

ARTICLE

# Sustaining fecundity: artistic creation as care for life

Andreas Weber 

Bard College Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Email: [frankandreasweber@posteo.de](mailto:frankandreasweber@posteo.de)

(Received 20 March 2023; revised 12 August 2023; accepted 12 August 2023; first published online 15 September 2023)

## Abstract

Art is as old as human culture. For most of the time, art was part of an exchange between humans and the cosmic order. Art was meant as a gift to nourish the fecundity of life. Art was communication with ancestral creational powers — the invocation of a poetic space from which creation entered the material realm. This paper explores art as a way of tapping into the invisible forces of reality. I argue that humans can experience these forces as aliveness (joy/desire to give) and can transmit them by poetic creation. Through art, humans have a capacity to nourish life, in parallel to how natural productivity unfolds from the unseen into the embodied domain. This capacity is a source of artistic creation. It is a crucial means to participate in a life-giving cosmos. Although the Western understanding of art is far from this attitude, art has remained the domain where aliveness is accommodated not with empirical, but with imaginal means. In the current global crisis of life, it is crucial to remember the potential of art not only to relate but to contribute to aliveness. Programs in environmental education should build on the direct perception and expressive imagination of aliveness.

**Keywords:** Art; wangarr; aliveness; commons; gift; reciprocity; animism

## Art as action

In 2016, the Art Museum in Rovereto (MART) presented the exhibition “Painters of Light” (MART, 2016). The show displayed mainly Italian and Swiss painters of early and late modernism whose works intended to use light as an artistic means—colors applied in a way that their reflection radiated out to the spectator. Arguably, all paintings, using colors—pigments that reflect, diffract and scatter electromagnetic waves—are paintings of light. The works in the MART, however, used color with the intention to visibly show the artistic transmission done by light.

Many of the works radiated sheer luminosity to the spectator. But the effect was not only that of brilliant colors. Rather, transmitted through those, was an experience of receiving “something.” We might call this something preliminarily “poetic experience,” “aliveness” or even “presence of beauty.” There was an invisible dimension to visible light that touched something invisible in the spectator. What was going on here?

As a biologist and nature educator, I try to understand life as embodied inner experience. I look for ways this inner experience can transform the mainstream Western attitude to “nature” (as object) into a reciprocal relationship aimed at giving life (see section “Art in service of life,” below). Here, I see art in a key position: Not only does it have a behavioral effect on humans (art moves us), but also is it inextricably linked to ecology either through the choice of its subject (Western art is often about life) or its intended effect (indigenous art is to sustain life).

In this essay, I will follow the hypothesis that the paintings exhibited in Rovereto were not an exception but rather a particular example of what art can do and very often does: It transmits aliveness. When I use the term “art,” I refer to those practices and processes distributed between agents that can be grouped under the moniker “art” in a wide sense and which, to Aboriginal Australian ways of interacting with the cosmos, would be viewed as manifestations of ancestral (life-giving) power (for a discussion, see Morphy, 2007).

In the aboriginal understanding, art is capable of transmitting and nourishing ancestral energy (of life and life-creation). Also, Western art has this capacity, so I will argue in this essay. But our understanding of its ancestral power has been buried under layers of dualistic conceptions. An important step in reclaiming contact to the powers nourishing life, and to our own capacity to work in service of life, is dependent on its transmission through a work of art.

This transmission is coupled to the presence of embodied processes of intra-action, to use Barad’s (2003, p. 803) term. In other words, it is material and “here,” but it is at the same time immaterial, happening on an invisible plane of aliveness. It is invisible and intangible but can be perceived and transmitted. It occurs in a “poetic space” of a nonbinary character which, in depth, is the domain of life (Weber, 2016, 2019, 2021).

“Poetic space” means that ultimately there is no separation between objects and meaning. Everything material also has a subjective, inward, feeling aspect. Living beings embody this unity of inward experience and outward material shape. As living beings, we can experience it. Art recreates it and activates it: Art works are processes of matter which at the same time exert their power on the plane of felt experience and meaning. They distribute and manage aliveness.

In this (non-spatial) domain, the conversion of “matter” into “inwardness” is not symbolical, hence dualistic (as pigments on a canvas have been thought to represent ideas or create meaning through semiotic difference). It rather draws from a collaborative space of co-becoming (to which the creators of art and the spectators both belong) and can enrich that space (Bawaka Country et al., 2016, p. 682; Bawaka Country et al., 2019, p. 456).

The “poetic space” comes forth through co-becoming: All individual beings and forms can only come into existence because they are transformations of other beings, and all creation happens in some form of reciprocity. Trees live because animals breathe out carbon dioxide which feeds the trees. The fruits of the trees feed the animals in turn. Flowers nourish insects and insects pollinate the flowers. Art inspires sensitive souls to create art.

The description of this poetic co-becoming finds its expression in the form of how the Australian Yolngu understand the shared life-in-place as “Wangarr” (Morphy & Morphy, 2020, p. 260), continuous unfolding of ancestral past and lived present (Morphy, 1991, p. 116; Poelina et al. 2022, p. 1; Bawaka Country et al., 2020, p. 300). It is also described by the way the experience/concept/creation of “Iwi” is happening in the culture of the Rarámuri in today’s Mexico’s Sierra (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328).

Western philosophy is currently trying to shed dualistic conceptions. It is doing its first baby steps in a terrain that has lost its binaries of now/then, me/you, mind/matter, mine/yours, inner/outer, picture/world, color/energy, mind/matter. Here, ancestral ways of understanding can provide the protocols to conceive of a true “intra-agential” (Barad, 2003, p. 814) cosmos, a cosmos in which stones are not “just matter” but also “themselves ecstatic” (Morton, 2018, p. 117) and hence able to work “within” our own/shared domain (“mind” and “body”). We might be heading toward an “aesthetics without sub/objects” (Perullo, 2022, p. 13), an infinite co-becoming in and with (Perullo, 2022, p. 163).

