just for music. Is it a work-related item? Probably not, but optimizing your life, automating your environment, and offloading mental tasks surely sound like it comes for the world of work. The assistant can do almost everything a computer can do as well. In the end, it's mostly an interface to the gigantic infrastructures of the tech companies, but those **Questions of Scale** are lost within the daily interaction with the user. They rather just use it to listen to music.

"For me is so, somehow, I do not want entertainment. I want technology that... an iPad is not entertainment for me. It's a tool for me to work with and to do. Yeah, even VR glasses are not just, just entertainment. It's kind of trying new things and not just entertainment. It's way too passive then."

The **Communication, Language and Behavior** involved with the assistant is very close to the uncanny valley. Now and then, the assistant is weird, spooky, and sometimes right out creepy - starting to speak or laugh without former interaction, setting alarms in the night, or playing unstoppable music. The assistant is always present, listening in, ready to act. This presence hooks into our subconsciousness and if there was no interaction for a while, we need to check-in.

After a while of inactivity and not using the voice assistant: "Hey Google, are you still alive?"

The assistant promises a human form of communication to our electro-digital environment. Some users anthropomorphize the assistant, but never as an adult. Many more users are othering the assistant. They act in master-slave patterns, see in it a stupid dog, or even worse, throw sexist insults at it while kicking it. What was meant as a companion, to make life easier, brings out the worst in us? It promised to enable natural human-computer communication, but it's all fake. We're not getting anything human out of this, no matter how angry we get.

What are the stories underlying the design and use of technological artifacts? What are the values conveyed in these stories? Are there alternatives to these stories?

Conditioning the User

More often than not, the user has to be conditioned into a way of communicating or behaving with the assistant as according to the manufacturer and developer of the device and assistant. They hardly ever have a say in this themselves.

Behind the acquaintance of a voice assistant device, or devices in many cases, lay a specific image of a promised future. Home automation, kitchen and household aid, extension of the brain.

These can be rudimentary be merged into one big theme of **Control and convenience**, also known as the preservation of energy by offloading tasks to the computer and its attached devices. The user becomes conditioned into believing in this future through advertisement and clever storytelling. One is promised a simpler life, sometimes also a more social or more creative one.

In my research, I did not find this promised future to manifest itself leaving the users more often than not, frustrated and the buggy, glitchy, and dumb technology that they brought into their homes. Nonetheless, the user sticks with their assistant's limited capabilities but need to drastically change their **Communication, Language and Behavior** towards and with the assistant.

Users feel that they are having an unnatural interaction with the assistant. They need to change their speech patterns, the language they usually use or are given irradicate responses by the devices. The user thus gets conditioned into behaving as the manufacturer of the device wants, to accommodate the limited capabilities. Or otherwise, no interaction would be possible at all.

They try repeatedly to play music but the device responds with "Je suis désolé, il y a un problème". At other times, the device misunderstands the command but it still doesn't work. The music they wish for can't be played. They give up, slightly annoyed, and concentrate on the situation around the table again, eating and socializing.

Of course, there are also good moments, and most of the time, the assistant does what it is asked for. But this bond, and the evoked emotions, are mediocre at best. What sticks with the user are mostly frustration, sometimes anger, and in a few cases, hate and rage. It is for sure not the promised future that the user was tricked into buying into.

By conditioning the user, by controlling the technological narrative, controlling the users' imagination, **GAF**A can bring about their utopia. The users know very well about the unsustainability of voice assistant technologies, electronics, and the cloud. But they don't see any other alternative, they can't imagine one. And it is the same with privacy issues. Users rather have an anonymous big data interface in their home, recording their family, than a human researcher observing them.

"Yes, many of these, let's say, gadgets are not very sustainable in principle. Because they are rather cheap products and are thrown on the market relatively cheaply so that they can be distributed as quickly as possible. From that point of view, yes, it's now probably not necessarily the most sustainable."

How does consumer technology un-/make our ability to care for our companion objects and the material plane?

Questions of Scale

The question of **What is a voice assistant** starts with the device itself. Most users are aware, that it is only a minuscule part of a gigantic, planet-spanning infrastructure. Though they hardly ever can imagine the true size of it.

The device is simple. A few electronics, chips, some sound hardware, that's it. But already with this simple setup, it shares the same problematics as all modern electronics; The resources for it come from far away and deep underground. The mining operations for the rare earth minerals used in the hardware are quite often difficult; for the environment of the planet as well as the indigenous people that get poisoned, displaced, or robbed of their sustenance. And like all electronics, voice assistant devices are hard to recycle. All the hard-earned materials are glued together, and properly recycling them is not worth the money, or so it seems.

"Yes, I see so processors and circuit boards somehow, but I have no idea. No, I don't know, no. I know some technologies, if they are in there I don't know, but I know what decides are some Amazon servers and their software behind it. That's actually, so Big Brother-like to me."

The device is the embodiment of the imagination of **GAF**A. The big tech companies create ecosystems, parallel to that of the planet. But their ecosystems are in their complete control. Once in every user's lifetime, they have to make a choice into which ecosystem they buy themselves. This choice is hardly ever changed because it is not easy to change from one to another. Once ascribed, you're locked in. Not really, but a lot of dark interaction patterns make it seem not worthwhile to migrate to another ecosystem.

