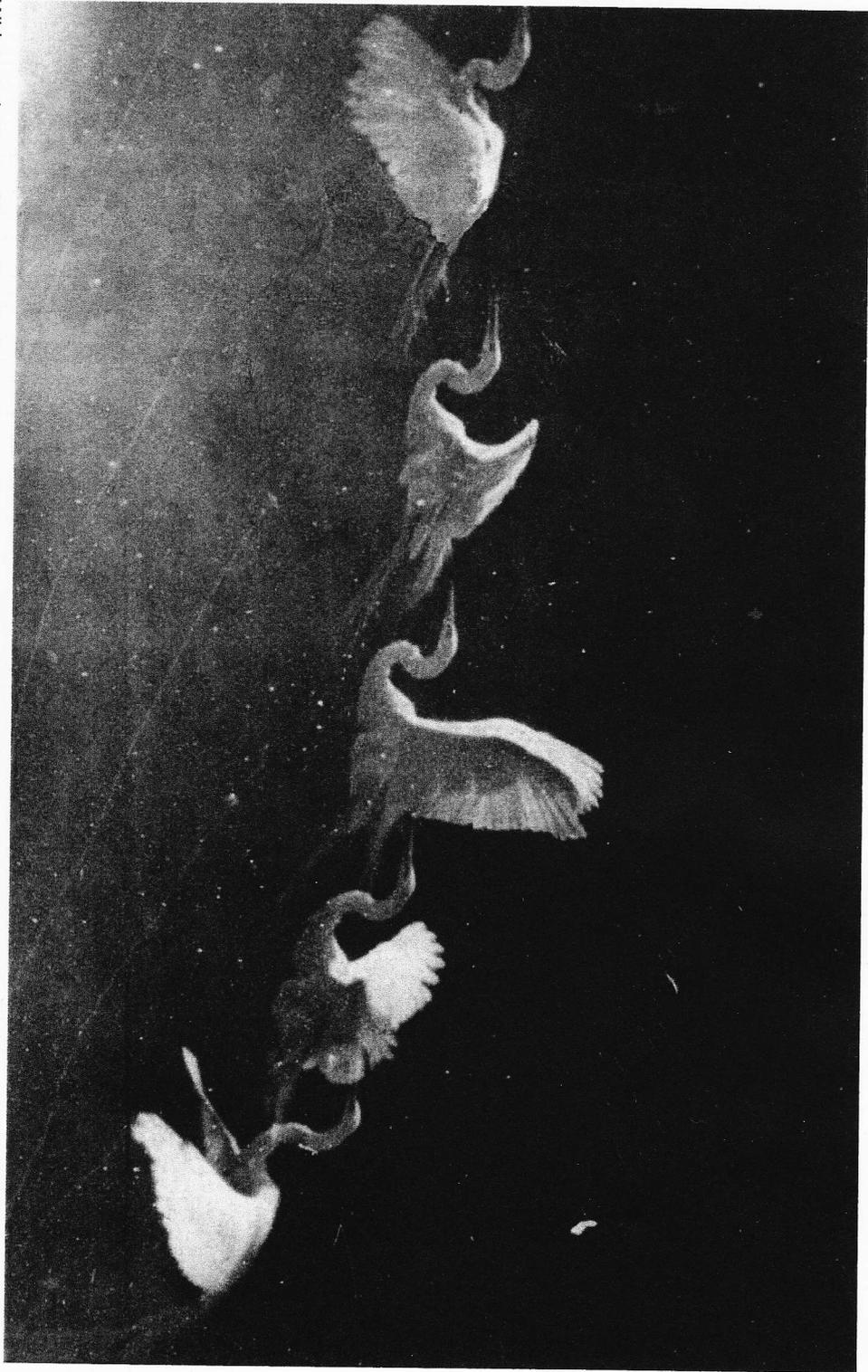


Animism



With texts by: Irene Albers, Bart De Baere, Oksana Bulgakowa, Edwin Carels, Didier Demorey, Brigid Doherty, Sergei Eisenstein, Anselm Franke, Masato Fukushima, Avery F. Gordon, Richard William Hill, Darius James, Gertrud Koch, Joachim Koester, Maurizio Lazzarato and Angela Meltopoulos, Bruno Latour, Vivian Liska, Henri Michaux, Santu Mofokeng, Philippe Piotte, Florian Schneider, Erhard Schüttpelz, Michael Taussig, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Martin Zillinger. Edited by Anselm Franke.