If we take the “intra-agential” turn seriously, then we can understand/experience a world that is only one poetic space, though endlessly differentiated (shared, discontinuous, layered, re-created in experience). In such a domain, certain material processes can transmit power, and actions are able to enhance aliveness. In poetic space, every step in every unfolding mutual relationship is an action and an existential experience. And it spurs transiently sedimented, material traces of both. Art is a crucial example of such co-creative move through/as poetic space. It creates the exemplar

of poetic space, as its functioning recreates the cosmic (“intra-agential”) functioning and stratification, and therefore allows to access and steward it.

### Being and aura: western aesthetics and life

“Western aesthetics” has been in profound uneasiness since its beginnings. Esthetic thinking revolves around the conundrum of how immaterial meaning relates to objects. Esthetic thinking took off after the “subjectivist unification” in Kant’s Critique of Judgement (Kant, 1987), which declared direct perceptual and conceptual connections with the experience impossible.

Modernism started when Western artists encountered ancestral practices and activated objects from traditional cultures, which opened a door back to do what Kant had forbidden. But most of them misunderstood what traditional art and ritual are. Art quickly found itself in a place where the autonomy of an artwork was understood as a conversation that art held with itself. Since then, asking questions about itself is the main criterion of quality by which critics and philosophers of esthetics judge an artwork. What is accepted as art needs to be a critique of art.

In the last years, Western art has been enlarging its monologue by incorporating animistic references. It promotes—at least in the form of lip-service—the collaboration with invisible powers and spirits in the co-creation of reality. This tendency could be observed at the Venice Biennale 2022, “The Milk of Dreams” (Hansen, 2022), with poignance in the works of Portia Zvahera (Hansen, 2022, p. 346ff) and Jaider Esebell (Hansen, 2022, p. 438ff) among others.

This attempt to step out of the Kantian limitation of art is the latest in a long line of efforts to break through the allegedly subjective limitations of knowing. On a philosophical level, arguably the most influential attempt has been the view of Martin Heidegger (2002, p. 1). Heidegger criticizes the “aesthetic” approach of Western philosophy as losing the connection to what he terms “being.” Heidegger blames esthetics of “subjectivism,” which cements the subject-object fissure prominent in Western thinking (Thomson, 2019).

Subjectivism *sensu* Heidegger fails to acknowledge “the integral entwinement of self and world that is basic to our experiential navigation of our lived environments” (Thomson, 2019). For Heidegger “our experience of this subject/object relation *derives from* and so *presupposes* a more fundamental level of experience, a primordial modality of engaged existence in which self and world are united rather than divided” (Thomson, 2019). For Heidegger, the role of art is to open, to bring into communication this shared ground.

Art in Heidegger’s eyes is essentially “poietic” (from the Greek verb “poiein,” “to make”). It makes something emerge that did not exist before, or existed so only as unrealized potential. Art “names into being” (Heidegger after Thomson, 2019). Heidegger stewards an approach to art which 1. understands that what is at stake is the activation of something primordial, and shared, an existential and fundamental experience of contact with being, and which 2. can never be wholly untangled from our primordial rootedness in a living whole. Being is real, and not exhaustible. It touches us in an existential manner. It is, one could say, “Ancestral”—an experience as well as a state, something that surpasses us and makes our existence possible, and at the same time is at our very center.

At the same time when Heidegger developed his conception, another German philosopher, although from a different tradition, suggested something astonishingly similar. In his essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” Walter Benjamin introduced the term “aura” to distinguish the original work of art (say an oil painting) from its technical reproduction (by for example photographing and printing this painting). For Benjamin, the true power and identity of an artwork resides in its aura. The aura is the “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin, 1969, S. 5).

We experience aura in the same way, and as the same “thing,” that underlies our encounter with other-than-human beings: “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your

eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (Benjamin, 1969, S. 5). Hence, the aura of a work of art shimmers in the way a distant mountain range does. It is intimately close to your experience, and still of another domain.

Benjamin gives another hint of how “aura,” artwork, and our immersion in aliveness are connected. For him aura is related to the “cult value” (Benjamin, 1969, S. 21, Footnote 5) of an artwork, to its “ritual power” (Benjamin, 1969, 21, Footnote 6). He relates the artwork to an individual, “unique” power it holds (Benjamin, 1969, S. 21, Footnote 6). Historically, through the development of Western art, this uniqueness of power has been transformed into (and lost within) the individuality of the authorship of a given work.

### Transmissions of light

One of the best-studied Aboriginal systems relating to Ancestral powers is the Yolngu culture in Northern Australia. It has been the focus of the extensive work of Frances and Howard Morphy together with their Yolngu partners.

#### *Shimmering like sun on water*

In the Yolngu cosmological experience, the material world is one side of an ongoing process in which aliveness is continuously welling up, manifesting into living beings like humans, gum trees, and kookaburras, but also water wells and mountain ranges. Life and its interconnectedness pour forth from the “*wangarr*”—the ancestral determinants of the present” (Morphy et al., 2020, p. 260). In the beginning, the *wangarr* beings journeyed the cosmos, thereby creating its rules of flourishing, and in turn becoming the land itself in its distinct features, so that the present still has the potential to pour forward life, as it partakes in the ancestral energy of creation (Morphy, 1991, p. 138).