"Yes, as I said, that there at Amazon, that they always play around there and tinker around, yes. In a very recent case, suddenly there was a new voice. If you wanted to listen to music, another voice came. I find the voice of the original voice very pleasant and I didn't like this change now at all. Others as well, yes. And they just do that then and say nothing, ask nothing. Yes, and that's not nice. You should not do that."

The brands, the manufactures of the devices, the developers of the assistant are present but have no presence. The devices as well as the assistants are supposed to be low friction ware. The design is simple, mild in aesthetic choices, easy to blend in. But the devices are always on, only off if consciously turned off, always listening. With voice assistant devices, tech companies can have a permanent foothold in your private space. It's another, constant stream, of information to feed the companies big data storages, recommendation algorithms, personal user models. A complete loss of privacy. And in this case, your whole family is involved. This loss of privacy was common knowledge with my participants. But they could not even start to fathom the implications or the size of this operation.

"And I appreciate that, for everything that makes my life easier in this sense. But I'm basically of the opinion that, for example, we don't actively try to provide the children with tablets or cell phones in this sense, but rather the opposite, to keep them away from them for as long as possible. Because, yes, they come into contact with these things early enough."

The device is manifested, the assistant present; But everything else, behind it, becomes many hyperobjects.

Communication, Language and Behavior

It could be argued, that all technologies need the user to adapt to them in a certain way. We need to learn how to operate a smartphone with touch gestures. That is not necessarily a natural, given thing. In the case of voice assistants we sometimes have to go extrem ways to accomodate this technology.

With a voice assistant, we're given another interface to the cloud and its services, with the promise of interaction natural for humans. After all, what is more human than our spoken language. In reality, communication with the device or the assistant is rather difficult. It starts with the limitations of language one can use and ends with eradicate and haunted response patterns across several devices in your home.

The way we have to communicate to the assistants was one of the highest rated problems by my participants.

The device is always listening. It waits for a keyword after which it starts recording and then sends that piece of audio to the servers to be taken apart, "understood", and to produce an adequate response. This process introduces the element of delay. I observed more than once, that users are highly irritated and distrustful of the device in terms of hearing. Did the device not hear me? Did the assistant not understand me? What follows are awkward moments of waiting, going closer to the device, or trying to issue a command just for the assistant to start speaking again as well.

"Exactly, and now when I say "Alexa, stop the music" The participants hurls the command towards the other room, where Alexa resides, waits, and then repeats louder "Alexa! Stop the music!"

In the context of my research, I interviewed and observed Swiss-German speaking people, and that is a big issue. The assistant doesn't understand dialects and especially not the Swiss-German ones. Users have to fall back to proper German or another language, like French or English. And even if you speak a language the assistant can understand a lot of misunderstandings happen, for example, that it sets an alarm at 01:00 in the night instead of a one-hour timer.

"Ok Google, LA Salami spielen" The Answer from the device is not understandable, since I sit in the other room. It seems to make the participant uncomfortable, she laughs it off. The device seems to have misunderstood _salami_. "Ok Google, Musik von LA Salami spielen." This time the device reacts correctly but weirdly spells "LA" in German, not knowing it's part of a name.

More than once, the assistant falls down the uncanny valley, when it is working with data from other services. The announcement of the Spotify Christmas playlist can be hilarious. In those moments, the users become acutely aware of the machine behind it all. The communication becomes artificial, code-like, as not to upset the assistant.

The simple instructions are the key to a successful relationship with this device. After a relatively short honeymoon phase, in which the user is enthusiastic or enchanted by this magical little thing, asking for facts or offloading some simple mental tasks is all that is left. The assistant is perceived as single-minded, as it can't learn through the interaction. The user was promised more, but the assistant just can't uphold those expectations. Because as opposed to smartphones and computers, where you can at least change the software, the voice assistant device is static.

"Stuff like that, so it's like, she doesn't learn anything. You can say "shutters up" 100 times and the next time she says "I don't know any device called shutters"."

The absence of any physicality isn't helping in creating bonds between user and machine. After the unboxing, which was generally loved by my participants, the device is placed strategically within the apartment. It is not omnipresent and can't listen into every single corner of the apartment. Another alternative is to buy additional devices to serve a multi-room home. The device allows for simple touch gestures. It includes three buttons and a switch. Curiously enough, the designers were so mindful as to add a switch to turn of the microphone, to tackle privacy issues. My participants were suspicious. Why would you want to add a switch for that, if you have nothing to hide? The three buttons control the volume and the last button is generally to stop the device from talking.

I had only two cases, where physicality was mentioned specifically. One participant let the device accidentally fall, for which she was very very sorry. Another participant, in anger, kicks the device now and then...

But why do we need an animistic approach to design?

I hope and I hypothesize that an animistic approach can have two effects. The first one is very practical. If an animistic design can forge stronger bonds between user and product, leading to longer usage times, there will be less turnover. In the case of electronics that means less unrecyclable trash and fewer mining observations, which is good for the environment. The second effect is highly utopian. It is about imagining another relationship to technology. The way we interact with tech is mainly designed by the companies we get the technology from. But as I'll show in my analysis, it's not always in our nor in the planet's best interest. I want us to have a relationship to technology as we can have with plants or pets. Respectful, caring, knowing that they form us as we form them. I hope that an animistic design approach can lead in that direction.

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On the provided website you'll find more information as well as all the data that this zine is based on.

Headers: **Manrope** by Mikhail Sharanda
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