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Anima's Silent Repatriation: Reconsidering Animism in the Contemporary World

Masato Fukushima

Introduction

Anima, the protagonist of the long-disputed notion of animism, has been at best somewhat a backseat player both in our everyday life and in the history of thought in recent years. Even though Western philosophers of antiquity and the medieval period occasionally paid serious attention to her role, she does not seem to be a hotter issue than, say, global warming or Islamic fundamentalism at present. Nowadays she is supposed to only inhabit African forests or oriental shrines; in short, she is still *there*, but not really here in the West.

Although anima is occasionally discussed in the academic circles of anthropologists or researchers of modern paganism, what happened to her *here*, is said to be the collapse of *der Zaubergarten* (the garden of magic) and the massive extinction of her species in modern society, as Max Weber sternly emphasized.¹ “The tidal waves of rationalization wiped her species away, and sooner or later the existing anima in other parts of the world will also suffer from a similar destiny”; such is the prediction of Weber’s countless sympathizers, reciting the mantra of modernization without questioning its premises.

These scholars, legitimately emphasizing the notion of the iron cage of modernity,² seem to me to have failed in recognizing the various holes, large and small, bored by the intrinsic limitation of rationality. Computational theorists, for instance, have cogently suggested that in general the more a particular system becomes complex, the more impossible it becomes to carry out rational computation because the required time for doing so will be exponential.³ In other words, rationality requires calculation, yet in many cases of complex systems, calculation cannot be properly exercised due to the time needed for it. The iron cage of modernity does not have the seamless walls of rationality, but countless holes of incomputability caused by its very complexity. And nobody knows what entities go in and out through these holes between modernity and its outside.

So it is not so illegitimate to reconsider the very premises of the idea of the collapse of *der Zaubergarten*. Anima may not really be extinct even in the West but may simply disguise herself, silently planning to return to the central stage. To visualize the various facets of her possible manifestation both in an explicit and implicit way through the holes of modernity, I invite readers to a brief round trip through the three scenes that follow—different in time, space and content—so as to provide cases to reconsider the possibility of her renewed role in the contemporary world.

1 Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (London: Methuen, 1965).

2 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978).

3 Yoshinori Shiozawa, *On the Order of Market: From Anti-equilibrium to Complexity* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Chikuma-Shobo, 1990).

Scene 1: Villages of Java, Indonesia.

The scene starts in the tropical region of Java, Indonesia. My field research in the depth of Javanese villages in the 1980s revealed to me some classical examples of the liveliness of the works of *anima* in the forms of spirits and magical exercises.⁴ The most impressive thing of all was the phenomenon of spirit possession in the village I stayed in, which I had previously seen only in an introductory ethnographic movie of anthropology for freshmen.

One day my landlord, one of the leaders of the orthodox Muslim school of the village, noticed that I was interested in the phenomenon of spirit possession and he somewhat reluctantly agreed to let me meet one of the well-known spirit mediums in the village. At a glance, the man, in his mid-forties, looked like a born-tired peasant, scrawny, suntanned, and reticent. The landlord asked the medium to invite the spirits he was in contact with, and at first he grumbled, a bit reluctant to respond.

But after a brief exchange of words between the two, the medium became silent for a moment and then suddenly he exploded into laughter, the facial expression changed dramatically from that of a reticent peasant to that of an aggressive and excited person with glaring eyes, a person very hard to imagine as the same as the one a few minutes before. The landlord whispered to me that it was Mr X who usually possessed the medium, and the landlord also told me that his neighbors, mainly poor tenant farmers, occasionally asked the possessing spirit for all sorts of medical advice.