The actualization of the ancestral determinants of the present happens also within us. This dimension is called “*birimbirr*” in Yolngu (Morphy et al., 2020, p. 261). *Birimbirr* could be partly translated into the English word “soul.” *Birimbirr* is that portion, which is us by not being us, because it is part of *wangarr*, or in other words: It is the creator beings themselves, and as those beings are the manifestations of the ancestral determinants continuously pouring forth with aliveness, it could be understood as aliveness as such, as source also of our own aliveness.

Humans have a direct relationship with the “ancestral determinants of the present,” which even form the center of human experience. This allows the contact with, and the handling of, *wangarr*. *Wangarr* is real because we can identify it. We can perceive it with our senses and with our emotions. Albeit invisible from an empirical standpoint as solidified matter, *wangarr* energy is very well perceivable through the way an embodied individual feels.

Much of what in the Western tradition is classified (and not understood) as “beauty of nature,” in Yolngu terms is perceived as presence of *wangarr* energy. This energy is “the light that makes the heart go happy, makes it smile” (Morphy, 1989, p. 29). It radiates from the picture, but also is in the glistening of light on the sea (Morphy, 1991, p. 36), the experience of bliss in the radiance of other beings, other participants in the continuous actualization of the “Ancestral determinants of the present,” the “shimmer” (Bird Rose, 2017, p. G51) of life in community is understood as Ancestral life-creating power manifest in the here and now.

“Shimmer” is the index of ancestral energy, like smoke is the index for a fire. Wherever “shimmer” appears, *wangarr* is happening *right now*. “Shimmer” is also a subjective feeling: Rituals that concentrate and redistribute *wangarr* nourish the feelings of the participants and make them feel soothed and lighthearted (Morphy, 2013, p. 127). Handling *wangarr* in art and ritual nourishes life. This happens not only on the concrete level of actions (though it can, for example through the ritual accompanying the collective decision to spare a species temporarily

from being hunted). It also happens on the level of how *wangarr* energies are managed in the invisible domain. This management is not an imaginary process. It has a real perceptual and emotional dimension that can be experienced. And it has a real effect on the power of life in a place. Seeing shimmer means to perceive ancestral power as an active force. Managing this *Wangarr* sustains fecundity.

Art plays an important role in this management. It acts—and is enacted—in service of *wangarr*. Art—embodied in paintings on objects, on bodies, or in sand—is a vehicle that transports the *wangarr* power, nourishes it and actualizes its fecundity. Art “objects” in this respect are somewhat miniature *wangarr* sources like those original ones in the landscape are. They are embodied matter, “objects” like those physical sources as well, and they are at the same time, again like the *wangarr* power sites in the landscapes, wells of life-giving power directly grounded in the ancestral past (which is also the life-giving potency of the present).

Yolngu art, therefore, has an outside dimension, in the form of objects, but also in an inside dimension, not as symbolic or iconic meaning but as active process whose actions can be perceived through our sensory and emotional reactions to them. If an individual is moved by art, this is a consequence of the presence of ancestral life-giving powers. An artwork lets us experience that reality is more than an object. It gives us the felt realization of a power of transmitting life inherent in life; it allows us to partake in an active formation of aliveness that comes from the ancestral past.

Because this power is not a symbolic convention, Yolngu pictures need to create a sensuous force that really acts on the observer. This is the reason painters fill their paintings with fine white crosshatches. Crosshatches give “brilliance” (Morphy, 1989, p. 28), and this brilliance transmits an emotional quality to the individuals who get in touch with the pictures. Morphy (1989, p. 30) observes: “It is almost as if Ancestral power is encoded in paintings by way of the emotional response it engenders in the viewer.”

Deborah Bird Rose, who has spent her later life in close connection with traditional Aboriginal culture, has developed a deep understanding of the shimmering force of aliveness working on various levels. Yolngu paintings need to shimmer because the ancestral reality itself shimmers. Experiencing shimmer means to understand ourselves as a portion of that ancestral reality. Creating shimmer through painting helps transmit this ancestral reality and nourish its life-giving power. “Brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world,” observes Rose (2017, p. G53). Beyond words, the Ancestral life-giving energy is palpable—as the “frisson of connection” (Burarrwanga et al., 2019, quoted in Bawaka Country et al. 2020, p. 301), beyond words, in the feeling and the emotion” (Bawaka Country et al., 2020, p. 301).

The experience of being captivated on a sensual-emotional level detects ancestral powers through the efficiency of the artwork. The participants feel that the painting transmits *Wangarr* energy. “Bir’yun, or shimmer, or brilliance, is—people say—one’s actual capacity to see and experience ancestral power. This is to say that when one is captured by shimmer, one experiences not only the joy of the visual capture but also, and more elegantly as one becomes more knowledgeable, ancestral power as it moves actively across the world,” observes Rose (2015, p. G53f). Morphy (1991, p. 100) states: “In creating beauty, Yolngu are creating ancestral power.”

Its sensual presence and its ancestral activity, are both intricately enfolded into a work of art. Its material appearance in a mysterious way is the emanation of aliveness that radiates forth from it. None could be without the other, both are intricately enfolded into one another, as the living reality is enfolded into the “Ancestral determinants” and those are implicit in even the most minuscule fold of the present.

### **Binding like a lasso**

There is a similar double-presence at play in the ways the Rarámuri of the Mexican Andes understand/live their own ancestral past (Salmón, 2000, p. 1327). In Rarámuri, the term which

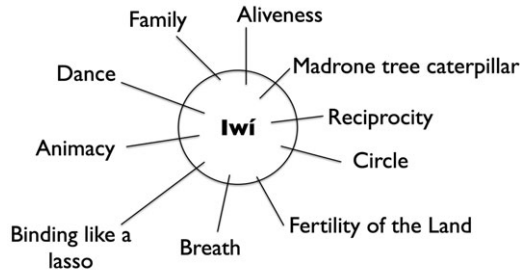


Figure 1. Dimensions of *iwí* (see Acknowledgements).

bears resemblance to *Wangarr* is “*Iwí*” (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328). *Iwí* is part of the term “*Iwígara*,” meaning “the total interconnectedness and integration of all life in the Sierra Madres, physical and spiritual” (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328).

*Iwí* is a dimension that paradoxically crosses the categories (Figure 1). *Iwí* refers at the same time to (1) outward material embodiments that are objectively measurable, (2) perceived sensory perceptions, (3) “inwardly” felt or (4) intuited and invisibly “known” dimensions of life-related presence, and the (5) apprehensible existence of a life-giving power that is at the same time an ecological structure and a potential felt as positive and even ecstatic power.

An example of this is how certain Rarámuri ceremonies function. To ask the land to be replenished with life-giving “ancestral” energy, the participants dance in a continuous circle. The word for circle is *iwí*. Salmón (2000, p. 1328) observes: “The land is nourished by the results of the ceremony, which brings rain. As the songs are performed, the *iwí* continues to turn. The *iwí* represents the fertility of the land. *Iwí* . . . translates roughly into the idea of binding with a lasso. But it also means to unite, to join, to connect. Another meaning of *iwí* is to breathe, inhale/exhale, or respire.” *Iwí* also means soul—the soul in every individual, human and otherwise, that after the individual death becomes a butterfly and unites with other such butterflies in the milky way. *iwí* is also the name of a caterpillar species.

The metamorphic cosmivision—the experience that all bodies have a material and an energetical, spiritual, life-affirming side to them—is inscribed into the language. It is realized in a poetic way through language. Poetic means that language does not create simple metaphors, but allows for presence, through a sort of metonymic crystallization. Language allows those who speak it to experience themselves in terms of an intimately shared cosmos pervaded by the feeling of being joined to life.

The soul, the butterfly, and the breath that we exchange are not just symbolically referring to one another, but are the same thing, the same realization. A butterfly *is* a soul. The soul *is* a butterfly. Being touched by a passing butterfly inevitably means being touched by soul. This constellation is more familiar to Western traditions than it might sound. There exists a quite similar metonymic rhizome in an archaic Western language context. The triad of soul, breath and butterfly is represented by the old Greek word “psyche,” pointing to possibly related animistic cosmivisions in the ancient European past.

Being moved by the “beauty” of a butterfly means, if we follow the Rarámuri perspective, being touched by the contact with *iwí*, the life-giving energies which manifest as this butterfly. Through it, they can manifest also in ourselves as our being moved by the butterfly. If *iwí* is enacted as circle, hence as a human (re-)creation or rather management of ancestral energy, through this cultural (re-)creation (performance or process, including “objects”) the participants tap into the same source of ancestral energy and help it manifest (like a butterfly that hatches from her chrysalid hull). The feeling conveyed is the manifest presence of *iwí*, as ultimately the participants

are concerned with the distribution of ancestral energies, of invisible raw aliveness able to incite and nourish their own individual experience of aliveness.

### Feeding poetic space

The postdualistic view, which is being discussed with fervor in the humanities, contains all the prerequisites which help us understand a reality where material assemblages can exert a power that is felt and hence has a material effect. Following the logic that “posthuman” (Federici, S.; Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 2022: On Re-enchancement and Chi’xi. A conversation between Silvia Federici and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, moderated by Manuela Hansen. In Hansen, M. ed., op. cit., 320-327. Ferrando, 2013) strategies of sensemaking entail, we have no choice but to embrace such a view. We must admit invisible forces at play which can be tapped into with faculties that are not necessarily discursive and rational.

Braidotti (2022, p. 217) counts “the psychic” as one of three basic layers of relating, besides the material and the social (building on Guattari’s idea of the “Three Ecologies,” Guattari, 2000). The speech of “ghosts,” “monsters” (Tsing, Swanson, Gan, & Bubandt, 2017, p. 1), “the spectral” (Morton, 2017, p. 55), and the full-fledged embrace of “magic” (Federici & Rivera Cusicanqui, 2022, p. 324) is prominent in post-humanist discourse and critique. If this is not intended to be understood as another twist of playing around with allegories without importance, we must face up to the consequences. A striking example of this facing up is the work of botanist Monica Gagliano (2018, p. 127), whose science depends on what the plants literally tell her about their own—and even other humans’—needs.

If we are co-existent, co-creative with “it” (Perullo, 2022, p. 15), and this “it” is a relational co-becoming that does not know any fundamental dualistic separation into objects, minds and/or agents, then not only “objects” in truth have agency but also “mind” has material presence. This exactly is what happens in ancestral art. And this is what deep down can happen in all art making.

Understanding that life-giving powers have their say in the constitutions of assemblages, the delicately layered and exquisitely interconnected superpositions of contradictory dimensions and their workings in a living matrix, allows us to understand that life has a direction (if not of teleology, then of desire). There is a vector, and that is from *wangarr* to *wangarr*, from *iwi* to *iwi*, from life to life.

This is directly relevant for environmental humanities, for its way to critical understanding—and for the way it manages teaching “about” the environment. Participating in the understanding of life must necessarily be an activity that gives life—otherwise it cannot be a true understanding. If we are describing the entangled processes of reality, we inevitably take a stance in them. This stance cannot be neutral, or it does not grasp what it is describing. Our insights need to be performative. They need to nourish life, in the sense Bawaka Country et al. (2016, p. 468) say: “It is what we do with this, how we care, attend, respond, that is important.”