The fact is that the landlord, though being a member of the conservative school of Islam in Java, had a hidden but insuppressible sympathy for the reformist movement, so, basically, he held a negative opinion about this kind of phenomenon. He was embarrassed by witnessing such a dramatic transformation of the personality of the medium, but he appeared to me not to want to admit that such a phenomenon had just occurred in front of him. Then the second spirit possessed the medium. It was quite a silent one, called a dumb (*bisu*), followed by a third, a polite character mimicking the demeanor of the Javanese nobility. The landlord watched these events with a wry smile.

Irrespective of the landlord's obvious distaste, spirits are witnessed everywhere in Java; they are supposed to cause various effects, sometimes attacking people in the forms of misfortune or illness or sometimes giving advice to those who have trouble in their life. These spirits, they say, are to be controlled by the various specialists like magic doctors, spirit mediums, and so on. The constant need for ritual offerings is to soothe them so they do not cause damage to people. A brief stay in a Javanese village would easily lead you to a full encounter with such entities.

Yet this was only half the story, as I soon realized. A few months later, a friend of mine, also a researcher on rural culture, came to see me to report that he had encountered legendary Saminists in a village of eastern Java. They were peasants who followed the teaching of Surontiko Samin, a well-known leader of a peasant revolt against the Dutch colonial government around the beginning of nineteenth century in central Java. Unlike other present revolts, however, the Saminists' behavior was mysterious⁵ and the authorities did not really understand the motive and content of what they adhered to.

4 For the general background to the Javanese religion, see Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960).

5 The Saminists use a sort of clandestine vocabulary hard to fathom by outsiders. For instance, when they were asked their name, they answered that their name was man (or woman). Their age: one for ever, and so on. Behind such tricky conversation lies their peculiar notion of language. On Saminism at large, see Harry Benda and Lance Castles, *The Samin Movement, Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* 125 (1968). Also see part three of Masato Fukushima, *Religion and Society of Java* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Hituzi-Shobo, 2002).

Some Saminists survived the persecution by the colonial government, and small numbers of their descendents were still living in various parts of the rural districts in Java. What my colleague happened to find was one such enclave.

The Saminists lived a very modest life, rarely attended to any other work than agriculture and were fond of wearing traditional clothes of village style. From their outward appearance they looked as if they were sticking to the traditional way of life in the village. Yet after tapping into their worldview, I was struck by the sheer rigor with which they excluded the traditional elements of otherworldliness. References to supernatural beings were completely erased; no offerings were made to deities. In short, the spiritual entities which are usually the invigorating addition to everyday life in Java, had utterly gone.

The appearance of the peasants' simple life was not due to their adherence to the traditional way of life, but rather, the result of them realizing their strict ideology, the religion of Adam, as they put it. Its basic idea is the belief in the dichotomy between "the way of man" (*tatane wong*) and "the way of material" (*sandang pangan*) as the fundamental principle that humans should abide by. "The way of man" is represented by the act of reproduction of the family, and "the way of material" is that of economy. So the essential requirement for man is to make love and to cultivate the fields.

From this basic tenet derives a dozen subsidiary rules, one of which is the very centrality of man, as it is man that names all the existence in the world. They emphasize that all the entities in the world are actually man-made or even part of the human. I was often ridiculed by them when I mentioned supernaturals. For them, what I called supernatural was caused by human utterance. The limited number of their rituals contained no references to supernaturals but was strictly confined to human action and conditions.

Metaphorically speaking, it was very much like observing the act of antibiotics on a Petri dish in a laboratory, when you cultivate bacteria on the plate. By putting antibiotics on the center of the plate, a clear circle is formed where the bacteria are killed. And the Saminist village reminded me of that. Despite its traditionalistic disguise, all the entities usually flourishing outside the village were massively eradicated, and the world around it became, amazingly, uninhabited.

Scene 2: A lecture room of cognitive science in London.