The “Ancestral determinants” envelop the ancestral laws, or for Yolngu shortly *Law* (Morphy, 1991). These precepts instruct to nourish life. To be giving of life. Ancestral power is about life. Life is what is desired. Life desires life (Weber, 2016, p. 26). The desire for life is felt; we know it because we are alive; it is even the highest emotional engagement. It is intensified in contact with art as the transmission vehicle for life.

Rose (2017, p. 51) relates shimmer to the conditions that make blossoming possible, and to the experience of those conditions—and their fulfillment—in one’s own life and the life of others. Shimmer is truly life-giving: Not only through its direct experience but also according to its performative structure, as it is the effect of a fruitful exchange. Shimmer characterizes reciprocity as it is happening. It is the experience of mutual transformation (Weber, 2017, p. 33), the central process in ecology. This is why the fruit bat who fertilizes the blossoming trees by enjoying their nectar, for Rose is a core instance of shimmer.

Shimmer means to give life in mutuality (the nectar nourishes the bat, the bat fertilizes the tree by distributing pollen). Shimmer includes the experience of receiving the gift of life with it. “Flowers and flying foxes come together every year with beautiful timing and exquisite generosity, giving each other great kisses that bring forth new generations,” Rose (2017, p. G53) observes. Shimmer is what happens in a kiss, in a life-giving embrace. We all know how it feels to shimmer. Here again, something structural—mutual gift-giving in the commons of the ecosphere (Weber, 2020, p. 158ff)—is at the same time an experiential dimension. “Co-becoming” (Poelina et al., 2022, p. 1) is the manifestation of ancestral co-creativity *and* our experience of being alive in togetherness from the subjective side of this co-becoming.

Ultimately, this experiential dimension makes the life process persist. To co-proceed in aliveness does not mean to obey a law, it means to open towards mutuality to give each other the “kiss” of life (Rose, 2017, p. G58). Reciprocity is not only a relational mode rule, it is also a dimension of inwardness, of invisible attraction, of subjective meaning—and this subjectivity is what then again guides the behavior of each partner implied in reciprocal relations. We are standing in front of a “nondual” process. This is exactly what makes it—and us—shimmer. The material structure has an intimate, meaningful side, and it is through this side that the participants keep the process going.

The precept thus honored is “care”—a “love story,” as Rose (2017, p. G58) says, love here is understood as the mutual interest in each other’s aliveness (Weber, 2017, p. 122). Care functions through giving the other the gift of life, like in the kiss between the tender flying foxes’ snout and the copious stamina of the flower. Care is experienced through desire and bliss in a feeding fruit bat and a blossoming flower, and in a human participant being ecologically and emotionally involved in this exchange of the gift of life. Passing on the gift of life is shimmer; passing it on happens on an inner level of desire and bliss *and* on an external level of transferring objects (pollen and nectar).

Passing on the gift of life hence is structurally the same as in pollination as in ancestral art. Shimmer is the real presence of reciprocity. Again, this is nothing other than plain ecological realism. Life is what it is: it is on its inside that what it appears to be on its outside: an endless process of meaningful transformations and entanglements of one single thread. As Perullo (2022, p. 68) in his “episto-etho-ontology” claims, structural relations are always meaning-relations. They are *felt* constellations on the horizon of ancestral precepts—ecological laws, and at the same time experiences of how aliveness feels “real”—how life needs to be distributed in order to flourish. I have called this inextricable ensemble, this nondual cross-connected relatedness “poetic space” (Weber, 2021, p. 321).

Poetic space follows from the “hybrid” nature a postdualistic stance necessarily implies. In poetic space we—as all participants—are entangled and active at once. We are individualized and we are the whole, source and outcome at once. If we are “in” poetic space, we necessarily “are” poetic space, hence we can also move it and mold it, we have agency independent of the “phase” (embodied or experiential, McGilchrist 2023, pers. comm.) of our presence. Art is that gift that can mold poetic space.

Art in this is not different from living beings transmitting these same ancestral energies, because these energies are about irradiating, shimmering with, aliveness. Here we find a reason why “art” and “nature” so often have been in close alignment. Works of art embody poetic space, they are material *and* invisible, formative (life-giving) powers. This double character makes them exemplars of what they set into being: concrete bodies with an invisible dimension of life-giving power.

In doing this, they are cosmical, unfathomable as an organism, as the cosmos, as *wangarr* itself. Shimmer, the presence of ancestral force, has the same reality—the same ontological status—as the perceivable live-giving presence (the “beauty”) of the ecosystem itself. It is the manifest reality of the gift exchange that builds the structure of the ecosystem, and of life. This double-layered character is built into how ancestral art works: It transmits the energy of aliveness, *and* it is executed in an active performance of “singing up abundance,” in direct service to life, as a gift to aliveness.



What ultimately is transmitted, is the desire to give, inherent in the “source” (called *wangarr* in Yolngu culture). Ancestral power is the pure desire to give from which everything springs forth. This desire is without individuality, totally immaterial, the central well, the “eye,” of poetic space, and it self-realizes through yearning to give. The desire to give is transmitted through arousing the desire to give. This is the center of what art does. All starts with a desire to give, which inevitably remains desire. “The poem is love realizing desire that remains desire,” says the French poet René Char (Midal, 2007, p. 7). And this is what life is. Desire inevitably crystallizes itself into the world as bodies that remain desire. We are of both.

### Art in service of life

Passing on the gift of aliveness is an experience Western artists are also familiar with. “Klee said the line no longer imitates the visible; it renders visible, it is the blueprint of a genesis of things,” states Merleau-Ponty (1993, p. 136). Under the “epistemic trauma” (Vargish & Mook, 1999, p. 14) of modernity, artists made epochal moves to shed the reflex of dualistic representation. Leading artists of modernity explicitly referred to spiritual or invisible dimensions which the artist molds so that they can radiate through the work.

The French painter and philosopher Fabrice Midal believes: “Modernity tried to reconstitute to art its highest ambition, to be a path of truth and an authentic spiritual experience” (Midal, 2007, p. 280). To him, without their “alchemist, spiritual, in other words, poetic dimension the majority of modernist works do not make sense” (Midal, 2007, p. 229). “Every true artist aims in a new way—meaning detached from any anthropocentrism—to restore the lost unity between humans and the universe,” Midal (2007, p. 230) claims.

Paul Klee is a painter who described his artistic goals and their underlying worldview with particular clarity. Klee is viewed by some as “perhaps, as artist, the most significant theoretician of art or philosopher of the iconic in the twentieth century” (Böhm, 2013, p. 314). Most interestingly, we find some striking parallels between Klee’s poetics and the cosmovisions of Yolngu culture.

For Klee, art operates in an analogous way to the forces that bring world into being. The artist’s intention was not to work with the “final forms themselves” but with the “powers who do the forming” (Klee, 1948, p. 45). Klee saw the cosmos as constant becoming—an ongoing creation in the process of happening (Böhm, 2013, p. 327). Art does, what the cosmos does, through the same forces of genesis, which the artist manages. It therefore has a cosmic—or “ancestral”—dimension. Ancestral power is molded into the work and radiates from it (as in “nature” it molds organisms and radiates from them).

A famous drawing (Figure 2) in one of Klee’s theoretical works shows that the artist pursues a nondual vision of the cosmos. This is strikingly close to the indigenous models of *Wangarr* and *Iwi* we have seen above. According to the drawing, beings and things are part of one big, undivided whole (“Welt,” “world” in the drawing). Through their realization into form, they gain a relative independence, so that a relation—creation, actually—becomes possible. Art affords a means to realize these more profound identities—an imaginative, nondiscursive understanding that Klee calls the “metaphysical way.”

Only one of three connecting arrows runs along the dimension that Western science accepts as real (the “optical-physical way”). All other modes of understanding, imagining and creating are circuited through domains of invisibility. These areas nonetheless execute their powers—only that those are the powers of genesis, which are *ipso facto* invisible. Klee reverts to an ancestral way of conceiving the interplay for the creation of forms and hence, life. He sheds the stereotype of Western opposites of the formal and the material.

Klee as an artist is participating in the dynamic reservoir from which “nature,” the cosmos, arises. This reminds of the Yolngu idea that a part of human inwardness, *birimbirr*, participates in the ancestral energy and therefore directly in *wangarr*. Böhm (2013, p. 330) observes: “Klee

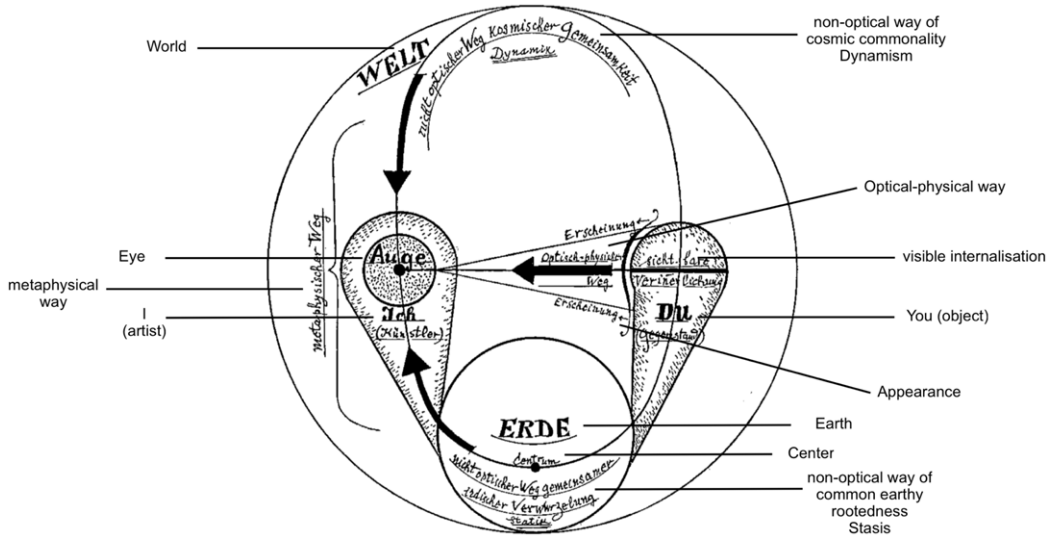


Figure 2. Paul Klee’s understanding of reality (from Klee, 1964, p. 67).

understands the artist as an organ of nature itself. He neither stands opposed to nature nor does he wish, in a Kantian manner, to determine it from the logic of human consciousness [ . . . ] To the contrary: nature is the actual and at the same time forceful and lucid reserve of artistic activity.”

Artistic production means to activate the underlying whole (its movement, its dynamism, its incessant creativity) through an act of creation. It lets ancestral creativity speak through what it does, namely creating. It therefore allows to re-identify with one’s own proper character, which basically consists of being this ancestral creativity. In a *wangarr* style cosmos, which is also the cosmos for Klee, there are ancestral energies that sing bodies into being (like a painter sings forms into existence with his paint), take residence as those bodies, shape them, act through them, and make them pregnant with life.