The scene now changes from tropical Java to a lecture room of cognitive science in London. In the 1960s and 70s, researchers of the human mind witnessed the massive advent of the gospel that the von Neumann type of computer architecture would become a pivotal tool for understanding the human psyche. Under the banner of emerging artificial intelligence and cognitive science, almost theatrical controversies were fought about ideas such as how the human mind can be simulated by a computer program, or how it represents outer reality by means of a "language of thought," a hypothetical mechanism in our brains inspired by the idea of a programming language like LISP.⁶

However, the general optimism in advancing such an ambitious program seemed to become almost lifeless twenty years later, which

⁶ Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

was what I witnessed during my stay in London in the 1990s. The very belief in the similarity (or even identity) between the computer and human mind just, somewhat awkwardly, corroded, and even the invention of parallel distributed processing and the neural network model, which in fact expanded the very notion of computation significantly, fell short of reviving the enthusiasm that we witnessed at the initial stage of its development.

While the heated controversy about the relation between computation and the human mind were gradually subdued, another attempt began to take shape, namely artificial life, or *alife*, as is called at present. Rather than talking about the working of the human mind, researchers tried more audaciously to define what life is, by means of computer simulation based on cellular automata. These automata proliferate like a unit of life, such as genes or germs, and you can observe how they grow or evolve in number on a display, following a couple of simple rules in relation to the neighboring cells. Some insisted that this could simulate the very evolution of living things through thousands of generations *in silico*, and others went further, insisting that these cellular automata were actually *alive*.

In a lecture held in a small office in Tokyo, presenting the general map of controversies around the status of *alife* philosophically in the 1990s, mainly for the purpose of introducing the original idea of C.G.Langton and his followers,⁷ I remember I had a very acute sense of *déjà-vu* about the way the very status of such simulation was discussed. It was something quite similar to the way the nature of human mind was debated in the frame of representation and computation. Naturally, as in the case of artificial intelligence, there were those for and against these ideas.

Yet at the same time, I also remember that I was also struck by the fact that there were some, as far as I observed the lecture-room, who, if somewhat hesitantly, agreed with the idea that these cellular automata *in silico* could be defined as alive. It was an eye-opener to me, in a sense, as there are a variety of ways to define life. And the essential function of these automata was self-multiplication in relation to others, and some seemed to believe the essence of life was reducible to such a simple operation.

Of course, like in the case of artificial intelligence, there is a huge gap between mimicking certain aspects of a living thing and insisting that these automata are actually living, yet I found it not easy to exclude the validity of the idea of life-as-it-could-be for describing *alife*.

Scene 3: A field museum of architecture in Tokyo.

The third scene is at the western outskirts of the expanding capital of Tokyo. There lies a large park where you find a field museum of traditional and modern buildings, some of which are traditional farmhouses equipped with a couple of well-known items for traditional Japanese houses, such as earth floors, *tatami*, and sliding paper doors. Western visitors that I have accompanied there usually marvel at witnessing the actual openness of the structure of these houses, as well as at the thinness of these sliding doors. Once I met a Finnish student of contemporary architecture there, and later I wondered if he noticed the historical

⁷ Claus Emmeche, *The Garden in the Machine: The Emerging Science of Artificial Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

genealogy from these peasant houses to some world-renowned contemporary works by Japanese architects, such as Toyo Ito or SANAA, whose architectures are famous for their transparency and structural airiness.

There is, however, an item which time-pressed visitors often overlook: a small shrine on the wall, close to the ceiling in the innermost room, the darkest part of the house. Traditional houses are usually furnished with this kind of miniature shrine, usually with a portion of various ritual foods provided as an offering to spirits or deities.⁸ Foreign visitors may have regretted having failed to notice such exotic tradition there, yet they would soon be compensated by discovering countless numbers of shrines, here and there, large and small, only if they manage to wander through the forests of fancy modern skyscrapers in the center of Tokyo, or through the densely populated suburbs around the city.