Seen from the surface of ecosystem interactions, ancestral power is *nothing else* but the uninhibited flow of the gift of life through the reciprocal transformations of living bodies. Seen from the depth of a living process and its experiencing selves, it is the ecstasy felt in receiving the shimmer of light being transmitted, an ecstasy that asks to be welcomed with a gift back to life. Art is that gift that passes on the original gift of life with life-giving brilliance, so that it bestows life on someone else.

### Implications for educators

In order to gain familiarity with the presumed object “nature,” Western-style environmental education focuses on object qualities—knowledge, categorization and ways in which this object can be understood and managed (Weber, 2011, p. 16). Of course, this attitude is part of the overarching Western understanding of the ecological crisis as a sort of object failure—the earth system, seen as gigantic, intricate machine, is being damaged and in need of repair. Environmental education therefore often aims at teaching the intricacies of this machine in order to enable urgent fixes and avoid further damage.

The object approach to mending “the environment” misses the most important aspect of “nature”—namely, that “nature” is not a thing. Nature in depth is incarnated ancestral power—a co-creating experiential process of which humans are always part and in which they—consciously

or not—partake (Mathews, 2003). Human participation happens in the form of material interferences, but it also means to manage the ancestral live-giving force which pours through the co-creating process of life and can be experienced in it.

In traditional cultures, the human role in the ecosystem is often understood through this capacity to care for life on an “interior” level, through working with ancestral powers directly (Salmón, 2000, p. 1327). Life-giving work here does not build on a technical familiarity with functioning, but on an emotional and intuitive familiarization with other-than-human persons as kin (Salmón, 2000, p. 1328; Weber, 2020, p. 142f). In those cultures, there is no ontological difference between art and other human activities. They all are expressions of the process of serving life.

From this perspective emerges a new template for nature educators. In addition to teaching object knowledge, nature education must provide an emotional and intuitive access to aliveness through felt experience. In order to do this, those perceptual and imaginative qualities need to be trained that are frequently suppressed by Western education. That is, the understanding of life as ensouled, personal, communicative and the confidence in our innate perceptual and expressive abilities to connect with other beings on the level of the shared participation in ancestral life powers.

Ironically, it is precisely these qualities that young children—the recipients of education—already exhibit (Weber, 2011, p. 20f.). In play, children intuitively participate in the creative forces that generate life. Education that is meant to heal the ecosphere and protect life thus can tap into our inborn desire to co-create embodied living experience. Children need simply to be allowed to be what they are—instead of being shaped into “little researchers” whose play is exploited as a future resource of object knowledge.

The curricula for this kind of “nature”-education based on a practice of kin, or “country,” are abundant. In indigenous contexts, they are followed to this day (Milgin, Nardea, Grey, Laborde, & Jackson, 2020, p. 1211). Concerning Western-style environmental education, it is time for a re-indigenization of life-related learning. The experience of receiving the gift of ancestral powers and the request to pass it on through meaningful invocation of those powers needs to become a core practice in all nature-related teaching matters, from environmental education to the study of biology. This approach is highly efficient in generating a kin-centric self-perception, as has been shown in the last years by the widening success of indigenous-inspired nature mentoring in the West (Young, 2013, Bawaka Country et al., 2017, p. 444).

A long-running empirical set-up with adults trying to communicate with rivers shows that the human perception can be attuned quickly to an “ancestral” communication mode in which one’s own presence is experienced as one manifestation among many in a co-creative, shared and subjectively felt field of life (Reason, 2023, p. 1). With the immersion into this field also the self-experience of the participants changed. They experienced themselves less as observers of an ultimately meaningless thing-world and rather as contributors to and receivers of the gift of aliveness (Lloyd et al., 2016, p. 11). Stabilizing this experience should be the ultimate goal of environmental education.

**Acknowledgments.** I am grateful to Dorothea von Hantelmann for suggestions and comments. I thank the students of my seminar “Animism: Nature as Self” (spring term 2023) at Bard College Berlin for inspiring discussions and valuable insights. The class discussion of Salmón (2000) yielded Figure 1 in this paper. Heartfelt thanks to Sandra Wooltorton for countless helpful suggestions.

All translations of originally non-English sources by me, A.W.