Yet, the visitors might have also noticed that the miniature shrine in the farmhouse was empty. The caretakers of the museum, usually very attentive to the cleanliness of these houses, do not seem to be bothered by the lack of any ritual offerings. The prosperous look of these shrines in town does not automatically guarantee the great liveliness of anima's activity. Some shrines are simply deserted; others may be used occasionally for karaoke concerts on bank holidays. And nobody appears to even care if the shrine in the farmhouse is empty, for this is Tokyo, at the apex of the manifestation of modernity.

But are these shrines always vacant like this? The following case is a story about a bizarre, but deeply disturbing TV program broadcast decades ago on Japanese TV, which may be seen as a tiny piece of counter-evidence to the seemingly empty shrines. The intention of the program appeared to be to exhibit the mysterious world of spirits in Japan in the form of a TV show and documentary, and various examples were introduced, such as spirit possession, favorite haunts for spirits, traditional mediums, and mysterious traditional dolls in the shape of a girl which are supposed to have ominous power. Thus far, it was like an occult entertainment show to scare the credulous audience.

Yet what was distinctive about the program was that the producer invited two different types of specialists to the stage and to appear in the documentary, and their contrasting opinions were repeatedly referred to and compared. They were psychiatrists and traditional spiritualists, the latter mainly women. On the stage, they both observed how the above mentioned Japanese doll with its mysterious atmosphere affected the mood of the audience, some of whom started to get into trance, allegedly because of its power. And in the documentary part of the program, a woman who suddenly got ill, lost consciousness and spoke in tongues was taken care of by both a psychiatrist and a spiritualist.

The psychiatrists, naturally, "diagnosed" these abnormal events as symptoms of acute mental disorder. So the reaction of the audience to the mysterious doll was diagnosed as a sort of collective hysteria or autosuggestion, while the woman who lost consciousness was interpreted as suffering from acute dissociative personality disorder. The spiritualists, in turn, insisted that these were the acts of spirits, the spirit of the doll possessing the audience, or that an unknown spirit was affecting the woman in the documentary.

⁸ For a classical introduction to the native religion of Japan, see Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: the Kami Way* (Tokyo: C.E. Tuttle, 1962) and Scott Littleton, *Shinto: Origins, Rituals, Festivals, Spirits, Sacred Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

What impressed me, then, was not really the contrast between the two. Rather, it was the overwhelming self-confidence of the spiritualists vis-à-vis the cautious psychiatrists. The contrast was most apparent in the case of the documentary part mentioned above. The psychiatrist's diagnosis of dissociation of personality at the scene was not directly followed by any concrete way of treating the woman, while the spiritualist, asserting that it was caused by a spirit of unknown origin at a glance, quickly went on to identify who the possessing spirit was.

In the exchange of conversation between the woman and the spiritualist, the latter gradually revealed the identity of the spirit, which turned out to be that of her friend who had died in a car accident in the recent past. The spirit then revealed that it had possessed the woman because it missed her. When this process of identification was over, the woman came to herself again, in front of the psychiatrist, who looked somewhat embarrassed to witness the exchange between the two.⁹

9 The same issue is treated more theoretically in Yuji Sasaki, *From Religion to Psychiatry* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Kongo-Shuppan, 1986).

Anima's repatriation to the contemporary cultural scene.

Our journey through the juxtaposition of these fragments of scenes, ranging from the villages of Java and alife to the Japanese shrines and the TV show, is intended for readers to come into contact with the various ways anima manifests itself in a contemporary context. Anima's liveliness cannot be easily confined to a particular place or culture.

Scene 1 shows that the very flourishing of spirit possession in one village is paralleled by the almost total negation of its existence in the next. In the Saminist village, anima's lively manifestation in the form of spirit changes into the abstract notion of "life" (*urip*) which they believe is eternal, inherited from generation to generation. And this variety of anima's ontology cannot be easily explicated by the limited notion of the unilinear progress of modernity. In Scene 3, the shrines are occasionally empty, but anima wanders the border between empty shrines and traditional healers, and also between spirit possession and dissociative personality disorder.

One of the lessons that we should learn from the tropical villages *out there*, is the remarkable richness of the activity of anima in the form of spirits or others. They are flying here and there. They may cause damage to people but may also carry fortunes. They may make people sick, but they also rescue them by possessing the human body in order to become an advisor. In short, they bridge the dispersed realms by building up an intricate network of relations. They are the embodiment of the nexus of cultural/natural relations.

Once this dense network of connectedness is understood in the form of spirit, anima's destiny can be foreseen through the observation of the shifting balance of culture/nature. One of the fallacies in diagnosing such an ever-changing condition is to reduce it to an intransigent dichotomy like tradition/modern. It is true, like in Scene 3, that in some areas, anima's habitat, represented by a particular type of holy space in a house, is seemingly empty. The small shrine has become simply a nostalgic and even somewhat exotic ornament for a traditional house. The modern theorists of architecture seem to have never reflect-

ed on the meaning of space represented by the small shrine of the Japanese farmhouse, when they compiled the theory of architecture based on the abstract and empty notion of functional space.

Here, however, the point is that the apparent dissolution of the work of anima is only half of the story. Scene 1 depicts the scattered distribution of anima's habitat through the rural area of Java. The disconnecting power of Saminism, a sort of revitalized traditionalism, actually wiped out the works of anima, while in the neighboring villages she was still active and busily connecting disparate realms of our living space. The point is that if anima is understood as the nexus of culture/nature, it will constantly appear and disappear from our view, in accordance with the shifting balance of cultural/natural conditions, so that in the very process of reappearance, anima might come into view in a very different shape from its traditional version, which would go beyond our ordinary imagination.

In Scene 2 we had a quick look at the notion of artificial life in the form of blinking cellular automata on a computer display. The very fragility of this candidate for a new form of anima, aside from its small number of supporters, is its very limited connectedness—almost close to nothing—in contrast to the shining richness of relations which the traditional anima spawns around her, as shown in Scene 1. The ontological status of the blinking automata is indeed ambiguous, so are the new chimera like products-to-be of the newly emerging synthetic biotechnology. These new entities may expand our fixed notion of life, yet the automata are far from causing illness or explaining our misfortune, or even incorporating into our body. The scope of their *work* is largely confined to the very limited area of activity in the computer display or in the test tube, in its extreme forms. For them to grow as a new form of anima, they would need to connect various elements in our daily zones of activity.

Conversely, once the prerequisite of anima as the nexus of connectedness is somewhat fulfilled, there is a chance for these new entities to grow as her new candidate. Here we should pay careful attention to the multifacetedness of the word "life." Viewing it from the non-Western linguistic tradition, it is hard to find a precise semantic counterpart in, say, Japanese language. Different terms in Japanese might be allocated to its derivatives, such as everyday life, life science, life world and so on. To put it concretely, *seimei* is for a biological term like life science (*seimei kagaku*), *seikatu* is for social life, and *sei* for philosophical life. The notion of life actually integrates these multiple aspects, and from this viewpoint, the notion of *alife*, for instance, only covers the very limited notion of life in the context of biology (*seimei*), but not the wider realm of the social and philosophical aspects of it (*seikatu*, and *sei*).

So if the new candidates for anima, ones not confined to computer simulation but any form of images and shapes, are ready to connect different realms of our "life" in the multifaceted meaning of the word, we are going to be eyewitnesses to the new form of anima emerging from our contemporary techno-scientific environment. Being still at the primitive level of development, there are in fact a profusion of candidates for the contemporary anima. And some of them in fact may audaciously challenge the border between life and non-life with their various strategies.

To acknowledge these as anima in the contemporary form, we have to scrutinize the connection she creates through her activity. Through such scrutiny, we can finally abandon all the negative and orientalist connotations of the concept of animism, to create a new one for the future, totally in the affirmative voice, in accordance with our contemporary age of a superficially empty, spiritless world like the abstract space of modern architecture.