**Competing interests.** None.

**Financial support.** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Ethical standards.** Nothing to note.

## References

- Barad, K.** (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–831.
- Benjamin, W.** (1969). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans.). New York: Schocken Books.
- Böhm, G.** (2013). Genesis: Paul Klee's temporalization of form. *Research in Phenomenology*, 43, 311–330.
- Braidotti, R.** (2022). Posthuman critical theory. In M. Hansen (Ed.), *59th international art exhibition, The milk of dreams, Biennale di Venezia, catalogue* (Vol. 1, pp. 215–224). Venezia, Italy: La Biennale di Venezia.
- Burrarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., Wright, S., ... Lloyd, K.** (2019). *Songspirals: Sharing women's wisdom of country through songlines*. Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- Federici, S., Rivera Cusicanqui, S.** (2022). On Re-Enchantment and Chi'xi. A conversation between Silvia Federici and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, moderated by Manuela Hansen. In Hansen, M. ed., op. cit., 320–327.
- Ferrando, F.** (2013). Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms: Differences and relations. *Existenz*, 8(2), 26–32.
- Gagliano, M.** (2018). *Thus spoke the plant*. Boston, MA: North Atlantic Books.
- Guattari, F.** (2000). *The three ecologies*. New Brunswick, Canada: Athlone.
- Hansen, M.** (Ed.) (2022). *59th international art exhibition, The milk of dreams, Biennale di Venezia, catalogue* (Vol. 1). Venezia, Italy: La Biennale di Venezia.
- Heidegger, M.** (2002). *Off the beaten track*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I.** (1987). *Critique of judgement*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Klee, P.** (1948). *On modern art*. New York: Faber & Faber.
- Klee, P.** (1964). *Das Bildnerische Denken*. Basel, Switzerland: Schwabe.
- Lloyd, K., Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Burrarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., ... Maymuru, D.** (2016). Morrku mangawu—knowledge on the land: Mobilising Yolŋu mathematics from Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land, to reveal the situatedness of all knowledges. *Humanities*, 5(5), 61. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/5/3/61>.
- Mathews, F.** (2003). *For love of matter: A contemporary panpsychism*. Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M.** (1993). Eye and mind. In G.A. Johnson (Ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Midal, F.** (2007). *Petit traité de la modernité dans l'art*. Paris, France: Agora.
- Milgin, A., Nardea, L., Grey, H., Laborde, S., & Jackson, S.** (2020). Sustainability crises are crises of relationship: Learning from Nyikina ecology and ethics. *People and Nature*, 2020(2), 1210–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10149>.
- Morphy, F., & Morphy, H.** (2020). Locating 'mind' (and 'soul') cross-culturally. In H. Bromhead & Z. Ye (Eds.), *Meaning, life and culture: In conversation with Anna Wierzbicka* (pp. 249–271). Canberra, Australia: ANU Press.
- Morphy, H.** (1989, March). From dull to brilliant: The aesthetics of spiritual power among the yolngu. *Man, New Series*, 24(1), 21–40.
- Morphy, H.** (1991). *Ancestral connections. Art and an aboriginal system of knowledge*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Morphy, H.** (2007). *Becoming art: Exploring cross-cultural categories*. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Morphy, H.** (2013). Art as action. The yolngu. In C. Shore & S. Trnka (Eds.), *Up close and personal. On peripheral perspectives and the production of anthropological knowledge*. New York/Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books.
- Morton, T.** (2017). *Humankind*. New York: Verso.
- Morton, T.** (2018). Third Stone from the Sun. *SubStance*, 47(2), 107–118. #146.
- Perullo, N.** (2022). *Estetica senza soggetti. Per una nuova ecologia del percepire*. Roma, Italy: DeriveApprodi.
- Poelina, A., Woollorton, S., Blaise, M., Aniere, C.L., Horwitz, P., White, P.J., & Muecke, S.** (2022). Regeneration time: Ancient wisdom for planetary wellbeing. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 38(3-4), 397–414. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2021.34>.
- Reason, P.** (2023). Extending co-operative inquiry beyond the human: Ontopoetic inquiry with rivers. *Action Research*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750323117956>.
- Rose, D.B.** (2017). Shimmer. When all you love is being trashed. In A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt (Eds.), *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Salmón, E.** (2000). Kincentric ecology. Indigenous perceptions of the human-nature relationship. *Ecological Applications*, 10(5), 1327–1332.
- Bawaka Country, Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Tofa, M., Sweeney, J., ... Maymuru, D.** (2019). Goŋ Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities as situated co-becoming. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37(4), 682–702. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818799749>.
- Thomson, I.** (2019). Heidegger's aesthetics. In E.N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2019 edition). Retrieved March 2, 2023 from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>.
- Tsing, A., Swanson, H., Gan, E., & Bubandt, N.** (Eds.) (2017). *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

- Vargish, T., & Mook, D. (1999). *Inside modernism: Relativity theory, cubism, narrative*. New Haven, CT/London, UK: Yale University Press.
- Weber, A. (2011). *Mehr Matsch. Kinder brauchen Natur*. Berlin, Germany: Ullstein.
- Weber, A. (2016). *Biopoetics. Towards an existential ecology*. Dordrecht, Netherlands/New York: Springer.
- Weber, A. (2017). *Matter & desire. An erotic ecology*. White River Junction, VT: New Society Press.
- Weber, A. (2019). *Enlivenment. Toward a poetics for the anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Weber, A. (2020). *Sharing life. An ecopolitics of reciprocity. Alternative worldviews*. New Delhi, India: Heinrich-Boell Foundation.
- Weber, A. (2021). A path to poetic space. *Constructivist Foundations*, 16(2), 321–324. <https://constructivist.info/16/2/192>.
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Suchet-Pearson, S., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., ... Tofa, M. (2017). Meaningful tourist transformations with Country at Bawaka, North East Arnhem Land, northern Australia. *Tourist Studies*, 17(4), 443–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797616682134>.
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., ... Maymuru, D. (2020). Gathering of the Clouds: Attending to Indigenous understandings of time and climate through songspirals. *Geoforum*, 108, 295–304. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.05.017>.
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., ... Sweeney, J. (2016). Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(4), 455–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515589437>.
- MART (2016, June 25–October 9). I pittori della luce. Dal Divisionismo al Futurismo. Retrieved March 2, 2023 from <https://www.mart.tn.it/mostre/i-pittori-della-luce-dal-divisionismo-al-futurismo-138693>.
- Young, J. (2013). *What the robin knows: How birds reveal the secrets of the natural world*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books.

## Author Biography

Dr. Andreas Weber is a biologist, philosopher and nature writer. He focuses on a re-evaluation of our understanding of the living. He proposes to view – and treat – all organisms as subjects and hence the biosphere as a meaning-creating and poetic reality. Andreas teaches at the University of the Arts, Berlin and at Bard College Berlin. He is Visiting Professor at the UNISG, Pollenzo, Italy. He contributes to major German newspapers and magazines and has published more than a dozen books, in English language most recently *Enlivenment. A Poetics for the Anthropocene*, MIT Press, 2019 and *Sharing Life. The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity*, Boell Foundation, 2020.